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The Strategic Threat of Terrorist Sanctuaries**

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The Islamic Emirate of Waziristan and the Bajaur Tribal Region: The Strategic Threat of Terrorist Sanctuaries

By Eric Sayers*

The events of September 11, 2001 forced the United States of America to recognize the strategic importance that sanctuaries provided to terrorist networks like al-Qaeda. A sanctuary, or “black hole” as a recent study by the Center for Strategic Studies termed it, can be defined as a territory where a terrorist organization is able to openly operate. This territory is considered safe either because the sovereign government in which the sanctuary exists has allowed it to exist, or because the government lacks the ability to police the territory in question.¹ With regards to the actual physical location of sanctuaries, the US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism recognizes that: “physical sanctuaries can stretch across an entire sovereign state, be limited to specific ungoverned or ill-governed areas in an otherwise functioning state, or cross national borders.”²

This paper will begin by focusing on the problems that terrorist sanctuaries pose to international security. The sections within the 9/11 Commission Report and the US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism that pertain to sanctuaries will be outlined and discussed.

Next, the focus will outline the specific sanctuaries al-Qaeda has been able to gain control of in the tribal regions of western Pakistan. These include both North and South Waziristan and Bajaur. To assist in explaining the probable causes that led to the establishment of these sanctuaries, a brief history of the events in this region since Operation Enduring Freedom was launched in Afghanistan will be conducted.

The possible consequences of the Pakistan sanctuaries, should they be allowed to persist, will then be addressed. Their existence poses a threat both at an international level, allowing terror networks the ability to plan and train for large-scale missions similar to 9/11, and at regional level, where these safe-havens allow al-Qaeda to continually destabilize the nascent democracy of Afghanistan.

Finally, both short and long term policy options will be considered. The strategy this paper will endorse will be to, as the 9/11 Commission recommends, “keep possible terrorists insecure and on the run” in the tribal regions, while ensuring Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf remains in power.³

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Islamist Sanctuaries

Terrorist organizations that are able to establish sanctuaries – where either a government allows them safe passage or does not have the ability to police the area – pose a major threat to both international and regional security. On an international level, The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (9/11 Report) outlined both the threat posed by sanctuaries as well as the areas where they could possibly emerge. The report recognized that, “a complex international terrorist operation aimed at launching a catastrophic attack cannot be mounted by just anyone in any place.”⁴ The September 11th attacks, which killed 2,973 individuals, constituted a complex international operation that was the product of years of planning. Smaller attacks, like those in Bali in 2003, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005, were planned and executed locally. Conversely, large-scale operations like 9/11 require a number of strategic advantages that can only be obtained through access to a sanctuary. In the case of 9/11, this sanctuary was found within the weakly governed state of Afghanistan, where the Taliban leadership allowed Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda network to operate freely. According to the 9/11 Report, the advantages that a sanctuary can offer include:

Time, space, and ability to perform competent planning and staff work; a command structure able to make necessary decisions and possessing the authority and contacts to assemble needed people, money, and materials; opportunity and space to recruit, train, and select operatives with the needed skills and dedication, providing the time and structure required to socialize them into the terrorist cause, judge their trustworthiness, and hone their skills; a logistics network able to securely manage the travel of operatives, move money, and transport resources (like explosives) where they need to go; access; reliable communications between coordinators and operatives; and opportunity to test the workability of the plan.⁵

The Commission also addressed the areas of the world that seem to be prime locations for sanctuaries. The report notes that the best areas include characteristics that, “combine rugged terrain, weak governance, room to hide or receive supplies, and low population density with a town or city near enough to allow necessary interaction with the outside world.”⁶ Some possible areas mentioned in the report include the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia, and West Africa.⁷

At the regional level, sanctuaries can also pose a significant threat to the stability of nascent democracies. The US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, released in October of 2006, stresses the regional importance of sanctuaries: “Our terrorist enemies are striving to claim a strategic country as a haven for terror. From this base, they could destabilize the Middle East [...]”⁸ This has been evident in Iraq, where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s organization, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, was able to operate openly in Fallujah until November of 2004, and where Sunni insurgents continue to organize from the al-Anbar Province in western Iraq. These regions have provided the Sunni insurgency with many of the important advantages that were noted in the 9/11 Report.⁹ This is also the case in Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban, after fleeing U.S. forces during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, relocated to the tribal regions along the

Pakistan-Afghanistan border. From this sanctuary, al-Qaeda has been able to continually launch destabilizing attacks into Afghanistan and then retreat across the Pakistan border where Coalition forces cannot pursue them.¹⁰

Thomas Donnelly, Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, believes that the object of U.S. strategy should be to deny sanctuaries due to the fact that, “as they grow they assume many of the traditional qualities of a military force, even of a nation-state.”¹¹ Recent events have seemingly proven Donnelly correct, as the recruiting, training, planning, and organizing elements vital for the maintenance of an effective fighting force are all afforded to a terrorist network in control of a sanctuary. Furthermore, sanctuaries established recently in both Pakistan and Iraq have possessed qualities of a nation-state, just as Donnelly warns, both with governing structures and declared state-like names. In Pakistan, al-Qaeda has declared the establishment of The Islamic Emirate of Waziristan and set up a governing Shura council.¹² The same has occurred in Iraq, where al-Qaeda’s governing body, the Mujahideen Shura Council, has declared the Islamic State of Iraq within the Sunni triangle.¹³ The establishment of governing institutions has allowed Islamic militants to consolidate and legitimize their power within the region. As this occurs, and the Islamists ties to the region and community strengthen, it becomes increasingly more difficult to mitigate the problem posed by the sanctuary.

The Pakistani Tribal Region

To ensure both clarity and proper depth, the sanctuaries that have been established in the Pakistan tribal regions – The Islamic Emirate of Waziristan and Bajaur - will be the main focus of this paper. In order to analyze the reasons for the development of al-Qaeda’s power in these territories we must deconstruct the series of political and military events that have led to their establishment.

In its initial response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda’s main camps in the country were destroyed, with many members being either killed or captured. However, those that did manage to escape traveled to southern Afghanistan where they crossed the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and entered the Federally Administer Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan.¹⁴

Following 9/11, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf made the strategic decision to stand aside and allow the United States to destroy the Taliban. In many cases Pakistan assisted in this effort, arresting top al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives.¹⁵ In the first several years after 9/11, Pakistan continued to assist the United States. However, domestic political constraints, specifically the power of Islamists within the country, severely limited the ability of Musharraf to fully comply with U.S. demands. These constraints were continually evident, as Musharraf was the target of many attempted assassinations during this period.¹⁶

During the winter of 2003-2004 Musharraf, under continued pressure from the U.S., ordered the Pakistan army to engage al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in the FATA.¹⁷ In an effort to assist Pakistan, the U.S. supplied financial and military aid, including surveillance radars, night-

vision goggles, and transport aircraft and helicopters.¹⁸ Over the next two years a series of both hard and soft power measures were undertaken to root out al-Qaeda members inhabiting the region. This included the failed “Shakai agreement” in which a process of reconciliation was attempted whereby militants would be left alone if they agreed to put down their arms and renounce violence.¹⁹

By the winter of 2005-2006 events began to turn in al-Qaeda’s favor as both Musharraf’s power and patience grew thin. Following the U.S. Predator Drone strike in Damadola in January 2006, Osama bin Laden and senior al-Qaeda leadership decided that Pakistan had to be pushed out of the tribal region to ensure their security. To accomplish this, bin Laden called for the consolidation of, “various bases in the shape of small pockets”.²⁰ Al-Qaeda and the Taliban proceeded to launch a military offensive against the Pakistan military throughout both North and South Waziristan. By late Spring South Waziristan had fallen. The Pakistan military withdrew and Sharia Islamic law was established.²¹ Fighting continued in North Waziristan through the summer of 2006, with the Pakistan military taking heavy losses. On September 4, 2006 the Pakistan Government and Taliban officials agreed to the terms of the Waziristan Accord. Part of the agreement called for the complete withdrawal of Pakistani force from Waziristan. In return for agreeing to end the violence, Pakistan also released 130 militants, returned captured weapons, and paid “reparations” payments to the families of slain militants. Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders then proceeded to declare the territory The Islamic Emirate of Waziristan.²² Essentially, the accord established an autonomous zone for militants within Waziristan where the Pakistan government no longer maintains control, but which would still be considered part of the sovereign territory of Pakistan.

A similar situation has slowly been unfolding in the Bajaur region. During the winter of 2005-2006 al-Qaeda maintained their command center in the Bajaur town of Shin Kot. Pakistani intelligence sources continue to believe al-Qaeda’s chief deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is hiding somewhere in the region.²³ Zawahiri was the primary target in both the U.S. Predator strikes in January and October of 2006. Recent reports also indicate that al-Qaeda and the Taliban are close to signing another accord with the Pakistan government to succeed control of Bajaur.²⁴

The Strategic Threat

The existence of sanctuaries in both The Islamic Emirate of Waziristan and Bajaur represents a major threat to both international and regional security. On an international scale, autonomous control of a territory can allow terrorists to plan large-scale attacks similar to 9/11. Indeed, the Pakistani sanctuaries have allowed al-Qaeda to organize one such attack already. In August of 2006 a plot to simultaneously blow up 10 U.S.-bound passenger airlines with liquid explosives was foiled by British and U.S. officials. According to reports, 24 suspects were arrested as part of the sting operation.²⁵ One of the prime suspects in the operation was Pakistani militant and al-Qaeda operative Matiur Rehman. Rehman, an al-Qaeda’s bomb expert, has been connected to numerous terror operations, including the murder of Wall Street journalist Daniel Pearl, the numerous assassination attempts on Pakistan President Musharraf, and the March 2006 attack on the U.S. consulate in Karachi.²⁶ According to Pakistani officials, Rehman found safe-

haven in the tribal areas of Waziristan and South Punjab and was in "constant communication" with al-Qaeda's top leaders.²⁷ Furthermore, according to British officials, several of the detained assailants involved in the plot traveled to "training camps in the Waziristan area of the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan for [terrorist] training," during the winter of 2006.²⁸

The existence of the Pakistan sanctuaries have allowed for many of the necessary requirements for carrying out a large-scale attack. The organizer of the attacks, Matiur Rehman, found in Waziristan a "command center," where he had the "time, space, and ability to perform competent planning and staff work," and could "assemble needed people, money, and materials" to execute the operation.²⁹ The sanctuary also provided the space to recruit and train the other operatives who traveled to the region. Had the London airline plot not be foiled, death tolls would have rivaled those of 9/11. Military analyst Bill Roggio is correct in his conclusion: "Al-Qaeda is using the camps to train their international cadres and recruits for terror missions against the world. The destruction of al-Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan during Taliban rule has been essentially been negated by the rise of Talibanistan in western Pakistan."³⁰

Regionally, the tribal sanctuaries also pose a security risk. While NATO forces attempt to help the nascent Afghanistan democracy increase security, the existences of the Waziristan and Bajaur sanctuaries have proven to be a serious impediment. Roggio notes that "the Taliban and al-Qaeda now have the freedom to train, arm and infiltrate foot soldiers, IED and suicide cells into Afghanistan with little fear of reprisal from the Pakistani government."³¹ According to NATO statistics, since the signing of the Waziristan Accord in September 2006, attacks into Afghanistan along the border with Waziristan have increased by almost 300 percent. Consequentially, U.S. military deaths in the region were almost double during this period, in comparison to what they were during the same period the previous year.³² Further emphasizing the strategic importance of the sanctuaries, recent reports have indicated the al-Qaeda fighters wounded in Afghanistan are being treated for their wounds in Bajaur hospitals.³³

These attacks are not only destabilizing the Afghan democracy, but they are slowly reducing the willpower of NATO forces to fight. As public opinion within nations contributing forces to Afghanistan continues to absorb the increased violence, their intensifying distaste for the mission has caused many to question their commitments.³⁴

Safe-havens in Pakistan have also ensured that top al-Qaeda targets Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri remain at large. On a tactical level, the importance of these two leaders has diminished in the past several years. However, their symbolic and ideological position within the Islamist movement still makes capturing or killing them a high priority. So long as the sanctuaries remain, there is a risk that these two leaders will continue to evade U.S. officials. While a number of attempted strikes on Zawahiri have occurred, the failure of both operations is a testament to the safety the sanctuaries provide.

The continued rule of Pakistan President Musharraf is also tied to the tribal regions. Musharraf has attempted to maintain a political balance within the country so as to maintain

power over the more hard-line elements of the government. After the failure of Pakistan to win a military victory within Waziristan, Musharraf was forced to accede to the demands of the Waziristan Accord. Political analysts have described the recent suicide attack, which killed 42 at a Pakistan military training facility, as an example of the increased opposition to Musharraf from Islamic radicals. These radicals are largely led and supported by al-Qaeda and Taliban militants within the tribal regions.³⁵ If the Islamist insurgency within Pakistan is able to topple the government and possibly gain control of Pakistan's military arsenal, this could lead to even further problems in the region.

Policy Options and Recommendations

Options for addressing the Pakistan sanctuaries are limited at this current juncture. It must be recognized that the worst possible outcome is for the situation within the tribal regions to continue to "stabilize" as al-Qaeda consolidates its power. Therefore, the United States and NATO must aim to, as was recommended in the 9/11 Report, "keep possible terrorists insecure and on the run." To let al-Qaeda remain in the region, unfettered from both the Pakistan military and NATO forces, will only result in the further destabilization of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda will also be left to organize large-scale attacks on the scale of 9/11 and similar to the foiled British Airways plot.

In the short-term this strategy can be met in a number of ways. First, the U.S. must continue to target al-Qaeda camps and high-level officials using Predator drones. The attacks in Bajaur in January and October of 2006 were effective in killing important al-Qaeda lieutenants – including al-Qaeda weapons expert Abu Khabab al-Masri.³⁶ Attacks such as these not only produce important results, but they ensure a continue level of instability within the territories that guarantees al-Qaeda and Taliban militants will be forced to remain in hiding or on the run. Second, Pakistan and NATO must continue to share intelligence and work together whenever possible. Although tensions between NATO countries and Pakistan have become strained at times, there are signs that cooperation is still occurring at a reasonable level. Finally, future agreements similar to the Waziristan Accord must be blocked. Pakistan cannot be allowed to continually sign so-called peace treaties with the tribal regions because it will only serve to embolden the militants and further destabilize Musharraf. Musharraf must be forewarned that appeasement of al-Qaeda and Taliban militants in the short-term will only weaken his power in the future. However, any current options available in these areas should be carried out with extreme caution due to the potential backlash they may cause Musharraf. Whatever the consequences of the sanctuaries, the worst possible outcome over the next several years would be for Musharraf to fall from power and a radical Islamist group to take control.

Long-term options to deal with the Pakistan sanctuaries remain limited. It is clear that the U.S. must maintain its relationship with Musharraf. There must be an effective balance, however, between doing what it can to secure Afghanistan by limiting the effects of the Pakistan sanctuaries, while also ensuring the continued rule of Musharraf. In addition to the financial and military aid being sent to Pakistan, U.S. forces could also provide both counterinsurgency and intelligence training to the Pakistan military to improve its effectiveness in the future. Such

efforts would be similar to the foreign military training programs that the U.S. is currently conducting in coordination with the Philippines, Indonesia, Tajikistan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Georgia and Colombia.³⁷ An effort to control the key entry points along the Afghan-Pakistan border using a series of fences, forts, and surveillance technology could also serve to control the unwanted flow of militants into Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government realized that the existence of Islamist-controlled sanctuaries presented a major security dilemma for the international community. Although al-Qaeda's main sanctuary was destroyed in Afghanistan, over the last five years, and specifically the last year, al-Qaeda has been able to establish and consolidate its power within the Western Pakistan tribal regions. Control of this area has allowed the organization to plan large-scale attacks and continually mount offensives into Afghanistan to destabilize the nascent Afghan democracy. Although policy options remain limited due to the unstable political situation within Pakistan, the United States and NATO forces must act to ensure al-Qaeda remains off-balance and on the run throughout the border regions. In the long-term, the US should work to strengthen the Pakistan government, while also supplying and training its military for future counterterrorism operations.

Notes

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