

By Kamran Bokhari and Fred Burton

Since the start of the U.S.-jihadist war in late 2001, and particularly since the rise of the Taliban rebellion within its own borders in recent years, Pakistan has been seen as a state embroiled in a jihadist insurgency threatening its very survival. Indeed, until late April, it appeared that Pakistan was buckling under the onslaught of a Taliban rebellion that had consumed large chunks of territory in the northwest and was striking at the country's core. A Shariah-for-peace deal with the Taliban in the Swat region, approved with near unanimity by the parliament, reinforced the view that Pakistan lacked the willingness or capability to fight Islamist non-state actors chipping away at its security and stability.

In the last three months, however, the state has staged a dramatic comeback, beginning with an offensive in Swat and adjacent districts that has resulted in the state regaining control over most of the affected areas. (The offensive is still under way.) The government action in Swat was followed by limited air and ground operations in the South Waziristan region, along with an intelligence campaign in cooperation with the United States, which has resulted in a two-month respite from any major insurgent suicide bombings. Most important was the killing Aug. 5 of top Pakistani Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud in a bombing strike by a U.S. unmanned aerial vehicle.

While many observers still view Pakistan as a state beset by a jihadist insurgency, the government's counterinsurgency campaign has clearly taken center stage. This does not mean that the jihadists no longer constitute a threat. They are and will remain a significant threat for the foreseeable future, but the state has recently gained the upper hand in the struggle — at least for now.

What Changed and How

This dramatic change begs the question: How was the government of Pakistan able to turn the situation around? This is an important question given the complex and historic relationship between the country's security establishment and Islamist militants of various stripes. This relationship has long prevented the state from taking decisive action — even in the face of a growing threat to the state's integrity. The first stirrings of the change can be traced back to the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, which brought Pakistan to the brink of war with India at a time when Islamabad was also facing a raging insurgency at home.

The dual security threats from domestic and foreign jihadists, coupled with political instability and an economy on the verge of collapse, created intense pressure on the Pakistani state. This pressure led to a consensus within the military-intelligence establishment that regaining control over Islamist militants was critical to the survival of the country. After aligning with Washington in the war against the jihadists, Islamabad had gradually lost control of Islamist militant groups it

had previously backed as instruments of foreign policy in dealing with Afghanistan and India. (Islamabad had even helped create some of these groups.) While Pakistan was trying to balance its need to maintain influence over these groups with its obligations to the Americans in the U.S.-led war against jihadists, many of these groups, to varying degrees, moved into al Qaeda's orbit.

The first order of business for Islamabad was to deal with renewed pressure from Washington and defuse tensions with New Delhi in order to avoid war. This required going after rogue elements of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) — aka Jamaat-ud-Dawah (JuD) — which, Pakistan acknowledged, masterminded the Mumbai attacks. Because LeT/JuD had morphed over the years into a wider social phenomenon in Pakistan, isolating the rogues from the mainstream group has been no easy task, evidenced by the fact that the effort is still under way.

Getting tough with LeT/JuD required the military-intelligence leadership to make further personnel changes within the country's premier spy service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate, a process that had been under way since army chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani appointed the current ISI director-general, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, in September 2008. Dozens of ISI officials were replaced, and under its new leadership the directorate played a lead role in the crackdown on rogue members of LeT/JuD. However, the state's need to deal with the crisis triggered by the Mumbai attacks and focus on the LeT/JuD problem provided the Pakistani Taliban the time and space to further entrench themselves in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Pakistan was able to ward off the threat of war with India but, in the process, the Pakistani Taliban assumed a more menacing posture. The crackdown against LeT/JuD was useful in that it was the first major move against a former proxy — an experience that paved the way for a wider campaign against Taliban forces in Swat and FATA. If Pakistan could no longer allow LeT/JuD (a group that it was not at war with) to use the country as a staging ground for attacks against India, it certainly could not tolerate the Pashtun jihadists and their Punjabi allies who were waging an open rebellion on Pakistani soil.

The stakeholders in Islamabad had begun to realize that there was no alternative to fighting the Taliban rebels, but this, too, was a daunting task. Clearly, Islamabad was not capable of waging an all-out assault against the entire rebel movement, for this entailed battling multiple groups in multiple theaters. A lack of consensus within the state and a dearth of support from the Pakistani public for such an initiative meant that a major offensive would only make matters worse.

For one thing, there was the risk of exacerbating the situation in cases where Taliban groups that were not fighting Islamabad could align with the likes of Mehsud and Maulana Fazlullah (leader of the Taliban group in Swat). The fear of turning more and more Pashtuns into Taliban served as a major arrestor, preventing the state from taking meaningful action beyond limited successes achieved by Frontier Corps-led security forces in the FATA's Bajaur agency. These considerations, and the need to buy time, led to negotiations with the Taliban group in Swat that resulted in the peace deal.

Emboldened by their victory in establishing a Taliban emirate in the greater Swat region, the Taliban group there decided to push farther eastward, sending its fighters into Buner district and demanding that Shariah be imposed not just in the greater Swat region but also in the entire country. In fact, the lead negotiator on behalf of the Swat Taliban, Maulana Sufi Muhammad, declared the Pakistani Constitution un-Islamic and those who opposed Shariah infidels. Meanwhile, the suicide-bombing campaign of the Mehsud-led Taliban group, which targeted mostly security forces in major cities like Islamabad and Lahore, had generated widespread public outrage.

The move on the part of the Swat Taliban to try and project power beyond their turf proved to be the turning point where the state finally realized it needed to take a firm stand against the rebels. It was at that time, in late April, that the government embarked on Operation Rah-i-Rast with the goal of eliminating the Taliban stronghold in the Swat region. Though the offensive was limited to Swat and its adjacent districts, the state took advantage of the budding public opinion against the jihadists and launched a major media campaign against "Talibanization" that proved extremely useful. It was also very timely, given the fact that more than 2 million residents of the greater Swat region were displaced from their homes during the government offensive, and this could well have undermined public support for the operation.

In the three and a half months since the Swat offensive began, the government has successfully cleared Taliban fighters from most of the region. Indeed, the Swat Taliban network has been disrupted and its war-making machine degraded to the point where it no longer has the capability to regain control over the area — though the leadership is still at large, which means a low-intensity conflict will continue to simmer for some time. Security forces are likely to remain in the area for at least two years and there reportedly are plans to build a permanent military garrison in Swat for the first time.

In early June, after its initial success in Swat, the military turned its attention to the country's largest jihadist hub — South Waziristan — where it knew it couldn't stage a major offensive along the lines of what it was doing in Swat. The hostile terrain — both physical and human — coupled with its status as an autonomous region and the government's lack of troops, forced the state to combine limited air and ground attacks with intelligence operations to isolate Mehsud and his Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan movement from the wider Taliban phenomenon.

In the midst of this campaign, the ISI, working in coordination with the CIA, was able to eliminate Mehsud, under whose leadership the Pakistani Taliban went from being a low-level militancy in South Waziristan to being a broad insurgent movement throughout the FATA, large parts of the NWFP and in parts of the core province of Punjab. Mehsud's death has initiated a power struggle among his associates for control of his group that Islamabad is trying hard to exploit.

Where to From Here?

Between the re-taking of most of Swat, which has allowed for the return of some 765,000 displaced residents, and the elimination of Mehsud, Pakistan has gained an important edge in its struggle against its Taliban rebels that it can build upon to deliver a decisive blow. But there

are a lot of moving parts in play that have to be dealt with in order to ensure continued progress.

Though the Swat Taliban have been damaged, they have not been entirely defeated, which will not happen until their leadership is captured or killed (or until they cannot recruit new fighters from their madrassas). And as displaced residents return to the region, a massive amount of reconstruction and development work is necessary to prevent unrest that the Taliban could exploit. Restoring the writ of the state entails the re-establishment of political administration and local law enforcement, and there are other areas in the NWFP — especially the districts that run parallel to the FATA — that also need to be brought back under government control.

In Waziristan and the rest of the FATA, Mehsud's death has wounded the Taliban, but they are very much entrenched in the region, along with their al Qaeda and other transnational allies. Any counterinsurgency campaign in the tribal areas is going to be exponentially more difficult than the offensive in Swat. This is why the military is now aligning itself with pro-Pakistani tribal and militant forces to try and root out those waging war against the state. Being able to distinguish between those militants hostile to Pakistan and those focused on Afghanistan is going to be hard not only because of the fluidity of the Taliban phenomenon but also because it complicates U.S.-Pakistani relations.

Then there is the matter of how Islamabad balances its efforts to re-assert state control over areas on its side of the border with an international move to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The challenge for Pakistan is to regain influence in its western neighbor by reviving its contacts and thus influence with the Afghan Taliban while rolling back Talibanization in its own Pashtun areas. Efforts to neutralize FATA-based domestic rebels impacts Taliban groups focused on Afghanistan, whose support Pakistan needs to crush the domestic insurgency and re-establish its influence in Afghanistan.

While Pakistan's Pashtun areas are most affected by Talibanization, the phenomenon has made considerable inroads into Pakistan's core, where the Taliban, like the LeT/JuD, manifest themselves more as social movement. This is why, in addition to the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaign, Pakistan has also begun focusing on anti-extremism and de-radicalization efforts — the ideological battle — which is designed to drain the swamp in which the jihadists are able to grow and operate. While Pakistani public opinion has turned against the Taliban in a meaningful manner, there are still significant pockets of social support and a large number of people who remain ambivalent about the need for a comprehensive campaign against the jihadists.

Pakistan's ability successfully to press ahead with this multidimensional effort depends on its ability to contain political instability within tolerable limits and improve economic conditions. While the judicial crisis ended with the reinstatement of the chief justice fired by former President Pervez Musharraf, political stability remains elusive because of the country's fragmented political landscape and the weakness of its civilian institutions. And while a loan from the International Monetary Fund has helped Pakistan avoid bankruptcy, it will be some time before the economic conditions begin to improve to the point where Islamabad is able to meet its routine financial obligations and pay the multibillion-dollar cost of fighting the Taliban.

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