

# AN EXTENDED PROFILE OF THE PAKISTANI TALIBAN

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan covers an area of 27,270 sq. kilometers, roughly the size of Massachusetts. This tremendously small area, however, is home to over roughly 45,000 militants and forty militant groups,<sup>2</sup> among them the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, al-Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Laskhar-e-Tayyiba, and the Pakistani Taliban. This policy brief focuses on the last of these insurgent groups and seeks to produce an extended profile of it.

Much confusion exists about the Pakistani Taliban, for many discussions about its members have taken place within the context of the Afghan insurgency. In other words, it has not been analyzed as a distinct militant movement in its own right, although its members have been involved in insurgent activity and terrorist attacks inside Afghanistan, trained Times Square bomber Faisal Shehzad, and participated in numerous suicide bombings and urban guerrilla attacks inside Pakistan, the most recent high profile one being the siege at the Pakistan Naval Base Mehran in Karachi.

An important characteristic of the Pakistani Taliban is their alliance with al-Qaeda, including personal relations dating back to the days of the Soviet-Afghan war.<sup>3</sup> The Taliban have provided shelter to al-Qaeda leaders, been operationally active with it, and most recently vowed to avenge the killing of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, since al-Qaeda has been involved in attacks inside

Pakistan and a decade after 9/11 vows to continue fighting the US, the war in FATA is crucial for both Pakistani national security and US foreign policy and national security objectives. Both states have made the elimination of al-Qaeda from the tribal areas a major goal. Nevertheless, the Pakistani state lacks the capability to fight a protracted war and this creates challenges for both states to accomplish their stated objectives.

This brief discusses the history and background of the conflict in FATA. The following section will address the Pakistani Taliban's ideological nature and some essential characteristics of the movement are explained. Next, the structural organization of groups, especially the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), is illustrated. Finally, recruitment patterns are surveyed with a discussion of some factors that have helped militants mobilize fighters.

## BACKGROUND

The origins of the Pakistani Taliban can be traced to two significant developments after the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. First, thousands of Pakistani Pakthun tribesmen were mobilized for armed action and crossed the Durand Line into Afghanistan to resist both the American and the NATO forces. For example Sufi Mohammad, the Pakhtun cleric and leader of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law), infiltrated Afghanistan with roughly 10,000 boys and young men. Nek Mohammed Wazir and Abdullah Mehsud, both of whom subsequently fought

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2010) at the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts and a former DSRP Scholar (2007-2010) at the Center for Research and Learning. In 2007 Shehzad founded the Council on Strategic and International Affairs, a student-led think-tank at IUPUI, and served as its Director from 2009-2010. He received his B.A. in International Studies from the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts and Honors College. He graduated with Highest Distinction and was also awarded the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts Faculty Medal of Academic Distinction. He is currently in the graduate program in International Relations at New York University.

the Pakistani Army, were also part of the resistance. From the invasion onward, Pakistani *madrasah* students and tribesmen have regularly been recruited and sent to participate in the insurgency in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

The second development was the arrival in the tribal areas of the Afghan Taliban's and al-Qaeda's senior leadership, along with hundreds of Afghan, Arab, Chechen, Uzbek, East Asian, and Sudanese fighters. As Zahid Hussain writes, al-Qaeda militants "distributed million of dollars among tribal elders in

return for shelter."<sup>5</sup> Most of the two groups' leadership and cadre escaped to South Waziristan, where they were offered protection by the Ahmedzai Wazir tribe, who, after two decades of engagement, had become sympathetic toward both groups. Al-Qaeda also began leasing compounds from tribesmen to establish training camps and command and control centers, as well as recruiting local tribesmen.<sup>6</sup> This rekindling of old alliances and forging new ones renewed a culture of militancy that had been cultivated during the Soviet-Afghan War.

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While these developments both radicalized and mobilized the locals, it was the Pakistan Army's 2002 invasion of the tribal areas that transformed the existing widespread militancy into a full-blown insurgency. In April 2002, the Pakistani Army entered the regions of North and South Waziristan with the intent of capturing or eliminating the mainly foreign-born al-Qaeda operatives. The army engaged these fighters and started meeting resistance from local tribesmen who had been angered by the American invasion and thus sympathized with al-Qaeda. Whereas initially the army had the tribal elders' permission to engage in military action, its harsh tactics soon made them angry and unwilling to hand over any foreign fighters. The subsequent fight between the Pakistan Army and foreign al-Qaeda insurgents turned into a war between the Pakistan Army and rebel tribesmen.<sup>7</sup>

The insurgency, which was initially limited to North and South Waziristan, spread during the next few years throughout FATA. Moreover, several rebel militias

emerged between 2002 and 2006. On December 13, 2007, these militant groups formed the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP; Student Movement of Pakistan) to coordinate their activities against the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan and against the Pakistan Army in FATA and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP).<sup>8</sup> By 2007, the Swat district had also fallen under rebel control, and within two years the Pakistani Taliban controlled towns located a mere sixty miles away from Islamabad.

## IDEOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE PAKISTANI TALIBAN

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In general terms, the Pakistani Taliban can be divided into two ideological camps: (1) Hakimullah Mehsud and Wali-ur-Rahman are leading members of one group that is composed mostly of the TTP. Given its very close relationship with al-Qaeda, it focuses its activities on fighting the Pakistani state and its army and considers any participation in the war in Afghanistan a secondary pursuit. This group has also been active in training terrorists who have volunteered for al-Qaeda, such as Time Square Bomber Faisal Shahzad and Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, who carried out a suicide attack at the CIA Forward Operating Base in Khost, Afghanistan.

(2) This group comprises those Pakistani Taliban who closely follow the Afghan Taliban's advice and thus focus on fighting the American and NATO forces inside Afghanistan. Members of this group, including Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, have either left the TTP alliance or are severely critical of its policies vis-à-vis the Pakistan Army. These two groups, of course, are not monolithic in themselves, and many instances of rebel infighting may break out among those that fall into the same ideological camp, such as Mangal Bagh, who fights the Pakistan Army but was also an enemy of Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP's late leader.<sup>9</sup>

## POLITICAL NATURE OF THE INSURGENT MOVEMENT

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The Pakistani Taliban have three major characteristics that are essential to understanding the insurgency. First, as explained below, this extremely decentralized movement follows the decisions taken by local Taliban chapters, decisions that are based on local political needs. Rebel leaders make those decisions and normally fight when it suits their immediate family, clan, tribal, and economic interests to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the movement remains fractured and rebel infighting is not uncommon. The power struggle that ensued between Hakimullah Mehsud and Waliur Rahman after Baitullah Mehsud's death is one key example. Moreover, militant groups have fought each other for control of criminal networks, local markets, "taxes" on commercial activities, and differences over religious opinion.<sup>11</sup> At times, they have also eliminated rival insurgent leaders or their tribal supporters. For example, in 2008 Baitullah Mehsud assassinated tribal leaders loyal to Mullah Nazir<sup>12</sup> and had Haji Namdar Khan (Khyber Agency) murdered after the latter broke with him to join a rival group.<sup>13</sup>

Third, local Taliban groups display a variety of interests. In North and South Waziristan, for example, the resistance is composed of ideologically motivated Taliban. In Khyber Agency, however, militant groups are composed of the drug mafia, smugglers, and local criminals. The Orakzai and Bajaur regions feature a combination in which some rebels are motivated by ideology and others by criminality.<sup>14</sup>

## ORGANIZATION

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The Pakistani Taliban, comprising forty militant groups and a combined membership of between 30,000 and 35,000 people, is a decentralized and fractured force (see TABLE 1 for a list of all known groups). Indiscipline, disagreement, and infighting are

**Table 1:** List of Rebel Groups Operating in FATA and Swat District<sup>17</sup>

REBEL GROUPS	LEADERSHIP	PRIMARY BASE
Harkat-ul Jihadi Islami ( <i>Movement of the Islamic Jihad</i> )	Qari Saifullah Akhtar	Bajaur
Jaish-e-Islami	Qari Wali Rahman ( <i>a.k.a Raihan</i> )	
Karwan-e-Naimatullah ( <i>Caravan of Naimatullah</i> ) Now defunct	Haji Naimatullah	
Qari Zia Group	Qari Zia Rehman	
Jamatud Da'awah ilal-Quran wal-Sunnah	Sheikh Jameelur Rahman	
Jamatul Mujahidin Takfir wal Hijra	Mustafa al Seerat al Suri	
al-Hezb	Unknown	Darra Adamkhel
Islami Taliban	Momin Afridi	
Tekrik-e-Islami	Muneer Khan	
Ahle Hadith ( <i>now defunct</i> )	Shah Khalid	Mohmand
Muqami Taliban ( <i>Local Taliban</i> )	Omar Khalid	Orakzai
Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan	Hakimullah Mehsud	
Sunni Banghash tribe		Kurram
Shia Turi tribe		
Ansar-ul Islam ( <i>Supporters of Islam</i> )	Pir Saif-ur-Rehman	Khyber
Amar bil Maroof wa Nehi Anil Munkir (Suppression of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue)	Haji Niaz	
Lashkar-e-Islami ( <i>Army of Islam</i> )	Mangal Bagh	
Muqami Tehrik-e-Taliban ( <i>Local Movement of the Taliban</i> ) a.k.a "Waziri Alliance"	Maulvi Nazir	South Waziristan
Muqami Taliban ( <i>Local Taliban</i> )	Wali-ur-Rahman	
Islamic Jihad Union	Suhayl Fatilloevich Buranov & Mohammad Fatih	
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	Abu Usman Adil	
Muqami Tehrik-e-Taliban ( <i>Local Movement of the Taliban</i> ) a.k.a "Waziri Alliance"	Hafiz Gul Bahadar	North Waziristan
Jaish-e-Islami	Qari Wali Rahman	
Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi	Maulana Sufi Mohammad	Swat District

Figure 1: Leadership network of the TTP.<sup>18</sup>

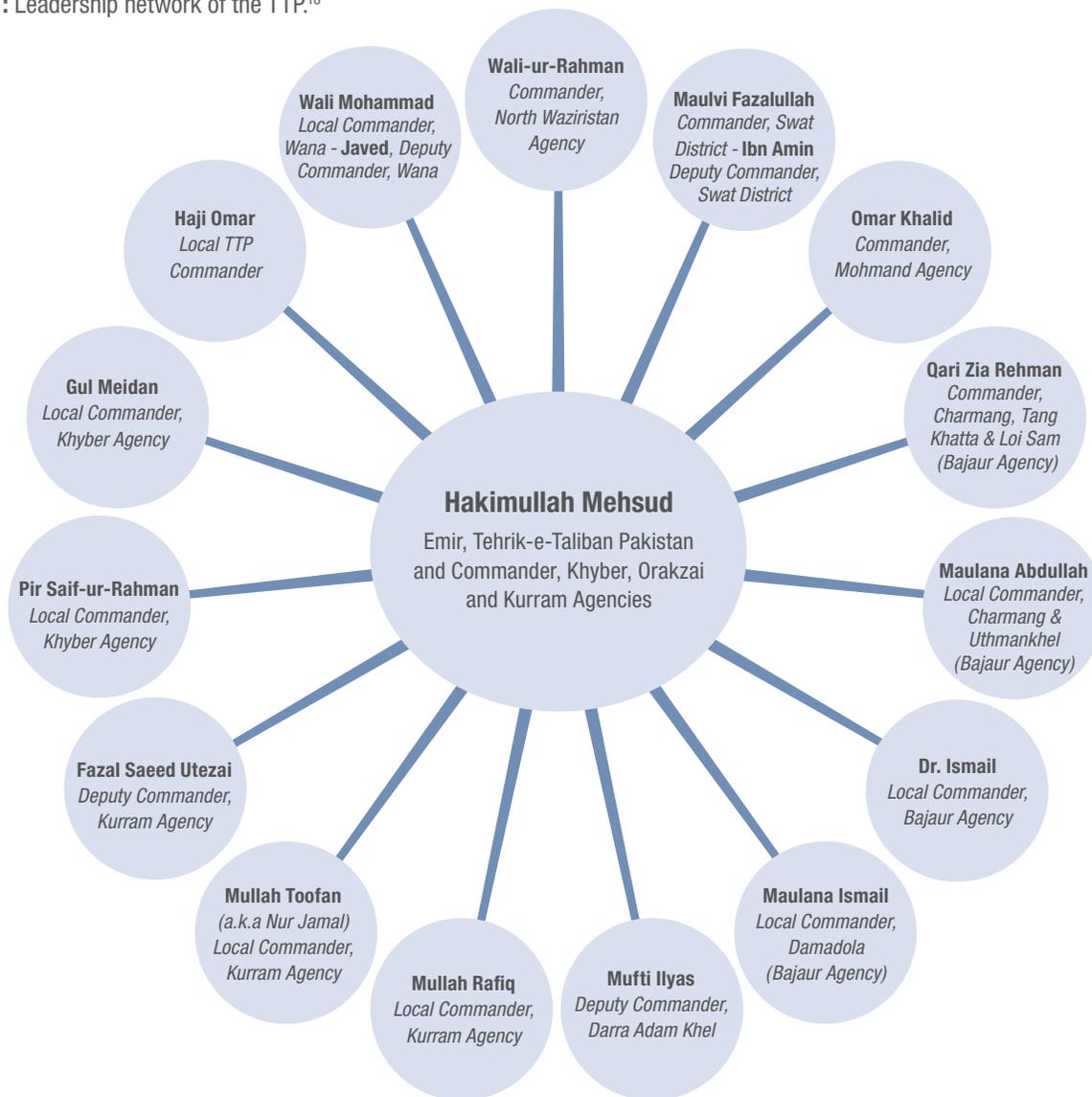
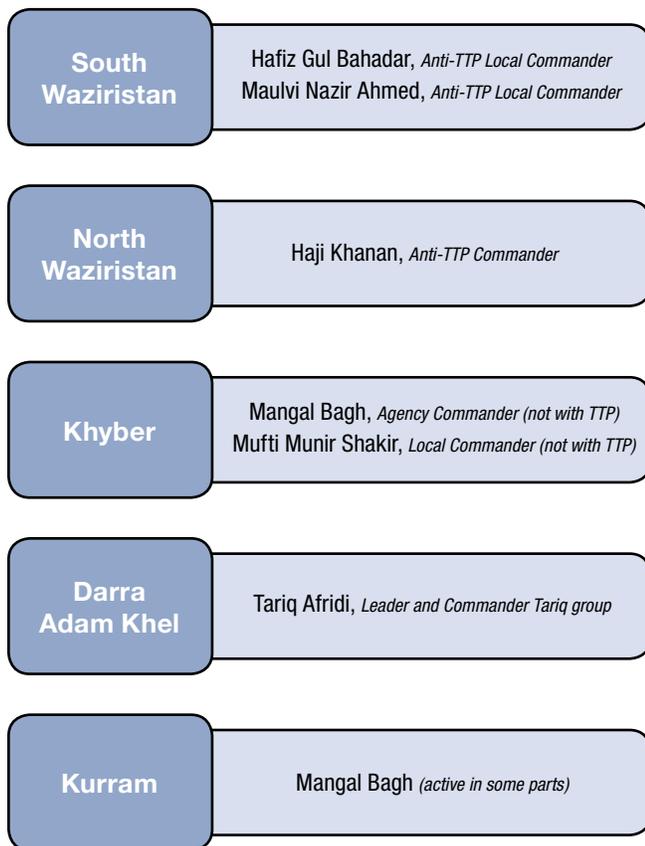


Table 2: Estimated strength of the Rebels in FATA, KP, and other areas of Pakistan<sup>22</sup>

GROUPS	2002	2004	2006	2010
Pakhtun Taliban ( <i>Pakistani</i> )		< 40,000	40,000	20,000-25,000
North Waziristan				10,000-15,000
Punjabi Taliban ( <i>Pakistani</i> )				2,000
Foreign Fighters ( <i>Arab, Uzbek, Tajik, and Sudanese fighters</i> )	< 3,000			9,000-14,000
TOTAL		< 40,000	40,000	31,000-41,000
TOTAL PAKISTANI TALIBAN				22,000-27,000

**Figure 2:** List of Pakistani Taliban not allied with or part of the TTP.<sup>19</sup>



common.<sup>15</sup> The umbrella organization Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has appeared as the most prominent opposition force to the Pakistan Army. Of course not all insurgents fighting the army belong to that group. In fact many insurgents, referred to as the *Muqami Taliban* (Local Taliban), have at times split off from the TTP or have otherwise always run separate organizations.<sup>16</sup>

The TTP is active in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's (KP) 24 districts, 7 tribal agencies, and 6 provincial regions. Its organizational structure features a *shura* (parliament) that meets frequently to plan tactics, discuss strategies, and choose the *emir* (president). This latter figure, currently Hakimullah Mehsud, speaks on behalf of the organization and leads the decision-making process.

Beyond the center, agency commanders, deputy commanders, and town and village commanders (in FATA and KP) coordinate the movement and direct the fighting. TTP's participating militias and their field commanders make their own tactical decisions, as opposed to following orders from the *emir* or the *shura* (see FIGURE 1 for a partial leadership structure of the TTP). The TTP's structural nature can be best illustrated visually in the form of a network, as opposed to a hierarchical system. The *emir* remains at the center, while leaders in different parts of FATA, Swat, and KP run their affairs autonomously.

As mentioned earlier, the Pakistani Taliban also comprises fighters that are either not aligned with the TTP or are actually opposed to it (see FIGURE 2). Prominent members of this group include Haji Gul Bahadur, Maulvi Nazir Ahmed, and Mangal Bagh. Haji Gul Bahadur has often been touted as pro-Pakistan Taliban.

Whereas the Pakistani Taliban are primarily a Pakhtun phenomenon, they are not wholly composed of Pakhtun fighters. The "Punjabi Taliban," more or less a conglomeration of militant outfits (including the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Laskar-e-Tayyiba) that fought in the insurgency in Kashmir, is allied with them. With close to 2,000 men, the Punjabi Taliban mostly carry out attacks inside Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban also receive support from Arab, Chechen, Uzbek, and other foreign fighters, many of whom settled inside FATA after the Soviet-Afghan War because they could not return to their own countries or came to FATA after the American invasion.<sup>20</sup> Al-Qaeda fighters number anywhere from 8,000 to 12,000, with 100 hardcore operatives and approximately 2,000 auxiliary fighters in North Waziristan alone. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has 1,000-2,000 insurgents inside FATA. Uighur rebels, some of whom have been active in the insurgency in China's Xinjiang province, are also present in the region and aid the Pakistani Taliban.<sup>21</sup> Table 3 breaks down the strength of the rebels in FATA and KP according to their political and organizational allegiance.

## RECRUITMENT

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Among the Pakistani Taliban's recruitment techniques are the following: access to social networks, providing them with economic endowments and judicial services, and employing coercion. Genuine grievances and abuse by counterinsurgent forces have also fueled participation in the insurgent movement.

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First, the Pakistani Taliban recruit young men by offering them access to and membership in social networks as well as money, power, and respect.<sup>23</sup> Many recruits are young unemployed men from undeveloped areas who have no access to education and jobs. Militants scout these men and invite them for informal conversations and social interaction. By offering them company, says Gul, they give them a sense of belonging to a peer group. The Pakistani Taliban seek to brainwash the men during these interactions and convince them to volunteer. For many of them, joining the movement endows them with political backing that subsequently engenders clout and prestige.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to the foot soldiers, many of the suicide bombers recruited by the TTP are poor, undereducated, or uneducated seminary students in their early teens.<sup>25</sup>

Second, and related to the previous point, existing poverty from an ongoing lack of infrastructural development, the poverty created by ongoing conflict, and the government's inability to provide education and judicial services are also major factors that aid recruitment efforts.<sup>26</sup> Most recruits are said to join not because of ideological radicalization, but because of economic

and political marginalization. The Pakistani Taliban pay recruits salaries. For example, in 2009 its rank-and-file members received approximately \$180 a month,<sup>27</sup> while unemployed young men from southern Punjab are reported to have been offered stipends ranging anywhere from approximately \$190 to \$240 a month.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to exploiting poverty and unemployment within the tribal areas, the militants have also taken advantage of the internal displacement caused by military operations and the Pakistani government's inability to provide those affected with decent living facilities. While some men living in refugee camps have reportedly joined to avenge the deaths of lost family members, many join due to frustration at the government's failure to provide basic human facilities in these camps, where people suffer from pneumonia and diarrhea.<sup>29</sup>

Third, the Pakistani Taliban have won support by providing swift and free justice, and law and order via their dispute-resolution centers and Shariah courts.<sup>30</sup> This reality stands in stark contrast to the government's lack of judicial services.

Fourth, the Pakistani Taliban sometimes use abduction and other coercive tactics to recruit fighters or quell dissent. In early 2007, they began forcing schoolchildren to sign up for suicide bombing missions in one part of Tank District and abducted 30 children for this purpose.<sup>31</sup> In Swat, they may have abducted as many as 1,200 to 1,500 children. While some of the boys are used for labor in the camps, others are trained to fight in the field, become informants, or undertake suicide-bombing missions. In 2009, for example, the Pakistan Army recovered approximately 20 boys, most of whom had been kidnapped in Swat by the local Pakistani Taliban.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, after taking over in Swat the rebels forced the locals to show their support by either supporting the regime monetarily or sending a family member to join them. Those who refused to comply were threatened with eviction or being chased out.<sup>33</sup> In places like Mohmand and Kurram Agency, the Pakistani Taliban killed tribal

elders and warned others against supporting the government or organizing anti-Taliban *jirgas*.<sup>34</sup>

Fifth, genuine grievances arising out of the Pakistani counterinsurgents' abusive tactics have fuelled rebel recruitment. Pakistani forces, which are trained for conventional warfare as opposed to following a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy, have committed serious tactical mistakes and atrocities.<sup>35</sup> In 2009 alone, they killed at least 1,150 civilians during military operations.<sup>36</sup> In its military strikes against the Pakistani Taliban, the army has used indiscriminate force in the region, and its heavy reliance upon airpower and artillery has led to great local infrastructural destruction and civilian casualties. For example, the counterinsurgency effort in Swat, dubbed Operation *Rah-e-Rast* (Straight Path), came at a high civilian cost<sup>37</sup> and caused the locals to turn to the Taliban for security or, as mentioned above, to avenge the deaths of family members.<sup>38</sup> The CIA's drone war inside FATA has also created a backlash.<sup>39</sup> According to the New American Foundation, the 158 unmanned aerial vehicle (viz., drone) strikes launched during 2004-10 have caused anywhere from 311 to 530 civilian casualties. Such strikes only help the insurgents recruit more fighters in FATA. Baitullah Mehsud once succinctly underscored this idea by remarking: "I spent three months trying to recruit and got only 10-15 persons. One U.S. attack and I got 150 volunteers!"<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, the Pakistani Army continues to alienate locals through arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions, unlawful killings, extrajudicial executions, deliberate property destruction, and other high-handed tactics. The most recent example of extrajudicial killings is video footage of alleged Pakistan Army soldiers allegedly killing six young men in Swat.<sup>41</sup> At times the army has imposed "collective responsibility," enforced through the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation, to bombard entire tribes, detain several members of a tribe, or erect economic blockades.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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The Pakistani Taliban insurgent movement is not simply a tribal or an Islamist insurgency, for its members have displayed sectarian as well as tribal concerns. While local political concerns have dominated its agenda, individual Pakistani Taliban militants have also been involved in transnational terrorism through their group's alliance with al-Qaeda. Some insurgent movements are driven by criminality, while others are disciplined and are fighting to evict the Pakistani

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Army from the region. Moreover, the Pakistani Taliban features many leaders with their own agendas and political interests, deep divisions among fighters, and a fluid system of alliances and allegiances. Not all of its outfits are united under the TTP umbrella organization; in fact, some are actually fighting it. If there is one goal that unites this diverse group of insurgents, however, it is the expulsion of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the insurgents still do not agree on the best way to accomplish this goal.

The TTP is a decentralized network-like structural organization that has a limited hierarchical nature in the form of a central body (*shura*) and a president (*emir*); however, most decisions appear to be made at the local level. Each agency has a commander, a sub-commander, and leaders at the village and town levels. Lastly, recruitment and participation can be explained through a variety of factors: offering young men access to social networks and economic and financial incentives in return for volunteering; abducting male teenagers from

villages or coercing people into enlisting; and joining the Pakistani Taliban to avenge the deaths of family members or as a reaction to the Pakistani Army's abusive and heavy-handed behavior.

From the perspective of both Pakistani national security and U.S. foreign and national security policy objectives, the war in the tribal areas has become very important. While most Afghan Taliban have moved away from al-Qaeda and their aims remain geographically circumscribed to Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban have moved in the opposite direction due to their alliance with al-Qaeda and other al-Qaeda aligned groups. Al-Qaeda has been involved in several attacks inside Pakistan and, with the appointment of Ayman al-Zawahiri as the new leader, has vowed to continue fighting the US. This creates a precarious situation. Insurgent conflicts are protracted and costly and over the long haul the Pakistani state, beset with social, economic and political problems, lacks the capability to continue fighting a high-intensity war. The endgame for Pakistan, like the US in Afghanistan, will be to strike a political settlement with the Taliban. Simultaneously, however, the US and Pakistan cannot afford for al-Qaeda to have a safe haven in the tribal areas.

The CIA-operated drone war has been seen as a major solution to this problem. While the Pakistani Army enters and clears new areas and holds ground, the US can target locations and fighters that Pakistan is either unwilling or unable to engage militarily. Nevertheless, the long-term challenge for Pakistan and the US remains the execution of a multi-pronged strategy through which the Pakistani Taliban can be significantly weakened and moved away from al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups, while the latter's presence and war fighting capabilities in the tribal areas is eliminated.

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## ENDNOTES

1 This policy brief is based largely on an academic paper: Qazi, Shehzad H. “Rebels of the Frontier: Origins, Organization and Recruitment of the Pakistani Taliban,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2011). (*Forthcoming*)

2 This number includes members of the Haqqani Network. Hassan Abbas, *Pakistan’s Troubled Frontier* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2009), 38.

3 For more see M.A. Rana, Safdar Sial, and Abdul Basir, *Dynamics of the Taliban Insurgency in FATA* (Islamabad: Pak Institute of Peace Studies, 2010).

4 Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), viii, 47; Abbas, *Pakistan's Troubled Frontier*, 4; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Klashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11, 37-38; Ashok Behuria, K., "Fighting the Taliban: Pakistan at War With Itself," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 4 (2007): 531-532.

5 Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, 148.

6 Ibid., 122, 143-144, 148, 158.

7 Ibid., 120-122, 143-147.

8 Abbas, *Pakistan's Troubled Frontier*, 32-33.

9 Ibid., 117-118, 188.

10 Ibid., 32, 50, 124.

11 Shujah Nawaz, et al, *FATA: A Most Dangerous Place* (Washington, DC: Center on Strategic and International Studies, 2009), 18.

12 Abbas, *Pakistan's Troubled Frontier*, 33, 120; Akbar S. Ahmed, *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society: Order and Conflict in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 20.

13 Abbas, *Pakistan's Troubled Frontier*, 33, 34, 139, 187, 189.

14 Talat Masood, "Pakistan's Military Examines its Options in North Waziristan," *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 5 (2010), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=36004&cHash=655d195234](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36004&cHash=655d195234).

15 Rohan Gunaratna, "Al-Qaeda: The Terrorist Sanctuary of the Afghan-Pakistan Border," in *Special Operations Report No. 14*, 14. Although it is not clear how Gunaratna got the figure of forty, it is quite possible that when these groups are added with the Punjabi Taliban—an umbrella group composed of militant outfits

groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizb-ul Mujahidin, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi that formerly operated inside Indian-held Kashmir with the sponsorship of the Pakistani intelligence—the Haqqani Network run by Afghan rebels Jalaluddin and Sirajuddin Haqqani, and militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the total number of militant groups comes to forty.

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