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THE BATTLE FOR PAKISTAN

Militancy and Conflict in Khyber

RAHEEL KHAN, APRIL 2010

Modern militancy in Khyber Agency is multifaceted. Sectarian violence, Sunni groups aiming to establish a Taliban-style government, and drug mafias all fuel conflict in the area. Lashkar-e-Islam, Ansar-ul Islam, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) activities in the area are wreaking havoc with the lives of Khyber's residents.

The northwestern tribal region of Pakistan known as Khyber Agency is just across the Durand line from the Tora Bora cave complex, the mountainous hideout from which Osama bin Laden escaped in late 2001. Named after the historic Khyber Pass, Khyber Agency covers 2,576 square kilometers and has a population of 546,730. It is subdivided into three administrative units—Bara, Jamrud and Landi Kotal. The remote Tirah Valley is small but geographically important, and is believed to have been used by al-Qaeda militants escaping into Pakistan in the wake of U.S. and NATO attacks on Afghanistan in 2001. The valley, like much of Khyber, is inhabited by Afridi tribe members and has long been a safe haven for criminals and Islamist militants.

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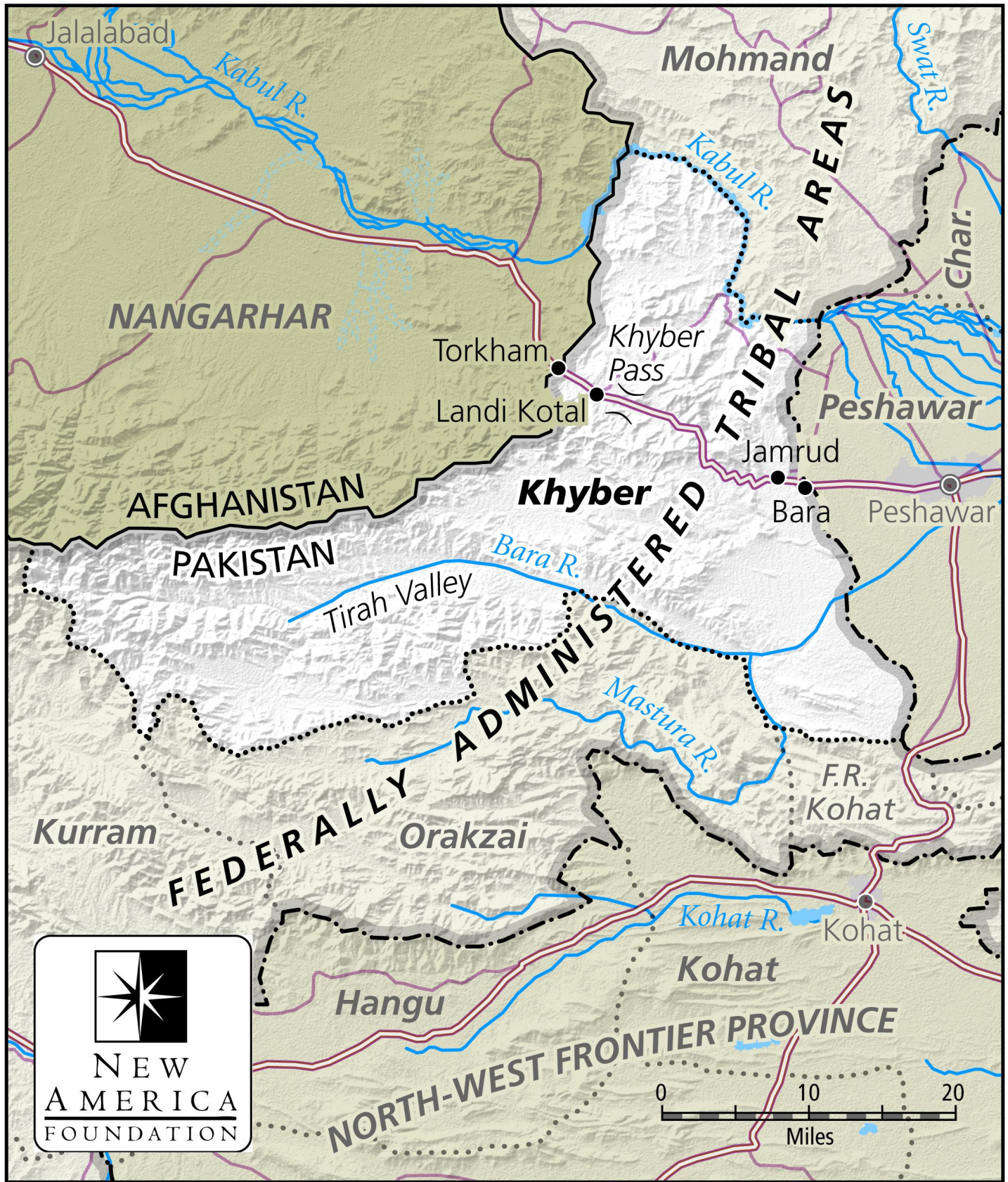
conflate these various militant groups despite the fact that they often compete with one another.

Structure of the insurgency in Khyber

Militancy Unfolding

Khyber Agency has long been considered relatively developed and modern because of its proximity to the urbanized lifestyle and comforts of Peshawar, the capital city of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). In the post-9/11 era Khyber's troubles started in 2003 when a 35-year-old local tribesman named Haji Namdar, a trader who worked for 12 years in Saudi Arabia, returned to Khyber and established an Afghan Taliban-style organization, Amr Bil Maroof Wa Nahi Anil Munkar (Invitation to Virtue and Negation of Vice), in the Tirah Valley.¹ Haji Namdar's social reforms were swift and harsh. He banned music, forced music shops to close in Landi Kotal, and ordered local men to grow beards and women to cover their heads. In some parts of Khyber, Haji Namdar established registrars to monitor attendance at mosques. Offenders were violently

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MAP BY GENE THORP OF CARTOGRAPHIC CONCEPTS, INC.

beaten or thrown into one of the private jails he created, facetiously named Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Namdar's movement used relatively sophisticated tactics to spread its message, and his forces allegedly included Arab fighters who carried out attacks on U.S. and NATO targets in Afghanistan. Since then, Tirah Valley has remained a stronghold of local and foreign militants.² Namdar set up his own illegal FM radio channel, the first of its kind in Khyber, and hired anti-Shia firebrand preacher Mufti Munir Shakir to broadcast radical sermons. In December 2004 the government banned the FM channel, and officials issued directives for its closure.³ But Namdar, challenging the writ of the state, continued to broadcast and expanded operations in the area, unconsciously setting a model for other militant outfits to follow. Haji Namdar's efforts laid the groundwork for militant movements to come, including Lashkar-e-Islam by Mufti Munir Shakir and Mangal Bagh in 2005, Ansar-ul Islam by Qazi Mehboob-ul-Haq and Mualana Ahmed in July 2006, and the entry of the TTP into Khyber Agency. The Pakistani government was relatively absent throughout this process; finally Amir Bil Maroof Wa Nahi Anel Munkar, Lashkar-e-Islam, and Ansar-ul Islam were banned in June 2008.⁴

Mufti Munir Shakir and Pir Saif-ur Rehman: Quest for Supremacy

Violence in Khyber Agency is often driven by sectarian differences represented by two religious figures—Pir Saif-ur Rehman, a Barelvi, and Mufti Munir Shakir, a Deobandi. The main difference between the Deobandi and Barelvi sects, both of which are Sunni, is that the Barelvis believe in saints and associate divine powers with the prophet Muhammad, while Deobandis believe that Muhammad was simply divinely inspired and his power should not be overemphasized.

Pir Saif-ur Rehman is an Afghan who settled in Bara in 1977.⁵ A staunch supporter of the Barelvi sect of Islam, he is considered a spiritual leader by many across Pakistan, and in parts of Afghanistan as well. Pir Rehman was supported

by local Afridi tribal forces and became well-known by preaching from his private FM station. Mufti Munir is a Deobandi religious scholar from Karak, a district in the southern Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). He arrived in Khyber after being expelled from Kurram Agency for stoking sectarian violence.⁶

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The two religious figures, both from outside Khyber Agency, quickly developed serious sectarian differences. Violent clashes between their followers began in November 2005 as the leaders attacked each other through their respective radio stations. Both Pir Rehman and Mufti Munir issued fatwas ordering each other to leave Khyber and rallied their followers on sectarian grounds. Even followers from outside Bara were ready to jump into the fight and support their respective leaders. The followers of the Barelvi school of thought, one of the majority sects in Pakistan, rallied and demonstrated throughout the country in favor of Pir Rehman.

In late 2005 and early 2006, as the tension increased between Pir Rehman and Mufti Munir, local people sought government attention to the problem, but there was very little response. The government's delay contributed to sectarian bloodshed that claimed dozens of lives, injured scores of people, and sabotaged the peace and trade of the area. A peace committee headed by Maulana Ahmed Khan, chief of the local religious scholars, failed to resolve the conflict and maintain law and order. The Afridi tribe removed Maulana Ahmed and appointed Haji Namdar as its head, a move which was rejected by the government and by Maulana Khalil-ur-Rehman, Khyber's National Assembly member, because Haji Namdar was connected with Mufti

Munir and there was fear he would spread Talibanization in the region. Haji Namdar was not accepted as peace committee head.

Mufti Munir's group attacked the administration and the old peace committee on February 24, 2006, in Qambarabad, about 11 kilometers from Peshawar. Seven people were killed, including Naseeb Khan, head of the peace committee.⁷ In response, the government launched a large military operation in Bara. Neutral people were asked to leave the area because the Mufti Munir Group was inciting local tribal people against the government. At the request of a tribal assembly, the government postponed military action to give the jirga an opportunity to peacefully resolve the issue, and they were ultimately able to pressure both Pir Saif-ur Rehman and Mufti Munir Shakir, who agreed to leave Khyber.

The government had ordered both leaders expelled in early February 2006 and was ultimately supported by the local tribes to make good on the order. Pir Rehman left Khyber to live in Punjab. Mufti Munir Shakir was arrested at the Karachi airport while going abroad, held for fifteen months, and released on August 21, 2007 from "Protective Custody." According to Mufti Munir, his release was unconditional.⁸

The physical departure of Pir Rehman and Mufti Munir did not bring peace to Khyber Agency. The two religious militant outfits they inspired, Mufti Munir's Lashkar-e-Islam and Pir Saif-ur Rehman's Ansar-ul Islam, continue to attack each other.

Lashkar-e-Islam and Ansar-ul Islam

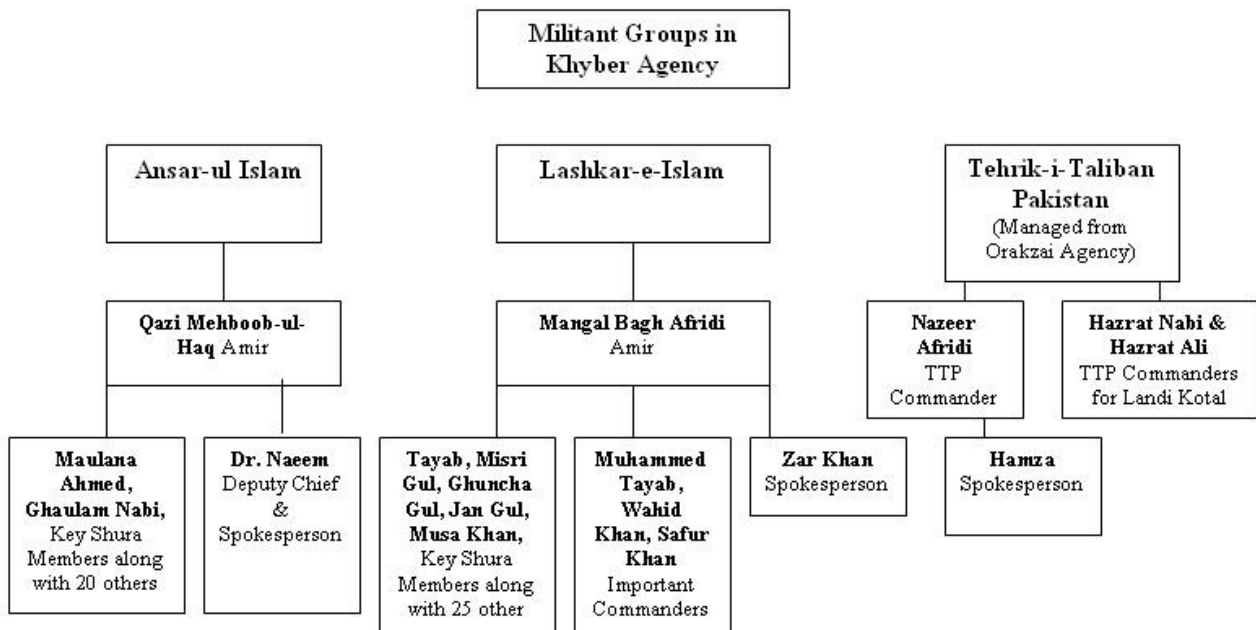
Mufti Munir Shakir established Lashkar-e-Islam in 2005 as an extremist Deobandi organization, espousing violence as a means to its ends.⁹ After Mufti Munir was expelled from Khyber in February 2006, a former bus driver named Mangal Bagh was named supreme commander of Lashkar-e-Islam. The group has a number of important commanders, including Muhammed Tayab and Safur

Khan. Tribal representatives include Misri Gul, Ghuncha Gul, Jan Gul, and Haji Haleem Shah, and 20 others from various tribes and sub-tribes are members of Lashkar-e-Islam's shura. Zar Khan is the group's spokesperson.¹⁰

Lashkar-e-Islam pays young recruits the equivalent of \$80-\$100 per month and offers free meals to entice fighters to join.

Lashkar-e-Islam also uses financial incentives to attract recruits. Like the rest of the Federally Administered Tribal Area, Khyber Agency is extremely poor and suffers from corrupt governance. Lashkar-e-Islam pays young recruits the equivalent of \$80-\$100 per month and offers free meals to entice fighters to join.¹¹

Ansar-ul Islam was created on July 18, 2006, to counter the growing influence of Lashkar-e-Islam.¹² The group was established by members of Tanzeem Ittehad Ulama—a moderate Deobandi group—former peace committee members, and tribal elders supportive of Pir Rehman. Importantly, Bareilvi members of the Pir Rehman group support Ansar-ul Islam despite being Deobandi.¹³ The organization is led by Qazi Mehboob-ul-Haq, a local religious elder. Maulana Ahmed, the former head of the peace committee; Ghulam Nabi; and Muhammed Hussain, along with 20 others from different tribes and sub-tribes make up the group's Shura. Dr. Naeem is the deputy chief and spokesperson for the group. Ansar-ul Islam is closely associated with Fazlur Rehman faction of the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI), a mainstream Pakistani political party. When Ansar-ul Islam's followers moved into Bara, they arrived carrying JUI flags and were clearly trying to express solidarity with the group.



The Rise of Mangal Bagh

Mangal Bagh, 35, belongs to the relatively impoverished and politically weak Sepah clan of the Afridi tribe, which is dominant in Khyber.¹⁴ He was raised almost single-handedly by his mother, as his father died when he was very young. Mangal Bagh lacks formal education but spent a few years in a madrassa (though he failed to receive any noteworthy religious qualifications). His first job was cleaning trucks, though he claims he was a bus driver and has claimed that his family owned the buses he operated.

Bagh is a shrewd political operator. In his youth, he fought in Afghanistan, but after returning he joined the secular Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), which had opposed the anti-Soviet operations which it called Fasad—Destruction and Chaos.¹⁵ The ANP now strongly opposes Islamist groups in the FATA. Bagh did not mind the seeming conflict of interest between being an active Islamist and working with an avowedly secular political party; he used the ANP as a springboard to become Secretary of the Bara Transport Association in 2001.¹⁶

Mangal Bagh met Mufti Munir after joining the nonviolent but evangelical Islamic missionary organization Tablighi

Jamat. The details of his rise through Lashkar-e-Islam are unclear, but when Mufti Munir was expelled from Khyber Agency in 2006, he was made amir.

Mangal Bagh's political program highlights the negative impact of criminal and drug networks, and the government's inability to counter them. Bagh portrays himself as a strong advocate for the poor and rails against the traditional tribal maliks (tribal elders) and rich who collect government favors for themselves. Bagh addresses the problems of the common tribal man, which has helped him attract a large number of youths to Lashkar-e-Islam.

Mangal Bagh cultivates an aura of fear around himself. He is escorted by well-armed bodyguards and, following the example of Mufti Munir, uses force to implement shariah. He ordered the men in Bara Tehsil to wear caps and women to wear burkas. From June to July 2006, the government had to close the main Bara market because Mangal Bagh announced he was taking control of the area. He banned music and ordered the liquor sellers and drug pushers of Bara and Jamrud to close. He regularly talks about religious issues on his radio station and has introduced a new form of law and order in Khyber. Monetary fines were introduced for criminals: murder was

around \$6,000 USD; keeping a television satellite dish, \$600; and failure to pray five times a day \$8.

After the expulsion of Mufti Munir in 2006, Mangal Bagh established a headquarters in Bara's Gagrina Village to continue Lashkar-e-Islam's activities. The group remained quiet initially, but after Bagh had built some physical and ideological space for himself as an Islamist leader, he openly challenged the writ of the state. Bagh urged the government to drop its demand that he surrender and threatened to launch a huge armed demonstration against the government, arguing, "Now it is difficult for us to live in peace. The conflict will not be confined to Khyber Agency alone, rather it will spread to the entire Peshawar region."¹⁷ But even as Bagh's rhetoric escalated, he has engaged the political authorities to negotiate for influence.

For a while, many in Khyber even believed that Mangal Bagh had the blessing of the Pakistani military establishment because he rebuffed several offers from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to cooperate and merge. Several medium-ranking TTP officials visited him in Bara and the Tirah Valley in 2008 and 2009 to convince him to join forces for actions in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Even during one of the Pakistani military actions in Khyber, known as Sirat-e-Mustakeem (Right Path), in June 2008, he urged followers not to resist.¹⁹ Mangal Bagh was assumed to be the man who would not allow the TTP to infiltrate Khyber. As Bagh's militia grew he expanded his operational area from Bara to Jamrud, Tirah, and Peshawar city.²⁰ But despite opposing the TTP in Khyber, Mangal Bagh has not become a government ally and remains in opposition dedicated to the imposition of sharia in Khyber Agency.

Bagh continued to fight Ansar-ul Islam in Bara and Tirah and extended his operations into the suburbs of Peshawar, about 30 minutes from Bara. His men began patrolling Peshawar suburbs, brandishing weapons and threatening music shop owners. In the last week of June 2008, Bagh's men kidnapped 16 Christians from Academy Town in Peshawar.²¹ The hostages were later released through help



Mangal Bagh // A Majeed/AFP/Getty Images

of a tribal jirga, but it was a clear signal to the people and government that Bagh intended to export his brand of Islam outside Khyber Agency.

Pakistan's government accuses Mangal Bagh of perpetrating acts of terror in Peshawar itself. The Peshawar police chief claimed that Lashkar-e-Islam was involved in an October 29, 2009 car bombing that killed more than 50 people.²² Investigators probing the October blast believe that Lashkar-e-Islam may also be involved in a number of other attacks in Peshawar.²³

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan Misadventures in Khyber

Despite Mangal Bagh's violence and conservative religious outlook, the TTP had difficulty establishing itself in Khyber Agency. The Khyber-based Lashkar-e-Islam and Amr Bil Maroof Wa Nahi Anel Mukar resisted the TTP because they operated independently and with a very localized agenda. After coming under pressure in North and South Waziristan and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and the TTP began to attack NATO supplies in Khyber and Peshawar in 2008. But, unable to come to a suitable agreement with Mangal Bagh and Haji Namdar, they sent their own corps under a strong Afghan commander, Ustad Yasir.²⁴ Haji Namdar was initially hospitable, assuring the TTP fighters that he would provide sanctuary and support the movement of weapons and supplies.²⁵ But the TTP clashed with locals

opposed to their presence and conducted a suicide attack on a tribal jirga that killed more than 40 tribal chiefs.²⁶

Under U.S. pressure, the Pakistani government launched operation Sirat-e-Mustakeem to protect the routes through Khyber in June and July 2008.²⁷ The Pakistani operation was very successful and ambushed Taliban forces retreating to their safe houses. Scores were caught, and their arms and ammunition seized. Since Haji Namdar, their host and guardian, was the only outsider who knew the location of their hideouts, many suspected that he had revealed their location to the Pakistani authorities. Haji Namdar subsequently announced on a local radio station that Ustad Yasir and his men must surrender or face a “massacre” like the one that occurred when local tribes in South Waziristan turned against Uzbek militants in January 2007.²⁸ Haji Namdar explained that he had the full support of the security forces and was not afraid of suicide attacks. Locals alleged that Haji Namdar’s loyalty had been purchased by CIA and Pakistani intelligence agencies for \$150,000.²⁹ An obvious target, Haji Namdar survived a suicide bombing and a missile attack by TTP elements before he was killed in his office by unidentified men on August 12, 2008. Hakimullah Mehsud, the new amir of the TTP, claimed responsibility for the killing.³⁰

Despite the TTP’s repeated attempts to woo Haji Namdar and Mangal Bagh’s Lashkar-e-Islam into an alliance, the group achieved very little. Today, however, the TTP has a major presence.

The TTP did not easily gain a foothold in Khyber Agency. Despite the TTP’s repeated attempts to woo Haji Namdar and Mangal Bagh’s Lashkar-e-Islam into an alliance, the group achieved very little. Today, however, the TTP has a major presence led by local commanders such as Nazeer Afridi, Hamza, Hazrat Nabi, and Hazrat Ali. These leaders

are managed by TTP leadership—Mullah Noor Jamal, Aslam Farooqi, and Said Khan—in the TTP stronghold of Orakzai Agency.³¹

The TTP’s assassination of Haji Namdar has been a success for the group, and it now uses Khyber Agency to attack NATO supplies, kidnap security and international organization personnel, and plan terrorist acts.³² So far more than 700 cargo trucks and military vehicles have been destroyed—a large number, but certainly a small percentage of the overall flow of goods.³³ In early 2009, more than 80 percent of the supplies to NATO and allied forces in Afghanistan travelled through Pakistan, making logistics routes in the agency attractive targets for militants.³⁴

The Pakistani security forces have worked hard to keep the supply lines open. In May 2009, an Afghan appointed by Baitullah Mehsud named Yahya Mustafa Kamran (known by the alias Hijrat) was killed by security forces near Peshawar. Hijrat had been responsible for disrupting and destroying NATO supplies on the Peshawar-Torkham road.³⁵ Hijrat had been on the authorities watch list for some time; he had previously been arrested for leading a series of attacks on NATO supplies from a base in the Khyber sub-division of Jamrud.

Following the death of TTP amir Baitullah Mehsud in a drone attack on August 5, 2009, the group retaliated with a deadly attack on security forces in Khyber Agency. In the last week of August 2009 a suicide attack on a police post along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Torkham killed 22 people.³⁶ Khyber Agency may become more of an arena for TTP attacks because the Pakistani military operation Rah-e Nijat (Path to deliverance) in South Waziristan, which was launched in October 2009, has pushed TTP militants into Orakzai and Khyber agencies.

Meanwhile, the TTP still must contend with Khyber’s local Islamist militants. Lashkar-e-Islam activists continue to operate in Badabher, Sarband, Surizai, Turnab, Bazid Khel,

Ormer, and Kachori, the suburbs of Peshawar.³⁷ The people live in fear and have demanded government action against the militant outfits. In the last weeks of November 2009, the government launched a military operation, Khwakh Ba De Shum,(You Will Like Me), in Khyber Agency, and the government claims to have made advances in the Tirah and Bara areas of Khyber Agency and inflicted losses on the militants.

Pakistani Military Offensives

The Pakistani military has conducted a number of military operations in Khyber Agency, including Darghlum (Here I Come), Baya Darghlum (Here I Come Again), Sirat-e-Mustakeem (Right Path), and Khwakh Ba De Shum. The operations were primarily designed to dislodge Mangal Bagh, the TTP, and other militants from the Tariq Afridi Group and Ansar-ul Islam in order to relieve pressure on Peshawar and secure NATO supplies through the Khyber Pass.³⁸ The series of operations started in the summer of 2007, and five have been undertaken.³⁹ Some of the operations, such as the June 2008 offensive, relied on Frontier Corps troops, who are widely considered poorly trained and motivated.⁴⁰

If insurgency is suppressed in Khyber, fighters are likely to move to Orakzai and Kurram.

After security forces launched operation Khwakh Ba De Shum against all the militants,⁴¹ Pakistani troops claimed success in Bara, the Tirah Valley, and surrounding areas, but failed to eliminate the militants. The offensive seemed limited in scope, with only 200 troops on the ground in Landi Kotal very few to secure the area.⁴² The military has mostly relied on gunship helicopters, fighter jets, and heavy artillery to pound Taliban fortifications. But such actions have failed to secure the region.⁴³ Attacks continue today. In early February 2010, TTP forces, including suicide

bombers, attacked NATO oil tankers in Khyber, targeted military outposts, destroyed an electrical substation, and murdered a teacher.⁴⁴ The Pakistani military has suffered significant casualties fighting in Khyber. On February 10, 2010, a brigadier was killed when a rescue party was attacked by Taliban insurgents while searching for the bodies of a pilot and gunner of a crashed helicopter.⁴⁵ Militancy remains a problem in large measure because Pakistani military offensives have been inconsistent; some are quite determined while others are constrained by political dynamics from outside the Agency. Militancy in the tribal areas of Pakistan is like a balloon that, when pressed at one end, pop ups at the other end. If insurgency is suppressed in Khyber, fighters are likely to move to Orakzai and Kurram.

Tribal Structure in Khyber

Khyber Agency is mainly inhabited by four major tribes: Afridi, Shinwari, Mullagori, and Shimani. The tribes live in the mountains and have a reputation for being extraordinarily tough. They are self-trained warriors, but well-armed fighters. The tribal fighters live in houses behind mud walls that are guarded with a watchtower for each compound. Like other Pashtuns, they have a code of honor that emphasizes hospitality, vengeance, and the need to seek forgiveness for misdeeds or causing harm to others.⁴⁶

The Afridi tribe is dominant, but divided into eight distinct clans: the Adamkhel, Akakhel, Kamarkhel, Qamberkhel, Malik Dinkhel, Kukikhel, Zakakhel, and Sepah. The Shinwari tribe is second largest and has three sub-tribes: the Khugakhel, Mirdakhel, and Mazsokai. The Shimani and Mullagori tribes are very small.⁴⁷

The Afridi tribe plays a critical role in Khyber, and if mobilized effectively tribal levers would be very useful for combating Talibanization in Khyber. In early 2006 an Afridi tribal jirga forced Mufti Munir Shakir and Pir Saif-ur Rehman to leave Khyber Agency.⁴⁸ Tribesmen in Khyber

can stand against militants but they have lost confidence in the government security system. More-aggressive government policies that showed determination to root out militants and support tribal allies would encourage local Lashkars to drive these groups from Khyber Agency.⁴⁹

Khyber to accommodate militants expelled from Afghanistan.



Tribe	Sub-tribes
Afridi	Adamkhel
	Akakhel
	Kamarkhel
	Qamberkhel
	Malik Dinkhel
	Kukikhel
	Zakakhel
Shinwari	Sepah
	Khugakhel
	Mirdakhel
Mullagori	Mazsokai
Mullagori	-
Shimani	-

Conclusions

The economic and social situation in Khyber is not much different from the rest of FATA, despite its proximity to Peshawar and status as a major trading lifeline. The multifaceted insurgency, which includes sectarian militants and TTP fighters, has capitalized on the lack of security, economic depression, and a perception of unfair governance and is now deeply embedded in local society. One challenge is that the security environment has so many players, including local militant groups, the TTP, various Pakistani security forces, and U.S. and NATO interests tied to the movement of goods through the Khyber Pass. Building and implementing a comprehensive strategy in such a complex environment is very difficult because it can be hard to distinguish between various groups and to focus efforts on unique areas. Indeed, the security situation in Afghanistan has direct fallout on FATA. Many locals believe the troop surge in Afghanistan has increased pressure on

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- 10 Personal interview with Daud Khattak, Peshawar-based correspondent for The News International, November 25, 2009.
- 11 Personal discussions with Ibrahim Shinwari, Peshawar-based correspondent for Daily Dawn and Voice of America, February 25, 2010.
- 12 Rana and Gunaratna, "Al Qaeda Fights Back Inside Pakistani Tribal Areas," 43.
- 13 Personal discussions with Ibrahim Shinwari, February 25, 2010.
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31 Interview with Daud Khattak, Peshawar-based reporter for *Daily Times Islamabad*, February 12, 2010.

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