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**NES-4
PAKISTAN**

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Migration Season: The Taliban and their Expanding Influence in Pakistan

By Nicholas Schmidle

JUNE 2006

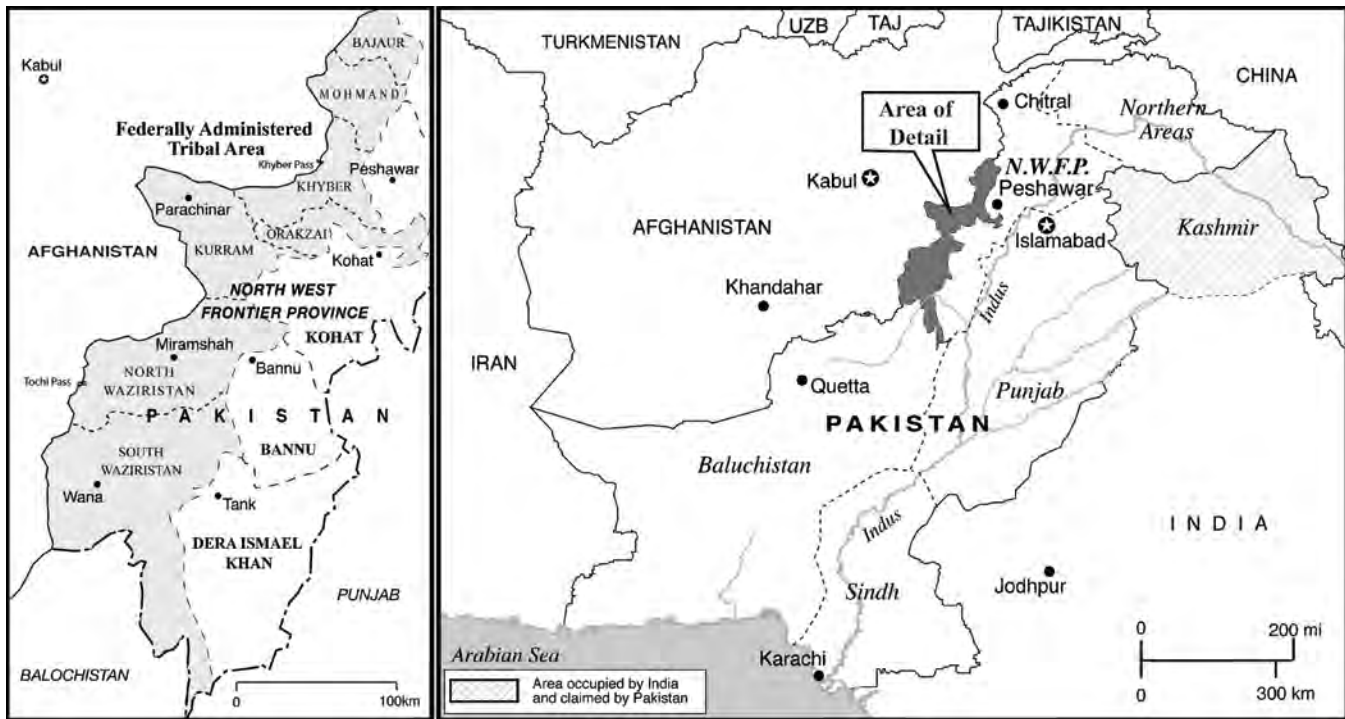
IN EARLY FEBRUARY, the Taliban distributed a DVD showing a public execution in North Waziristan. The Taliban, whose name in Arabic means “students” or “seekers,” hang five alleged criminals from a metal tower that looks like an oil derrick. After the five men’s bodies go limp, they are lowered, decapitated, and then re-strung, upside-down and headless, from the scaffold. The picture and sound quality of the video is grainy, and at times, images and words are difficult to discern. But the message is clear. In the Islamic State of Waziristan, the Taliban are in charge.

Waziristan, which is divided into North Waziristan and South Waziristan, belongs to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a region of Pakistan roughly the size of Connecticut running alongside the border with Afghanistan. Since the Taliban were chased out of power in Afghanistan during the U.S.-led invasion in the winter of 2001, they have gained strength and support throughout all of FATA — and particularly in Waziristan.

Many Pakistanis tell me they are concerned that “Talibanization” will soon engulf the whole country, starting with Waziristan and ending in the capital, Islamabad. They described the phenomenon using medical references, comparing the expansion of the Taliban’s influence to a cancer. But a visit this May to a sensitive part of Pakistan where the Taliban are gaining support convinced me that the spread of the Taliban owed more to political and military decisions taken in Islamabad than to any Islamist ideology.

WAZIRISTAN’S RECENT HISTORY EXPLAINS much about why it’s at the center of attention today. During the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, American, Saudi and Pakistani intelligence agencies worked together to provide the *mujahideen* with ideological and military training in camps set up throughout the tribal areas. The CIA typically supplied high-tech weaponry, such as the lethal surface-to-air Stinger missiles, while the Saudis built thousands of *madrassas* where fighters could be educated in the finer points of *jihad*. The majority of those fighting the *jihad* were Pashtuns, the ethnic group dominating western Pakistan and southeastern Afghanistan. The Pashtuns follow a strict code of tribal law, the *Pukhtunwali*; the first two laws are *badal*, which means taking revenge, and *melmastia*, which means showing hospitality without any expectation of return or favor.

Today, U.S. officials allege that local tribesmen are sheltering members of al-Qaeda and Taliban, and giving them areas to train. In the tribal areas, after all, the state, officially, doesn’t function. In FATA, tribal law supersedes everything else. The Pakistani penal code is irrelevant, its judges and courts don’t exist, and the police aren’t allowed in. Technically, neither are foreigners. As you approach any checkpoint bordering the tribal agencies, white, interstate-highway-sized signs, say, in English, No Foreigners Allowed Beyond This Point. Without proper clearance and escorts from the Pakistani government, entering FATA is illegal — and life threatening. But for someone like Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar, the tribal



areas are ideal: rugged terrain that is almost impossible for outsiders to navigate, a hospitable — and fiercely loyal — culture, and tons of weapons. “[The tribal areas] are probably the best place in the world to hide,” said Yusuf, a balding contractor and tribesman from a town just outside of the tribal agency of North Waziristan. “You can escape the law there.”

After the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, thousands of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters did, in fact, flee to the tribal regions of Pakistan. Some of the foreign al-Qaeda fighters — made up predominantly of Arabs, Uzbeks, and Chechens — married local women, and are now considered family. The Pashtun Taliban simply got back to business. They formed committees to enforce Islamic law in the villages and began reconstructing their ideal Islamic state — inside the borders of Pakistan. As the recently released DVD shows, they have largely succeeded.

The Taliban’s unchecked rise in Waziristan has provoked a debate in Pakistan about the prospect of “Talibanization” sweeping across the country. The Taliban’s influence is already spilling beyond the tribal areas. In Tank, a city just outside of South Waziristan, the Taliban have distributed pamphlets directing men to grow beards and to keep their women indoors. “The government’s grip is loosening in Tank,” Dr. Fazal-ur-Rahim Murwat, a Professor of Pakistan Studies at the University of Peshawar and the author of *The Talibanization of Pakistan*, told me. “The colonial-era power structures [which kept power out of the hands of religious leaders] stopped working with the presence of foreigners [over the past couple decades].” Murwat, who sports a clipped mustache and a tongue-rolling accent that, together, remind me of a French chef, observed some of these changes first-hand in the Afghan refugee camps in Peshawar during Soviet-Afghan War.

He also has a habit of prefacing important talking points by adding “for your kind information.” “I, for your kind information, watched Arabs walk around and freely distribute money from briefcases filled with clean notes,” he said. Now this foreign-funded militancy is coming back to haunt the country. Besides Tank, Murwat pointed to two other cities — Dera Ismael Khan and Bannu — that are vulnerable to Taliban influence. He feared that the next video of beheadings and declarations of Taliban rule might come in one of these cities — where the Pakistani government is supposed to be in charge.

In May, I accompanied a friend of mine named Zargar on a trip to Bannu, a city of 250,000 people that straddles the border with North Waziristan. Zargar is a Waziri in his mid-20s and of above-average height. He normally wears a close-cut goatee, but when he goes to Bannu these days, he grows a beard to look less conspicuous. His cousins are in the Taliban and, every few hours, he reminded me that he is a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad. The rest of the trip, Zargar was rolling *hashish* cigarettes and poking fun at the mullahs. “Can you help me find some beer?” he kept asking.

We stopped once, for food, on the road from Peshawar to Bannu. Lunch was a couple bowls of oily onions and lady-fingers, or okra, a plate of greasy and marbled meat, and a spicy yogurt sauce for dipping. Zargar told me a story about how, last month, bandits kidnapped his family’s driver — along with the car — from outside their home in South Waziristan. “The first thing my family did was to call the Political Agent,” he said. The Political Agent (PA) is the federally-appointed official who represents the central government in the tribal agencies. James Spain, in his *The Way of the Pathans*, describes the PA as being “half-ambassador and half-governor.” The institution is one of the “colonial-era power structures”

noted by Dr. Murwat. The Taliban don't recognize the PA's authority.

"The PA told us, 'I can't do anything.'" Zargar continued. "So then we called the local Talib commander. Within a few days, he raided a safe house, got the car, and freed the driver. These Talibs are being praised as heroes." Zargar went on to tell me how the men hanged in the DVD were some of the most reviled characters in North Waziristan, and that local people, Taliban sympathizers or not, saw it as an act of justice.

The owner of the rest stop, a heavy-set man with the forearms of a lumberjack, approached our table and introduced himself. He spoke English and had glacier-blue eyes. He asked where we were coming from and where we were heading. Zargar answered quickly and told him we were going to Dera Ismael Khan. Sensing my confusion, he waited until after the lumberjack left and then leaned forward. He whispered, "I don't tell anyone about my itinerary when I go to Bannu nowadays, man. I don't want anyone there waiting for me to arrive."

HAVING BLONDE HAIR AND fair skin in Bannu is asking for trouble, for two entirely different reasons. First, the city is to Pakistan what The Castro is to San Francisco. Only in San Francisco, men usually prefer men of the same age, while in Bannu homosexuality has disturbing tendencies towards pedophilia. (The parents of handsome young boys will often shave their child's hair to make him look "less pretty.") Zargar warned me that the Bannuccis would love seeing a blonde in their midst. He asked me during the ride down how old I was. I told him 27. "In Bannu," he said, "Tell everyone you are 35." He joked that, "Even the pigeons fly over Bannu with only one wing... they cover their tail with the other." This contrasts the typical portrayal of Pashtuns, who pride themselves on being the manliest of the manly, with their beards and guns and strict codes of loyalty and revenge. When I asked one of Zargar's friends about it later, he said matter-of-factly, "What, haven't you seen *Brokeback Mountain*?"

The second reason why flaunting Nordic roots is a bad idea is that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are right next door. Over the past several months, Taliban fighters have killed dozens of local journalists and tribal *maliks* in Waziristan on suspicions of working — or even cooperating — with Western intelligence agencies and/or the Pakistani government. The Taliban have warned reporters against using the words "miscreants" or "militants" to describe Taliban fighters, wanting, instead, to be called "Talibs" or "*mujahideen*." (The Taliban first acquired their name because most of the leading members were *madrassa* graduates. Technically, as graduates and not mere students, their name should have been The Maulanas, but they opted for The Taliban.) In late April, a pro-government cleric and tribal elder from North Waziristan was abducted near his home, killed, and left in a ditch. Villagers found his body a week later with a photograph

tacked to his chest that showed him shaking hands with a Pakistani government official. Now these threats are carrying over into Bannu. The *nazim*, or mayor, of Bannu, has received several written threats. One of them contained 5000 Rupees (about US\$83) slipped inside a note telling him to purchase a coffin for himself.

When we finally reached the outskirts of Bannu, I slid low in the back seat. Even though the once-blinding sun was falling behind the mountains, I left up the mesh screen shading my window. Before we continued further into the city, Zargar instructed the driver to turn down a dirt road towards a village where his friend lived. Shamroz, the friend, greeted us outside and invited us into a room with four *charpoi* beds (four-legged wooden frames with taught rope stretched across the top), a ceiling fan, and a dirt floor. Ants scurried on top of the dry ground and Shamroz twirled the ends of his budding handlebar mustache while we drank a round of cold water, then *sharbat*, a nectarish juice, and then *kava*, a type of green tea. Zargar and Shamroz spoke in Pashto about their friends and families, then, for a few minutes, about the Taliban. As we were preparing to leave, I asked Shamroz in a mixture of Urdu and English if he thought Bannu would look like Miramshah, the capital of North Waziristan and the "set" of the Taliban's recent DVD, a year from now. "A year?" he replied, "It might only be a month." I asked him if he was worried about the prospect of the Taliban running around Bannu. "Why should I be?" he said. "I have my own Kalashnikov."

After we finished our tea, Shamroz got into the front seat of our car and offered to show us around Bannu. Even with the window shades still on, being discrete was difficult. Out late-model Toyota Corolla stood out on the road otherwise choked with farm tractors, bicycles, and horse-drawn carriages. The few women out were crammed in the carriages, clutching young children and baskets of fruit. All of the women wore *burqas*, the head-to-toe covering with a patch of mesh over the eyes. The Taliban made the *burqa* mandatory during their rule in Afghanistan during the late 1990s; locals claim the tradition dates back centuries. When walking in a group, the women looked like a flock of screen doors. I asked Shamroz what he knew about the rumors that foreigners, perhaps some with links to al-Qaeda, were hiding in the area. He told a story from the previous day when he had gone to the courthouse in Bannu. "There were three people who I didn't recognize," he said, "so I tried to speak to them. When I did, a friend of theirs leaned over and scowled at me. 'Don't bother them, they don't speak Pashto.' They were definitely Arabs."

We drove from Shamroz's village into the center of Bannu and parked in front of an empty shop. Neat stacks of old newspapers and used and unused notebooks lined the walls. A prominent local journalist used it as an office. I waited in the car as Zargar and Shamroz talked with the man for a few minutes. The journalist, whom I'll call Marwand for the sake of anonymity, is based in Bannu,

but frequently travels back-and-forth to Miramshah. (Almost all of the reporting in local newspapers from in or around Waziristan is bylined only "Our Staff Correspondent.") Without much convincing, he agreed to talk with me and he too joined us in the car. He wore a long, grey beard and a gentle expression. He had bright blue eyes, skin the color of milky tea, and wore a white prayer cap with a matching *shalwar kameez*, the traditional baggy-pants-and-tunic-outfit worn by men in Pakistan and Afghanistan. After directing the driver through a couple of intersections, Marwand pointed out an alleyway behind the Bannu Press Club. From here, no one could watch us enter or leave.

Shamroz, Zargar, Marwand and I joined another handful of journalists who were talking in the office of the secretary of the Press Club. The office boy brought a round of sodas out for cold refreshment. Marwand and I — through Zargar's translation — conversed about the Taliban. I asked what the connection was between the Talibs fighting the Americans in Afghanistan, and the Talibs issuing DVDs from Waziristan. In other words, who are the Talibs? "In the current situation, every home in this area has at least one Talib in it," he said, drawing a wide, but unspecified, circle in the air. "This is all because of the operation." In October 2003, the Pakistani Army launched a military operation in South Waziristan (and later, in North Waziristan) aimed at destroying the al-Qaeda and Taliban networks scattered in villages throughout the tribal agency. The consequences have been a disaster.

Local tribesmen, who may previously have felt little affinity with the Taliban, have since joined them to defend their homes. The Pakistani Army, in their minds, is a foreign intruder. Marwand told me of a farmer in North Waziristan who was recently working in his fields when his village came under attack from Cobra Gunships of the Pakistani Army. His sister was at home taking a bath, Marwand said, and they blew her naked body to bits. "The farmer grabbed his gun and went to the mountains. Now he is Taliban." (For Pashtuns, life is about honor and keeping score. The *Pukhtunwali* allows a man a lifetime to seek revenge for his bruised honor. "You can wait until you are old and frail," Zargar said, "but the day you forget about taking your revenge, you are no longer a Pashtun.")

"Now there are reports of an impending military operation in Janikhel," Marwand said. The town of Janikhel is less than a half-hour from Bannu by car. Army officials allege that Taliban fighters based in Janikhel orchestrated the recent surge of rocket attacks on the Bannu Cantonment. Marwand compared this rhetoric to the rhetoric preceding the operations in South Waziristan and North Waziristan. "We can feel in the air that this is coming," he said.

"That what is coming?" I asked. "The operation or the Taliban?"

"One leads to the other. If there is no attack [in Janikhel], then there won't be a spillover of this 'Taliban-

ization,'" he responded, pinching quotations with his fingers. "It only takes the death of one man or woman to inspire the vengeance of an entire village."

"What will happen if the Taliban comes to Bannu?" I asked. "If someone looked around at the women in *burqas* and the men with big beards and guns, they might think the Taliban are already here," I said.

"The Talibs are relatively harmless people," Marwand said. "Basically, the concept of 'Talibanization' is projected wrongly. If they come to Bannu and don't hurt anyone, then there won't be any objections."

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON, a dust storm blew through Bannu that turned the sky a shade of sepia and forced shop-owners to drop their metal shutters and temporarily close for business. A couple hundred children playing cricket in a grassless field were sent sprinting for the cover of nearby trees. Zargar, Shamroz and I, now joined by another friend of Zargar's named Imran, drove around Bannu with the windows rolled up and the mesh shades still attached with suction-cups.

When the dust storm subsided, we headed downtown to catch one of Bannu's evening traditions in which all the town's males, adorned in necklaces made of jasmine, congregate at the bazaar. The custom, I learned, is to spot an attractive boy, sneak behind him, and loop your jasmine necklace around his neck. Those wearing a necklace are considered taken. (This is confusing, of course, because the one who hasn't mustered the courage to toss his Pakistani *leis* yet is wearing a necklace as well. Sometimes, the camaraderie of "the hunt" is more important than the hunt itself.) People sing and beat on drums to encourage one another along. Shamroz insisted we stay in the car. When we stopped at the next intersection, he called over one of the children selling the flowered necklaces and bought one for each person in our car. Sufficiently smelling of jasmine — and now, apparently, stuck with Shamroz for the night — we cruised alongside the throng of drummers and the men holding hands adorned with purple rhinestone rings. With all the town's women stashed away back at home, casual — and, sometimes, not-so casual — flirtation becomes an all-male activity. If the Taliban ever controlled Bannu, I wondered how long this tradition would survive.

That evening, a few other people came by Imran's house. One of them, Yusuf, the balding contractor mentioned earlier, shared a conversation of his from an hour before with local officials from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Although Yusuf was speaking in Pashto, I caught something about foreigners being spotted in Bannu. I turned to Zargar and asked, "Are they talking about Arabs?"

"No, man," he said with a chuckle, "they were talking about you. They asked Yusuf what he knew about



An afternoon dust storm blows through Bannu. Are the Taliban far behind?

our plans. And, man, they knew everywhere we have gone today — and even the places we decided not to go and people we were supposed to meet.” Zargar noticed my eyes widening. “Don’t worry. It’s normal. It happens every time I come down here. I don’t even think about it anymore.”

The other two people who had joined us for dinner were from South Waziristan. One of them, a skinny fellow with a patchy beard in his early 20s named Hamid, had just returned from visiting his family in the Shakai Valley of South Waziristan, an area bombarded by the Pakistani Army over the past few years. I asked him what the picture looked like inside South Waziristan. (Foreigners are prohibited from entering the tribal agencies without an armed, government-appointed escort, and since the operation began in Waziristan, the only journalists who have reported from there have been whisked in and out in army helicopters.) Hamid looked me up and down once, nodding in approval of my *shalwar kameez* and six-day-old shadow of facial hair. “If we wrap your head in a turban, we could easily sneak you in,” he said. “You just couldn’t talk. Then you could see for yourself. The fighters in Waziristan aren’t Taliban. These are all local people who are seeking revenge for their homes being destroyed and their families being killed.”

I turned to Shamroz, who hours earlier told me the story of a 26-year-old guy who left his village outside of Bannu and joined the Taliban in North Waziristan. “He

wasn’t religious and everyone knows he is a criminal,” Shamroz had told me. “But becoming a Talib now is a way to gain social status. These guys are regarded as heroes. For Bannuccis, a Talib is like Tom Cruise in your society.” (Considering Cruise’s embrace of Scientology, I wanted to commend Shamroz for his unintentionally insightful remark, but thought too much might be lost in the translation.)

In reality, with each passing day that the Pakistani Army tries to “flush the terrorists” out of Waziristan, the Taliban gain strength. While *madrassa* students and graduates are certainly playing a lead role in the implementation of *sharia* law there, the Talibs in Pakistan are a hodgepodge of Afghans, Pakistanis, and criminals who joined the Taliban before they themselves could be strung up from a lamppost. “There are few pure Taliban there now,” Lt. General (retired) Hamid Gul explained to me a week before I traveled to Bannu. Gul, the former head of the ISI and a self-professed Islamist, was a vocal supporter of the Talibs in Afghanistan during the late 1990s. “But there are lots of sentimental Taliban. The Waziris have been trained to fight for centuries. Their war horse starts snorting and they want to go muck it up with whatever force it is.”

I asked Hamid, the young man from the Shakai Valley, how his village has greeted the declarations of Taliban rule in Waziristan. “We want to live an Islamic life and we want to live under an Islamic government,” he answered. “That is what the Talibs are talking about. The Pakistani

government has failed us, so we'll see what the Taliban can do."

Zargar interrupted to tell me a story about his cousins. There are nine brothers — four from one mom and five from another. They recently had a property dispute that they asked a local council to rule on. The five brothers, of whom one is a Talib ("I think he studied in a *madrassa* for a few months," Zargar said, "and then he went to a militant's training camp"), didn't agree with the decision so they took it to a judiciary committee run by the Taliban in South Waziristan. "The Taliban's authority is growing, man," he explained. "They gave the exact same verdict as the local court, but coming from the Taliban, the five brothers immediately accepted it."

After dinner, we all left Imran's house and stepped out onto the sidewalk. It was around 1 a.m. and the city streets were empty. A yellow street light shined on a playground with rusty chains dangling from the swing sets. An old man with a long, whiskbroom beard was walking up the middle of the street in our direction. He held a hunting rifle in his right hand and, as he passed by, he paused to look at us. Someone said *Salaam Alaikum* and he returned the greeting. On the 15-minute drive from Imran's house to the guesthouse where Zargar and I stayed the night, I saw only a few

more lone walkers. All of them carried guns.

I HEADED FOR THE guesthouse pool first thing the following morning. Outside the gate, a list of rules was posted in Urdu. I stared at it for a minute or two before deciphering #5: "No Wearing *Shalwar Kameez* in the Pool." I didn't bring my bathing suit, but, fortunately, a few dozen pairs of damp shorts hung on a line of hooks poolside for everyone to share. Most of them had elastic waistbands stretched to fit a middle-aged oak tree. I worried for a second that the pool might be a trick — part two of the evening jasmine-necklace tradition. Eventually, Zargar found a couple of pairs of khaki shorts with a drawstring and we dove in.

After our swim, as we stood around drip-drying (no communal towels available), I noticed a stack of movie posters leaning against a wall outside of the pool area. Most of them were busy, bright and colorful, with burly men flexing muscles, holding guns, and dripping blood. "Is there are cinema nearby?" I asked Zargar.

"Yea man, right here at the guesthouse," he answered. "There are three in Bannu." I thought about how people in Islamabad were losing sleep over the prospect of "Talibanization" and, yet, the only movie theater in Islamabad was



A woman clad in a burqa holds her baby.

burned down three years ago by a mob of Islamists, and to this day, hasn't been rebuilt. Here in Bannu, less than an hour from the so-called Islamic State of Waziristan, there were three. Adding to the irony, just outside the front gate of the guesthouse, the black-and-white-striped flag of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) was fluttering in the morning breeze.

The JUI is one of the two most influential Islamist parties in Pakistan and they have been an unflagging supporter of the Taliban at both the government level and the grassroots level since its rise to power in Afghanistan during the 1990s. Initially, the majority of the Taliban leadership, including Mullah Omar, graduated from JUI *madrassas* in Pakistan. Then in 1993, the Secretary-General of the JUI, Maulana Fazlur Rahman, was tapped for an important foreign policy post in Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government. From there, he lobbied for funds that helped the burgeoning Taliban movement eventually go national (it was, at the time, confined to southeastern Afghanistan). Later, when the Taliban's military campaigns in northern Afghanistan exhausted their manpower, several JUI-run *madrassas* closed and encouraged their students to fight alongside the Talibs.

Today, the JUI wields enormous power in the Pash-tun communities. In the 2002 parliamentary elections, it joined five other Islamist parties to make up the Mut-tahida Majlis-e-Amal, or MMA. It campaigned on an anti-American and pro-Taliban platform and easily won a majority in the provincial assemblies in both Baluch-istan and North West Frontier Province. Shortly after taking power, the provincial assembly in NWFP formed a special council to advise the provincial government on the proper implementation of sharia law. Before long, a law was passed banning music in public places. On the bus ride from Islamabad to Peshawar, the in-bus movie is switched off upon entering NWFP from the Punjab. On the sides of the highway, newly posted street signs display religious and moral food for thought. Some are soft and benign, such as "Don't say hello, say Salaam Alaikum" and "Smile, it's your religious duty;" others are more biting, such as the one that promises, "Jihad will continue until doomsday." Perhaps the most controversial legislation that the MMA government in NWFP has tried to pass is a bill authorizing an Orwellian-sounding Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice that would act in tandem with local authorities, and behave as a religious police. (The Taliban had, and Saudi Arabia still has, a Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice that likely inspired the MMA's proposed legislation.)

The JUI's long-standing relationship with the Taliban and its well-known affinity for Taliban-like ideas have led many to question whether the provincial government is at all interested in curbing what Dr. Fazal-ur-Rahim Murwat of the University of Peshawar terms the "Talibanization of Pakistan." Dr. Murwat is one of many who think the Taliban's rise in Waziristan has been, in some way, fa-

cilitated by the MMA government. "The presence of the MMA is fostering ideological tendencies of the Taliban," he said. "Just look at these billboards!" he added, referring to the fact that female faces on billboards have been either covered in black cloth or sprayed over with grey paint.

Is "Talibanization" best understood as a movement metastasizing like a cancer from the lawless tribal areas, or as a phenomenon emanating from the chambers of the provincial assembly in Peshawar?

TWO DAYS AFTER MY trip to Bannu, I traveled back to Peshawar, where I spoke with Mohammad Jalalud-Din, an influential member of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam. Jalalud-Din, who speaks perfect English, was the Political Secretary to Maulana Fazlur Rahman, chief of the JUI, from 1993 to 1995, before being made Pakistani Ambassador to Niger from 1995 to 1997. He keeps his grey hair and beard short. I asked him how he reacts when people say that the crisis in Waziristan is directly linked to the fact that JUI hasn't issued any statements condemning the Taliban's activities there.

"We are not condemning these things because the government is not hearing us," he said. "We are just silent spectators. This is a crisis between the inhabitants of the tribal areas and the central government. But we are sympathetic to the whole tribal belt because it has voted for us.

"Now," Jalalud-Din continued, "the situation is changing. You have a war in the whole tribal belt. These disturbances have engulfed the settled areas and extremists are holding more ground than in the past. The mechanism [military action] of the West and the government of Pakistan isn't working. We can see these results in Bannu."

I explained how, in Bannu, the street scenes I observed seemed to match every description I had read about the street scenes during the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan. What is the difference, I asked, between the political and religious vision of JUI and the political and religious vision of the Taliban?

Jalalud-Din explained that he saw the difference as one of style. "We were elected by the people's choice," he said, "and they came to power by force."

But with another election slated for sometime in 2007, questions are popping up about how the JUI will try to play the Taliban to its electoral benefit. Will leading party members like Maulana Fazlur Rahman recognize the potential fallout of associating his party with groups carrying out public executions and find a way to keep the Talibs contained to the tribal areas? Is this even feasible? Does Rahman still wield any influence over the Taliban commanders? Or might the JUI incorporate Taliban leaders onto its own electoral slate, thus

validating Taliban rule under the guise of democracy?

Provincial politics in the North West Frontier Province and in FATA weren't always like this. For decades, Islamist parties like the JUI were checked and rivaled by the Awami National Party, or ANP, a secular outfit championing the rights of Pashtuns. At points throughout its history, the ANP has also clamored for total independence from Pakistan. The party's ideologues contend that Pashtuns are, in fact, Afghans.

One afternoon, Zargar and I rode to the house of Lateef Afridi, a member of the ANP's Central Executive Committee, a former Member of the National Assembly, and a tribesman from the Khyber agency. We were met in the drawing room by Afridi's private army. In the next room, Afridi — a towering man in his mid-50s with stringy, slicked-back hair and squinty eyes that look as if he were constantly staring into the sun — sat upright in a chair while a younger fellow, perhaps in his early 40s, relaxed on a bed.

The man splayed out, Shuja, was a *malik*, or tribal head, from the Bajaur agency and a former MNA candidate himself. His story exemplifies the pitfalls of being a secular — and pro-American — politician in NWFP these days. In the 2002 elections, he ran on an ANP ticket and lost, in what he claims was a rigged election, to the MMA candidate. A few months ago, he met with the American Ambassador in Islamabad. This earned him the designation of being tagged an American lackey, and within a few days, several missiles were fired into his bedroom window. "Luckily," he said with a shrug, "I was out of the house."

Several AK-47s leaned against the back wall of the room where Afridi, Shuja, Zargar, and I were sitting. I asked Afridi whether the situation in the tribal areas could be remedied and settled peacefully. He shook his head back and forth. The whole system has been disrupted, he said, and the power of traditional and secular politicians is in decline. Afridi pointed to Shuja, whose tribal title, he argued, should be a badge of respect, not a target. He faulted the state. "Economic independence, the bondage of Islam, and the Army are the only three factors keeping Pakistan together," he said.

I pressed him on the threat posed by the Taliban. Like Shamroz, he looked as if I'd questioned his ability to defend himself.

"We can raise an army of 10,000 to 20,000 people in two months," he bragged. "We could have an army of 100,000 if we really mobilized our resources." At that moment, my thoughts drifted to some of the stories I had heard in Bannu, like the one about the man avenging his sister's death by taking his gun and joining the Talibs in the mountains. Could the ANP possibly match the number of Taliban being created and recruited daily? *Every death will be avenged. This blood is not as cheap as some think it is. One dead creates hundreds of avengers.* Is every farmer today, I wondered, really a potential Taliban fighter tomorrow?

I asked Afridi how, considering the *Pukhtunwali* and how the honor of the thousands of Pashtuns is being violated daily by the Pakistan Army in Waziristan, he sees the future. "If there is a genuine federation not perpetually ruled by the army and held back by religion," he said, "we can consider being a part of this Pakistan." He ran his long fingers through a strand of his shimmering, silver hair, pursed his lips, and continued, "But when I think of reality, I see it bleak and dark." □

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Author: Schmidle, Nicholas
Title: ICWA Letters (South Asia)
ISSN: 1083-4257
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia, The Americas; Mideast/North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Europe/Russia

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4257) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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