The Taliban Divide: Baitullah Mehsud and mission creep
Alec E. Metz and Harold Ingram

The Taliban is a fractious organization. In their drive for post-9/11 power, they have set aside a number of ideological positions in order to defeat a common enemy. As this month’s actions have shown, even the identity of that common enemy is a subject of debate and friction. This, in turn, has led to a fracturing of the Taliban itself.

Within the Taliban, despite earlier pledges to drive foreign forces out of Afghanistan, the center of gravity in their internal power struggles is increasingly in Pakistan’s tribal territories, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It is there, more so than any province in Afghanistan, that the fate of the Taliban will be decided. Without the strategic depth they enjoy in the FATA, the Taliban cannot carry on their campaign in Afghanistan. When events in the FATA take a violent turn, actions on the other side of the Durand Line slow down, something that has infuriated Mullah Omar.1 The fight against Islamic extremism in South Asia will be decided in Pakistan’s tribal areas.2 A wrong action there, according to Lee Kuan Yew, “…would result in [Pakistan’s] four provinces becoming four failed states. And then what happens to Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal? It’s a horrendous festering problem.”3

The area has always been a thorn in the side of Pakistan,4 and has been especially so in the last few years. As in any area, however, riveted with tribal factionalism and receptive to strong personalities, the FATA is proving to be less a permanent

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refuge than the Taliban had hoped. There have been waves of assassinations, attacks, and shifting alliances; enough to leave even the studied observer befuddled.5

In the fast paced events since Mansoor Dadullah (AKA Mullah Bakht Mohammad) was “fired” by Mullah Omar at the end of December,6 there has been a growing rupture between Taliban operating in Pakistan’s FATA, and those primarily involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. Although Mullah Omar is of the latter, his probable location near Quetta makes him particularly sensitive to the actions of the former.7 It was rumored that the two Western diplomats expelled from Afghanistan for entering into talks with Taliban elements, one British and the other Irish, were talking with Mansoor. This was not because of any new-found love on Mansoor’s part for NATO, but rather because of the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend principle.8 The Taliban and the Afghan government seemed to have learned of Mansoor Dadullah’s double-dealing at roughly the same time, and acted in more or less the same fashion. Mansoor became a pariah in the jihadist community, and no more had been heard from him until his apprehension in Pakistan.

In Pakistan’s tribal regions there has been a steady succession of tribal leaders since the Taliban retreat from Afghanistan. In the summer of 2004, one of the first leaders of the “Pakistani Taliban,” Nek Mohammed, met his demise at the hands of the Pakistani military.9 A Mullah Nazir, thought to be linked to the infamous Haqqani network across the border, was seen as another possible “Amir of Waziristan,” but his fierce fighting with Uzbek militants in Waziristan, with Pakistani government assistance, seems to have pushed him to the sidelines.10

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Eventually, he was arrested in Quetta by Pakistani security forces.\textsuperscript{11} Next, Abdullah Mehsud (AKA Noor Alam) seemed to step into that role, after spending a couple of years at Guantanamo Bay.\textsuperscript{12} He operated under the command of Baitullah Mehsud, but his charismatic and ostentatious nature got the better of him, and he became a target for the Pakistani government after his abduction of two Chinese workers in 2004, causing serious problems in a very vital relationship for Pakistan. The one-legged cherubic Abdullah, on the run for three years, was shot and killed in Zhob in Baluchistan in the summer of 2007.\textsuperscript{13}

Baitullah Mehsud, also of the great Mehsud tribe of Waziristan, is now undoubtedly the head of the Taliban in Southern Waziristan.\textsuperscript{14} Although he was originally thought to serve under Jalaluddin Haqqani, since the latter’s disappearance from the insurgent scene, Baitullah has effectively taken control in Southern Waziristan, governing the area as a fiefdom. He has assaulted a number of government fortifications in the tribal areas successfully, marking a new low for a military government that cannot even hold a position in its own territory.\textsuperscript{15}

For a long while Baitullah operated under what has become a Taliban confederation, or what some refer to as “taliban,” with a deliberate lower-casement.\textsuperscript{16} Originally the tribal reserve for Taliban fighting across the border in Afghanistan, the Taliban and affiliated tribes in the FATA even received

government support in order to pay off debts with terrorist organizations.\textsuperscript{17} A period of rocky peace followed in North and South Waziristan, but it was not to last.\textsuperscript{18} Growing strong in their power, militants inside the FATA, and in particular in the South Waziristan Tribal Agency led by Baitullah, rebelled from a position of strength.\textsuperscript{19} Recently, the Pakistani government has again sued for peace. Even if granted, it will be temporary.\textsuperscript{20}

The Pakistani Taliban has sought to attack the Pakistani government for perceived injustices, and has in many cases been more successful than any Taliban actors in Afghanistan. Additionally, they have been in some cases closer to al Qaeda than even those Taliban concentrating on Afghanistan, as al Qaeda is dependent on tribes within the FATA for sanctuary.\textsuperscript{21} The Quetta Shura, led by Mullah Omar, tried to appease the up-and-coming Baitullah with increasing levels of responsibility (although it is debatable what he was given, and what he took). He proved, however, more action-oriented than his Afghan counterparts would have liked, and after distracting enough would-be jihadists and raising the ire again and again of the Pakistani military establishment (something the Quetta Shura has always been anxious to avoid whenever possible) by naming himself commander of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP-the Pakistani Taliban),\textsuperscript{22} Mullah Omar broke ties with him.\textsuperscript{23}

Now, in the last week, Mansoor Dadullah has popped up again. On Monday, February 11, he was shot and wounded by Pakistani security forces in Qilla

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\textsuperscript{19} “90 militants killed in S Waziristan clashes; Big offensive on the cards; warplanes target hideouts,” Pak Tribune, 19 January 2008 <http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?196308> (12 February 2008). Note the map; it is in fact a map of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, where “Mordor” has been replaced with “Waziristan.” Although the Tribune probably didn’t realize it, the map adds a healthy portion of humor to an area otherwise consumed by war.


Saifullah District of Northern Baluchistan, just south of Zhob. 24 What he was doing there is unclear. On the same day the Pakistani envoy to Kabul, Tariq Azizuddin, went missing in the FATA. 25 The timing is too close to be anything but a coincidence; therefore, the chances that forces loyal to Baitullah took the envoy are remote, and later statements substantiate this. 26 What is more probable is that Mansoor was taken, the envoy was taken, and Baitullah saw an opportunity. The next day, Baitullah offered a swap: the envoy for Mansoor Dadullah. 27 There are two possible reasons for this: first, that Baitullah wants Mansoor as peace offering for Mullah Omar, as a way to reclaim true Taliban status, or second, that Baitullah wants Mansoor on his side. The second seems much more probable.

Although as late as January 25th of this year Baitullah was still swearing fealty to Mullah Omar, 28 the truth is that once Mullah Omar relieves a commander, that commander’s life-expectancy dramatically decreases. Either the Taliban itself silences him, or Pakistani security forces, eager to have a warm body to offer U.S./NATO forces, capture or kill the former commander. Baitullah is independent now, wanted dead by all sides, and he knows this. That Baitullah is willing to obtain, and trade, the envoy for Mansoor substantiates this. He needs allies, and time. Baitullah, although fingered for the death of Benazir Bhutto, 29 is not omnipotent, and despite his recent rash of offences, seems eager to buy some time with either the Quetta Shura, or the Pakistani government. This is the logic behind the recent peace talks. 30


If the Pakistani military is serious about a peace deal, the swap for the envoy (and two other abducted nuclear scientists) and Mansoor can be expected to go through.\textsuperscript{31} Mansoor Dadullah and Baitullah Mehsud will form a truly formidable force in the FATA. While in the short term this will prove beneficial for the situation in Afghanistan, as jihadists remain in Pakistan. In the long term, however, a terrorist zone in Pakistan will prove just as problematic, if not more so, than an ungoverned space in Afghanistan.

Still, this division in the Taliban ranks is promising. Should the tribal element in the conflict be sufficiently exploited, and loyalties divided, the Taliban, like past insurgencies in Afghanistan, may collapse on itself. If Baitullah and Dadullah engage the Pakistani military, it may eventually prompt the Pakistanis to rid themselves of the Taliban, both Pakistani and Afghan, altogether. More than any visit of senior American officialdom, provocation on the ground will stir the Pakistani military establishment to action. Baitullah and Dadullah, together, may just provoke that response.

Carefully observed and managed, Baitullah Mehsud and Mansoor Dadullah’s split with the Quetta Shura can only prove positive for operations in Afghanistan. As in all Afghan conflicts, the enemy of an enemy is a friend. At least for now.

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