

## Pakistan Taliban set up camps in Syria, join anti-Assad war

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ISLAMABAD/PESHAWAR, Pakistan (Reuters) - The Pakistani Taliban have set up camps and sent hundreds of men to Syria to fight alongside rebels opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, militants said on Sunday, in a strategy aimed at cementing ties with al Qaeda's central leadership.

More than two years since the start of the anti-Assad rebellion, Syria has become a magnet for foreign Sunni fighters who have flocked to the Middle Eastern nation to join what they see as a holy war against Shi'ite oppressors.

Operating alongside militant groups such as the al Nusra Front, described by the United States as a branch of al Qaeda, they mainly come from nearby countries such as Libya and Tunisia riven by similar conflict as a result of the Arab Spring.

On Sunday, Taliban commanders in Pakistan said they had also decided to join the cause, saying hundreds of fighters had gone to Syria to fight alongside their "Mujahedeen friends".

"When our brothers needed our help, we sent hundreds of fighters along with our Arab friends," one senior commander told Reuters, adding that the group would soon issue videos of what he described as their victories in Syria.

The announcement further complicates the picture on the ground in Syria, where rivalries have already been on the boil between the Free Syrian Army and the Islamists.

Islamists operate a smaller, more effective force which now controls most of the rebel-held parts of northern Syria. Tensions erupted again on Thursday when an al-Qaeda linked militant group assassinated one of Free Syrian Army's top commanders after a dispute in the port city of Latakia.

It also comes at a time when Assad's forces, with backing from Shi'ite fighters from Hezbollah and Iran, have been making gains on the Syrian battlefield.

Another Taliban commander in Pakistan, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said the decision to send fighters to Syria came at the request of "Arab friends".

"Since our Arab brothers have come here for our support, we are bound to help them in their respective countries and that is what we did in Syria," he told Reuters.

"We have established our own camps in Syria. Some of our people go and then return after spending some time fighting there."

### AL QAEDA LOYALTIES

Known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban operate mainly from Pakistan's insurgency-plagued ethnic Pashtun areas along the Afghan border - a long-standing stronghold for militants including the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies.

Taliban militants in Pakistan, who are linked to their Afghan counterparts, are mainly fighting to topple Pakistan's government and to impose their radical version of Islam, targeting the military, security forces and civilians.

But they also enjoy close ties with al Qaeda and other jihadist groups who have, in turn, deployed their own

fighters to Pakistan's volatile tribal region on the Afghan border known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA.

In the latest sign of this trend, at least two suspected foreign militants were killed in a drone attack in North Waziristan, local security officials said.

Ahmed Rashid, a prominent Pakistani author and expert on the Taliban, said sending Taliban fighters to Syria was likely to be appreciated as an act of loyalty towards their al Qaeda allies.

"The Pakistani Taliban have remained a sort surrogate of al Qaeda. We've got all these foreigners up there in FATA who are being looked after or trained by the Pakistani Taliban," said Rashid, who is based in the Pakistani city of Lahore.

"They are acting like global jihadists, precisely with the agenda that al Qaeda has got. This is a way, I suppose, to cement relationships with the Syrian militant groups ... and to enlarge their sphere of influence."

(Additional reporting by Mariam Karouny in Beirut; Writing by Maria Golovkina in Islamabad; Editing by Jeremy Laurence)