

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FATA: PLAYERS IN WAZIRISTAN - A PRE-OPERATION PRIMER

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As the government of Pakistan has worked to prepare for its upcoming ground operation in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) against Baitullah Mehsud (ref C) and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), it has narrowed the focus of its operation by attempting to keep neutral the two other major militant leaders in the area and building two other more minor leaders up against Baitullah. The government has worked through jirgas led by Deobandi clerics associated with the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) to isolate Baitullah and his lieutenants; as the operation has become more imminent (and to JUI-F leader Fazlur Rehman's chagrin), these jirgas have been sidelined. Tribal maliks, though included in those jirgas, are too cowed to play anything other than supporting roles, and the SWA Political Agent, while talented, is rarely able to even enter SWA due to security concerns. Political actors will continue to work around the edges, but they are ceding the field to the military and militants for the foreseeable future. End summary.

Baitullah Mehsud and His Lieutenants

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¶2. (C) 35-year-old Baitullah Mehsud has been the most prominent militant in Waziristan since the death of Wazir leader Nek Mohammad in 2004 and the most notorious militant in Pakistan since his announcement of the formation of the TTP and assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. He has undisputed control over the Mehsud home areas of northeastern SWA and significant influence in areas with Mehsud diaspora populations such as Tank and Dera Ismail Khan districts. Since the formation of TTP, an umbrella group whose expressed aim is to overthrow the government of Pakistan and secure its FATA safehaven in order to support cross-border attacks into Afghanistan, Mehsud and his allies had established significant levels of effective control in part or all of Kurram, Orakzai, Khyber, Mohmand, and Bajaur agencies, as well as in Swat, Shangla, Buner, and Lower Dir districts prior to recent military operations. In all of these areas, Consulate contacts and Pakistani press have reported a strong presence of Mehsud tribesmen and allied Uzbek militants supporting local elements fighting against the government.

¶3. (C) Qari Hussain has long been Baitullah's most feared lieutenant from Waziristan; a post contact in the NWFP parliamentary assembly included him as one of six militants whose death would prove that the Pakistani government was "serious" about finally getting tough on militants. He was notable over the period 2006-8 for claiming the most extreme and offensive actions taken by the TTP, particularly in the wake of the government's July 2007 operation against the Lal Masjid in Islamabad. These actions included suicide bombings throughout the NWFP, the kidnapping of FC personnel, and an attack on the Tank family residence of the Political Agent for Khyber Agency which killed many of his relatives and guests, among them surrendering women and girls, violating one of the strongest taboos under Pashtun tribal law. Baitullah disavowed most of these activities, though they generally directly benefited him. In late 2008, after the conclusion of the most recent peace deal in SWA, Baitullah "exiled" him to North Waziristan because of his poor image; he recalled him to SWA recently. Hussain may have been killed in an air strike on a post-funeral meeting on

June 23 in South Waziristan.

¶4. (SBU) Hakimullah Mehsud, a first cousin to Baitullah, has come to prominence more recently, initially commanding TTP forces assisting Sunni militants who were fighting Shi'a militants in Kurram agency and neighboring Hangu district. His activities quickly spread to Orakzai, where he masterminded an October 2008 suicide bombing of a jirga that killed over fifty tribal maliks and broke virtually all organized resistance to TTP control in most of the agency. By early December 2008, his men in Khyber were launching regular raids on trucking depots around Peshawar and burning hundreds of trucks containing supplies for American forces in Afghanistan. A Pakistani military operation in Khyber in January 2009 reduced TTP effectiveness operating out of that agency, but Hakimullah continued to plan and execute attacks out of his base in Orakzai

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prior to returning to SWA in late May, reportedly with large numbers of those under his command and in preparation for the upcoming SWA operation.

Misbahuddin Mehsud and Turkestan Bhattani - GOP Surrogates

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¶5. (C) Misbahuddin Mehsud, the 23-year-old younger brother of the recently assassinated Qari Zainuddin (ref C), is Zainuddin's apparent successor as leader of a group of Mehsuds independent of Baitullah who have engaged in tit-for-tat assassinations and street battles with the TTP in the areas of Tank and Dera Ismail Khan over the past several months. Zainuddin was generally considered raw and untested; his close familial relation (first cousin) to deceased militant leader Abdullah Mehsud and the clear Pakistani government backing given to him, however, had made him the pole around which anti-Baitullah militants had coalesced. Misbahuddin is even more untried. He is reportedly more poorly educated and rougher of manner than Zainuddin (Misbahuddin's nickname is Tofan, meaning "storm" and referring to his temper).

¶6. (C) Turkestan Bhattani, a 40-year-old soldier who retired from the South Waziristan Scouts (Frontier Corps) in 1998 to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan, was an ally of Baitullah Mehsud until 2007. Following his break with Baitullah, he formed a militia composed primarily of members of the Bhattani tribe. The Bhattani, whose population lives primarily in the area along the border between SWA and Tank and controls access between Mehsud territory and the settled areas to the east, has a history of feuds with the Mehsuds; relatively few Mehsuds are settled in Jandola and the other Bhattani-dominated areas around it. A June 2008 incident in which TTP-affiliated Mehsuds overran the town of Jandola and carried off thirty Bhattani tribesmen and killed over twenty of them (including many close relatives of Turkestan) solidified Bhattani tribal opposition to the TTP. As Qari Zainuddin's group gained mass over recent months, Turkestan allied his own, longer-lived group to it, and this alliance seems unlikely to change with Zainuddin's death. A Bhattani contact told us that it was Turkestan's firm control of F.R. Tank that allowed Qari Zainuddin space to grow his group; Turkestan had and continues to have a strong personal interest in assisting any group that would weaken the TTP.

Hafiz Gul Bahadur - Siding with the TTP

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¶7. (C) Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a senior militant commander in North Waziristan Agency (NWA) and erstwhile rival of Baitullah Mehsud for the title of "leader" of the Tehrik-i-Taliban, is an Utmanzai Wazir in his late 40s. Despite considerable effort by the Pakistani government to keep him on the sidelines and an initial period in which his quiescence appeared to indicate that he would stay out of the fight, Bahadur allowed and then claimed a series of escalating ambushes of Pakistani military convoys

June 26-28. His spokesman then announced on June 29 that the February 2008 peace deal with the government that Bahadur had hitherto more or less respected was now a dead letter due to continued drone strikes in and Pakistani military operations near NWA (ref B). (Note: Consulate contacts told us that Bahadur had faced pressure from lieutenants to confront the Pakistani military.) The government responded with airstrikes against his positions on June 30, but reiterated its commitment to the peace deal. A low-level conflict has ensued since, with occasional minor attacks by militants on Pakistani military installations.

Maulavi Nazir - Neutral?  
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¶8. (C) Maulavi Nazir, the senior militant commander in southern and western SWA, is an Ahmadzai Wazir in his 30s. Our contacts from and in SWA consider Nazir to have been the Pakistani government's man ever since his 2007 campaign against Baitullah Mehsud ally Haji Omar and associated Uzbek militants residing in Ahmadzai areas of SWA, though Nazir signed on to the February 2009 alliance with Baitullah. Like Bahadur, he has remained silent about the upcoming operation; on July 2, he told

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a jirga that he would maintain neutrality. A well-connected Ahmadzai Wazir who resides part-time in Wana told us that Nazir will stay out of the fight unless a spillover from the campaign creates significant casualties among Ahmadzai Wazir militants or civilians. In such a circumstance, Nazir would come under considerable pressure to retaliate proportionately. This is a plausible eventuality. According to a Consulate contact in SWA, since the beginning of June, an Ahmadzai lieutenant of Nazir in the Angoor Adda area of SWA (near the Afghan border) has repeatedly detonated roadside bombs against Pakistani military vehicles, killing several soldiers and wounding dozens of others. More recently, over the past two weeks rockets have been fired from Ahmadzai Wazir areas toward Pakistani military installations in and around Wana. The Pakistani army has retaliated in each instance by shelling militant positions in the areas from which attacks have been launched.

The Haqqanis - Staying Out of the Fight  
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¶9. (S) Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, Afghans who are based primarily in NWA, are involved primarily in the fight against coalition forces in Afghanistan. Jalaluddin, a former anti-Soviet mujahid from the Zadran tribe who had been aligned with Hizb-i-Islami (Khalis), is now in his 70s and is considered by our contacts to have a close relationship with Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. Sirajuddin, in his 30s, runs day-to-day affairs for the Haqqani network. This Taliban group operates primarily in Khowst and Paktika provinces but is also suspected of having a hand in some of the most audacious Taliban attacks in Kabul, including the July 2008 bombing of the Indian embassy there. The Haqqanis have generally taken the stance that attacks against Pakistan's government are illegitimate, and they have worked to keep militant leaders in Waziristan focused on the war in Afghanistan - without success in the case of Gul Bahadur. They appear to be hunkering down as well; a Consulate contact in the inner circle of the NWFP's ruling Awami National Party (ANP) says that they have moved their families out of the agency and to Rawalpindi (ref A).

Maulana Fazlur Rehman and the Deobandis - The Would-Be Mediators  
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¶10. (C) The opening moves to the government's SWA campaign have occasioned a flurry of jirgas aimed at mediating between the Pakistani government and the various militant leaders.

These jirgas have been very similarly composed: led by elected officials or prominent mullahs (and usually both), they have been composed in equal measure by maliks from the affected areas and prominent mullahs active in the region but outside of tribal structures. The most active jirga, which has been shuttling between the Pakistani government and Baitullah Mehsud, has been led by Senator Saleh Shah, a Deobandi cleric in his thirties from SWA (but not a Mehsud or Wazir) who leads two madrassas, one in the Tirarzia tehsil of SWA (north of Wana, in the Mehsud area) and the other in the Mehsud-settled Murtaza area of Tank. In his absence (when the Senate is in session), jirga leadership has generally fallen to Maulana Esamuddin Khan, a Mehsud Deobandi cleric who has led a madrassa in Makeen, the heart of the area controlled by Baitullah. Maulana Mirajuddin Qureshi, another Mehsud Deobandi cleric who is a former National Assembly member, has also played a leading role. Over the past two weeks, activity by this jirga has tailed off as military operations have increased their pace.

¶11. (C) Saleh Shah, Esamuddin, and Qureshi (along with fellow repeated jirga leaders Noor Mohammad among the Ahmadzai Wazirs and Maulavi Nek Zaman among the Utmanzai Wazirs) are affiliated with the Deobandi Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam party faction under the direction of Maulana Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F). Fazlur Rehman, whose hometown is nearby Dera Ismail Khan, has positioned himself and his party as a primary mediator between the government and militants; his affiliates have been mediators in each of the five peace agreements concluded in the Waziristans since 2004. His decreasingly oblique criticisms of Pakistani military operations in Swat and the surrounding Malakand

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division and his more direct criticisms of a follow-on Waziristan operation have kept pace with the increasing drumbeat of official talk about Waziristan. Fazlur Rehman's upset at the prospect of such an operation may in part be a reaction the political support that his party continues to carry there (significantly greater than that enjoyed by his party in Malakand), but it also reflects the fact that the beginning of such an operation will represent the eclipse of his affiliates' mediating role in favor of force wielded by parties outside of his control.

The Maliks - A Non-Factor

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¶12. (C) The peace jirgas of the past two months, led and partially staffed by Deobandi clerics, have generally been filled out by Mehsud maliks (tribal elders). Our contacts from SWA have uniformly dismissed them as entirely cowed by Baitullah and irrelevant in mediation; the deaths of over three hundred other Waziristan maliks over the past four years appear to have sapped them of the willingness to confront Baitullah in any way and rendered them essentially placeholders in the jirgas for sake of form. Asked if there were any maliks of sufficient stature to chart an independent course at all, one contact responded with a Pashtun proverb in which a prince, queried on how he kept his kingdom under control, replied by silently chopping off the tops of all of the tallest poppies in the field where he was walking.

Shahab Ali Khan - The Absentee Political Agent

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¶13. (C) Shahab Ali Khan, a Bannu native in his mid-30s, was appointed Political Agent (PA) of SWA in September 2008. He has been in district government service for just over ten years; before his current posting, Khan had most recently served as District Coordination Officer in the sectarian strife-ridden Hangu district from 2007. Shahab Ali has been described by his peers and locals as a good negotiator in an agency where many consider such skills a necessity, and he most recently played a

secondary role in the release of the kidnapped students from Razmak Cadet College. He reportedly holds conservative views and is pious. His youth is noted by his colleagues, though it is not his greatest handicap: effective militant control over virtually all of "his" agency makes it difficult to travel outside of Wana and makes life dangerous even in that city. He reputedly spends most of his time in Tank.

The Division Commanders - A Mixed Bag  
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¶14. (C) The commanders of the three Pakistani military divisions that will bear the brunt of the fight in Waziristan come from widely varying backgrounds. The Seventh Division, headquartered in Miram Shah, NWA, is commanded by Major General Navid Zaman. Zaman, a Punjabi from Rawalpindi, spent several successful years as a staff officer at Pakistan's General Headquarters (GHQ) prior to assuming command in October 2008. The Ninth Division, headquartered in Wana, SWA, is commanded by Khalid Rabbani. Rabbani, who has previous experience as a brigade commander in the FATA, was most recently assigned as Pakistan's Defense Attache to Libya and Algeria, which face counterinsurgency challenges of their own. He left that position at the end of 2007 and was given command of the Ninth Division at roughly that time, making him the longest-serving of the three in their current capacities (ref E). The Fourteenth Division, headquartered in Tank, is commanded by Major General Ijaz Chaudhry, of whom less is known; he assumed command of the division in September 2008.

Comment  
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¶15. (C) Baitullah Mehsud and the military are the predominant actors in South Waziristan. However, as the government plays out a strategy of divide and rule, the alliances, feuding, and maneuverings of other militants as well as tribal and political

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figures bears watching in assessing the direction that operations in South Waziristan will take. End comment.  
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