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Uzbek Militancy in Pakistan

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Entrenchment of foreign fighters

The word ‘maqami’ (local) Taliban came into use well before 9/11, as well as the Punjabi and foreign militant mobilization, which was also an early phenomenon. This was due to two separate streams of militants, one local and one foreign; the name ‘maqami’ was used for the local variant.¹ The lodgment of foreign militants and the phases of their developments are divided into two temporal phases, which do not fit into neatly defined time periods but overlap to a great extent. The first phase is when these militants immigrated after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan to Pakistan to South and North Waziristan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), mainly South Waziristan. The other main catchment area was Swat; they remained in Swat till 2007 to 2008, when they were forced to relocate to Kunar and Nuristan in Afghanistan due to being pushed back by the Pakistani military forces in the wake of the military operation ‘Rah-e-Rast’ in Swat.

The Uzbek militants predominantly remained in South Waziristan till 2009, when military operations forced them to relocate mainly to North Waziristan, also settling in certain areas in Bannu. To date, they are present in these areas, albeit in steadily decreasing numbers due to ongoing operations. It is generally agreed that since it is now extremely difficult to travel to militant areas in FATA due to a virtual blockade by the Pakistani army, the reinforcement of foreign militants by new recruits is now much less as compared to their attrition rates in military operations.² In a policy perspective, unless there is a paradigm shift (such as effective military operations in North Waziristan for instance), this implies that the foreign militants in Pakistan are under steady pressure due to operations by the state and American drone strikes, and are on the defensive.

In the foreign militant scenario, Uzbeks take predominance. It is widely believed that the dynamics of the two Waziristans would change if the Uzbeks are taken out, because they represent the most dedicated al-Qaeda ally in Waziristan. The only common thing that Uzbeks had with Waziristani people was their religion. Both of them are Muslims but most of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) fighters have good, secular education, rather than just being madrassa students. They are graduates from the universities and some have military background etc. They speak in Uzbek which belongs to Turkic group of languages, while Waziristani people speak in Pashto. Uzbeks are racially closer to Chinese or Mongolian typology of races, while Waziristanis are darker and resemble Caucasians.

Apart from the Uzbeks there are other foreign militant groups such as networks of isolated Chechens, Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and Chinese Uyghur militants from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Members of ETIM were largely believed to be dormant in the area.³ Uyghurs and Uzbeks resemble each other more. Their languages Uzbek

and Uyghur are similar as well. However, Uyghurs have also been largely insignificant in scheme of things as they have been present in much lesser numbers. On the other hand, there were reportedly more than 100 Uzbek families in the tribal areas by the end 2001, and the numbers have been steadily increasing. Even though militant men are the potent force, children and widowed women account for a large number of the Uzbeks.⁴ Among them there were several hundred IMU members. The overall picture is further confused because some Pakistani officials erroneously assumed that Islamic fighters from other countries - such as Chechnya – also were from Uzbekistan.⁵ Again, Chechens have not been present in significant numbers either, and the threat from them was always overestimated. Also, Chechens have assumed the role of foot soldiers as opposed to the Uzbeks, who have become leaders due to their predominant numbers in these areas.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is the spearhead of Uzbek presence in the region. The IMU was founded in 1996 in the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan, with the goal to overthrow the regime of President Islam Karimov and replace his rule with Islamic law in the country. The Karimov regime cracked down with an iron hand, forcing the IMU cadres to flee and seek refuge outside Uzbekistan in the mid-1990s. By August 1998, when the Taliban were in control of more than 90% of Afghanistan, the IMU had established military camps in that country's northern provinces. Like the Taliban, IMU suffered losses in Afghanistan in December 2001, primarily when its leader Juma Namangani was reportedly killed. Tahir Yuldashev replaced him, and under his leadership, the Uzbeks found sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas after the collapse of the Taliban regime. Fleeing Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime, in early 2002, Uzbeks and militants from several other countries started taking refuge in the Pakistani border regions. Yuldashev has since then claimed to have been killed. However, what is indisputable is that he became a cult figure amongst the local fighters in the area due to his zeal. This went a long way in establishing Uzbek presence in the area, with a list of established deputies waiting in line to succeed commanders killed in action.

Another factor that helped Uzbeks become a major power in this area was that they were always in enough numbers to form their own organizations, rather than following the lead of the majority as in case of many other groups of foreigners, who were in substantially smaller numbers. It now stands proven by police records that the major foreign militant groups who surfaced time and time again in attacks in Pakistan are Uzbek. It is a recurring theme in Pakistan to date that when the state engages terrorists, the reported presence of Uzbeks in fiercely combated operations tends to often crop up.⁶

The other predominant group which was present in much smaller numbers but carried a lot of ideological clout were Arabs. They also had a lot of money as opposed to all the other groups,

and hosting Arabs became a lucrative pastime for locals in the two Waziristans. The Arabs were mainly found in Sheen Warsak, Kaloosha, Ghwakaha, Kari Kot areas. Their largest area of concentration was at the Mandotta cave complex (South Waziristan), which was a training camp run by al-Qaeda with Arab trainers, which was later destroyed by the army. Arabs were also hosted by the local Taliban commander Faqir Muhammad in Bajaur, since he was on very friendly terms with them. Later they were seen mostly in Mir Ali and Miram Shah, and as of spring 2012 their presence was reported to be confined mainly to North Waziristan and the Frontier Regions (FR) Janikhel and Bakkakhel.⁷ However, Arabs lost their significance as the dominant foreign group in Pakistan because of being present in smaller numbers, and trying to influence militancy in Pakistan by influencing other organizations, rather than by active fighting. In contrast to the lower key Arab presence, it seems that the more overtly violent Uzbeks got their way, at least in terms of living amongst local populace more openly. This 'leading from the front' mindset also enamored them to the locals, for whom personal bravery carries a high premium value.

Uzbeks needs an elaboration as the biggest group of foreigners in Pakistan now. Their presence is estimated to be almost 90% of foreign militant presence swelling the ranks of al-Qaeda and Taliban. Led by Tahir Yuldashev, these IMU militants encountered few problems finding support and shelter amongst the Ahmadzai Wazir tribesmen in North and South Waziristan in wake of their retreat from Afghanistan after the US-led Operation Anaconda in early 2002. Yuldashev soon became a star speaker at mosques in the Sheen Warsak region near Wana, the administrative headquarters of South Waziristan. Once well-entrenched, Yuldashev founded an organization that he dubbed 'Mohajireen-o-Ansar', which means refugees and friends (or supporters) in Arabic, to pursue his agenda, which essentially converged with that of al-Qaeda. A Punjabi fugitive called Qari Mudassar used to act as spokesman for the group. Yuldashev also set up a private jail in order to punish enemies and dissidents. Yuldashev's revered status took a hit when his vigilantes began targeting Pakistan army and government officials beginning in late 2006. These anti-army strikes turned the Uzbeks from murky, unknown entities to villains in the eyes of the Pakistani populace, especially when the Uzbeks became involved in terrorism against civilians. The pro-government Ahmadzai Wazir Taliban commander Mullah Nazir disapproved of targeting the Pakistani army and civilians. This led to bloody fights between Mullah Nazir's men and the Uzbeks in March 2007, and eventually forced the IMU zealots to take refuge in South Waziristan, then dominated by late Pakistani Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud, and also in smaller pockets of North Waziristan to some extent.

Despite the limits that the new geo-military situation put on the IMU's area of influence, most intelligence and local sources agree that this organization has indeed morphed into a lethal non-Arab al-Qaeda entity. From the late 1990s, when Uzbeks opened their first training camp

near Mazar-e-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan to their escape to South Waziristan from the US-led Operation Anaconda, most of the Uzbeks are probably now making their last stand in a region (North Waziristan Agency) that is under sharp U.S. and Pakistani focus because of the presence of the al-Qaeda-driven militant outfits there. There are reasons for this domination of Uzbeks. Firstly, the locals were scared to mobilize opposition to the Uzbeks due to their reputations as fierce fighters with long memories and very strong military backgrounds. Some of them used to be soldiers of the Soviet Army during the invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and some of them had military trainings given by the CIA during the 1990s; hence they are experts in guerrilla warfare. The IMU fighters had little to lose and it was difficult for them to escape somewhere else. They couldn't go back to Uzbekistan, and after 2009, re-infiltration back to Afghanistan also started getting more difficult. Thus, they made the Waziristans their home.

The lack of adequate and actionable intelligence makes military operations that much more difficult to conduct in the area, and thus contributed to their growth due to little hindrance caused. The execution and beheading of "spies" also reached alarming levels, particularly in North and South Waziristan since early 2008 as a result of targeted killings. This also suggested that military operations in the tribal areas had forced the militant groups to adopt greater internal security measures. During the Taliban heydays, thousands of Punjabis also moved to South Waziristan over the years, and successfully established themselves in the restive border region. Most of these migrants came from Raheem Yar Khan, Lahore, Multan, Sadiqabad, Bahawalpur and other parts of Punjab, with estimates of around 2,000 people from southern and northern Punjab province moving to South Waziristan since March 2005. These migrants paid much higher rents to the locals for their houses and shops, and started different business, mostly food and pharmacy-related. These well-trained Punjabi militants soon started flexing some muscles by confronting Uzbeks in these areas, in which task they were helped by the so-called 'good' Taliban commanders like Maulvi Nazir; the Uzbeks had at that stage become unpopular with the locals due to their high handedness. A conservative estimate at that time (2005) put the numbers of foreign militants, especially Uzbeks at roughly around 2,500 to 5,000 in South and North Waziristan. The Punjabis thus provided a counterweight to these foreign militants, since they provided a mercenary force, which stood to gain territorial rights in a deeply clan-oriented area by ousting the 'meddlesome' Uzbeks.

The Punjabi militants also reportedly established separate training centers in FATA, especially in North Waziristan. These Punjabi militants had a distinct identity distinct from their Pashtun counterparts, and were also comparatively more educated, better equipped and more technologically savvy than their Pashtun counterparts. This was a result of their upbringing in Punjab Province with its urban linkages, where internet access and communications equipment are more readily available; they were thus the confluence of the urban and the 'other' Punjab. They are also reported-

ly more unscrupulous than their Pashtun brothers, with the tendency to be bought out by highest bidders. Many police officers in Punjab have cited their criminal tendencies at the start of their careers. The Punjabis relocated to FATA after their organizations were banned to raise funds through drug smuggling, and acquired weapons from the indigenous weapons markets Darra Adam Khel. Banned organizations resurfaced under new names or as charities, and several splinter groups also relocated to FATA. These 'Punjabi Taliban' were also one of the main factors pushing Uzbeks out of South Waziristan.

The IMU and its relocation from South Waziristan

The rout from South Waziristan forced the Uzbeks to relocate in bulk to North Waziristan. Very few remained back, and it is generally agreed that there could only be smaller cells of these Uzbek presence in South Waziristan now, especially after the military operations.⁸ Most are now in North Waziristan. By a rough estimate in 2009, more than 4,000 Uzbek militants had relocated to different localities in North Waziristan enjoying close association with militants of the Mehsud Tribe. Most are now subsumed within the main factions of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).⁹ The Uzbeks were first targeted by Pakistani security forces in March 2007 when militants started attacking and killing Pakistani soldiers and paramilitary troops. Since then Tahir Yuldashev's men have been accused of numerous suicide attacks and of killing hundreds of tribal elders in Pakistan over the years. His militants carried out attacks on Pakistani forces in the tribal belt, and are believed to have taken part in the 'Lal Masjid' (Red Mosque) siege in 2007, in which dozens of people were killed. The military says that Uzbek militants are a formidable enemy. Pakistani security forces believe that some of the major bomb attacks in Islamabad are the work of Central Asian militants. At first the Uzbek militants were presumed to be concerned only with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. However a message by Yuldashev through a DVD, calling for attacks on Pakistani security personnel, made it clear that his movement was not just about Uzbekistan but was working on al-Qaeda's overall goal.¹⁰

Many Uzbeks have by now learnt Pashto and passable Urdu and have been frequently travelling between Islamabad and Uzbekistan in the disguise of mainly cloth traders or merchants. Interestingly, these militants had been using various airports in Pakistan for their departure and arrival, arriving in Pakistan like any other foreigner and casually catching a taxi from Islamabad to Mir Ali (their main abode of residence outside settled areas). Personnel of the Federal Intelligence Agency (FIA) of Pakistan were unable to segregate the Uzbek militants from the routine traffic of foreigners coming into Pakistan.¹¹ This problem of militant traffic has been recognized at inter-governmental levels as well. Uzbekistan has asked Pakistan in the past to extradite a number of suspected al-Qaeda fighters of Uzbek origin who have been captured during the operations in Wana. These Uzbeks captured in Pakistan are said to have

joined the al-Qaeda network based in neighboring Afghanistan in 1990s. Their movements were not restricted to the tribal belt as they also travelled to the Balochistan province. There has also been evidence of Uzbek militants' involvement in the unrest of Balochistan, with many Uzbeks living in Islamabad's suburbs having connections with the top leaders of Baloch militant groups. Many such Uzbeks have been arrested in the proximity of these urban areas, ostensibly blending in with the population by pretending to be of Afghani origin, which represent a sizable population in these areas.¹² In July 2008, the authorities presented a report to then Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani providing the latest figures on foreign fighters present in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Roughly their numbers were more than 8,000, and 4,800 of them were believed to be Uzbek. The same facts and figures were also presented at a special cabinet meeting later.

A few years ago Pakistan was the safest route for foreign fighters to enter Afghanistan, but this is not so easy any more due to much stricter enforcement. Most of them used to come as tourists and traders directly from Dushanbe, Baku, Istanbul, Dubai, Sharjah, Delhi and Frankfurt to Kabul by different airlines. Many Afghans in Kabul, Karachi, Dubai and Delhi are working for them as travel agents. It is apparently quite easy to make a new Afghan passport for them in Kabul.¹³ The number of foreign fighters thus began to exponentially increase, with a huge increase in 2007. The main incitement for those young militants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe was the increase in the number of US troops in Afghanistan. Most of them came from the IMU.

These Uzbeks are now mostly subsumed into other entities besides IMU. Pakistani military offensives over the past years in Swat and South Waziristan have brought different groups closer together under the duress of a common enemy. For example Qari Zafar, the Punjabi Taliban leader reportedly killed in a February 2010 U.S. missile strike, merged his organization Badar Mansoor into the TTP just before the Pakistani Army's offensive in South Waziristan. Reportedly, this merger was in addition to three thousand Punjabi fighters assisted by Uzbeks already in the area before the army moved in. Many Uzbeks are also part of the TTP Shura, the umbrella council of forty top militant commanders supervising TTP activities in Pakistan.

These Uzbeks have been instrumental in planning attacks on the Pakistani state. Such attacks, to which a distinct Uzbek and Arab element is now being tied in, included the March 8, 2010, suicide attack on the Special Investigation Agency in Lahore, killing and wounding over one hundred people. Both the TTP and al-Qaeda's al-Jihad Group in Punjab claimed responsibility. "If the government does not halt military operation in the tribal area and drone attacks continue, the TTP will continue suicide bombings (on government installations)", TTP spokesman Azam Tariq warned. Four days later, coordinated suicide bombings directed at La-

hore killed at least fifty-seven and injured over one hundred soldiers and civilians. Punjabi militants belonging to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi carried out the attack, but the TTP leadership in Waziristan claimed credit for the strikes. Subsequently, the police uncovered 4.5 tons of explosives and sophisticated arms in Lahore's residential areas and arrested over fifty locals with links to militants in southern Punjab. Four Uzbeks were amongst those arrested. These incidents amply demonstrated the inroads of these foreign militants into Pakistan's urban centers, whence investigations showed that planning and arrangements for the attacks had originated in Lahore at the behest of Uzbek coordinators from North Waziristan.

The links to Swat and the TNSM

It is not generally comprehended that Swat acted as one of the three main deployment areas (besides the two Waziristans) for foreigners before 2009, especially Uzbeks. The Tehreek-e-Nizam-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM) would provide the cadres, while Uzbeks would effectively take over the leadership of the TNSM in Swat as representatives of the Taliban, and the TNSM would morph into the TTP. The TNSM was formed by Maulana Sufi Muhammad, a firebrand cleric ostensibly for creating peace and harmony in the society. Sufi Mohammad started out as an activist and then became one of the prominent leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in the 1980s, being the principal of the JI madrassa in Tamergarah in the north-western part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). He split up with them eventually due to his uncompromising extremist ideals and wrangling over control of a madrassa, and in 1988 he formed the TNSM.¹⁴

At the very outset the TNSM embraced the radical forms of Sharia wholeheartedly, and with the emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan identified closely with them. The movement soon revealed its radical colors when it initiated an armed uprising in wake of Pakistan Supreme Court's February 12, 1994 verdict, which nullified the Provincially Administered Tribal Area (PATA) regulations. These regulations had governed certain areas (including Swat and Malakand) since the 1970s. Ostensibly, the governance vacuum created by the cancellation of these regulations encouraged TNSM activists to agitate for the establishment of a Sharia form of government in the Malakand areas adjoining Swat. This was a relatively scaled down precursor of things to come; at that time, the state was able to suppress the uprising by a combination of counter-insurgency operations and negotiations, though the Sharia system was introduced in the Malakand area twice in response to TNSM's group pressure. However, the TNSM continued to thrive; this was amply demonstrated when Sufi Muhammad crossed over into Afghanistan,

reportedly with 10,000 fighters to aid the beleaguered Taliban after 9/11. His force was routed and disbanded however, and Sufi was arrested on his way back to Pakistan. These TNSM cadres would later form the backbone of the Taliban in Swat and Bajaur; TNSM was the precursor of the Taliban militancy that would follow, with the Taliban effectively hijacking the TNSM movement, primarily with the help of Uzbeks. Two of the most prominent leaders of Pakistani Taliban, Maulana Fazlullah in Swat and Faqir Muhammad in Bajaur, had originally been TNSM adherents. Many of their fighters are also drawn from the ranks of TNSM, particularly in Bajaur, though they are aided by many foreigners and militants from other organizations.

Uzbeks would take over the role of the Shura or advisory body of Fazlullah, and would never show their faces but would always cover them. The local clearly differentiate these masked men from the local populace, saying they had strange dialects and were usually taller than the average Swatis.¹⁵ They obviously yielded much greater influence on Fazlullah than did the locals. On various occasions, local civilians would recall men with guttural accents speaking in foreign dialects, which had no resemblance to their own group of languages. These men usually kept to themselves, rarely mingling with the more indigenous Swati Taliban.¹⁶

Somewhere along the way, the TNSM thought they were strong enough to set up Sharia in Swat as a mirror of Afghanistan. They switched sides with TTP, and foreigners, largely Uzbeks, moved in huge numbers to Swat. Many of the locals relate this moving in of foreigners which started sometime in 2007, the same year when the atrocities really started in earnest. Peochar came into focus at this time as the area where most of these activities occurred, and became the hub of foreign militant activities. This area would later experience bitter combat between the state forces and what were ostensibly hard core militants instructed by Uzbeks during the military operations 'Rah-e-Rast' in Swat.¹⁷ This would morph the TNSM in Swat into the Taliban, effectively subsuming the more militant cadres into what was perceived by them as a more effective organization. The TNSM was overtaken by Taliban, and they would start moving a lot of militant cadres into Swat, and many foreigners would also start moving in.¹⁸ The locals differentiate taller, fairer militants from indigenous ones; it was very difficult to say where they were from, since they were usually veiled, and seemed like foreigners. This is also corroborated by testimony from other people.¹⁹ A prevailing hypothesis about the insurgency in Swat is that the movement started with influx of fighters alien to the area into Swat, and then the local people joined in.

The Mullah's zeal paled in comparison with some of his followers who reportedly joined him from Mir Ali in North Waziristan, Darra Adam Khel, Bajaur and other tribal areas to

fight the security forces. Many fighters also started moving in from Afghanistan. Some sources claimed that he had lost control over some of his more overzealous fighters. The ruthless beheadings of captured security personnel was ascribed to these fighters, which reportedly had a large foreign element within them. This was widely reported at the time. It was also reported at the time that militants from South Waziristan as well as foreign militants belonging to IMU had arrived in Swat to support Fazlullah's attempt to Talibanize Swat, and establish his fiefdom in the region.

At the same time, Uzbeks were imparting training to the TNSM in Peochar how to plant explosive and perpetrate suicide bombings.²⁰ TTP was simultaneously flexing its muscle in FATA, and the more traditional TNSM elements would not be able to control the permeation of foreign elements into TNSM. Gradually, foreigners would start appearing in Swat, and acts of terrorism and mass atrocities like slitting of throats and beheadings would escalate. Thus, global militancy organizations would take over, which would have within them elements of al-Qaeda as well; these elements would spark off the Swat insurgency in earnest, and Fazlullah would decide to go the way of global and anti-state militancy.

The situation took an ominous turn when the Fazlullah-led militants joined the TTP formed by top Pakistani militant Baitullah Mehsud in December 2007. This was a bid to provide an umbrella to all insurgent movements operating in several tribal agencies and settled areas of KP. With this, the movement fell into the hands of tribal-area-based Taliban, and Maulana Fazlullah lost his authority to make decisions independently. The Swat-based Taliban were previously insisting only on the promulgation of Sharia, but they started making increasingly strident demands from the government. The first peace deal of the Swat chapter of Taliban after being subsumed in TTP was negotiated on May 31, 2008, which immediately fell to pieces, with both sides blaming each other for the failure of the negotiation process. Fazlullah seems to have hardened his stance from then onwards, with directions apparently emanating from a more centralized Taliban command and control. "Baitullah Mehsud has the last word on the agreement, and until his permission we cannot resume talks aimed at the enforcement of the accord", spokesman for the Swat Taliban Muslim Khan told the TNS News service.²¹

In essence, Swat's problem became linked to FATA, since the success of any peace deal was re-conditioned to the situation in the tribal agencies. According to the Swati Taliban, in case of any action in the tribal areas, the pact would automatically stand terminated. Operations would later start in earnest, and the area would return to a semblance of its previous normalcy, even though some targeted

killings would continue, and still continue sporadically to this day. The recent shooting of Malala Yousafzai, a child peace activist, is testimony to the continued presence of militants in Swat, even though they are indisputably under tremendous pressure from the Pakistani establishment.

The settling in North Waziristan

South Waziristan is no longer an exclusive refuge of foreign fighters. They have almost entirely been displaced from these areas to North Waziristan. Thus, whenever news of a major leader of Uzbeks being killed comes out in the media, almost invariably the area where the leader is killed is reported to be in North Waziristan.²² This indicates that the command and control structure of such foreign fighters has shifted to North Waziristan Agency. Uzbeks are not the only foreign fighters in Pakistan of course; the foreign fighters' wing of the Haqqani militant network has suffered huge human losses in North Waziristan in the wake of the ongoing US-drone campaign which perished 100-plus al-Qaeda-linked militants in October and November 2011 alone, most of whom belonged to Uzbekistan, Turkey, Germany, England, China, Afghanistan, etc.²³ North Waziristan hosts a blend of insurgents, especially the Haqqani network which is headquartered in Miram Shah. The foreign militants who had been fighting alongside the Haqqani network in Waziristan and killed by American predator strikes between October 1 and November 30, 2011, belonged to Islamic Jihad Union, IMU, Islamic Army of Great Britain, Ittehad-e-Jihad Islami, German Taliban Mujahedeen, Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Taifatul Mansura or the Victorious Sect, and several others.²⁴ North Waziristan remains an open source information black hole; this may be due to the fact that the state retains a stalemate and peace agreement with Gul Bahadur and warlords of North Waziristan, and subsequently does not have the same penetration into this area since this is frowned upon under the terms of the peace agreements. One of the biggest nightmares for policy makers has always been that Gul Bahadur would turn against the state.

However, news of foreign militant activity in North Waziristan as well as figures of Uzbek fighters killed in drone strikes or by military operations tend to keep cropping up. According to the figures available on various al-Qaeda-linked Jihadi media outlets, over three dozen Turkish fighters belonging to Taifat ul-Mansura (The Victorious Sect) and linked to the Haqqani militant network were killed in numerous US drone strikes in North Waziristan in the months of October and November 2011. However, according to Gazavat Media, a jihadi propaganda website which caters to Turkish jihadis, the Turkish fighters were killed in a "low-intensity chemical weapon attack". Taifat ul-Mansura is a transnational Turkish Jihadi group, which operates along the Pak-Afghan border and is based in North Waziristan. Its fighters operate in Eastern Afghanistan alongside the Afghan Taliban and its powerful subgroup, the Haqqani network. Many of these foreign fighters are reportedly helped to get into

Pakistan by two American born Pakistanis in Afghanistan known as Azzam ‘Amriki’ and Amir Butt.

There are other groups as well; the Victorious Sect, for instance, was established in 2009 by the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a splinter faction of the IMU, to accommodate the increasing influx of European foreign fighters in the region. Furqoon, the official website of the IMU, recently released a list of its commanders and fighters who have been killed in Pakistan and Afghanistan in recent months, especially in drone attacks. The deceased commanders and fighters were from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Germany, Russia and Pakistan. The website also carried short bios, and in some cases photographs, of its members who have been killed in their ongoing ‘jihad’ against the ‘forces of the infidel’.²⁵

The IMU and the IJU are two predominately Uzbek militant groups with a presence in North Waziristan. After the fallout with Mullah Nazir however, they went under the protection of Baitullah Mehsud. Both the IMU and IJU relocated to Mir Ali, North Waziristan by mid-2009 due to pressure from military operations, although the IJU had reportedly been operating there since 2006. Both groups have close ties to al-Qaeda, the TTP, and the Haqqani Network. Both groups have been linked to terror plots in Europe. The planning and training for the execution of these plots are believed to have originated in Mir Ali. Both groups are considered as enemies of the Pakistani security establishment.

A sermon delivered by an Uzbek cleric, Abu Dher al-Barmi, which was videotaped at a mosque in North Waziristan and distributed by Ummat Studios on November 14, 2011, exhorted all the foreign militants currently fighting in Pakistan, especially Uzbeks, to continue to shelter the Islamic fighters who are waging a ‘holy war’ against the ‘forces of the infidel’. Abu Dher said in his sermon (which was recorded on September 30, 2011) that “the Mujahedeen of Islam emigrated to the land of (North) Waziristan after the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and sheltered with the Pakistani people, but are now being punished by both the US and Pakistan for doing so.” A week before the release of the videotaped sermon, the IMU had announced the death of Abu Bakr al-Almani, a German jihadi who was presumably killed in a US drone attack in North Waziristan. The announcement was made by another German who called himself Abdul Matin al-Almani. Abu Bakr’s death was disclosed at the end of a martyrdom statement titled “Thoughts of a Mujahid.” The statement was released on jihadi forums on November 5, and translated by the SITE Intelligence Group. A good number of German fighters belonging to the German Taliban Mujahedeen are believed to be present in North Waziristan, and have reportedly set up a “German colony” where fighters live with their families. Two German brothers, known as Munir Chouka and Yasin Chouka, serve as key members of the ‘white mujahedeen’.

This German presence may in turn be responsible for indoctrination of a number of Europeans into the Pakistan based IMU in Waziristan. One of the latest seems to be a Norwegian with the nom de guerre of Abu Bilal, who has recently featured in an IMU video.

Conclusions

The main areas of foreign militant lodgment besides North Waziristan are regions in the Bannu area. The only area where foreigners are found in anything approaching large numbers and structured organizations are in North Waziristan, and to some extent in Bannu in FR Janikhel and Bakkakhel. These are categorically the only areas where foreign militant fighters can now be found en masse outside North Waziristan.²⁶ FR Janikhel and Bakkakhel are both contiguous to North Waziristan. There are numerous ways linking North Waziristan with these two areas. Even though the army has set up numerous camps along these routes to stop this infiltration, it has not been possible for the army to plug all the routes because of the terrain. Thus, there is still relatively free movement along these routes of these foreigners.

Since there is a government truce between Hafiz Gul Bahadur of North Waziristan and the Pakistani government, North Waziristan is still a relatively safe area for these foreigners to take sanctuary. From here they are also crossing the many paths available to reach Janikhel and Bakkakhel. Here they have the same associations with the locals that they have in NWA; intermarriage. Indeed, one of the biggest integration tools these foreign fighters use is that they intermarry amongst the locals, who became bound to them by kith and kin since such family ties are taken very seriously, and defended even at the cost of lives in the tribal Pathan society. Bannu is also reportedly one of the main areas of catchment for foreigners, especially the trickling in of Mullah Omar's afghan Taliban.²⁷ These people are totally dormant in the area, do not seem to make any trouble for establishment, and keep a very low profile. They seem to socialize amongst themselves. Some do menial jobs but seem to remain aloof about their backgrounds. Thus, they do crop up on the radar, since they have assumed such low profiles.

The main areas of foreign lodgment in Bannu are FR Janikhel and FR Bakkakhel. These inhospitable rugged areas have always been areas which have been favored areas of abode for Arab and other militants, who have translocated to these areas whenever pressure on them increased in wake of military operation. Whenever the operations intensified, especially after 2009, the foreigner population of this area would immediately start swelling up. Incidentally, these are the only areas which are still frequented by the diminishing number of Arabs who are seen in Pakistan, and perhaps these areas represent the last bastion of sanctuary to all races and forms of foreign fighters living in Pakistan today. It needs to be remembered that Saiful

Assad, the ‘killer of 300 people’, the main deputy of Yuldashev, was killed in this very area by the authorities.

Many foreigners have perished in Pakistan due to drone strikes or military operations, and their numbers have dwindled a lot. Many of them who went to Swat were pushed back along with Fazlullah’s militants to Kunar and Nuristan, where they are still reportedly present. Thus, the numbers have decreased significantly due to either being killed or translocation from (in case of Swat fighters) Swat to Afghanistan. Thus, when it is now said that there are a lot of foreign fighters in Pakistan, it is certainly not as true now as say, it was in 2007. It is also difficult to ascertain exactly who and how many foreign fighters are in North Waziristan. This is primarily due to the fact that it’s still a no-go area, with any attempts at in-depth penetration being viewed as violation of peace treaties by Gul Bahadur. The state cannot afford to open up too many fronts, so Gul Bahadur is primarily left alone. It’s well known that he hosts a lot of foreign militants. The same applies to areas of Bannu like Janikhel and Bakkakhel, which have tribal affiliations with North Waziristanis, and tend to act as spill-over areas from North Waziristan, notwithstanding the fact that administratively these areas are parts of Bannu. The fact that Bannu also acts as sanctuary to the Afghani Taliban, who are quiescent and don’t commit any terrorist acts there, also belies the fact that they are using these areas as just sanctuaries, lying low. This is not what is happening in North Waziristan, where militants actively engage in terrorist activities.

The majority of foreigners are still Uzbeks. This is amply displayed by ongoing reporting by media in Pakistan regarding Uzbeks as being synonymous with the term ‘foreign fighters’. It is not that there are no other foreigners present, but their presence has always been much smaller, and they have never been able to form or maintain viable organizations, or be present in such large numbers as Uzbeks managed to do. The problems associated with difficult intelligence generation in North Waziristan means that many smaller entities (other nationalities) go undetected. There is also a tendency on part of Pakistani Counter Terrorism law enforcement agencies to bunch together many nationalities (Uyghurs, Tajiks, Chechens and even Turkish) into the Uzbek category, creating confusion about the nationality issue of these fighters.²⁸ However, what is categorically confirmed by almost all of the sources is that Uzbeks are overwhelmingly the main fighting force representing the foreign fighters, while the number of Arabs has radically decreased, and they do not carry the same clout in the tribal agencies as they used to do.

Notes and references

¹ Detailed interviews with (late) Safwat Ghayur, Inspector General Frontier Constabulary, an acclaimed Police officer who was entrusted with counter insurgency operations against almost the entire panoply of the anti-state militants in Pakistan. He was leading the Passawan and Kala Dhaka Operations against the Taliban, when he was assassinated by them in a suicide attack in Peshawar on 4 August 2010. TTP claimed responsibility for the attack. Interview held in March 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Individual and focus group interviews with KP Police officers. The focus groups consisted of a mixture of KP CID and district Police officers; four such group interviews were held over a period of three months between December 2011- February 2012.

⁴ Supra Note 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See for instance "6 Uzbek militants killed in North Waziristan Drone Strike; Official". Published July 29, 2012, Express Tribune, online edition, accessed 5 November 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/414619/6-uzbek-militants-killed-in-north-waziristan-drone-strike/>. Occurrences like this are regularly reported in Pakistani media.

⁷ Supra Note 3.

⁸ This has sometimes been reported in the media as well; see for instance "Uzbek Group Says Drone Killed Leader" by Declan Walsh and Ismail Khan, New York Times, Asia Pacific section, August 4, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/world/asia/us-drone-strike-kills-uzbek-militant-leader.html?_r=0. Accessed November 2, 2012.

⁹ Supra Note 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Afzal Lala, a veteran political leader from Swat. He was one of the few maliks (leaders) who stood up defiantly against the Taliban; resultantly, he and his son were ambushed were by them. See link: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/109171/mohammad-afzal-khan-lala-the-man-who-stood-up-against-militancy/>. Accessed 3 November, 2012.

¹⁵ Interviews with Professor Fazal Hussain and lecturer Muhammad Imad, Matta, Swat. This was a common finding amongst different focus groups of about seventeen people in Matta, which was one of the epicenters of the Taliban insurgency in Swat. Focus groups held on September 2010.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Supra Note 1.

¹⁸ "Fazlullah has become a spiritual figure now. A multitude of foreign elements, including Arabs, Uzbeks and Chechens moved out from Mirali, Darra Adam Khel and Bajaur, and reached there. They are in full control of the region and are directly involved in carrying out actions against our security forces," was reportedly disclosed by a senior security to the media. The News, November 4, 2007.

¹⁹ Interviews with ZARBAKHT KHAN, a Police officer who faced direct reprisal from the Taliban in Swat when he refused to cede to their demands to surrender his Police Post. His police station was later besieged by the Taliban.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Special Report, News on Sunday, 6 July, 2008, <http://jang.com.pk/thenews/jul2008-weekly/nos-06-07-2008/spr.htm>.

²² See for instance Supra Note 6.

²³ Supra Note 3.

²⁴ Estimates by KP Police officers. However, there is little other data regarding specifics of these entities.

²⁵ A translation of a portion of the IMU statement (along with the names and images of the IMU operatives) has been provided by the Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Intelligence Group, an independent group that tracks the online activity of terrorist organizations.

²⁶ Supra Note 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.