

Insight into a Suicide Bomber Training Camp in Waziristan

By S.H. Tajik

SINCE THE OVERTHROW of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan has been increasingly victim to suicide bombings. In the past three years, attacks have escalated dramatically, especially after the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) operation in 2007.¹ Today, suicide bombings are a frequent occurrence in Pakistan's northwest, and they have spread to previously stable parts of the country, including in Punjab Province.

This article provides an in-depth look at how Pakistani Taliban suicide bombers train for their operations at camps in South Waziristan Agency. It draws heavily from information acquired from Pakistani police interrogations and interviews with suspected militants. The article includes information on general camp characteristics, why individuals join the camps, the daily routine of the trainees, the rituals carried out before an attack and finally post-attack activities.

General Camp Characteristics

Before the ongoing military operations in the Swat Valley and in South Waziristan Agency, suicide bomber training camps were active in various parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and in Malakand Division of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).² In FATA, the camps have been located in North and South Waziristan, Orakzai, Bajaur and Mohmand agencies. The most prominent camps operated in the following areas of South Waziristan: Kotkai, Nawazkot, Deeley, Karama, Kazha Pangha, Barwand, Karikot, Ladha and Tangay. Newer training camps

operated in Charbagh and Peochar in Swat; Galjo and Ferozkhel in Orakzai Agency; and Chinaari and Mohammad Ghat in Mohmand Agency.³

The training facilities themselves are usually established in abandoned schools, or in houses offered by locals.⁴ In some camps, such as at the Nawazkot facility, paintings depicting paradise are drawn on the walls, such as images of flowing rivers of milk with fairies walking along in lush green valleys.⁵

The training camps are generally located in areas where the government has little oversight or control, which reduces the need for camp security. At night, however, a senior trainee guards the camp, and no one is allowed to leave the camp after night prayers (*isha'*).⁶ The locations themselves are switched regularly for security reasons.

Inside the camp, adults and minors are generally segregated and trained in different areas of the facility; however, this is dependent on various conditions.⁷ The age of suicide bombers range from seven to 40.⁸ Large suicide training camps operate in two categories: junior and senior camps. Senior camps usually accommodate trainees from 16 years of age and older, while the junior camps accommodate trainees from seven years of age to 15.⁹ All the camp participants are not necessarily tasked on suicide missions, and they are allowed to quit their training. As is often the case, family members do not approve of their kin's participation, and they occasionally

travel to the camp to retrieve them. Such efforts are not resisted by the camp operators if the children leave at their own volition.¹⁰ Therefore, whether to stay at the camp or return to family largely depends on the will of the suicide bomber. Life at the camp, however, is incredibly absorbing. Trainees who are pulled out of the camp by their families often flee their homes to return to the camp. One would-be suicide bomber admitted, "Yes, I felt attracted to life in the camp as I felt happy over there with my fellows. There was good food, pocket money, good friends and vehicles for driving."¹¹

During the winter months, training is minimal due to severe weather in the mountains. The camps are also vacated in response to government military operations, at which time the members melt into the general civilian population.¹² The average number of trainees in a camp ranges from 30-35, but this can vary.¹³

Within the camp, Pashtu is the working language, although Urdu may be spoken. The Taliban leadership provides all expenses associated with the camp. Trainees are occasionally provided 500 to 1,000 rupees for their expenses when they visit their homes.¹⁴ This serves as pocket money on a demand basis.

The first camp to specialize in training suicide bombers was the Kotkai camp. It was closed after Qari Hussain, a senior Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operative known as the "Trainer of Suicide Bombers," was deposed from his leadership role as the head of the suicide bomber brigade in 2007.¹⁵

1 The *Lal Masjid* siege occurred in July 2007 when Pakistani security forces engaged jihadist militants holed up in the mosque complex. The operation is viewed as the catalyst that turned formerly Kashmir- and sectarian-focused militants against the Pakistani government.

2 Operation Rah-e-Rast (Path to Righteousness) in Swat began in May 2009. Operation Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Salvation) in South Waziristan began in October 2009. For details, see Sameer Lalwani, "The Pakistan Military's Adaptation to Counterinsurgency in 2009," *CTC Sentinel* 3:1 (2010).

3 Omar Waraich, "Taliban Running School for Suicide Bombers," *Independent*, July 29, 2009.

4 Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Ishaq Mehsud, Islamabad, Pakistan, June 2008; Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Abid Mehsud, Islamabad, Pakistan, July 2008; Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Hameedullah Mehsud, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 2008; Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Mir Janan, Islamabad, Pakistan, September 2008; Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Aitezaz Shah, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan, January 2008; Pakistan Police interrogation report, subject Hasnain Gul (also known as Ali Punjabi), Rawalpindi, Pakistan, August 2009.

5 This information was drawn from Geo TV news reporting in 2009.

6 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

7 Ibid.

8 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

9 Ibid.

10 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

11 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

12 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

13 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

14 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

15 Ibid. Baitullah Mehsud removed him from command when Qari Hussain's followers attacked the residence of Pir Amiruddin Shah, the government's political agent in Khyber Agency, in May 2007. The brazen attack killed seven guests and six family members, a violation of Pashtun ethics since women and guests were among the dead. More importantly, Qari Hussain never sought Baitullah's approval to conduct the attack. Although Qari Hussain was reported killed in January 2010, it appears that he is still alive. For details on Qari Hussain and his 2007 conflict with Baitullah Mehsud, see the following reports: Abid Mehsud, July 2008; Behroz Khan and

Wali Muhammad was put in command of the brigade and the camps were shifted to Deeley and Karama in South Waziristan.¹⁶

Since the October 2009 Pakistan military operation in South Waziristan, all of the suicide camps in the Mehsud-dominated areas of the agency have been closed.

Recruitment Motivations

Statistically, it is estimated that more than 90% of suicide bombers who join the training camps in Waziristan are Pashtun.¹⁷ Moreover, according to an unpublished internal report from Pakistan's Special Investigation Group in 2009, approximately 70% of suicide attacks are conducted by fighters from the Mehsud tribe.¹⁸ Non-Pashtuns also join the camp, such as Aitezaz Shah, who was arrested due to his alleged role in the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.¹⁹ According to would-be suicide bomber Ishaq, the main explanation for the high prevalence of suicide terrorism among the Mehsud is because the training camps are located in areas inhabited by the tribe.²⁰ Additionally, pockets of civilians in Mehsud-dominated areas of Waziristan eulogize the bombers for their courage, which incites more youth to join the camps.

Most suicide bombers are recruited from kinship or friendship networks.²¹ Other factors that draw individuals to the camps include: curiosity, proximity of the camps to civilian residential communities, unemployment or under-employment, poor academic options, boredom and lack of entertainment. Abid, a 16-year-old Mehsud from South Waziristan, identified boredom and his uncle's behavior for his reason in joining a suicide bomber training camp: "I was working with my uncle in his shop at

Landa Bazaar Hyderabad. I was sick of life and wanted to get rid of it. I escaped Hyderabad in 2006 and went straight to Qari Hussain instead of home."²² Ishaq, an 18-year-old would-be suicide bomber belonging to the Mehsud tribe in South Waziristan, dropped out of school early and was lured into a suicide training camp because it operated in his village of Kotkai.²³

There are a number of motivations that cause individuals to join suicide bomber training camps. Recruits are primarily motivated by atrocities against Muslims. The main theme in the camp lectures is revenge. Ishaq explained that instructors call attention to the helplessness of Muslims whose daughters and sisters are dishonored by non-Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq.²⁴ According to Abid, the camp leaders incite the audience when they narrate stories about Muslim women languishing in the prisons of infidels.²⁵

Instructors consistently emphasize the religious permissibility of suicide attacks against non-Muslims and even their Muslim allies. According to this logic, Pakistan's security forces are working for the United States and they hinder jihadist activities; therefore, suicide bombings against them are permissible. As stated by one would-be suicide bomber, "The instructor, Maulvi Rahimullah used to tell us that suicide attacks on the army, security forces and even all government employees was permissible under the injunctions of Islam."²⁶

Qari Hussain, known for his anti-Shi'a beliefs, also motivated camp members by arguing that the Shi'a are *kafirs* (infidels) and therefore can be killed. According to the camp instructors, innocent civilians killed in suicide attacks are martyrs, and therefore there is no need to be concerned about their fate. Instructors justify these teachings with references to the Qur'an and hadith. They use decrees by religious scholars, and cite the precedent of the famous commander and companion of the Prophet Muhammad, Khalid bin

Walid, whose outnumbered army fought bravely against the enemies of Islam.

Instructors tell stories of past suicide bombers who have appeared in dreams saying that they are now in paradise.²⁷ Camp members are also shown videos of previous bombers planning their operations; they are not, however, shown the scene after a suicide blast, likely due to fear that the images of carnage will demoralize the recruits.²⁸

The bombers are radicalized to such an extent that they compete over the chance to launch an attack. One would-be bomber admitted, "Yes, the suicide bombers ask the *amir* persistently to give them an opportunity as soon as possible. They are always anxious to be launched."²⁹ The more a trainee pushes to conduct an attack, the sooner they are provided with an opportunity. One example is suicide bomber Ismail, who was sent to attack the police training school at Sargodha in 2007 only two weeks after his induction at the camp.³⁰ Some recruits prefer to carry out attacks in Afghanistan. This was the case with Abid, who wanted to carry out a suicide attack against Americans at Birmal, Afghanistan.

Camp trainees are told that a suicide bomber wins paradise for giving up his life for Allah, and enters the afterlife the moment the explosives detonate. Once in paradise, the suicide bomber has the opportunity to recommend 70 people for paradise and Allah honors that recommendation. The bombers are told that they are superior to other jihadists because they have no worldly ambitions such as status, money and esteem. While other jihadists can survive after an attack on the enemy, the *fidai* (suicide bomber) faces certain death—the supreme sacrifice for Allah. As a result, there is a sense of pride among the bombers as they refer to non-suicide bombers as "common mujahids," and they are not allowed to interact or socialize with them.³¹

David Montero, "Pakistan's Taliban Fight Each Other," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 2, 2007.

16 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

17 *Ibid.*; Abid Mehsud, July 2008; Mir Janan, September 2008; Hameedullah Mehsud, August 2008.

18 The Mehsud are a Pashtun tribe.

19 Aitezaz Shah, January 2008.

20 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

21 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Scott Atran, "Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:5 (2008).

22 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

23 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

27 Aitezaz Shah, January 2008; Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008; Mir Janan, September 2008; Hameedullah Mehsud, August 2008.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

31 Aitezaz Shah, January 2008; Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008; Mir Janan, September

The Camp Schedule

Information on the daily schedule within the training camps has been acquired from interviews with multiple detainees. The camp members wake before sunrise to offer special night vigils (*tahajjud*) followed by the recitation of the Qur'an until morning prayers (*fajr*).³² After breakfast, most trainees receive driver's education, and they practice vehicle maneuvers. Experienced driving instructors teach them how to handle motorcycles and cars in preparation for vehicle-borne (VBIED) suicide attacks.³³ At the Kotkai training camp, six station wagons were available for this purpose.³⁴

During the morning session, some trainees stay at the camp for services that include cleaning the camp, preparing lunch and buying utilities. Lunch is typically served around mid-day followed by the noon prayers (*zuhr*). Afterward, the trainees split into two groups and study the Qur'an. A new recruit is typically paired with a more senior member to help teach him the prayers. The trainees then depart again for outdoor driving lessons after having tea with cookies.³⁵ In the summer months, they usually take a nap after lunch before assembling for afternoon prayers (*asar*), which are usually followed by lessons from Maulana Masood Azhar's *Fazail-e-Jihad* (The Virtues of Jihad) for more than an hour. The evening prayers (*maghrib*) are offered together followed by a *wazifa* during which the trainees recite *Astaghfirullah*, *Alhamdulillah*, *Allah o Akbar* and *Allah Allah* 100 times each.³⁶ The *wazifa* is followed by dinner where the trainees have informal conversations with each other. During the training routine, they are shown jihadist videos on a DVD player.³⁷ Afterward, they go straight to sleep after night prayers (*isha'*) and no activity is allowed after the final prayers.

Throughout the training period, the instructors make emotional speeches designed to influence the trainees. Qari Hussain, in particular, apparently mesmerized his listeners and was able to bring them to tears.³⁸ The same emotional ambience is repeated during the concluding prayers (*du`a*). The two most famous books used at the camps for religious lessons are *Islam aur fidai hamlay* (Islam and Suicide Attacks), written by Mufti Abdul Bashar Qasmi, and *Fazail-e-Jihad* (Virtues of Jihad), written by Maulana Masood Azhar. The religious instructors are all local, and local guest speakers also deliver lectures. The *amir* of the camp hires a local *maulvi* (religious leader) for translation of the Qur'an and other lessons.

Rituals and Preparation Before an Attack

Before an attack is executed, only the head of the Pakistani Taliban, the head of the training camp, the *rabbar* (guide) and the *fidai* know the target. The other members of the training camp are not informed about the target beforehand. Some suicide bombers leave behind notes that are delivered to their families upon their deaths. Some record "video wills" before their departure, which are released by the Taliban after the mission is accomplished. Usually, suicide bombers visit their families for one final meeting before departing on their mission.³⁹ Abid, for example, met his family before his failed attack on President Pervez Musharraf, but did not tell them about the operation.

When a suicide bomber begins on the mission, his campmates say farewell by embracing him and requesting that he recommend them for paradise. The bomber is instructed to bathe and wear clean new clothes, and he shaves his pubic hair. The purpose of the bomber wearing new or clean clothes is to avoid suspicion and to have uninterrupted access to the target location. The bomber recites Qur'anic verses, and continues the recitation until the actual blast. The *rabbar* instructs the bomber on the proper timing of the blast in advance, and the bomber begins preparations ahead of time.

The *rabbar's* duty is to take the bomber to a predetermined target either a few days before the attack, or on the actual day. He helps the bomber become acquainted with the area and remains in contact with the high command directly to inform them about the success or failure of the attack. On the day of the attack, the *rabbar* decides the most opportune time for the bombing. Due to the *rabbar's* crucial role in the operation, obedience and loyalty to the *rabbar* is inculcated in the camp. A suicide bomber, however, reserves the right to disobey the *rabbar* if he changes the venue of the attack, attempts to hand him over to another handler, or asks him to attack an impossible target or one that will result in too few casualties. A normal target should result in the deaths of at least 10 people, with the exception of VIP targets when the number of dead is irrelevant.⁴⁰

The *rabbar* does not strictly monitor the suicide bomber in the days before the attack. The bomber can roam around with the hosts (who provide a safe house) in the target city until the moment he leaves for the attack. The bomber is provided with a code word for the final attack time. While the code word can change, until recently it has been "marriage."⁴¹ In the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the code word was "the meal is ready."⁴²

To boost the morale of the bombers before an attack, they are instructed to recite Ayat-ul-Kursi or a verse from Surah e Yaseen (chapter from the Qur'an).⁴³ The verse is *Wa jaalna mim baina aideebim saddan wa min khlfabum saddan fa aghsbainabum fabum la ubsaroon* (And we have put a barrier before them, and a barrier behind them, and we have covered them up, so that they cannot see). By reciting this verse, the bombers believe they are invulnerable to law enforcement detection. They receive explicit directions from the *amir* of the camp and *rabbar* not to surrender at any cost and to trigger the explosives if arrest is imminent or if they are about to be intercepted.

When conducting the attack, the suicide vest is worn under the bomber's

2008; Hameedullah Mehsud, August 2008.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

35 Aitezaz Shah, January 2008; Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008; Mir Janan, September 2008; Hameedullah Mehsud, August 2008.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

42 Hasnain Gul, August 2009.

43 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008; Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

garments, typically under a waistcoat so it is properly concealed. The orange color detonation cord connects the explosives vest or jacket to the striker sleeve, which is adhered to the bomber's left-hand wrist with duct tape. On reaching the target, the ring of the striker sleeve is pulled with the right hand and the blast occurs. There is no evidence of any intoxicant administered to the suicide bombers before the attack.

Since suicide bombers often either abort their missions or are arrested before they can detonate their explosives, they have been able to narrate their pre-attack emotions. The bombers' felt no fear of death or consequence before the attack. Some bombers, however, were anxious about missing the target, such as detonating their explosives early or too late (for example, after a convoy has already passed). Before the attack, they would feel pride that Allah had chosen them for such a great mission. Thoughts of their family did not enter their mind. They experienced no abnormal physical reactions such as sweating, dry mouth, restlessness, heart palpitations, or abnormal movements of the body. Breathing remained normal. There were no speech abnormalities, nor did they appear to be in a hurry.⁴⁴

Post-Mission Activities

At the completion of a successful mission, the Taliban leaders do not always inform the other trainees about the real location of the suicide blast. They also sometimes give them false information about where the attack occurred.⁴⁵ When an attack occurs in Afghanistan, however, the leaders inform the recruits of this fact.

After an attack takes place, the *amir* of the Pakistani Taliban and the *amir* of the training camp visit the family of the suicide bomber, provided that the family is in Waziristan or accessible.⁴⁶ Although the other trainees at the camp feel loss for their former friend, they are consoled by the notion that the bomber has reached paradise. No specific funeral rituals or celebrations are offered at the camp for those who go on suicide missions. They are, however, remembered in prayers. The

families of the bombers rejoice over the martyrdom mission, and some mothers wear new black dresses to greet local women after the death of their son. One bomber, however, explained that while the mother of the bomber is typically sad, they cannot overtly express their true feelings due to threats from the Taliban.

Also, contrary to the general public's perception, the Taliban do not regularly pay compensation to the families of suicide bombers after an attack.⁴⁷ Any posthumous compensation package is largely a myth. In some cases, when the parents of a bomber are extremely destitute, they are given a small amount of financial assistance.

Conclusion

The suicide bomber training camps in South Waziristan have been shuttered as a result of Pakistan's October 2009 military operation. Yet insight into how the Waziristan camps functioned helps to provide context for how and why individuals choose to use their body as an explosive device. Moreover, although the South Waziristan camps have been closed, they may have been relocated elsewhere. Continuing to deny militants safe haven to train and plan for attacks is essential to reducing their operational capabilities in Pakistan and in the region.

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Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan

By Sajjan M. Gohel

IRAN IS PLAYING a pivotal role in Afghanistan's post-Taliban development. It is a large source of foreign direct investment, and provides assistance in critical national infrastructure, road construction, distribution of energy supplies, and agricultural and communications development. Iran also shares ethnic, linguistic and religious links with millions of Afghan Shi'a. This is particularly true with Afghanistan's Shi'a-minority Hazara community, which resides in the central and northern regions of the country. As a result of these positive connections, Iran has been viewed as a potential stabilizing force in Afghanistan, with its interests largely aligned with those of the Western mission: concern about the Taliban insurgency, resistance to al-Qa`ida and weakening the opium trade

Paradoxically, Iranian-made armaments have been discovered in the hands of Afghan Taliban fighters, raising concern and questions about Tehran's overall strategy in Afghanistan. An August 2009 report authored by General Stanley A. McChrystal, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, cited Iran's "ambiguous role" in the country, stating that Iran is providing aid to the Afghan government while at the same time allowing weapons to pass into the hands of the Taliban.¹ U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also accused Tehran of playing a "double game" in Afghanistan.² This "ambiguous" role has created confusion over Iran's true intentions toward its neighbor.

1 Stanley A. McChrystal, "COMISAF'S Initial Assessment, Secretary of Defense Memorandum June 2009, Initial United States Forces - Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Assessment," Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, August 30, 2009. General McChrystal's exact words were, "Iran plays an ambiguous role in Afghanistan, providing developmental assistance and political support to GIROA while the Iranian Qods Force is reportedly training fighters for certain Taliban groups and providing other forms of military assistance to insurgents. Iran's current policies and actions do not pose a short-term threat to the mission, but Iran has the capability to threaten the mission in the future."

2 Mark Thompson, "U.S. Forces Get New Protection in Afghanistan," *Time Magazine*, October 28, 2009.

44 Ibid.

45 Mir Janan, September 2008.

46 Abid Mehsud, July 2008.

47 Ishaq Mehsud, June 2008.