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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 8/2010

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Steinberg, Guido; Wagner, Christian; Wörmer, Nils (2010) : Pakistan against the Taliban: Wave of arrests weakens Afghan insurgents, but still doesn't signal strategic shift, SWP Comments, No. 8/2010, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256113>

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Pakistan against the Taliban

Wave of Arrests Weakens Afghan Insurgents, but Still Doesn't Signal Strategic Shift

Guido Steinberg, Christian Wagner and Nils Wörmer

Since January 2010, Pakistani security forces have arrested nearly a dozen leading figures of the Afghan Taliban. While these arrests have dealt a serious blow to the Taliban, Pakistan's leadership has not made any fundamental changes to its policy for dealing with insurgents. Pakistan still clings to its objective of exercising significant influence on Afghanistan's political fortunes and will continue to look to elements within the Taliban as an ends to fulfilling this objective. Current actions should be seen as more of a reaction to changes in the larger political situation. Pressure has long been placed on Islamabad by the USA to finally take effective action against the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan's military leadership wants to participate in talks that are currently being conducted with the Taliban and therefore also presents itself as willing to cooperate. The arrests have caused shifts within the Taliban's internal power structure, which also has an impact on the situation in Kunduz and German troops in Afghanistan.

On February 15, 2010, it was announced that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had succeeded in cooperation with the CIA in arresting Mulla Abdul Ghani Baradar near Pakistan's port city Karachi at the end of January 2010.

This was the hardest blow dealt to the Taliban since 2001. Up until this point, Mulla Baradar was said to be the Afghan Taliban's second in command and the closest associate of their uncontested leader, Mulla Omar. While Omar (like Osama bin Laden for al-Qaeda) is more of a symbolic figure and has less operative importance, Baradar functioned as the organization's military leader.

In the weeks following Baradar's capture, additional high-ranking leaders of the Afghan Taliban were arrested on Pakistani territory. These included Maulawi Abdul Kabir, the regional commander responsible for Eastern Afghanistan, and the "shadow governors" of the Kunduz and Baghlan provinces, Mulla Abdul Salam and Mulla Mir Mohammed. Most recently, Mulla Agha Jan Mutassim, the Taliban's chief negotiator during the latest talks in Saudi Arabia, was arrested in early March, when he was staying near Karachi. According to press reports, Pakistani security authorities have arrested additional leading Taliban figures. As a result of the latest wave of arrests, the

Taliban's most important executive body – the so-called Quetta Shura – has been considerably weakened.

Pakistan and the Taliban

To date, Pakistan's leadership has always viewed the Afghan Taliban as an indispensable element of its Afghanistan policy. The arrests have now raised the question as to whether Pakistan has changed this policy.

Since its emergence at the start of the 1990s, the Taliban have been an instrument of Pakistan's army and the ISI. In the 1980s, the army supported seven Afghan mujahedeen groups (the so-called Peshawar seven) and also steered them to a certain extent. The largest recipient of Pakistani and American weapon shipments and financial support was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan). Since Hekmatyar was unsuccessful in the civil war after 1992, the Pakistani military turned away from its earlier favorite.

Instead, Pakistan started supporting the newly established Taliban movement in 1994 in the Afghan province of Kandahar. Within just three years, Pakistan's new clients succeeded in taking over large portions of Afghanistan including its capital, Kabul. This also meant an important success for Pakistan, which had achieved its goal of exercising significant influence on politics in its neighboring country.

This approach was an element of Pakistan's conflict with India, which is the focal point of Islamabad's foreign and security policies. Pakistan's army wants to control Afghanistan in order to have the 'strategic depth', which it believes is necessary if a military confrontation ever arises with India.

This scenario explains Pakistan's profoundly ambivalent policies following the American invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001. On the one hand, Islamabad felt compelled to support the USA's military intervention and to assist in the hunt for al-Qaeda. On

the other hand, however, Pakistan allowed for the Taliban and its associates to retreat across to the Pakistani side of the border and to organize the insurgency against the coalition troops and the new Afghan administration. The army leadership observed with concern that instead of the Taliban, now it was allies of Pakistan's major rival, India, who formed part of the government in Kabul. Pakistan then continued with its ambivalent policy as the insurgency in Afghanistan increased in intensity from 2005/2006. The army leadership hoped this would provide them with leverage to bring Pakistan's interests to bear in Afghanistan.

It was not until 2009 that a partial rethinking of this policy seemed to take hold. The cause for this shift can be traced to activities by the Pakistani Taliban, which aim primarily at combating the Pakistani state. The Pakistani Taliban groups combined under the umbrella of the Pakistani Taliban Movement (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, TTP), established in December 2007. Due to tight interactions among the Pash-tuns on both sides of the border, the government's tolerance for the Afghan Taliban and their cooperation with their Pakistani counterparts have contributed to an increasing "Talibanization" of Pakistan's border region (Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA).

Apparently a line in the sand was crossed when the Pakistani Taliban expanded their sphere of influence beyond the tribal regions along the Afghan/Pakistan border, where state control had already collapsed anyway. Initially, Islamabad accepted the fact that the Taliban had taken over control of the Swat Valley. As the Taliban began to seep into the bordering areas, thereby approaching dangerously close to Islamabad, Pakistan's army decided to go on a counter-offensive in May 2009.

Following the killing of TTP leader Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009 by a US drone strike, Pakistan's military began a major offensive in South Waziristan. Under its new leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, the

TTP along with al-Qaeda and militant Pakistani groups initiated an unprecedented terrorist campaign in Pakistan's major cities, which continues to this date.

During its offensive, Pakistan's army avoided taking action against groups which concentrate on the war in Afghanistan, such as the Haqqani network. This underlined once again that it wants to continue to use these groups as Pakistani policy instruments. Even the arrests at the start of 2010 should not be seen as sufficient evidence for a shift in Pakistan's policy. Statements in early February by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, Ashfaq Kayani, speak to this conclusion. He affirmed that Pakistan's army is adhering to its objective of looking to Afghanistan to address Pakistan's lack of strategic depth in its conflict with India.

The Wave of Arrests

With the wave of arrests over the first months of 2010 and the de facto destruction of the Quetta Shura, Pakistan's leadership reacted to the new overall political situation. The timing of its actions is an indicator for this causality. The announcement of Baradar's arrest coincided with the start of the American offensive in Helmand and should be seen primarily as a reaction to America's new Afghanistan strategy. Among politicians, journalists and scholars, three different explanations are offered for Pakistan's actions: American pressure, Pakistan's attempt to guarantee its influence on the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban, and infighting within the Taliban movement.

American Pressure

The most obvious interpretation for the events is that Pakistan's leaders have yielded to longstanding American pressure and are now being rewarded for their cooperation. This interpretation is supported by press releases from early March 2010, according to which the USA is supplying Pakistan's air force with additional

equipment for F-16 fighter jets as well as munitions and night-vision equipment. An agreement has also been reached to supply Pakistan with 18 additional F-16s in the spring or summer of 2010. This equipment does not serve a purpose in counter-terrorism and must be seen in connection with the India-Pakistan conflict.

Pakistan has been trying for years to increase the power of its air force by buying new F-16 jets and by modernizing those it currently owns, but it does not possess the necessary financial resources. At the same time, the USA has been very cautious in supplying weaponry of this sort as it is worried about further heightening the arms race between Islamabad and Delhi.

A Pakistani Agenda

According to a second interpretation, Pakistan's army has taken the initiative as a reaction to negotiations between Afghanistan's conflict parties, which have been underway for some months now.

Talks have already taken place in the fall of 2008 and early 2009 in Saudi Arabia as well as in late January of 2010 in the Maldives. The parties involved were the Afghan government and representatives of the Afghan insurgency, principally the Taliban and members of Hezb-e Islami. The extent to which the Taliban participated on behalf of Mulla Omar is not entirely clear. According to media reports, Pakistani negotiators were not involved in the discussions in Saudi Arabia or the Maldives. Given Afghanistan's importance for Pakistan and the close relationship with the Afghan Taliban, this was unacceptable for Islamabad.

Along the same lines, observers argue that Pakistan's leadership used the arrests to demonstrate its power and state its case for being incorporated into negotiations over Afghanistan's future. In fact, Mulla Baradar is seen as an important pragmatist within the Taliban leadership who would probably not dismiss the option of negotiation. An even more important fact is that

Taliban negotiator Mulla Agha Jan Mutasim, who is one level below Baradar in the Taliban hierarchy, was present at the talks in Saudi Arabia.

Infighting among the Taliban

Internal conflicts among the Taliban could also have played a role in the arrests. According to this interpretation, opponents of a negotiated settlement intentionally fed information to the Pakistanis about those members of the leadership who were prepared, in principle, to enter into talks.

It is entirely possible that the Pakistani authorities received information in specific cases from within the Taliban movement. This would not be unprecedented. Mulla Osmani, who was killed by an American airstrike in December 2006 and Mulla Dadullah, who was shot by British special forces in May 2007, are examples of high-ranking Taliban figures, who by all appearances were tracked down based on tips from within their own ranks.

Possible motives for this type of betrayal include power rivalries based on political and strategic differences of opinion as well as personal resentment. It is striking that with the capture of Baradar and Mutassim, two figures were removed, who either did not fundamentally dismiss a negotiated solution (Baradar) or even went so far as to support it (Mutassim). It is also possible, however, that Baradar awakened envy and resentment among his opponents due to his prominent position within the Taliban leadership. Mutassim's arrest, in particular, is a hard blow to those Taliban elements which seem interested in negotiations.

Consequences for the Taliban

The arrests have weakened the Taliban considerably. This carries even greater consequences as more and more US troops are being moved into Southern Afghanistan and the coming year is supposed to be crucial for the future of the Afghanistan conflict. If Pakistan maintains its pressure

on the Taliban, they could be decisively repulsed in Afghanistan. If the arrests, however, are only an expression of a short-term policy change, the Taliban will compensate for these losses within months.

Baradar's capture meant not only that Mulla Omar had lost his deputy and military chief. Mulla Baradar was also the last remaining member of a quartet of senior commanders (the others were Mulla Obaidullah, Mulla Osmani and Mulla Dadullah), who were decisively involved in converting the Taliban into a guerilla movement following the loss of power in 2001.

Mulla Omar continues to be the uncontested leader of the Afghan Taliban. From 1996 to 2001, he was the de facto head of state of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Since 2001, the newly constructed leadership structure of the Taliban has been dominated by the so-called Rahbari Shura (leadership council). It consists of about 18 people and has committees including ones for the military, finances and propaganda. The leadership of the movement is arranged within these committees in different constellations of people.

From 2002 to 2009, the leadership council met principally around Quetta in the Balochistan province (giving rise to its name, the Quetta Shura). At the end of 2009, however, there was increasing evidence that Mulla Omar and other senior figures had moved to Karachi. This showed a reaction to American warnings in the fall of 2009 that air strikes would be expanded to the Quetta region and no longer be limited to the tribal regions.

The Rahbari Shura controls the regional shuras responsible for coordinating military operations in Quetta, Peshawar and Gerdi Jangal, as well as the Miran Shah Shura in North Waziristan (although this shura is considerably more independent than the others). The regional shuras coordinate and support the activities of the shadow governors, who are assigned leadership councils at the provincial level that are also called shuras. According to an estimate from the ISAF Director of Intelligence, the

Taliban had installed shadow governors in 33 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces by the end of 2009. For this reason, some observers say that there are in fact two different governments and governance systems in Afghanistan.

Independent of these formalized leadership structures, the Taliban movement was dominated by a number of exceptional personalities in the years following the military defeat of 2001. Mulla Akhtar Osmani, Mulla Obaidullah, Mulla Dadullah and Mulla Baradar were all members of the Rahbari Shura or at least the military committee of the Quetta Shura. Due to their reputations as military commanders and their privileged access to Mulla Omar, they all had much more power than was accorded their formalized positions. Following the death of Akhtar Osmani in December 2006, the arrest of Obaidullah by Pakistani authorities in March 2007 and the spectacular killing of Dadullah in May 2007, Mulla Baradar had risen through the ranks to become the uncontested second in command to Mulla Omar.

Over the past two and a half years, Baradar and his closest associates oversaw daily military actions and also had a considerable influence on the political agenda of the insurgency. It remains to be seen whether Mulla Baradar can be replaced. Following his capture, several commanders were named as potential replacements. Most observers believe that Mulla Abdul Qayum Zakir, a former Guantanamo detainee, will take over Baradar's position. It is possible, however, that Baradar's functions will be taken on by several commanders, which would make the movement less susceptible in the case of future losses.

New Balance of Power

The weakening of the Quetta Shura has also changed the balance of power within the Afghan insurgency. The wave of arrests has indirectly strengthened the position of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami, in

particular, which has thus far not been affected by Pakistan's activities.

The insurgency is dominated by three groups, which are currently cooperating and the majority of which are nominally under Mulla Omar's control. These groups are the Taliban itself, the Haqqani network and the Hezb-e Islami.

The Taliban groups under the Quetta Shura and Mulla Omar are based in Pakistani Balochistan and control the insurgency in the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul in Southern Afghanistan. The wave of arrests in Pakistan affected these insurgents in particular.

The insurgency in the Eastern provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost, on the other hand, are controlled by the so-called Haqqani network. Numerous attacks in Kabul can also be attributed to this organization. It is named after Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was already a well known commander of Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s. Its fallback areas are in Pakistan's tribal area of North Waziristan and thus far it has largely been spared from Pakistan's attacks. However, the Haqqani network has been a repeated target of American drone attacks for about two years now.

Hezb-e Islami is the driving force behind the insurgency in the northern part of the Afghan-Pakistan border region. Its fallback area is the region around Peshawar and to the north of it. Hekmatyar's group is principally active in the Afghan provinces of Kunar, Nuristan, Laghman and Kapisa. The fact that Pakistan's security forces did not expand their pattern of arrests in early 2010 to include Hezb-e Islami could be an indication that Islamabad wants to strengthen Hekmatyar's position within the insurgency.

It is possible that Pakistan's actions have already had an impact on relations among Afghanistan's insurgent groups. Following the arrest of Mir Mohammed, the Taliban's shadow governor in the northern province of Baghlan, intense fighting erupted in early March between the Taliban and Hezb-e Islami.

Repercussions for Kunduz

The wave of arrests also carries consequences for the situation in Kunduz. Mulla Baradar is seen as the architect of the Taliban offensive in the German area of responsibility. It can be assumed that the arrests of the shadow governors of Baghlan and Kunduz were painful for the Taliban.

During the 2001 war, Mulla Baradar was already an important commander of Taliban forces during fighting in Kunduz. In April 2009, he ordered intensified attacks on German soldiers there and also made the necessary resources available. Thus, Baradar created the conditions for the Taliban to substantially expand their activities in Kunduz in the spring and summer of 2009.

The shadow governor Mulla Abdul Salam served as the link between Mulla Baradar and the Quetta Shura, on the one side, and the Taliban groups in the province on the other. Apparently, he also fought in 2001 under Baradar's command and in recent years advanced to become one of the most important field commanders in northern Afghanistan. Just a few days after Baradar's arrest, Abdul Salam was captured while on the way to a meeting with his superior. Mulla Mir Mohammed, shadow governor of Baghlan, which is the province bordering Kunduz to the south, was also arrested causing a weakening of the Taliban in the German deployment zone. The transit routes through Baghlan are important not only for the ISAF, but also for the Taliban and other insurgents. Fighting between the Taliban and Hezb-e Islami in March 2010 can apparently be traced back to the power vacuum that was created by Mir Mohammed's arrest.

The Taliban, however, are just one of several insurgent groups in Kunduz. Operations are also conducted there by Hezb-e Islami, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and possibly the Haqqani network, which means that a weakening of the Taliban does not necessarily translate into a dip in the insurgency. It is rather to be feared that fighting in the province will initially

escalate because US troops are currently being moved there. Since the US government no longer is counting on the German military to participate in a substantive way in fighting the insurgency, the American military will take over this responsibility in the province as far as possible.

Outlook

The wave of arrests in Pakistan is still not clear evidence for a strategic change in Islamabad. On the contrary, it seems to be a short-term reaction to changes in America's strategy for Afghanistan and the Taliban. Indicators of a distinct shift in Pakistan's policies would be the arrests of key figureheads of the insurgency such as Mulla Omar, Jalaluddin Haqqani or Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Nevertheless, Pakistan has dealt the Afghan Taliban major blows. The extent to which the Quetta Shura is still capable of action is questionable, which means that contact with the respective commanders of the movement in Afghanistan will be difficult in the coming weeks. The military hub of the Taliban's operations in its heartland in Southern Afghanistan will be crippled – at least temporarily. This considerably increases the chances of success for the American offensive in the southern provinces.

With their base of operations now unsafe, how quickly can the remaining members of the Quetta Shura reorganize? To what extent will the leadership councils in Peshawar and Miran Shah, which are also under pressure, be able to take over the Quetta Shura's functions and compensate for its collapse? This all depends primarily on further actions by Pakistan's security forces. If they maintain this pressure, the Afghan Taliban will lose important fallback areas, which could be a major blow to Mulla Omar's movement. If the pattern of arrests stops, however, the Taliban will likely succeed in renewing their leadership structures on Pakistani territory within a few months.

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ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Robert Blasiak

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 30/2010)

Map

Afghanistan and Pakistan, Provinces and Regional Surroundings



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