
III. Special Correspondence

Winning Hearts and Minds in Pakistan's Tribal Areas: A Personal Recollection of a Peace-Building Effort with the Taliban

by Muhammad Feyyaz

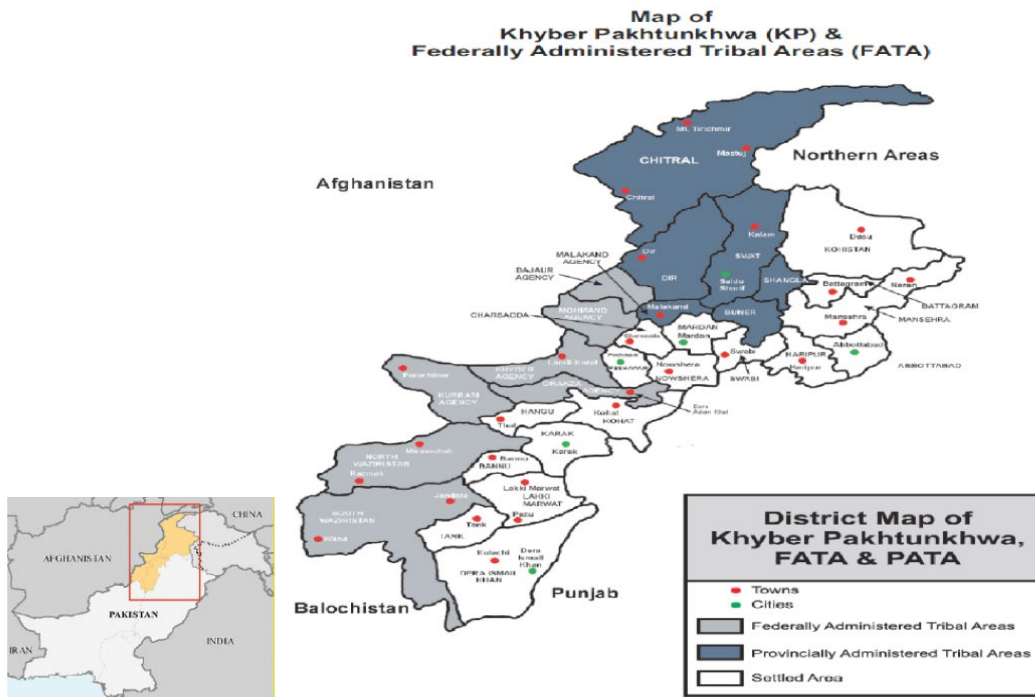
Abstract

This biographical contribution describes experiences of a military commander gained during field employment in North Waziristan Agency – the most militancy riven region in tribal areas of Pakistan. The recollection outlines the transformation of part of this turbulent area into a zone of peace through a well-structured peace-building vision. Primarily, the approach entailed the idea of applying the concept of inclusive human security in order to turn all stakeholders and antagonists into a cohesive community, tolerant of each other's existence. Importantly, the strategy was evolved in a backdrop when security conditions in the Agency were characterized by a heightened phase of Taliban-led violence and fluid counter insurgency operations. Risk taking was vital to restore order but it indeed proved worth the effort.

Keywords: FATA; Pakistan; peace-building; human security; Taliban; hearts and minds

Introduction

The tribal areas of Pakistan, situated on the Pakistan-Afghan border, commonly known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), have been in the global spotlight for more than a decade (Map 1). I had the opportunity to serve there during the turbulent period of June 2006 until January 2008, as a Brigade commander. It was a trying time in my professional life. Prior to taking up the post, I had articulated a strategy to restore order and create stability in the area. The territory that fell under my responsibility [called area of responsibility (AOR) in military jargon] comprised the lush green Shawal Valley as well as the Detta Khel area of the North Waziristan Agency (Map 2), an area also dubbed 'factory of suicidal bombers'. Together with my team we developed ideas based on our professional experience and learning, and decided to apply these with utmost rigor and perseverance. Our approach of peace-building was based on the idea of forging inclusive human security, the objective of it was to turn all stakeholders and antagonists into a cohesive community, tolerant of each other's existence. The key features of our approach are briefly recounted in this contribution.



Map 1 - FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan)

Ideas and Practices of Peace-building

Building Security Stakeholders

Given the chaotic environment of the area, I first envisioned to make local tribes indirect stakeholder in my security, i.e. of my entire military establishment in the area. Consequently, after seeking consent of my military seniors as well as peers and subordinate staff, I assembled some material resources to use for education. We selected children between the ages of 5 and 15 from different regions and tribal segment of the population for education at a school in Nowshera, a district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. My battalion commanders assisted me in the selection process by asking for applications and also pinpointing needy families regardless of their lineage, Taliban connections or religious inclinations. Following a series of selection procedures, we were able to gather a good number of young students, in keeping with the available resources. Some of the children had been taken to schools prior to my joining this brigade, but without an eye for the long-term dividends I envisioned. We conceptualized it as a goodwill civil action component of our presence in the region and adopted it as regular feature in our social interactions with locals. As time passed, and even in the midst of high-level Taliban violence, parents of children kept communication with me. This allowed me at times also to obtaining a reading of the pulse of the area, similar to feedback from community policing. When those children would come home, parents and peers saw their sophisticated and urbanized outlook; this motivated many more to come to us. In the process, we were able to develop a reliable constituency for whom our security became of prime interest as they wanted to see our engagement in the educational process of their children to continue. Almost ten years later, I am still in touch with some of the parents, while many of their children have now risen to higher education. This successful experiment was based on my experience as a UN Peace Keeper in Somalia. There I had learned to identify children as the most effective means and route to forge a lasting security paradigm in the most harsh environment, based on the idea of harmonizing stakes through mutual inclusion.

Following the same underlying theme, we embarked upon helping families in our AOR whose members were suffering from chronic diseases (e.g. vision impairment, hepatitis, pulmonary tuberculosis, skin disorders and heart problems, etc.) We connected them to hospitals and specialists in major cities; those requiring urgent attention were even flown by helicopters or transported through army ambulances to urban areas in case of emergency. This developed a second tier of security stakeholders which proved vital during an armed encounter with Taliban fighters belonging to Baitullah Mehsud's faction. In this particular battle we lost several of our soldiers; those soldiers who succeeded in escaping an ambush found refuge with families sympathetic to us. The latter informed us, and we could retrieve our soldiers though bringing the wrath of Taliban upon them. Some of these friendly families were even displaced by the Taliban who destroyed their houses and forced their expulsion from their villages.

Higher military headquarters helped us a great deal in furthering our hearts & minds approach by sending mobile free medical camps along, with male as well as female doctors and paramedics; this became a huge success. This service came on top of the medical camps that my brigade already operated on a routine basis in the area. It was particularly satisfying to see how womenfolk thronged these medical facilities. They took our sincere endeavour to bring peace to the region to every household.

Reconciliation and Personal Healing

Bitterness, anguish and grievances stoked by previous Pakistani army operations ran deep into the psyche of local people in our part of FATA. While a plain apology for what had gone wrong in the past would have been seen as an empty gesture, a more practical reconciliation strategy addressing the material hardships and mental turmoil of affected people was deemed more effective to contain the psychological traumas. As part of a deliberate and carefully worked out plan, close liaison was established with all the families who had lost relatives and relations in operations with the army. In fact, our Brigade assumed responsibility to administer to their various needs. At times, I used to personally go to deliver rations to aggrieved families besides taking care of the education of their children. Furthermore, we would also attend all funerals in the area and visit homes of grieved families as a routine practice—despite the dangers associated with such interactions. Gradually, we were able to wean away the desperate families and their youth from undertaking retaliatory actions against us—or we against them.

Friends, not Master!

Pashtun people are fiercely independent as individuals, and have historically never submitted to authority by coercion. Therefore, I decided to use compassion and introduce the democratic notion of the military being subordinate to the people. This might appear astonishing to Western audiences but in a country like Pakistan where the military has frequently ruled the country, there was no such conception of the military being in a subservient position. Rather a mindset of superiority has existed among the country's military leadership for a long time. On the first day of addressing a *jirga* (a council of elders, notables, representatives, et al) belonging to a warrior tribe, after an exchange of pleasantries, I sat on ground with them - something contrary to past military practices. I explained to them that I (metaphorically, the Pakistani army) was there because of them and for them, and not the other way round. That broke the class- and social barrier that had separated us and we discussed issues of common interest in a most congenial setting. This particular sub-tribe of *wazirs* known as *jani khel* from Shawal valley had been a principal challenger of the army due to past excesses from both sides; some of the known local Taliban commanders also belonged to this tribe. Not much later, some Taliban from their tribe could be employed as go-between in conciliatory talks with out-of-area Taliban. In fact, this meeting opened a flood gate: a series of interactions were initiated, built upon and could be sustained, resulting in an enduring friendly and peaceful situation in this hitherto highly volatile region of North Waziristan. This practice was followed with all the other tribes of the area, without distinction.

However, *jani khels* and *khaddar khels* from the Detta khel area (who had a reputation for violence) became close ally, and were influential in spreading our appeal for peace and harmony.



Map 2 – My AOR in North Waziristan Agency

Accountability for Unrestrained Use of Force

An idea that had long resided inside me was to exercise restraint in the use of force, again thanks to my past peace-keeping experience. It was an extremely hazardous endeavor, difficult to put into practice in a fluid environment such as FATA where it was widely believed that tribes only understood the language of bullets. I was determined to prove them wrong. Two measures were instituted to implement the new approach.

First, I began to ingrain with great persistence in the minds of my soldiers the theme of a restrained and accountable use of lethal force. I would emphasize (metaphorically) that this brigade was not operating under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, that the conditions were different and warranted a spectrum of responses embodying peace-keeping virtues, with combat being the last option in a less escalatory and more cost effective process. The whole notion was to create space to get ourselves accepted as part of the local community, which would better serve the objectives of our deployment in the area.

Secondly, while addressing the locals on several occasions, I would pledge that even if I am killed by an IED (improvised explosive device) or a suicidal attack during routine movements, my protection squad (which comprised highly trained and well equipped soldiers), will not retaliate in kind. Besides, I also promised I shall not enter their houses unless so warranted by a special situation but that was to be done subject to consultation and approval of their elders. I further assured them of my intention not to use high caliber weaponry (or, for that matter, any weapon) for firing at their dwellings, under no circumstances. Orders were also issued to subordinate units for compliance with this. In one instance, near Detta Khel, a convoy of 150 vehicles was attacked by IEDs; the pilots providing aerial cover readied to open fire on some suspects. They were sternly dismissed by the ground convoy commander, reminding the pilots that such was not the practice in this brigade and that the brigade's commander strictly objected to it. While ground forces and pilots were conversing on wireless, the entire area had tuned into what is locally called *mokhwara*, a radio, and clearly listened to my instructions not to use force. Somehow, a few individual soldiers did open fire on those suspected to have triggered the IED, and also apprehended them. I not only released them with a financial compensation, but also publically sought apology for imprisoning the innocent and causing hurt to their families. This turned out to be a big success in convincing the tribes of our sincere commitment to keeping the peace, bringing many more bystanders into our folds. An immediate impact of this action was that even the Taliban from Detta Khel became sympathetic and began to resist foreign intruders to prevent attacks against us.

In fact, several of them were only nominally Taliban—just to avoid reprisals against their families and property. Actually these men abstained from adhering to the propagated cause of the mainstream Taliban; these men were also not crossing into Afghanistan. I used this opportunity to bring back into use a number of vacant girls' and boys' schools, completing some quick impact development projects, organizing sports on national days, various children competitions, disposing of grievances involving compensations for past military operations and creating further inroads through frequent visits to remote border areas of the AOR in order to connect plaintiffs with local civil administration officials to settle outstanding issues.

The Challenge - Opportunity Nexus

I had heard former President General Musharraf frequently using the phrase 'turning challenge into an opportunity', but was unable to grasp its real meaning until two instances revealed its underlying spirit. First were the flash floods in the area, caused by torrential rains during July 2006. The moment was seized promptly and capitalized effectively by officers and men of the Brigade, to win over the local people's hearts. The entire Brigade was mobilized, including aviation effort to reach out to the distressed people to demonstrate our capacity and readiness to share their loss by meaningful actions. This massive effort—which received considerable attention in the national media—brought me into immediate contact with the local populace soon after my arrival. It also neutralized the Taliban's anti-government propaganda in the area. The second instance was more challenging.

One night in the early hours of May or June 2007, two NATO helicopters violated Pakistan's air space, allegedly in pursuit of some fleeing miscreants. They began to bomb suspected civilians in a border village located on the southern fringes of my AOR, along a historical route leading into Afghanistan, called *mangrotai*. The helicopters even opened fire on one of my border military post during this operation. The whole episode lasted for about 2-3 hours, despite protests from our side. In the process ten civilians had lost lives, and more than a dozen others were injured. The Pakistan Army was perceived by tribesmen and even by mainstream citizenry as America-friendly. It was also assumed that no such action would have been possible without the consent of Pakistan's army headquarters or local commanders. In this way, suddenly a situation of a strong attitudinal hostility was created, with multiple implications and consequences, including the possibility of exploitation by Taliban against our troops and those wishing us well. A meditation effort revealed that even though dangerous, this challenge could be turned into an opportunity to redeem goodwill and keep peace in the area. I therefore instructed the local battalion commander to help evacuate the victims to regimental first aid post. Some local elements stood up against it, but we managed through announcements from mosques to avail the medical help. There were some casualties in critical condition these were brought to Bannu CMH (combined military hospital) by air. In addition, political agent of North Waziristan Agency (the apex civil bureaucrat in the area) was approached and he announced handsome compensations both for the deceased as well as those injured. This critical situation turned out to be a catalyst in re-establishing ourselves even more strongly. Peace and calm was preserved, potential spoilers were disappointed and the situation returned to normalcy within no time.

Conclusion

Among others achievements, a significant spin-off of our peace-building efforts was that we were able to effectively check cross-border infiltration from, or into, our area by hostile and anti-state elements. Secondly, many of the Taliban renounced violence, while also keeping a watch on foreign fighters.

The Brigade remained an island of peace for one complete year—until other dynamics began to change its environment. Two reasons account for what I could achieve. A sense of purpose refined with a clear vision of objectives, and, secondly, the total support from superior commanders and the cooperation

from subordinates. It does not need a special mentioning that obviously all those engaged in this peace-building effort were constantly exposed to risks to their life. However, the concept of human security and its implementation was indeed worthy of taking such risks.

About the Author: Muhammad Feyyaz: *A soldier turned academic, Brigadier (Retired) Muhammad Feyyaz joined the Pakistan Army in 1980 and was commissioned in an infantry battalion. Among several other assignments, including overseas as UN peacekeeper, he has remained instructor at the Army's Command and Staff College, Quetta, National Defence University (NDU) Islamabad and National School of Public Policy, Lahore. As an experienced peacekeeper, he also headed the Centre of Excellence for Peacekeeping Studies at NDU, Islamabad. He currently teaches in the School of Governance and Society at the University of Management and Technology, in Lahore, and also acts as country coordinator of the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI)—Pakistan Chapter.*