

## Pakistan's New Offensive in South Waziristan

By Samir Syed

IN APRIL 2009, the Pakistani military launched a major operation against Taliban militants in the Malakand region of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The operation was considered a success, and the military claims that the entire Swat Valley has been cleared of militants. In the wake of the offensive, the Pakistan Army is now mobilizing its forces to begin a major operation against the headquarters of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a coalition of Pakistani Taliban groups led by Baitullah Mehsud. Baitullah is one of the world's most wanted terrorists, and U.S. authorities have placed a \$5 million bounty on his head. Moreover, he is wanted by Pakistan's government for his alleged role in the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007.

The operation, however, will require Pakistan's military to deploy into what is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world: South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan's army must do what no military has achieved in more than 2,000 years of the region's recorded history: use military force to defeat the tribes of Waziristan in their own territory. The Mehsud, along with the Afridi and the Wazir, have traditionally been the most warlike of the Pashtun tribes. Even the British Empire was forced to withdrawal after two disastrous and failed campaigns. Yet with modern technology and public support for the operation, there are hopes that the Pakistan Army will be able to achieve the monumental task.

This article will examine Pakistan's planned operation in South Waziristan and how Baitullah Mehsud might retaliate, and also explain why even a successful operation will not put an end to Pakistani Taliban groups undertaking attacks against U.S. and NATO forces in neighboring Afghanistan.

### The Army's Planned Operation in South Waziristan

Beginning in May 2009, the Tank-Jandola road—which travels from Pakistan's settled areas of the NWFP into South Waziristan Agency of FATA—has seen the daily movement of military convoys.<sup>1</sup> Tanks, artillery, armored personnel carriers and trucks carrying troops to the frontline pass through on an hourly basis.<sup>2</sup> Escort vehicles with red flags precede the convoys, warning all traffic to move off the road.<sup>3</sup> No one is allowed to drive alongside a military convoy due to fears of a suicide attack. The forces' general destination is through Jandola to the Sarwakai route of South Waziristan. That route, which runs through the heart of the Mehsud tribe's territory, is the key to a successful military campaign in the area.

Without control of Sarwakai, Baitullah Mehsud's Taliban will have the ability to attack the army at will and retreat across Waziristan into Afghanistan. If the army is able to control Sarwakai, however, it will cut off the Baitullah-led Taliban's ability to retreat into Afghanistan. Under this scenario, to reach the border Baitullah's forces would have to cross territory controlled by the Wazir, the Mehsud tribe's traditional enemy. While the Taliban's ideology has softened that feud, there are still tensions between the tribes. Pakistan's intelligence agencies are trying to ensure that these tensions remain high.<sup>4</sup> The army's overall plan is simple: surround the militants, deploy as much military firepower as possible, and attack them into submission. The army has also deployed soldiers to key points along the perimeter of the operation so that they can kill or capture militants as they flee the bombardment toward Afghanistan. The government's operation is strictly against the Baitullah-led Taliban, and not against other Pakistani Taliban groups.

The army's operation in South Waziristan is different from the recent operation in Swat. The objectives of the two operations are clear in their titles. The Swat operation is called Rah-e-Raast, which means "the path of righteousness." The goal is to bring the militants in the Swat Valley back to the "right path." After dislodging these fighters from Swat, the army will maintain a presence in the region to re-establish the writ of the government. The Waziristan operation, on the other hand, is titled Rah-e-Nijat, or the "path to deliverance." The army's plan for Waziristan is simply to eliminate Baitullah Mehsud and his group; there is no plan to establish the writ of the state, or even to counter other Taliban groups. In fact, the army's plan hinges, quite tenuously, on the hope that other Taliban groups will remain neutral in the conflict, allowing the military to focus exclusively on one troublesome faction. Failure to isolate Baitullah will imperil the entire Waziristan operation. No government or military force has ever executed a successful campaign against the combined strength of the tribes in Waziristan.

Even if the government is able to cause Waziristan's tribes to unite against Baitullah or at least remain neutral in the conflict, it may not be enough to succeed. As a result, the intelligence agencies are pursuing two strategies. In addition to isolating Baitullah from other tribal militias, the intelligence agencies are also backing a pro-government leader among the Mehsud tribe to rival Baitullah. They hope that such a leader will pull support away from Baitullah, especially if he is killed. Until recently, this was in the form of Qari Zainuddin Mehsud, a relative of slain Taliban commander Abdullah Mehsud. With support from the government and Turkistan Bhattani, the leader of the Bhattani tribe, Qari Zain was trying to weaken Baitullah's popularity.<sup>5</sup> Recently, he launched a much publicized smear campaign questioning Baitullah's commitment to Islam and the Taliban

1 This information is based on the author's first-hand observations in the tribal regions of Pakistan.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 The principal card that the Pakistan Army has used to divide the Waziristan tribes is the issue of foreign fighters. These include mainly Arabs and Uzbeks, who do not see eye-to-eye with each other.

5 The Wazir are the largest of Waziristan's tribes. They are divided into two main branches, the Utmanzai Wazir (predominantly in North Waziristan) and the Ahmedzai Wazir (South Waziristan). The tribe stretches into eastern Afghanistan, and many tribesmen have dual nationalities. The Mehsud are the next largest in size. The Bhattanis are among the smallest of the tribes in Waziristan.

cause, and his “unpatriotic” motives for attacking Pakistani security forces. That gamble failed, however, because Qari Zain was gunned down by one of his own bodyguards allegedly on the orders of Baitullah.<sup>6</sup> Qari Zain’s mantle has now been passed to his brother, Misbahuddin, who has vowed to carry on the “jihad against Baitullah Mehsud.”

Pakistan’s last offensive against Baitullah Mehsud’s militants in 2008 ended in a de facto cease-fire. There is no clear explanation as to why the government failed to achieve success in 2008. The militants themselves admitted that they “had been pushed” to the limit.<sup>7</sup> The army clearly had the upper hand in the offensive, yet for some reason pulled back. That action was in character with all of Pakistan’s security operations in the region since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The security forces have regularly pursued the militants in response to international pressure, and consistently ended up forging peace deals with them. As explained in a BBC report,

The militants control territory throughout the North West Frontier Province and every operation by the army has ultimately ended with the army losing territory. In fact, there is a recurring pattern to the army’s offensives. Troops nearly always tend to be deployed following international claims that the area in question is newly under al-Qaeda’s control and poses a threat to the country’s nuclear arsenal.<sup>8</sup>

It is likely that Pakistan’s government wants to avoid turning the militias in the tribal areas firmly against the government due to concern about their ability to destabilize Pakistan.

#### **Baitullah’s Ability to Retaliate**

Although the Waziristan operation has begun, Baitullah Mehsud has not yet retaliated in any significant manner. His only alleged gesture of retaliation

was the assassination of Qari Zain. His failure to respond is probably because he has not yet been pressured to the point of taking action. Despite its claims, the army has yet to kill or arrest a single senior Taliban commander in Waziristan, or even in Swat.<sup>9</sup> Reports from Waziristan suggest that while the army has been expending a substantial amount of ammunition, there has been little loss of life on the militants’ side. As one senior ex-intelligence official said, “They want to see what the real situation on the ground is likely to be, before going in with full force.”<sup>10</sup>

There are several reasons why both Baitullah and Pakistan’s military have reacted timidly. Baitullah is likely hoping that the other Pakistani Taliban leaders in the tribal areas will begin retaliating against the government due to encroachments on their territory. For their part, Pakistan’s intelligence services are being careful to keep Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, two other top Taliban commanders in Waziristan, out of the equation. Unfortunately, this may no longer be possible.<sup>11</sup> Both men operate out of Waziristan, and while both leaders have said they have no conflict with the Pakistan Army, they are vehemently opposed to the Pakistani military entering their territory. Furthermore, they already collaborate with Baitullah’s faction during cross-border raids in Afghanistan. Indeed, as soon as the army moved convoys across their territory, a number of incidents have occurred. On July 5, militants loyal to Hafiz Gul Bahadur ambushed a military convoy outside the town

of Miramshah in North Waziristan, killing 22 soldiers.<sup>12</sup> After the incident, a spokesman for the militant leader said they were breaking off their peace deal with the government. Maulvi Nazir, operating out of South Waziristan, has already announced the dissolution of his peace deal with the government.<sup>13</sup> The army immediately responded by saying it was not conducting an operation in North Waziristan and that its actions were only against Baitullah Mehsud. Subsequently, efforts were launched to reconcile “differences” with both Taliban commanders to prevent misunderstandings.

Unfortunately, the July 5 incident is not an isolated misunderstanding. The fact remains that all the Taliban factions are suspicious of the army, and despite differences immediately band together if another faction is threatened by a military operation. Throughout history, each government that has attempted to pacify the region has practiced a strategy of “divide and rule,” and the region’s tribes understand its dynamics well.

Baitullah and his faction also have a more direct way to retaliate against the Pakistani government. They retain the option to strike in Pakistan’s major cities to politically destabilize the country. The fact that Baitullah has not already exercised this option since the start of the Waziristan offensive likely signifies that the army’s operation is not yet intense enough. When the army does decide to escalate their campaign, the recoil will likely be felt from Islamabad to Karachi. Baitullah Mehsud has one of the most efficient militant networks in the country, with extensive ties to Punjabi-based militant groups such as Jaysh-i-Muhammad, Harkat-ul Mujahidin and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.<sup>14</sup> Any serious operation in Waziristan will at least in the short term unite the Taliban leadership and increase militant attacks across Pakistan. By retaining the capability to execute suicide attacks in Pakistan’s major cities, Baitullah Mehsud and his

9 The Swat Taliban militants operated under 15 senior commanders. All of these were later named in government “most wanted” lists. See “Pakistan Puts up Taliban Chief Reward,” BBC, May 29, 2009. The army says only two of these commanders might have been killed, but could not confirm their deaths with certainty.

10 Personal interview, former Pakistani intelligence official, Islamabad, July 3, 2009.

11 The Pakistan Army has made peace deals with both leaders. In September 2006, they forged a deal with Hafiz Gul Bahadur, while in March 2007 they brokered a deal with Maulvi Nazir Ahmed. The conditions of the deal were that the army would keep its strength to the minimal in their territories and not use it to conduct any sort of military operation in the region. The army also tacitly agreed to “look the other way” as the Taliban carried out cross-border raids. This has kept them from attacking the Pakistan Army. See “Pakistani Militants Abandon Deal,” BBC, June 30, 2009.

12 Mushtaq Yusufzai, “22 Soldiers Killed in Waziristan,” *The News International*, June 29, 2009.

13 Ibid.

14 For more details on the “Punjabi Taliban,” see Hassan Abbas, “Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network,” *CTC Sentinel* 2:4 (2009).

6 For more on the assassination of Qari Zain, see Rahimullah Yusufzai, “The Significance of Qari Zain’s Assassination in Pakistan,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:7 (2009).

7 Personal interview, Baitullah Mehsud and militants, South Waziristan Agency, May 2008.

8 Syed Shoaib Hasan, “Long War Against Pakistan Taliban,” BBC, June 2, 2009.

affiliates have a stranglehold over the Pakistan government's actions in the tribal areas.

#### **Conclusion**

Even if the Waziristan operation succeeds, it will not cease cross-border Taliban attacks against NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan. In fact, the operation may provide greater impetus to the flow of militants across the border. Baitullah has always been more focused on effecting changes in Pakistan, and his death would have little or no effect on the situation in Afghanistan. As stated by Qari Misbahuddin, who is now leading the anti-Baitullah faction among the Mehsud, "Jihad against America and its allies in Afghanistan would continue" if Baitullah was killed. "Pakistan's government only has problems with the foreign militants in the area. They [the government] have always supported us in the jihad in Afghanistan."<sup>15</sup>

The lessons are clear. The army's goal is to eliminate one Pakistani Taliban commander due to his penchant for attacking Pakistan's government and military. Its success in this operation will depend on whether it can isolate Baitullah from Waziristan's other tribal commanders. Furthermore, even if Pakistan succeeds in the Waziristan operation, it will have little effect on the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

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<sup>15</sup> Syed Shoab Hasan, "A Very Strange Taliban Burial," BBC, June 24, 2009.