

Right at the Edge

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I: The Border Incident

Late in the afternoon of June 10, during a firefight with Taliban militants along the Afghan-Pakistani border, American soldiers called in airstrikes to beat back the attack. The firefight was taking place right on the border itself, known in military jargon as the “zero line.” Afghanistan was on one side, and the remote Pakistani region known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA, was on the other. The stretch of border was guarded by three Pakistani military posts.

The American bombers did the job, and then some. By the time the fighting ended, the Taliban militants had slipped away, the American unit was safe and 11 Pakistani border guards lay dead. The airstrikes on the Pakistani positions sparked a diplomatic row between the two allies: Pakistan called the incident “unprovoked and cowardly”; American officials regretted what they called a tragic mistake. But even after a joint inquiry by the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan, it remained unclear why American soldiers had reached the point of calling in airstrikes on soldiers from Pakistan, a critical ally in the war in Afghanistan and the campaign against terrorism.

The mystery, at least part of it, was solved in July by four residents of Suran Dara, a Pakistani village a few hundred yards from the site of the fight. According to two of these villagers, whom I interviewed together with a local reporter, the Americans started calling in airstrikes on the Pakistanis after the latter started shooting at the Americans.

“When the Americans started bombing the Taliban, the Frontier Corps started shooting at the Americans,” we were told by one of Suran Dara’s villagers, who, like the others, spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of being persecuted or killed by the Pakistani government or the Taliban. “They were trying to help the Taliban. And then the American planes bombed the Pakistani post.”

For years, the villagers said, Suran Dara served as a safe haven for jihadist fighters — whether from Afghanistan or Pakistan or other countries — giving them aid and shelter and a place to stash their weapons. With the firefight under

way, one of Suran Dara's villagers dashed across the border into Afghanistan carrying a field radio with a long antenna (the villager called it "a Motorola") to deliver to the Taliban fighters. He never made it. The man with the Motorola was hit by an American bomb. After the fight, wounded Taliban members were carried into Suran Dara for treatment. "Everyone supports the Taliban on both sides of the border," one of the villagers we spoke with said.

Later, an American analyst briefed by officials in Washington confirmed the villagers' account. "There have been dozens of incidents where there have been exchanges of fire," he said.

That American and Pakistani soldiers are fighting one another along what was meant to be a border between allies highlights the extraordinarily chaotic situation unfolding inside the Pakistani tribal areas, where hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Taliban, along with Al Qaeda and other foreign fighters, enjoy freedom from American attacks.

But the incident also raises one of the more fundamental questions of the long war against Islamic militancy, and one that looms larger as the American position inside Afghanistan deteriorates: Whose side is Pakistan really on?

PAKISTAN'S WILD, LARGELY ungoverned tribal areas have become an untouchable base for Islamic militants to attack Americans and Afghans across the border. Inside the tribal areas, Taliban warlords have taken near-total control, pushing aside the Pakistani government and imposing their draconian form of Islam. And for more than a year now, they have been sending suicide bombers against government and military targets in Pakistan, killing hundreds of people. American and Pakistani investigators say they believe it was Baitullah Mehsud, the strongest of FATA's Taliban leaders, who dispatched assassins last December to kill Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister. With much of the North-West Frontier Province, which borders the tribal areas, also now under their control, the Taliban are increasingly in a position to threaten the integrity of the Pakistani state.

Then there is Al Qaeda. According to American officials and counterterrorism experts, the organization has rebuilt itself and is using its sanctuaries inside the tribal areas to plan attacks against the United States and Europe. Since 2004, six major terrorist plots against Europe or the United States — including the successful suicide attacks in London that killed 52 people in July 2005 — have been traced back to Pakistan's tribal areas, according to Bruce Hoffman, a professor of security studies at Georgetown University. Hoffman says he fears

that Al Qaeda could be preparing a major attack before the American presidential election. “I’m convinced they are planning something,” he told me.

At the center of all this stands the question of whether Pakistan really wants to control the Talibs and their Qaeda allies ensconced in the tribal areas — and whether it really can.

This was not supposed to be a major worry. After the attacks of Sept. 11, President Pervez Musharraf threw his lot in with the United States. Pakistan has helped track down Al Qaeda suspects, launched a series of attacks against militants inside the tribal areas — a new offensive got under way just weeks ago — and given many assurances of devotion to the antiterrorist cause. For such efforts, Musharraf and the Pakistani government have been paid handsomely, receiving more than \$10 billion in American money since 2001.

But as the incident on the Afghan border suggests, little in Pakistan is what it appears. For years, the survival of Pakistan’s military and civilian leaders has depended on a double game: assuring the United States that they were vigorously repressing Islamic militants — and in some cases actually doing so — while simultaneously tolerating and assisting the same militants. From the anti-Soviet fighters of the 1980s and the Taliban of the 1990s to the homegrown militants of today, Pakistan’s leaders have been both public enemies and private friends.

When the game works, it reaps great rewards: billions in aid to boost the Pakistani economy and military and Islamist proxies to extend the government’s reach into Afghanistan and India.

Pakistan’s double game has rested on two premises: that the country’s leaders could keep the militants under control and that they could keep the United States sufficiently placated to keep the money and weapons flowing. But what happens when the game spins out of control? What happens when the militants you have been encouraging grow too strong and set their sights on Pakistan itself? What happens when the bluff no longer works?

II. Being a Warlord

Late in June, to great fanfare, the Pakistani military began what it described as a decisive offensive to rout the Taliban from Khyber agency, one of seven tribal areas that make up the FATA. “Forces Move In on Militants,” declared a headline in Dawn, one of Pakistan’s most influential newspapers. Reporters were kept away, but footage on Pakistani television showed troops advancing

behind trucks and troop carriers. The Americans were pleased. “We think that’s a positive development and certainly hope and expect that this government will continue,” Tom Casey, the deputy spokesman at the State Department, said.

The situation was serious indeed: Peshawar, the capital of North-West Frontier Province and just east of Khyber agency, was almost entirely surrounded by Taliban militias, which had begun making forays into the city. The encirclement of Peshawar was the culmination of the Taliban’s advance: first they conquered the tribal areas, then much of the North-West Frontier Province, and now they were aiming for the province’s capital itself. The Talibs were cutting their well-known medieval path: shutting girls’ schools, banishing women from the streets, blowing up CD kiosks and beating barbers for shaving beards.

A few days into the military operation, the photographer Lynsey Addario and I, dressed in traditional clothes and with a posse of gunmen protecting us, rode into Khyber agency ourselves. “Entry by Foreigners Prohibited Beyond This Point,” the sign said on the way in. As we drove past the dun-colored buildings and corrugated-tin shops, every trace of government authority vanished. No policemen, no checkpoints, no guards. Nothing to keep us from our appointment with the Taliban.

It was a Friday afternoon, and our guides suggested we pull off the main road until prayers were over; local Taliban enforcers, they said, would not take kindly to anyone skipping prayers. For a couple of hours we waited inside the home of an uncle of one of our guides, listening to the muezzin call the locals to battle.

“What is the need of the day?” a man implored in Pashto over a loudspeaker. “Holy war — holy war is the need of the day!”

After a couple of hours, we resumed our journey, traveling down a mostly empty road. And that is when it struck me: there was no evidence, anywhere, of the military operation that had made the news. There were no Pakistani soldiers, no trucks, no tanks. Nothing.

After a couple of miles, we turned off the road and headed down a sandy path toward a high-walled compound guarded by young men with guns. I had come to my destination: Takya, the home village of Haji Namdar, a Taliban commander who had taken control of a large swath of Khyber agency.

Pulling into Namdar's compound, I felt transported back in time to the Kabul of the 1990s, when the Taliban were at their zenith. A group of men and boys — jittery, clutching rifles and rocket-propelled grenades — sat in the bed of a Toyota Hi-Lux, the same model of truck the Taliban used to ride to victory in Afghanistan. A flag nearly identical to that of the Afghan movement — a pair of swords crossed against a white background — fluttered in the heavy air. Even the name of Namdar's group, the Vice and Virtue brigade, came straight from the Taliban playbook: in the 1990s, bands of young men under the same name terrorized Afghanistan, flogging men for shaving their beards, caning women for walking alone and thrashing children for flying kites.

The young fighters were chattering excitedly about a missile that had recently destroyed one of their ammunition dumps. An American missile, the kids said. "It was a plane without a pilot," one of the boys explained through an interpreter. His eyes darted back and forth among his fellows. "We saw a flash. And then the building exploded."

His description matched that of a Predator, an airborne drone that America uses to hunt militants in the tribal areas. Publicly, at least, the Predator is the only American presence the Pakistani government has so far allowed inside its borders.

We walked into the compound's main building. In a corner, Namdar sat on the floor, wearing a traditional *salwar kameez*, but also a vest that looked as if it had been plucked from a three-piece suit. He stood to shake my hand, and he gave a small bow. To break the ice, I handed him a map of Pakistan and asked him to show me where we were. Namdar peered at the chart for several seconds, his eyes registering nothing. He handed it to one of his deputies. He resumed his stare.

Trying again, I asked about the Pakistani military operation — the one that was supposed to be unfolding right now, chasing the Taliban from Khyber.

Why, I asked Namdar, aren't the Pakistani forces coming after you?

"The government cannot do anything to us, because we are fighting the holy war," he said. "We are fighting the foreigners — it is our obligation. They are killing innocent people." Namdar's aides, one of whom spoke fluent English, looked at him and shook their heads to make him speak more cautiously. Namdar carried on.

"When the Americans kill innocent people, we must take revenge," he said.

Tell me about that, I asked Namdar, and his aides again shook their heads. Finally Namdar changed his line. “Well, we can’t stop anyone from going across” into Afghanistan, he said. “I’m not saying we send them ourselves.” And with that, Namdar raised his hand, declining to offer any more details.

By many accounts — on the streets, among Western analysts, even according to his own deputies — Namdar was regularly training and dispatching young men to fight and blow themselves up in Afghanistan. An aide, Munsif Khan, told me that his group had sent “hundreds of people” to fight the Americans. At one point, he described for me how the Vice and Virtue brigade had recently set a minimum-age requirement for suicide bombers. “We are opposed to children carrying out suicide bombings,” Khan said. “We get so many young people coming to us — 15, 16 years old — wanting to go on martyrdom operations. This is not the age to be a suicide bomber. Any man who wants to be a suicide bomber should be at least 20 or 25.”

Khan himself, a former magazine reporter in Peshawar, had been gravely wounded in a car-bomb attack last year. His feet were mangled, and he could walk only with crutches. A bloody struggle for power rages among the many Taliban warlords of the FATA; Khan said his assailants had likely been dispatched by Baitullah Mehsud, the powerful warlord in South Waziristan, because Namdar had refused to submit to Mehsud’s authority.

Another of Namdar’s aides had spoken enthusiastically of his commander’s prowess in battle. “He is a great fighter!” the aide told me. “He goes to Afghanistan every month to fight the Americans.”

So here was Namdar — Taliban chieftain, enforcer of Islamic law, usurper of the Pakistani government and trainer and facilitator of suicide bombers in Afghanistan — sitting at home, not three miles from Peshawar, untouched by the Pakistani military operation that was supposedly unfolding around us.

What’s going on? I asked the warlord. Why aren’t they coming for you?

“I cannot lie to you,” Namdar said, smiling at last. “The army comes in, and they fire at empty buildings. It is a drama — it is just to entertain.”

Entertain whom? I asked.

“America,” he said.

III. Playing the Game

The idea that Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies could simultaneously be aiding the Taliban and like-minded militants while taking money from the United States is not as far-fetched as it may seem.

The relationship dates to the 1980s, when, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became the conduit for billions of dollars of American and Saudi money for the Afghan rebels. Pakistan's leader, the fundamentalist Gen. Zia ul-Haq, funneled the bulk of the cash to the most religiously extreme guerrilla leaders. After the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989, Pakistani military and intelligence services kept on supporting Islamist militants, notably in the Muslim-majority Indian state of Kashmir, where they threw their support behind a local uprising. Through time, with the Pakistanis closely involved, the Kashmiri movement was taken over by Islamist extremists and foreign fighters who moved easily between Pakistan and Kashmir.

Then, in 1994, Pakistani leaders made their most fateful move. Alarmed by the civil war that engulfed Afghanistan following the Soviet retreat, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her government intervened on behalf of a small group of former anti-Soviet fighters known for their religious fanaticism. They called themselves "the students": the Taliban.

With Pakistan providing support and the United States looking the other way, the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996. "We created the Taliban," Nasrullah Babar, the interior minister under Benazir Bhutto, told me in an interview at his home in Peshawar in 1999. "Mrs. Bhutto had a vision: that through a peaceful Afghanistan, Pakistan could extend its influence into the resource-rich territories of Central Asia." That never happened — the Taliban, even with Pakistani support, never completed the conquest of Afghanistan. But the training camps they ran, sometimes with the help of Pakistani intelligence officers, were beacons to Islamic militants from around the world.

By all accounts, Pakistan's spymasters were never terribly discriminating about who showed up in their training camps. In 1998, when President Bill Clinton ordered missile strikes against camps in Afghanistan following Al Qaeda's bombings of American embassies in East Africa, several trainers from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, were killed. Osama bin Laden was supposed to be there when the missiles struck but apparently had already left.

After 9/11, President George W. Bush and other senior American officials declared in the strongest terms that Pakistani leaders had to end their support

for the Taliban and other Islamic militants. Pakistan's military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, promised to do so.

Yet the game did not end; it merely changed. In the years after 9/11, Musharraf often made great shows of going after militants inside Pakistan, while at the same time supporting and protecting them.

In 2002, for instance, Musharraf ordered the arrest of some 2,000 suspected militants, many of whom had trained in Pakistani-sponsored camps. And then, quietly, he released nearly all of them. Another revealing moment came in 2005, when Fazlur Rehman, the leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, one of the most radical Islamist parties, denounced Musharraf for denying the existence of jihadi groups. Everyone knows, Rehman said in a speech before Pakistan's National Assembly, that the government supports the holy warriors. "We will have to openly tell the world whether we want to support jihadis or crack down on them," Rehman declared. "We cannot afford to be hypocritical any more."

In 2006, a senior ISI official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told a New York Times reporter that he regarded Serajuddin Haqqani as one of the ISI's intelligence assets. "We are not apologetic about this," the ISI official said. For a presumed ally of the United States, that was a stunning admission: Haqqani, an Afghan, is currently one of the Taliban's most senior commanders battling the Americans in eastern Afghanistan. His father, Jalaluddin, is a longtime associate of bin Laden's. The Haqqanis are believed to be overseeing operations from a hiding place in the Pakistani tribal agency of North Waziristan.

But such evidence, however intriguing, fails to answer the critical questions: Exactly who in the Pakistani government is helping the militants and why?

THE MOST COMMON THEORY offered to explain Pakistan's continued contact with Islamic militants is the country's obsession with India. Pakistan has fought three major wars with India, from which it split violently upon independence from Britain in 1947. To the east, the Pakistani military and intelligence services have long tolerated and sometimes directed militants moving into Indian Kashmir. To the west, Afghanistan has long been seen as a potentially critical arena of competition with India. After the U.S.-led invasion in the fall of 2001, for example, India lost no time in setting up consulates throughout Afghanistan and beginning an extensive aid program. According to Pakistani and Western officials, Pakistan's officer corps remains obsessed by the prospect of Indian domination of Afghanistan should the Americans leave.

The Taliban are seen as a counterweight to Indian influence. “We are saving the Taliban for a rainy day,” one former Pakistani official put it to me.

Another explanation is growing popular hatred of the United States. Pakistan’s leaders — whether Musharraf or the army chief, Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, or the country’s leading civilian politicians — are finding it more and more difficult to mobilize their own army and intelligence services to act against the Taliban and other militants inside the country. And while the Pakistan Army used to be a predominantly secular institution, increasingly it is being led by Islamist-minded officers.

The pro-Islamist and anti-American sentiments pervading the armed forces might help explain why a group of ill-trained, underpaid Pakistani Frontier Corps soldiers would open fire on American troops fighting the Taliban. Those same sentiments buttress the notion, offered by some American and Pakistani officials, that rogue officers inside the army and ISI are supporting the militants against the wishes of their superiors.

Finally, there is the problem of the Pakistan Army’s competence. For all the myths that officers like Musharraf have spread about the institution, the simple fact is that it isn’t very good. The Pakistan Army has lost every war it has ever fought. And it isn’t trained to battle an insurgency. Each of the half-dozen offensives the army has launched into the tribal areas since 2004 has left it bloodied and humbled.

For all these reasons, when it comes to the militants in their midst, it’s easier for Pakistan to do as little as possible.

“There is a growing Islamist feeling in the military, and it’s inseparable from anti-Americanism,” I was told by a Western military officer with several years’ experience in the region. “The vast majority of Pakistani officers feel they are fighting our war. There is a lot of sympathy for the Taliban. The result is that the Pakistanis do as little as they possibly can to combat the militants.”

These are reasonable explanations, offered by reasonable people. But are such explanations enough? The more Pakistanis I talked to, the more I came to believe that the most reasonable explanations were not necessarily the most plausible ones.

ONE SWELTERING AFTERNOON in July, I ventured into the elegant home of a former Pakistani official who recently retired after several years of

serving in senior government posts. We sat in his book-lined study. A servant brought us tea and biscuits.

Was it the obsession with India that led the Pakistani military to support the Taliban? I asked him.

“Yes,” he said.

Or is it the anti-Americanism and pro-Islamic feelings in the army?

“Yes,” he said, that too.

And then the retired Pakistani official offered another explanation — one that he said could never be discussed in public. The reason the Pakistani security services support the Taliban, he said, is for money: after the 9/11 attacks, the Pakistani military concluded that keeping the Taliban alive was the surest way to win billions of dollars in aid that Pakistan needed to survive. The military’s complicated relationship with the Taliban is part of what the official called the Pakistani military’s “strategic games.” Like other Pakistanis, this former senior official spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of what he was telling me.

“Pakistan is dependent on the American money that these games with the Taliban generate,” the official told me. “The Pakistani economy would collapse without it. This is how the game works.”

As an example, he cited the Pakistan Army’s first invasion of the tribal areas — of South Waziristan in 2004. Called Operation Shakai, the offensive was ostensibly aimed at ridding the area of Taliban militants. From an American perspective, the operation was a total failure. The army invaded, fought and then made a deal with one of the militant commanders, Nek Mohammed. The agreement was capped by a dramatic meeting between Mohammed and Safdar Hussein, one of the most senior officers in the Pakistan Army.

“The corps commander was flown in on a helicopter,” the former official said. “They had this big ceremony, and they embraced. They called each other *mujahids*.”

“*Mujahid*” is the Arabic word for “holy warrior.” The ceremony, in fact, was captured on videotape, and the tape has been widely distributed.

“The army agreed to compensate the locals for collateral damage,” the official said. “Where do you think that money went? It went to the Taliban. Who do you think paid the bill? The Americans. This is the way the game works. The Taliban is attacked, but it is never destroyed.

“It’s a game,” the official said, wrapping up our conversation. “The U.S. is being taken for a ride.”

IV. A New Government, A New Tack

In February, nationwide elections lifted to power Pakistan’s first full-fledged civilian government in nine years. The elections followed the tumultuous events of Benazir Bhutto’s return from exile and her assassination.

If there was any reason to hope that the government’s games with the Taliban would end, this was it: Pakistan’s new leaders declared they had a popular mandate to steer the country in a new direction. That meant, implicitly, reining in the military and the spy agencies. At the same time, the country’s new civilian leaders, led by Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, made it clear that they would not be taking orders from officials in the Bush administration, whom they resented for having supported Musharraf for so long. (Musharraf, facing impeachment, finally resigned from the presidency last month.) Instead of launching military operations into the tribal areas, Pakistan’s new leaders promised to embark on negotiations to neutralize the militants.

The leader of this new civilian effort in the tribal areas is Owais Ahmed Ghani, governor of the North-West Frontier Province. Since February, Ghani is said to have embarked on a series of negotiations in tribal areas.

I went to see Ghani earlier this summer at the governor’s mansion in Peshawar, inside a lovely compound built by the British at the height of their imperial power. Ghani seemed as if he might have stepped from the Raj himself: he gave off an air of faint amusement, a British affectation common in the upper tiers of Pakistani society. On his wall hung a British-made Enfield rifle, preserved from colonial days. Outside, peacocks strolled across the manicured lawn.

“You know the joke about the Pathans,” Ghani began, using the old British name for the Pashtuns, the ethnic group that dominates the tribal areas and the Taliban. “A Pathan’s heart hammers harder when he has a gun than a woman!”

Suddenly turning serious, Ghani spelled out a state-of-the-art counterinsurgency campaign to defeat the militants in control of the FATA. He emphasized that the purely military approach to the tribal areas had failed — not merely because the army has been unable to succeed militarily but also because it no longer could count on popular support. “No government can afford to make war on its own people for very long,” Ghani said.

The new approach, Ghani said, would entail negotiations and economic development. Under the plan, the government would pour billions into the region over the next five years to build schools, roads and health clinics. (The United States has agreed to pitch in \$750 million.) The political negotiations, Ghani said, would be conducted by civilian members of the government and the region’s tribal leaders, not, as in the past, by military officers and Taliban militants. Ghani called this new strategy “Jang and Jirga” — the Pashto words for “war” and “tribal council.” Carrot and stick.

“The idea is to drive a wedge between the militants and the people,” Ghani said. “There will be no negotiations with the militants themselves.”

Ghani’s previous post had been as governor of Baluchistan Province, to the south, where he had weakened an ethnically based insurgency that had churned on for decades. He said he was confident he could do the same here. “Don’t underestimate the Pakistani desire to confront the militants,” he insisted. “Ninety percent of the country is behind us.”

It was sundown when Ghani and I finished talking. As I strolled across the grounds of the governor’s compound, a group of soldiers had just begun lowering the Pakistani flag. Another man blew into a bugle, playing “A Hundred Pipers,” a Scottish air.

FOR GHANI AND PAKISTAN’S civilian government, the crucial players in achieving peace are traditional tribal leaders whose power is independent of the Taliban or other militants. This method of governing the tribal areas — indirect rule through local chiefs — dates back to the British imperial period. The British put tribal leaders — known as *maliks* — on the payroll to stand in for the central government, which imposed no taxes or customs duties and, in turn, did very little. At the same time, imperial administrators reserved for themselves extraordinary powers of arrest and punishment that extended to collective reprisals against entire tribes. The purpose of the malik system was to keep the tribal areas quiet and at least nominally under the thumb of the imperial government. This preserved a feudal political structure, and feudal levels of economic development, into the 20th century.

The British system, with a little tinkering, has survived to this day: the FATA stands apart from the rest of Pakistan, with little or no government presence and little or no development. Not 1 person in 5 can read or write. Pakistani political parties are banned. Universal suffrage wasn't allowed until 1997. Until recently, tribesmen could claim no protection by Pakistan's Constitution or its courts. Inside the FATA, the locals do not even change the time on their clocks, as other Pakistanis do, when daylight savings begins. "English time," it is called.

A few days after my talk with Ghani, I met an elder of one of the two main tribes of South Waziristan. He refused to give his name and insisted that I refer to him as Jan. South Waziristan is believed to contain the largest number of militant Arabs and other foreign fighters, possibly even bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. To be more specific about Jan — to use his name, to identify the tribe he leads, to name the town where he lives — would almost certainly, he said, result in his death at the hands of the militants and Taliban fighters who control South Waziristan.

"There are many Arab fighters living in South Waziristan," Jan told me. "Sometimes you see them in the town; you hear them speaking Arabic.

"But the important Arabs are not in the city," he continued. "They are in the mountains."

Important Arabs? I asked.

"They ride horses, Arabian horses; we don't have horses like this in Waziristan," Jan said. "The people from the town take food to the Arabs' horses in the mountains. They have seen the horses. They have seen the Arabs. These horses eat better than the common people in the town."

How do you know?

"I am a leader of my tribe. People come to me — everyone comes to me. They tell me everything."

What about Osama? I asked. Is he in South Waziristan?

"Osama?" Jan said. "I don't know. But they" — the Arabs in the mountains — "are important."

The labor it took to persuade Jan to speak to me is a measure of what has become of the area over which his family still officially presides. Since it was not possible for me to go to South Waziristan — “Baitullah Mehsud would cut off your head,” the Taliban leader, Namdar, told me — I had to persuade Jan to come to Peshawar. For several days, military checkpoints and roadblocks made it impossible for Jan to travel. Finally, after two weeks, Jan left his home at midnight in a taxi so no one would notice either him or his car.

Jan had reason to worry. Seven members of his family — his father, two brothers, two uncles and two cousins — have been murdered by militants who inhabit the area. Jan said he believed his father was killed by Uzbek and Tajik gunmen who fled to South Waziristan after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. His father had opposed them. Jan’s cousins, he said, were killed by men working for Baitullah Mehsud. Jan’s father was a malik, and thousands of Waziri tribesmen came to his funeral: “the largest funeral in the history of Waziristan,” Jan said.

The rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda has come at the expense of the maliks, who have been systematically murdered and marginalized in a campaign to destroy the old order. In South Waziristan, where Mehsud presides, the Taliban and Al Qaeda have killed more than 150 maliks since 2005, all but destroying the tribal system. And there are continual reminders of what happens to the survivors who do not understand this — who, for example, attempt to talk with Pakistan’s civilian government and assert their authority. In June, Mehsud’s men gunned down 28 tribal leaders who had formed a “peace committee” in South Waziristan. Their bodies were dumped on the side of a road. “This shows what happens when the tribal elders try to challenge Baitullah Mehsud,” Jan said.

Like Taliban militias in other parts of Pakistan, Mehsud’s men have been strong-arming families into turning over their young sons to join. “They have taken my own son to be a suicide bomber,” Jan said. “He is gone.” The Talibs, he said, now control the disbursement of all government money that comes into the area.

The Taliban have not achieved this by violence alone. They have capitalized on the resentment many Pakistanis feel toward the hereditary maliks and the government they represent. Taliban leaders and their foot soldiers come mostly from the lower classes. Mehsud, the Taliban chieftain, was an unemployed man who spent his time lifting weights before he picked up a gun. Manghal Bagh, the warlord in Khyber agency whom the Pakistan military went after in June,

swept public buses. “They are illiterate people, and now they have power,” Jan said.

EVERYWHERE I TRAVELED during my stay in the tribal areas and in Peshawar, I met impoverished Pakistanis who told me Robin Hood-like stories about how the Taliban had challenged the wealthy and powerful people on behalf of the little guys. Hamidullah, for instance, was an illiterate wheat farmer living in Khyber agency when, in 2002, a wealthy landowner seized his home and six acres of fields. Hamidullah and his family were forced to eke out a living from a nearby shanty. Neither the local malik nor the government agent, Hamidullah told me, would intervene on his behalf. Then came Namdar, the Taliban commander. He hauled the rich man before a Vice and Virtue council and ordered him to give back Hamidullah’s home and farm.

Now Hamidullah is one of Namdar’s loyal militiamen.

“There are so many guys like me,” he said, cradling a Kalashnikov.

The social revolution that has swept the tribal areas does not bode well for the plans, laid out by Governor Ghani, to oust the Taliban by boosting the tribal elders. Nor does it hold out much promise for the Americans, who have expressed hope that they could do in the FATA what they were able to do with the Sunni tribes in Iraq. There, local tribesmen rose up against, and have substantially weakened, Al Qaeda of Mesopotamia.

Indeed, in some cases the distinction between tribe and Taliban has vanished altogether. Baitullah Mehsud, for instance, comes from the Mehsud tribe, one of the two largest clans of South Waziristan. (“The Taliban is the Mehsud tribe,” Jan said. “They are one and the same now.”)

Mehsud is the most powerful of dozens of Taliban chieftains who control the tribal areas. Some of them answer to Mehsud; some do not. The others are no less brutal: in July, for instance, in Bajaur tribal agency, the Taliban leader Faqir Mohammed staged a public execution of two men “convicted” of spying for the United States. One was shot; the other beheaded. A photograph of the men’s last moments was displayed on the front page of *The News*, a Pakistani newspaper.

The chieftains’ rivalries are intense, too. Six weeks after I met Namdar, he was gunned down by one of his bodyguards, in the very house where I met him. It isn’t entirely clear who ordered the killing of Namdar, but many of his followers suspect it was Mehsud.

V. The Game Changes

While most of the Taliban chieftains do share a basic ideology, they appear to be divided into two distinct groups: those who send fighters into Afghanistan to fight the Americans and those who do not. And that is an important distinction for the Pakistanis, as well as for the Americans.

After the rout of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, many militants fled across the border, and the Taliban inside Pakistan grew. At first, they largely confined their activities to the tribal areas themselves, from where they could send fighters into Afghanistan. That started to change last year. Militants began moving out of the FATA and into the rest of Pakistan, taking control of the towns and villages in the neighboring North-West Frontier Province. Militants began attacking Pakistani police and soldiers. Inside the FATA, Mehsud was forming Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, an umbrella party of some 40 Taliban groups that claimed as its goal the domination of Pakistan. Suddenly, the Taliban was not merely a group of militants who were useful in extending Pakistan's influence into Afghanistan. They were a threat to Pakistan itself.

The turning point came in July last year, when the government laid siege to a mosque in Islamabad called Lal Masjid, where dozens of militants had taken shelter. The presence of the militants inside Islamabad itself, Pakistan's stately, secular-minded capital, was shock enough to the country's ruling class. Then, after eight days, on orders from Musharraf, security forces stormed the mosque, sparking a battle that left 87 dead. The massacre at Lal Masjid became a rallying cry for Islamic militants across the country. Mehsud and other Islamists declared war on the government and launched a campaign of suicide bombings; there were 60 in 2007 alone. In an act of astonishing humiliation, Mehsud's men captured 300 Pakistan Army soldiers that came into South Waziristan; Mehsud eventually let them go. And then, in December, a suicide bomber, possibly dispatched by Mehsud, killed Bhutto.

The bloody siege of Lal Masjid, Western and Pakistani officials say, finally convinced senior Pakistani military and ISI leaders that the Taliban fighters they had been nurturing for so many years had grown too strong. "Now, the militants are autonomous," one retired Pakistani official told me. "No one can control them anymore."

IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, Pakistan opened an offensive into South Waziristan that was far fiercer than any that had come before. It inflicted hundreds of casualties on Mehsud's forces and caused at least 15,000 families

to flee. Then, after just three weeks, the operation ended. As they had before, Pakistani commanders and Mehsud struck a deal. But this time, remarkably, the deal seemed to stick. The army dismantled its checkpoints and pulled back its troops, and the suicide bombings all but stopped.

What happened? A draft of the peace agreement struck between the army and Mehsud may help explain. The agreement itself, which has not been officially released, provides a look into the Pakistani government's new strategy toward the militants. According to the agreement, members of the Mehsud tribe agreed to refrain from attacking the Pakistani state and from setting up a parallel government. They agreed to accept the rule of law.

But sending fighters into Afghanistan? About that, the agreement says nothing at all.

And that appears to be the essence of the new Pakistani game. As long as the militants refrain from attacking the state, they are free to do what they want inside the tribal areas — and across the border in Afghanistan. While peace has largely prevailed between the government and the militants inside Pakistan since earlier this year, the infiltration of Taliban fighters from the tribal areas into Afghanistan has risen sharply. Even the current Pakistani offensive, according to Maj. Gen. Jeffrey J. Schloesser, the top American commander in eastern Afghanistan, has failed to slow the influx.

In short, the chaos has been redirected.

This must have been why Namdar told me with such confidence that “fighting the jihad” insulated him from the Pakistani government. The real purpose of the government's Khyber operation became clear: to tame Manghal Bagh, the warlord who does not send men into Afghanistan and who was encroaching on Peshawar. Indeed, after more than a week of enduring the brunt of the army's assault, Bagh agreed to respect the Pakistani state. Namdar had been left alone by government troops all the while.

If channeling the Taliban into Afghanistan and against NATO and the Americans is indeed the new Pakistani game, then one more thing is also clear: the leaders of the Pakistan Army and the ISI must still be confident they can manage the militants. And it is certainly the military and ISI officers who are doing the managing — not the country's elected leaders. When I asked Jan, the tribal elder, about the negotiations that Ghani had described for me — talks between the country's new civilian leaders and FATA's tribal elders — Jan laughed. “The only negotiations are between the army and the Taliban, between

the army and Baitullah Mehsud,” he said. “There are no government officials taking part in any negotiations. There are no tribal elders taking part. I’m a tribal elder. I think I would know.”

Western officials agreed that the influence of Pakistan’s new civilian leaders over strategy in the tribal areas was close to nil. “Until the civilians get their act together, the military will play the dominant role,” a Western analyst in Pakistan, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told me. The parliamentary coalition cobbled together earlier this year is already falling apart.

“It’s a very close relationship,” Jan said, describing the meetings between the Pakistan Army and the Taliban. “The army and the Taliban are friends. Whenever a Taliban fighter is killed, army officers go to his funeral. They bring money to the family.”

Indeed, American officials said in July that the ISI helped Jalaluddin Haqqani’s fighters bomb the Indian Embassy in Kabul. The attack killed 54, including an Indian defense attaché. American officials said the evidence of the ISI’s involvement was overwhelming. “It was sort of this ‘aha’ moment,” one of them said.

VI. The Path of Jihad

After I met Namdar, the Taliban commander, he ordered some of his young fighters to take me to the Afghan border. The mountains that ran along the border shimmered in the monsoon rains, and a new stream was running down from the peaks. It was this range, called the White Mountains, through which Osama bin Laden escaped from Tora Bora in December 2001. The Afghan frontier, the fighters told me, was a day’s walk over the hills.

It was along a similar route, two years ago, that an 18-year-old Pakistani named Mudasar trekked into Afghanistan to blow himself up. His family, who live in the town of Shakhas in Khyber agency, told me they learned of his fate in a telephone call. “Your son has carried out a suicide operation inside of Afghanistan,” a man said without identifying himself. There was no corpse to send home to Pakistan, so Mudasar’s family and the rest of the villagers of Shakhas gathered for a *ghaibana*, a funeral without a body.

“It is very respectable to die this way,” Abu Omar, Mudasar’s brother, told me one day at a cafe in Peshawar. Mudasar and Abu Omar were both part of the tide of young Pakistani men that has been surging across the Afghan border to fight the Americans. Abu Omar described his brother as intensely religious,

without hobbies — unlike Abu Omar himself, whose passion was playing fullback on the soccer field. “Mudasar would lie awake at night crying for the martyred people in Afghanistan,” Abu Omar said.

What finally drove Mudasar to want to kill Americans was a single spectacular event. In January 2006, the Americans maneuvered a Predator drone across the border into Pakistan and fired a missile at a building they thought contained Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda’s deputy leader. The missile reportedly missed Zawahiri by a couple of hours, but it killed his son-in-law and several other senior Al Qaeda members. A number of civilians died as well, including women and children. Television footage from the scene, showing corpses lying amid the rubble, sparked protests across Pakistan.

“My brother saw that and resolved to become a martyr,” Abu Omar told me.

Confiding in only his mother and brother, Mudasar enrolled in a local camp for suicide bombers. Abu Omar declined to tell me who ran the camp or where it was, saying such things were military secrets. “There are many such camps,” he said and shrugged.

It was during our second meeting, in Peshawar’s main shopping area, that Abu Omar agreed to talk about his own mission across the border. We sat in a shabby second-floor office in the Saddar bazaar. Last October, following the death of his brother, Abu Omar enrolled in one of the Taliban training camps inside Khyber agency operated by Mehsud’s organization. The camp, Abu Omar said, was split into three sections: one for bomb making, one for reconnaissance and ambushes and one for firing large weapons. Abu Omar’s section was given a heavy machine gun.

“Big enough to shoot down helicopters,” he said.

Abu Omar spoke listlessly but in great detail. The militant camp sat within a few miles of the Afghan border, he said, and only a few miles from a Pakistan military base. Most of the volunteers were Pakistani, he said, although foreigners trained, too, including a Muslim convert from Great Britain.

“He had blond hair, but a very long beard,” Abu Omar said, breaking into his only smile of the afternoon. “A good Muslim.”

When the time finally came, Abu Omar said, he and about 20 of his comrades moved at night to a safe house near the Afghan frontier, in Mohmand tribal agency. They were just across the border from Kunar, one of the most violent

of Afghanistan's provinces. There, he said, he and his comrades waited for two days until the way was clear. Then, when the signal came, they moved across. None of the men, Abu Omar said, were particularly worried about what would happen if they were spotted by Pakistani troops. "They are Muslims," he told me. "They support what we are doing."

Fighting in Afghanistan, Abu Omar said, was a hit-and-miss, sometimes tedious affair: once across the border, he and the other fighters sat inside another safe house for two days, waiting for word to launch their attack. Finally, Abu Omar's commander told them that there were too many American and Afghan soldiers about and that they would have to return to Pakistan.

The second time, the mission worked. Crossing into Kunar once more, Abu Omar and the other fighters attacked a line of Afghan army check posts just inside the border. Omar put his heavy machine gun to good use, he said, and four of the posts were overrun. "We killed seven Afghan soldiers," he claimed. "Unfortunately, there were no Americans."

Their attack successful, Abu Omar and his comrades trekked back across the Pakistani border. The sun was just rising. The fighters saw a Pakistani checkpoint and headed straight for it.

"They gave us some water," he said of the Pakistani border guards. "And then we continued on our way."

VII. The Rose Garden

From the Rose Garden of the White House, you could just make out the profile of the Pakistani prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, sitting across from President Bush inside the Oval Office. It was Gilani's first official visit and, by all accounts, not a typical one. That same day, July 28, as Gilani's plane neared the United States, a Predator drone had fired a missile into a compound in South Waziristan, killing Abu Khabab al-Masri, an Al Qaeda poison and bombing expert. The hit was a significant one, and Al Qaeda posted a eulogy to al-Masri on the Internet a couple of days later. Gilani, according to the American analyst who was briefed by officials, knew nothing of the incident when he arrived in Washington. "They just did it," the analyst said. The Americans pressed Gilani, telling him that his military and security services were out of his control and that they posed a threat to Pakistan and to American forces in Afghanistan.

At the Rose Garden, though, appearances were kept up in grand style. Bush and Gilani strode from the Oval Office side by side. Gilani laughed as the two leaders stopped to face the assembled reporters. Over to the side, to the right of the reporters, the senior members of Bush's foreign-policy team had gathered, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, John Negroponte.

"Pakistan is a strong ally and a vibrant democracy," Bush said. "We talked about the common threat we face: extremists who are very dangerous people. We talked about the need for us to make sure that the Afghan border is secure as best as possible: Pakistan has made a very strong commitment to that."

"Thank you," Gilani said, hesitating, looking at Bush. "Now?"

"Please, yes, absolutely," the president said.

Gilani played his part. "We are committed to fight against those extremists and terrorists who are destroying and making the world not safe," Gilani said. "There are few militants — they are hand-picked people, militants, who are disturbing this peace," he concluded. "And I assured Mr. President we'll work together for democracy and for the prosperity and peace of the world."

And then the two men walked together back into the White House, with Rice and Negroponte trailing after them.