

Pakistan's Challenges in Orakzai Agency

By Tayyab Ali Shah

IN PAKISTAN'S FEDERALLY Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Orakzai Agency has become the scene of violent clashes between security forces and Pakistani Taliban militants. In the past few years, militants have fled to Orakzai to establish safe havens in the wake of Pakistani military operations in other parts of the tribal belt. As a result, on March 23, 2010, Pakistan launched a military offensive in Orakzai and declared victory on June 1. Pakistan claims that it has killed more than 1,500 militants in the agency during the last three months.¹ Nevertheless, despite the official end of its offensive, Pakistan's security patrols continue to be ambushed in Orakzai, and the government has responded by dispatching helicopter gunships and fighter jets to assault various areas of the territory. Military operations are ongoing today.

In light of the continued fighting, this article provides an overview of the strategic importance of the agency, the history of its Talibanization, the different Taliban groups operating there and the current state of Pakistan Army operations in Orakzai.

The Strategic Importance of Orakzai Agency

Orakzai Agency, which has an estimated population of 250,000 people, is strategically important to both Pakistan's military and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).² Orakzai is considered the TTP's "second home," as its current leader Hakimullah Mehsud rose to power in the agency. Additionally, after Pakistan's military offensive in South Waziristan Agency in late 2009, many TTP militants relocated to Orakzai. The TTP is not the only militant group operating in Orakzai. Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaysh-i-Muhammad, for example, have bases and training camps in the agency, and they reportedly launched suicide bombers from Orakzai to attack targets in Punjab Province in late 2009

1 "At Least 25 Militants Killed in Orakzai Clash," *Dawn*, July 21, 2010.

2 For details, see the FATA Secretariat website at www.fata.gov.pk.

and early 2010.³ Some analysts believe that Maulana Fazlullah, the former chief of the Swat Taliban, could also be hiding in Orakzai.⁴ Finally, the Ghazi Force, believed to be behind most of the deadly attacks in Islamabad during the last three years—including an attack on the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Marriott Hotel, the World Food Program and the recent June 9 attack near Islamabad that destroyed multiple NATO supply trucks—is also based in the agency.⁵

Geographically, Orakzai is in a strategic position as it borders the Tirah Valley of Khyber Agency, Kohat and Hangu districts of the North-West Frontier Province, and Kurram Agency. Orakzai's total area is 1,538 square kilometers (594 square miles).⁶ The main access to Kurram, the only tribal agency with a Shi'a majority, is through Orakzai; by blocking this road, Taliban fighters have often put the Kurram Shi'a under siege.⁷ Also, compared to other Taliban strongholds such as North and South Waziristan, Orakzai is closer to Peshawar, Islamabad and Rawalpindi, making it an ideal launching point for fighters attacking Pakistan's more populated and strategically significant cities. The topography of Orakzai also plays a factor, as the mountainous region between Stori Khel and Dara Adam Khel provide a natural fortress and plenty of cover for militants.⁸ Orakzai, however, is the only tribal agency that does not share a border with Afghanistan.

The Talibanization of Orakzai

The Talibanization of Orakzai Agency can be traced to 1999, when a 30-year-old native of the agency, Aslam Farooqi, raised a Taliban *lashkar* (militia).

3 Michael Hughes, "Pakistan Turns Up Heat on Tehrik-i-Taliban in Orakzai and North Waziristan," *Afghanistan Headlines Examiner*, May 25, 2010.

4 Rahimullah Yusufzai, "The Taliban Strike Back," *Newsline*, May 20, 2010.

5 Kathy Gannon, "The Ghazi Force: Vengeful New Militant Group Emerges in Pakistan," *Associated Press*, July 1, 2010.

6 For details, see the FATA Secretariat website at www.fata.gov.pk.

7 Tayyab Ali Shah, "Taliban Exploit Shi'a-Sunni Divide in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:15 (2010); Mariam Abou Zahab, "Sectarianism in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency," *Terrorism Monitor* 7:6 (2009).

8 Hughes.

Farooqi belonged to the Mamuzai tribe and was affiliated with the anti-Shi'a group Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). In the wake of the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan in 2001, Farooqi reportedly offered the Afghan Taliban

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12,000 men with arms and ammunition to fight against the U.S.-led coalition.⁹ Farooqi's men remained active in Afghanistan until the end of 2001, when they melted away as the Afghan Taliban resistance crumbled before the U.S.-led offensive.¹⁰

Orakzai was relatively calm until 2004-2006, when Pakistan Army operations in South Waziristan forced many Pakistanis, as well as foreign militants, to seek refuge in the agency. Orakzai acted as a safe haven for these fighters since Pakistan's military was not present in the area. After the formation of the TTP in 2007, a Taliban force was organized in Orakzai.¹¹ Hakimullah Mehsud, the current head of the TTP, moved to Orakzai and was appointed by the TTP's leader at the time, Baitullah Mehsud, as the chief commander for the group in Orakzai, Khyber and Kurram agencies.¹²

There have been attempts to counter Talibanization in the agency. Law and order is the responsibility of Khasadars¹³

9 "Orakzai Taliban Chief Extends Full Help," *Dawn*, November 6, 2001.

10 Personal interview, Brigadier (retired) Asad Munir, former Inter-Services Intelligence official, July 2010.

11 Asad Munir, "Taliban & Orakzai," *The News International*, June 13, 2009.

12 Amir Mir, "A Young Turk Takes Over TTP, Ringing Alarm Bells," *The News International*, August 28, 2009.

13 The Khasadar are a poorly trained and organized force that is recruited and managed by the FATA Political Agent, the head of a tribal agency.

in Orakzai, due to the absence of the Frontier Corps in the agency. Khasadars, basically local security forces, are not trained or equipped to combat well-trained militants. As a result, the tribes were forced to fight against Taliban fighters on their own. When the Taliban asked the biggest tribe in Orakzai, the Ali Khel, to expel 100 Shi`a families from the area, the Ali Khel convened a tribal *jirga* to establish an anti-Taliban *lashkar* in October 2008.¹⁴ The *jirga*, however, was attacked by a suicide bomber, who killed more than 82 tribal elders.¹⁵ This one attack decimated the tribal leadership of Orakzai and paved the way for the Taliban to take control of the entire agency.¹⁶

After consolidating its hold on the agency, Taliban militias announced the enforcement of Shari`a, and they established Islamic courts and complaint centers. Through mosque loudspeakers, they urged people to contact the Islamic courts to settle disputes in accordance with Islamic law. The Taliban established a parallel political administration and levied *jizya* (protection tax) on members of the local Sikh and Hindu communities.¹⁷ In June 2008, six men were publicly executed after a Taliban-established court found them guilty of kidnapping.¹⁸ In January 2010, the Taliban punished tribesmen who refused to remain in their village to support the Taliban in the fight against security forces by setting 63 houses on

fire in Tori Mela.¹⁹ Continuing with their atrocities, the Taliban chopped off the hands of three men on theft allegations in the Ghaljo area of the agency in the first week of May 2010.²⁰

Today, the most active Taliban groups operating in Orakzai are the Commander Tariq Group, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, and the Ghazi Force. The Commander Tariq Group is headed by Tariq Afridi,

“Despite its recent offensive, Pakistan’s government has yet to bring Orakzai under control.”

who is based in Dara Adam Khel, and is considered the most powerful militant group in Orakzai. The Abdullah Azzam Brigade was reportedly involved in the attack on the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar and the killing of anti-Taliban religious scholar Sarfraz Naemi in June 2009.²¹ Lashkar-i-Jhangvi is a violent, sectarian group and an offshoot of the SSP.²² The Ghazi Force is named after Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the former cleric of *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) who was killed when Pakistani security forces stormed the facility in 2007. The Ghazi Force is currently led by Niaz Raheem, a former student of *Lal Masjid*, and is suspected of being behind many of the recent violent attacks in Islamabad and other populated areas in Pakistan.²³

The Commander Tariq Group is part of the TTP, while Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, the Ghazi Force and the Abdullah Azzam Brigade are closely affiliated with the TTP.²⁴

19 “Militants Burn Village in Lower Orakzai,” *Dawn*, January 5, 2010.

20 “Taliban Cut Off Hands of Three Tribesmen,” *Dawn*, May 6, 2010.

21 Bill Roggio, “Arakzai Taliban Take Credit for Mosque Suicide Attacks,” *The Long War Journal*, June 12, 2009.

22 Bill Roggio, “Taliban Torch Village in Arakzai,” *The Long War Journal*, January 5, 2010.

23 Gannon.

24 Ibid.; Syed Yasir Shah, “Unknown Group Claims Peshawar Hotel Bombing,” *The News International*, June 11, 2009.

Pakistan’s Offensive in Orakzai

On March 23, 2010, Pakistan’s military launched a major anti-Taliban operation in Orakzai called *Khwakh Ba dee Sham*.²⁵ As part of the offensive, the army blocked most of the entry and exit routes to and from Orakzai. Both sides reportedly suffered casualties, and the military claims that the dead included foreign fighters, such as Arabs, Chechens and Uzbeks.²⁶

On June 1, the Pakistan Army declared that the military operation in Orakzai was finished and the objectives achieved. This announcement, however, appears more a public relations move than a military reality. Air strikes in the agency have continued through July, providing ample proof that military operations are far from over.²⁷ Moreover, according to residents in the area, Mamozai, Ghaljo and Shahoo are still under Taliban control. Some government officials also admitted in early June that terrorists were putting up “stiff resistance” in upper Orakzai.²⁸ These results are not surprising considering that Pakistan’s military deployed just 5,000 troops for only three months (March 23-June 1) to clear Taliban militants from the territory. By comparison, operations in South Waziristan and Swat were supported by more than 25,000 and 15,000 troops, respectively.²⁹ Nevertheless, it appears that Pakistan’s military has cleared some areas in southern Orakzai to act as a base camp from where it can continue its anti-Taliban operations.

Conclusion

Despite its recent offensive, Pakistan’s government has yet to bring Orakzai under control. The security services

25 This is a Pashtu expression meaning, “I will teach you a lesson.”

26 Ikram Sehgal, “Counterinsurgency Operations,” *The News International*, April 29, 2010.

27 “At Least 38 Taliban Insurgents and Four Security Personnel Were Killed,” *Express Tribune*, June 23, 2010; Manzoor Ali, “22 Suspected Militants Killed in Orakzai,” *Express Tribune*, July 12, 2010.

28 Iqbal Khattak, “Taliban Still Rule Half of Orakzai,” *Daily Times*, June 3, 2010.

29 Although Orakzai differs in size from South Waziristan and Swat, there are likely more militants in the agency and they appear to be in hardened positions. Therefore, it seems that the number of troops deployed in the Orakzai offensive was inadequate. For details, see “Brief: Military Operations In Orakzai Over?” Stratfor Global Intelligence, June 2, 2010.

14 Syed Hasan Mahmood and Mushtaq Yusufzai, “Orakzai Blast Toll Rises to 82,” *The News International*, October 12, 2008; Farhat Taj, “Life in Orakzai,” *The News International*, February 11, 2009.

15 Mahmood and Yusufzai.

16 Mukhtar A. Khan, “The Role of Tribal Lashkars in Winning Pakistan’s War on Terror,” *Terrorism Focus* 5:40 (2008).

17 The Sikhs of Orakzai have lived in the agency for centuries. When the Taliban took control of Orakzai, they discriminated against the Sikhs. In April 2009, 11 houses in the Sikh community were razed for not being able to pay the Rs. 150 million (\$1.9 million) *jizya* to the Taliban, and the Sikh community—comprising 30-35 families—had to shift from the Feroze Khel area to the nearby Merozai area in lower Orakzai. For details, see “Taliban Seize Houses, Shops of Sikhs in Orakzai,” *Daily Times*, April 30, 2009; “Taliban Raze Houses of Sikhs in Orakzai,” *Dawn*, April 30, 2009. There are also approximately 18 Hindu families in Orakzai. For details, see Munir and Mir.

18 Bill Roggio, “Pakistan Signs Peace Accord in Orakzai Tribal Agency,” *The Long War Journal*, July 19, 2008.

need to approach the Orakzai campaign in a more “intelligence informed manner,” concentrating on breaking the Taliban from within. There are chances for success in this approach, as during the past two years there have been a number of occurrences where Taliban factions have fought each other over disputes in Orakzai.

In August 2009, for example, 21 militants were killed when two Taliban groups clashed for control of the Akakhel area of upper Orakzai.³⁰ In April 2010, more clashes were reported, when six Taliban, including a local commander, were killed in Orakzai during infighting between two rival Taliban factions led by Mullah Toofan and Mullah Rafiq.³¹ There were also reports of a Taliban commander who defected to his Ali Khel tribe over the Taliban’s poor treatment of Shi`a in Orakzai.³² Although the senior Taliban leadership was able to prevent these infighting incidents from spreading, it does show that there are possible rifts that can be exploited with a more nuanced understanding of the Taliban factions operating in Orakzai.

Tayyab Ali Shah is a freelance political and security analyst specializing in the Taliban and other Islamic extremists. He is a Pakistani Pashtun and has a post-graduate education in Political Science, Business Administration and Public Policy. He has extensive experience in community development, policy advocacy and political education with both Pakistani and Afghan Pashtuns. He moderates the Pakhtunkhwa Peace Forum and has written for The Jamestown Foundation, Pakistan’s Frontier Post and the Daily Times.

The Growing Threat of Female Suicide Attacks in Western Countries

By Houriya Ahmed

IN JANUARY 2010, U.S. intelligence officials warned that al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—the Yemen-based group responsible for the attempted Christmas Day airline bombing in the United States—is training female suicide bombers to attack countries in the West.¹ In May 2010, AQAP itself issued a call to Muslim women to join the jihad movement in Yemen.² U.S. officials reportedly believe that these women may have a “non-Arab” appearance and have Western passports, making it easier for them to evade detection while traveling.³

There are growing concerns that al-Qa`ida will start deploying women in its global fight against Western states and their interests. The group is clearly reaching out to Muslim women and asking them to participate in its “struggle” against the West. This year, for example, female suicide bombers have already attacked in Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan. Belgium convicted one woman of leading a terrorist group, while Muslim convert Colleen LaRose is currently facing trial in the United States for wanting to fight violent jihad.⁴ These signs, combined with the ongoing concern of homegrown militants, make it increasingly likely that the United States or Western European countries will experience their first female suicide bombing in the future.

This article provides background on Muslim female participation in violent extremism, shows how certain clerics have encouraged female participation in jihad, and finally examines how al-Qa`ida may adapt its strategy to make use of this tactic.

Female Participation in Violent Extremism

Hizb Allah, the Shi`a Islamist group based in Lebanon, first introduced suicide terrorism in 1983.⁵ Although it was the first religiously motivated party to use this tactic of warfare, secular nationalist groups popularized female suicide bombings in 1985 on behalf of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.⁶ Indeed, according to one 2009 study, 85% of female suicide attacks have been carried out by secular organizations.⁷

By 2004, however, the Palestinian group Hamas employed a female suicide bomber—Reem al-Rayashi.⁸ Since that attack, the tactic has been emulated by a number of militant Islamist groups waging jihad, especially in Iraq. Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the deceased leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), claimed responsibility for the group’s first female suicide bomber in September 2005.⁹ By November of that year, AQI claimed responsibility for an additional five female suicide attacks, which included one Iraqi-born woman, Sajida Mubarak al-Rishawi, whose bomb failed

5 Cindy D. Ness, “In the Name of a Cause: Women’s Work in Secular and Religious Terrorism,” in Cindy D. Ness ed., *Female Terrorism & Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organisation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 18.

6 Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “What’s Special about Female Suicide Terrorism?” *Security Studies* 18:4 (2009). Other examples of secular militant groups that used female suicide bombers include the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Turkey, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka and the Palestinian al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

7 Ibid. O’Rourke also states that female suicide bombers have detonated from approximately eight times in the 1980s to more than 100 since 2000. For details on that claim, see p. 696.

8 The militant Islamist group Palestinian Islamic Jihad also started using female suicide bombers. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are not the first Palestinian groups to have embraced female terrorism. Fatah’s militant al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (a nationalist group) was the first to introduce female suicide bombings against Israeli targets with Wafa Idris in January 2002. For more information see O’Rourke, pp. 697-698.

9 Little is known about AQI’s first female suicide bomber. See Christopher Dickey, “Women of Al Qaeda,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 2005.

1 A May 2010 magazine published by AQAP, *Sada al-Malabim*, includes an article by the wife of AQAP’s second-in-command, Said al-Shihri, calling on women to join the jihad in Yemen.

2 Ibid.

3 Phil Sherwell and Sean Rayment, “Al-Qaeda Has Trained Female Suicide Bombers to Attack the West, US Officials Warn,” *Daily Telegraph*, January 23, 2010; Anthony Browne, “Western White Woman a Suicide Bomber,” *The Times*, December 1, 2005.

4 “Belgium Convicts Terror Suspects,” BBC, May 10, 2010; “Muslim Convert Colleen LaRose, aka Jihad Jane, Faces Terror Charges,” *Guardian*, March 10, 2010.

30 “Hakeemullah’s Followers in Orakzai Clash; 21 Killed,” *Dawn*, August 12, 2009.

31 “Taliban Infighting Claims Six Lives in Orakzai,” *Daily Times*, April 2, 2010.

32 Taj.