

The Taliban Arrest Wave in Pakistan: Reasserting Strategic Depth?

By Thomas Ruttig

IN LESS THAN a month, Pakistan's authorities have arrested a number of Afghan Taliban leaders. Most of the arrests have taken place in Karachi and in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The first in the chain of arrests was Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Afghan Taliban's second-in-command behind Mullah Omar, who was apprehended on February 11, 2010.¹ Baradar took control as the Afghan Taliban's military leader after the arrest of former Taliban Defense Minister Mullah Obaidullah in early 2007.² Before his recent arrest, Baradar also led the Taliban's second-highest authority, the Leadership Council, or *rahbari shura*.

Baradar's arrest was followed by the capture of the Taliban's shadow governors for Afghanistan's Kunduz and Baghlan provinces—Mullah Abdul Salam and Mullah Mir Muhammad—in addition to former Taliban acting Prime Minister Maulawi Kabir³ and former Zabul Province shadow governor and head of “the commission”⁴ Maulawi

Muhammad Yunos. According to media reports, yet denied by sources close to the Taliban, a number of other prominent leaders have also been arrested, including former Kandahar governor Mullah Muhammad Hassan Rahmani, former Herat and Kabul corps commander Mullah Abdul Ra'uf, and former Guantanamo Bay detainee and Taliban commander in southern Afghanistan Mullah Abdul Qayum Zaker. Moreover, on February 28 Pakistani security officials announced that Mullah Omar's close adviser, Seyyed Tayyeb Agha, was arrested in Karachi,⁵ and on March 4 Taliban finance minister and reportedly Mullah Omar's son-in-law Agha Jan Mo'tassem was also apprehended in Karachi.⁶

The wave of arrests follows years of meager results in capturing Afghan Taliban leaders in Pakistan. The arrests have been perceived in the United States as a veritable about-face in Pakistan's counterterrorism policy. U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, for example, called the arrests “another high-water mark for Pakistani and American collaboration.”⁷ Bruce Riedel, who led the Barack Obama administration's policy review on both countries in spring 2009, called the arrest of Baradar a “sea change in Pakistani behavior.”⁸

A closer look, however, reveals that the arrests may not represent a clear change in Pakistan's policy toward the Afghan Taliban. All of those recently arrested were seeking political negotiations with the Afghan government, circumventing

third edition of the code-of-conduct for Taliban fighters issued in the name of Mullah Omar in mid-2009. On the “commission,” also see Thomas Ruttig, “The Other Side: Dimensions of the Afghan Insurgency. Causes, Actors and Approaches to Talks,” The Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2009.

5 Rezaul H. Laskar, “Afghan Taliban Leader Agha Jan Arrested in Karachi,” *Outlook India*, March 4, 2010.

6 Anand Gopal, “Half of Afghanistan Taliban Leadership Arrested in Pakistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 2010; Deb Riechmann and Munir Ahmad, “Pakistani Officials: Nearly 15 Top Taliban Held,” Associated Press, February 25, 2010; “Pakistan: Key Taliban Leader ‘Held in Karachi,’” AKI News Agency, March 4, 2010; Personal interviews, anonymous contacts, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 2010.

7 Chris Allbritton, “Holbrooke Hails Pakistan-U.S. Collaboration on Taliban,” Reuters, February 18, 2010.

8 *Ibid.*; Mazzetti et al.

Pakistan-controlled channels. This article contends that the arrests may be an attempt by the Pakistani government to regain control over the Afghan Taliban's political agenda and, in a broader sense, over the “reconciliation” process announced by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Suspicious Arrests

The string of arrests raises questions on whether they will affect Afghan Taliban operations in the long-term. Without a doubt, Mullah Baradar's arrest is a serious blow to the Afghan Taliban; it hampers their military operations at a time when they are under pressure in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Nevertheless, the Taliban have proved adept at substituting even high-ranking leaders quickly and without losing much operational effectiveness. Neither the arrest of Obaidullah nor the killings in 2006 and 2007 of Akhtar Muhammad Usmani and Mullah Dadullah have slowed their pace. In contrast, the Taliban movement has grown in strength from year to year, and the organization is operating in more areas than ever before.

The more critical question is why Pakistan's authorities have decided to move against these militants—or publicized previous arrests—at this time. All of the Afghan Taliban militants recently arrested in Pakistan were apprehended under suspicious circumstances. Maulawi Kabir's whereabouts, for example, had been known for some time. A German journalist described how UN officials were easily able to locate Kabir in the Pakistani town of Nowshera in the NWFP last year where he occupied a posh house and was driving a large SUV with diplomatic license plates.⁹ The same journalist reported a temporary arrest of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the military leader of the semi-autonomous Haqqani network, in Pakistan.¹⁰

There are also the cases of Maulawi Muhammad Yunos and Abdul Ahad Jehangirwal, along with Seyyed Tayyeb Agha, Mullah Omar's “aides-de-camp.”

9 Willi Germund, “Rentable Verhaftungen,” *St. Galler Tagblatt*, March 2, 2010; Christoph Reuter, “Some Birds with One Stone,” The Afghanistan Analysts Network, undated.

10 *Ibid.*

1 Mark Mazzetti and Dexter Filkins, “Secret Joint Raid Captures Taliban's Top Commander,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2010. On Mullah Baradar's background, see Ron Moreau, “America's New Nightmare,” *Newsweek*, July 25, 2009; Thomas Ruttig, “How ‘Neo’ Were the ‘Neo-Taliban?’” The Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 5, 2010.

2 Mullah Obaidullah's current status is unclear. He was reported arrested (or put under house arrest) in February-March 2007 and in February 2008 again. Then, he was reportedly exchanged for the abducted designated Pakistani ambassador to Kabul in May 2008. For details, see Shahnawaz Khan, “Security Agencies Arrest Mullah Obaidullah Again,” *Daily Times*, February 25, 2008; Aamer Khan, “Ex-Taliban Minister Swapped for Envoy,” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, May 20, 2008; Jonathan S. Landay, “Why Hasn't the U.S. Gone After Mullah Omar in Pakistan?” *McClatchy Newspapers*, November 16, 2008.

3 Some observers believe that Maulawi Kabir is a member of the *rahbari shura* under the *nom-de-guerre* of Mullah Qaher.

4 “The commission” was a Taliban body that traveled through various provinces to question the Afghan population about the behavior of local Taliban commanders. This happened after the publication of the *layha*, the

Sources close to the Taliban confirm that Yunos has been in Pakistani custody since September or October 2009 and Jehangirwal for almost a year, but their arrests only became known recently.¹¹

The timing of the arrests and announcements suggest that Pakistan is detaining Afghan Taliban elements who are seeking political negotiations independent of official Pakistani channels. All of the recently arrested militants fit into this category.

Arrested Militants Seeking Peace Deals with Afghan Government

One strong theory of why Pakistan has moved against these militants at the present time is due to what has been dubbed “talk about talks”—the decision over whether the Afghan government and its international supporters should negotiate with the Afghan Taliban. This debate has heated up since the “Mecca talks” in the fall of 2008, when the Saudi government invited an Afghan delegation composed of government members, parliamentarians and former Taliban leaders for a reception to break the fast during the holy month of Ramadan.¹² The latest incident occurred after a press leak about a Dubai meeting between UN Afghanistan Envoy Kai Eide and Taliban “commanders” supposedly sent by Mullah Baradar in January 2010.¹³ For the first time, Afghan President Hamid Karzai drafted a policy document for reconciliation and reintegration that found support and funding at the international Afghanistan conference held in London in January 2010. Afghan parliamentarians, some leaders of Hizb-i-Islami and two Islamic scholars close to the Afghan Taliban from Pakistan met in the Maldives at the same time.¹⁴

11 Personal interview, sources close to the Taliban, March 2010.

12 According to unconfirmed rumors, Mullah Omar’s adviser, Tayyeb Agha, also had attended the meeting.

13 The Afghan Taliban and the United Nations later denied that the meeting had ever taken place. For details, see Dexter Filkins, “U.N. Mission Head in Afghanistan Met With Taliban Envoys,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2010; “Afghan Taliban Deny Peace Talks With UN’s Kai Eide,” BBC, January 30, 2010.

14 Julian Borger, “UN in Secret Peace Talks with Taliban,” *Guardian*, January 28, 2010; John Simpson, “Peace Scheme Mooted for Taliban,” BBC, January 21, 2010; Zubair Babakarkhel, “Delegations Formed to Try Broker Afghan Peace,” *Pajhwok Afghan News*, February 2,

During 2007 and 2008, there was a relatively strong current within the Kandahari mainstream of the Afghan Taliban that recognized they would not be able to achieve victory—defined as reestablishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—by military means, or that it would at least be too costly in terms of human lives. Similar to the United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban also suffer from a civilian casualty problem that has cost them support from the local population.¹⁵ These elements, labeled “pious Taliban” by some Afghans, consider suicide attacks that cause high numbers of Afghan civilian casualties as “un-Islamic” and reacted to them by issuing the *layha* (code of conduct for Taliban fighters) that provides for care concerning civilians during attacks.¹⁶ These “pious Taliban” also may have had a role—by providing inside information—in the killing of Mullah Dadullah in 2007, who was the most notorious proponent of the Taliban’s hardcore terrorist tendencies. Dadullah copied the methods of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, and it is believed that the Afghan Taliban’s Quetta *shura* decided that Dadullah was out of control.

This Taliban current also had been discussing the usefulness of a political solution that would involve the Afghan government and possibly its foreign allies. Baradar, Kabir, Yunos and Mo’tassem¹⁷ all belong to the Taliban faction considering talks with the Afghan government. Their arrests suggest that Pakistan’s military wants to resume full control over any future reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Although the reports on Saudi, Dubai and Maldives contacts were likely overblown, it appears that Pakistan wanted to put a stop even to the slightest inclination of independent

2010; Personal interviews, participants of the Maldives meeting, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 2010.

15 In general, the United Nations stated that the Taliban accounted for 67% of all civilian deaths in 2009. For details, see “Over 2,400 Civilian Deaths in 2009 – UNAMA,” IRIN, January 13, 2010.

16 Personal interviews, former Taliban members and Afghans close to the insurgency, 2008-2009. Also see Ruttig, “The Other Side.”

17 Mo’tassem headed the Taliban’s political commission, responsible for pursuing talks during the “thaw period” after Mullah Dadullah’s death. Mo’tassem was removed from this position in early 2009.

Taliban actions. Although Pakistan has officially dropped its “strategic depth” policy, a future conflict with India remains its number one security concern. As a result, establishing a friendly or even clientele government in Kabul still ranks high on Pakistan’s agenda, and the Afghan Taliban are considered a core element of this strategy.

Although the Afghan Taliban depend on Pakistani support—in the form of safe havens, logistical and possibly financial support, and the ability to move unhindered in parts of Pakistan and over the border with Afghanistan—their current leaders were never mere puppets in the hands of the ISI. Mullah Baradar—who belongs to the same tribe as President Hamid Karzai, the Popalzai—seems to have circumvented Pakistan-controlled channels by relying on shared “blood links” to establish links to Karzai family members in an effort to discuss “reconciliation.”¹⁸ Indeed, according to one of Karzai’s advisers, the president was “very angry” at Baradar’s arrest because the Taliban leader had been “given a green light” to participate in a peace *jirga* that Karzai is hosting in April.¹⁹ Therefore, the arrests can be viewed as a warning to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar himself that “he also can be drawn out of his hiding place” in case his supporters do not follow Pakistan’s agenda.²⁰

Separately, the arrests also prove that Afghan Taliban leaders use sanctuaries inside Pakistan, a fact that Islamabad consistently denies. Yet Pakistan’s military chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, recently tacitly admitted this fact by offering to NATO that Pakistan would be willing to open communication channels with the Taliban on all levels.²¹ A high-ranking official in Islamabad’s foreign office was even blunter: “We have considerable influence on the Taliban and will play our role in securing peace in Afghanistan.”²² The

18 Personal interviews, former Taliban and Afghan government officials, Kabul, Afghanistan, February-March 2010.

19 “Aide: Karzai ‘Very Angry’ at Taliban Boss’ Arrest,” Associated Press, March 16, 2010.

20 Hamed, “Aya nasl-e jadidi dar rah ast?” *Hasbt-e Sobh* [Kabul], March 6, 2010.

21 Jane Perlez, “Pakistan is Said to Pursue Role in U.S.-Afghan Talks,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2010.

22 Willi Germund, “Pakistan lässt Taliban-Chef

New York Times even called the arrests a “strategic coup for Pakistan” because it restores control over the Taliban, draws applause from the United States and even releases U.S. money.²³

Conclusion

For Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban remain a card to be played after an expected departure of most Western troops from Afghanistan. The arrests epitomize the ISI’s strategic manipulation of its assets in Afghanistan and might result in the emergence of an entirely new Taliban leadership that would replace the founders’ generation.²⁴ The new leadership would be composed of unknown and likely younger, more radical newcomers trained in Pakistani *madrasas*. These militants would be less in touch with Afghanistan’s realities than the older Taliban generation that participated in the anti-Soviet war, and they would be more prone to listening to Pakistan’s military and intelligence services. They would, in effect, be the real “neo-Taliban.” Pakistan’s “strategic depth” strategy, which has officially been discarded, is very much alive.

For Afghanistan, however, the arrests have at least temporarily closed the window of opportunity for direct talks with the Afghan Taliban leadership. As a result, the fighting in Afghanistan will continue and President Karzai’s peace *jirga* announced for mid-spring may run aground before it even begins.

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auffliegen,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, February 17, 2010.

23 Carlotta Gall and Souad Mekhennet, “Arrest of Taliban Chief May Be Crucial for Pakistanis,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2010.

24 Similarly, immediately before the Afghan presidential elections of August 2009, the author received reports that the ISI had pressured Taliban commanders to go fight inside Afghanistan or otherwise be handed over to the United States and sent to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

Untangling the Punjabi Taliban Network

By Raheel Khan

SINCE 2006, PAKISTAN has been victim to rising terrorist violence from a nexus of militant factions consisting of al-Qa`ida, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and fighters from Punjab-based militant groups.¹ All three entities share a common, violent Islamist ideology, and they have solidified bonds in response to Pakistan limiting its operations against Indian-administered Kashmir, while at the same time expanding operations against Pakistani Taliban factions in its northwest.² These factors have caused previously disparate groups to join together against a common enemy, the Pakistani government, which is allied with the United States and NATO in the “war on terrorism.” As a result of these developments, Punjab Province itself is increasingly at risk. Punjabi militants have established cells across the province, and according to security officials are running their own training facilities in southern Punjab.³ The March 12, 2010 twin suicide blasts that killed at least 45 people in a high security area of Lahore underscored this concern.⁴

Punjab Province is Pakistan’s most critical region. Geographically, it is Pakistan’s heartland and the country’s most populated province.⁵ It contains a

1 The Punjabi Taliban comprise members from a number of Punjab-based groups that were formerly focused on Indian-administered Kashmir or on sectarian attacks against the Shi`a community in Pakistan. The Punjabi Taliban include members from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Jaysh-i-Muhammad and Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan—fighters from other Punjab-based groups may be involved as well. For more details, see Issam Ahmed, “Why Pakistan’s Old Jihadis Pose New Threat—At Home and in Afghanistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 8, 2009; Kachan Lakshman, “Heartland Trauma,” *Kashmir Herald*, February 7, 2010; Raza Khan and Ayesha Nasir, “Punjabi Taliban Threat is Growing, Pakistan Fears Shift in Control,” *Washington Times*, October 21, 2009.

2 Pakistan’s northwest consists of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North-West Frontier Province.

3 Alex Rodriguez, “Taliban Taps the Punjab Heartland,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2009.

4 Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack. For details, see “At Least 37 Killed in Pakistan Bombings,” CNN, March 12, 2010; “TTP Claim Lahore Bombings; 39 Dead,” Geo TV, March 12, 2010.

5 According to 1998 census numbers, approximately 72

number of strategically significant cities, such as the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan and Gujranwala. Moreover, the country’s civil and military recruits are drawn mainly from the province. Any destabilization of Punjab Province would have dire ramifications for Pakistan and would also endanger international coalition operations in Afghanistan.⁶

The threat has become increasingly serious. In September 2008, alleged militants of Punjabi origin were interrogated in the wake of the al-Qa`ida-linked Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad that killed more than 50 people.⁷ On March 3, 2009, Punjabi militants attacked the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team in the Punjab capital city of Lahore, killing eight people.⁸ On March 30, 2009, a police training center just outside Lahore was attacked and eight people killed.⁹ The unprecedented assault on the military’s General Headquarters (GHQ) in the garrison city of Rawalpindi on October 10, 2009 displayed the growing sophistication and intent of the network.¹⁰ Finally, on October 15, 2009, three teams of militants launched a coordinated assault in Lahore, attacking the regional headquarters of the Federal Investigation Agency, the Manawan Police Training School, and the Elite Police Academy; the combined assault killed more than 30 people.¹¹ Attacks have continued into 2010.

This nexus of militants has evolved significantly since it first emerged in 2006-2007. Although the sophistication and intensity of their

million people live in Punjab Province.

6 Sabrina Tavernise, Richard A. Opiel Jr. and Eric Schmitt, “United Militants Threaten Pakistan’s Populous Heart,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2009.

7 The suspected militants were alleged members of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam. For details, see Amir Mir, “South Punjab Threat,” *The News International*, October 25, 2009. For the al-Qa`ida-link, see “Pakistan al-Qaeda Leaders ‘Dead,’” BBC, January 9, 2009.

8 Ibid. Also see “‘Cricket Attacker’ Held in Lahore,” BBC, June 17, 2009.

9 “Siege at Pakistan Police Academy,” BBC, March 30, 2009.

10 “Six Soldiers, Four Assaultants Killed in Attack on GHQ,” *Dawn*, October 10, 2009.

11 Jane Perlez, “Pakistan Attacks Show Tighter Militant Links,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2009.