

North Waziristan: Terrorism's new hub?

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By Ahmed Rashid

A sense of despair and helplessness has come to grip the Pakistani public, which faces more suicide bomb attacks each day than even the Afghans next door. Major cities like Peshawar, where more than 100 police officers have been killed this year, are under siege by the Pakistani Taliban. Now it seems Pakistani militants are also involved in global jihad.

Information is still emerging about suspected Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani-born U.S. citizen who apparently spent time here from July until February. Court documents indicate that Shahzad received bomb-making training in Waziristan, the known haven of numerous groups and extremists.

Over the past 18 months, Pakistan's army has conducted major offensives in six of the seven tribal agencies that border Afghanistan. But the seventh agency – North Waziristan – has been left alone. In part, that is because it is home to the Afghan Taliban networks of Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who have close relations with the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI). It has also been left alone for good tactical if not poor strategic reasons – the army has struck deals with the Pakistani Taliban in North Waziristan not to attack Pakistani forces. Until recently, these deals have held.

But Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, which has been voluminously praised by American generals, is now coming apart at the seams – all because of North Waziristan.

The area is the hub of so many terrorist groups and so much terrorist plotting and planning that neither the CIA nor the ISI seems to have much clue about what is going on there. A year ago, the Pakistan Taliban under Baitullah Mehsud ran a semi-disciplined terrorist movement from the tribal areas that bombed and killed Pakistanis with dastardly methodicalness. Mehsud was killed last year in a U.S. drone strike. What is left is anarchy, as groups and splinter groups and splinters of splinters operate from North Waziristan with no overall control by anyone, not even Jalaluddin Haqqani.

Hakimullah Mehsud, a ruthless leader of the Pakistani Taliban pronounced dead by authorities after a U.S. drone strike in January, has turned up alive and well. He was probably hiding out in North Waziristan all these months and nobody knew. In videos released Monday, he promises that “the time is very near when our fedayeen will attack the American states in the major cities.” He is ominously flanked by two armed and masked men.

Punjabi extremist groups that were once trained by the military to fight Indian forces in Kashmir have splintered from their mother groups and operate out of North Waziristan in alliance with the Pashtun Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda. Inexplicably, one of these Punjabi groups last week executed Khalid Khawaja, a former ISI officer known for his sympathy for al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Who killed Khawaja and why is still a huge mystery. Was it a case of terror eating its own?

Other militant groups operating out of North Waziristan include vehemently anti-Shiite groups, several Central Asian and Chechen groups, and, by some accounts, Lashkar-e-Taiba, blamed for the deadly 2008 attack in Mumbai. Training is available for Pakistanis and foreigners who come and go at will. Five young Americans are on trial in Pakistan for trying to reach North Waziristan.

Pakistan's army says it cannot open another front in North Waziristan because it is overstretched and is focusing on its offensives in other agencies. Yet the army just held exercises with 50,000 troops on the Indian border to signal to the international community that it still considers India its main enemy.

In the tribal agencies, the army is also dealing with a quarter-million internal refugees and is engaged in humanitarian relief, reconstruction and the maintenance of supply lines that are regularly ambushed by

militants. The tragedy is that neither has the civilian government offered to take over these tasks – which it should – nor is the army encouraging it to do so. Counterterrorism without a civilian “hold and build” component is meaningless.

Clearly what is happening in North Waziristan is having a global impact. Something has to be done about a region that has become an even greater terrorist hub than Afghanistan was before 2001. Pakistan’s leaders – both civil and military – should take the lead in finding solutions to the problem, as the international community helps Islamabad implement a policy that will clear out this lethal terrorism central.