

Tehrik-e-Taliban PAKISTAN

Origin, Evolution and Future Portents

Ashok K. Behuria



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Preface

While interacting with tribal elders in Mir Ali in, North Waziristan on 2 March 2021, the army chief of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa referred to “an uptick in violence and deadly clashes” and emphasised on the need “to remain vigilant and steadfast to thwart hostile attempts to create chaos and reverse the gains of Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad”.¹ General Bajwa spent an entire day with forward troops in Asman Manza, South Waziristan and Mir Ali in North Waziristan. It was days after the claim by Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) on the occasion of anniversary of Operation Radd-ul-Fassad (which was launched in 22 February 2017), that over the last four years, the Army had conducted as many as 750,000 intelligence based operations (IBOs) throughout the country with the help of intelligence agencies including the ISI, the MI, the IB as well as the police and other law enforcement agencies.²

The very day the ISPR was claiming success of operations, the media reported that militants on motorbikes shot four women aid-workers in Mir Ali while in the Shewa area of North Waziristan, gunmen killed one person and abducted at least eight others. On everyday basis since then, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has put out claims in social media about conducting attacks on security forces in different parts of the tribal areas—in Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Lakki Marwat, Bajaur, North and South Waziristan and Mohmand.

These claims and counter-claims point to a disturbing disquiet among the military of Pakistan about the state of internal security situation in Pakistan because of the continuing threat the armed forces of Pakistan have encountered from TTP, a conglomerate of

radical Islamist groups formed in December 2007. It appears to stage a come-back after nearly seven years of concerted army action in the tribal areas starting with Operation Zarb-e-Azb (ZeA) in June 2014 and continuing with Operation Radd-ul-Fassad (RuF) since February 2017. After losing its firebrand and pathological militant Amir, Mullah Fazlullah, also infamous as Mullah Radio, in an American drone attack in Afghanistan in June 2018, it is gathering its strength all over again with its new leader Abu Mansoor Asim investing in mergers of various splinter groups to turn TTP into a dreaded terror machine it used to be. It seems to be undertaking a well-directed social-media campaign to regain its image it has lost among the people of Pakistan, after conducting a heinous attack on the Army Public School of Peshawar on 16 December 2016. All in all, amid myriad Islamist groups operating in the Af-Pak region, TTP has managed to hold its sway as a regional and local Islamist outfit, much like Taliban, seeking to bring about an armed Islamic revolution and displace the Pakistani army in Pakistan, while retaining its interest in global Islamic issues.

The run of the Islamist groups in Pakistan has always been an engaging area of study for researchers focussing on the future of Pakistan worldwide. What makes the subject even more fascinating is the agency as well as autonomy with which these groups operate, and the invisible umbilical cord that connects them to the shadowy and murky realm of intelligence games planned by powerful agencies and factions within the Pakistani state system, which plays a significant role in the permutations and combinations that the groups work out among themselves. All this makes it daunting for a researcher to track and correlate events, incidents, personalities and outfits and arrive at a conclusive opinion about the subject of study.

As a student of Pakistani society and politics, when the first signs of Taliban-like onslaught emerged in the horizon in the late 1990s in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands, incidentally brought to my attention by my good friend Vishal Chandra, who is a student of Afghan politics, I started tracking the phenomenon with all the constraints that an Indian researcher working on Pakistan is likely to have. One had to court criticism and even ridicule while pointing

out politely even in early 2002 that jihadi elements that Pakistani agencies had enabled, through their entanglements in Kashmir and Afghanistan, had started coalescing into a force that the Pakistani state would find it difficult to handle. Many Pakistan-watchers in India would refuse to believe that there can ever be an entity called Pakistani Taliban and would deem it as an extension of Afghan Taliban and hence unworthy of scholarly merely attention. The effort to pull out some early articles on the theme partly, in the wake of TTP's emergence in 2007, succeeded in drawing the attention of analyst in India to this phenomenon. The work on TTP by this researcher went on till it hit another bend on the road in the shape of the attack on Army Public School (APS), Peshawar, and massive army action in the tribal areas. It seemed as if Pakistan had found a way of completely eliminating this menace once and for all time to come. However, seven years hence, through dismantling of the terror infrastructure in the tribal areas and merger of the tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the resilience shown by the entity called TTP demanded refocusing of attention on the theme.

The present work is a result of an abiding interest in the phenomenon of radical Islamist terror that haunts Pakistan today. Through this work, an attempt has been made to understand the phenomenon through study of its origin, evolution and growth. The research questions that it seeks to answer are: Why does the tribal areas remain a problem area for rulers and administrators throughout history? How and why radical Islamism embedded itself in the terrain? Was it influenced by overall emphasis on Islam in Pakistani state politics? What is the role of history and politics in fuelling religious passions in the area? What has led to the survival of TTP despite humongous efforts of the Pakistan army to decimate it? What are the future portents of such a movement? What impact it is likely to have on Pakistani society and politics?

This work would not have been possible without the charitable help of my friends across the border, who would like to remain anonymous, given the nature of relations that the two countries have. The vast body of literature available in the cyberspace/internet was very helpful, although it took away a lot of my time trying

to isolate wheat from the chaff. My colleagues in the South Asia Centre at the Institute deserve special thanks for their constant persuasion and encouragement, especially Dr Smruti S Pattanaik, Dr Muhammad Eisa, Dr Zainab ul Akhter, Dr Mir Ahmad Nazir and my ex-colleagues, Dr Yaqoob-ul-Hassan and Manzoor. I fondly remember the hours of debate and discussions we have had over the issue, which helped me a great deal in putting my thoughts into perspective and overcoming my own prejudices. I owe a debt of gratitude to the library staff of the Institute, especially Mukesh Jha and Vikrant Kumar, who were always there to dig out information and articles from various sources making my efforts easier and more manageable. I would also like to thank Col Vivek Chadha and Vivek Kaushik for their constant words of encouragement through my lean days, pepping me up to be up and doing, when my morale was down.

I do not claim to have unearthed anything new in this work, but I have most certainly tried to collate as much information as I could use, rather than gather, and look at the issue in all its dimensions. As an evolving issue, as with any other issue in the socio-political domain, TTP-related Islamist assertion as well as the Pakistani state's response to it, will remain dynamic, and I would be happy to be proved wrong in some of my pessimistic assertions I make here. I hope this work will be a helpful addition to the existing pile of works on the theme, aiding researchers to develop a holistic view on the phenomenon called Tehrik-e-Taliban of Pakistan and its impact on the regional security situation.

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New Delhi

Ashok Behuria

Abbreviations

AeH	Ahl-e-Hadith
ANP	Awami National Party
APS	Army Public School
AQIS	Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent
ASWJ	Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamat
CID	Crime Investigation Department
CII	Council of Islamic Ideology
CT	Counter Terrorism
CTD	Counter Terrorism Department
DIG	Deputy Inspector General
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FC	Frontier Corps
FCR	Frontier Crimes Regulations
FIR	First Information Report
FR	Frontier Regions
FRC	FATA Reforms Commission
HUJI	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami
HuM	Harkat-ul-Mujahideen
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IJI	Islami Jumhoori Ittehad
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham)
ISPR	Inter Services Public Relations
JeM	Jaish-e-Muhammad

JIT	Joint Investigation Team
JuA	Jamiat-ul-Ahrar
JUI-F	Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazlur Rahman
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LeI	Lashkar-e-Islam
LeJ	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
MI	Military Intelligence
MMA	Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal
MML	Milli Muslim League
MNA	Member of National Assembly
MQM	Muttahida
MSG	Mujahideen Special Group
NACTA	National Counter-Terrorism Authority
NAP	National Action Plan
NWA	North Waziristan Agency
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
PATA	Provincially Administered Tribal Areas
PCNA	Post Crises Needs Assessment
PDM	Pakistan Democratic Movement
PIPS	Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies
PKR	Pakistan Rupee
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PTI	Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf
PTM	Pakistan Tahaffuz Movement
QWP	Quami Watan Party
RuF	Radd-ul-Fassad
SATP	South Asia Terrorism Portal
SNAR	Sharia Nazam-e-Adl Regulation
SSG	Special Services Group
SSP	Senior Superintendent of Police
SWA	South Waziristan Agency
TLP	Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan
TLYRAP	Tehreek-i-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah Pakistan
TNSM	Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi

TSG	Taliban Special Group
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ZeA	Zarb-e-Azb

Introduction

The post-9/11 developments had a profound effect on the militant groups operating in the tribal borderlands of Pakistan. The growth of Taliban-inspired groups in this terrain was too obvious to be missed, even before 9/11. But such groups were largely ignored by Pakistan and their demands for imposition of Sharia in areas controlled by them were treated with sympathy rather than concern. The tribal areas did not beg too much attention at the political and administrative levels. When Sufi Muhammad (1933-2019), who was jailed in Pakistan for sending his followers as volunteers to Afghanistan to fight the Americans in 2001, established his Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi³ (TNSM) in 1992 in the Malakand Division and launched his black turban movement in 1994 to demand Islamic rule in the region, the Pakistan authorities conceded the demands in December that year. The Governor of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) introduced the Nizam-e-Shariat Regulation to placate these forces, perhaps thinking such concessions at the peripheries of the Pakistan state, would help quarantine the virus locally and stop its spread elsewhere.

Similarly, the local administration in Orakzai let off the militant groups calling themselves Tehrik-e-Tulaba (or Taliban) Pakistan in December 1998 after a tame warning. The prospect of a few hotheaded mullahs imposing their version of Sharia-based Islamic rule in different pockets of the tribal areas did not ruffle the feathers much in Islamabad. It was at best treated as natural, and at the worst, as a tolerable and manageable aberration. Moreover, Pakistani rulers were aware of the fact that there was a steady outflow of tribal mujahideen into Afghanistan to fight alongside Taliban in

Afghanistan with the implicit or explicit approval of its intelligence agencies, and therefore, the left-over militants in the tribal areas posed no existential threat to the Pakistani state. They could rather be used as assets both to secure 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and reserves for subversive low-intensity engagement with India.

The 9/11 changed all this as the militant-chickens came home to roost. As US-led operations dislodged the Taliban from Kabul, these militants came back home along with their transnational mentors and collaborators. The tribal areas witnessed a surplus of multinational jihadi elements of all hues shadowed by American intelligence. Pakistan was predictably soft with most of these groups because of the strategic alliance that it had struck with most of them in its aborted Afghan-Taliban enterprise. But the situation was unlikely to remain so especially when the US goaded the Pakistan military into action. The devastation caused by B12 stealth bombers in Afghanistan warned Pakistan of the consequences of neglecting American pressures and the veiled threat from US, to bomb Pakistan to stone-age if it did not oblige,⁴ kept Pakistan gasping for breath as local Afghanistan-returned tribal militants girded their loins to turn the area into a safe-house/sanctuary for international jihadi groups relocating themselves to the tribal areas of Pakistan.

As the Pakistan army entered the terrain under US pressure in its quest for Al Qaeda heavy-weights like Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawairi, it had to contend with local militants who shielded the so called 'foreign fighters'—Uzbeks, Chechens, Arabs, Africans, etc. As the Pakistan army tried to persuade the tribal warlords to surrender some of these foreigners, it came face to face with stiff resistance which culminated in an all-out armed resistance, soon enough, against the Pakistani state.

The developments surrounding this military-militant interaction in the tribal belt against the larger setting of the grand war on terror led by the Americans were covered in the international media with aplomb. As instances of local militant groups imposing Taliban-like administration and justice systems grew, there was a sense that Pakistan was facing a looming threat of Talibanisation. When this phenomenon was isolated by this author in early 2002-2003, it was

dismissed by peer-Pakistan-watchers as an Afghanistan-focussed one and as an exaggerated account of the developments taking place in the region unworthy of scholarly attention.

However, towards the close of 2005, the worst nightmares of Pakistan were coming true. A group calling itself “Pakistani Taliban”⁵ slowly emerged in the tribal areas seeking to replicate the (Afghan) Taliban experiment in the tribal areas as media reports of militant excesses poured in from the area in December 2005. In Miramshah—also written as Miranshah (named after Timur Lane’s son Miran Shah) and nerve centre of Pashtun resistance under the leadership of Mirza Ali Khan better known as Faqir of Ipi in the 1950s—the headquarter of the North Waziristan agency, the local militant group calling itself Taliban executed alleged “criminals, drug pushers, bootleggers and extortionists”, with their bodies hung from poles, eyes gouged out, and cash stuffed into their mouth.⁶ The video footage of it was circulated later bringing back memories of Mullah Omar and his men when they hung some rapists in Kandahar from abandoned Soviet tanks in 1994. While this Miramshah incident was the goriest and widely reported, many other similar assertions by local mullahs went unreported. The local militants—very much like Taliban in Afghanistan—sought to impose a puritanical version of Islam on the populace by banning music and dance, cutting of beard and by imposing Quranic punishments for crimes. A new generation of clerics and militants was ready to push for a “Taliban movement” in the tribal belt of Pakistan. These groups finally came together in the face of attack by Pakistani security forces to form Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in December 2007. The TTP has had a bloody presence in Pakistan ever since making its presence felt even outside the tribal belt in the hinterland of Pakistan.

Over a decade since its first assertions in Pakistan—after nearly two decades of high-pitched military operations (2002-till date)⁷ in the areas susceptible to Taliban influence—as we reassess the effect of such a movement, we notice that the phenomenon has come to stay in Pakistan. It has threatened internal security and posed an existential threat to Pakistan, despite years of military operations, intelligence

penetration, US-aided drone strikes and steady elimination of high-value militants. The resolve of the militants has grown rather than flagged over the years and shows no sign of wilting under heaviest of pressures. The close and complex interactions among Al-Qaeda, TTP and its allied local Taliban groups in the tribal areas, various Afghan Taliban factions and the Islamic State of Khorasan, slowly raising its head in the region, have posed a critical challenge for Pakistani security establishment despite its all-out efforts to eliminate the threat. With the appearance of *Da'esh* or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—an ultra-radical Islamic group in the neighbouring West Asian region—since 2014, a new jihadi context has emerged in the Pak-Af region.

In order to understand the socio-political dynamics that fueled Islamist militancy of the most persistent kind in Pakistan, one has to understand the very complex relationship that has come into play since the US attack of Afghanistan following 9/11, among (i) Pakistan army and intelligence; (ii) Afghan Taliban; (iii) local Pakistani militant leaders who were inspired by and had fought alongside Taliban; (iv) Al-Qaeda—consisting of a hotchpotch of foreign militants from different Arab countries, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, China (Xinjiang or Eastern Turkestan), diasporic elements from within Muslim communities residing in Europe as well as very few new converts from the West; and (v) the Islamic State-Khorasan. To understand the context, within which the TTP came into being and operated over the years, the policies of the Western countries towards the region in the aftermath of 9/11, the approach of the Pakistan military towards Islamist jihadi groups as well as its temptation to use terrorism as an element of its security policy, its complex and complicated relations with India and Afghanistan, the role of the post-Bonn Afghan political system and its response to Pakistan's pro-Taliban policy need to be explored and analysed in a dispassionate manner.

The present volume seeks to understand the context in which Pakistani Taliban or TTP, as it is called now, came into being, the enabling factors that made the growth of TTP possible, the formation and growth of TTP as a militant organisation, its leadership and its

activities over the years, its ideological orientation and its worldview, its aims and objectives, its relationship with other militant groups in and outside Pakistan and the efforts of Pakistani establishment to come to terms with such a phenomenon. There is an attempt to analyse the process and study its implications for Pakistan and the region.

Notes

1. “Normalcy in tribal areas to be set in stone by its people: COAS”, *The Express Tribune*, 3 March 2021 at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2287152/army-chief-cautions-against-hostile-attempt-to-sow-chaos-in-erstwhile-tribal-regions>
2. “Army dismisses speculations on DG ISI’s replacement”, *The Express Tribune*, 23 February 2021 at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2285521/army-dismisses-speculations-on-dg-isis-replacement>
3. Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (loosely translated as Movement for Enforcement of Muhammad’s Sharia) was established in 1992 by Maulana Sufi Muhammad who was earlier with Jamat-i-Islami, Pakistan.
4. Pervez Musharraf (2006). *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, Simon & Schuster Ltd, UK, p. 201.
5. The media reports on the self-proclaimed group called Pakistani Taliban flowed in since early 2006. Some of them are Zahid Hussain, “Terror in Miramshah”, *Newsline*, April 2006 and Declan Walsh, “Pakistani Taliban take control of unruly tribal belt”, *The Guardian*, 21 March 2006.
6. Syed Saleem Shahzad, “The Taliban’s Bloody Foothold in Pakistan”, *Asia Times* online, 8 February 2006 and also see Zahid Hussain, quoting eyewitness account, “Terror in Miramshah”, *Newsline*, April 2006.
7. These included Operations *Al-Mizan* (2002-2006), *Zalzala* (2008) and *Rab-e-Nijat* (2009) in Waziristan area, *Operations Rab-e-Haq* (2007-2009) and *Rab-e-Rast* (2009) in Swat, *Op Sirat-i-Mustaqeem* (2008) in Khyber, *Op Zarb-e-Kaleem* (2008) in Hangu district, *Op Sherdil* (2009) in Bajaur, *Kob-e-Sufaid* (2009) in Kurram, *Op Zarb-e-Azb* (2014-2017) and *Op Radd-ul-Fasad* (2017-2019).

This volume is a result of an abiding interest in the phenomenon of radical Islamist terror that haunts Pakistan today. The research questions that it seeks to answer are: Why do the tribal areas remain a problem for rulers and administrators throughout history? How and why did radical Islam embed itself in the terrain? Was it influenced by the overall emphasis on Islam in Pakistani state politics? What is the role of history and politics in fuelling religious passions in the area? What has led to the survival of TTP despite humongous efforts of the Pakistan Army to decimate it? What are the future portents of such a movement? What impact is it likely to have on Pakistani society and politics?

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