

COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY INITIATIVE POLICY PAPER

THE BATTLE FOR PAKISTAN

Militancy and Conflict in Orakzai

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SEPTEMBER 2010

There are three distinct but often mutually reinforcing components to militancy in Orakzai: sectarian conflict between the 10 percent of the agency that is Shia Muslim and the majority Sunni population; a religiously inspired, locally motivated movement similar to the Tehrik-i-Nifaz Shariat-Muhammadi (TNSM) in the Swat Valley; and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan-inspired insurgency.

Orakzai is the only one of Pakistan's seven tribal agencies that does not border Afghanistan. It was once home to Hakimullah Mehsud, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan chief who led militant operations there and in the Khyber and Peshawar regions, targeting hundreds of NATO supply vehicles in 2008 and 2009.¹ Orakzai is dominated by the Karagh Ghar mountains, ranging from 1,500 meters to 2,500 meters in height.² The agency was once part of the frontier region of Kohat, but after persistent demands by the Orakzai tribe, Pakistani president Fazal Ilahi Chaudhry declared it a separate tribal agency on November 3, 1973.³

Orakzai comprises about 1,500 square kilometers and is divided into two administrative areas, Upper Orakzai and Lower Orakzai,⁴ which have a total population of 225,000.⁵ Upper Orakzai is further divided into Upper Tehsil and Ismailzai Tehsil, while Lower Orakzai is composed of Lower Tehsil and Central Tehsil.⁶ Major towns in the agency are Dabori, Ghiljo, Kalaya, Mishti Mela, and Kurez.

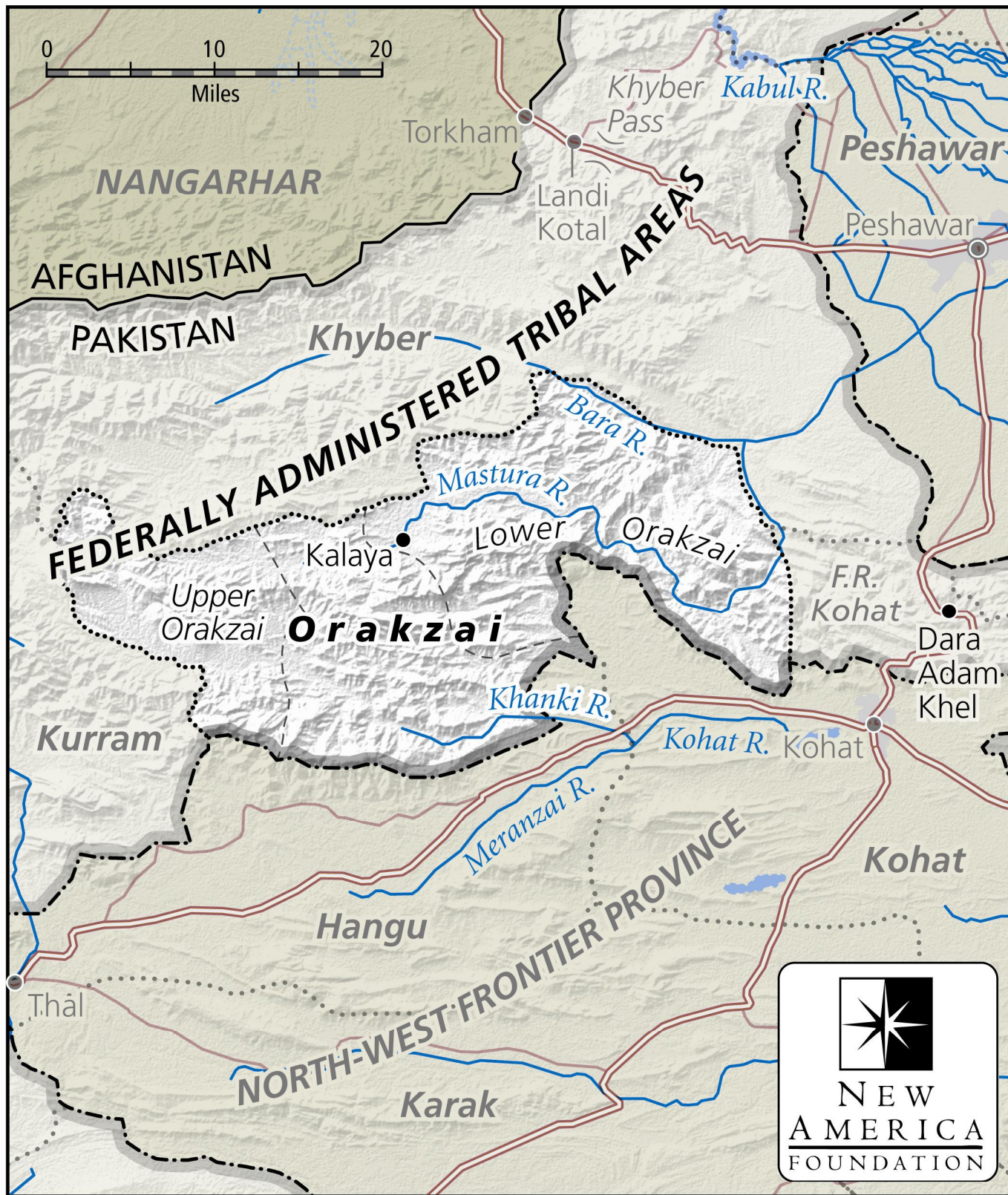
Orakzai is administratively headquartered at the Kohat-Thal road in Hangu district.

Literacy in Orakzai is low, and most of the people who live there are involved in agriculture. Educated tribesmen often join the government, and many have left the country for the Middle East to earn a living, many as construction laborers and cab drivers.

The Structure of the Insurgencies in Orakzai

There are three distinct but often mutually reinforcing components to militancy in Orakzai: sectarian conflict between the 10 percent of the agency that is Shia Muslim⁷ and the majority Sunni population; a religiously inspired, locally motivated movement similar to the Tehrik-i-Nifaz Shariat-Muhammadi (TNSM) in the Swat Valley; and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan-inspired insurgency.

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MAP BY GENE THORP OF CARTOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS, INC.

Sectarianism in Orakzai

The violent divide between Orakzai's majority Sunnis and the 40 percent Shia population in the neighboring Kurram agency heavily influences the nature of sectarian conflict in Orakzai. Three of the 18 subtribes are completely and two are partially Shia, while the rest are Sunni.⁶ The sectarian dispute in Orakzai is primarily over the ownership of the Mir Anwar Shah Shrine in Kalaya.⁷ The shrine, which is more than 300 years old, is dedicated to a saint who is highly regarded by Shia Muslims.⁸ Shiite members of the Orakzai tribe long claimed that the shrine and its surrounding property originally belonged to them, but the colonial British gave control of it to the Sunnis in 1936 and separated the Sunnis and Shiites into different areas to minimize the chances of sectarian clashes.⁹ For the next several decades, peace was prevalent in the agency, with only minor skirmishes between the sects. In August 1988, after the death of President Zia ul Haq, the Sunnis and Shiites clashed because a member of the Shia community allegedly celebrated the pro-Sunni dictator's passing. As part of an agreement a month later between the sects and the political administration of Orakzai, the Shiites were allowed to pay homage at the shrine and work for its maintenance and preservation.¹⁰

The sectarian conflict in Orakzai also has an economic dimension; Shiites in Orakzai are comparatively affluent and more educated than Sunnis.

An opening ceremony for the beginning of the renovation of the shrine was held on June 20, 1999, with members of both sects participating, but a few days later, local Taliban from the Daboori area of Orakzai raided Kalaya and stopped the renovation work, destroying the peaceful atmosphere of the agency, claimed the Orakzai elders.¹¹ The leadership of the Orakzai Taliban denounced the 1988 agreement,

declaring the music in the shrine to be "against Islam" and barred Shiites from the building. Shiite elders said that the use of musical instruments inside the shrine was not an act of heresy and that Taliban members occupying nearby hilltops had fired rocket-propelled grenades and mortars on their villages, injuring people and destroying property.¹² The Taliban imposed heavy fines on 40 Shiite families in the Ali Khel area and forced them to leave their homes.¹³ The Orakzai-based Aslam Farooqi group, a local Sunni militant group associated with the anti-Shia Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) raised and led by Aslam Farooqi, a member of Mamozai tribe, and foreign fighters including Uzbeks and Arabs were the key elements in disrupting the peace.¹⁴ Capitalizing on the existing sectarian conflict, the Taliban sided with the local Sunni groups against Shiites to try and establish their own Islamic state.¹⁵

In October 2006, the political administration of Orakzai imposed restrictions on both sides, forbidding them from entering the shrine area after clashes between them resulted in deaths.¹⁶ In the clashes a Shiite group burned houses of Sunnis and captured the shrine's adjoining area. The shrine was reduced to rubble, and sectarian conflict continued in Kalaya. From 1999 through 2009, 22,000 overall sectarian killings were recorded in Orakzai and the neighboring district of Hangu in Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa.¹⁷

The sectarian conflict in Orakzai also has an economic dimension; Shiites in Orakzai are comparatively affluent and more educated than Sunnis. Many of them own large properties, as well as forests and water reservoirs. Shiites have also obtained contracts for coal mining from Pakistan's local political administration. Sunnis, by contrast, are relatively poor, less educated, and located in less fertile areas.

Tehrik-i-Tulaba Movement (Student Movement)

Although Orakzai is the only tribal agency not to border Afghanistan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Taliban's subsequent rule there in the 1980s and 1990s

heavily influenced the region. In the late 1990s, Maulvi Muhammad Rehmin, a local cleric, started a Taliban-like organization in Orakzai called the Tehrik-i-Tulaba Movement (TTM) that advocated for the imposition of *sharia* law in the agency. The TTM was heavily influenced by the Tehrik-i-Nifaz Shariat-Muhammadi (TNSM) in the Malakand Division to the north, founded by Sufi Muhammad.¹⁸ Imitating the Taliban in Afghanistan, in 1998 the Taliban in Orakzai ordered the public execution of a young man found guilty of a crime by a Tehrik-i-Tulaba *sharia* court composed of local ulema, or Muslim legal scholars.¹⁹ The man was executed in front of a crowd of 2,000 by a brother and uncle of the cousin he was convicted of killing. Rehmin hailed the execution as a huge step toward the enforcement of *sharia*. This is the first reported example of TTM justice, and later Taliban movements imitated these techniques. As in other tribal agencies, the TTM in Orakzai included local tribal elders in their decision making to earn legitimacy and enforce *sharia*. To fully "Islamize" the agency, the TTM outlawed music, television sets, and VCRs, and those found guilty of violating the ban were punished with fines and destruction of their property.²⁰

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks caused the United States to invade Afghanistan, Rehmin issued a decree supporting jihad against the invaders and led several hundred men alongside TNSM leader Sufi Muhammad to fight with the Afghan Taliban.²¹ Inspired by the TNSM in Malakand, tribal religious leaders did make some efforts to form an alliance across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with the TNSM and other militant groups, holding a number of meetings to that effect, including one in Orakzai but the fall of TNSM and Sufi Muhammad destroyed their hopes.²² The TTM has since largely disappeared from view. It is believed that some of its fighters died and some joined other groups, but the whereabouts of Rehmin are unknown.²³

Since 2004, Orakzai has been used as a sanctuary for Taliban fighters fleeing Pakistani military action in

Waziristan, and as a launching pad for attacks on Pakistani security forces or across the border into Afghanistan. Beginning in 2005, Mangal Bagh's Lashkar-e-Islam also operated in parts of the Khyber agency bordering Orakzai.²⁴ Lashkar-e-Islam and TTP elements operating in Khyber and Orakzai support each other against the Pakistani government.²⁵

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Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militant umbrella organization was established under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud on December 14, 2007.²⁶ Following its creation, Taliban militants stepped up their activities in Orakzai, intimidating residents and imposing a harsh brand of *sharia* on the local tribes. Prominent *maliks*, or local elders, were kidnapped for ransom or killed, forcing the residents to accept Taliban rule.²⁷ The TTP's support base came from Waziristan, the Afridi-dominated Tirah valley between Khyber and Kurram, and other tribal areas in northwest Pakistan. Supporters of the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi groups joined from Dara Adam Khel in Frontier Region Kohat. Ideologically sympathetic local militant leaders from the Orakzai Ali Khel and Mamozai tribes became part of the Taliban movement.

In January 2008, some of the local tribes tried to unite against the Taliban militants, but the Taliban launched a

vicious campaign against the tribes and they finally gave in when the government did not support them.²⁸

By early 2008, the Sunni majority areas in Orakzai were under the virtual control of the Taliban with very little influence from the Pakistani government. To win public support, the Taliban started cracking down on criminals, as Orakzai residents had long been dissatisfied with what they viewed as a corrupt and inefficient central government. In April 2008, the Taliban arrested nine people in Orakzai and took them to Waziristan for punishment.²⁹ To create more space to establish its authority, on May 9, 2008, during a *jirga* attended by members of the local Council of Scholars and tribal leaders, the Taliban banned the education of girls and the operation of nongovernmental organizations in Orakzai.³⁰ Local Taliban leaders also warned kidnappers and robbers to appear before the Taliban *shura*, repent their crimes, or face stern punishment according to *sharia*, and urged government employees to improve or face severe punishment.³¹

The Taliban was running a fully functional parallel administration in Orakzai, with its security force on patrol and their *sharia* courts dispensing justice. As an example of the local Taliban's harsh rule, in June 2008 it publicly executed six alleged kidnappers who had been found guilty of "anti-social activities" by a *sharia* court.³² The Pakistani government struck a peace deal with tribal elders in July 2008 in the Daboori area of Orakzai. The peace deal dictated that the agency would not shelter terrorists, criminals, or those otherwise acting against the Pakistani government and the government will not launch military action in these areas.³³ The peace deal failed, as had similar deals in South Waziristan.³⁴ In October 2008, while the Ali Khel tribe was holding a grand *jirga* of 500 men to devise a strategy to drive Taliban militants out of the area, a suicide car bomber blew up in the middle of the gathering, killing 182 people.³⁵

The Emergence of Hakimullah Mehsud

Hakimullah Mehsud, the ruthless Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan chief who reportedly survived a suspected U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan in January 2010 that was believed to have killed him, entered the public spotlight in late 2008. He invited a group of Peshawar-based journalists to his base in Orakzai and announced that he wanted to be known as his predecessor Baitullah Mehsud's lieutenant.³⁶ Hakimullah said at this meeting that he had been appointed by Baitullah as the TTP's commander in Orakzai, Kurram, and Khyber, leading as many as 8,000 fighters.³⁷



Hakimullah Mehsud, center // A Majeed//AFP//Getty Images

Born in Kotkai, South Waziristan, in 1980, Hakimullah comes from the Ishangi branch of the Mehsud tribe and studied at a Deobandi religious madrassah in Hangu, though he did not graduate as a mullah.³⁸ Initially serving as a bodyguard and driver for Baitullah, the charismatic young Hakimullah shot up through the ranks of the TTP and was infamous for leading assaults on Pakistani security forces and NATO supply trucks. In late August 2007, Hakimullah's forces captured 300 Pakistani army soldiers in South Waziristan and did not release them until President Pervez Musharraf freed 25 TTP militants.³⁹

In December 2008, Hakimullah's Taliban imposed *sharia* in both Upper Orakzai and Lower Orakzai, banning women from attending bazaars, outlawing television and CDs, and instituting *sharia* courts across the agency, as the TTP had

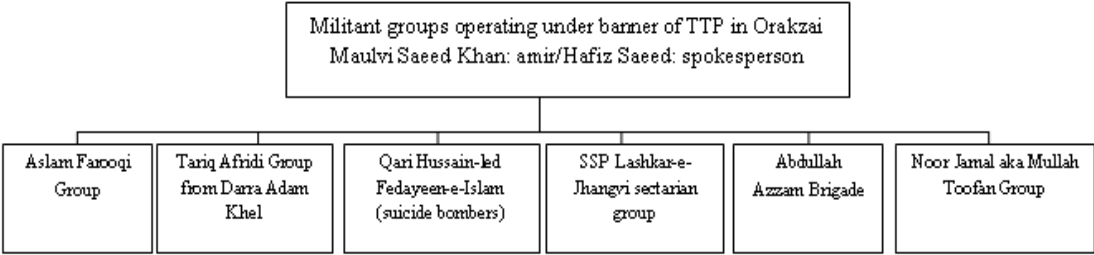
done earlier.⁴⁰ Declaring Orakzai his own "Islamic Emirate," several months later Hakimullah imposed *jizya* (a medieval Islamic tax on non-Muslims living in an Islamic emirate) on the Sikh community of 63 families who had been living there for more than a century. A sum of 3.4 million rupees was paid, and some of the Sikh families had to flee the area because they couldn't afford the fines.⁴¹ The TTP also took heavy commissions from the traders involved in the local coal-mining business.⁴²

Hakimullah easily moved into Khyber Agency by pressuring Mangal Bagh, the commander of Lashkar-e-Islam, who was opposed to the TTP because he wanted to have an independent sphere of influence. He allowed Bagh to control Khyber while forcing him to allow the TTP to attack and block NATO supply vehicles via Torkham in Khyber to Afghanistan.⁴³ Hakimullah claimed responsibility for the burning and destruction of more than 600 NATO vehicles destined for Afghanistan, targeting freight terminals in Peshawar's outskirts, in 2008 to 2009.⁴⁴ Because of these attacks, Pakistan has closed the Khyber route for NATO traffic six times since 2008.⁴⁵ Hakimullah put pressure on Peshawar from Khyber and Dara Adam Khel and stepped up attacks, bringing the city under siege in 2009.⁴⁶ The TTP also engaged in sectarian violence in Hangu and effectively cut off Kurram from the rest of Pakistan. The "Talibanization" of Orakzai has played a key role in fueling the sectarian conflict, as anti-Shia groups like the SSP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have merged their agendas with the TTP.⁴⁷

The structure of the TTP in Orakzai is somewhat unclear, but it is believed that Maulvi Saeed Khan is the central leader (emir)⁴⁸ while Hafiz Saeed is the group's spokesperson. Maulvi Saeed Khan is a respected figure among the militant commanders in Orakzai and is considered knowledgeable and intelligent.⁴⁹ Malik Noor Jamal, also known as Maulvi Toofan, is a TTP leader for the Mamozai area of Upper Orakzai. In his 40s with a reputation for cruelty and a bad temper, Toofan was a teacher in a madrassah in Hangu.⁵⁰ Aslam Farooqi is the TTP's commander for the Ferozkhel area, in Orakzai Agency and Tariq Afridi is the commander of an eponymous group in Orakzai, Khyber, and Kurram.⁵¹ Aslam Farooqi was associated with the SSP, an anti-Shia militant outfit, and raised a Taliban force in 1999.⁵² The Farooqi group small movement, inspired by the success of the Taliban in Afghanistan, was active until 2001 but lost momentum in Orakzai following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.⁵³ Much of the TTP's operational command is believed to have sought refuge in Orakzai after the Pakistani military's operations in South Waziristan in the fall of 2009.⁵⁴

Groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, another anti-Shia militant group, the Qari Hussain-led Fedayeen-e-Islam (suicide bombers) who trains and provide suicide bombers for bombings, and the Abdullah Azzam brigade, a mixed group of foreign and local fighters, also operate in the area.

Structure of the TTP in Orakzai



Al-Qaeda and Foreign Fighters in Orakzai

Most of the fighters in Orakzai appear to be outsiders, coming mainly from Waziristan and Dara Adam Khel, though there might be a small number of local recruits who have no option but to work with the militants.⁵⁵ The Taliban have strong support base in the Mamozai, Ali Khel and Ferozkhel tribes. Initially, some of the local tribes cooperated with the Taliban more for sectarian reasons than because of their belief in militant Islam.⁵⁶

Al-Qaeda and allied foreign fighters, including Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens, have used Orakzai as a shelter and planning ground, especially following Pakistani military operations in South Waziristan in the fall of 2009.⁵⁷ They, along with the TTP, were left with little choice but to flee South Waziristan for Orakzai and North Waziristan, where they have been fighting fiercely to maintain territorial control.⁵⁸

Pakistani Military Operations

Before 2010, the Pakistani military had taken only sporadic action against Taliban targets in Orakzai, mostly relying on air assaults with very few ground troops. In July 2009, helicopter gunships hit Taliban hideouts in the Oblan and Toorchaper areas of Orakzai, killing seven militants.⁵⁹ In November 2009, jetfighters again pounded Taliban hideouts in Lower Orakzai, killing 12 militants, and blowing up underground ammunition dumps.⁶⁰ In December 2009, Yousuf Raza Gilani, the prime minister of Pakistan, announced that the government was planning a full-fledged military operation in Orakzai to flush out the militants, who were regrouping and launching attacks and suicide bombings across Pakistan.⁶¹ As the aerial and partial ground offensive against the militants continues, more than 40,000 people have been displaced from Orakzai.⁶² Militant commander Aslam Farooqi and the Tariq Afridi Group from Dara Adam Khel led attacks against the security forces and the local tribal militia. On December 30, 2009, in a ground and aerial assault, security forces

claimed to have killed 37 militants and lost four levy soldiers in the Anjani area of Lower Orakzai.⁶³

However, in early January 2010, the Taliban burned an entire village in the Ferozkhel area of Lower Orakzai as a punishment for residents who did not support the Taliban against the government.⁶⁴ Taliban fighters have also kidnapped a number of tribal elders since December 2009 and killed accused spies in efforts to force the locals to side with them.

In response, in mid-January, Pakistani security forces closed off the main routes to Orakzai, preparing for a major offensive in the region, and troops set up 18 checkpoints around the agency.⁶⁵ The Pakistani government apparently had been informed that 90 percent of suicide bombers sent to strike cities around the country were trained in Orakzai, which prompted them to take action.⁶⁶ Pakistani security forces have taken control of Kalaya, the administrative headquarters of the lower half of the agency, but thousands of militants reportedly took positions along the borders with Hangu, Kurram, and Khyber, ready to defend their stronghold in Orakzai.⁶⁷ The Frontier Corps moved into Anjani Storikhel, Lalbelkhel, Ferozkhel and Uthmankhel of Lower Orakzai on March 23, 2010, and declared the area cleared by April 28.⁶⁸

So far, 700 families of refugees reportedly have been repatriated, and Pakistani forces are trying to enter the Daboori area of Upper Orakzai, which is still mostly under the control of the TTP. The Pakistani military claims that more than 550 Taliban militants have been killed in the military offensive, but Taliban sources say 100 have died.⁶⁹ Thirty-one Pakistani security personnel have lost their lives in the action. On May 31 General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, chief of Pakistan's army, visited Orakzai and declared the army's victory.⁷⁰ However, many of the 200,000 people displaced from the agency have yet to be repatriated, and sporadic clashes continue in the agency.⁷¹ In early September, the Pakistani Army declared Orakzai cleared of

militants again, and claimed 600 Taliban fighters were killed during the operations.⁷²

Grievances of the population in Orakzai

Grievances of the population in Orakzai are similar to those in the rest of the FATA: political and administrative corruption, a slow justice system, and economic underdevelopment. The administrative system is viewed as serving only the interests of tribal chiefs and elders, who receive bribes from government officials in exchange for their political support.⁷³ Additionally, locals are concerned about the presence of militants and subsequent Pakistani military operations there; those who have fled the spring 2010 offensive do not seem to be returning.



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