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## The Truth About Talibanistan

By Aryn Baker / Kabul, Afghanistan

The residents of Dara Adam Khel, a gunsmiths' village 30 miles south of Peshawar, Pakistan, awoke one morning last month to find their streets littered with pamphlets demanding that they observe Islamic law. Women were instructed to wear all-enveloping burqas and men to grow their beards. Music and television were banned. Then the jihadists really got serious. These days, dawn is often accompanied by the wailing of women as another beheaded corpse is found by the side of the road, a note pinned to the chest claiming that the victim was a spy for either the Americans or the Pakistani government. Beheadings are recorded and sold on DVD in the area's bazaars. "It's the knife that terrifies me," says Hafizullah, 40, a local arms smith. "Before they kill you, they sharpen the knife in front of you. They are worse than butchers."

Stories like these are being repeated across the tribal region of Pakistan, a rugged no-man's-land that forms the country's border with Afghanistan--and that is rapidly becoming home base for a new generation of potential terrorists. Fueled by zealotry and hardened by war, young religious extremists have overrun scores of towns and villages in the border areas, with the intention of imposing their strict interpretation of Islam on a population unable to fight back. Like the Taliban in the late 1990s in Afghanistan, the jihadists are believed to be providing leaders of al-Qaeda with the protection they need to regroup and train new operatives. U.S. intelligence officials think that Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, may have found refuge in these environs. And though 49,000 U.S. and NATO troops are stationed just across the border in Afghanistan, they aren't authorized to operate on the Pakistani side. Remote, tribal and deeply conservative, the border region is less a part of either country than a world unto itself, a lawless frontier so beyond the control of the West and its allies that it has earned a name of its own: Talibanistan.

Since Sept. 11, the strategic hinge in the U.S.'s campaign against al-Qaeda has been Pakistan,

handmaiden to the Taliban movement that turned Afghanistan into a sanctuary for bin Laden and his lieutenants. While members of Pakistan's intelligence services have long been suspected of being in league with the Taliban, the Bush Administration has consistently praised Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf for his cooperation in rooting out and apprehending members of bin Laden's network. But the Talibanization of the borderlands--and their role in arming and financing insurgents in Afghanistan--has renewed doubts about whether Musharraf still possesses the will to face down the jihadists.

Those doubts are surfacing at a time when Musharraf confronts his biggest political crisis since grabbing power eight years ago. Since March 12, Pakistani streets have been the scene of clashes between police and thousands of lawyers and opposition activists outraged by Musharraf's decision to suspend the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, for alleged abuse of office. Musharraf's critics say the President is attempting to rig the system to ensure he stays in power. Their ire boiled over when Pakistani police raided a television station to prevent it from covering protests outside the Supreme Court. Some Pakistanis who have excused Musharraf's authoritarianism in the past now portray him as a jackbooted dictator. "I think he has ruined himself," says retired Lieut. General Hamid Gul, former director general of the Pakistani intelligence organization Inter-Services Intelligence. "He's not going to be able to placate the forces he has unleashed."

Because Musharraf also heads Pakistan's army, it's unlikely that he will be forced from office. But a loss of support from his moderate base could deepen his dependence on fundamentalist parties, which are staunch supporters of the Taliban. If the protests against Musharraf continue, he will be even less inclined to crack down on the militants holding sway in Talibanistan--grim news for the U.S. and its allies and good news for their foes throughout the region. Says a senior U.S. military official in Afghanistan: "The bottom line is that the Taliban can do what they want in the tribal areas because the [Pakistani] army is not going to come after them."

In fact, the territory at the heart of Talibanistan--a heavily forested band of mountains that is officially called North and South Waziristan--has never fully submitted to the rule of any country. The colonial British were unable to conquer the region's Pashtun tribes and allowed them to run their own affairs according to local custom. In exchange, the tribesmen protected the subcontinental empire from northern invaders. Following independence in 1947, Pakistan continued the arrangement.

After 9/11, Islamabad initially left the tribal areas alone. But when it became obvious that al-Qaeda and Taliban militants were crossing the border to escape U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan sent in the first of what eventually became 80,000 troops. They had some success: the Pakistani army captured terrorist leaders and destroyed training camps. But the harder the military pressed, the more locals resented its presence, especially when civilians were killed in botched raids against terrorists.

As part of peace accords signed last September with tribal leaders in North Waziristan, the Pakistani military agreed to take down roadblocks, stop patrols and return to their barracks. In exchange, local militants promised not to attack troops and to end cross-border raids into Afghanistan. The accords came in part because the Pakistani army was simply unable to tame the region. Over the past two years, it has lost more than 700 troops there. The change in tactics, says Gul, was an admission that the Pakistani military had "lost the game."

The army isn't the only one paying the price now. Since Pakistani forces scaled back operations in the border region, the insurgency in Afghanistan has intensified. Cross-border raids and suicide bombings aimed at U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan have tripled, according to the senior U.S. military official. He concedes that "the Pakistanis are in a very difficult position. You could put 50,000 men on that border, and you wouldn't be able to seal it."

The troop drawback has allowed Pakistani militants allied with the Taliban to impose their will on the border areas. They have established Shari'a courts and executed "criminals" on the basis of Islamic law. Even Pakistani-army convoys are sometimes escorted by Taliban militants to ensure safe passage, a scene witnessed by TIME in North Waziristan one recent afternoon. "The state has withdrawn and ceded this territory," says Samina Ahmed of the International Crisis Group. "[The Taliban] have been given their own little piece of real estate."

The militants are using sympathetic mosques in Talibanistan to recruit fighters to attack Western troops in Afghanistan, according to tribal elders in the region. With cash and religious fervor, they lure young men to join their battle and threaten local leaders so they will deliver the support of their tribes. Malik Haji Awar Khan, 55, head of the 2,000-strong Mutakhel Wazir tribe of North Waziristan, was approached a year ago to join the Taliban cause. When he refused, militants kidnapped his teenage sons. "They thought they could make me join them, but I am tired of fighting," says Khan, who battled alongside the Afghan mujahedin in the war against the Soviets. "This is a jihad dictated by outsiders, by al-Qaeda. It is not a holy war. They just want power and money."

Tribal leaders interviewed by TIME say they do not support the aims of the jihadists. But the Taliban's campaign of fear has worn down local resistance. Malik Sher Muhammad Khan, a tribal elder from Wana, says, "The Taliban walk through the streets shouting that children shouldn't go to school because they are learning modern subjects like math and science. But we want to be modern. It's not just the girls. In my village, not a single person can even sign his name." Khan estimates that only 5% of the inhabitants of Waziristan actively support the militants. Others benefit financially by providing services and renting land for training camps. The rest, he says, acquiesce out of fear. A few months ago, militants

stormed his compound in retaliation for his outspoken criticism of their presence in the area. During the melee, a grenade killed his wife. "If I had weapons, maybe I could have saved her," he says. "We have no way to make them leave."

The emergence of Talibanistan may directly threaten the U.S. Locals say the region The emergence of Talibanistan may directly threaten the West too. Locals say the region has become one big terrorist-recruitment camp, where people as young as 17 are trained as suicide bombers. "Here, teenagers are greeted with the prayers 'May Allah bless you to become a suicide bomber,'" says Obaidullah Wazir, 35, a young tribesman in Miranshah. National Intelligence Director John McConnell told the Senate Armed Services Committee last month that "al-Qaeda is forging stronger operational connections that radiate outward from their camps in Pakistan to affiliated groups and networks throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Europe." Muzafar Khan, a headman from one of the local tribes, told TIME that Uzbek commander Tahir Yuldashev, leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and a suspected confidant of bin Laden's, commands some Uzbeks, Chechens, Arabs and local fighters from his base in the borderlands. "We know they are al-Qaeda," says Khan. "They are foreigners, they have different faces, and they don't speak Pashto." He claims that "their camps are easy to find. Even a child could show you."

The camps hold from 10 to 300 militants and are usually hidden deep in the forest, according to local residents. They have simple structures, low concrete-and-brick buildings with high walls. Some have underground bunkers for protection in case of attack. Outsiders easily mistake them for traditional village housing. "We know they exist," says the U.S. military official in Afghanistan. "But it's like finding a needle in a haystack." A Pakistani intelligence official says there are training camps in the region and that Pakistan is doing everything it can to find them and destroy them. "I don't say that [foreigners] are not here, but wherever we know of their presence, we go after them and take action," he says. The best hope for dislodging al-Qaeda from the region may be local tribesmen, who have recently engaged in heavy clashes with foreign and local militants around the town of Wana.

Will Musharraf join the fight? Though the U.S. is pressing Musharraf to do more to rout terrorists in Pakistan, his political survival still depends on parties that resent his ties to Washington. There is a widespread view in Pakistan that Vice President Dick Cheney, during his trip to Pakistan two weeks ago, reprimanded Musharraf for failing to rein in the militants. But officials on both sides say the partnership between Bush and Musharraf remains solid. "Is it doing more? Well, yeah, it's doing more. We all gotta do more, do better, do different. It's a war," says a senior Western diplomat in Pakistan. "But for folks to sit there in Washington or London or wherever and say, 'Damn it! We're tired of this. Go fix it,' is not hugely helpful."

That may be true. But the Bush Administration is beginning to recognize that to stabilize Afghanistan

and prevent the rebirth of al-Qaeda, it has to contain the growth of Talibanistan. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher announced in Islamabad that the U.S. intends to give an extra \$750 million to Musharraf over the next five years to support development in the tribal areas. "I think this commitment to the development of Pakistan, this commitment to a long-term relationship, is another example of the very broad and deep relationship we have and that we are developing with Pakistan," Boucher said. "We have a fundamental interest in the success of Pakistan as a moderate, stable, democratic Muslim nation."

That infusion of U.S. money would go far toward developing a region nearly devoid of civil infrastructure. There's no doubt that in the long run, schools, hospitals, roads and electricity would do much more to quell militancy than would an increased military presence. But that kind of development takes years. As the militants consolidate power, Musharraf needs to take bolder steps. The judicial crisis and the resulting protests have weakened Musharraf's credibility among the moderate, secular Pakistanis who could provide a bulwark against the threat of jihadism. Musharraf has pledged to hold general elections at the end of the year, but regaining the support of moderate groups may require him to go further and open up the vote to opposition leaders Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, who have both been exiled. If Musharraf can prove that he is committed to democracy, Pakistanis may well choose to keep him in power. Armed with such a mandate, Musharraf would be better poised to tackle militancy in the tribal areas. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri concedes that the peace agreement with the tribes in Waziristan has "weaknesses" that the government is addressing. An official says Islamabad intends to send two new brigades of troops to seize back the initiative.

Last month the same mountain passes used by militants set on attacking U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan served as passage for an unlikely delegation of 45 tribal elders from Pakistan's borderlands. They were headed for a meeting with Hamid Karzai, the President of Afghanistan, who has openly criticized Musharraf's failure to stem Pakistani support for the Taliban. "We have had too many years of war, too many widows, too many orphans, too many amputees. If this jihad continues, it will destroy Afghanistan and Waziristan," said an elder. "We need help, and we no longer trust the Pakistani government." The leader of the delegation presented Karzai with a traditional Waziri turban, a great soft-serve swirl of butter-yellow silk. As he placed it on the President's head, he said, "You are our President. You can free us from this disaster. We are at your service, and we support you." That the tribesmen would turn to one of Musharraf's rivals for help against the Taliban is a telling indictment of his leadership. And if Musharraf doesn't find a way to re-establish control over Talibanistan, he may find his backers in Washington giving up on him too.

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