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Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi

University of Central Lancashire, UK, manzarj@hotmail.com

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Geographic Trajectories of Al-Qaida and Taliban Terrorist Groups in Pakistan

Author Biography

Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, LLM, LLB (Hon.), MBA, MBBS, is a Lecturer in Policing and Criminal Investigation at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. His areas of research expertise are the radical Islamist militancy in Pakistan, inter faith dialogue, and the deconstruction of the global communicative jihadist discourse. He is a senior associate editor of the *Long War Journal*, and has authored two books on the subject of the Taliban in Pakistan, besides having written extensively for numerous professional journals. The author may be reached for comment at: manzarj@hotmail.com.

Abstract

Though Western analysts tend to mention al-Qaida and Taliban in Pakistan in the same context, the dynamics of their relationship are far more complex than a cursory examination would reveal. The context of this relationship is best understood within the overarching paradigm of militant activities of post 9/11 Taliban and al-Qaida remnants in Pakistan's tribal areas, where these groups flourish. The military struggle in Afghanistan has significantly influenced the formation of a loosely structured alQaida/Taliban "nexus" that was forged in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), particularly Waziristan. In order to survive the ongoing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military operations to flush them out, these groups rapidly devised a symbiotic strategy that characterizes al-Qaida's ability to subsume itself within the ranks of different militant organizations in Pakistan.

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Introduction

Though Western analysts tend to mention al-Qaida and Taliban in Pakistan in the same context, the dynamics of their relationship are far more complex than a cursory examination would reveal. The context of this relationship is best understood within the overarching paradigm of militant activities of post 9/11 Taliban and al-Qaida remnants in Pakistan's tribal areas, where these groups flourish. The military struggle in Afghanistan has significantly influenced the formation of a loosely structured al-Qaida/Taliban "nexus" that was forged in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), particularly Waziristan. In order to survive the ongoing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military operations to flush them out, these groups rapidly devised a symbiotic strategy that characterizes al-Qaida's ability to subsume itself within the ranks of different militant organizations in Pakistan.

The Taliban

After U.S. forces toppled the Taliban regime in Kabul in the aftermath of September 11, the Taliban retrenched a sizable contingent of forces along the Durand Line (the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan). The Durand Line abuts swathes of rugged mountainous territory, which is a surveillance nightmare. These areas are replete with mountain passes and treacherous routes linking Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are in most cases known only to the locals. It is not a coincidence that the Taliban resurgence in Pakistan has taken place in areas that adjoin the Taliban's traditional strongholds in Afghanistan; the remote southern plains of Helmand Province is one such area, where the Taliban possess the capability to disrupt transport and logistical supply on the highway connecting Kandahar with Herat.¹ This area is contiguous to the Pakistani territory of the Noshki-Chaghai region in Baluchistan Province, where the Taliban have found refuge among dispersed, but sympathetic, local tribes.

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Similarly, even though they have largely been prevented from taking over the city of Kandahar, the Taliban maintain a formidable presence in the neighboring Afghan countryside, which is not far from the Pakistani city of Quetta. Quetta and its suburbs, like Pashtunabad, have consequently become centers of Taliban consolidation, with some sources maintaining that Mullah Omar has been hiding in Quetta, Kandahar, or Helmand.² Similarly, Taliban are reported to use the Toba Kakar mountain pass route north of Kandahar to penetrate into Pakistan's tribal areas whenever the Waziristan route is inaccessible because of increased vigilance by the Pakistani military.³

South Waziristan is adjacent to the Paktika Province in Afghanistan, where U.S.-led forces have a large base in the Barmal region, as well as several outlying check posts scattered around the landscape. Similarly, North Waziristan abuts the Afghan provinces of Paktika and Khost. Reportedly, there are 243 illegal passages in North Waziristan by which it is possible to enter Afghanistan, while there are only five check posts on the border in this area.⁴ Whenever the Pakistani army initiates operations in these areas, terrorists move from one side of the Pakistani border to the other, seamlessly and with impunity.⁵

From Afghanistan to Pakistan

After the United States and its allies launched operations in Afghanistan to flush out the Taliban and al-Qaida fighters, many of these militants used their knowledge of the terrain to escape from the American dragnet. The American operations 'Anaconda' and 'Snipe' for example, which were intended to flush out the Taliban in Khost and Shahi Kot in Paktika Province, only managed to push al-Qaida fighters further inside the FATA areas of Pakistan.⁶ Having regrouped from their newly enshrined refuge in the FATA, these cadres soon initiated militant activities against the Americans and the Karzai government. The initial strategy utilized was the kidnapping of American and Afghan government officials, who were used as bargaining tools.

On September 5, 2002, a tribe in the Bannu district of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) forced the Pakistan army to release six prisoners arrested for their alleged links with al-Qaida.⁷ Sometime later, in July 2003, a Waziri sub-tribe in North Waziristan helped al-Qaida terrorists kidnap five U.S. troops, forcing the Pakistan army to launch its first major military operation against the tribes.⁸ The operation masqueraded under the guise of 'routine military exercises.' American kidnappings had by then become a favorite tactic with Waziri tribesmen, reports of which

started cropping up sporadically in the media.⁹ This crisis necessitated a response by Pakistani Government forces in the shape of 'Operation Mountain Lion' in October 2003, which claimed the lives of thirteen al-Qaida militants, tribesmen, and Pakistani Frontier Corps (FC) personnel.¹⁰ Escalating U.S. insistence for decisive action forced the Pakistani Government to pressure the local tribes into releasing the hostages, which prompted a standoff.

The Shawal Region of Waziristan

The mountainous Shawal region of Waziristan, adjacent to the even more inaccessible Afghan Shawal range, came into prominence after the infamous Tora Bora bombing campaign, where ibn Ladin and Zawahiri were believed to have been in hiding.¹¹ The area is extremely remote; the Pakistani Government had nominal influence here even before the arrival of the Taliban. For example, much of the populace was involved in nefarious activities like kidnapping for ransom, heroin trafficking, and carjacking, with minimal or no law enforcement action taken by the state in response.¹² The tribal leaders in these areas were extremely reluctant to hand over the foreign fighters and terrorist facilitators to Pakistan's Government forces. Consequently, joint U.S.-Pakistani military operations became commonplace in these areas, though the United States refuted any claims of being directly involved in anti-militant activities on Pakistani soil.¹³

Official Pakistani estimates of al-Qaida fighters present in Waziristan in late 2003 ranged from 100 to 600 fighters.¹⁴ The local tribesmen, however, were estimating much higher figures: around 1,500 al-Qaida guerrillas; mostly Chechens, Uzbeks, and Arabs, were thought to be present in and around South Waziristan.

Military engagement in the tribal areas intensified in October 2003, when the Zalikhel and Karrikhel tribes blatantly refused to surrender their al-Qaida and Taliban "guests" to government troops. In the ensuing standoff, twenty-two al-Qaida members and seven tribesmen were reportedly killed. When it became evident that Pakistani forces meant business and weren't taking no for an answer, the tribal leaders handed over about a dozen al-Qaida warriors to the army on the condition of a ceasefire.¹⁵ Early on during this operation, the militants escaped to nearby mountainous regions with the help of local woodcutters and shepherds, who are intimately acquainted with the region. These so-called guides were paid,

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by local standards, handsomely for their services; 5,000 to 10,000 Pakistani rupees (\$60–120 U.S. dollars) each for a safe passage to the mountains.¹⁶

Fault lines in the NWFP

The high mountain ranges of the NWFP, many of which are covered in ice most of the year, have provided safe haven for militants.¹⁷ These areas abut China and Afghanistan, with a narrow strip of Afghan land, the Wakhan Corridor, separating them from Tajikistan.

On October 5, 2003, Pakistan's security forces destroyed a training camp run by *Harkat ul-mujahideen* (HUM) in Diamir, in the Northern Areas of Pakistan.¹⁸ The camp was ostensibly a terrorist facility involved in training Taliban, al-Qaida, and HUM militants in domestic terrorism, and in the blockading of the Karakoram Highway.¹⁹ Besides the HUM camp, other camps sprang up in Ghowadi village in Skardu, Juglote near Gilgit and Konoda Gilgit. A huge training facility was also established near Mansehra in the NWFP on the Karakoram Highway.

According to the jihadi periodical *Zerb-e-Momen*,²⁰ Americans suspected ibn Ladin's presence in these areas at about this time; the subsequent FBI search operations, however, yielded no positive results. Hazarding an empirical observation, it seems that American intelligence was correlating increased militant traffic in the area with the presence of the supreme leader of al-Qaida; it seems unlikely, however, that he would be directing militant movements at the grassroots level in person at all theatres. His presence has been postulated at different times in places such as Quetta, Peshawar, Chitral, and other areas in Pakistan but has not been substantiated. It seems that whenever intelligence reported increased militant activity in these areas, rumors about ibn Ladin's presence started spreading simultaneously, which may have been conjecture on the part of authorities.

The presence of jihadist organizations like *Lashkar-e-Tayyiba* (LeT), *Tehreek-e-Khudam-e-Islam* (TKEI or Jaish-e-Muhammad), and *Jamiat-ul-Ansar* in these areas is quite well documented. Ostensibly, accessibility to Central Asia is one of the desirable characteristics of this region for these pro-Taliban and al-Qaida organizations. This development has alarmed the Chinese government, which sent a list of terrorist organizations of concern to the Government of Pakistan.²¹ Chinese agencies asserted that more than 1,000 Uyghurs were trained by ibn Ladin's forces in Afghanistan, for fomenting separatist movements in China's Muslim

areas.²² Many of these Uyghurs became active members of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a group Beijing asserts is linked to Usama bin Ladin and Pakistan-based HUM. China has repeatedly warned the Pakistani Government of the potential for these militants to enter its Xingjiang Province to conduct terrorist activities.²³ Pakistan's NWFP could provide the ideal linkage to these areas and beyond. It may be pertinent to mention here that the 'liberation' of the Muslim majority province of Xingjiang is part of the manifesto of many Pakistani jihadist organizations such as *Harkat ul-Jihad-e-Islami*, *Jamat ul-Ansar*, and *Lashkar-e-Tayyiba*.²⁴

Evolution of al-Qaida in Pakistan

U.S. intelligence sources estimated in mid-2008 that "Pakistani military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas have had limited effect on al-Qa'ida," ever since Pakistani authorities started operations against the organization in response to escalating U.S. pressures in the post 9/11 period.²⁵ The Pakistani military seemingly underestimated the staunch tribal affiliations and the popularity of the *mujahids* amongst the locals. Consequently, military action did not produce the desired result. After sustaining heavy losses, the government in Islamabad concluded the Shakai agreement in mid-2004 with one of the leading militant commanders in Pakistan, Nek Muhammad Wazir, a local pro-Taliban leader. It seems likely that foreign militants were still present in the area when this agreement was concluded.²⁶

Nek Muhammad Wazir was no stranger to anti-government militancy, and had set up two radical organizations; *Jaishul al-Qiba al-Jihadi al-Siri al-Alami*, which was openly supportive of al-Qaida, and *Jundullah*, which was at one time allegedly headed by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), the al-Qaida operational commander of the 9/11 attacks.²⁷ Nek Muhammad provided the Taliban and al-Qaida the requisite logistical support and manpower needed to reorganize in the tribal areas, and helped to establish training camps in Wana and other areas of South Waziristan.²⁸

Baitullah Mehsud also showed up around this time along with several prominent Taliban leaders, such as Maulana Dadullah; Dadullah reportedly met with Nek Muhammad to express dissatisfaction with Nek Muhammad's agreement with the Government of Pakistan. Reportedly, the Taliban high command or *Shura* decided to replace Nek Muhammad with Baitullah Mehsud as the operational commander in Waziristan; Nek Muhammad, however, convinced them of his undying loyalty, and was allowed to retain his command position.²⁹ Baitullah's name had cropped

up as a natural choice because he was the leading commander among the Mehsud tribe. Interestingly, his positional authority was based on political expediency, rather than on any military credentials. Arguably, the scorched earth tactics used by the Pakistani army enraged militant tribals like the Mehsuds, who started joining the Taliban and al-Qaida movements en masse as a retaliatory measure. The terrain in the Mehsud-dominated areas is treacherous, with steep defiles and rugged mountains. Ostensibly, this hostile terrain, along with the common bond of Mehsud hostility towards the armed forces, motivated the locals to provide sanctuary to a large number of al-Qaida and Taliban fighters.³⁰

After the Sararogha accord with Mehsud, it seemed that the shift in state policies regarding the foreign presence in Waziristan was complete; instead of expelling them, the Pakistani state had to settle for tacit agreements from locals that these foreigners would not create trouble for Pakistan. This would prove to be a mistake; a comprehensive counteroffensive initiative was lost in return for short-term peace, which would ultimately prove detrimental to Pakistan.

The Shakai accord created ripples of discontent on both sides of the Durand Line. To prevent al-Qaida and Taliban militants from re-entering Afghanistan from the Pakistani side of the Durand Line, the Americans deployed hundreds of troops in the Birmal, Argoon, and Khost areas of Paktika province at the time the accord was signed.³¹ In short order, Nek Muhammad was targeted by a missile attack and killed; he was soon replaced by Baitullah Mehsud.

Militant Organizations

The Taliban and al-Qaida were not the only organizations which were forced to retreat to Pakistan in the wake of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan; many Pakistani jihadist groups like *Harkat-e-jihad-e-Islami* (HUJI), along with *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* militants also found their way back home. Many HUJI commanders and warriors, engaged in the fighting in Kandahar and Qandooz, escaped into Waziristan and Buner in NWFP. HUJI was one of the main Pakistani organizations supporting Arab militants in Afghanistan, with its leader Qari Saifullah Akhtar being held in great esteem by Mullah Omar. HUJI's importance in the eyes of the Taliban was such that Mullah Omar appointed in the Taliban government three Taliban ministers and twenty-two judges who belonged to Qari's HUJI. These linkages would eventually 'al-Qaidaise' HUJI in Pakistan.³² Moreover, HUJI would later cleverly blend in with the more mainstream political scenario in Pakistan by hav-

ing many of its militants drafted into Maulana Sami ul-Haq's *Jamiat ulema Islam Sami ul Haq* (JUI-S) party.³³ This effectively camouflaged HUJI militants from scrutiny later on, in the wake of the Pakistani Government's crackdown against militant groups from January to December 2002; at least 2000 militants were arrested during this operation, very few of whom belonged to HUJI.³⁴ Rana asserts that HUJI was responsible for providing the recruiting and networking facilities for al-Qaida, with cadres being drawn from *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* (LJ), *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JM), *Jamiat-al-Ansar*, and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* for al-Qaida's operational divisions.³⁵ To support his argument, Rana mentions that when Qari Saifullah Akhtar was arrested and extradited from Dubai on August 7, 2004, he disclosed these details while being interrogated by intelligence agencies. He also reportedly disclosed that scores of HUJI militants were working with al-Qaida, with several of them actively engaged in fighting against the Pakistani troops in Waziristan.³⁶

Sipah-e-Sahaba

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) merits a somewhat detailed discussion here, since it is one of the main Pakistani militant organizations supporting the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan. The organization was founded in 1985 with the primary aim of elimination of Shias and Shiism from the society. A causal loop of retribution and vendetta between the Shia militants and SSP ensued, which claimed the lives of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the founder of SSP, and Sadiq Ganji, the Counsel General of Iran in 1990. SSP was also active on the political scene, claiming political lineage by independently standing for elections in 1992. Moreover, SSP fought with the Taliban against Ahmed Shah Masood and the Shiite Hazaras in Afghanistan, and is thought to be jointly responsible with the Taliban for the massacre of Hazaras and Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in August 1998.³⁷ After being banned by the Pakistani Government in 2002 because of American pressure, SSP simply changed its name to *Millat-e-Islamia*.³⁸ Its activities went underground but nevertheless continued. This practice of adopting *noms de guerre* in response to bans while continuing activities would characterize many Pakistani jihadist organizations in the post 2002 period. The importance of SSP diminished somewhat after the 2003 assassination of Azam Tariq, its paramount leader, and because of the formation of the more radical breakaway splinter group, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* (LJ), from within the ranks of SSP.

It is important to contextualize here the continuous evolution of terrorist groups; they are usually in a constant state of flux in terms of capabilities, sophistication, and ideology. Newly emerging groups usually remain

under the tutelage of more established organizations until they develop the required levels of proficiency. Thus, SSP at one time consisted of two loosely allied subgroups, namely *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, which acted as a kind of domestic "Shia elimination unit," and *Jaish-e-Muhammad (JM)*, the "externalist" face of SSP.³⁹ Both these groups remained under SSP until they had developed their capabilities, after which they broke away from SSP and emerged as more potent terrorist entities. At least six other splinter groups were formed from SSP, namely *Jhangvi Tigers*, *al-Haq Tigers*, *Tanzeemul Haq*, *Al Farooq*, *al-Badr Foundation*, and *Allah-o-Akbar*,⁴⁰ though JM and LJ are the only powerful organizations to emerge from the SSP schisms. A change in leadership also tended to take these organizations on different trajectories; for example, Masood Azhar and Riaz Basra, the new leaders of JM and LJ respectively, were more radical in their views, and consequently formed more violence-prone factions. Moreover, an organization may become smaller and 'leaner and meaner' after splintering from its parent body, as happened in the case of LJ and JM, or larger groups can be formed by smaller factions, which is what has happened in the case of the Taliban in Pakistan.

The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi model

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi epitomizes a decentralized jihadi organization based on a modern, devolved al-Qaida model. Founded by Riaz Basra, it is "very decentralized and compartmentalized,"⁴¹ and represents the ideal form within which al-Qaida militants can operate freely. Moreover, it is probably based on an organizational model that al-Qaida itself has presumably adopted in Pakistan. The LJ militants took sanctuary in Pakistan after the fall of the Taliban, rather than run the risk of falling into the hands of the Northern Alliance leaders in Afghanistan. LJ was taken over by the 'internationalists' and became irrevocably intertwined with the radical ideologies of the Taliban and al-Qaida. The ideal organizational structure for this kind of decentralized group is the 'cell based' structure. The greatest advantage of this model is security; any given cell, if compromised, ideally does not have information about other cells, and therefore cannot disclose their identity. Moreover, it is impervious to penetration at higher organizational levels, even if compromised at the cellular one. A cell is composed for a particular operation, and is disbanded after the objectives of the unit have been realized. Intelligence estimates put the number of a typical LeT cell at three militants, though it can consist of up to seven persons according to the tactical requirements of the operation.⁴²

Harkat-ul-Mujahideen

The *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* (HUM) was initially formed as a splinter group of HUJI under the leadership of Fazlur Rehman Khalil. A detailed review of the development of these organizations is outside the purview of this study and many laudably detailed studies, particularly by Amir Rana, cover this area. Our concern here is to demonstrate its link to al-Qaida and the Taliban. In the wake of the American defeat of the Taliban, Khalil took hundreds of HUM militants to Afghanistan, many of whom were killed when the U.S. bombed suspected al-Qaida camps near Khost and Jalalabad in August, 1998.⁴³ Khalil returned to Pakistan in 2002, apparently to resume the struggle from within Pakistan.⁴⁴ He subsequently resigned from the leadership of the organization, but his jihadist credentials entered the international spotlight again when the FBI arrested two American-born Pakistani jihadists in California in 2005.⁴⁵ These men revealed that they had received militant training under HUM tutelage in the centre of the densely populated Pakistani city of Rawalpindi. Reportedly, this covert training facility was being run by Khalil, which suggests that he still retains 'international' jihadist linkages. Thus, even though HUM is said to have been marginalized by newer organizations, its potential for helping Taliban and al-Qaida cannot be ignored.

Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi

Another important organization whose role needs to be examined here is the banned *Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi* (TNSM). The fire-brand cleric Maulana Sufi Muhammad formed TNSM in 1989, ostensibly for promoting peace and harmony. However, the movement soon revealed its radical colors when it initiated an armed uprising in the wake of the Pakistan Supreme Court's February 12, 1994, verdict, which nullified the Provincially Administered Tribal Area (PATA) regulations. These regulations had governed certain areas (including Swat and Malakand) since the 1970s, and the governance vacuum created by the cancellation of these regulations apparently encouraged TNSM activists to agitate for the establishment of a Sharia form of government in the Malakand areas adjoining Swat. The state was able to suppress the unrest by a combination of counterinsurgency operations and negotiations, though the Sharia system was introduced in the Malakand area twice in response to TNSM pressure. The flourishing of TNSM was amply demonstrated when Sufi Muhammad crossed over into Afghanistan, reportedly with 10,000 fighters to aid the beleaguered Taliban. His force was routed and disbanded, however, and Sufi was arrested on his way back to Pakistan. Nevertheless, the TNSM movement had already deeply penetrated the tribal systems of

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Swat, Hazara, and the Bajaur agency. These cadres would later form the backbone of the Taliban in Swat and Bajaur, where the Taliban effectively hijacked the TNSM movement. Two of the most prominent leaders of the Pakistani Taliban, Maulana Fazlullah in Swat and Faqir Muhammad in Bajaur, were at one time TNSM adherents. Moreover, many of their fighters, particularly in Bajaur, are from the ranks of the TNSM.

Al-Qaida in Pakistan: A Decentralized Organizational Model

The initial euphoria in the wake of the post 9/11 American operations against al-Qaida, in which the organization was presumed to have been seriously weakened, has been gradually wearing off. Al-Qaida seems to be resisting heightened international operations against it by insinuating itself into other militant entities. The radical jihadist organizations in Pakistan have become one of the main hubs of al-Qaida re-entrenchment.⁴⁶ It also seems that the senior al-Qaida command and control structure has not been significantly disrupted, and that recruitment continues unabated.⁴⁷ In the ongoing imbroglio of events, it has become increasingly unclear who exactly is in charge of al-Qaida in Pakistan, and this complicates the counterinsurgency efforts to eliminate the leadership of the organization.

Even though the attacks in Pakistan against al-Qaida have been effective, killing as many as eighty al-Qaida fighters in 2008 alone,⁴⁸ the organization is still presumed to retain a significant strike capability because of better human and financial resource management, as well as its entrenchment in FATA.^{49, 50} Many reports have questioned the counterinsurgency efforts against al-Qaida, pointing out that despite a seemingly all out offensive the organization essentially retains its potency.⁵¹ Michel Hayden, former Director of the CIA, has mentioned on record that al-Qaida's physical safe haven in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area provides it with the physical and psychological space to meet, train, expand its networks, and prepare new attacks.⁵² Evidence suggests that Pakistan's Pashtun-dominated tribal areas are the command and control centre for al-Qaida's core leadership, which was reportedly actively engaged in planning attacks in the western hemisphere.⁵³ This is evidenced by the fact that both the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks were later linked to training facilities in Pakistan that were heavily influenced by al-Qaida ideology.

Al-Qaida remains so elusive partly because of its propensity to rapidly alter its command and control structures in response to changing circumstances. The difficulty in substantiating linkages is that the organization

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has become decentralized in Pakistan; as mentioned above, it has been surmised that nobody is controlling al-Qaida, but that it has integrated itself into jihadist movements around the globe.⁵⁴ There have been media reports that Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has assumed command of al-Qaida, fueled by statements that ibn Ladin has not chaired meetings of al-Qaida's Shura Council since 2007. Purportedly, Zawahiri has been busy rebuilding the organization's logistical and human resource capabilities in Pakistan.⁵⁵ There have also been reports that the Shura Council meets in Pakistan.⁵⁶ Al-Qaida in Pakistan likely exists in a networked structure composed of small 'cells' found in jihadist organizations such as LJ, as well as in 'clusters' of these cells within the larger Taliban umbrella organization.

This is not a new development; terrorist organizations seem to be increasingly adopting a networked structure in response to counterinsurgency pressures, which allows them the freedom from a hierarchical command and control structure. Another advantage is that in this loose network, command and control can be decentralized, and may not even require intimate geographical proximity. It appears that al-Qaida has adopted this sort of network in Pakistan while effectively merging into a network of allied militant bodies.

Moreover, Pakistani intelligence agencies deduce that al-Qaida, in response to increasing pressures, is now conducting "decentralized operations under small but well organized regional groups" within Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Some analysts maintain that even though the organization is under stress, and currently not in a position to carry out a major attack in the United States, it is nevertheless adapting to this hostile environment by shifting to mobile training teams instead of designated training sites. Pakistani intelligence officials maintain that such decentralized training is effective, being conducted by small groups of bomb-making and/or tactical experts in private safe houses.⁵⁸

Fluidity of Structure

Intelligence also suggests that al-Qaida is now replenishing its depleted ranks (killed or arrested) with less experienced, but much more fanatical warriors. These fighters are being recruited in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, concomitant with an increase in funding and logistical support for the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The new al-Qaida militants enter Pakistan's Baluchistan province via Iran, and then report to Waziristan for training. This foreign presence is amply demonstrated in Swat, where Fazlullah, the leader of the Taliban in Swat,

is reportedly supported by about a half dozen seasoned Arab fighters from al-Qaida.⁵⁹

Seasoned al-Qaida commanders continue to be found in FATA, such as Usama al-Kini, a Kenyan, who was alleged to be the mastermind of the terrorist attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008, and was killed in January 2009 near Wana.⁶⁰ Militants arrested in Pakistan are found to originate predominantly from Saudi Arabia, Algeria, UAE, Morocco, Libya, Kuwait, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, and West Asia, while there have also been a few arrests of nationals from the United States, Australia, and the UK.

As mentioned above, al-Qaida has started functioning as a loose network of groups spread throughout the world. Affiliated 'nodes' include the *Egyptian Islamic Jihad* (EIJ), *Al Jamaya-al Islamia* (IJ: Islamic Group of Egypt), *Armed Islamic Group of Algeria* (GIA), *Islamic Party of Turkestan* (IPT), *Jaish-e-Muhammad* (JM: Army of Mohammad), and the *Abu Sayyaf Group of The Philippines* (ASG).⁶¹ The constituent groups of the network maintain a distinct command, control, and communication structure,⁶² but have the inherent flexibility to incorporate the al-Qaida operational philosophy. Thus, while acting as the second-in-command of al-Qaida, Dr. Zawahiri also leads the EIJ in Egypt.⁶³

Not everyone agrees about the existence of a Taliban/al-Qaida nexus, asserting that al-Qaida and the Taliban are fighting their own separate wars which may overlap but have distinct objectives. "There are two battles going on here," says Ikram Sehgal, a defense strategist. One, he says, involves the American search for al-Qaida operatives hiding in the tribal areas. The other is the Pakistan military's fight against the Taliban movement of Pakistan that has taken root in the northwestern regions of the country.... Though the two have 'linkages,' they are "two separate wars."⁶⁴

On the other hand, it is reasonable to propose a Taliban/al-Qaida nexus in Pakistan; the hostilities between the state and tribesmen began with the demands of the former to the latter to hand over foreign militants. It should be remembered that a formally constituted Taliban umbrella body had not been formed at that time, even though the tribesmen may have been decidedly pro-Taliban. Moreover, many of the disparate groups that would ally themselves under the banner of the Taliban had not yet forged their symbiotic relationships, even though they may have been cooperating in their efforts. Thus, the beginning of the jihad is marked by al-Qaida entrenchment in the tribal areas, and it seems unlikely that the organization would not have participated in the ensuing alliances and consolidation. It also seems unlikely that al-Qaida would have neglected

to reconnect with its former jihadist allies, such as *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and *Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Alami*, in order to 'blend in' with the militant landscape.

Conclusion

The Taliban remnants from the Tora Bora and other allied campaigns took refuge in FATA areas of Pakistan which are geographically contiguous to Afghanistan, and provided easy access because of the Pashtun Taliban's familiarity and cultural affiliations with the region. In these areas, particularly Waziristan, the locals were receptive to the influence of these militants. During the Soviet jihad, the state had led these locals to believe that militants in Afghanistan were 'heroes' and 'mujahids,' and the identification of these same men as villains was not well received. The humiliating peace deals concluded by the state with militants such as Nek Muhammad further emboldened these Taliban and al-Qaida remnants, who resumed their activities in the form of kidnappings, which in turn led to military operations by the state. However, the peace accords concluded between the militants and the state gave the former the chance to reorganize, since the army was loath to enter the imbroglio of these areas, after withdrawing consequent to a peace deal. Militancy was further heightened by the support of many militant organizations in Pakistan, which had been in intimate contact with Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan's training camps and battle grounds, and were openly contemptuous of the state's volte face regarding jihad in the post 9/11 scenario.

The cadres of organizations like TNSM and SSP provided the substrate from which the Taliban would recruit; TNSM provided the leadership and cadres in the NWFP, effectively becoming the new face of the Taliban. SSP splintered into more radical groups, which either swelled the ranks of the Taliban, or provided sanctuaries for al-Qaida, or both. As the movement grew in magnitude, many other organizations of various sizes but with similar hardline ideologies joined the ranks of these Taliban; at the same time, independent recruitment also continued. Thus, these organizations continued to grow in their own capacities, particularly in the NWFP, until their trajectories met in the shape of a unified Taliban movement in December 2007. These problems forced the Pakistani state to engage in negotiations with the militants and, consequently, interrupted trend lines of successes of military campaigns. The result led to uneasy peace accords that would break down under duress of the militant propensity to violate the same by continued kidnappings of state officials or enforcement of

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their brand of Sharia. This is the chain of events that has catapulted Pakistan to the top of the ladder as the state most endangered by terrorism today.

About the Author

Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi, LL.M., LL.B. (Hon.), MBA, MBBS, is a Lecturer in Policing and Criminal Investigation at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. His areas of research expertise are the radical Islamist militancy in Pakistan, inter faith dialogue, and the deconstruction of the global communicative jihadist discourse. He is a senior associate editor of the Long War Journal, and has authored two books on the subject of the Taliban in Pakistan, besides having written extensively for numerous professional journals. The author may be reached for comment at: manzarj@hotmail.com.

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