PAKISTAN'S PUNJABI TALIBAN TO CEASE INTERNAL ATTACKS, CONTINUE THEM IN AFGHANISTAN

Although their first press release announcing their change in plans earlier this month got little fanfare, now that they have followed it up with a video (fortunately, there are no beheadings in the video), the Punjabi Taliban's decision to cease violent attacks within Pakistan is being hailed as a "Watershed Event":

> "We have decided to give up militancy in Pakistan. I've taken the decision in the best interests of Islam and the nation. I also appeal to all other armed groups to stop violent activities in Pakistan," Asmatullah Muaweya, the chief of the Punjabi Taliban, said in a three-minute video message released to the media on Saturday. He added that his group would now focus on Dawah (Islamic preaching) for the "supremacy of Islam and protection of the system."
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> "I've taken the decision after consulting religious scholars and tribal leaders," said Muaweya whose group had been blamed for several deadly attacks in the country, especially in Punjab. He also called upon other militant groups to renounce violence and come to the negotiating table as the country was passing through a critical juncture.

Nearly lost in this fanfare about renouncing violence inside Pakistan is that we learned, even in the earlier announcement, that violence by the group inside Afghanistan would continue:

> "We will confine our practical jihadist

> role to Afghanistan in view of deteriorating situation in the region and internal situation of Pakistani jihadist movement," Punjabi Taliban chief Ismatullah Muawiya said in a pamphlet faxed to the media, without clarifying further.

That part of the change in plans was not overlooked by Afghanistan:

> "Pakistani Charge d'Affaires Syed Muazzam Shah was summoned to the Foreign Ministry on Sunday, and a strong protest was lodged over the declaration of war made by the Punjabi Taliban on the Afghan side of the Durand Line," a Ministry's statement said. The Dari-language statement was also emailed to The Express Tribune.
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> Abdul Samad Samad, head of political affairs in the Afghan foreign ministry, condemned the threats made by Muaweya, and described his remarks as "clear conspiracies against the stability and security of Afghanistan."
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> "Such statements are against international laws and principles of good neighbourly relations," the statement quoted the Afghan official as telling the Pakistani envoy.

The language gets even stronger from Afghanistan's military:

> In response to the assertions of the Punjabi Taliban, officials of the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) have warned that any attacks on Afghanistan would face harsh response from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).
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> "We have a death message for those who want to attack Afghanistan," MoD spokesman Gen. Zahir Azimi said.

> “Afghanistan would be a cemetery for those who want to attack it.”

Further, Afghan politicians believe that they see the hand of ISI behind the move:

> Afghan MPs have asserted that the proclamations made by Punjabi Taliban’s are another plan of Pakistan’s Inter-service Intelligence Services (ISI).
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> “This is another ISI stunt,” MP Rehana Azad said. “Pakistan has never wanted stability in Afghanistan.”

The Punjabi Taliban has not been the only branch to break away from Pakistan’s Taliban, also known as the TTP. There has been significant infighting in the TTP since the US killed its leader Hakimullah Mehsud just as he was about to begin peace talks with Pakistan. Today marks the split of an even larger group from the TTP that now claims to have the support of most TTP leaders:

> The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) led by Mullah Fazlullah appear to have suffered a serious blow as the newly formed splinter group Jamatul Ahrar claims that it has the support of 70 to 80 per cent of TTP commanders and fighters. The group says they are not under TTP’s command any more.
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> Speaking to Dawn, Ehsanullah Ehsan, the spokesperson for the new group Jamatul Ahrar, claimed that they were administratively a separate group now. Responding to a query if they would follow the orders of the TTP Ameer, he said: “We, Jamatul Ahrar, have been administratively separated from them now.”
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> When questioned further about the control exercised by the Mullah Fazlullah-led Taliban, Ehsan said: “I’ll

> not comment on this question, however, I can claim about 70 to 80 per cent of the TTP, including Swat, is now part of TTP Jamatul Ahrar".

This group, however, has announced that it will focus its actions on Pakistan first and has already claimed an attack inside Pakistan.

Returning to the Punjabi Taliban, Bill Roggio had this to say about a US drone strike back in July:

> The remotely piloted Predators or Reapers are reported to have fired eight missiles at a compound in the village of Doga Mada Khel in the Datta Khel area of the tribal agency in the early morning of July 19, according to AFP.
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> Two commanders from the Punjabi Taliban, a grouping of jihadist groups from Pakistan's Punjab province, are said to have been killed, but their names were not disclosed by Pakistani officials. The Punjabi Taliban, whose leader, Asmatullah Muawiya, also serves as an al Qaeda commander, has been agreeable to conducting peace talks with the Pakistani government.

Roggio continues, describing Datta Khel:

> The Datta Khel area, where today's strike took place, is administered by Hafiz Gul Bahadar, the top Taliban commander for North Waziristan. Bahadar provides shelter to senior al Qaeda leaders as well as terrorists from numerous Pakistani and Central Asian terror groups.
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> Datta Khel is a known hub of Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al Qaeda activity. While Bahadar administers the region, the Haqqani Network, al Qaeda, and allied Central Asian jihadist groups are

> also based in the area. The Lashkar al Zil, al Qaeda's Shadow Army, is known to operate a command center in Datta Khel. Some of al Qaeda's top leaders have been killed in drone strikes in Datta Khel, including Mustafa Abu Yazid, a longtime al Qaeda leader and close confidant of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri; Abdullah Said al Libi, the commander of the Shadow Army; and Zuhaib al Zahibi, a general in the Shadow Army.

But don't look for any more high level terrorists to be killed in North Waziristan:

> North Waziristan is in effect sealed off to outsiders, but many villagers believe that, as with previous operations, top militant commanders left the area before the bombings began. The offensive had been in the offing for several months as the Pakistani government's attempts to engage the insurgents in peace talks collapsed, and even some military officials acknowledged that militants had time to flee.
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> "The fact of the matter is, the leadership at the moment is not present in the areas where we have carried out the operation. If they were, we would have apprehended them," Maj. Gen. Zafarullah Khan, an army commander in the tribal region, told reporters last week at a briefing in a cantonment in Miram Shah.
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> Commanders said they had cleared militants out of Miram Shah, but many experts believe the most powerful insurgent leaders slipped across the border into Afghanistan, where they may be responsible for a recent increase in insurgent attacks coinciding with the country's presidential election.

It seems very convenient for Pakistan’s military that the entrenched protesters in Islamabad calling for Nawaz Sharif to resign have taken headlines away from the military operation in North Waziristan and the attendant questions of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced residents it has caused or whether the Haqqani Network and other groups had sufficient advance warning and/or help slipping away before the offensive began. Given these developments, Afghanistan’s allegations regarding the hand of ISI in the Punjabi Taliban’s move begin to take on more significance.