

Profile of New TTP Chief
Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud:
**Challenges and
Implications**



Profile of New TTP Chief
Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud:
Challenges and Implications

By Farhan Zahid

About The Author

Dr. Farhan Zahid earned his PhD in Terrorism Studies from the University of Brussels, Belgium. Dr. Zahid has authored more than 120 research papers and articles. He writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, ISIS, Islamist violent non-state actors in Pakistan, jihadi ideologies and the Afghan Taliban. He has also authored three books "Roots of Islamic Violent Activism in South Asia", published by Narratives (2014), "From Jihad to al-Qaeda to Islamic State", published by Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), 2015; and "The Al-Qaeda Network in Pakistan", published by Narratives (2015).

About PIPS

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) is an independent think-tank committed to provide an in-depth understanding and objective analyses of regional and global issues. PIPS provides international strategic thinkers a forum to play an active role in understanding and researching real and perceived threats to regional and global peace and security. The objective is to engage leading regional and international strategic thinkers, academicians and media persons in pursuance and production of knowledge of national, regional and global security issues and to promote awareness about the importance of peace and democracy. The goal will be achieved through independent policy analysis, and collection, processing, interpretation and dissemination of information and skills/training.

Following the killing of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) chief Mullah Fazlullah in a US drone strike in June 2018, the TTP's Central Shura (executive council) appointed Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as his successor.^{1 2}

With Noor Wali's appointment, the control and leadership of TTP has returned to the Mehsud tribe. The first two chiefs of TTP, Baitullah Mehsud (2007-2009) and Hakimullah Mehsud (2009-2013), were also from the Mehsud tribe. Meanwhile Fazlullah was a non-tribal and hailed from Yousafzai clan of Pashtuns from Swat district.

This brief presents the life history of the new leader of TTP.

Who is Noor Wali?

The 40-year old Noor Wali is a religious scholar and a prolific writer. He was born on June 26, 1978 in Machikhel Zafarkhel, sub-clan of Mehsud tribe and comes from Sararogha sub-district of South Waziristan Agency (SWA). Wali received his religious education from Faisalabad (Jamia Imdadia, Jamia Haleemia and Jamia Farooq-e-Azam), Gujranwala (Jamia Nusratul Uloom) and Karachi (Jamia Ahsan-ul-Uloom and Jamia Yaseenul Quran).³ He graduated in 1999, and for two years, taught as a teacher at Madrassa Imdad-ul-Uloom in South Waziristan.⁴ Within the Af-Pak jihadist circles, he is a well-respected militant commander for his religious and jihadist credentials. Noor Wali is also known by the *nom de guerre* of *Ghar Starga* (Hill's Eye).

Wali served as the deputy of first chief of TTP, Baitullah Mehsud; as a judge (*qazi*) of a TTP court; and briefly as manager of group's media operations. He also remained chief of TTP's Karachi chapter from June 2013 to May 2015. Later, he became the deputy of Khalid Mehsud aka Khan Said Sajna, the head of TTP's Mehsud faction, until his elimination in a drone strike Afghanistan's Paktika province in February in 2018. After that, Wali became the head of the Mehsud faction. In 2018, Fazlullah appointed him as his deputy.⁵

During the rise of the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s, Wali fought with the insurgent movement in Mazar-i-Sharif and Jabal-ul-Siraj. Later, he returned to his native area Tiaraza in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) and resumed his religious education.⁶ After 9/11 and the subsequent US intervention Afghanistan, he went back to Afghanistan as part of Maulana Mirajuddin's convoy of Islamist fighters to resist the US invasion of Afghanistan. He joined TTP in 2003 and led the organization against the military operation in 2004.⁷

In 2017, he authored a 690-page book entitled *Inqilab-e-Mehsud, South Waziristan: Firangi Raj se Amreeki Samraj Tak* (Mehsud Revolution, South Waziristan: From British Raj to American Imperialism).⁸ In this book, he claimed responsibility for carrying out the targeted assassination of the former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007.⁹ The book claims, "She (Benazir) allegedly planned to collaborate with the US against the mujahedeen if she returned to power."¹⁰ The book also provides a historical background of TTP's formation from South Waziristan. Wali also admits in the book that various operations carried out by Pakistani security institutions in different parts of the country hampered TTP's operations and forced it to flee to Afghanistan's border areas.¹¹

It was perhaps the first time at the jihadi landscape of Pakistan that a jihadi commander described the details of assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007. Mehsud not only claimed the role of TTP in assassinating her but also provided details of masterminds Moulvi

Imran, Ahmas alias Nasrullah, Qari Ismail, and Mullah Ihsan and suicide bombers Bilal alias Saeed and Ikramullah^{12 13}.

An Ideologue in Arms

From a madrasah student to jihadi and finally rising up to lead TTP, the case of Noor Wali Mehsud as a jihadi is a peculiar one. Having a bird's-eye view at his jihadi career one could assess that he is both an active Islamist militant and an ideologue. His long career that started as a student of religious studies at various different religious seminaries and at a later stage when he joined jihadi activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan during Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001) and then hosting Al-Qaeda and other foreign militants in tribal areas of Pakistan after the fall of Taliban regime in late December 2001. He fought alongside Afghan Taliban against Northern Alliance and later participated in pitched battles against Pakistani security forces in tribal areas of Pakistan.

Interestingly, Mehsud, while continuously fighting, also kept writing jihadi articles, monographs and books. In most cases, militant jihadis do not get engaged in research and writing, as their forte is militancy and tactics. Apart from his widely read book *Inqilab-e-Mehsud*, he also authored *Majmua tal Masail man Fiqah al-Jihad*, *Ahkaam al-Ghanaam Walasari*, and *Maidan ul Masail man Fiqah al-Jihad*.

This clearly shows that Mehsud's elevation as Emir of TTP would inspire more to join jihadi activities in Pakistan, as he is an inspiring figure in terms of both militancy and dissemination of jihadi thoughts and ideology.

Strategist and Alliance Maker

Mehsud appears quite practical from his writings and as explained earlier is both a jihadi and an ideologue. As a seasoned war historian, he penned details of battles fought against Pakistani, Afghan and US forces in *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* and also provided a detailed figures of casualties (perhaps exaggerated), enemy's material losses, and outline of jihadi strategy and future course of action. Such details and data have previously not been collected and publicly provided by any jihadi commander.

Mehsud explains the case of jihad in Pakistan as 'defensive jihad'. To him, the tribes were protecting the *Ansars* (on-the-run Al-Qaeda and other foreign militants) and providing them shelters from Americans. It was only after that Pakistani military at the behest of America invaded the tribal areas and demanded tribals to handover of foreign jihadi, a demand against the tribal principles of *Malmastia* (Hospitality) and hence started the fighting hitherto in progress¹⁴.

According to Mehsud, the real jihad is against US forces in occupied Afghanistan to restore the Islamic Emirate while using tribal areas of Pakistan as base of operations and safe haven for both Taliban and Al-Qaeda. He further explains the goals and aims of the jihadi movement as:

- Maintaining the independent status for Mehsud tribe
- Defeating the US in Afghanistan
- Establishing caliphate in Afghanistan

He termed America's war in Afghanistan and ouster of Islamic Emirate as a deliberated and calculated attempt to impose 'New World Order' in this region while starting a 'crusade' and implementing the agenda of New World Order, which according to Mehsud had started to take its roots with French Revolution in 1789¹⁵¹⁶.

The launch of military operation in 2004 against jihadis in tribal areas by Pakistani military paved the way for defensive jihad against Pakistan. Mehsud believes that the military operations to extract Al-Qaeda leaders from the safe havens in tribal areas in fact the turning point that allowed tribes in general and Mehsud tribes in particular to unite against the onslaught of Pakistani military. This eventually resulted in the establishment of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud.

As a shrewd strategist and an alliance maker, Mehsud described his role and efforts for the formation of a united jihad front in tribal areas termed as Ittehad al-Mujahedeen. In 2009 Al-Qaeda's top commander Hafiz Sultan and Baitullah Mehsud (founder of TTP) after consultations established the new terrorist entity. The military Shura of alliance comprised of Ustad Ihsan, Dr Abu Khalid, Ustad Farooq and Mansur alias Turyalia (from Al-Qaeda), Moulvi Mohammad Azeem, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Mullah Nazir, Qari Zia ur Rehman (from TTP) and Ilyas Kashmiri (from Brigade 313).

The short-lived alliance had the following objectives:

- Developing joint defence strategies in case of military's offensive in North and South Waziristan districts of tribal areas
- Forcing government to halt US drone strikes in tribal areas
- Joint front against military if the military does not vacate areas under its control
- In case of joint war effort against the military, the Mehsud areas would be treated as retreating area

The alliance did not last long enough after the death of Baitullah Mehsud in a drone strike in August 2009. Another reason of alliance's collapse was exit of top TTP commanders Mullah Nazir from Wana and Hafiz Gul Bahadur from North Waziristan¹⁷.

According to Mehsud, a common front against enemy forces is the only solution for the longevity and eventual success of the jihadi movement in Pakistan. He considers the lack of unity among the jihadi circles as the failure of jihadi movement in Pakistan. As a realist he accepts that because of the infighting among TTP rank and file in 2015 and 2016, there is a slight decline of jihadi activity in Pakistan¹⁸. It is apparent from his writings that Mehsud would indeed like to revive such moves to establish alliances with Al-Qaeda and other foreign militant groups operating in the region. His strategy seems more a conciliatory one with other warring factions of Islamist terrorist organizations.

While discussing the successes and failures of jihadi movement in tribal areas, he also described the losses incurred by Pakistan military which he claims is in thousands; he also analysed the tactics of TTP in sabotaging military operation Rah-e-Najat in South Waziristan after its commencement in 2009. The successful tactics included use of IED, targeted assassinations of pro-military tribal elders and Maliks, suicide bombings in urban centers, targeting of military forts and recruitment centers, prison breaks (Bannu and D I Khan districts), and targeting of non-governmental organizations' workers and staff, and kidnapping for ransoms of locals and foreigners such as Swiss couple from Baluchistan,

students of Cadet College in Wazirsitan and multiple others and finally how a whole battalion of Pakistan Army (247 officers and soldiers in August 28, 2007)¹⁹ was forced to surrender after encircling them and capturing them without firing a shot²⁰. Moreover the TTP's terrorist attacks in Pakistan's financial capital Karachi not only targeted security forces (i.e. police and paramilitary) but also struck political rallies and election campaigns of overtly secular parties such as Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) and Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP)²¹.

Thoughts and Ideology

Mehsud explains his ideology and method (Manhaj) on the basis of religion and Pashtunwali (the ancient pre-Islamic Pashtun tribal code). While stating 'what to do', he suggests jihad for change of prevailing system of government and replacing it with Islamic caliphate. As Al-Qaeda has established its regional branch Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) hence it is now sine quo non for TTP to work in tandem with AQIS's local leadership²².

While Mehsud could be termed as an Islamist jihadi of Deobandi traditions but at times, his writings show, he seems to be tilted towards Pashtun nationalist causes. He termed Sindhi and Punjabi ethnic groups of Pakistan as less familiar with ways of Islamic religion whereas Pashtuns in his opinion are not only Islamic but also valiant in terms of defending the religion. He uses a derogatory language against Punjabi ethnic group and considers Pakistan Army a Punjabi army. On other occasions, he appears favorable towards foreign jihadis especially Al-Qaeda, Uzbeks, Chechens and Chinese Uighurs.

The way he describes atrocities of Pakistani security forces against Mehsud tribes in particular and Pashtuns tribal in general showcases his views are in fact Islamo-Pashtun nationalist. Despite having these thoughts, Mehsud has incorporated a number of Punjabi jihadi among the ranks of TTP and occasionally elucidated their bravery and valor in perpetrating terrorist strikes in Pakistani urban centers (especially terrorist strike on General Headquarters of Pakistan Army in 2009 in Rawalpindi) which was led a Usman Punjabi, a commander to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi who later joined TTP.

Challenges and Implications

Noor Wali is assuming the leadership of TTP when it is past its prime and no longer poses an existential threat to Pakistan's internal security. Two of its splinter factions Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and ISK have eclipsed TTP. The immediate challenge for the new TTP chief would be to reunite various TTP factions which splintered after the appointment of Fazlullah and the rise of Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK). For instance, Jandullah, Bajaur and Orakzai factions of TTP gravitated towards ISK following its precipitous rise in early 2015. Meanwhile, Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) broke away from TTP over organizational and operational differences. The killing of Fazlullah can trigger further defections within TTP towards ISK. Unlike TTP, ISK has consolidated its place within the Af-Pak jihadist market and established its credentials by carrying out high profile terrorist attacks both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the contrary, TTP has struggled to mount large-scale coordinated attacks in mainland Pakistan.

Noor Wali's second immediate challenge would be to establish his authority over various TTP factions. When Hakimullah Mehsud took over in 2009, he proved his militant mettle by attacking Pakistan army's General Head Quarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi, Mehran Naval Base

in Karachi and spreading TTP's tentacles to Karachi. Similarly, Fazlullah's became notorious for masterminding attacks on Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and girls education activist, in 2013 and the tragic Army Public School (APS) attack, Peshawar in 2014.

The third challenge for Mufti Noor Wali would be to re-establish TTP's organizational infrastructure in Pakistan. Though TTP maintains a small footprint in different parts of Pakistan, it is disorganized, dispersed, weak and under-resourced to mount high-profile terrorist attacks. To attract new recruits and create resonance for its ideological narrative, TTP will have to show some ground presence. Also, the operational environment of the Af-Pak jihadist landscape has transformed and it has expanded into cyber sphere as well. A robust social media footprint is as important as having physical presence to shape the strategic and operational environment.

TTP's ambition of increasing female participation in its terrorist activities will also suffer a setback. In 2017, TTP published two issues of English-language magazine *Sunnat-e-Khaura* (The Way of Khaura), focusing exclusively on women to increase their participation in its jihadist activities.²³ The idea of giving women more proactive roles was a brainchild of Fazlullah's wife, who would not be able to influence TTP's policies anymore. It is worth pointing out that Fazlullah's wife is the daughter of influential jihadi cleric Maulana Sufi Muhammad, the founder of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM).

Fazlullah's killing will also jeopardize the limited organizational resurrection that TTP achieved after relocating to Afghanistan. The current locations and position of TTP are exposed and if the newfound US-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation increases further to carry the stalled Afghan peace process forward; more drone strikes on TTP positions in Afghanistan cannot be ruled out. In this event, TTP will have to look for new hideouts inside Afghanistan to survive and recover from recent leadership losses.

Conclusion

TTP is entering the elimination phase of its lifecycle from where recovery seems unlikely. TTP is struggling to get fresh recruits. But given hardening of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and better border management measures, its hideouts in Afghanistan are in peril and the ideological rhetoric of Islamizing Pakistan through jihad has no takers.

Arguably, it is the beginning of the end of TTP and the group will continue to suffer further setbacks. Four factors have contributed to TTP's weakening. First, the US drone strikes have decapitated TTP's top leaderships in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Second, Pakistan army's military operations have downgraded group's organizational and operational capabilities. Third, indiscriminate and over-the-top violence against civilians has deprived TTP of public support, life line of any terrorist group. Finally, ideological de-legitimization of TTP's terrorist activities, particularly the suicide attacks, has dented its political narrative.

However, notwithstanding TTP's degradation, the terrorist threat to Pakistan is far from over. As TTP slides down the precipice, the threat is morphing and metastasizing. Now the long-term internal security threat to Pakistan comes from ISK that has absorbed two main factions of TTP (Bajaur and Orakzai factions). ISK has also forged working relationship with anti-

Shia Pakistani extremist groups, such as Jandullah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). It is expected that the residual TTP commander sand fighters will be absorbed into ISK.

References:

-
- ¹ Azaz Syed, "TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah killed in US drone strike, confirms Afghanistan," *Geo Tv*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/199369-afghanistan-claims-mullah-fazlullah-killed-in-us-drone-strike>
- ² "TTP appoints Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as chief after Fazlullah's killing," *Dawn*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1415660>
- ³ "Fazlullah is dead, confirms TTP: Noor Wali Mehsud appointed new chief," *Arab News*, June 23, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1326706/world>
- ⁴ Daud Khattak, "Who will be the next leader of the Pakistani Taliban," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/who-will-be-the-next-leader-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>
- ⁵ Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Noor Wali Mehsud appointed TTP head," *The News*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/333048-noor-wali-mahsud-appointed-ttp-head>
- ⁶ "Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, TTP's new chief," *Express Tribune*, June 23, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1740912/1-mufti-noor-wali-mehsud-ttps-new-chief/>
- ⁷ Iftikhar Firdous, "TTP picks Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud as successor of Mullah Fazlullah," *Express Tribune*, June 23, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1736990/1-ttp-picks-mufti-noor-wali-mehsud-successor-mullah-fazlullah/>
- ⁸ Zia Ur Rehman, "TTP's book admits Karachi operation dismantled their operation," *The News*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/269287-ttp-s-book-admits-karachi-operation-dismantled-their-network>
- ⁹ "We killed Benazir Bhutto, TTP claims in its book," *Express Tribune*, January 16, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1610220/1-killed-benazir-bhutto-ttp-claims-book/>
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ "TTP member exposes militant outfits sources of funding in tell-all book," *Samaa Tv*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2018/04/ttp-member-exposes-militant-outfits-sources-of-funding-in-tell-all-book/>
- ¹² *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* p. 396-397
- ¹³ Ikramullah did not blow himself and fled the scene and according to Noor Wali Mehsud is living in Afghanistan.
- ¹⁴ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud*, p. 118
- ¹⁵ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud*, 103-104
- ¹⁶ Mehsud did not explain here the role of French Revolution in the implementation of NWO.
- ¹⁷ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* 603-605
- ¹⁸ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* p. 133
- ¹⁹ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* p. 441
- ²⁰ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* p 100-300
- ²¹ *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* p. 344
- ²² *Inqilab-e-Mehsud* 106-116
- ²³ Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Militant Rivalries Extend to Female Recruitment in Pakistan," *Combating Terrorism Centre*, September 14, 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/ctc-perspectives-militant-rivalries-extend-to-female-recruitment-in-pakistan/>



Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)

P.O Box No: 2110 Islamabad, Pakistan

Phone No:+92-51-8359475-6

Email: pips@pakpips.pk

Web: pakpips.com