

Resisting displacement by the Taliban in Pakistan

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Local tribal councils have organised traditional forms of militia to resist displacement caused by the Taliban in Pakistan's borderlands with Afghanistan.

The maintenance of local peace and order in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA) bordering Afghanistan is the responsibility of traditional tribal councils (*jirgas*). A *jirga* commonly resolves disputes peacefully but it also has the authority to form an ad hoc armed militia (known as a *lashkar*) in order to enforce its settlement of local disputes. The *jirga* obliges every family or clan to provide a number of men to fight. As such, a *lashkar* is made up of a broad cross-section of the male community.

Orakzai Agency (Tribal Area) has a population of some 225,000 and suffers from economic depression, corruption and bad governance. Violence is sometimes attributed to these factors, as well as to other less visible causes such as family, land and water disputes and struggles for control over markets and trade. However, human rights abuses by the Taliban and aerial bombing during Pakistani military operations are the main drivers of large-scale forced displacement.

The Taliban chose the Ali Khel tribe as its conduit for entering Orakzai. Ali Khel is the biggest tribe in the Agency, numbering 40,000 people of whom 5% are Shi'a. Militants entered the Ali Khel area in 2008, supported by two local Ali Khel tribal leaders. Local supporters of the two leaders joined them, as did other members of the tribe linked to *madrassas* (religious schools) and still others who took part in the war in Afghanistan, including local thugs. They organised intimidating public gatherings where young militants with covered faces stood alongside spirited jihadist speakers.

The Taliban appointed local judges to resolve disputes according to *shari'a* law, recruited local men and boys and set up jihadist *madrassas*.

The militants threatened and killed the area's tribal leaders and those who opposed their authority. They stripped the *jirgas* of their authority to settle disputes and banned all public meetings. Local people were also banned from carrying weapons. Punishment for opposition – particularly public beheadings – terrorised people into submission.

Taliban-endorsed kidnappings for ransom became common, and the Shi'a community was particularly targeted. Militants kidnapped and sometimes killed those who failed to pay a special tax that was imposed on Shi'a families, and/or ransacked their homes. Under these circumstances, Shi'a women and children fled the area, leaving the men behind. After the Taliban imposed a complete economic boycott on the Shi'a community and beheaded several Sunni tribesmen for failing to comply with it, the Shi'a elders decided to leave the area as well. Taliban followers looted the property they left behind, sold their crops and butchered their livestock.

Sunni and Shi'a people had by and large lived peacefully together in the same area for a long time, and so both Sunni and Shi'a tribesmen decided to act together in an effort to protect their communities from further abuse.

Attempts to prevent displacement

A grand *jirga* of 5,000 Ali Khels decided to form a *lashkar* to destroy all Taliban centres around the main Ali Khel towns of Daboori and Khadayzai. Its ranks comprised 2,000 farmers, labourers, local traders and other tribesmen. Following the formation of the *lashkar*, the *jirga* leaders sent a message to the displaced Shi'a that they could return to their homes. Within a few days, the Ali Khel *lashkar* had destroyed all Taliban centres in and around

Daboori and Khadayzai. Most of the militants fled; others were killed.

A *jirga* was then convened to decide how to treat, fine or punish the Ali Khel tribesmen who had supported the Taliban. A decision was reached to impose a fine of 200,000 Pakistani rupees (\$2,300) on each supporter. They were also given the choice of handing over a Kalashnikov or vacating their houses before they were burned down by *lashkar* men. As the *jirga's* deliberations came to an end, a Taliban vehicle loaded with explosives rammed into the *jirga*, killing some 200 people, including the Sunni-Shi'a Ali Khel leadership.

In spite of insistent requests, the security forces did not provide protection to the Ali Khels, and most families made a collective, *jirga*-backed decision to leave and were displaced, mainly to the homes of relatives in nearby towns. The tribal leadership would normally be expected to play a role in providing displaced families with basic needs but insecurity caused by targeted killings in the areas where the IDPs sought refuge meant that the Ali Khel *jirga* had little capacity to do so.

The IDPs also became a security liability in their areas of refuge, attracting unwelcome attention from both the Taliban and the Pakistani security forces. Members of the Taliban travel as civilians, some of them posing as IDPs, which means that the latter become targets of the security forces. And the Taliban also sometimes attack IDP targets, such as the suicide attack in April 2010 on an IDP aid distribution point. After this, Shi'a Ali Khel IDPs organised themselves in order to ensure security in places where they congregated.

The Story Khel is a small tribe of both Sunni and Shi'a from Lower Orakzai with 5,000 members. The Taliban established control in the Story Khel's Sunni-majority area after the assassination of the Ali

Khel leadership in October 2008. The nearby Shi'a Story Khel placed armed guards at checkpoints set up at the main entry points to their neighbourhoods, ensuring that Taliban fighters could not enter without alerting – and triggering a response from – their *lashkar*.

Early in 2010 the Sunni population of a village situated on the border between the Sunni and Shi'a areas had a confrontation with the Taliban. Interestingly, it was the women who initiated violent resistance against the Taliban. A group of female relatives of men who had been killed by them avenged their deaths by capturing five militants and beating them severely with farming tools. Despite an intervention by community elders, it became clear that the Taliban would avenge this incident and attack the village. A number of men armed themselves to defend the village, and a neighbouring Shi'a village supplied them with Kalashnikov rifles and ammunition. Sporadic fighting took place over a two-week period, by the end of which the 'victorious' but angry Taliban burnt down all 80 houses in the village.

The *jirga* leadership in both villages had previously discussed the possibility of the people from one having to flee en masse to the other in the event of an attack. The whole community was granted asylum in the neighbouring village where the *jirga* decided that tribal rivalries should be set aside during displacement. These villagers were initially accommodated in hosts' houses and then offered places to stay in schools, mosques and 'guesthouses'. The IDPs were treated as guests and given food throughout their four-month stay. They were also given loans to pay for additional expenses such as healthcare.

The village leaders realised that the burden of hosting the entire village on a long-term basis would be unsustainable, and that it was

also important for their security that the IDPs' village be cleared of the Taliban. In response to a request by the *jirga*, who argued that the Taliban would establish a base there from which to launch attacks on neighbouring Shi'a villages, the army cleared the village and most of the villagers were then able to return home. Meanwhile, the tribesmen in both villages strengthened their own security to withstand future attacks and prevent new displacements in the event of new Taliban attacks.

Conclusions

FATA tribes have shown themselves able to overcome sectarian differences to form armed *lashkars* with a responsible line of command capable of controlling a defined territory. As demonstrated in the case of the Ali Khel, the local nature and legitimacy of such organisations can make them extremely effective. The Ali Khel *lashkar* destroyed large parts

mobilised to protect and assist those in need.

Today the Ali Khels are still displaced, while the Story Khels have returned home. One reason for this difference is that the Ali Khel *lashkar* had no state support, whereas in the other case the army intervened to clear the village of the Taliban. *Lashkars* have never had a regional or national agenda and are not trained to fight an organisation such as the Taliban by themselves. Although the Taliban leaders are not rooted in the local communities they can overpower *lashkars* that stand alone militarily.

Neither *lashkar* ever had wider ambitions; they sought only to protect their communities but Taliban commanders have a jihadist agenda with global resonance, and it is the responsibility of national actors to address such threats.

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of the Taliban's infrastructure in their area in a couple of days, held the Taliban at bay and protected its territory and families.

Lashkars can also become IDPs and reorganise during displacement but tribal resources are mobilised differently in such a situation. In the case of the Ali Khel, they were