

Understanding the insurgency in FATA

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Let me begin the paper by admitting to two failures on my part in being able to acquire accurate information as specified in the outline provided to me by PILDAT i.e. firstly in attempting to obtain the cost being incurred by the army in this conflict; it just is not available and secondly, in obtaining accurate information on the number of casualties. While I had expected difficulties in obtaining data but not the kind I faced. I contacted both the DG ISPR and the Corps Commander Peshawar, both of whom have the misfortune of being my students. But not only was there phenomenal variation in the figures from both major sources; there were also great discrepancies in the figures provided by the corps commander and his staff and those quoted by the DG and his staff. I have, therefore been forced to approximate and cannot vouch for the accuracy of this data.

Background: The Traditional Pashtun Tribes

Traditionally, the Pashtun tribes, whether Afghan or Pakistani are very egalitarian, more so than any other region of Pakistan e.g. there is no such word as servant for domestic help. Depending on the means available, the wealthy and the upper middle class construct very large to medium sized houses, which are walled in. Depending on the number of mouths they can feed, poorer members of the tribe are housed in huts along the boundary wall built by the occupants; they are referred to as *Hamsay*, the closest English translation being, neighbors. In addition to providing protection to all those residing within these walls, some of the men housed within, may be paid full time domestic employees of the owner, while others may work on his land or seek other means of employment, though not with a rival, female members of the family of these *Hamsay* help out at the residence of the owner, while the owner assumes responsibility of ensuring that they always have food on their table.

Although egalitarian, the tribes have a very strict class system, which is not wealth based. Consequently, only scions of certain traditionally respected families may become members of the tribal council of elders or *Jirga*. There is no such thing as an election, the council decides on who is to be included as a member and, from within it who is to be **the tribal elder** to lead the council.

The council functions as the legislative, judiciary, and the executive; ensuring equality and justice to all members of the tribe; crimes committed outside the tribal area may be ignored or dealt with lightly, but those committed against fellow tribesemen are dealt with promptly and harshly. An individual ousted from the fold of the tribe becomes an outcast not to be recognized even by his own family. Disputes between tribes or those involving members of two tribes are usually settled by a combined *Jirga* of the tribes involved. However, women have virtually no rights.

While on the complaint of a commoner who feels that one of the elders has denied his rights, the council can oust that elder from the council, it was inconceivable in the traditional tribal system for a commoner to be able to lead a revolt against the system. Moreover, the Mulla or cleric used to be very far down the scale of the tribal class system. A Pushto saying, in which an elder is addressing a Mulla roughly translates to, 'I will not let people consider you below a menial, but don't dare look upwards'. All this has since changed: today commoners are not only challenging the system, they are killing tribal elders who, they perceive as being in opposition to them; some forty plus elders have been executed in the last year or so for being pro-Musharaf or pro-US, which is considered to be the same thing. What is more, the Mulla dictates terms to tribal elders, supported by these armed militant revolutionaries. The traditional tribal structure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has been torn asunder, for only slightly different reasons.

What changed them?

The transition began during the war against Soviet occupation; in Afghanistan; while the non-Pashtun tribes bordering erstwhile USSR took to the campaign immediately and were led by their tribal leaders; the Pashtuns, being inland had more time to react. Thus, while some tribal elders led their own campaign against the Russians, most appointed warlords; Hamid Karzai, currently ruling Afghanistan, was appointed by his father, Abdul Qadir and Abdul Haq, by their uncle and so on.

In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, while some of these warlords appointed for the campaign chose to return to traditional customs, others decided that they enjoyed enough support amongst their followers to take over the tribal leadership and proceeded to do so, thus adding to the anarchy that reigned from 1989 to 1994, when the Taliban entered the fray.

Realizing that the tide of the Taliban had become inexorable, most of the tribal elders and the rest of the so-called 'blue blood' of the Afghan Pashtuns chose to leave their country; this includes the three named above. The primary reason for doing so was the unacceptability of Mulla Muhammed Omer as their leader, a non- 'blue blooded' Pashtun who was also a Mulla! This led to disastrous consequences when the traditional leadership returned in the wake of the American invasion of Afganistan since, while they were able to lead mini revolts in their provinces to help accelerate the fall of the Taliban, the members of the tribe felt betrayed by the fact that their leaders had abandoned them to the tyranny of the Taliban and revolted against the traditional leadership, which is the current anarchy in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, on the other hand, those who had chosen to fight alongside their Afghan brethren had no appointed leadership and, since very few of the 'blue blood' joined them, the leadership thrown up in combat was from the commoners. They however, returned to their traditional life until they realized that the Americans were treating their Afghan brethren little better than the Soviets had and thus began what I refer to as an 'Afghan nationalist freedom movement'. The media began to call them Taliban and Al-Quaida, which they were not, but they accepted the titles with pride because, from being hated,

the Taliban and Al-Quaida suddenly became the symbol of those resisting the all-powerful US. Today, undoubtedly most of them have become Taliban and many certainly have Al-Quaida connections, though that is not how they started.

The Pakistan government's efforts to seek the support of the traditional tribal leadership resulted in a revolt in these tribes led by survivors of the struggle against the Soviets. Thus e.g. a common Waziri, Nek Muhammed, acquired fame a couple of years ago when he successfully challenged the tribal leadership and his argument was that 'if it was Jihad, sanctioned by the Pakistani and Saudi government and supported by the US, for me to kill Soviets when they kicked us in the ass, why should we be expected to kiss the boot of the American, when he does the same'. The Pakistan army had him killed but members of all neighboring tribes thronged to his burial and no tribal elder dared be absent.

Why the tribal belt is linked to Afghanistan

When the Durand Line was drawn by the British in agreement with the Afghan government, it was an arbitrary line intended to be something like the line of control that we have between AJK and IHK. However, since it was supposed to be defensible by both sides, the emphasis was on holding heights on both sides that could command the valleys. Consequently the same tribes straddled the Durand Line, in many instances members of the same family lived on either side. Consequently, the Pashtuns on both sides of the border never accepted this as a delineated border and crossed over at will.

Moreover, the Pashtun has always been proud of his Afghan heritage. Not just the tribes bordering Afghanistan, those from the more settled areas; the Uthmanzais, the Yousafzais, the Alizais, the inland Khattaks, and even the Niazis, claim Afghan heritage. It includes them amongst those that have conquered India, ruled it or just raided it, instead of those that have been conquered. Consequently, while all Pashtuns are directly concerned with the happenings in Afghanistan, the tribes bordering them have, and will continue to fight alongside their tribal brethren on the other side of the Durand line.

The Taliban in brief

I have already mentioned certain aspects of this earlier, but some further details are necessary. The birth of the Taliban, which is often erroneously, and sometimes, maliciously attributed to the ISI or the CIA, was actually an impromptu movement instigated by the public rape of a young girl in Mulla Muhammed Omer's village. A handful started off to impose Sharia and bring peace to the region; the truth is that when the ISI initially heard of this movement they considered it a bit of a joke. But then stalwarts of other local warlord began to throng to them; not only did their ranks swell, but they were conquering without fighting a single pitched battle---until, of course, the ISI led them to the stupidity of Jalalabad.

However, when they had conquered Kandahar, the ISI and, because of the ISI, the CIA began to take them seriously. They began to receive arms, ammunition, helicopters and even aircrafts. A usually forgotten part of their story is that initially they burned all the

poppy fields of the land that came under their control; moreover, to start with, they provided the most peaceful and representative rule, through tribal and even village councils, thus fulfilling their promises.

However, abandoned by the US, they were strapped for cash and soon ordered that poppy growth be re-started. In 1996 when Osama bin Laden was declared persona non grata in Sudan and arrived in Afghanistan to find a safe haven, the Taliban were still unable to make ends meet, even though they had become the largest exporters of poppy in the world. That was essentially because the farmer received only \$1000/- for a kilo of paste which, when transported to the west reached a price of \$250,000/- and had a street value in excess of \$ 3,000,000/-. Osama promised them a share of the transportation cost, since Al-Quaida was already in the business of smuggling arms and drugs. Consequently, instead on only \$1000/- for a kilo of paste, they were to receive a respectable share from \$ 250,000/- per kilo!

However, in return for this economic windfall Osama wanted a more stringent version of Islam. This was the beginning of the change: women were stopped from working and could no longer move around unescorted; the religious police began to have increasing authority to act indiscriminately; if a man's beard did not measure to the right size he could be turned over and whacked on his buttocks in the streets, the same treatment could be meted out to any woman deemed to be improperly dressed; the proud Afghan was proud no more. Thus, these very same tribal leaders welcomed the US intervention in Afghanistan; and the overthrowal of the Taliban swifter than their conquest, was due, not only to the assistance provided by the National Alliance, but because there were mini-revolts in most provinces, led by the traditional tribal leaders.

The post 9/11 scenario

When it began to be clear that the US was here to stay and that even though a Pashtun ex-warlord and veteran of the anti-Soviet occupation, Hamid Karzai was chosen to lead the country, the fact that he permitted the US to dictate to him and include a disproportionately high representation of the non-Pashtun members from the National Alliance made him suspect. It is my opinion that had Abdul Qadir not been murdered, it is possible that he might have been able to put together a dispensation that could have ruled Afghanistan in relative peace; because he had become a living legend in the anti-Soviet war, but then he would not have readily acquiesced to the US and, therefore, might not have been acceptable to them.

US forces continue their use of indiscriminate force and there are even complaints from their European allies, primarily British forces regarding their interference in territories supposedly under British control, with disastrous effect, but to no avail. Consequently, amongst the Afghans Pashtuns, and now even amongst the non-Pashtuns, as well as the Pashtuns in our tribal belts, there is a deep rooted hatred for the US and its allies, including the Pakistan government; with Musharaf as the symbol of those who are viewed as American supporters. In fact, there are members of even inland Pashtun tribes of the NWFP who have sworn to take Musharaf's life, even if he flees the country.

Our own security forces, in addition to the use of field artillery, have now resorted to aerial bombing and strafing, in addition to the use of attack helicopters. Some of us here have witnessed the effect of bombardment, both ground and aerial; for those who have not, an example would be that if a 500 pound bomb fell within half a kilometer of habitation; all children would begin to bleed from their ears and noses; while some would be maimed for life. These injuries are unknown and, therefore, not included in the approximate figures of casualties at the end of the paper.

The only period that witnessed some success of the government's attempt to win support of our border tribes was soon after General Aurakzai took over as Governor, organized a grand Jirga in Peshawar, and negotiated with the tribal elders to oust foreigners from within their tribal areas and withdrew all security forces from Waziristan. As a result of which, when some Uzbeks attempted to attack the residence of a Waziri elder who had led the negotiations with the government, members of his tribe helped repulse the attack leaving some twenty six Uzbeks dead in one battle and seventeen in another early this year.

Just as there seemed to be a ray of hope, in March this year, US forces again attacked a border village in South Waziristan, claiming to have killed twenty odd Taliban. The locals however, vehemently denied the claim and stated that the death toll was twenty seven with thirteen wounded, that they were local peaceful citizens, and that the dead included three women and seven children.

Under these circumstances, there appears little hope, since it all becomes a vicious circle. Even though the tribals acknowledge that US attacks against them are intended to subvert their reaching an agreement with the Pakistani government, they cannot but retaliate against US forces, thus forcing the Pakistani forces to take military action against them or to permit the Americans to do so. In either eventuality, Pakistan: the government and the people stand to lose.

Another attempt is underway to negotiate with the Waziris; however, given the circumstances, there is little chance of its success. The Pak-Afghan Jirga or any other Jirga can succeed only if undertakings by all sides can be fulfilled. Unfortunately, Hamid Karzai is in no position to fulfill any undertakings that he commits himself to; being wholly at the mercy of the Americans. The Pakistan government, even with the best of will, finds itself sabotaged. Unless, therefore, the Americans become party to a Jirga in which they are prepared to give a timeframe for their withdrawal, and I certainly see no possibility of that in the foreseeable future, it seems we are doomed to continue on the path we are presently on.

There was a time when Maulana Fazlur Rahman enjoyed considerable influence in the tribal belt; however, it had been steadily eroding due to his own pro-American shift, and his recent shenanigans in supporting Musharaf to get re-elected has certainly put paid to any influence that he had. Nor does any other member of the MMA or the NWFP government have any influence. I could name a handful of individuals who have left a

reputation enabling them to influence the tribals, led by Maj Gen (ret'd) Khurhid Ali Khan ex-governor NWFP and even Maj Gen (ret'd) Naseerullah Babar ex-PPP. But they will never commit themselves to a venture like this unless they are certain that the government will honor its commitments; and none of them trust Musharraf.

Nor can I think of any political dispensation which is likely to emerge from the current pot pourri of our politics which can throw up a leadership that can address this issue successfully. I recall Musharraf's address to the UN General Assembly a couple of years ago; where he was bold enough to make a courageous and accurate statement that 'as long as there is injustice in Palestine, Lebanon, and other parts of the so-called "Muslim World", terrorism will not end. The war on terror cannot be won by force alone'. I suggest that it can, in fact, never be won by force; but only by justice, equality, and freedom.

The army—surrendering

This effort would remain incomplete without some explanation of why such large numbers of soldiers are being captured without battle or are surrendering. Like all armies, the Pakistan army also teaches and routinely practices 'Mountain warfare', including movement and protection of convoys. And while there have been incidents in previous insurgencies when officers and troops failed to follow standard operating procedures, SOP, and were ambushed; but even though they suffered greater number of casualties than the insurgents, there was combat, since the anti-ambush is also routinely taught. Consequently, there has to be some explanation for these occurrences.

The basic assumption while teaching or practicing warfare of any kind is that you will be opposed by an enemy. Therefore, whenever faced with opposition from your own citizens, the soldier is faced with a moral dilemma: his *raison d'être* is the defence of the citizens of his country, not killing them. For brief durations this can be suppressed but over prolonged periods, particularly if the conflict is intense, this question keeps coming to the fore. To add to this is the virtual national consensus that the so-called war on terror is being fought on behalf of the US and we are paying the price for it.

Finally, there is the ethnic factor: about 35% of the army is Pashtun with more than half coming from Bannu, Kohat, and Karak, all areas bordering the troubled region of Waziristan; and the bulk of the rest bordering Bajaur. Not only may some have closer ties with the miscreants, there may be many who are genuinely apprehensive of the consequences to their families. Traditionally, Punjab has been referred to as the exploitative province but nowhere do Pashtuns have more friends than among Punjabis; who might also be hesitant to kill these tribal miscreants.

If there was any one overpowering reason for establishing that Musharraf must go; it is these surrenders, which prove that, not only the rank and file, but even mid level officers have lost faith in his policies.

So where are we headed?

There are really no alternative scenarios for me to suggest. It seems that we are destined to see increasing violence, not only in the tribal belt, but more and more of it in our cities. Pragmatically, I can see no ray of hope, because the prerequisites for change that I am listing below are almost impossible to visualize as materializing; and these are:

- To begin with Musharaf has to not only step down, but leave the country.
- The US must announce its immediate withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan subject to the proviso that a grand Jirga of all Afghan tribes can come to an agreement on a consensus self governing formula; in which there is no attempt to impose a pro-US leadership on Afghanistan (I cannot imagine the US making such a commitment or the Afghans reaching a consensus)
- Alternately, even if the US only agreed to withdraw, and monetarily assist in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, it is remotely possible that, after an initial period of chaos, some system might emerge.
- The US must similarly announce its withdrawal from Iraq and promise an independent self-governing Palestine and that its support to Israel will be conditional to the fact that Israel will abstain from violating the rights of its non-Jewish citizens and its neighbours.
- As an alternate to asking the US to do the impossible, there is still a possibility of reducing domestic violence. To do so the Pakistan government will need to lay down the law to the US and tell them that, while we will deal with the Taliban and Al-Quaida elements in our midst and would welcome US support by way of providing us with the means to do so and, when available, intelligence of their whereabouts; but under no circumstances will US forces be permitted to carry out ground or aerial attacks on our soil. Further, that if US forces violated this agreement, they would have to take on the Pakistani military. If this is seen to happen only once, the tribal belt will return to the fold of Pakistan and respect their security forces and, it is likely that they might again agree to assist in ousting foreigners from amongst them. However, amnesty will have to be given for past errors-----if we can grant amnesty to those known to have looted the country, this is a small price for peace. Unfortunately, I do not see any political figure on our horizon with the guts to do so.
- Following this, any Pakistani government will need to ensure that **all** its citizens are given access to basic amenities, socio-political equality, and justice. Then, perhaps we can have peace.

I am fully conscious that this is a wish-list, which is why I began with stating that there is really no pragmatic ray of hope. Having said that, there may yet be some possibility of negotiating with our border tribes if we could explain to them that we, the rest of the country and the government, also seek the same end i.e. the departure of US forces from Afghanistan but by creating the unrest that they are doing, US forces find justification to prolong their stay rather than to shorten it. And, simultaneously, start work on providing them the basic facilities that they lack. Don't give them what you think they need but what they know they need: water, basic health facilities, employment and economic opportunities, and then perhaps, education. The tendency to start with education, not only makes them suspicious, but also does not meet their immediate requirements.

A 'guesstimate' of casualties

1. Security personnel dead: approximately 1500.
2. Security personnel wounded: approximately 2000.
3. Security personnel captured/surrendered approximately 450.
4. **Known** militants dead: approximately 400.
5. **Known** militants wounded: approximately 700.
6. Civilian dead: approximately 1500. This does not include those killed recently during the days before, during and immediately following Eed; which unofficially are numbered at around three hundred; though the ISPR denies this categorically, it is reported that in the areas surrounding Mir Ali and Miranshah funeral prayers were being held instead of Eed prayers on the very day of Eed.
7. Civilian wounded: approximately 3000.