

# Pakistan's Most Dangerous Place

*Pakistan's remote and poorly understood tribal region has emerged as key to the future of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.*

BY ZAHID HUSSAIN

AS THE UNITED STATES STRUGGLES TO BROKER AN endgame to the decade-old war in Afghanistan, an arid mountain region in northwestern Pakistan not much larger than Vermont has emerged as the key to the beleaguered Afghan state's future—and perhaps Pakistan's as well. Often described as the most dangerous place on earth, Pakistan's semiautonomous tribal region serves as a haven for Al Qaeda operatives, Pakistani militants, and jihadists from across the Islamic world, as well as Muslim radicals from the United States and Europe who come for ideological instruction and to plot terrorist attacks in their home countries.

Once mainly a springboard for cross-border attacks into Afghanistan, the region now harbors militants who have taken the battle deep inside Pakistan itself. Their ambitions expanded in 2007, when escalating conflicts between religious militants and the government of the then president Pervez Musharraf exploded during a government effort to expel militants from the famous Red Mosque in the capital city of Islamabad. A long standoff that concluded with an assault by Pakistani army and paramilitary troops left scores of people

dead. That December, some 40 militant leaders from the tribal region and elsewhere gathered in South Waziristan, a regional district, to unite under the banner of a new organization called Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). With thousands of fighters, the group seeks to enforce draconian Islamic rule in the tribal areas and neighboring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly called the North-West Frontier Province).

Most of the leaders had long experience fighting U.S. forces in Afghanistan and attempting to overthrow the government of President Hamid Karzai. But now they turned their wrath against Pakistan's security agencies and the military. Within a year, the TTP had swept through almost all the tribal territory as well as part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By the middle of 2009, Taliban fighters had advanced to the districts of Swat and Buner, only 70 miles from Islamabad.

A massive army operation pushed back the advancing Taliban, but the insurgents maintained their hold in some of the tribal territory. That August, U.S. drone aircraft killed TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud (who had been blamed for the 2007 assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto); the attack was one of the highest-profile successes of the CIA's aerial campaign in the tribal areas. But the insurgency was not dampened by the death of Baitul-

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**After capturing Kotkai, the South Waziristan stronghold of Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, in 2009, Pakistani troops destroyed a training camp for suicide bombers, along with other facilities.**

lah Mehsud; he was replaced by an even fiercer commander, Hakimullah Mehsud, who unleashed a fresh wave of deadly terrorist attacks across the country to avenge his comrade's death.

Over the past five years, thousands of Pakistani civilians and military personnel have been killed in terrorist attacks and in the fighting in the country's northwest. The TTP has launched suicide bombings and other attacks in Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore, targeting crowded markets and other civilian targets as well as security installations. In a stunning attack in 2009, mil-

itants stormed the army's heavily guarded national headquarters in the city of Rawalpindi, killing several officers and holding off Pakistani troops for hours.

These events made it clear to knowledgeable Pakistan observers that their worst fears were being realized. Not only had the Taliban forged a new unity, but it was forming an increasingly well-coordinated web including Al Qaeda and outlawed militant groups such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen whose primary objective is to drive Indian forces from the disputed Himalayan border state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Despite the wave of U.S. drone attacks that have killed many of its leaders, Al Qaeda is gaining strength. A flood of recruits from Pakistan's well-educated urban middle class— young people, professionals, and retired military officers—have flocked to its strongholds in the tribal areas. This new generation of militants, committed to global jihad, act as a magnet for Muslim radicals from across the world. They are part of a new Al Qaeda that has taken root in Pakistan, one whose influence is

no longer confined to the distant mountains. The port city of Karachi, a metropolis of 18 million people that is Pakistan's economic capital, has become a significant militant hub and source of funding. Thousands of madrassas in the city provide a steady stream of new recruits and suicide bombers.

The economic and political costs of the spreading militant violence have been huge, threatening to destabilize the country. Last January, Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, Pakistan's most powerful province, was shot to death by a member of his security detail who

claimed that the governor had committed blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. Hard-line clerics publicly hailed the assassin as a hero of Islam. Weeks later, a government minister was shot dead by militants outside his house in Islamabad for the same reason. In May, days after U.S. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in his hideout in Abbottabad, a city in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a band of Taliban fighters infiltrated a Pakistani air base in the southern city of Karachi and managed to keep it under siege for 16 hours. It was clear that the attackers had been helped by insiders. The audacious attack on the high-security defense installation dealt a serious blow to ordinary Pakistanis' confidence in the military's ability to deal with the militant threat.

Meanwhile, high inflation and growing unemployment have fueled discontent among Pakistanis, providing an even more conducive environment for religious extremism. The beleaguered government of President Asif Ali Zardari has been unable to deal with the country's grave political, economic, and security challenges. Pakistan, a country with more than 100 nuclear weapons and an army half a million strong, has descended into near chaos. The fragmentation of the country, perhaps with Pakistani security forces losing control over some parts of the tribal areas to the Taliban insurgents, has become a real possibility.

The region officially known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas has a long history of fierce independence and lawlessness. Occupying less than five percent of Pakistan's total area, it is divided into seven semiautonomous districts. The thick forests and numerous caves that dot the treacherous mountains make the region a natural redoubt for insurgents. Six of the districts border Afghanistan. Two are at the heart of the current tribal unrest: North and South Waziristan. The division is mostly a matter of administrative convenience; it is generally more useful to think in terms of one Waziristan. Most of Waziristan's population is composed of Wazirs and Mehsud, two of the fiercest tribes of an ethnic group, the Pashtuns, whose homeland extends into Afghanistan.

Tribal members zealously guard their independence under a code of honor known as *pashtunwali*, and no foreign invader, from Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan to the British in the 19th and 20th centuries, has ever tamed them. Sir Olaf Caroe, who had the misfortune to be a British colonial administrator in the region during the 1940s, likened the Wazirs to panthers and the Mehsud to wolves: "Both are splendid creatures; the panther is slyer, sleeker, and has more grace, the wolf pack is more purposeful, more united, and more dangerous." The two tribes, segmented into a complex array of

**Along the Afghan border, a Pakistani soldier stands silhouetted against the forbidding mountains that militants have found so hospitable.**

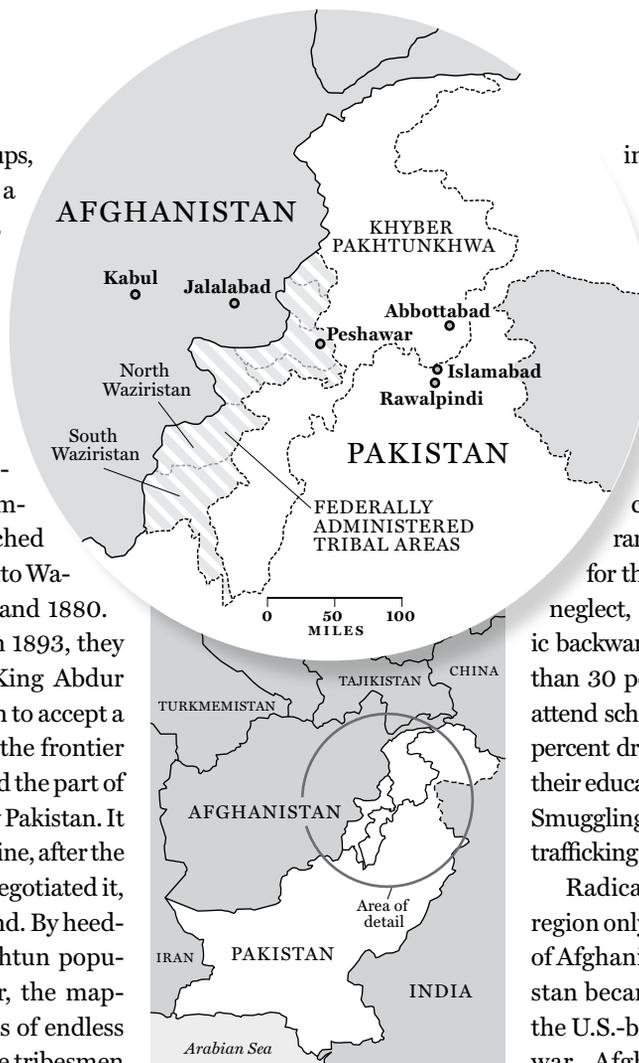


clans and other subgroups, have long coexisted in a state of chronic feuding, though they have always united when faced with an invader.

In 1850, that invader was Britain, intent on creating a buffer zone between British India and the Russian Empire. The British launched six major expeditions into Waziristan between 1850 and 1880. All six failed. Finally, in 1893, they were able to compel King Abdur Rahman of Afghanistan to accept a formal demarcation of the frontier between his country and the part of British India that is now Pakistan. It was called the Durand Line, after the British diplomat who negotiated it, Henry Mortimer Durand. By heedlessly dividing the Pashtun population in half, however, the map-makers sowed the seeds of endless conflict. Predictably, the tribesmen despised the artificial divide, and continued to move freely across the border as if it did not exist.

The British granted the territories a high degree of autonomy, ruling indirectly through Pashtun *maliks*, or tribal elders, using a mix of persuasion, pressure, and regular armed intervention to govern. Nevertheless, they faced a series of major revolts, led in most cases by mullahs. Waziristan's landscape is dotted by early-20th-century British forts, monuments to a largely futile effort to control the territory.

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the tribes pledged their loyalty to the new government, and in return the authorities withdrew regular army troops from the region, replacing them with locally recruited paramilitary forces. But Pakistan largely retained the British colonial administration and legal structure, so that the tribes were deprived of basic civil and political rights and other protections under Pakistani law. Only in 1997 did residents gain the right to vote



in Pakistani elections.

All power in each district rests with a centrally appointed political agent who operates through the *maliks*; some of these agents are chosen by tribes, others by the government. The perpetuation of the old colonial administrative arrangement is largely to blame for the continuing lawlessness, neglect, and social and economic backwardness of the region. Less than 30 percent of tribal members attend school, and of this group, 90 percent drop out before completing their education. Poverty is pervasive. Smuggling, gunrunning, and drug trafficking are common occupations.

Radical Islam took root in the region only after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when Pakistan became the frontline state in the U.S.-backed Afghan resistance war. Afghan mujahideen fighting

the Soviets used Pakistan's tribal areas as their base, and Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in collaboration with the CIA, funneled weapons and millions of dollars into the region. Thousands of tribesmen joined their fellow Pashtuns across the border in the holy war. Strategically located Waziristan became the main training center for thousands of Arab fighters who came to wage jihad against the Soviets.

American money and arms stopped flowing into Pakistan after the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989, but a civil war in Afghanistan kept the kettle boiling. Fearful that India, Pakistan's great rival, might gain a foothold to the north, Pakistan's military and the ISI helped Pashtuns in the tribal areas link up with their Taliban brethren across the border who were fighting the secular regime left behind by the Soviets. The fighting drove hundreds of thousands of Afghan Pashtuns across the border, causing severe



Thousands of refugees were displaced by fighting in South Waziristan in 2011.

social and economic strains in the impoverished tribal areas. Meanwhile, Saudi- and Pakistani-funded madrassas flourished, strengthening the influence of militant clerics.

The invasion of Afghanistan by American forces in October 2001 pushed thousands of Al Qaeda operatives and Afghan Taliban fighters into the Pakistani tribal region, where, for the most part, they were welcomed. Not only did *pashtunwali* demand it, but many were not strangers to the region at all—indeed, some had married local women after the anti-Soviet war and had families there. Al Qaeda was helped, moreover, by the simple fact that it had money to spend.

The region's lush valleys became home to clusters of sprawling, rugged, mud-brick compounds—Al Qaeda's new command-and-control centers. Humming inside nearby caves were sophisticated propaganda factories, complete with video-editing capabilities. Several camps sprung up in the area to provide training to new recruits from across Pakistan and from other Muslim countries. Money was freely distributed to tribesmen to secure their loyalty, bringing a newfound prosperity to many communities.

In 2002, Pakistani troops entered the tribal area for the first time in 55 years, albeit under an agreement that confined the army to development work. The

main objective was to secure the border and prevent Al Qaeda operatives fleeing U.S. and other NATO forces in Afghanistan from entering tribal areas, but the treacherous mountain passes made it impossible to completely fulfill the mission. Foreign fighters moved freely through the region, using it as a base for cross-border attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan. Pakistani military leaders were reluctant to launch military operations to drive the foreigners out, a policy of appeasement that later cost Pakistan hugely when the militants turned against Islamabad.

Early in 2004, under pressure from the United States, Pakistan finally launched an offensive against Al Qaeda in South Waziristan, but

it soon turned into an undeclared war between the Pakistani military and rebel tribesmen, spreading into other tribal areas. Despite the commitment of more than 100,000 troops, the military's efforts have yielded only questionable gains. The Taliban and Al Qaeda have shown themselves capable of regrouping and striking back after defeats, and they have resumed attacks in some areas that were thought to be secure. American drone attacks have killed a number of senior Al Qaeda leaders but have had little effect on the group's operations. Indeed, the drone strikes have helped fuel the insurgency by stoking public anger over the increasing toll on civilians, including many women and children. *Pashtunwali*, moreover, requires the families of those killed to seek revenge. In the crucial district of North Waziristan, meanwhile, the frustrated Pakistani military struck a peace deal in 2006: Local Taliban groups would sever their ties to the TTP but would be free to keep fighting U.S. and Afghan forces across the border.

North Waziristan is now the eye of the storm. It has become the main sanctuary for the TTP and other Pakistani militant groups driven from South Waziristan and other tribal regions. Pakistani military officials admit they cannot contain militant violence in the country without clearing North Waziristan of

TTP sanctuaries. Yet the region is also the home base of one Afghan Taliban group, the Haqqani network, that they are not prepared to act against. Led by legendary former Afghan mujahideen commander Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, the Haqqani network has perhaps 10,000 fighters battling U.S. and other NATO forces in Afghanistan. Its strong connections with Al Qaeda have made the network the most dangerous insurgent faction in Afghanistan.

Pakistani military leaders maintain that the Haqqani network has not been involved in the TTP's activities inside Pakistan. But their deep reluctance to take action against the network is also a reflection of Islamabad's concern about what will happen after the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Afghanistan, which is supposed to be completed by the end of 2014. The Pakistani military establishment doesn't believe the United States has a clear strategy for an orderly exit from Afghanistan. Its leaders are convinced that if the United States and NATO leave in 2014 without first putting a political settlement in place in Afghanistan, civil war will again break out in the country. If that happens, the Haqqani network and other Pashtun-dominated Taliban groups will be needed as proxy forces to protect Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan against other tribes and the much-feared Indian influence.

Meanwhile, a series of spectacular attacks by the Haqqani network on Western installations, including a strike on the U.S. Embassy in Kabul last September, has led to a complete rupture in relations between Washington and Islamabad. "The Haqqani network acts as a veritable arm of the ISI," charged Admiral Mike Mullen, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a hearing in September before the Senate Armed Services Committee. In November, a NATO attack on a Pakistani border post that killed 24 troops provoked Islamabad to halt all NATO supply shipments to Afghanistan through Pakistan. The United States has suspended all military cooperation with Pakistan, the most serious blow yet to what has



In November, these North Waziristan tribal elders met with Pakistani army officers.

been a tortured alliance.

No Afghan peace effort will succeed if the trust gap between the United States and Pakistan is not bridged, and an unstable Afghanistan would pose a threat to the entire region. In the interest of both its own national security and regional peace, Pakistan must eliminate militant sanctuaries in North Waziristan, but as long as the standoff with the United States persists, it will be extremely difficult for Islamabad to launch a major military operation in the region.

Over the longer term, however, military action alone does not offer a solution to the complex problems of the tribal areas. Pakistan needs to take urgent measures to end their alienation and backwardness, and the ongoing military operation provides an opportunity to push for the long-delayed integration of the region into Pakistan and end its semiautonomous status. The oppressive, century-old administrative system must be scrapped, and the people of the region must be accorded the full protection of the nation's legal system. Massive investments in human and physical infrastructure are needed. A modern road network, for example, would help end the tribal areas' economic isolation and link them with the rest of Pakistan, and Afghanistan too. In other words, in this crucial, strife-torn region, more war is not the answer. ■