



JUL-SEP  
2009

Paper

## Taliban on the March: Threat Assessment and Security Implications for the Region

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*Safdar Sial*

## Introduction

Surfacing in Afghanistan as a group when they captured Kandahar in 1994, the Taliban—students of religious seminaries, mostly from Afghan refugee camps inside Pakistan—were not a completely nascent phenomenon for the world at the time. Neither were their religio-political mentors a surprise, nor their *jihad* roots untraceable. They had been a key part of the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan backed by the US and Pakistan. The Afghan war had already put many of the students in seminaries along Pak-Afghan border, and some from as far as Karachi, out of place, not only geographically between the two countries but also psychologically from studentship to *jihad*.

The Taliban had emerged with an agenda—to restore peace and provide justice to the people of Afghanistan in accordance with Islamic law (*Shariah*) when Afghanistan was embroiled in ethnic chaos after the Soviet withdrawal. Tired of war, the people of Afghanistan did not have many options to choose from, in the quest for peace and tranquility. Being Pashtuns and belonging to religious seminaries, the Taliban did not take much time to win support of their ethnic community in Afghanistan, mostly along the Pak-Afghan border areas.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the mujahideen were encouraged to establish their base camps in these bordering areas. Abdullah Azzam had then established his Maktab ul-Khidmat (Services Bureau) in Peshawar and Osama bin Laden's Masjida tul-Ansar was located in Kurram Agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Centers of Ittehad-e-Islami Afghanistan were situated close to Jaji Cantonment of Alikhel, around 10km from the border with Pakistan. Hizb-e-Islami, Jamiat-e-Islami and Hizb-e-Islami (Khalis) also established their training centers in this area. Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) militants from Miranshah, headquarters of North Waziristan Agency in FATA, used to cross Ghulam Shah check-post to enter Afghanistan. They used to report at Chochi, one of the training camps established by Jalaluddin Haqqani.<sup>1</sup>

Religious seminaries played a key role in the recruitment and training of these mujahideen. This trend continued after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and students from religious seminaries, particularly in Pakistan's tribal areas and the NWFP kept adding to the Taliban's strength. Osama bin Laden had donated a lot of funds for this purpose whereas Jalaluddin Haqqani and Fazl-ur-Rehman Khalil's Harkatul Mujahideen took the responsibility to train the new recruits from Pakistan on a short-term basis.<sup>2</sup>

The 9/11 attacks in the US once again brought Afghanistan into limelight where the Taliban had consolidated their position and allegedly provided shelter to Al-Qaeda militants. When the

Taliban—following the US invasion of Afghanistan—felt that they could not survive the heavy US air strikes, most of them looked to Pakistan’s western border areas for refuge and establishing base camps to continue *jihād*. After noticing this danger, Pakistan constructed 186 regular army posts along Pak-Afghan border.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the Pakistani government was trying to convince the tribes on its side of the border against providing refuge to the Taliban and other ‘mujahideen’ but the tribal people defied the state and supported the Afghan Taliban on the basis of ethnic and religious affinity.

The Pakistani government could not stop the continuity in strengthening and expanding network of the Taliban in FATA and the NWFP despite its continuous efforts, through peace deals and security operations. At times both options were exercised simultaneously. Haqqani Madrassa, base camp of Jalaluddin Haqqani, in Miranshah was sealed in November 2001 soon after US attack on Afghanistan, but Haqqani’s network is still operational and has remained a prime target of cross-border US drone attacks for providing human resource support to the Afghan Taliban. The ‘military’ wing of Haqqani’s network is currently being headed by two of Jalaluddin Haqqani’s sons, Nasir ud-Din Haqqani and Badr ud-Din Haqqani, whereas another son, Siraj ud-Din Haqqani alias *Khalifa Ji*, is leading the overall network.<sup>4</sup> Taliban groups have, in fact, multiplied in Pakistan over seven years. More than 40 Taliban groups from the tribal areas and the NWFP joined hands under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud in December 2007 to form the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) with the agenda to liberate Afghanistan from foreign forces, target Pakistani security forces and pursue ‘Talibanization’ in Pakistan, particularly in the tribal agencies of FATA, and the NWFP. Having close links with Al-Qaeda, the TTP has been extensively brutal towards local tribesmen, political leaders and Pakistani forces. The TTP has targeted even the Taliban and militant groups that did not join their cause in fighting against the Pakistani security forces. As a response to TTP atrocities, another major Taliban alliance, Muqami Tehreek-e-Taliban or Waziri Alliance, came into existence in June 2008. Comprising 14 Taliban groups, it is led by Maulvi Nazir and Commander Gul Bahadur. In the seven tribal agencies of FATA and some regions of the NWFP, the total number of militants associated with Taliban groups is believed to be more than 120,000. The figure does not include Taliban militants present in various districts of the NWFP, the Pashtun belt of Balochistan and urban Sindh. This suggests that the number of the Pakistani Taliban is not less than that of the Afghan Taliban and it is estimated that there are over 200,000 Taliban militants across the Durand Line.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the Afghan Taliban have increased their attacks and expanded their areas of influence inside Afghanistan, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated south and east. Britain’s top military commander, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith is of the view that any clear victory for the allied forces in Afghanistan would be impossible. He says that the “Britons should prepare for a possible deal with the Taliban.” General David Petraeus, head of the US Central Command, also does not see an early end to the war in Afghanistan. He says, “One should be prepared for a long drawn out war against terrorism in Afghanistan.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, since 2006 the Taliban have become more active on the operational front in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. They are on the offensive now.

### **Pashtun Ethnic and Religious Ethos as Taliban’s Support Base**

People living along the Durand Line on the Pakistani side have always remained susceptible to the effects of events in Afghanistan, mainly due to the fact that the people on both sides of the border share

the same ethnicity and religion.<sup>7</sup> Pashtun tribes on both sides of the border mostly share a common religious sect, Sunni or *Hanafi* Islam.

Pashtuns constitute the majority of Afghanistan's population. They are spread in southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan as well. FATA's seven tribal agencies—Khyber, Kurram, Orakzai, Mohmand, Bajaur, and North and South Waziristan—are populated with more than three million Pashtun tribesmen, adding to the 28 million Pashtuns who live in the settled areas of Pakistan and the 15 million in Afghanistan. The tribes on both sides of the border engage in intermarriages, trade and, sometimes feud too, with one another. They all adhere to *Pashtunwali*, the tribal code of honor and behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Several Pashtun tribes are known to have moved from Afghanistan to the areas that now constitute Pakistan between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> Living on both sides of the Durand Line, they have kept their way of life and tribal system intact over the centuries in spite of the pressures from Indian and Central Asian empires.<sup>10</sup> In Afghanistan and Pakistan, where tribal law still has the final say in their day-to-day affairs, the political borders have assumed little significance for the people of the same tribes living on either side of the border.

The present state of Afghanistan arose from the Pashtun tribes at a historical juncture when the Mughals in India, the Safavids in Iran, and the Uzbek kingdom in Central Asia were all in decline due to political turmoil and civil wars. At that time, the words Afghan and Pashtun were used interchangeably, and the Pashtun were seen as the only true Afghans. In 1747, all the Ghilzai Pashtun tribes held a nine-day *Loya Jirga* (grand meeting), in Kandahar, ultimately choosing Ahmed Shah Abdali as their king. Ahmed Shah, who changed his last name and that of his dynasty to Durrani, became the father of the Afghan nation. The Durrani moved the capital from Kandahar to Kabul in 1772 and conquered northern Afghanistan, incorporating other ethnic groups into the Afghan nation. Disputes and rivalries between the Ghilzais and the Durrani, and between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns continued in the next two centuries.<sup>11</sup>

The present day cross-border support for the Taliban is not the first case where the Pashtuns from the Pakistani side of the border going to help their Pashtun brethren in Afghanistan or vice versa. They had acted in a similar manner against British and Central Asian empires. Nadir Khan—king of Afghanistan from 1929 until his assassination in 1933—was supported by Pashtun tribes across the Durand Line in his fight against Habibullah Kalakani, known as Bachai Saqao (son of the water-carrier), in 1929. Historical evidence also suggests that Waziristan has had a special place in Pashtun community, uniting and joining their 'Afghan brethren' in Afghanistan throughout history.

It was again the same ethnic and religious ethos which made the Pashtuns on both sides of the border fight side-by-side against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Apprehending that Marxism and secularism would place Islamic and its traditional values and practices in jeopardy, Pashtuns across Pak-Afghan border took it upon themselves to fight for the cause of Islam and preservation of their religion and culture. Starting in the northern areas of Afghanistan, the *jihad* against the Soviets soon became a widespread movement. Afghanistan's Pashtun groups were vehemently supported by the Pashtuns in Pakistan.

The Taliban's initial success also rested mainly on these two basic ingredients of support: Element of Pashtun ethnicity Pashtun ethnic and pro religious ethos. They had the advantage of a shared language,

Pashtun human resource, *Hanafi* Islam, sympathies of fundamentalists, and well-established financial and educational institutions.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the popular perception of the Taliban as a religious movement driven by the zeal of Islamic fundamentalism, the ethnic undertones of the movement cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the analysis of its social support base. For the ethnic minorities, the Taliban was both a symbol of Islamic conservatism as well as a reflection of Pashtun ethnic chauvinism that aimed at recapturing political power and reaching its dominance.<sup>13</sup> This belief is amplified by the reports to the effect that in taking over Mazar-e-Sharif, the Taliban evidently showed a sectarian twist.<sup>14</sup> Hazara and Shia community did not feel at home in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. Hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced or fled the country to become refugees as a result of the Taliban's rigid policy on ethnic communities. Thousands of people were reportedly kept under captivity for months on the basis of ethnicity alone. Among these were around 2,000 Tajik and Hazara men who were taken from their houses in Kabul and held in various jails, including the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison in Kabul.<sup>15</sup> Ethnic rivalries between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns that had remained dormant during the war against the Soviets erupted again after Soviet troops' withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> The Taliban had now become a new symbol of Pashtun ethnic and religious ethos.

### Taliban Frontiers

Post-Soviet Afghanistan was destruction incarnate when it went through a civil war for five years, from 1992 to 1997. The Taliban emerged as a direct consequence of this civil war when warlords were trying to establish their own fiefdoms across the country. Frustrated young men who had fought against the Soviets and then returned to madrassas in Pakistan to resume their religious studies or to their villages in Afghanistan gathered around their elders demanding action. Under the leadership of Mullah Omer they chalked out a minimum agenda: to restore peace, disarm the population, enforce *Shariah* law, and defend Islam in Afghanistan. The Taliban soon organized themselves into a successful military force, seizing Kandahar in the winter of 1994 and then rapidly spreading north and west, capturing Herat in 1995 and Kabul in 1996.<sup>17</sup>

This encouraged an influx of foreign Islamic militants from Arab and Central Asian countries into Afghanistan, and Taliban's Pakistani fellows and supporters already knew no borders. The support of the religious groups was not confined to the *Deobandis* or major factions of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) but went beyond. Most of the religious groups and parties in Pakistan, usually those with roots in the madrasa networks, extended full support to the Taliban, from their very rise to their control of Kabul and territories beyond the Hindu Kush mountains, when they confronted their ethnic rivals in the northern part of the country. The support ranged from food supplies to money. Young fighters were motivated to fight against Muslims belonging to ethnic minorities of Afghanistan believing they were fulfilling a religious responsibility of *jihad* or holy war against the "infidels". Thousands of Arabs, along with Chechens and Uzbeks, were also part of the Taliban support base.<sup>18</sup>

The Taliban's initially set agenda was expanded by their political and religious mentors. They were increasingly coming under the influence of global *jihadi* network Al-Qaeda, which had a strong desire to keep the Taliban isolated from the world, but too dependent on its financial and logistic support base as

a means of tactic and strategy. Between 1996 and 2001, Al-Qaeda trained an estimated 30,000 militants from around the world in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the Taliban fighters had personal and institutional links with some, if not most, Pakistani sectarian terrorists who had got refuge in Afghanistan. They had a mutual support system and strategic ties that were forged during the anti-Soviet resistance and during their common training in some of the madrassas in Pakistan. A common religious ethos, socialization in the madrassas, an identical worldview, and similar approach to social and political issues in their respective societies helped forge the ties that have survived even after the ouster of the Taliban from power.<sup>20</sup>

However, this phenomenon did not take long. After the fall of the Taliban regime in Kabul, their only option was either to relocate to far-flung areas of Afghanistan or to move their support bases into Pakistan. For two long years, from January 2002 until the spring of 2004, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Central Asian militants continued pouring into Pakistan's tribal areas, mostly into South Waziristan. Pakistani intelligence agencies believe that two assassination attempts on former president Pervez Musharraf in 2003 had been planned in South Waziristan. In March 2004, Pakistan Army launched a security operation in these areas. According to official sources, 46 soldiers lost their lives, while 63 militants were killed and another 166 captured in the operation.<sup>21</sup> The Wazir militants emerged as heroes after the operation, and their leader Nek Mohammad became an icon. He had fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan and then made his mark by helping Al-Qaeda leaders escape from the Tora Bora cave complex. A few weeks later he provided an escort for Mullah Dadullah, who arrived from Quetta to reorganize the Taliban in South Waziristan.

In an effort to re-establish the Taliban regime that existed in Afghanistan before the US attack, the Pakistani Taliban used multiple tactics for managing local support and operational capabilities in South and North Waziristan. The Pakistani Taliban occupied one tribal agency after another, moving from South and North Waziristan to Bajaur and Mohmand. Each and every offensive by the army led them to find new territory to occupy and spread their ideology.

The government reached another agreement with Taliban militants in North Waziristan on September 5, 2006. Although the militants agreed in the new deal not to launch attacks across the border into Afghanistan, Pakistan had no means to challenge or punish the Taliban when they continued their attacks across the Durand Line. The other prime target of the Taliban was the Pakistani security forces. FATA had by then become center of the Taliban militancy, providing training and human resource for the insurgency in Afghanistan and expanding Talibanization to the NWFP.

The Taliban rule in Afghanistan had, indeed, been a strong appeal for fellow madrassa students, militants and supporters on the Pakistani side of the border. Their copycat act in Pakistan had started just two years after the Taliban captured Kabul. Mullah Muhammad Rahim formed the first Tehreek-e-Taliban in Orakzai Agency in FATA in 1998 on the pattern of the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> Instantly after its inception, the Tehreek banned TV, VCR and music in the agency. On 13 December 1998, its 'Shariah court' publicly executed a man accused of a murder. The Tehreek-e-Taliban leaders had soon managed to spread the movement into 18 tribes in Orakzai Agency and also to some semi-tribal areas.<sup>23</sup>

But until 2001 the Taliban on both sides of the border focused mainly on Afghanistan, the center of their “Islamic caliphate”. The Afghan Taliban had a strong support base in Pakistan’s tribal areas, which provided the human resource for their fight, first against non-Pashtun warlords and then against the US forces. If one looks at the composition of the major Pakistani Taliban groups in FATA, it is clear that most Taliban leaders, including Nek Mohammad, Abdullah Mehsud, Baitullah Mehsud, Maulvi Faqir, Gul Bahadur and Mullah Nazir, among others, had been affiliated with the Afghan Taliban even before the September 11 attacks in the US.

## Security Implications

The Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan today pose the greatest threat, not only to these two countries but also to the whole region, if not to the entire world. Already struggling for stability, security and peace, Afghanistan cannot afford to sink further into war. Pakistan also cannot afford a volatile security situation. But ground reality indications are undesirable. Neither NATO-US forces have been able to dilute the threat of the Taliban, nor the Afghan security establishment has been capable of securing the law and order situation in the country. Social security in Afghanistan is decaying day-by-day, providing more space to Taliban militants. The situation in Pakistan has become even more disturbing where the Taliban have been able to expand and consolidate their strength. They have successfully multiplied their human resource, strengthened their infrastructure, deterred the people and demoralized the Pakistani security forces across the tribal belt and the NWFP.

The rising Taliban threat in both countries can be analyzed at three levels; strategic, operational and tactical. Be it in Pakistan or in Afghanistan, the Taliban have proved resolute in pursuing their strategy and ideological propaganda. They have well-defined targets in both countries in pursuance of imposition of their “Islamic code of life”. And they are trying to widen their ideological sphere by convincing the people in the name of religion and ethnicity, offering temptations and deterring them from siding with the ‘enemy’. They are not willing to tolerate their perceived ‘ideological enemies’ which can be put into two broad categories: first, people following and supporting “un-Islamic practices,” and secondly “infidels and friends of infidels.” The former category includes a wide range of people and activities such as girls’ education, women’s movement and employment, music and video shops, barbershops and shaving of beards, mobile phone shops, Internet cafés, NGOs and Western concerns, etc. But the list does not end here. They define what is un-Islamic and punish the “culprits” on the spot. Besides pamphlets, leaflets, letters and phone calls, they have illegal FM radio channels and other outlets to propagate their ideology and terrify the people. Their enemies include the US, the West, and their allies—be it Pakistani and Afghan security forces or local/tribal people who support those pro-West and anti-Islamic elements.<sup>24</sup>

The Taliban on both sides of the border have remained very active on the propaganda and ideological fronts in the past four years. Tens of thousands of tapes and DVDs produced by the Taliban media outlets, *Ummat* (Nation) Productions and *Manbaaul-Jihad* (Origin of *Jihad*), were sold for a few pennies in the bazaars of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, starting in 2007, 151 audio and videotapes have been released by Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaeda leaders so far.<sup>25</sup> In 2006 alone, the Afghan Taliban killed 85 teachers and students and burned down 187 schools, while another 350 schools were shut down in southern Afghanistan because of Taliban threats.<sup>26</sup> In the NWFP of Pakistan, the Taliban targeted as many as 111 girls’ schools, six co-education and two boys’ schools during 2008, mostly in

Swat, Kohat, Peshawar and Dir. About a dozen schools were also targeted in Mohmand, Bajaur, Orakzai and Khyber tribal agencies in FATA. The Taliban destroyed more than 100 music, barber and mobile phone shops in the NWFP and FATA during 2008.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the Taliban have become operationally active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly since 2006. Counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and security operations in Pakistan have failed to deter them. The Taliban's recruitment, training and deployment facilities remain intact in both countries.

Between 2002 and 2005, the Taliban consolidated their power in four southern Afghan provinces. This was the time when Quetta link of the Taliban was not being monitored properly and the focus of security forces and law enforcement agencies was more on Pakistan's tribal areas. Over several days, starting May 18, 2006, the Taliban launched attacks in the four Afghan provinces, involving up to 1,000 fighters, storming towns within 25-minute drive from Kandahar city. Dadullah, the Taliban commander in the south, claimed he had control over 20 districts in the south and 12,000 armed Taliban.<sup>28</sup> They had by then started to establish a parallel government in the south. The Pashtun affinity and absence of justice and security helped the Taliban challenge the writ of the state.

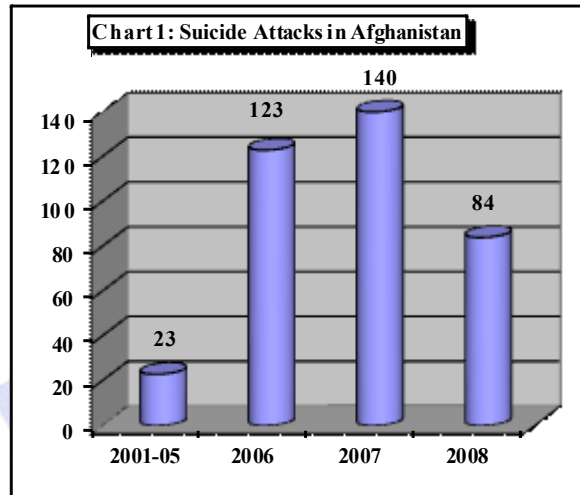
Since 2006, suicide and conventional attacks by the Afghan Taliban have been widespread, with targets including key political figures. The Afghan police remained a prime target for the Taliban during 2007; some 900 policemen were killed.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, US military deaths in Afghanistan started to increase during and after 2005 and 468 US fatalities were reported in four years from 2005 to 2008, compared to 149 from 2002 to 2004.<sup>30</sup>

There was also a spike in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by the Taliban—from 530 such attacks in 2005 to 1,297 in 2006—a strategy which took NATO completely by surprise.<sup>31</sup> According to another report, there were 1,931 and 2,615 IED attacks in 2006 and 2007 respectively.<sup>32</sup>

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Taliban have regrouped and reorganized as a viable guerilla force in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. By 2006, potential suicide bombers traveling from Europe and North Africa to join Al-Qaeda operations in Iraq were increasingly being directed to Afghanistan. French intelligence monitored a new route for militants from North Africa that ended up in Peshawar.<sup>33</sup> Between 2001 and 2005, some 23 suicide attacks were reported in Afghanistan but the number rose in the subsequent years. There were 123 suicide attacks in 2006, 140 in 2007 and 84 in 2008 (*see* Chart 1).<sup>34</sup> Suicide attacks also increased in the NWFP and FATA region in Pakistan during and after 2007, with 42 and 48 suicide attacks reported in the two regions during 2007 and 2008 respectively.<sup>35</sup>

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The Afghan Taliban brought the war into the heart of Western policymaking process when a group of suicide attackers stormed into Kabul's Serena Hotel on January 14, 2008, and killed six people, including a Norwegian journalist.

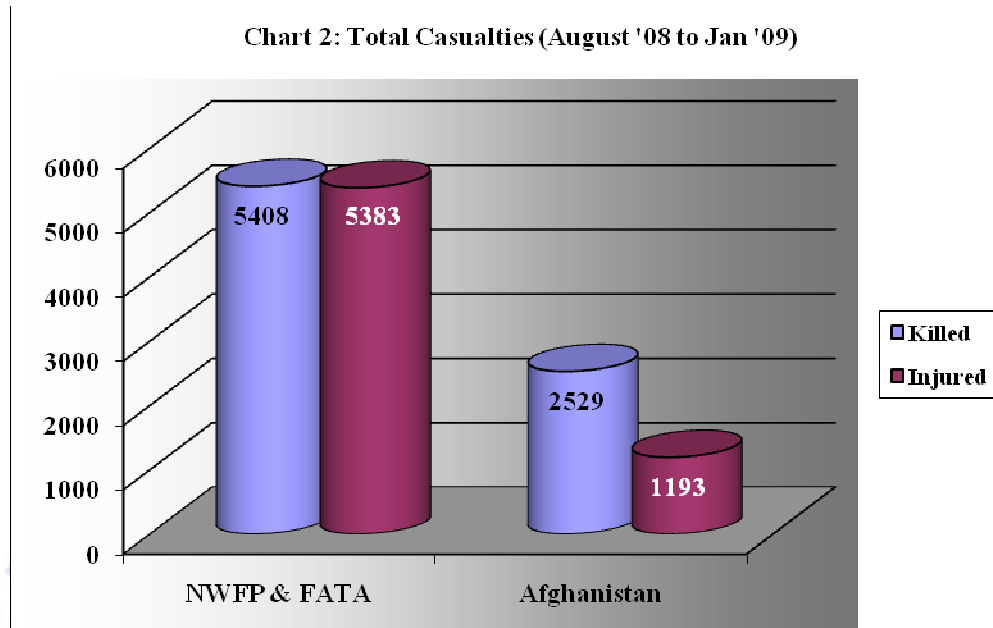
Such tactical successes emboldened the insurgents and further covered the population.<sup>36</sup> The Taliban insurgency has indeed increased significantly in Afghanistan not only on the southern but also the central and northern fronts. This phenomenon is directly and indirectly increasing the human and material cost for US and NATO forces.

The expanding Taliban offensive and the inability of the Karzai government to provide peace to the Afghan people while winning their support, is adding to security deterioration in Afghanistan, which, coupled with civilian casualties in counterinsurgency attacks, is expanding the risk matrix of the country and the region at large.

Civilian casualties have posed a dilemma for the United States and its coalition partners in Afghanistan. On one hand, they want to win Afghan population's sympathies, and on the other, they cannot help but bomb the militant insurgent forces and their hideouts among civilian population. The bombings cause extensive civilian casualties which lead to increase hatred and to fuel feeling of vengeance among the general public against the US and its allied forces in Afghanistan. In total, 4,991 civilian fatalities were reported from 2006 to 2008.<sup>37</sup> The way the US approaches the Afghan problem and the events taking place in the country show that the war may continue for much longer than initially anticipated.<sup>38</sup>

According to a report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "children in Afghanistan suffer more than in any other country in the world from violence, war and poverty, and sometimes become suicide bombers."<sup>39</sup>

The overall casualty figures have also increased in the recent past in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, much more so in the latter. A comparison of casualties in Pakistan and Afghanistan during a period of six months, from August 2008 to January 2009, reveals that in total 5,408 people were killed and 5,383 injured in Pakistani tribal areas and NWFP whereas 2,529 people were killed and 1,193 injured in Afghanistan during the same period (see Chart 2).<sup>40</sup>



Militant activities of the Pakistani Taliban, which were confined to South and North Waziristan and Bajaur tribal regions until 2006, gradually spread to all seven tribal agencies of FATA, and to the NWFP's settled districts of Bannu, Kohat, Karak, Dera Ismail Khan, Dir, Lakki Marwat, Swat and Tank. As the year 2008 drew to a close, frequent Taliban attacks had spread to NWFP's capital Peshawar as well as to Charsadda, Shabqadar and Mardan.<sup>41</sup> In Swat, the government's writ had virtually ended when the government launched a military operation there in last week of April 2009. And more dangerous is the mushroom growth of Taliban groups in settled districts of NWFP. Every group is largely independent in operations, which makes it difficult for the government to identify and target them in its counter operations. Kohat and Swat are vivid examples for this situation. At the same time, the Taliban have increasingly got involved in sectarian clashes in Kurram Agency, Hangu, and Dera Ismail Khan. Their old *jihadi* associates, Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, are part of their activities leading to sectarian violence.

The Taliban in the NWFP and FATA disrupt NATO supply lines to Afghanistan that pass through Pakistan. Repeated attacks in 2008 on parking terminals of companies which transport supplies to Afghan based NATO forces hinted at a change of tactics by the militants. These terminals were situated in the militancy-plagued suburbs of Peshawar and in the adjacent tribal regions. Sporadic attacks on trucks supplying fuel, food and equipment, etc. to coalition forces in Afghanistan via the historic Khyber Pass in Khyber Agency had been occurring for many years, but the first two weeks of December 2008 witnessed organized attacks on the parking terminals in Peshawar in which scores of trucks, other vehicles and supplies were torched.<sup>42</sup> In the last three or four months of 2008, the TTP militants established their base near Jamrud and after an armed clash with the Amr Bil Maroof militants ended the latter's practice of extorting money in exchange for protection from the contractor of the supplies. The TTP militants are stated to be behind most of the attacks targeting NATO supplies now.<sup>43</sup>

Pakistani Taliban groups provide opportunities to foreign and other terrorist groups in FATA and NWFP to expand their influence and training facilities across northern Pakistan. Baitullah Mehsud was

in regular contact with Al-Qaeda, which increasingly seemed to be giving strategic direction to the Pakistani Taliban movement.<sup>44</sup> Militant group Jundullah, established in Pakistan on pattern of the Iran-based group of the same name, has also maintained close links with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Beijing, too, has in most occasions expressed its concern on presence of Chinese Muslim separatists in Pakistan's tribal areas. Since the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in 2001, Chinese officials have at various times estimated that between 500 and 1,000 Uighurs were fighting alongside the Taliban.<sup>45</sup> Three hundred Uighurs Muslims from China's western province of Xinjiang were captured fighting alongside Taliban forces in Afghanistan, and hundreds more Chinese Muslim separatists remained in hiding in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>46</sup>

The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Tahir Yuldeshev's Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have been associated with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, one way or the other, since the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Although IMU is an Uzbekistan-based militant group, during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan it was combined with Chechen, Tajik, Turkmen, Uighurs and Burmese groups because of their similar facial features, general outlook and food preference. The Taliban were very conscious about Central Asian groups because of their ethnic and cultural bonds with Taliban's opponent Northern Alliance. To monitor their activities and ensuring loyalty, the Taliban had put all these groups under one formation and barred them from using their groups' identities. After 9/11 when these groups infiltrated into Pakistan's tribal areas, the same formation remained intact and they chose Tahir Yuldeshev as their Head. Since October 2007, there has been growing resentment against Uzbeks and other Central Asian militants, including Uighurs, in the Mirali area of North Waziristan Agency. It seems that the Central Asian militants—Uzbeks, Uighurs, Tajiks and Chechens—are trying to find new sanctuaries following their falling reputation with the North Waziristan tribes. Their attempts to move further north (Malakand, Bajaur, Mohmand and Darra Adamkhel), points to the fact that they want to remain closer to the Central Asian and Xinjiang borders.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Eight years after the war against the Taliban was launched in Afghanistan, the number and intensity of Taliban attacks, including suicide attacks, is increasing in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The number of civilian casualties in Taliban attacks and the 'war on terror' is on the rise since 2006 on both sides of border. As counter-terrorism strategies evolve, the Taliban are also changing their targets and tactics. The defensive war they started in 2001 has gradually transformed into a brutal offensive. The Afghan Taliban still remain a security threat for Afghanistan with their *Shura* still intact. They have increased their areas of influence in Afghanistan. Taliban leaders including Mullah Omer still remain at large and play an active role across Pak-Afghan border, not only in FATA but also in Balochistan.

The transnational milieu of the Taliban will go on expanding as the war along Pak-Afghan border spreads further. The Taliban's growing strength and weakening writ of the states on both sides of the border do not augur well for the region's and also the world's future. The militancy, which has been bleeding Pakistan and Afghanistan for several years, has the potential to spread across the region.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana and Mubasher Bukhari, *Arabs in Afghan Jihad*, (Lahore: Nigarishat Publishers, 2007), p.15.
- <sup>2</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana and Rohan Gunaratna, *Al-Qaeda Fights Back: Inside Pakistani Tribal Areas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Islamabad: PIPS, 2008), p. 51.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.
- <sup>4</sup> Aqeel Yousufzai, *Talibanization* (Urdu), (Lahore: Nigarishat Publishers, 2009), p. 62.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- <sup>6</sup> *Pajhwok*, Oct. 9, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> Ahmed N. Shinwari, *Understanding Fata*, 2008, p. 40.
- <sup>8</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, (London: Penguin Group, 2008), p. 268.
- <sup>9</sup> J. M. Gohari, *The Taliban: Ascent to Power*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 118.
- <sup>10</sup> Azmat Hayat Khan, *The Durand Line – Its Geo-Strategic Importance*, (Area Study Center, University of Peshawar, 2005), p. 23.
- <sup>11</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 7-8.
- <sup>12</sup> Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *Recovering the Frontier State: War, Ethnicity, and State in Afghanistan*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 3 and 45.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Gohari, *The Taliban*, p.103.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- <sup>16</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 12.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>18</sup> Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *Recovering the Frontier State*, p. 73.
- <sup>19</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *Recovering the Frontier State*, p. 72-73.
- <sup>21</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 271.
- <sup>22</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, *Gateway to Terrorism*, (London: New Millennium Publication, 2003), p.169.
- <sup>23</sup> *Monthly Newslines* (Karachi), January 1999.
- <sup>24</sup> Pro-government tribal elders and groups, government officials, foreigners, and even tribal people (termed as 'US spies') are some examples of such 'enemies'.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2009. Complete data is available at New America Foundation website: [http://newamerica.net/publications/articles/2009/obamas\\_war\\_10845](http://newamerica.net/publications/articles/2009/obamas_war_10845), retrieved on February 16, 2009.
- <sup>26</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 363.
- <sup>27</sup> *Pakistan Security Report 2008*, (Islamabad: PIPS, 2009).
- <sup>28</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 359.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- <sup>30</sup> Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2009.
- <sup>31</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 367.
- <sup>32</sup> Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2009.
- <sup>33</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 282.
- <sup>34</sup> Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2009.
- <sup>35</sup> The statistics are based on Pak Institute for Peace Studies' (PIPS) annual security reports for 2007 and 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 398.
- <sup>37</sup> Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2009.
- <sup>38</sup> Adil Zareef, "The time for peace is now," *Dawn*, July 28, 2008.
- <sup>39</sup> *The Frontier Post* (Peshawar), July 06, 2008.
- <sup>40</sup> Statistics and information on Afghanistan are based on *Pajhwok* reports using the newspaper's archives available at <http://www.pajhwok.com>. Casualties in Pakistan's tribal areas and NWFP have been calculated by using the database and archives of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Islamabad. The casualties include those of militants, civilians and the security forces' personnel in terrorist and counter-terrorist attacks/clashes.
- <sup>41</sup> *Pakistan Security Report 2008*.
- <sup>42</sup> There were 19 such attacks in December 2008 alone. (Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann).
- <sup>43</sup> *Pakistan Security Report 2008*.
- <sup>44</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*, p. 386.
- <sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, *New York Times*, January 22, 2002.

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<sup>46</sup>Erik Eckholm, *New York Times*, May 28, 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, interviewed by the author, Islamabad, January 2009.



## *About Institute*

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an independent, not-for-profit non governmental research and advocacy think-tank. An initiative of leading Pakistani scholars, researchers and journalists, PIPS conducts wide-ranging research and analysis of political, social and religious conflicts that have a direct bearing on both national and international security. The PIPS approach is grounded in field research. Our surveys and policy analyses are informed by the work of a team of researchers, reporters and political analysts located in different areas of conflict in Pakistan. Based on information and assessments from the field, PIPS produces analytical reports, weekly security updates and policy briefings containing practical recommendations targeted at key national and international decision-makers. We also publish survey-based reports and books, providing in-depth analysis of various conflicts or potential conflicts.



### **Pak Institute for Peace Studies**

Post Box No. 2110, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Tel: +92 - 51 - 2291586

Fax: +92 - 51 - 2100651

[www.san-pips.com](http://www.san-pips.com)

Email: [pips@san-pips.com](mailto:pips@san-pips.com)