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Pakistan's New Generation of Terrorists

Author: [Jayshree Bajoria](#), Staff Writer

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Introduction

Pakistani authorities have long had ties to militant groups based on their soil. They have supported some organizations fighting Indian forces in Kashmir and played a pivotal role in supporting the Afghan resistance against the Soviets throughout the 1980s. In the 1990s, Pakistan's government supported the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan in the hope of having a friendly government in Kabul. But with Pakistan joining the United States as an ally in its war against Islamic extremists since 9/11, experts say Islamabad has seen harsh blowback on its policy of backing militants operating abroad. Leadership elements of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, along with other terrorist groups, have made Pakistan's tribal areas (the semi-autonomous region along the Afghan border) their [home](#). Pakistan's deployment of troops in the tribal areas has generated resentment among tribal leaders and others who sympathized with the Taliban. In recent years, many new terrorist groups have emerged in Pakistan, several existing groups have reconstituted themselves, and a

new crop of militants have taken control, more violent and less conducive to political solutions than their predecessors.

Terrorist Groups

Many experts say it is difficult to determine how many terrorist groups are operating out of Pakistan. Most of these groups tend to fall into one of the five distinct categories laid out by [Ashley J. Tellis](#), a senior associate at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in January 16, 2008, [testimony \(PDF\)](#) before a U.S. House Foreign Affairs subcommittee:

- **Sectarian:** Groups such as the Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba and the Shia Tehrik-e-Jafria, which are engaged in violence within Pakistan;
- **Anti-Indian:** Terrorist groups that operate with the alleged support of the Pakistani military and the intelligence agency [Inter-Services Intelligence](#) (ISI), such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and the Harakat ul-Mujahedeen (HuM). This [Backgrounder](#) profiles these organizations which have been active in Kashmir;
- **Afghan Taliban:** The original Taliban movement and especially its Kandahari leadership centered around Mullah Mohammad Omar, believed to be now living in Quetta;
- **Al-Qaeda and its affiliates:** The organization led by Osama bin Laden and other non-South Asian terrorists believed to be ensconced in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). [Rohan Gunaratna](#) of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore says other foreign militant groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad group, the Libyan Islamic Fighters Group and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement are also located in FATA;
- **The Pakistani “Taliban”:** Groups consisting of extremist outfits in the FATA, led by individuals such as Baitullah Mehsud, the chieftain of the Mehsud tribe in South Waziristan, Maulana Faqir Muhammad and Maulana Qazi Fazlullah of the Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TSNM), and Mangal Bagh Afridi of the Lashkar-e-Islami in the Khyber Agency.
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The Pakistani Taliban

Supporters of the Afghan Taliban in the tribal areas transitioned into a mainstream Taliban force of their own as a reaction to the Pakistani army’s incursion into the tribal areas, which began in 2002, to hunt down the militants. This Pakistani Taliban is organizationally distinct from the Afghan Taliban. Gunaratna says it is clear that Afghan Taliban only fights in Afghanistan, emphasizing it is the Pakistani Taliban that is operating in Pakistan against the state. Analysts say it is this arrangement with the Pakistani authorities that keeps members of the Afghan Taliban safe from arrest or transfer to U.S. or NATO forces based in Afghanistan. But Pakistani authorities have repeatedly denied any involvement with the Taliban and have often said the problem lies within Afghanistan, saying Taliban sympathizers from Afghanistan slip across the border to recruit in refugee camps in Pakistan.

Experts say most adult men in Pakistan’s tribal areas grew up carrying arms but it is only in the last few years that they have begun to organize themselves around a Taliban-style Islamic ideology pursuing an agenda much similar to that of the Afghan Taliban in

Afghanistan. The people of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA, as well as the adjacent eastern regions of Afghanistan, are overwhelmingly Pashtun and share ethnic and linguistic links. [Hassan Abbas](#), a research fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, [writes \(PDF\)](#) in a January 2008 paper that the Pakistani Taliban have effectively established themselves as an alternative to the traditional tribal elders. Abbas adds that the Taliban killed approximately 200 of the tribal leaders and these indigenous Taliban groups coalesced in December 2007 under the umbrella of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). He writes that a *shura* (consultative council) of more than 40 senior Taliban leaders established the TTP under the militant commander Baitullah Mehsud from South Waziristan.

TTP not only has representation from all of FATA's seven agencies (please refer to this [interactive map](#) of the area) but also from several settled districts of the NWFP.

According to some estimates, the Pakistani Taliban collectively have around 30,000 to 35,000 members. Among their other objectives, the TTP has announced a defensive jihad against the Pakistani army, enforcement of sharia, and a plan to unite against NATO forces in Afghanistan. Pakistani authorities accused the group's leader, Mehsud, of assassinating former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007.

Analysts say it may be too early to say how successful the TTP will be in unifying the disparate militant groups across diverse tribal regions, or how loyal the tribes will be to Mehsud's leadership.

Changing Face of Terrorism

The new Taliban are fiercer, younger and impatient for results, say experts. [Steve Coll](#), president of the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank, tells CFR.org the Afghan-oriented Taliban of the 1990s had a sort of a political cover in Pakistan. But what's happening now, he says, is that those traditional intermediaries between the Taliban and the establishment are being displaced by "a younger generation of more violent radical leaders who are in a hurry and have no patience with compromise with the state." Coll adds: "These are like hard-core breakaway children militias of the sort you encounter in failed states in Africa and elsewhere," running roadblocks, moving around in bands on highways in the tribal areas, and operating under some notion of political control under this Tehrik-i-Taliban set-up. "But they are the law and that is real change." This new generation of terrorists is also more willing to engage in suicide attacks; there were more than fifty in 2007, compared to no more than twenty between 2001 and 2007. Gunaratna attributes this to the influence of al-Qaeda. He says bin Laden's group is training most of the terrorist groups in FATA. "Al-Qaeda considers itself as the vanguard of the Islamic movement," Gunaratna says, and has introduced its practice of suicide bombings to both the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban.

"Pakistani Taliban are a younger generation of more violent radical leaders who are in a hurry and have no patience with compromise with the state."- Steve Coll

Pakistan's tribal areas are also experiencing growing extremism. Like their Taliban predecessors in Afghanistan, the younger militants consider music, TV, and luxuries like massage parlors un-Islamic and wage war against them. Local Taliban leaders in the tribal agencies tell men to keep beards and women to wear the veil. In a January 2008

[article](#) in the *New York Times* magazine, writer Nicholas Schmidle quotes Maulana Fazlur Rehman, chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F), a pro-Taliban religious party: “When the jihad in Afghanistan started, the maliks [tribal leaders] and the old tribal system in Afghanistan ended; a new leadership arose, based on jihad. Similar is the case here in the tribal areas.”

Terrorist Breeding Ground

Pakistan’s tribal areas, which have long been torn by ethnic and tribal rivalries, became radicalized during the 1980s when the Pakistani state supported the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. To escape the post-9/11 U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, most militants, including those in al-Qaeda, fled eastwards into western Pakistan, further destabilizing the tribal areas. Having served as the logistical route for weapons to the mujahideen, experts say, the area is awash with small weapons and the current population of more than a million men under the age of twenty-five grew up carrying weapons. As this [backgrounder](#) on the troubled Pakistan-Afghanistan border explains, the tribal areas also became critical to the illicit drug trade and criminalized economies of the region. Counter-terrorism experts say these traditional smuggling and criminal activities continue to fund the militants.

Pakistan’s tribal region is governed under the colonial-era [Frontier Crimes Regulations \(FCR\) Act](#) by a political agent in each of the seven tribal agencies. Experts say the tribes have long struggled with each other over economic or territorial issues. Coll says what has happened in FATA during the last twenty years is “almost like painting a coat of Islamist radicalization over this complicated structure of smuggling and competition” among the tribes. He says “by painting this coat of Islamist ideology over certain areas of FATA, it’s changed the dynamic of competition in ways that are really complicated and very hard for us to understand on the outside.”

Counterterrorism Challenges

Pakistani authorities are struggling to confront the changing dynamics in the region. There is growing criticism both within and outside Pakistan that the army does not have the capacity to fight insurgency within its borders. Militants increasingly target the army with suicide attacks and in August 2007, the kidnapping of around 250 soldiers by Baitullah Mehsud in FATA’s South Waziristan posed a huge embarrassment for Pakistan. These soldiers were only released when the government released twenty-five militants associated with Mehsud. The army faces a tough fight not only in the tribal areas but increasingly the settled areas of NWFP, which are being targeted by militants. In 2007, the militant group TSNM led by Maulana Fazlullah took control of large areas in the Swat valley, previously a tourist destination. The army, after a long fight, reclaimed it but experts say hundreds of militants continue to operate there.

Coll questions the will of the Pakistani military to confront the new Taliban groups. He writes in the *New Yorker* that there was evidence to suggest that “some current and former Pakistani military and intelligence officers sympathize with the Islamist insurgents with whom they are notionally at war.” U.S. officials have made similar allegations but Pakistani officials have pointed to the death of about a thousand Pakistani

soldiers fighting the war on terror and several attempts made by the militants on President Musharraf's life as proof that such allegations are not true.

"[A] strategy to manage the threat of terrorism is to co-opt the groups that are in the margins and draw them to mainstream politics to create opportunities for them."- Rohan Gunaratna

One approach taken by Islamabad is to deploy the Frontier Corps, Pakistan's paramilitary organization that operates in the FATA and has played an important part because of their local language skills and familiarity with the local terrain. But numerous defections and refusals to fight and follow orders have taken place within the Frontier Corps. Rand Corporation expert Christine C. Fair, in January 2008 [testimony](#) to a U.S. House Foreign Affairs subcommittee, says while its officers are seconded from the Pakistan army, its cadres are drawn from the local Pashtun population. According to Fair, the Corps is "inadequately trained and equipped and has been ill-prepared for counter-insurgency operations in FATA." Fair also says the Corps "was used to train the Taliban in the 1990s and many are suspected of having ties to that organization." Yet many experts believe that Frontier Corps has a much better chance than the Pakistani army in securing the tribal areas. Washington plans a significant increase in current military assistance to the Frontier Corps. Its effort to secure the tribal belt includes a proposal by U.S. Special Operations Command to train and arm tribal leaders to fight al-Qaeda and Taliban and a \$750 million aid package for the border area over the next five years. Another approach taken by the Pakistani government in the tribal areas was to sign some peace agreements with the tribal leaders but most of them have failed so far and critics, including many in Washington, said they only ended up strengthening the militants. In January 2008, news reports saying the United States was considering sending U.S. troops to Pakistan's tribal areas drew angry reactions from Pakistani authorities and analysts said it would further destabilize the country. Imran Khan, chairman of the opposition party Tehreek-e-Insaf in Pakistan, says [political negotiations](#) are the only way to deal with terrorism. Gunaratna, too, says a military solution is not the answer. A "strategy to manage the threat of terrorism is to co-opt the groups that are in the margins, in the periphery," he says, "and draw them to mainstream politics to create opportunities for them."