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The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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A Profile of the TTP's New Leader: Hakimullah Mehsud

By Mukhtar A. Khan



Hakimullah Mehsud speaks with reporters in Pakistan's Orakzai Agency in November 2008. - Photo by A. Majeed/AFP/Getty Images

ON OCTOBER 17, 2009, Pakistan's military launched a new offensive in South Waziristan Agency, the stronghold of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The offensive comes in the wake of a series of major attacks launched by suspected TTP militants, including an October 5 suicide attack on a United Nations office in Islamabad, and the audacious October 10 assault on the military's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.¹ In the days before the October 17 offensive, the TTP warned Pakistan's government that any assault on South Waziristan would result in increased attacks on civilian and military targets in Pakistan. On October 28, the TTP seemed to deliver on its threat. The group was blamed for a powerful car bomb that killed more than 100 people in Peshawar just hours

after the arrival of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Islamabad.

Pakistan's military offensive is significant because it follows on the heels of the August 2009 Predator drone strike that killed Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP's leader. Baitullah's death left the TTP in disarray, as he had not established a clear succession plan. After three weeks marked by significant infighting, Hakimullah Mehsud was finally confirmed as the new leader of the TTP.² With Hakimullah at the helm of the TTP, the group may reach further into Pakistan's Punjab Province due to Hakimullah's links to Punjabi-based militant networks; this may allow the group to further solidify ties with local insurgent outfits that have been

² Shortly after his appointment, there was speculation that Hakimullah was killed as a result of infighting. It appears, however, that it was his brother who died. For more, see Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Baitullah's Death Finally Confirmed by Taliban," *The News*, August 26, 2009; "New Taliban Chief Meets Reporters," BBC, October 5, 2009.

¹ Shaiq Hussain and Karin Brulliard, "In Pakistan, Militants Attack Army Bastion," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2009; "Taliban Claims Responsibility For UN Pakistan Blast," Agence France-Presse, October 5, 2009.

traditionally focused on neighboring Kashmir and India. Moreover, Hakimullah could move the TTP in a more sectarian direction as a result of his association with anti-Shi`a militant leaders. These factors mean that the TTP could become increasingly radical and dangerous under Hakimullah's leadership. On the other hand, Hakimullah's sectarian and potentially more aggressive agenda could spark infighting within the TTP and cause the loosely structured network to split into factions. Given these new challenges and broad lack of knowledge about the TTP, it is critical to understand the character of the group's decision-makers. This article profiles Hakimullah Mehsud, who has now assumed the mantle of one of the most dangerous groups threatening Pakistan.

Personal History

Estimated to be 28-years-old and approximately six feet in height, Hakimullah has become a household name in the region.³ He achieved prominence in November 2008 after he introduced himself to journalists in Orakzai Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and displayed his access to heavy weaponry. He grew up in South Waziristan's Kotki, and his original name is Jamshed.⁴ He is also known by his alias name, "Zulfiqar Mehsud."

Hakimullah belongs to the Eshangai clan of the Mehsud tribe, which is a less influential clan than Baitullah's Shobi Khel. Like other Pakistani Taliban predecessors such as Baitullah Mehsud, Abdullah Mehsud and Nek Mohammad Wazir, Hakimullah never completed his religious education. He attended a *madrasa* in Shahu village of Hangu District in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), but quit his studies early and joined the ranks of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the late 1990s.⁵ Hakimullah received military training during the last few years of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, he reportedly returned to Pakistan's Waziristan.

3 Information on his personal statistics was acquired through speaking with journalists who have interviewed him.

4 Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Hakimullah a Fiercely Ambitious Militant," *Dawn*, August 27, 2009.

5 Alex Altman, "Hakimullah Mehsud: The New Head of Pakistan's Taliban," *Time Magazine*, August 28, 2009.

Unlike his predecessors, Hakimullah never had the opportunity to fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan because of his young age. He worked as a driver for Baitullah Mehsud when Baitullah emerged as a Pakistani Taliban leader in 2004 and became his chief spokesman in October 2007 under

"Hakimullah's anti-Shi`a agenda is an outgrowth of his long association with Qari Hussain Mehsud, his cousin and a TTP commander."

his alias name of Zulfiqar Mehsud. He married two women, one in South Waziristan from the Mehsud tribe and a second wife, from the Mamunzai tribe, in Orakzai Agency.⁶ During his time as Baitullah's driver and chief spokesman, Hakimullah reportedly served as a confidant to the former TTP leader.

Extensive Media Contacts

Hakimullah embraced his role as Baitullah's chief spokesman, and he quickly established strong relationships with journalists. Unlike Baitullah, who refused to be photographed due to religious concerns about the capture of human imagery, Hakimullah has been willing to pose for photographs, and he recognizes the value of the media as a propaganda tool.

In November 2008, for example, Hakimullah invited more than a dozen journalists to his stronghold in Orakzai Agency. During the meeting, he identified Mullah Omar as his supreme leader, and said that Usama bin Ladin's al-Qa`ida network was his ally.⁷ He criticized Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari for ceding sovereignty to the United States and vowed revenge for Zardari joining the "infidels."⁸ Hakimullah boasted about disrupting NATO supply routes

6 Riffatullah Orakzai, "Taliban's New Leader: A Fiercely Ambitious and Emotional Commander," BBC Urdu, August 22, 2009.

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

8 Imtiaz Gul, "Will Hakimullah Fit Baitullah's Shoes?" *Pulse*, September 3, 2009.

through Pakistan; to prove his point, he arrived at the interview driving an armor-plated Humvee that he claimed was commandeered from an Afghanistan-bound NATO convoy in Khyber Agency.⁹ During the interview, Hakimullah said his men destroyed more than 600 trucks and shipping containers in Peshawar and Khyber Agency destined for NATO in Afghanistan.¹⁰

More recently, after rumors of his death, Hakimullah again appeared before journalists on October 4, 2009.¹¹ During the meeting, Hakimullah ended speculation of his death, and he also warned that he would avenge the killing of Baitullah Mehsud. Hakimullah likely used the press conference to improve morale among his followers; two other key Taliban leaders, Qari Waliur Rahman and Qari Hussain Mehsud, were also at the meeting.¹²

Military Capabilities

Recognizing Hakimullah's value, Baitullah assigned Kurram, Orakzai and Khyber tribal agencies to his command in early 2008. By the end of that year, Hakimullah managed to gain significant control in these agencies, which some analysts argue is evidence of his leadership and military capabilities.¹³ In these agencies, Hakimullah gained influence by controlling strategic smuggling and supply routes. Moreover, he assassinated potential opponents.¹⁴

One tactic employed by Hakimullah to gain power in these agencies was to exploit sectarian rivalries between the Sunni and Shi`a sects. This was particularly evident in Orakzai and Kurram agencies, where he targeted the Shi`a community indiscriminately and sent a wave of fear throughout the Shi`a population in Pakistan.¹⁵ Hakimullah's anti-Shi`a agenda is an outgrowth of his long association with Qari Hussain Mehsud, his cousin and a TTP commander. Before joining the TTP,

9 Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Hakimullah Mehsud Unveils Himself to Media," *The News*, November 30, 2008.

10 Amir Mir, "The Top 10 Most Wanted Jihadis," *The News*, September 1, 2009.

11 "New Taliban Chief Meets Reporters."

12 Ibid.

13 Sherazi.

14 "Profile: Young Slayer Takes Up Reins of Pakistani Taliban," Deutsche Press Agency, August 28, 2009.

15 Ibid.

Qari Hussain was an active member of the banned anti-Shi`a group Sipah-i-Sahaba and its militant wing, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.¹⁶ Hakimullah reportedly relied on Qari Hussain's access to suicide bombers to gain control of Orakzai, Kurram and Khyber agencies.¹⁷ Qari Hussain, for example, is considered one

“The October 5 suicide attack on a United Nations office in Islamabad, and the October 10 assault on the military’s General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, show that the TTP remains highly effective under Hakimullah’s leadership.”

of the TTP’s most important assets due to his training of suicide bombers; he is often called Ustad-i-Fidayin, or Trainer of Suicide Bombers.

The importance of this relationship is evident in the wave of attacks that hit Pakistan in October 2009. On October 15, Lahore, the capital of Punjab Province, was assaulted by approximately three teams of militants, leaving more than 30 people dead. The TTP claimed credit for the attacks. Analysts believe that the TTP’s links to Punjab-based militants formerly (or currently) part of groups such as Lashkar-i-Jhangvi are responsible for these strikes that are increasingly occurring in the heart of Pakistan. It is likely that Hakimullah’s relationship with Qari Hussain contributes to the TTP’s capability to strike deeper inside Pakistan.

In addition to targeting the Shi`a community, Hakimullah has undertaken other sectarian actions. In December 2008, for example, Hakimullah imposed Shari`a in Orakzai Agency and demanded local tribesmen seek the

resolution of their disputes in Shari`a courts.¹⁸ He then levied *jizya* (protection tax) on the Sikh and Hindu communities. This decision is unique and significant in the history of the tribal areas because the Sikh and Hindu communities have lived unharmed in FATA for centuries under the tribal traditions. Yet the new imposition of Shari`a forced them either to leave the FATA region or submit to the dictates of the TTP and pay the *jizya*. Consequently, reports state that many minorities have already left the area and others plan to follow suit.¹⁹

TTP More Prone to Splintering?

It is clear that Hakimullah Mehsud poses a serious threat to Pakistan and U.S. interests. It is believed that his militia includes 8,000 fighters and several hundred suicide bombers.²⁰ Nevertheless, there are some indications that Hakimullah’s appointment as the new head of the TTP could cause further splits in the group.

Within the TTP, for example, there are differences between Salafists and Deobandis. The Salafist members of the TTP practice a harsher interpretation of Islam and consider the Shi`a infidels. Deobandi followers, on the other hand, are more flexible in comparison and generally do not support killing Shi`a unless they themselves are attacked by them. Hakimullah Mehsud, Qari Hussain and the TTP spokesman Azam Tariq are more inclined toward Salafijihadism, and their past affiliations with the anti-Shi`a Lashkar-i-Jhangvi have made them highly sectarian.²¹

Baitullah Mehsud, on the other hand, was known for his ability to coalesce an array of diverse groups under a single leadership. This leadership allowed him to overcome disagreements with Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Maulvi Nazir, while continuing to host Uzbek fighters linked to al-Qa`ida.²² Yet with Baitullah out of

the picture, the TTP must be concerned about future cooperation from Maulvi Nazir in South Waziristan and Hafiz Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan. On August 17, 2009, more than a dozen supporters of the Maulvi Nazir group were gunned down in the Laddha area of South Waziristan allegedly by Uzbek fighters part of Baitullah Mehsud’s faction.²³ The TTP is also facing challenges from the Abdullah Mehsud Group in South Waziristan and from Turkistan Bhattani in Tank District of the NWFP.

Pakistan’s government and intelligence agencies are aware of these differences, and they have been working to court tribal groups. The government’s goal is to keep as many tribal groups as possible out of its conflict with the TTP, with the hope that they will be able to eliminate the hardcore anti-Pakistan and Salafist leadership. This appears to be the goal of Pakistan’s offensive in South Waziristan, which went into full force on October 17. The increasing number of drone strikes has further shaken the Pakistani Taliban movement and disrupted its militant activity.²⁴

Conclusion

The TTP has suffered a number of losses in the last few months. In addition to the killing of Baitullah Mehsud, the TTP’s chief spokesman, Maulvi Omar, was apprehended by authorities on August 17.²⁵ Muslim Khan, a well-known spokesman from the Swat faction of the group, was arrested along with another militant leader, Mahmud Khan, on September 10.²⁶ Sher Mohammad Qasab, a feared Pakistani Taliban leader known for beheading opponents, died in government custody on September 20.²⁷

ziran, "The News, February 23, 2009.

23 This was seen as retaliation for a 2007 incident when Maulvi Nazir killed and expelled several Uzbek militants from the area. See "17 of Maulvi Nazir Group Killed in Tehsil Laddha," Geo TV, August 17, 2009.

24 "Pakistan Drone Attacks Kill 10," BBC, August 11, 2009.

25 "Two Pakistani Taliban Leaders Captured," CNN, August 18, 2009.

26 For a profile of Muslim Khan, see Imtiaz Ali, "The Taliban's Versatile Spokesman: A Profile of Muslim Khan," *CTC Sentinel* 2:2 (2009). For information on his arrest, see Ismail Khan, "Swat Taliban Mouthpiece, Top Commander Captured," *Dawn*, September 12, 2009.

27 Robert Kennedy, "Captured Pakistan Taliban Commander Dies in Jail," Associated Press, September 20, 2009.

16 For more on Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, see Arif Jamal, "A Profile of Pakistan's Lashkar-i-Jhangvi," *CTC Sentinel* 2:9 (2009).

17 Kamran Khan, "Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath," Geo TV, August 11, 2009.

18 Caroline Wadhams and Colin Cookman, "Faces of Pakistan's Militant Leaders," Center for American Progress, July 22, 2009.

19 "Sikhs, Hindus Dread Taliban Tax in Northwest Pakistan," *Dawn*, July 27, 2009.

20 Baitullah Mehsud gave Hakimullah control of 8,000 militants when he assigned him Orakzai, Khyber and Kurram tribal agencies. For more, see Amir Mir.

21 Hamid Mir, "Capital Talk Show," Geo TV, September 29, 2009.

22 Yousuf Ali, "Taliban Form New Alliance in Wa-

Despite these losses, the TTP clearly remains a dangerous organization. The October 5 suicide attack on a United Nations office in Islamabad, and the October 10 assault on the military's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, show that the TTP remains highly effective under Hakimullah's leadership. These two attacks have caused an irreparable loss of confidence in the Pakistan Army. Moreover, the October 15 attacks in Lahore show that Hakimullah retains strong links with jihadist groups with access to Punjab Province. In the face of the government's major offensive in South Waziristan Agency, TTP spokesman Azam Tariq vowed that the group would continue such strikes if military operations against them were not ceased.²⁸ The assassination of a Pakistani brigadier amid heavy rush hour traffic in Islamabad on October 22 could be a sign of a new TTP assassination campaign.²⁹

It appears that the TTP is currently at a crossroads, and its future could move in two directions. Either the TTP will successfully escalate its activities and increasingly make use of its Punjabi network to shake Pakistan, or it could splinter into smaller factions due to internal disagreements, heightened sectarian tendencies, or Pakistan's current offensive against its central leadership.

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²⁸ "GHQ Attackers Demanded Release of 100 Militants," *Dawn*, October 13, 2009.

²⁹ Jane Perlez and Salman Masood, "Pakistani Brigadier Assassinated in the Capital," *New York Times*, October 22, 2009.

The October 2009 Terrorist Attack in Italy and its Wider Implications

By Federico Bordonaro

ON OCTOBER 12, 2009, at approximately 7:45 AM, a Libyan citizen named Mohamed Game¹ attacked an Italian Army barracks in Milan with an improvised explosive device similar to the type used by terrorists in the London Underground attacks of July 7, 2005.² It is believed that the attack was an attempted suicide bombing, although Game survived the explosion due to poor construction of the IED. Nevertheless, the bomb was powerful enough to injure him severely. By October 19, Game was still hospitalized and in a coma, having lost one hand and the use of both eyes. The IED's blast also lightly injured the Italian soldier who managed to stop Game's attempt to access the inhabited sections of the barracks.

After five days of investigations, Italy's intelligence services believe that Game and his apprehended accomplices—the Libyan Mohamed Imbaeya Israfel³ and the Egyptian Abdel Hady Abdelaziz Mahmoud Kol⁴—may be linked to an unspecified Egyptian terrorist organization.⁵ Although many of the details are not yet clear, some conclusions can be drawn about the operative and tactical aspects of the attack, and especially on the wider political and security implications for Italy. Italy's north is home to Muslim immigrants, and the activities of some

¹ Game, a 35-year-old engineer and electrician, has been living in Italy for nine years and has a relationship with an Italian woman. The couple have two children and are reportedly undergoing serious economic troubles after Game's business failed to pay back debt. See Carlo Bonini, "Dal sogno di fare fortuna ai debiti il mistero di Mohamed, lupo solitario," *La Repubblica*, October 13, 2009.

² "Libyan in Milan Bomb Attack," ANSA Press Agency, October 12, 2009.

³ Israfel is a Libyan citizen aged 33 and currently unemployed. He attracted the attention of Italy's DIGOS police service in July 2009, as he was wiretapped speaking in extremist religious terms. He has a clean criminal record.

⁴ Kol, a 52-year-old Egyptian living in Italy, has a clean criminal record but is suspected of being linked to Egyptian extremist networks.

⁵ "Attentato, spunta un testimone 'Ho visto nascondere il nitrato,'" *La Repubblica*, October 16, 2009.

Muslim religious leaders have been strictly monitored in recent years due to fears of radicalization in mosques.

This article will first describe the operative and tactical aspects of the October 12 terrorist attack and report the findings of the ongoing investigations. It will then briefly illustrate the recent history of Islamist terrorist threats in Italy before analyzing the wider implications of the seemingly minor incident in Milan.

The Dynamics of the Milan Terrorist Attack

According to initial reports, Mohamed Game tried to enter the "Santa Barbara" barracks by waiting near the facility until the arrival of an authorized vehicle enabled him to follow it through the automatic gate. Once the gate opened, he tried to reach the core area of the barracks, but was immediately confronted by an armed soldier, Corporal Guido La Veneziana, whose unit is currently deployed in Herat, Afghanistan. Before the soldier could physically block him, Game reportedly detonated the IED. The device, however, was not prepared properly, and the blast did not cause the desired amount of damage. According to the soldier's declarations, the Libyan shouted some words in Arabic moments before the explosion.⁶

Early probes found that the IED was carried by the attacker in a toolbox placed in a rucksack. It had been assembled with five kilograms of ammonium nitrate, likely mixed with ammonia and acetone, while the trigger may have been electronic.⁷ The explosive mixture used by Game was similar to ANFO,⁸ although the exact chemical composition of the device has not been revealed by authorities.

While the prompt intervention of Corporal La Veneziana denied Game the possibility of proceeding deeper into the barracks, the damage could have been considerable had the terrorist been able to exploit the full potential of the IED.

⁶ "Bomba contro una caserma a Milano Gravemente ferito l'attentatore libico," *La Stampa*, October 12, 2009.

⁷ "Bomba caserma, 40 kg nitrato ammonio," ANSA Press Agency, October 13, 2009; *Il Giornale*, October 15, 2009.

⁸ ANFO stands for ammonium nitrate-fuel oil and is a widely used explosive mixture.