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The Taliban Divide: Baitullah Mehsud and mission creep

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

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

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

¹ "Pakistan's most wanted: Baitullah Mehsud," *Jane's*, 12 February 2008 <http://www.janes.com/news/security/terrorism/jtsm/jtsm080212_1_n.shtml> (13 February 2008).

² Khalid Hasan, "Restive tribal belt could destabilise the region," *Daily Times*, 9 January 2007 <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007%5C01%5C09%5Cstory_9-1-2007_pg7_17> (11 February 2008).

³ Qtd., Arnaud de Borchgrave, "Commentary: Playing with fire," *United Press International*, 8 February 2008 <http://www.upi.com/International_Security/Emerging_Threats/Analysis/2008/02/08/commentary_playing_with_fire/9679/> (13 February 2008).

⁴ William McCallister, "Operations in Pakistan's Tribal Areas," *Small Wars Journal*, 30 January 2008 <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/01/operations-in-pakistans-tribal/>> (5 February 2008).

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

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

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

⁵ M. Ilyas Khan, “Pakistan’s tribals – who is killing who?” *BBC News*, 5 April 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6529147.stm> (11 February 2008).

⁶ “Taleban sack military commander,” *BBC News*, 29 December 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7164277.stm> (29 December 2007).

⁷ P. Parameswaran, “Al-Qaeda, Taliban leaders hiding in Pakistan: U.S. Official,” *Agency France Press*, 9 February 2008
<http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20080209/wl_asia_afp/uspakistanattacksafghanistan> (11 February 2008).

⁸ Dean Nelsen, “Expelled British envoys tried to turn Taliban chief,” *Times Online*, 6 January 2008
<<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article3137692.ece>> (7 January 2008).

⁹ Rahimullah Yusufzai, “Profile: Nek Mohammed,” *BBC News*, 18 June 2004
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3819871.stm> (11 February 2008).

¹⁰ Hassan Abbas, “South Waziristan’s Maulvi Nazir: The New Face of the Taliban,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 5 (9), 10 May 2007
<<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373385>> (11 February 2008), Bill Roggio, “The Pakistani Taliban Org Chart,” *Long War Journal*, 9 January 2007
<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/01/the_pakistani_taliba.php> (8 February 2008), and Isambard Wilkinson, “Pakistan behind pro-Taliban tribesman,” *Telegraph*, 13 April

Eventually, he was arrested in Quetta by Pakistani security forces.¹¹ Next, Abdullah Mehsud (AKA Noor Alam) seemed to step into that role, after spending a couple of years at Guantanamo Bay.¹² He operated under the command of Baitullah Mehsud, but his charismatic and ostentatious nature got the better of him, and he became a target for the Pakistani government after his abduction of two Chinese workers in 2004, causing serious problems in a very vital relationship for Pakistan. The one-legged cherubic Abdullah, on the run for three years, was shot and killed in Zhob in Baluchistan in the summer of 2007.¹³

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

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

2007 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/04/13/wpak13.xml>> (11 February 2008).

¹¹ Charles Haviland, "Pakistan arrests 'Taleban aides,'" *BBC News*, 8 July 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6281886.stm> (12 February 2008).

¹² "Rs 5m for Abdullah 'dead or alive,'" *Daily Times*, 18 December 2004 <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_18-12-2004_pg1_2> (12 February 2008), "Pakistan puts bounty on militant," *BBC News*, 17 December 2004 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4104589.stm> (11 February 2008), and "Profile: Abdullah Mehsud," *BBC News*, 24 July 2007

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3745962.stm> (11 February 2008).

¹³ Abdul Hai Kakar, "Taleban commander was 'shot dead,'" *BBC News*, 26 July 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6917419.stm> (13 February 2008).

¹⁴ Sohail Abdul Nasir, "Baitullah Mehsud: South Waziristan's Unofficial Amir," *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 3 (26), 5 July 2006 <<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370054>> (11 February 2008).

¹⁵ Ismail Khan, "Pakistan Fort Overrun by Militants," *New York Times*, 17 January 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/17/world/asia/17pakistan_web.html?_r=1&ref=world&ref=slogin> (12 February 2008), and Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Pakistan's Frontier Corps Struggles to Hold Forts against Taliban attacks," The Jamestown Foundation, 22 January 2008 <http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=299#> (13 February 2008).

¹⁶ Harood Rashid, "Pakistan Taleban vow more violence," *BBC News*, 29 January 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6292061.stm> (13 February 2008).

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

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

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

¹⁷ "Pakistan pays tribe al-Qaeda debt," *BBC News*, 9 February 2005

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4249525.stm> (13 February 2005).

¹⁸ Arthur Bright, "Pakistan Signs Peace Deal With Pro-Taliban Militants," *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 September 2006 <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0906/dailyUpdate.html>> (11 February 2008), and Dilawar Khan Wazir, "Amnesty granted to militant leader," *Dawn*, 8 February 2005 <<http://www.dawn.com/2005/02/08/top7.htm>> (12 February 2005).

¹⁹ "90 militants killed in S Waziristan clashes; Big offensive on the cards; warplanes target hideouts," *Pak Tribune*, 19 January 2008

<<http://www.paktribune.com/news/index.shtml?196308>> (12 February 2008). Note the map; it is in fact a map of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth, where "Mordor" has been replaced with "Waziristan." Although the *Tribune* probably didn't realize it, the map adds a healthy portion of humor to an area otherwise consumed by war.

²⁰ Bill Roggio, "Operations in South Waziristan halted for peace talks," *Long War Journal*, 2 February 2008 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/02/operations_in_south.php> (12 February 2008).

²¹ "Pakistan's most wanted: Baitullah Mehsud," *Jane's*, 12 February 2008 <http://www.janes.com/news/security/terrorism/jtms/jtms080212_1_n.shtml> (13 February 2008).

²² Bill Roggio, "Pakistani Taliban unites under Baitullah Mehsud," *Long War Journal*, 15 December 2008 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/pakistani_taliban_un.php> (11 February 2008).

²³ "Baitullah is on his own, say Afghan Taliban," *Dawn*, 28 January 2008 <<http://www.dawn.com/2008/01/29/top18.htm>> (29 January 2008).

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

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

²⁴ Matthew Pennington, "Senior Taliban figure caught in Pakistan," *Associated Press*, 11 February 2008

<http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080211/ap_on_re_as/pakistan_violence;_ylt=AgHsyFp2y3v67r_otvoRik1bbBAF> (11 February 2008), and Saleem Shahid, "Taliban commander Dadullah captured," *Dawn*, 11 February 2008 <<http://www.dawn.com/2008/02/12/top2.htm>> (11 February 2008).

²⁵ "Pakistani ambassador goes missing," *BBC News*, 11 February 2008

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7239555.stm> (11 February 2008).

²⁶ "Taliban denies kidnapping Pakistani envoy," *Reuters*, 13 February 2008

<<http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKISL2823120080213?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>> (14 February 2008).

²⁷ "The posthumous poll," *The Economist*, 14 February 2008

<http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10696056> (14 February 2008).

²⁸ Ahmad Zaydan, "Interview with Baitullah Mehsud," *Al Jazeera*, aired 25 January 2008.

²⁹ Alec Metz, "The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto," *Culture & Conflict Review*, Vol. 2 (1), January 2008 <<http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Journal/Jan08/Metz.html>> (13 February 2008).

³⁰ "Pakistan Taliban declare truce, military denies it," *Reuters*, 6 February 2008

<<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SP200286.htm>> (11 February 2008), Ishtiaq Mahsud, "Secret Talks Led to Pakistan Cease-Fire," *Associated Press*, 7 February 2008 <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5jIE0IUn4WliaMBpjG8SI_6H5RXzgD8ULDPHO0> (11 February 2008), and Laura King, "Taliban truce before Pakistani elections," *Sidney Morning*

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

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

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

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Herald, 8 February 2008 <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/taliban-truce-before-pakistani-elections/2008/02/07/1202234065755.html>> (11 February 2008).

³¹ Jo Johnson and Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan hunts for diplomat," *Financial Times*, 12 February 2008 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/de48935e-d97a-11dc-bd4d-0000779fd2ac.html>> (12 February 2008).