

Quetta: The Headquarters of the Afghan Taliban

By Mukhtar A. Khan

IN MARCH 2009, the U.S. special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, told the BBC that “Quetta appears to be the headquarters for the leaders of the Taliban.” After the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban leadership likely fled from Kandahar Province into Pakistan’s southern Balochistan Province.¹ For Mullah Omar and his senior aides, Balochistan’s capital of Quetta was the closest safe haven geographically and also the friendliest due to the cultural similarities it shares with southern Afghanistan.²

Today, U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan’s Kandahar and Helmand provinces—located across the border from Pakistan’s Balochistan Province—are facing fierce resistance from the Taliban. It is believed that these fighters regularly cross the porous and mostly unguarded border to conduct attacks, and then slip back into their Pakistani safe havens in Balochistan. Afghan officials and Western analysts regularly allege that Mullah Omar and his Quetta *shura* council are sheltering in and around the city, from where they are planning and directing attacks across the border. To combat this problem, some analysts have suggested that the U.S. government expand Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) strikes to Taliban targets in the Quetta area.³

1 “Afghan Taliban Hiding in Quetta,” *Daily Express*, June 7, 2007; Jonathan S. Landay, “Why Hasn’t the U.S. Gone after Mullah Omar in Pakistan?” *McClatchy Newspapers*, November 16, 2008. Al-Qa’ida’s leaders, on the other hand, escaped from Afghanistan’s Tora Bora mountains across the border into Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

2 Southern Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Balochistan Province share many cultural similarities. The ethnic groups resident on both sides of the border are nearly identical, and they share the same dialects. The dress code is also the same.

3 The United States regularly conducts UAV strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and it more recently expanded these strikes to targets in the North-West Frontier Province.

This article will provide background information on Balochistan, explain allegations that the senior Taliban leadership operates from its capital, and provide evidence of broader Taliban activity in the Quetta area.

Balochistan: Strategically Important

Balochistan Province is a vast and underdeveloped region bordering Afghanistan and Iran. It is home to the strategically significant Gwadar Port, a deep sea port located on the Arabian Sea at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Its capital, Quetta, is a frontier city that is approximately a three-hour drive from Kandahar city in Afghanistan. It is encircled by mountains, and it commands the entrance into Afghanistan through the strategic Bolan Pass.⁴

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Quetta has an established network of roads and railways connecting it to the rest of Pakistan. The province is rich in natural gas, coal, oil and mineral reserves—resources that have sparked tension between the government and secular Baloch nationalist movements. These movements have been active in the province since the early 1970s, and they seek autonomy over Balochistan’s natural resources,⁵ as well as greater economic and political rights. During the last four decades, several military operations and other strict measures

4 Afghanistan is linked through Chaman Road, Qamar Din Karez Road via Qila Saifullah, Brahama Road via Noshki and Chaghi Giridi Jangal Road. The Chaghi Giridi Jangal road is infamous for drug trafficking. Iran is connected to Balochistan via Tuftan RCD Highway, Turbat-Mand Road, Gwadar Coastal Highway via Jivani and Punjgur Road.

5 Robert G. Wirsing, “Baloch Nationalism and the Geopolitics of Energy Resources: The Changing Context of Separatism in Pakistan,” *Strategic Studies Institute*, April 2008.

have been taken by successive Pakistani governments to suppress the ethnic Baloch movement.

The province’s population is divided between Baloch and Pashtuns. Estimates place the Baloch at 45% of the province, whereas the Pashtuns comprise 38%. Pashtuns, however, outnumber the Baloch in Quetta, especially after 2001 when a large number of Afghans took refuge in the city. The long war in Afghanistan has also made Quetta the hub for arms and drug smuggling to the outside world. A large portion of opium in Afghanistan is cultivated in the southern region, mainly in Kandahar Province. According to one journalist, the general route for smuggling opium proceeds overland from Afghanistan to Balochistan and then across the border into Iran. It then passes through Iran’s northwestern region, which is inhabited by Kurds, and finally into laboratories in Turkey, where the opium is processed and moved into Europe.⁶

Home to the Quetta Shura Council

The Quetta *shura* is the Taliban’s most important senior leadership council. It is different from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) *shura* council in FATA, which is comprised of young but violent Pakistani Taliban militants.⁷ The Quetta *shura* is of paramount importance for counterterrorism officials because it is considered the intellectual and ideological underpinning of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.⁸ It is also identified as the Taliban government-in-exile. The Quetta *shura* is a 10-member council⁹ of senior Taliban leadership, who under the guidance of their spiritual leader, Mullah Omar, devise military, political, religious and intelligence strategies that are then

6 Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Opium Gold Unites US friends and Foes,” *Asia Times Online*, September 3, 2005.

7 Jayshree Bajoria, “Pakistan’s New Generation of Terrorists,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 6, 2008.

8 This description—that the Quetta *shura* is the “intellectual and ideological underpinnings of the Taliban insurgency”—came from Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, a retired former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan who recently advised General David Petraeus. See Erich Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, “Taliban Haven in Pakistani City Raises Fears,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2009.

9 The size of the *shura* council is debateable. Some accounts place it at 12, whereas others place it as high as 30. The author believes that there are 10 hardcore members.

executed by Taliban fighters mostly in southern Afghanistan. There are reports that they also raise money for their military operations from the Gulf countries along with supplies of arms and fresh fighters.¹⁰ According to one recent press report, Maulvi Hamdullah, a senior Taliban leader who previously headed the Finance Department of the former Taliban government in Afghanistan, has been appointed as Taliban representative for the Gulf countries to raise money for the movement.¹¹ He has been allegedly contacting Taliban sympathizers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar for donations.¹² Mullah Omar himself has reportedly written letters to approximately 1,000 “philanthropists” asking for help in supporting the Taliban.¹³

Evidence of Taliban Activity in Quetta

A number of important Taliban leaders were tracked or arrested in and around Quetta. In October 2005, Taliban spokesman Abdul Latif Hakimi was apprehended in Quetta.¹⁴ In February 2007, Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, the former Taliban defense minister and a senior member of the Quetta *shura*, was arrested in the city by Pakistani authorities.¹⁵ Mullah Dadullah Mansur was arrested in Balochistan’s Qilla Saifullah district in February 2008 after he was discovered crossing the border from Afghanistan.¹⁶ His elder brother, senior Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Akhund, was believed to have been killed after he left Balochistan and crossed into Afghanistan in May 2007.¹⁷ Commander Abdullah Mehsud, leader of the Taliban in South Waziristan tribal agency, was killed in the Balochistan town of Zhob, 207 miles from Quetta, in July 2007. Separately, when Taliban spokesman Dr. Mohammad Hanif was arrested in January 2007, he confessed before the media that Mullah Omar

10 Schmitt and Mazzetti.

11 Shamim Shahid, “Quetta-based Taliban Move to Karachi,” *The Nation*, April 30, 2009.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Carlotta Gall, “Pressed by U.S., Pakistan Seizes a Taliban Chief,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2007.

15 Ismail Khan, “Mullah Omar’s Deputy Obaidullah Captured,” *Dawn*, March 2, 2007.

16 “Top Taliban Chief Arrested in Pakistan,” ABC News, February 11, 2008.

17 “Taliban in Quetta,” BBC Pashtu, April 3, 2009.

was hiding in Quetta under the safe protection of the ISI.¹⁸ Other Taliban spokesmen, in addition to the Pakistani government, rejected Hanif’s allegation. Analysts argue that the multiple arrests in Balochistan provide ample evidence that senior level Taliban leaders are operating in and around the city.

Besides U.S. and Afghan officials, local secular Baloch nationalist groups also blame Pakistan for consolidating the grip of the Taliban in and around Quetta. The Balochistan National Party accused Pakistan’s ISI of facilitating the Taliban in acquiring land worth \$2.5 million in the eastern and western parts of Quetta.¹⁹ They also charge the Pakistani

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government with letting the Taliban use Quetta as a resting and treatment location for Taliban militants recovering from injuries sustained fighting international troops in Afghanistan. They suspect the government is using the Taliban against secular-nationalist Baloch and Pashtuns, who are demanding autonomy over the province’s resources. Pakistani government officials, on the other hand, allege that the nationalist forces in Balochistan are armed and funded by Afghan and Indian intelligence agencies for separatist moves against Pakistan.²⁰

18 David Montero, “More Evidence of Taliban Leader Hiding in Pakistan,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 19, 2007.

19 Malik Siraj Akbar, “Taliban Consolidating Grip on Quetta,” *Daily Times*, January 5, 2009.

20 Abdul Haye Kakar, “Quetta: The Headquarter of Taliban,” BBC Urdu, February 18, 2009; Muqqadar Iqbal, “Pakistani Security Forces Facing Stiff Resistance in Bal-

Quetta’s Refugee Camps

Quetta likely provides a ready supply of young men prepared to fight in Afghanistan. Most of these men are recruited at the many refugee camps around Quetta, trained in safe houses in the city and nearby Chaman and then shifted to Afghanistan for fighting against U.S. and NATO forces.²¹ Taliban leaders can easily shelter in these camps; despite Taliban rule in Afghanistan for almost five years, many of its leaders are not recognizable since they have always avoided photographs. There are 13 Afghan refugee camps in Balochistan, including the famous Jangal Pir Alizai, Girdi Jangal, Panj Pai, Katwai and Surkhhab. Pakistani officials have complained that these refugee camps—notably Jangal Pir Alizai and Girdi Jangal—have been used by terrorists as safe havens and recruiting grounds.²² They want the camps relocated to Afghanistan.²³

The areas of Pashtunabad, Karbala and Pishin in and near Quetta that stretch toward the border with Afghanistan are believed to have sprawling religious seminaries, some of which are used for inciting jihad against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. In Balochistan, there are around 1,300 *madrases*,²⁴ among which Madrasa Arabia in Chaman and ‘Matlu’ul Uloomul Arabia Nizamia’ on Quetta’s Bravery Road have been popular for jihadist recruiters looking for fighters for the Afghan jihad.²⁵ Another *madrasa*, Jamiya Islamiya, located on Haji Ghabi Road, has hanging boards with inscriptions “Long Live Mullah Omar,” and “Long Live Fazl-ur-Rehman,” the leader of Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam-Fazlur (JUI-F) and the coalition partner of President Asif Ali Zardari’s

ochistan,” *The Exclusive News*, May 8, 2009.

21 Ahmad Rashid, “US Failure Breeds a Stronger al-Qaeda,” *Asia Sentinel*, September 4, 2008.

22 Hamid Mir, “Capital Talk,” Geo TV, January 23, 2007.

23 Many Afghan refugees do not want to return to Afghanistan. The security situation is less volatile in Pakistan, and Afghanistan’s health and education facilities are poor. As a result, the official argument of the Afghan government is that it will not force refugees back “home,” but rather make the repatriation process voluntary.

24 This information was conveyed to the author by Abdul Raheem Mandokhel, the leader of the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP).

25 This information is based on personal interviews with contacts in the region.

Pakistan People's Party.²⁶ Locals say they have seen people from this area frequently slipping into Kandahar and that some of them were "martyred" in the jihad.²⁷

Pakistani Taliban gains in Swat have also impacted Quetta. The Taliban and its sympathizers have become emboldened by developments in Swat, and in Quetta women are increasingly being pressured against eating at outdoor restaurants. Some restaurants that were once popular among women now have inscribed boards with statements such as "Only for gentlemen. Women not allowed." In recent months, Taliban militants also threatened music and CD shops and internet cafés in Quetta.²⁸ There are fears that if Swat becomes the model, the Taliban may start bombing Quetta's girls' schools and colleges.²⁹

The Balochistan government does not appear concerned about tackling the rise in Talibanization. One reason is that the ruling party in the province does not want to antagonize its coalition partner—JUI-F—which is believed to have close links with the Afghan Taliban. JUI-F officials say that they want the implementation of Shari`a in Pakistan, but not the one enforced by the Taliban in Swat. They claim their struggle for Shari`a is through democratic means.³⁰

Conclusion

During the past seven years, Pakistan has conducted several military operations against al-Qa`ida and their Taliban allies in FATA and in the NWFP. In Quetta, however, there have been no such offensives. One important reason is that the Taliban in Quetta have mostly engaged in cross-border fighting against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan; they have not challenged the Pakistani security forces. This distinguishes the security problem in the south from that in the northwest tribal areas.

Nevertheless, pressure is growing on the Pakistani government to take action in Balochistan Province before it becomes another spotlight in the war on terrorism. Media reports frequently speculate whether U.S. intelligence agencies will begin targeting high-value individuals in Quetta with UAV strikes. The Pakistani government, however, continues to deny the presence of al-Qa`ida and Taliban leaders in Quetta despite arrests proving the contrary. The government needs to take the problem of Taliban militancy in Balochistan more seriously, as the Taliban alliance is shaking the entire socio-political fabric of Pakistan and increasingly posing a serious threat to regional security.

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²⁶ Carlotta Gall, "At Border, Signs of Pakistani Role in Taliban Surge," *New York Times*, January 21, 2007.

²⁷ Abdullah Shahin, "Where the Taliban Train," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, March 3, 2006.

²⁸ Malik Siraj Akbar, "Curbs on Women in Militancy-Hit Areas Spreading to Quetta," *Daily Times*, January 25, 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Raza Khan, "Taliban Shifts to Southwest Pakistan," *Washington Times*, March 19, 2009.