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“The Most Dangerous Place on Earth”^{*} Case Study of the FATA Area, Pakistan

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Introduction

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan are considered one of the main sources of insecurity in the region as well as internationally and conveniently conceived as “stateless” or “ungoverned.”¹ The fact that this area actually possesses robust alternate social and economic structures in a ‘militarized society’ is not addressed by scholars and policy makers. It is of course the poorest and least developed part of Pakistan with a literacy rate of only 17% (3% among women), with per capita income of approximately \$250, and about 66% of households below poverty line.² There have been varying estimates about FATA’s rapidly growing population, which range from 3.5 million (1998 census) to 7 million according to various experts. However, the notable feature is the ethnic homogeneity of the population, whose great majority belongs to different tribes³ of 40 million Pashtuns scattered on both sides of the border.⁴ Total territory encompasses just over 27,000 square kilometers (almost 11,000 square miles) and it is divided administratively into seven agencies and six frontier regions⁵

* President Barack Obama’s speech on March 27, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/akbar-ahmed/with-obama-at-the-worlds_b_180371.html.

¹ Chalk, Peter. “The Pakistani-Afghan Border Region.” Found in Rabasa et al ed. *Ungoverned Territories: Understanding and Reducing Terrorism Risks*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007. See also: Rohan Gunaratna and Anders Nielson. “Al Qaeda in Tribal Areas of Pakistan and Beyond.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31: 7, 2008. Pages 775-80.

² “World Development Indicators Database.” World Bank: July 1, 2009.

³ *NWFP Handbook: A Guide to People and the Province*. Eds. Nick Dowling and Amy Frumin Arlington. VA: IDS 2009. The booming population is despite the presence of highest Infant and Maternal mortality.

⁴ Hussian, Zahid. *Scorpion Tail : The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan and how it threatens America*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2010. Page 10. The international border called as ‘Durand Line’ besides being porous and impossible to Police, has been a source of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan due to different interpretations of agreement between British and Afghanistan in 1893.

⁵ Seven agencies are North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Kurrum, Orakzai, Khyber, Bajuar, and Mohamnd. All except Orakzai share border with Afghanistan. Frontier Regions are small portions of districts of Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, DI Khan, Tank, and Lakki Marwat of KPK Province.

governed through an informal system of “collective responsibility.”⁶ The “usual” state institutions and processes of taxation, law enforcement, courts, and administration are not present there⁷ and all judicial, administrative, and development functions are supervised by a “French prefect” type of office, known as “political agents.”

Fertile Conditions: “The Most Dangerous Place”

Pashtuns, the natives of tribal areas, though tribal and parochial as a group, have proved agile and entrepreneurial in keeping all political and economic activities outside state control. The physically inhospitable environment ensures higher level of ‘invisibility’ for terrorists, especially the foreign *jihadis*, who blend into the local population, making detection substantially more difficult. A vibrant and effective black market economy exists in the FATA owing to tax evasion and illicit smuggling facilitated by the Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) agreement.⁸ The World Bank has estimated the overall value of this “stealth” economy to be over \$30 billion a year, which is one of the highest in the world and which successfully insulates local livelihoods from outside pressures.⁹

The regional *hawala* system that handles on average \$4.6 billion in foreign remittances is at the heart of this informal economy which has been found to be robust and defying inflationary pressures and adverse exchange rates.¹⁰ Illicit narcotics are another lucrative source of income in the tribal areas and, according to casual estimates, as much as a quarter of the drugs produced in Afghanistan pass through the border areas.¹¹ The FATA region is historically abundant in arms and ammunition, but in the last two decades illegal and highly sophisticated weaponry has arguably tilted the balance in favor of the local non-state actors against the Pakistani state.

The political economy of this Black Spot is further fueled by the presence of a reasonable road network, telecommunication facilities, and financial institutions in the area.¹² The tribal areas largely lack the formal education system, but they do have a sizable presence of mostly foreign-funded Madrasas that, according to some estimates, cater to around 33% of school-aged children¹³ and provide a steady supply of volunteers to the insurgent groups (related to the Taliban and, potentially, Al Qaeda) that are active in the area.

⁶ Abbas, Hassan. “Militancy in Pakistan’s Borderlands.” *The Century Foundation*. The collective punishment system is also a crime under the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

⁷ Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Article 246.

⁸ Rashid, 2000. Pp 189-194. He also estimates that each year thousands of stolen cars end up in FATA.

⁹ Behar, Richard. “Kidnapped Nation.” *Fortune*, Vol. 145, No. 9, April 2002. See also: Ahmed, Mansoor. “Regulations to curb smuggling, under invoicing a must.” *Nation* (Pakistan), July 13, 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Chalk, 2007. Page 56. Also there is evidence that Islamist groups are benefiting from this trade. See also Rotella, S. “Jihad’s unlikely alliance.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2004. Scarborough in a *Washington Times* article also notes that Bin Laden is reaped as much as \$24 million a year from one heroin network in Knadhar.

¹² Ibid, page 63.

¹³ Andrabi Tahir et al. “Religious School Enrollment in Pakistan.” Washington, DC; *The World Bank Policy Research Paper*, No 3521, March 2005.

Slipping Outside of the State's Control

There is a consensus among scholars as well as practitioners that following the insurgency and terrorism of the last decade the erstwhile governance system has totally collapsed, leaving the areas at the disposal of mullahs (prayer leaders) that turned into warlords,¹⁴ as well as local and foreign militants. During the 1980s, around 35,000 Muslim radicals passed through the FATA area to wage *jihad* against the “Russian infidels.”¹⁵ The war left behind experienced fighters, training camps, substantial amounts of military equipment, transnational networks of organizational relationships, and—above all—self-confidence and a belief in the possibility of a victory over a superpower.¹⁶

Several thousand of these so-called “Arab Afghans” established their bases in the provinces of Kunar, Nuristan, and Kandahar, all of them bordering Pakistan,¹⁷ and spilled over to the FATA after the Operations Enduring Freedom and Anaconda launched by NATO forces in 2001-2002.¹⁸ The so-called “Pakistani Taliban” (TTP) was established on December 14, 2007, by 40 militant commanders leading approximately 40 thousand fighters.¹⁹ Subsequently, these Taliban militias emerged also in North Waziristan, Kurram, Orakzai, Mohmand, and Bajaur Agencies of the FATA.²⁰

State and International Responses to the Insecurity Challenges

Pakistan and its international partners have faltered in most of the available options to counter crime-terror nexus (i.e. targeted strikes, military offensive, border control, law enforcement, negotiations, and public diplomacy). Pakistani government has, however, shown willingness and ability to use military force to extend control over the region,²¹ but after struggling to hold the areas had to enter into agreements with the militants on their terms.²² The state's resort to

¹⁴ Johnson, Thomas H. and M. Chris Mason. “No Sign until the Burst of fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier.” *International Security*, 2008, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 41-77. See also: *International Crisis Group*, Report No. 164, notes that several hundred *Maliks* or elders were assassinated and rest have been forced to change their loyalties.

¹⁵ Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000. Page 130.

¹⁶ Huntington, Samuel P. *Clash of Civilizations Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

¹⁷ Rashid, 2000. Page 132.

¹⁸ Chalk, 2007; page 54. Ahmed Rashid (2000) puts the number of Pakistani fighters around 80000, who trained and fought with Afghan Taliban since 1994 and according to Zahid Hussain, the number of militants in the FATA region is between 10000 to 15000. *The News* (Pakistan) reported the number of foreign fighters in FATA around 8000 quoting the Interior Minister Reman Malik.

¹⁹ Hussain, 2010; page 135. Also, *International Crisis Group*, Report No. 178 (2009). Khalid Khesghi, in *Daily Times* (Pakistan) July 31, 2009, estimates that Taliban ranks receive salary of PKR 15000 PM far more than the government.

²⁰ Gul, Imtiaz. *The Al-Qaeda Connection*. Penguin: London, 2009. This gives a detailed profile of different groups.

²¹ Gul, 2009; pp 263-273. Law enforcement and writ of the State has always been weak and various agencies like irregular *Khasadars*, Frontier Constabulary (FC) and Frontier Corps (FC) had officers drawn from outside but the force consisted of local tribes with the objective of keeping the tribes engaged

²² Hussain, 2010; p 71. Agreements included *Shakai* and *Sararogha* in South Waziristan on April 24, 2004 and February 7, 2005 respectively and *Miramshah* agreement in North Waziristan on September 5, 2006.

military force, economic blockades, and appeasement has been found to be helping the terrorists' cause and has only fueled the militancy in the area.²³

The United States and her allies have also continued with the "hard intervention" type of response in hunt for Al Qaeda members through Predator and Reaper drone strikes that have resulted in the killing of many high value targets,²⁴ but at the cost of substantial collateral damage. Many experts are questioning the efficacy of drone strikes and there is now increasingly a shared belief that the "political costs" of these attacks exceed the tactical gains.²⁵ Political and legal reforms within the FATA area are considered inevitable, but there is difference of opinions regarding the nature and extent of those reforms.²⁶ As a part of the "soft intervention" type of response, the United States in 2001 also committed \$750 million for development projects within the FATA over a five-year period, in addition to proposing the so-called Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZ).²⁷

Most of the operational and tactical achievements have been compromised and thwarted as a result of repeated disregard for the dynamics and fertile conditions that make the FATA area a Black Spot and a source of insecurity. The matter has not been helped by the lack of political will and a lagging counter-insurgency capacity of Pakistan to bring the FATA region under control through increased state presence.

Insecurity Threat to the Outside World

The tribal areas form the crux of residual Al Qaeda network, which is dispersed but able to communicate with regional affiliates around the world.²⁸ Besides Al Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban (TTP), there has been visible presence of a number of other actors in the FATA.²⁹ The TTP also became a formidable threat even after the killing of its founding commander, Baitullah Mehsud, in a U.S. drone strike on August 9, 2009. He was succeeded by the more ferocious Hakimullah Mehsud, who took responsibility for suicide attacks on the CIA Forward Operating Base (FOB) Chapman in the Khost Province of Afghanistan. As a result of that attack, 7 officers

²³ "Pakistan Countering Militancy in FATA." *International Crisis Group*, Report No. 178, October 21, 2009. Around one-third of FATA's population has been displaced by conflict. Government of Pakistan also puts the cost of conflict at around \$ 2 billion in damages to livelihood and infrastructure.

²⁴ Hussain, 2010; pp. 80, 147. Amongst the senior Al-Qaeda operatives killed in drone strikes the most important was the international operations chief Abu hamza al-rabia in 2005 and al-Libbi in 2008.

²⁵ Kilcullen, David. "CIA's silent war in Pakistan." *Times*: June 1, 2009.

²⁶ Johns and Mason (2008) favor strengthening the tribal structure as opposed to majority of pro 'development' advocates. Marten et al, on the other hand, propose complete integration into mainstream

²⁷ Eckert, Paul. "US Senate approves bill to triple aid to Pakistan." *Reuters*: June 24, 2009. Most of the aid is got 'livelihood development programs' to prevent the Youth's reversion to terrorists, other initiative of Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZ) are yet to take shape.

²⁸ Risen, James, and David Hode. "Mountains and Border foil quest for Bin Laden." *New York Times*, December 13, 2004. Gunaratna and Nielson (2008) note the presence of al-Zawahiri in Bajaur Agency and the training infrastructure in North Waziristan, pp. 781-788.

²⁹ Gunaratna and Nielson (2008) identify presence of Afghan Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan(IMU) led by now dead (Aug 2009) Tahir Yalshadov, Libyan and Moroccan Islamic Fighters Group(LIFG), and Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement(ETIM) consisting of Chechens and Uighurs.

were killed, while Hakimullah Mehsud was also responsible for scores of strikes inside of Pakistan, which led to the deaths of hundreds of security personnel. The failed Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, was also motivated by Hakimullah in his attempt to avenge the killing of Beitullah Mehsud, a reportedly similar motive to that of the Afghan-born Najibullah Zazi who pled guilty of charges of planting a bomb in the New York City subway system.³⁰ Terrorist attempts and attacks in Britain and other parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf have also been traced to the networks operating in the FATA region.³¹

Conflicts in the FATA and in Afghanistan have always complemented each other with formidable presence of and support for Afghan Taliban in the area.³² In the longer term, the area certainly has the potential of becoming an increasing source of instability not only for Pakistan, but also for the entire region and even globally.

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³⁰ Ibid: pages 8, 193.

³¹ Gunaratna and Neilson (2008), p 789. Crevice operation by the British Security Service is one example. "British Terror Trail traces a path to militant Islam." *New York Times*, November 25, 2006.

³² General Pervez Musharraf. *In the Line of Fire*. NY; Simon and Schuster, 2006; page 220. See also: Hussain 2010, page 95. See also: Bergen, Peter. "The long hunt for Osama." *The Atlantic*, October 2004. The network is led and facilitated by the Soviet war veteran Jalal-u-Din Haqqani who allegedly helped Bin Laden escape the Tora Bora in 2001 and through his son Sirajudin is responsible for Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan.