

## Propaganda and Peace Deals: The Taliban's Information War in Pakistan

By Arthur Keller

IN EARLY 2008, the United States announced that it would invest \$400 million to train and equip Pakistan's Frontier Corps (FC) to combat the Pakistani Taliban and slow cross-border attacks into Afghanistan. U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region rely on Pakistani troops, such as those from the under-equipped FC, to control the border in the violent Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).<sup>1</sup> Most FC units—such as the Tochi Scouts—are composed of indigenous Pashtun levies.

Unfortunately, Pakistani soldiers are being actively targeted by the Pakistani Taliban's propaganda efforts, often with disturbing effectiveness. To realistically understand U.S. options in Pakistan, one must understand the impact of the Taliban's propaganda and intimidation tactics in FATA, and why these tactics have caused the Pakistani government to resort to ineffective "peace deals" with Taliban-affiliated fighters. These realities mean that U.S. assistance to Pakistan's FC is unlikely to curtail the Taliban's increasing influence.

### The Taliban's Message

Amat studios is the Pakistani Taliban's production studio. It churns out a steady stream of propaganda aimed at the local Pashtun populace and the Pakistani armed forces. Amat's videos, generally in Pashtu or Urdu, seem to be intended for domestic consumption, although senior Taliban members have said they will soon be appearing on "You Tube." One Amat video, "Clean Army," hit the market in 2006.<sup>2</sup> The video starts with a clip of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf addressing assembled Pakistani Army officers,

1 Hassan Abbas, "Transforming Pakistan's Frontier Corps," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:6 (2007).

2 "Clean Army" is an untitled Amat studios video designated "Clean Army" because of the accusations of ethnic cleansing against the Pakistani Army. The video was transcribed by the author in May 2006.

which morphs into a computer graphic of a box of laundry detergent. The box is easily recognizable as the most popular brand in Pakistan. On this soap box, however, are words in English and Urdu for "Pak Force" or "Pak Foj" (common shorthand for the Pakistani Army) with a logo saying "Pervez" (a logo which later turns into "Bush"). The voiceover of the pseudo-commercial exclaims:

Slaves (infidels) you can buy the Pakistan Army for 25 rupees a box! For cleaning all Muslims! They are the best in destruction. Just say their name and ask for it. Look at the pictures and buy it. They are smarter than the devil.

The voiceover terminates with a sinister chuckle. Yet, "Clean Army" is only warming up. Next, it laments that the United States broke the promises it made to Pakistan for a better life for its citizens:

Now all of those four years have passed but none of the promises have been fulfilled...Economics and life in Pakistan speaks for itself, which needs no proof: Gas which was 30 rupees in 2001 per liter is now 70 rupees because of friendship with Bush. Sugar which was 20 rupees per kilo is now 35 rupees a kilo. There are a lot of other examples. Even ignorant people can see the difference between then and now.

The video finishes with a snuff-film ending. The viewer sees clips of Pakistani General Khattak,<sup>3</sup> leader of the 2005 army campaign in South Waziristan. Then comes shaky low-light footage dated January 7, 2006. The location is Mir Ali, a small city in North Waziristan. Cries of "Allahu Akhbar" (God is Great) ring out to

3 Khattak was in charge of the Pakistani Army raids into South Waziristan in 2005, raids renowned for the amount of ill will they generated in the local Pashtun populace because of the popular perception that the Pakistani Army used their helicopter gunships and artillery indiscriminately, causing many civilian casualties. Khattak was also prominent in calling for a peace deal with local militants after the Waziristan offensive, a deal that is now widely acknowledged to have created a safe haven for the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qa`ida. Khattak is currently in charge of the efforts, funded with U.S. dollars, to improve the Frontier Corps.

the accompaniment of gunfire: the Pakistani Taliban are attacking a Tochi Scouts checkpoint. The video jumps to the aftermath, in which the checkpoint has been overrun and close-up shots of corpses with the Tochi Scouts' uniforms are clearly visible. The Taliban videographer zooms to a nauseating view of one of the Scout's corpses, his head smashed open and his brain clearly visible, as is the nametag on the uniform: "Tahir Iqbal." In the eerie light from fires of the burning camp, surrounded by charred and bloody Tochi Scout corpses, one of the Pakistani Taliban, spectrally lit with the green glow of low-light cameras, delivers a monologue aimed directly at every Pakistani Army or FC soldier that sees the video:

We want the "Pak Force" to understand their goals and not to give in to the Jews and Bush and go to hell for their doings. Listen and understand the meaning of belief, being clean, and jihad in the way of Allah. Think about your life after death. Army mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers, and family: make your children understand. You are a mother or father of the army, you have wished that your son sacrifice themselves for their country, and be successful. But today your sons have joined the infidels and the American flag and they are fighting with mujahidin and ruining the life and afterlife, and will go to hell. Would you like this to happen to your loved ones?

Labeling a box of soap "Pak Army" and saying that the army is "cleansing" brother Muslims is a simple but devastating accusation in a Muslim country. To many Muslims in the Pakistani military, the dual threat of brutal death and hellfire earned by siding with "infidels" against the umma has a dispiriting effect, and nowhere more so than in FATA.

Other Amat videos cleverly exploit local customs. One video, "Ansar,"<sup>4</sup> goes into details on the duty of Pashtuns to shelter

4 "Ansar" is an untitled Amat studios video designated "Ansar" because of the discussions of the need to harbor al-Qa`ida. The video was transcribed by the author in May 2006.

al-Qa`ida, specifically playing on Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code, and the duty of Pashtuns to provide *milmastbia*, which loosely translates as “hospitality,” to al-Qa`ida guests.<sup>5</sup> Another Amat video, “Snake,” reinforces the evil of the United States and its allies. The opening scene is a rattlesnake morphing into President Bush.<sup>6</sup> The video displays houses in Waziristan demolished by the 2005 Pakistani Army offensive. One voiceover states that the demolished house belonged to a widowed mother of four. Another clip shows an interview of a young boy who explains that he has been orphaned and wants to become a jihadist. Passionate appeals for local tribesmen to take up arms against the Pakistani government are a constant theme in “Snake.” The Taliban’s propaganda in FATA also extends beyond videos. Dozens of unregulated or “black” low wattage radio stations spew extremist propaganda in almost every valley of FATA.

In conjunction with these propaganda vehicles, the Taliban have made a practice of attacking alternate sources of information, such as newsstands. To further control the information environment, Pakistani journalists in FATA have been assassinated for writing articles of which the Taliban did not approve. There has also been a campaign of intimidation aimed at the local Pashtun tribal leaders, who are called maliks. In Afghanistan, the Taliban have long employed “night letters,” crude notices posted in public places or nailed to buildings threatening death for those who cross the Taliban.<sup>7</sup> The Pakistani Taliban also make prolific use of night letters to warn off maliks who might be inclined to cooperate with the Pakistani government against the Taliban. Maliks who have failed to heed the threatening letters have been summarily executed by the Taliban.

Added to the assaults on the maliks is the regular killing of ordinary Pashtun tribesmen by the Taliban. These killings

are generally motivated by revenge or money, but the targets are left dead by the side of the road with “American Spy” pinned to their jacket. The dead men rarely had any connection to the United States, but their corpses nevertheless are chillingly effective psychological warfare.

Despite many outlandish claims and inconsistencies in Amat videos, the paucity of contradictory information flowing into FATA as well as the complete dominance of the Taliban’s message means that the Taliban’s twisted version of events is often the

**“To many Muslims in the Pakistani military, the dual threat of brutal death and hellfire earned by siding with ‘infidels’ against the umma has a dispiriting effect, and nowhere more so than in FATA.”**

only one heard.<sup>8</sup> How seriously is the Pakistani Taliban about spreading its propaganda? Tehrik-i-Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud recently announced a major propaganda push and stated, “The media war is the real war.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Pakistani authorities have shown little ability to curtail this media war. For example, the “Clean Army” video included the name, location in the Wana bazaar, and phone number of the video distributor. The distributor obviously has no fear of Pakistan Army soldiers even though his wares openly advocate their death.

**Are the Taliban’s Tactics Successful?**

Overall, the Taliban’s tactics are working. The average FC soldier, having seen videos of fellow soldiers brutally

killed, becomes ever more unwilling to oppose the Taliban. The malaise injected into Pakistan’s military has long since spread from the paramilitary FC units such as the Tochi Scouts into Pakistan’s regular army. In 2007, India’s security and intelligence establishment noted that Pakistani Army troops in FATA have “unprecedented levels of desertions, suicides, and discharge applications.” In the space of just five days in October 2007, the Pakistani Army allegedly suffered 150 desertions.<sup>10</sup>

Even stronger evidence of disaffection was the 2007 surrender of 250 Pakistani soldiers to a few dozen militants in South Waziristan without a single shot being fired. In January 2008, an entire checkpoint of 40 soldiers surrendered their post to Taliban militants, again without a single shot fired.<sup>11</sup> Apathy and risk aversion are pervasive in the Pakistani military.

The Taliban are not universally welcomed in FATA and their brutal tactics have excited considerable resentment among many Pashtun tribesmen. Unfortunately, that resentment does not mean the Taliban’s grip on power is weakening. The usual avenue for Pashtun tribesmen living in FATA to deal with physical threats is the formation of a *lashkar*, an informal tribal army. The assassination campaign against maliks suggests that a *lashkar* to oppose the Taliban probably will never be formed; many of the maliks who could lead such a *lashkar* are dead, others are cowed into inaction by the body count.

**U.S. Assistance Unlikely to Make Impact**

Although the United States declared it will invest \$400 million to train and equip FC troops to combat the Pakistani Taliban and slow cross-border attacks into Afghanistan, even in the best of circumstances it would be hard to get FC troops to actively engage the Taliban; in fact, many of the FC troops are related to Taliban members.<sup>12</sup> After factoring in the FC’s demoralization, it becomes evident that no amount of training and

5 “Pashtun Tribes Live by Their Own Set of Rules,” PashtunFoundation.org, date unknown.

6 “Snake” is an untitled Amat studios video designated “Snake” because of the opening sequences showing film of a rattlesnake. The video was transcribed by the author in May 2006.

7 Declan Walsh, “Night Letters from Taliban Threaten Afghan Democracy,” *Guardian*, September 19, 2004.

8 Just a few of those claims include that the United States has 10,000 troops in Pakistan, that Musharraf has given the CIA 74 bases in Pakistan, that the U.S. battle against Islamic extremism is actually a systematic effort by Christendom to destroy Islam worldwide and contains the clear implication that the West wants to enslave Muslims lands.

9 Iqbal Khattak, “Media War is Real War: Mehsud,” *Daily Times*, May 27, 2008.

10 Rajat Pandit, “Multiple Conflicts Bleed Pak Army,” *Times of India*, October 31, 2007.

11 Bill Roggio, “Pakistan Troops Abandon Second Fort in South Waziristan,” *The Long War Journal*, January 17, 2008.

12 “US to Spend Over \$400m to Enhance the FC,” *The News*, March 3, 2008.

equipment will likely be able to overcome the pull of local ties, when combined with the fear and guilt engendered by the Taliban's intimidation tactics and propaganda. Marksmanship classes or Kevlar vests will not change the social realities on the ground, or the near total information dominance of the Taliban in FATA. The likelihood of a return on the \$400 million investment is low.<sup>13</sup>

The Taliban's morale-destroying propaganda also has important implications for the various peace deals being negotiated with Pakistani Taliban in FATA. These deals are "bait and switch" scams. For example, the North Waziristan Accord of 2006 required the

**"The average FC soldier, having seen videos of fellow soldiers brutally killed, becomes ever more unwilling to oppose the Taliban."**

Pakistani Army to be withdrawn from many areas, to be replaced by expanded FC units. Another recent example is the 2008 peace deal with Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud (a deal that came even after Mehsud was accused of arranging the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto). The deal withdraws regular army troops from the Mehsud areas of South Waziristan and instead gives the FC "freedom of movement." Missing was any mention of how the FC will enforce the provisions of the agreement.<sup>14</sup> Reliance on FC units for "enforcement" is one big reason all agreements with the Taliban are dead letters.

In some cases, the various Pakistan-Taliban peace agreements now under

<sup>13</sup> The United States has tried training Pakistani soldiers before, to hunt al-Qa`ida in Afghanistan. The unit never saw action, but became an informal guard for President Nawaz Sharif and later dissolved, never having gone after a single al-Qa`ida member. See Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 445.

<sup>14</sup> Ismail Khan, "Peace Accord Finalized with Mehsuds," *Dawn*, April 22, 2008.

negotiation do not rely on either the risk averse regular army or the even more timid FC for enforcement, but on the local police force in FATA, the Khasadars, who are even more poorly trained and equipped than the FC. A provision of one of the latest peace plans is that an expanded force of Khasadars will fill the security gap left by the withdrawal of the Pakistan Army from FATA. The Khasadars will allegedly accomplish this extremely difficult task with the benefit of training, funded by the United States.<sup>15</sup>

The fact of the matter is that the peace deals are being signed because the Pakistani government knows that its demoralized soldiers and police have little will to fight, and believe face-saving but impotent peace deals are the only alternative to publicly admitting the truth: the Army, the FC and the Khasadars are incapable of handling the Taliban. Regardless of the reassurances the United States may receive from General Khattak or Army Chief of Staff Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, pervasive morale problems mean that no elements of the Pakistani military will slug it out with the Taliban in ground combat, with the exception of very limited engagements, such as clearing the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in 2007, or the (now-curtailed) operations in Swat this year. Pakistan's recent "offensive" against militants in the Peshawar area, for example, grounded to an ineffectual halt in early July 2008 before significant numbers of militants were ever even engaged.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2005, the only consistent and tangible benefit to the United States for "engagement" with the Pakistani military has been the occasional authorization to target militant compounds inside Pakistan with airstrikes, an authorization which does not require the demoralized Pakistani military to put any of its soldiers at risk.<sup>17</sup> Any U.S. plan to combat Islamist

<sup>15</sup> "23,000 Levies Being Trained to Help Counter Terrorism," *Daily Times*, May 27, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Riaz Khan, "Pakistan Halts Assault on Militants," Associated Press, July 5, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> As in Swat earlier this year, the Pakistani military has demonstrated that they will use artillery and Cobra helicopter gunships to target militants, but for any purposes requiring "boots on the ground," such as active patrolling, border control and raids, the Pakistani military has

extremism that relies on effective ground action from the Pakistani Army, the FC, or the Khasadars will fail. Until that basic truth is recognized, U.S. efforts to combat militant Islamists in FATA will continue to flounder, and money will continue to be spent on training and equipping Pakistani troops while getting very little in return.

Indeed, the Taliban's propaganda tactics, followed up with its campaign of fear, are making it increasingly unlikely that Pakistan, despite support from the United States, will be able to resist the Taliban's growing strength and spreading influence in the near future.

*Arthur Keller is a former case officer with the Central Intelligence Agency's Counter-Proliferation Division, where he worked on both nuclear and "delivery systems" proliferation, as well as on counter-terrorism issues. Mr. Keller served as an inspector in the Iraq Survey Group in 2003 and 2004 and in Pakistan's tribal areas in early 2006. Since leaving the CIA, he has been published in the New York Times, Washington Post and provided commentary to CNN and WBEZ (NPR Chicago) on intelligence matters. He recently finished writing Hollow Strength, a novel about the CIA, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran's nuclear program. He can be reached via e-mail at manofletters2006@yahoo.com.*

been highly ineffective.