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## **Unholy Nexus: Talibanism and Sectarianism in Pakistan’s “Tribal Areas”**

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Sectarian violence has added a new dimension to the conflict in Pakistan’s “tribal areas” (Federally Administered Tribal Areas – FATA). Unlike in other tribal agencies, the conflict in Kurram and Orakzai is complicated due to sectarian divisions that have flared into violent encounters between Sunni and Shi’a communities. Rising sectarianism in the FATA is a direct offshoot of growing talibanisation: different strains of militancy have overlapped to the point where it might not seem relevant to treat sectarian violence as separate from al Qaeda attacks and militancy in Punjab as different from FATA.

## A HISTORY OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN THE KURRAM AGENCY

Sectarian violence is not a new phenomenon in Kurram, the only tribal agency with a significant Shi'a population. Around 40 % of the region's 500 000 inhabitants are Shi'a. Upper Kurram is inhabited largely by Turis – who belong to the only Pashtun tribe which is wholly Shi'a – while Lower Kurram is inhabited by Sunnis, mostly Bangash<sup>1</sup>.

Turis form the largest tribe and occupy the most fertile land. They were considered by the British as *alag* (separate), apart from their neighbours because of their origin (Turkish or Mongol) and their Shi'a faith. They were under Bangash domination until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they attacked the Bangash – apparently in retaliation for an insult to a Turi woman –, turned them into *hamsaya* (dependants) and pushed them into Lower Kurram. During British rule, the Turis requested that the British take over the administration of Kurram because they feared aggression from the neighboring Sunni tribes. This explains why the Turis of Kurram who had been paying revenues to the Afghan state since the 1850s found themselves on the British side of the Durand Line. The agency headquarters at Parachinar located in the parrot beak inside Afghanistan are less than 100 km from Kabul.

There are longstanding disputes over ownership of forests, hills, land and water resources between Sunni and Shi'a tribes and sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s. But it was the massive influx of Afghan refugees in the 1980s that caused a distortion in the demographic and religious balance of the area. Afghan refugees introduced a militant brand of Sunni ideology at a time when the Shi'a of Parachinar under the leadership of Allama Arif Hussain al Hussaini were being radicalized by the Iranian revolution. The Turis were seen as a hurdle in the jihad as they refused to allow Sunni Afghan refugees into their areas. Since the 1980s hundreds of tribesmen have been killed in

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<sup>1</sup> The Bangash clans living in Lower Kurram are Sunnis, but other Bangash clans living in Upper Kurram are Shi'a. They claim to be of Arab origin. See Teepu Mahabat Khan, *The Tribal Areas of Pakistan. A Contemporary Profile*, Lahore, Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2008.

sectarian fighting and over the years Sunni militants have taken control of dozens of villages of Turi and Bangash tribes while the government has seemed unable, or unwilling, to do anything<sup>2</sup>.

The first large scale attack took place in 1986 when the Turis prevented Sunni *mujahidin* from passing through to Afghanistan. General Zia ul Haq allowed a “purge” of the Turis at the hands of the Afghan *mujahidin* in conjunction with the local Sunni population<sup>3</sup>. There were major clashes again in 1996 after the murder of a college principal by Shi’a activists in Parachinar; over 200 Sunnis and Shi’a were killed.

#### **NEW PATTERNS OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN THE KURRAM**

The nature of the conflict has changed since 2001. The Shi’a did not offer shelter to al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban fleeing Tora Bora, some clans even denounced them to the authorities, which created bad blood between Sunnis and Shi’a.

The conflict took a new dimension from 2003 onwards. The FATA have become a sanctuary for Punjabi members of banned Sunni extremist groups – Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LJ) – who took shelter in the tribal areas, particularly in the Sunni dominated areas of Lower Kurram and Orakzai. Others joined them after the earthquake of October 2005 which had destroyed training camps in Azad Kashmir. JeM was reorganized under the leadership of Mufti Abdul Rauf, Masood Azhar’s brother, who established a training camp in Kohat, long a hotbed of sectarian violence and a

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<sup>2</sup> “From Kurram – with no love”, *The News*, March 26, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Times*, November 11, 2007.

stronghold of the SSP<sup>4</sup>. Javed Ibrahim Paracha, a former member of the National Assembly for Kohat and a strong supporter of the SSP, has declared openly that he is at war with the Shi'a.

Kurram has been in the grip of sectarian violence and under siege for the last two years: around 1600 persons have been killed and at least 5 000 others injured<sup>5</sup>. Jirgas have failed to stem the violence.

Clashes started in April 2007 after a procession in Parachinar was fired on<sup>6</sup>. Mortars and RPGs were used, resulting in heavy casualties – 215 dead and over 600 injured. The Sunnis accused Iran of providing money and weapons to Shi'a fighters and Mast Gul of the Harakat ul Mujahidin (HUM) warned that if the Pakistan army did not take action, Sunnis would come from other parts of the country to help the local Sunnis.

The storming of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007 was a turning point. The militants entrenched in the mosque were made to believe that the soldiers who led the assault were all Shi'a<sup>7</sup>. From the summer of 2007, the Shi'a in the army and the paramilitary forces have become a direct target. Paramilitary troops were frequently abducted; Sunnis were generally released, but Shi'a identified by their name or the marks left on their back by Muharram flagellations were badly treated; some were even beheaded.

A new spell of violence started in November 2007. Local Sunnis were joined by Taliban from Waziristan under the command of Hakeemullah Mehsud based in the Orakzai Agency. The army used helicopter gunships to control Parachinar, but the fighting continued in the rural areas. The clashes escalated during the summer of 2008 while the federal government did

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<sup>4</sup> SSP and JeM appeared to be two wings of the same party. Soon after its creation in 2000, JeM became involved in sectarian warfare in Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> *The News*, December 7, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Dawn*, April 9, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> A pamphlet was circulated in Islamabad informing of the arrival of the LJ to attack government forces whom they claimed were Shi'a. The Red mosque had long been associated with the SSP and JeM.

not intervene to stop the fighting, blaming a foreign hand for pitting the tribes against each other<sup>8</sup>.

The road from Parachinar to Peshawar passing through Orakzai has been closed for two years<sup>9</sup>, resulting in a shortage of food and medicine<sup>10</sup>. People going to Peshawar are forced to travel via Paktia and Kabul. Due to the attacks many Shi'a have migrated to other cities – mainly to Peshawar and Karachi – or have been forced into enclaves,<sup>11</sup> which make them easy targets.

After a temporary lull in the fighting in December 2008, a general perception that the Shi'a had emerged as the winners in the struggle led to retaliatory violence in other parts of the NWFP. A December 5, 2008 bomb blast in the Kucha Risaldar district of Peshawar where Shi'a from Parachinar form the majority community killed as many as 34 people and wounded over 120 others.

## **THE SPILL-OVER EFFECT OF THE KURRAM CONFLICT**

The sectarian clashes spilled over to the Orakzai Agency where some clans of the Orakzai tribe are Shi'a. This tribal agency created in 1973 does not share a border with Afghanistan and was relatively peaceful until October 2008<sup>12</sup>. The conflict in Orakzai is mainly over the ownership of the Syed Mir Anwar Shah shrine at Kalaya. This shrine, which originally belonged to the Shi'a, was given to the Sunnis during British rule. Later the Shi'a were

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<sup>8</sup> *Dawn*, September 16, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> It was reopened for 20 days in January 2009 after a peace *jirga* but closed again owing to firing at travelers. It is the only road connecting Kurram Agency with the rest of the country.

<sup>10</sup> It was reported in May 2009 that 43 children had died in 3 weeks because of a severe shortage of life-saving medicines; *Daily Times*, May 21, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> For instance "Shi'agarh" situated 10 miles from Kohat on the road to Hangu.

<sup>12</sup> *Herald Monthly*, October 2008.

allowed to visit and ensure its maintenance. Major clashes erupted in 1927, leading to the eviction of all Shi'as from Orakzai. The shrine was renovated in 1999, but in 2000 local Taliban warned the Shi'a not to return to Kalaya and demolished the half-built Shi'a mosque. They also expelled the Shi'a from fertile land and forced them to pay *jiziya* (poll tax on non-Muslims). In October 2006, the shrine was reduced to rubble after a seven day battle over its ownership. People from both sects were banned from entering the disputed area<sup>13</sup>. The trouble in Kalaya continued, with a suicide-car bombing killing six people at a jirga called by the Shi'a to settle a dispute with the Sunnis in December 2008.

There is an economic dimension to the sectarian conflict in Orakzai. Shi'a are relatively affluent compared to Sunnis. They own huge properties, notably forests and hills. Sunnis prevent them from cutting their trees and selling them. Shi'a had also acquired contracts for developing coal mines, but they were expelled from the area by the Taliban who claimed that infidels had no right to extract coal.

Taliban have also imposed *jiziya* on some 35 Sikh families who have been living in Orakzai for centuries. They banished them from the agency, burnt their houses and looted their shops<sup>14</sup>. Thirteen Sikh families are still living in Lower Orakzai on land belonging to Shi'a where the Taliban have no control<sup>15</sup>.

The Taliban based in Lower Orakzai have also been stirring sectarian violence in Kohat and Hangu where sectarian tensions are rampant. In 2005 a suicide-bomber attacked a Muharram procession in Hangu, killing 40 people. The Hangu bazaar was torched and a curfew was imposed for four months. Clashes erupted again in January 2009 during Muharram, leaving 17 people killed and 30 injured.

Both sects accuse each other of drawing support from outside: the Sunnis are alleged to be backed by the Afghan Taliban and the Shi'a by Iran and Afghan Hazaras.

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily Times*, October 4, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> *The News*, April 29, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Dawn*, May 18, 2009.

There has been an upsurge in violence in 2009 due to the increase of operational spaces for jihadi-sectarian groups linked to the absence of writ of the State in the region. Traditional leaders from both sects have lost control over the situation as very young fighters fill the ranks on both sides of the conflict<sup>16</sup>. The violence shows few signs of abating as the Taliban are expanding their control over Kurram and Orakzai by backing sectarian fighting. Sectarian violence is likely to become endemic in the region.

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<sup>16</sup> *The News*, September 2, 2008.