

A Profile of Baitullah Mehsud

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Abstract: Pakistani Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud is considered in some intelligence circles as a threat as big as, or bigger than, even Osama bin Laden. His rise from a relatively little known entity in South Waziristan to the head of a full-fledged Taliban movement in Pakistan has not only grave repercussions for local security, but also for the Global War on Terror. The rise of this movement in Pakistan is not just a local disturbance, but the phenomenon of Taliban resurgence after their post-2001 setback in Afghanistan, and with Baitullah as a protégé of Mullah Omar taking charge, has international implications as well. This paper will examine the little that is known about Baitullah's personal background, his rise to power, and his place in Pakistan.

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The disturbance created in the name of sharia by the Taliban is posing a serious threat to socio-political and socio-cultural infrastructure of Pakistan. The violence is taking a turn toward sectarianism and ethnic and international unrest despite the fact that majority of people in Pakistan do not support such an aggressive enforcement of Islamic law. Yet, the Taliban are out to prove that power of bullet is greater than the power of ballot. Between 2003 and 2008, 1,200 Pakistani soldiers were killed, along with more than 6,000 tribesmen. The insurgency has spread to urban areas and swathes of territory have been destabilized. Militancy has spread to other parts of Pakistan, with bomb blasts happening in Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Peshawar, Multan, Kohat, Tarbela, Mardan, Charsadda, Swat, and the entire tribal belt. Over the past year, there was the assassination of a former prime minister, and the US has started missile attacks and troop build-up across the border in Afghanistan. All this is a far cry from 2002, when none of these aggressions existed.

With the rise in violence, particularly stemming from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Area, a more visible and organized insurgent effort has emerged and new leadership has come forefront. One such leader is Baitullah Mehsud. Baitullah was recently named as one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people in the world.¹ *Newsweek* labeled him "more dangerous than Osama bin Laden."² Certainly, Baitullah is now a household name in Pakistan and an almost endless source of worry for the intelligence and strategic circles. His meteoric rise to infamy is coupled with a shroud of secrecy that has surrounded him from the very inception of his career. This paper will examine the little that is known about Baitullah's personal background, his rise to power, and his place in Pakistan.

A tribal man of Waziristan

Baitullah is a Pashtun from the Broomikhel branch of the Shabikhel subtribe of Mehsuds. Son of the late Muhammad Haroon, Baitullah was born in the early 1970s in a village called Landi Dhok in the Bannu region of Northwest Frontier Province at a distance from the Mehsud tribe's stronghold in South Waziristan, an agency in FATA.³ While geographically the whole of Waziristan is a single unit, it was split into two agencies -- North Waziristan and South Waziristan -- for administration convenience. This seemingly inhospitable terrain with high and difficult hills and deep and rugged defiles is home to some 700,000 tribal people. The Mehsud tribe makes up approximately 60 percent of the population while the rival Wazir tribe comprises roughly 35 percent.

Religious extremists, both foreign and homegrown, have long been present in the tribal areas of Pakistan. This is in large measure due to the past acquiescence and support of the Pakistani and US governments, which encouraged the mujahideen to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Since the tribal areas

are the natural geo-strategic gateway to Afghanistan, South Waziristan was a particularly important supply route for the mujahideen, helped by the fact that the same tribe lives on both sides of the border. After the toppling of the Afghan Taliban regime in late 2001, Pakistani, Afghan, and foreign militants fleeing from the US forces gathered in strength in Waziristan due to the naturally porous borders.

But the population is not ubiquitously radical, as some Western observers would like to believe. Indeed, most people of Waziristan would just like to make a decent living, as evidenced by the large number of tribals working in metropolitan cities of Pakistan as businessmen and laborers, trying to eke out a living by escaping the turmoil of FATA.

Since the tribal pattern in FATA is radically different from the settled districts in the Northwest Frontier Province, the tribal style of living is different inasmuch as they are governed by the local customs and traditions, observed by their forefathers through centuries. Although there is a federal government representative in each agency, the real local governing power comes from the tribal leaders. The tribal malik is the chief of a tribe with manifold responsibilities including that of a spokesman, guardian of tribal interests, and head of the tribal elders who enjoys immense powers of the jirga.¹ The malik has considerable administrative and political influence within his own tribal jurisdiction and with the provincial and federal governments. Prior to Baitullah's rise to power in South Waziristan, it was unheard of for someone other than a malik to become a leader of such prominence in a tribal area.

The tribesmen of FATA, although diverse in many ways, share some common defining characteristics: they fiercely value their independence to the point of obsession; all foreign elements are by default considered suspicious (including Pakistani forces); and they would rather fight to the bitter end than lay down their arms in combat zones. Yet, at the same time, as history shows, they are prone to compromises if there are tangible dividends available that do not impact upon their traditional lifestyle.

From the outside, the Pashtun man is a delightfully confusing mix of contradictions. He can be a lifelong friend and a deadly enemy, a paradox of honesty and a shameless cheat, a jovial person who would watch Pashto movies, while taking a break to say his prayers. To quote renowned Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid from "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia":⁴

Anyone who has been touched by an Afghan or visited the country in

¹ The jirga has no equivalent in modern political thought. It is a combination of a semiformal court, a think tank, and a social tradition that has bearing on the everyday life of the tribals. It is frequently used as a meeting of knowledgeable tribals has obligatory sanctions on tribals. The jirga also functions as a mediation or arbitration body.

peace or in war will understand when I say the country and the people are amongst the most extraordinary on earth. The Afghans have also been affected by one of the greatest tragedies of this century – the longest running civil war in this era which has brought untold misery. Their story and their character involve immense contradictions. Brave, magnificent, honourable, generous, hospitable, gracious, handsome, Afghan men and women can also be devious, mean and bloody-minded.

The same is true for the tribesmen of Pakistan.

Admittedly, the difficult terrain and the militants' knowledge of Waziristan play into their hands; it is certainly not an easy area to fight a guerrilla insurgency. Even CIA Director Michael V. Hayden admits challenges of the region on close examination. "This looks simpler the further away you get from it," Hayden said in a January 2008 interview with *The Washington Post*. "And the closer you get to it, geography, history, culture all begin to intertwine and make it more complex."⁵

Baitullah's training

Baitullah calls himself a Talib and swears allegiance to Mullah Mohammad Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban. While attending a madrassa in his early 20s, Baitullah was immensely inspired by Taliban ideology, making frequent visits to Afghanistan as a volunteer to participate in the enforcement of sharia by the Taliban.

Other than attending a madrassa, where student frequently do little more than memorize Koranic verses, Baitullah has no other education. This is in sharp contrast to the leaders of North Waziristan who are known for acquiring their conservative religious knowledge through more formal education opportunities. Yet, despite his lack of formal schooling, Baitullah is very savvy. Considered a natural leader, with in-born keen political and strategic sense, Baitullah is leading his tribe against Washington and the NATO Allies in the War on Terror, even the Pakistani Army when necessary. Besides, he has a natural advantage over his foreign adversaries in that he was raised in the rocky region and is very well familiar with the locale, including topography, weather, and socio-cultural traditions of the tribes, language, and religious values prevalent in the area. And with guerrilla warfare, this advantage goes to the local populace, not the "foreign invaders."

As a guerrilla fighter, Baitullah is considered a skilled marksman and expert in using small arms. Baitullah sharpened his skills under the guidance of legendary Pashtun commander Maulana Jalaluddin

Haqqani,⁶ the man who is widely believed to have helped Osama bin Laden escape the targeted bombing by the US in the Tora Bora mountains of Afghanistan in early 2002.

Now with Baitullah in a place of prime importance in South Waziristan, a tribal territory about the size of New Jersey, he is provided ample opportunities to prove his political and strategic acumen by displaying excellent military skills especially in guerrilla warfare and blitzkrieg techniques. He is considered a leader who displays great ability to infuse vitality and esprit de corps amongst his followers, adapting to the prevailing situation.

Baitullah seems to be obsessed with the concept of jihad, which is the militant hallmark. He draws his authority from verses of the Koran, citing those that defend his stance that non-Muslim foreign forces must be evicted from Islamic countries. "Allah on 480 occasions in the Holy Koran extols Muslims to wage jihad. We only fulfil God's orders. Only jihad can bring peace to the World," he says.⁷ The militant leader has been active in fighting the foreign troops in Afghanistan, and the traditional Pashtun aversion to invaders also runs in his blood. "We will continue our struggle until foreign troops are thrown out. Then we will attack them in the US and Britain until they either accept Islam or agree to pay jazia [a tax in Islam for non-Muslims living in an Islamic state]." Suicide bombers are vital tools in his arsenal; he has predicted that they are capable of giving a bloodier nose to foreign forces in Afghanistan in the coming years. "The mujahideen will carry out even more severe attacks. If [the West] have air power we have fidayeen [suicide bombers]. ... They will leave dishonoured."⁸

Baitullah, believed to be around 35 years old, is diabetic.⁹ A local tribal chieftain divulged to *Islam Online*, on condition of anonymity, that "despite his diabetes, he is a very active man and keeps changing his hideouts frequently and briskly in order to be clueless to the hostile agencies."¹⁰

"Personally, he is a very generous and polite man. ... I found him a good person, and felt nothing extraordinary about him," the local chieftain said describing an encounter with Baitullah about one year ago.¹¹

Rise to power

In the early days of the current war in Afghanistan, it is believed by many that Baitullah was involved in the Taliban insurgency, dispatching his men to Afghanistan to fight against the US-led Coalition forces. In hindsight this point seems to be more than probable.

Known as emir, or commander, among his followers, Baitullah was a little-known figure on the tribal scene until late 2004, when he filled the vacuum left by the infamous tribal militant leader, Nek Muhammad Wazir who was killed in a missile attack in June 2004.¹²

His name appeared for the first time in newspapers after the abduction of Chinese engineers about three years ago when Baitullah was an aide to Abdullah Mehsud. Abdullah fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan against the Northern Alliance and in 1996 lost a leg when he stepped over a land mine.¹³ He was taken captive by warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum who turned him over to American forces. Abdullah was sent to Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba and held prisoner for two years, insisting the whole time that he was just an innocent tribesman. He was released in 2004 for reasons that remain unclear, and he returned to Waziristan. Soon after his return, Abdullah and his aide orchestrated the kidnapping of two Chinese engineers working on a dam in his region, proclaiming that Beijing was guilty of killing Muslims.

On Feb. 7, 2005, Baitullah signed a deal with the federal government. Negotiating on behalf of his own group, which was becoming increasingly powerful in South Waziristan, bolstered Baitullah's credentials as a local leader. While the federal government interpreted the deal as Baitullah's surrender, his associates called it merely a peace agreement. One might call by whatever term one might prefer, but it is a fact that Baitullah and scores of his supporters laid down arms in a tribal jirga meeting.¹⁴ It is also an undeniable fact that he was wanted by the government for allegedly sheltering and assisting al Qaeda fugitives in areas dominated by the Mehsud tribe.¹⁵ As a part of the peace agreement, Baitullah pledged that he and his associates would not provide assistance to al Qaeda and other militants, and would not launch operations against government forces.

Baitullah, at that time, explained that the peace agreement was in the interests of the tribal regions as well as in the interest of the government of Pakistan, since hostile forces like India and the Russian-backed former Northern Alliance fighters were benefiting from the lack of unity between the government and the tribesmen. This has been a consistent theme in his communications. He has referred to the Pakistani Army as a national institution that he does not see weakened by infighting.¹⁶ "We understand fighting against Pakistani security forces did not help the Taliban at all," he told an assembled audience of press. "Pakistan has also realized that fighting tribal people is undermining it. Pakistan's enemies are India, the Northern Alliance and Russia."¹⁷ In return for amnesty, Baitullah promised not cross into Afghanistan for jihad.

If nothing else, the February 2005 treaty tremendously raised Baitullah's stature among his own men and established him as a negotiating entity on par with the government. Also this peace treaty allowed Baitullah a respite to widen and further strengthen his support base.

In July 2007, Abdullah, who Baitullah once suspected of being a double agent,¹⁸ died during a shootout with Pakistani military. As the forces raided his residence in Zhob district of southwestern Baluchistan province on the Afghan border, Abdullah detonated a grenade killing himself. Abdullah's death was a crucial element in catapulting Baitullah to the top leadership slot in South Waziristan and its vicinity.

Baitullah further consolidated his hold and established his warlord credentials in late 2007. On Aug. 30, 2007, in one of the most humiliating moments for the Pakistani Army in recent years, Baitullah's forces brazenly captured more than 240 Pakistani soldiers and held them hostage for two months until his demands were met. One day after declaring a state of emergency in response to political scenarios in the country, then-President Pervez Musharraf reached a settlement with Baitullah, exchanging 25 militants in government custody for the captured troops. Musharraf later admitted that these men were trained suicide bombers, and one of them was under indictment for participating in a suicide bombing. As part of the deal, Baitullah agreed to expel foreign militants from his territories and stop attacking the Pakistani Army.

Thereafter, Baitullah's name regularly began to emerge in daily news reports. Some have tended to portray Baitullah as merely an annoying thorn in the government's shoe, while others have consistently seen him as a key figure that can disturb the political equilibrium in Pakistan. Regardless of the perception, Baitullah's influence and ability to inflict damage is raising.

The formation of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Baitullah's strength as a leader was made definitive in December 2007 when a Taliban shura, a 40-member consultative council, chose Baitullah to unify its operations in Pakistan. The council consisted of Taliban representatives from seven tribal agencies of FATA -- Bajaur, Khyber, Kurram, Mohmand, Orakzai, and North and South Waziristan -- as well as from several districts in the Northwest Frontier Province, including Swat, Bannu, Tank, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Kohistan, Buner, and Malakand.¹⁹

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan initially put forward a straightforward agenda, reiterating its stance to continuing the jihad against Coalition forces in Afghanistan as its main point. At the same time, the group

issued a warning to the Pakistani establishment carrying out military operations against Taliban to desist from hostilities and release their prisoners, or face the consequences. In particular, they demanded the government pull its troops out of Swat within 10 days, the military close its check posts in Waziristan, and all Taliban be released, including former Lal Masjid khateeb Maulana Abdul Aziz.

While the stated main goal of the newly formed group is to target the NATO allies in Afghanistan, a “defensive jihad” within Pakistan, according to the group’s spokesman Maulvi Omar, was forced due to the federal government’s activities against Taliban supporters.²⁰

Prior to the creation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Taliban had been merely local groups. By forming a cohesive Pakistani Taliban, their insurgency is afforded better coordination with the Afghan Taliban as well as with al Qaeda. A unified Pakistani Taliban certainly provides both military and political advantages by acting as one and speaking with one voice.²¹

In order to rise to this upper echelon, Baitullah superseded several influential Taliban leaders, including Sadiq Noor, Mullah Nazir, and Noor Islam. It is unclear if Faqir Mohammed and his branch of the outlawed Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM - the Movement for the Implementation of Mohammad’s Sharia Law) were represented at the meeting. A representative of Maulana Fazlullah’s Swat branch of the TNSM was in attendance.²²

There is some sketchy evidence that even though Baitullah collected many of the splinter jihadi groups under the auspices of the Tehrik-i-Taliban, he has not entirely succeeded to keep some regional and ethnic militant groups united under him. One of the aims of the Tehrik-i-Taliban was to coordinate and make joint decisions on talks with the government. Some militants are in favor of halting attacks on the Pakistan military, in order to conserve tribal military energy for the fight against American and NATO forces across the Afghan border. Showing that united Pakistani Taliban are committed to the fight inside Afghanistan should serve as inspiration for Afghan jihadis to follow suit against Coalition forces.

Yet, militants from the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe in South Waziristan are now pro-government and are attempting to remain neutral, going so far as to push back against Baitullah’s fighters. In North Waziristan, one of the important militant leaders, Hafiz Gul Bahadar, has kept a cease-fire with the government, while Baitullah’s fighters have continued to carry out attacks on government troops.²³ Farther north in Bajaur, Faqir Mohammed, a firebrand figure second only to Baitullah, was quiet early on, but has now joined the movement wholeheartedly.²⁴ It should be noted that Faqir Mohammed’s inclusion

in the Taliban cause adds great strength to it. In an area where alliances have historically had a bewildering tendency to abruptly materialize and just as suddenly disappear, one cannot really predict the future of the Taliban coalition. For the time being, however, Baitullah is in a robust strategic position, now having control over the militant groups in Waziristan, Swat, and adjoining areas.

As the leader of the Tehrik-i-Taliban, Baitullah is playing a definitive and pivotal role in the upsurge of militancy in northwest Pakistan, in turn having a direct bearing on the political situation in the country, with grave ramifications for international security.

Life under Baitullah's enforcement of sharia

“People dance to his tune. On his command, they can sacrifice their lives,” says the editor of a Peshawari newspaper on the condition of anonymity.

Baitullah's camp followers give him credit for bringing peace, but detractors argue that this semblance of peace was a creation of Baitullah's mafia, his lieutenants squeezing the local people of their entire financial and other resources. Baitullah was in close association with Mullah Omar for the enforcement of extreme form of sharia dating back some 14 centuries, without being mindful of the changes that have occurred since the birth of Islam. Baitullah's dictates are as retrogressive as those that the Taliban tried to impose in Afghanistan, with a disastrous effect on the fabric of the society.

With porous borders and tribes that straddle both side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the enforcement of sharia in FATA is carried out much in the same way it is in Afghanistan. Civil liberties and fundamental human rights are not allowed in this society, and strict conformity to Taliban code of conduct is required. Music is banned, music and video shops are burned, vehicles if equipped with stereo are confiscated, and barbers are not permitted to shave beards. All of these activities have been regarded by the Taliban as haraam, or sacrilegious.

According to a tribal barber, all hair-cutting saloons in the area have been ordered by Baitullah to display warning signs to the effect that since shaving the beard has been forbidden, that service is not offered. Not only so, those violating this order are punished with barbershops being reduced to ashes; some have been put to death for undertaking this sacrilegious act. “Earlier I would shave my customers, but now I don't. Because if I do, my shop will be torched and I will be punished to death by Baitullah Mehsud,” recounted Hayatullah, a barber in Makeen, South Waziristan, to a reporter early 2006.²⁵ Hayatullah further

mentioned that about three months earlier, Baitullah ordered a couple who had committed adultery to be stoned to death.

It does seem that the inherent structural imbalances, in distributive social justice in FATA, have left gaping wounds, which the fundamentalist project is quick to exploit. Hussein Khan, who owns a pharmacy in Wana, the district headquarters of South Waziristan, credits local tribesmen like Baitullah for some of his good acts. "He has restored law and order in the area. Dacoits and thieves have left the area fearing harsh punishments," Hussein Khan told a reporter for *Islam Online*.²⁶ "Some people also believe that there are many bad people in his militia," Hussein Khan reported citing the killing of 13 family members of the federal government's political agent in Khyber agency in an armed attack by Baitullah's militia in late 2007. Baitullah publicly apologized for the incident, and the militants involved were placed in Baitullah's jail.

"Mehsud is gaining the advantage of indiscriminate bombing and killing of common tribesmen. Sympathies are increasing for him with every passing day. I am not a literate person, or a security expert, but I know that no military operation will succeed against him," Hussein Khan added. "Those who are not supporters of Osama [bin Laden] or Baitullah, even they have been forced by the indiscriminate military operation to harbour sympathies."

Baitullah runs a tight ship. Deserters are summarily executed. Even Taliban not following a tightly regulated code of conduct are summarily dealt with. Similarly, he does not tolerate opposition; according to reliable intelligence sources at least 100 Waziri tribal leaders have been purged on his orders.²⁷

Aslam Awan, a journalist working with the jihadi publication *Weekly Takbeer*, mentioned setting up of a special task force in June 2007 purportedly to crack down on criminals in South Waziristan. "This force launched a number of crackdowns and made a feared kidnapper, Abdul Rashid Bakakhel, free some of his hostages. Baitullah also collected donations from the local people to establish peace. It was a kind of protection money," Awan continued.²⁸

Baitullah has established his own parallel government and has set up his own judicial system wherein tribals approach him for delivery of justice rather than resorting to the federal judicial courts. Money to support this operation comes from al Qaeda and the Taliban. Baitullah uses local clerics and 20 illegal FM radio channels in FATA to enforce his writ.

During times when a peace treaty is in effect, Baitullah uses the opportunity to consolidate his stronghold by giving a sense of security to the locals. This attitude can be examined in light of a local reporter's statement: "Baitullah succeeded in establishing peace in the area. Thus, the local people started trusting him. Unfortunately, the Pakistan army failed to take action against Baitullah's private army taking up the self-assumed responsibility without any governmental mandate for establishing law and order in the area. Pro-government and pro-US tribal people are being killed in Waziristan."²⁹ Sometimes death comes on the basis of hearsay and in the absence of any formal evidence, which is really alarming in any civilized country.

Baitullah's opponents, however, blame him bitterly for the collapse of the entire legal structure, and they despise his ruthless approach towards internationally acknowledged inviolable and inalienable fundamental human rights.

Tribal elements cooperating with Pakistani and US forces, considered as spies, are targeted and killed with impunity. Notably, espionage is considered the worst possible indictment in Pashtun culture, and culprits are rarely, if ever, spared. Pro-Taliban radio stations are thriving in many agencies, and there are preponderant reports of militant camps in FATA. All this implies a gross lack of trust on part of the tribals for the government, to the point where it has taken the form of a militant movement.

One unit of Baitullah's lashkar, or private army, is tasked to kill those who support the federal government or the US and its presence in Afghanistan.³⁰ MI Khan, a journalist with the *Nida-i-Millat* newspaper, described how Baitullah kills pro-government tribal leaders: "First, he would confirm that the guy is an informer and then he would send him a Rs. 1,000 note along with a thread and a needle, telling the person to buy and have his kafan [shroud] stitched within 24 hours," MI Khan said. "And the guy is murdered within 24 hours."³¹

Additionally, there is a wave of sympathy within some Army circles for the tribals, as evidenced by some Army officers and a few Air Force pilots refusing to conduct military operations in the area. Pashtuns are the second largest ethnic group represented in Pakistan's armed forces, and tribal affiliation with the beleaguered militants is surely pulling many of who serve in the military. This has the potential for generating a power base within the Army for Baitullah.

Evidently, differences of opinion exist, as some believe that not much has changed in the tribal areas. An officer of Frontier Constabulary holding the rank of an Army Major emphasizes: "It is a question of how

you look at things. Jirga has along been a part of tribal tradition and cannot be equated with a parallel government. People in tribal areas were already keeping beards. The women were already in purdah. So, you can't say that a Taliban-like Shariat has been imposed."³²

It is imperative to contrast the rather laissez-faire variety of tribal religiosity that existed before the emergence of this phenomenon. Admittedly, the tribals did keep beards and women were in purdah, but this was more or less done out of a spirit of long-standing tribal tradition than an intense religious fervor.

In essence, the pre-Taliban tribal scenario was quite different. A prime example is the number of educational institutions for women in FATA, which even though not well attended to previously, is dwindling to zero. Girls' schools are frequently torched. The formation of an al Qaeda and Taliban-run state within a state is such an alarming development, it certainly cannot be written off as if nothing much has changed.

Baitullah and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto

The assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto catapulted Baitullah into the mainstream. Baitullah was a relatively unknown entity to lay Pakistanis, until an English daily newspaper in October 2007 quoted a "low-profile tribal leader" who threatened to exterminate Bhutto if she returned to Pakistan.

Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the founder of Pakistan's nuclear program, was noted as saying that upon Bhutto's triumphant return to Pakistan in October 2007, Baitullah instructed al Qaeda militants in Karachi to kill her for "three major offences against Islamists."³³ Firstly, Bhutto stated in clear terms that the Pakistani military operation regarding Lal Masjid, or the Red Mosque, in Islamabad on July 10, 2007 as justified and proportionate. The operation involved 164 Pakistani special forces commandos storming the mosque and madrassa, killing at least 20 and injuring more than 100 radicals holed up inside. Lal Masjid remains an extremely emotive issue in the Pakistani radical scene.

Bhutto's alleged second offense was engaging in a vigorous shuttle diplomacy with Washington, and probably as a corollary, she stated in unequivocal terms that if she succeeded in returning to power in Pakistan, she would allow an American search for Osama bin Laden inside Pakistan's borders. This is anathema to extremists. Finally, she made a pre-electoral statement that she would allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to question AQ Khan. Baitullah has indicated that he considers the detention of

AQ Khan over alleged nuclear contraband smuggling to radical buyers to be unjustified, unsubstantiated, and an American ploy.

Baitullah has denied attacking any political figures, specifically denying he had anything to do with the attack on Bhutto on Oct. 18, 2007 and her assassination little more than two months later on Dec. 27. Baitullah claimed that it is against tribal custom to kill women. Retired Lieutenant General Hameed Gul, a security analyst and a former head of the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, maintains that there was no personal animosity towards Bhutto. "Taliban came into being during her stint [as prime minister]. Her government fully supported Taliban and they too never considered her an enemy," said the former ISI chief. "She was personally conveyed [a message] by Mehsud that he was not her enemy. She accepted that clarification that is why her party men reject the government claims about Mehsud's involvement in her assassination."³⁴ Baitullah's claims aside, his involvement is arguably possible, since Bhutto was hoping to return to the Pakistani political scene as an icon of the war against terror riding on a perceived wave of American support.³⁵

It is also an undeniable fact that there was a strong anti-Bhutto feeling among the militants. When a *BBC* reporter spoke to some of Baitullah's men in October,³⁶ days before the first attack against Bhutto, most regarded her as an "American pawn," and some openly condemned her for belonging to the minority Muslim Shia sect,³⁷ which makes her apostate in the eyes of many of these ultraorthodox Sunnis. Many of them are of the opinion that Bhutto got what she deserved.

Some investigators maintain that extremists from radical groups such as the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi could have been responsible for the October attack, and many conspiracy theories abound regarding her assassination.

Baitullah's lashkar

Baitullah commands a force of 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan.³⁸ A local tribal chief has put the number between 8,000 and 10,000 well-trained fighters. Roughly 2,500 to 3,000 foreign fighters, mostly of central Asian origin, are thought to be the forte of his force. With a force of this size, he is no doubt a most influential and powerful person in all of Waziristan.³⁹

There is evidence that the Army operations tend to get bogged down in the difficult terrain, and the extreme methods used by the militants certainly seem to send a clear message to the soldiers. In October 2007, for instance, 50 troops went missing during an operation, and the Army later confirmed 25

casualties. However, local sources quoted by a *BBC* correspondent, mentioned that all 50 had been killed and their bodies burnt.⁴⁰ It is not unusual to have beheaded corpse of Pakistani soldiers turning up.

Baitullah is said to be the man who has masterminded most of the recent suicide attacks in the country. Without discriminating between Muslims and non-Muslims, he has dispatched suicide bombers to kill Pakistani police and soldiers in Swat, Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, and Peshawar. A UN report released in September last year blamed Baitullah for almost 80 percent of suicide bombings in Afghanistan.⁴¹

According to some reports, Baitullah has compiled his own hit list of political leaders and high-profile government officials, and has formed special squads for carrying out such terrorist acts.⁴² They have been implicated in more than 60 suicide attacks in Pakistan over the last year, including the assassination of Bhutto.

In June this year, a person from Baitullah's native village admitted in unequivocal terms that the Taliban leader had not been credited with any victory worth the name, nor has his performance been noted in any significant gun battle or skirmish unlike Taliban leaders in Afghanistan. Yet, Baitullah has a long list of major victories to his credit, including the capture of more than 240 Pakistani soldiers last year and the capture of two important military forts in South Waziristan on Jan. 16 and 17, 2008.⁴³

Negotiating with the government

There has been a consistent pattern of negotiation going on between the government and the Baitullah: there is a military operation, then negotiations, followed by a cease-fire. The cease-fire has tended to be violated by the warlord, and the intervening period is ostensibly being used to either strengthen his position or violate the terms of the peace treat by capturing security personnel or imposing his radical laws on the local populace.

The government forces first entered the tribal areas in 2002 in response to reports of militancy, subsequently discarding military operations, which sustained high casualties, in favor for negotiated peace. Between March and July 2004, the government imposed a blockade on the Mehsud area of South Waziristan with extreme difficulty and protracted resistance, only to enter hasty negotiations in February 2005.⁴⁴ The military at that time vacated these areas with a specific undertaking not to carry out similar operations in future. One bewildered senior government official at the time recalls having asked his bosses, "Whose compulsion is it to strike a deal, ours or the militants?"⁴⁵

While Baitullah negotiated a peace deal with the government in February 2005, attacks on security forces were resumed in July 2005, resulting in a yet another inglorious peace deal.⁴⁶ Another deal on Sept. 5, 2006, also fell apart. Each time Baitullah gets the government to agree to a cease-fire, he uses the opportunity to regroup and plan, such as for the August 2007 capture of 240-plus soldiers. In regard to the subsequent negotiated release of 25 militants, one senior military officer said, “This was a bitter pill that we had to swallow.”⁴⁷

The US has repeatedly voiced reservations about any further deal making, since ostensibly, this has led to the current scenario where the militants are gaining the upper hand. Owais Ahmed Ghani, the governor of the Northwest Frontier Province, has repeatedly warned of the inability of the local governments of settled districts abutting the tribal areas to combat the growing menace militancy. “The government system in settled districts and the political system in tribal regions are heading toward a state of collapse,” Ghani told a number of journalists in February 2008.⁴⁸

Baitullah’s place in Pakistan

Baitullah’s state stretches the length of FATA. The once media shy Taliban commander is very well poised to grab top spot as Pakistan’s public enemy number one, both within the country and internationally in being associated with Bhutto’s death. In addition to his lashkar, he “is now the head of all the tribes harbouring sympathies for Taliban. Tribesmen (local Taliban) from South Waziristan to Bajur agency have gathered under his flag, making him the most powerful and influential person in the tribal belt,” reported a local journalist.⁴⁹

Over the past year, Baitullah has become far less reclusive and is not above flaunting his power occasionally. His operations now boast of running terror-training camps near the Afghan border, and the destruction of a suicide bombing “nursery” in Spinkai by Pakistani troops was flaunted in the media as evidence of his operational strength. Even more intriguing is the evidence that he is possession of state of the art intelligence monitoring equipment that relies on encrypted information to monitor Pakistani troop movement in real time.⁵⁰ Pakistani intelligence circles have so far been unable to decrypt these signals.

There abound many opinions about the exact role of Baitullah within the overall Pakistani paradigm. Former ISI head Gul believes Baitullah is not at war with the Army as an institution: “He is acting against only those who have been there (in tribal area) at the behest of America. Otherwise, if not his brother, I am sure his many cousins would be in Pakistan army.” He insists that the military interventions in the tribal area and last year’s fiasco of Red Mosque onslaught have boosted Baitullah’s popularity.⁵¹ “His

only strength is a tribal system, which has given him so much power. In tribal system, everyone is your brother or cousin. So it's very hard for a tribesman to sit idle if his brother, cousin or even fellow tribesman is fighting." The veteran expert contends that the issue of Baitullah is being played for political reason: "This is just a hype being created by the US intelligence agencies about him to provide an excuse to their force to enter Pakistan and attack," Gul told *Islam Online*.⁵²

"There is no comparison between Mehsud, and Bin Laden or Ayman Zuwahiri. He is a simple reaction or retaliation to the bombings and killings of his fellow tribesmen by Pakistan Bomb. The militants say they don't wish to fight Pakistani security forces because it only benefits the Americans." Gul argues that Baitullah is not the first victim of such a hype campaign.

"He is not the first one who is being presented as a big fish. Before him, there were Naik Muhammed, Abul Firaj Al-Libbi, Amjad Farooqi and Abdullah Mehsud," said Gul, naming local al Qaeda chiefs killed by security forces in recent years. "It has become a trend here to make villains and then kill them."⁵³

This does not make Baitullah any less dangerous nor diminish his power in the region of the world that is the breeding ground for terrorist activities against NATO forces in Afghanistan, the West in general, and for that matter, all who do not think as he does. In an interview with *Al Jazeera* last year, Baitullah claimed, "his ultimate aim is to attack New York City and London."⁵⁴

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