

PAKISTAN'S KURRAM OFFENSIVE

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFGHANISTAN

The insurgency in Afghanistan's eastern region is likely to benefit from the Pakistani military's new military operations in Kurram Agency. As the Pakistani military targets only a select pocket of militants, groups that have recently declared a truce with the Pakistani military or are aligned with elements of the security establishment are allowed room to expand. Ultimately, an expanding presence of Afghanistan-focused Haqqani network fighters and affiliated groups in Kurram will be a growing threat to U.S., coalition and Afghan efforts to secure eastern Afghanistan.

On June 24, the Pakistani military launched operations in Kurram Agency. The operations, as briefed by the Pakistani military, are designed to clear insurgents from central and lower Kurram. Approximately 4,000 Pakistani Army troops supported by the Pakistani Air Force are taking part in the offensive. Despite all appearances, the military is only targeting a select pocket of these militants, largely those with an anti-state agenda, such as the Pakistani Taliban or Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Military operations are not targeting militants who have recently declared a truce with the Pakistani military or those that are actively aligned with elements of the Pakistani security establishment in their campaign to secure influence in eastern Afghanistan, such as the Haqqani network. In fact, these operations will help facilitate the movement of Haqqani-backed forces into Kurram in order to project into Afghanistan's eastern provinces. Ultimately, an expanded presence of Afghanistan-focused Haqqani network fighters and affiliated groups such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e Taiba in Kurram will increase the threat to U.S., coalition and Afghan forces and further jeopardize ongoing efforts to secure eastern Afghanistan.

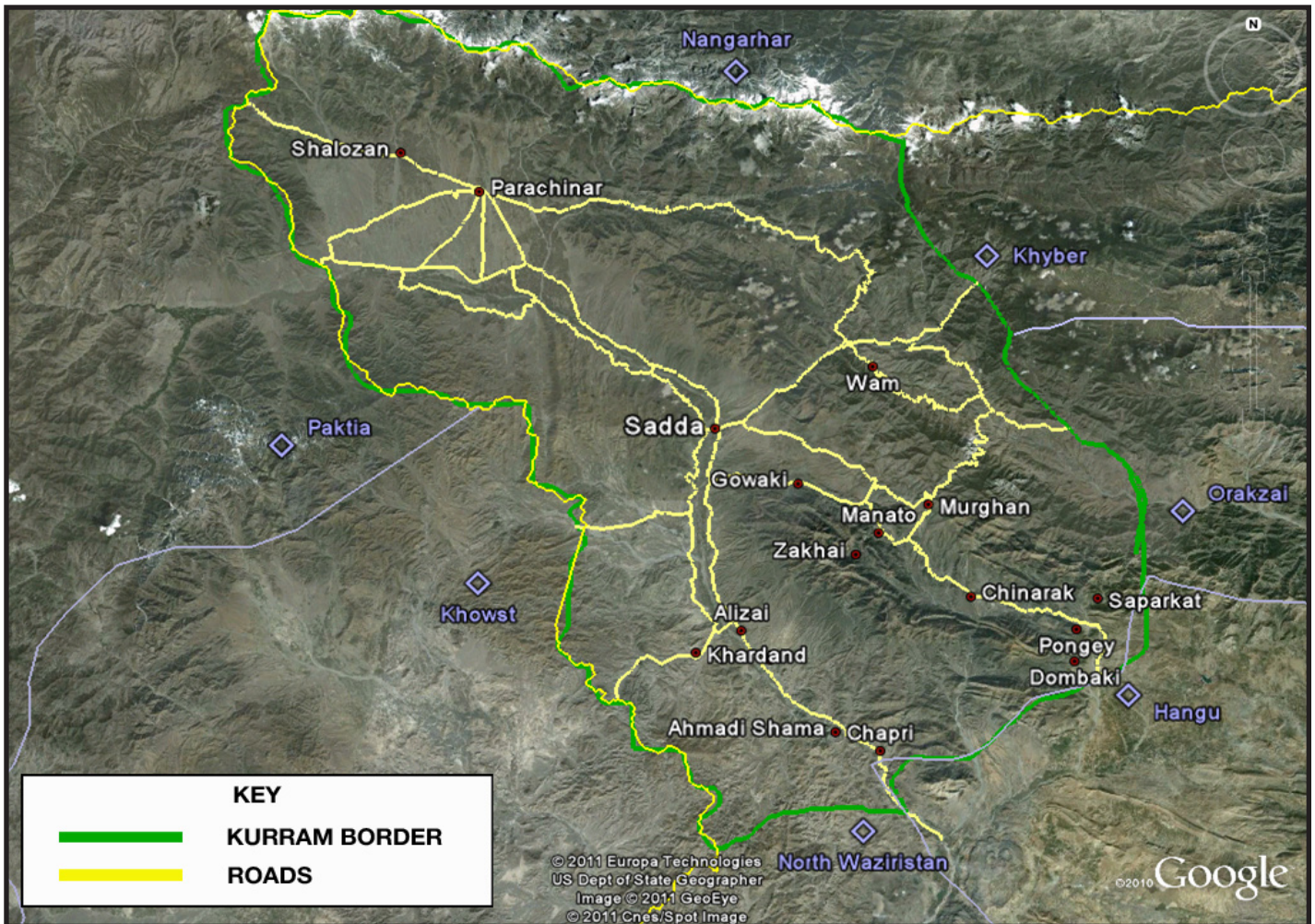
This report provides a comprehensive understanding of recent Pakistani military operations in Kurram and the greater significance these events will have on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The first section provides a detailed account of developments leading up to the decision to launch operations. The subsequent sections describe the unfolding military campaign, the internally displaced persons' crisis in the agency and militants' attempts to exploit the situation. The report concludes with some strategic considerations detailing precisely how the Haqqani network and affiliated fighters will directly benefit from recent developments in Kurram.

THE HAQQANIS' TTP PROBLEM IN KURRAM

Kurram Agency is nestled between Pakistan's North Waziristan and Kyber Agencies and projects into the mountainous border between Afghanistan's southeastern and eastern regions. During the mujahideen's struggle against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Kurram served as a gateway for men and materials headed to Afghanistan. Today Kurram is equally important for militants battling U.S. and coalition forces and the government of Afghanistan. Since at least 2008, Afghanistan-focused insurgents have increased their attempts to manipulate developments in the agency.

In February 2011, Sunni and Shia tribesmen in Kurram signed a historic peace deal that brought nearly four years of constant warfare to an end. The agreement was, in part, brokered by influential members of the Haqqani network. These individuals had been working to establish a presence in Kurram since early 2009 to facilitate access through Shia-populated areas in central and upper Kurram to Afghanistan's eastern provinces. The Shias quietly agreed to allow the Haqqanis and affiliated groups to transit through upper Kurram into Afghanistan's eastern provinces in exchange for the opening of the Tal-Parachinar road. The road had been closed for years due to security concerns and the constant threat of attack from both Sunni militants and minority tribesmen in central and lower Kurram. The closure isolated the Shia population in upper Kurram and caused great hardship as residents were unable to trade, secure food and medicine, or visit family in major Pakistani population centers.

The agreement held without incident for nearly a month until late March when approximately 45 Shia passengers were taken



MAP 1 | KURRAM AGENCY & EASTERN AFGHANISTAN

hostage in the Baggan area of lower Kurram on their way from Peshawar to Parachinar in upper Kurram.¹ Baggan is a stronghold of Fazal Saeed, who was then the leader of the TTP in Kurram and was likely responsible for the kidnapping.² The kidnapping and other small-scale skirmishes largely initiated by elements of the Kurram faction of the TTP earned the ire of the Haqqani network's senior leadership. The Haqqanis unsuccessfully appealed directly to Hakimullah Mehsud, the head of the TTP, in a petition to cease these attacks in order to preserve the peace.³

The kidnapping of the Shia in Baggan jeopardized the fragile peace that the Haqqani network worked to achieve throughout 2010 and 2011. The incident is representative of a larger issue that has plagued relations between the Afghanistan- and Pakistan-focused insurgents for much of the past several years. While the Pakistani Taliban is primarily concerned with launching attacks on the Pakistani state and armed forces, groups like the Haqqani network do not share those objectives. The Haqqanis and affiliated militants such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Lashkar-e

Taiba are focused on launching attacks in Afghanistan against coalition forces, the Afghan government, and Afghan security forces—an agenda that elements within the Pakistani security establishment support.⁴ Mullah Omar and senior Haqqani leadership have directly appealed to TTP leaders and urged them to discontinue their attacks on the Pakistani state and focus their resources on the fight in Afghanistan.⁵ On both occasions, Omar and the Haqqanis were rebuffed.⁶

In fact, tensions between Mehsud and the Haqqanis have escalated in recent months. The first issue that raised the ire of the Haqqanis was the kidnapping and assassination of Ameer Sultan Tarar (better known as Colonel Imam) in late January, 2011.⁷ Colonel Imam was a retired senior official in Pakistan's intelligence directorate who played an instrumental role in the mujahideen's struggle against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and later helped the Taliban rise to power in Afghanistan. Many considered him to be the father of the Taliban movement. Although it appears that Mehsud did not order the kidnapping, he eventually took custody of Colonel Imam and attended his filmed execution.⁸ Mehsud ignored

direct appeals from Mullah Omar and Sirajuddin Haqqani to release Colonel Imam.⁹

Aside from the kidnapping and execution of Colonel Imam, the Haqqanis' main grievance with Mehsud is over the TTP's continued attacks in Kurram. In late spring 2011, Sirajuddin Haqqani instructed Mehsud to stop the attacks on Shia in Kurram, "or my men will make you stop it."¹⁰ The firm warning was issued after militants from the TTP ignored more subtle requests from the Haqqanis and continued their attacks on Shia in Kurram.¹¹ Although Saeed's group may have conducted some of these attacks, Taliban factions led by Maulvi Noor Jamal (AKA Mullah Toofan) and Tariq Afridi, from neighboring Orakzai and Khyber who have relocated to central Kurram are also accused of launching attacks on Shias.¹² The Haqqanis' direct appeal to Mehsud suggests that these attacks in Kurram were carried out either on his orders or at least with his blessing. Before he became the head of the TTP, Mehsud made a name for himself by killing Shias while he was TTP commander for Kurram.¹³

FAZAL SAEED 'HAQQANI'

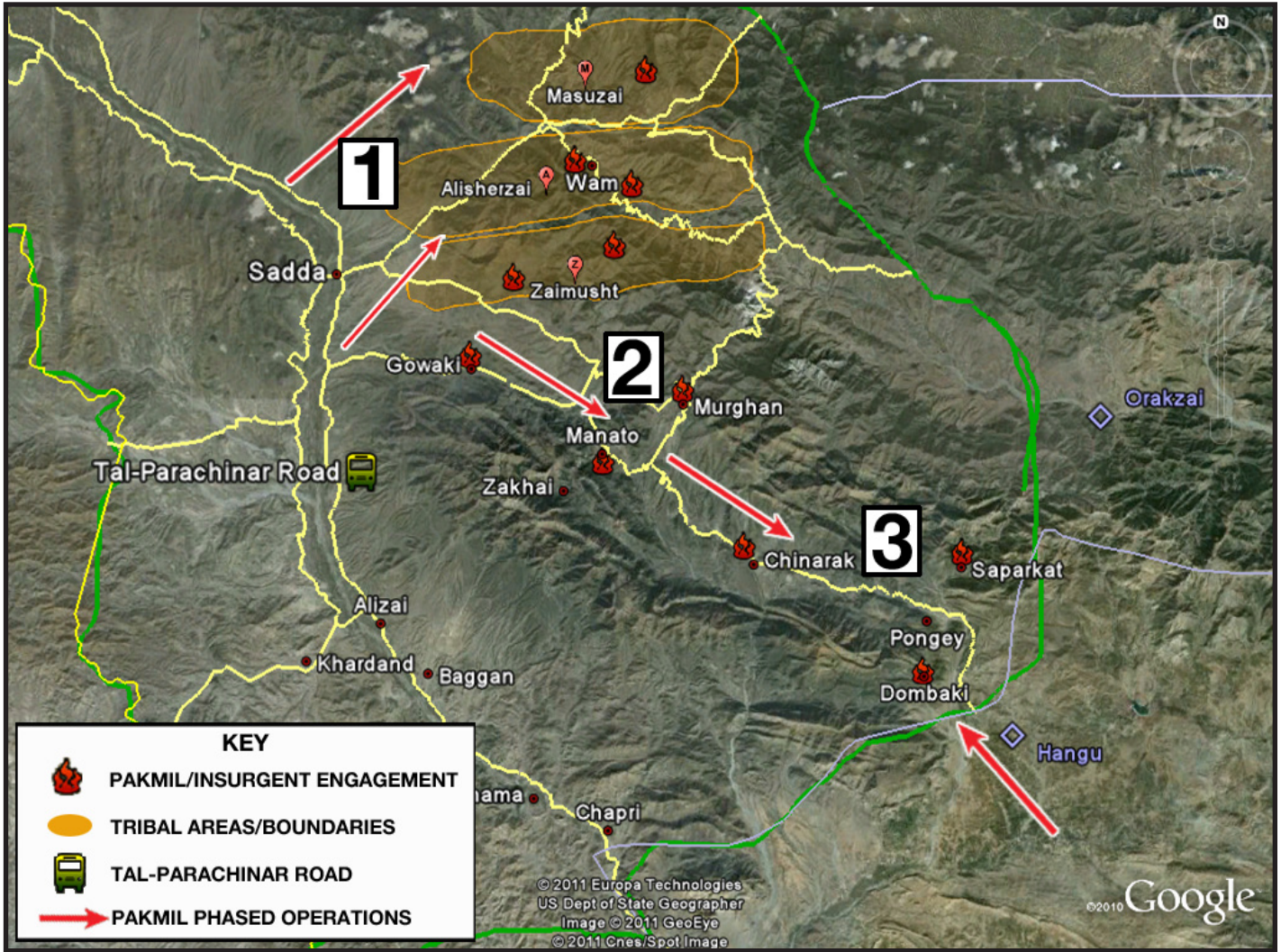
Saeed, from Uchat village in lower Kurram, led the TTP in Kurram until roughly late June 2011.¹⁴ The 39-year old commander got his start fighting under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani in Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion in 2001.¹⁵ Saeed's main area of operations is located in and around the town of Baggan in lower Kurram near the border with North Waziristan Agency and the town of Tal in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹⁶ Saeed's fighting force is comprised of several hundred fighters, possibly as many as 800, who largely control the roads in and around the Tal-Parachinar road in lower Kurram.¹⁷ The Tal-Parachinar road is a key transit route for a bevy of militant groups operating in Pakistan's tribal regions and eastern Afghanistan.¹⁸

When military operations in Kurram commenced in late June 2011, Saeed announced his defection from the TTP in Kurram. He claimed he had run out of patience with the TTP because of their "suicide attacks against mosques, markets and other civilian targets" and that he and his group had personally protested the killing of unarmed and innocent people.¹⁹ Rather than focusing on attacking civilians in Kurram, Saeed vowed to focus on the fight against the Americans in Afghanistan, forming a new organization called Tehrik-i Taleban-i-Islami.²⁰ According to Saeed's statements, his new group, Tehrik-i-Taliban Islami Pakistan (TTIP) is now affiliated with the Haqqani network. He has even begun using "Haqqani" after his name, which is common for graduates of the infamous Darul Uloom Haqqania madrassa in Pakistan's Kyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as the North West Frontier Province.

In Saeed's public statement announcing his split from the TTP, he pronounced that his newly formed organization would not attack Pakistani security forces, the Pakistani Army, or social infrastructure in Kurram.²¹ Publicly, Saeed denied his defection was related to the government, Pakistani intelligence or security agencies who have an active five million Rs (\$112,000USD) bounty for his capture. However, the timing of his split follows a familiar pattern of militants declaring truces with the Pakistani Army ahead of impending or concluding military offensives.²² In 2006 and 2009, the Pakistani Army declared formal and informal ceasefires with local Taliban leaders Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur so as to reduce the size of the opposition, and to create divisions within the larger TTP and isolate the leadership.²³ Although both have initiated sporadic violence with Pakistani security forces in the years since, they remain largely opposed to attacks against the Pakistani state or armed forces and are free to conduct their affairs without interference from Pakistani security forces.²⁴ Likewise, if Saeed made similar arrangements with the Pakistani Army prior to the launch of ground operations in Kurram, that would explain why his stronghold and affiliated fighters in lower Kurram's western valley are not targets of the Army's offensive. The most plausible explanation for Saeed's sudden change of heart is likely due to his pragmatic decision to side with the Haqqani network and its ongoing campaign against American forces in Afghanistan's eastern region while simultaneously avoiding a confrontation with the Pakistani military.

While Saeed may indeed have decided to focus on fighting the Americans in Afghanistan rather than the Shia in Kurram, it was certainly not because of his disgust with the TTP over civilian casualties, as he was personally responsible for kidnapping and launching attacks on Shia in Kurram for the past several years, including the March 2011 kidnapping of the Shia convoy in Beggan.²⁵ Saeed's decision to kidnap the Shia convoy is interesting because it directly contradicts his statements immediately following the signing of the peace deal between the Sunni and Shia just one month earlier. He stated that "militants would hand down severe punishments under the Shariah [Islamic law] if any party flouted the peace deal.... Nobody would be allowed to sabotage the peace process."²⁶ Saeed is virulently anti-Shia and has launched attacks on the Shia population of Kurram for years, so it was odd that he agreed to support such a peace in the first place.

Although it is unclear what may have motivated Saeed to continue his anti-Shia attacks despite originally voicing his support for the Haqqani-backed truce, it may have been a result of pressure from his superior, Mehsud, who demanded large sums of money for the Pakistani Taliban's coffers.²⁷ Mehsud directly requested that the kidnapped tribesman be given to him to exact ransom, but Saeed's deputy, Noor Mohammad, rebuffed his request.²⁸ Reports suggest that Saeed's group was paid a ransom of 30 million rupees (roughly \$350,000)



MAP 2 | PAKMIL OPERATIONS IN KURRAM

by a Shia-led grand tribal jirga in Kurram for the release of twenty-two of the hostages.²⁹

CALLING IN THE ARMY

In mid-June, rumors began to circulate in Kurram that the Pakistani Army was preparing to launch a ground offensive. In fact, as early as May, Pakistani Army 11th Corps Commander Lieutenant General Asif Yaseen stated that “results-oriented action will be taken very soon.”³⁰ Ultimately, the attacks by elements of the TTP led to the Pakistani military’s decision to launch a ground offensive in Kurram in late June.

On June 24, Pakistani warplanes began bombing insurgent positions in Murghan and Wam, mountainous areas near Kurram’s border with Orakzai, while Pakistani ground forces began preparations to deploy to areas of central Kurram.³¹ The offensive aims to clear select areas of central and lower Kurram of TTP-linked militants who continue to threaten the fragile peace in Kurram.

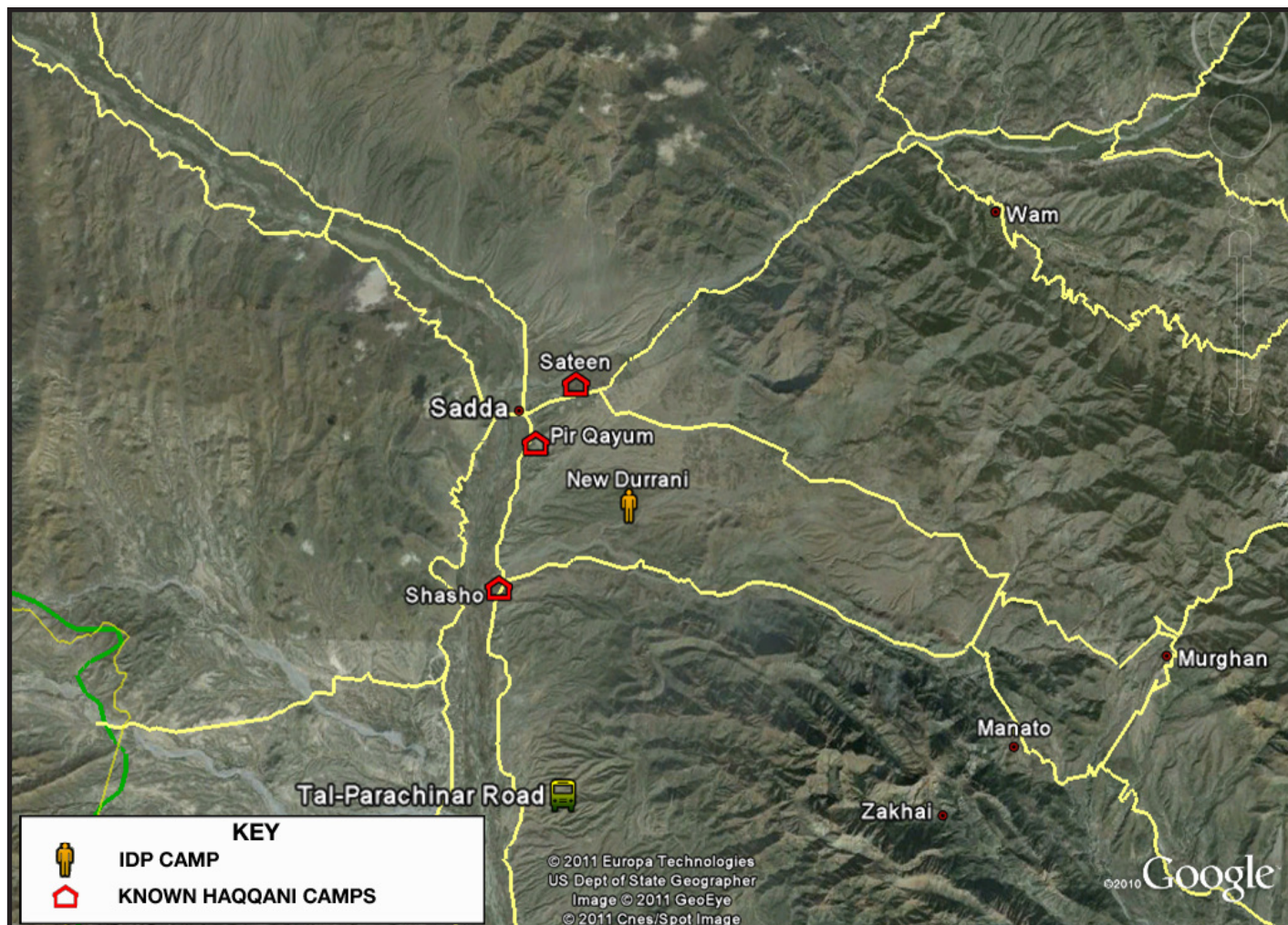
The operations are designed to clear TTP-linked militants from one of two major valleys in lower Kurram. The western valley includes the towns of Shasho, Alizai, Beggan and Chapri, is under Saeed’s influence and has not been a target of the military’s operations. This valley is the main transit point for Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Haqqani-linked fighters moving from North Waziristan to Kurram and on to Afghanistan’s southeastern provinces.³² The eastern valley in lower Kurram, which includes such towns as Sadda, Manato, Murghan, and Dombaki and the adjacent mountains bordering Khyber Agency, is the primary target of Operation Koh-i-Sufaid (Urdu for “White Mountain”). Pakistani military commanders believe approximately 600 hardcore fighters live there. About 250 of them are locals and dozens are foreign fighters.³³ The valley is primarily under the influence of Mullah Toofan and the Mehsud-linked Pakistani Taliban who go to and from Kurram via Orakzai Agency.³⁴ Militants maintain a presence throughout the length of the eastern valley running south from Sadda to Dombaki. Mountain sanctuaries in the Masuzai,

Alisherzai and Zaimusht tribal areas provide militants with easy access to Sadda and the Tal-Parachinar road.³⁵ The closure of the road due to the threat of militant attacks has been the main source of contention between the Shia of upper Kurram and the Pakistani government as well as the primary threat to the Haqqani-backed peace deal.

The Pakistani Army began ground operations backed by gunships and fighter jets on July 3.³⁶ Approximately 4,000 Pakistani Army troops supported by the Pakistani Air Force are participating in the offensive.³⁷ Initial operations targeted isolated militant encampments in the Mushat, Masuzai, and Ali Sherzai tribal regions only miles east from Sadda in central Kurram. Pakistani military officials reported little to no enemy resistance during these initial operations. The majority of militants reportedly fled ahead of the early July operations after a failed attempt to negotiate with the military through interlocutors of the Haqqani network.³⁸ Between the middle and end of July, there were reports of sporadic clashes between militants and tribal lashkars (defense forces) that have been assisting in operations in the Masuzai tribal region.³⁹ Militants' sanctuaries in the mountains

east of Sadda were discovered in Mushat, Masuzai, and Ali Sherzai. Fighters in these tribal areas have also used captured government installations, schools and health centers for the training of fighters and maintained private prisons which housed kidnapped tribesmen from areas all over the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).⁴⁰

After operations started east of Sadda, Pakistani Army forces launched raids targeting Gowaki, Dombaki, Murghan, and Manato, four towns along lower Kurram's eastern valley, in order to disrupt the militants' lines of communication and destroy their ammunition dumps and training facilities.⁴¹ Villagers from the valley reported that some militants escaped to neighboring Orakzai before Pakistani security forces launched their operations.⁴² For the Pakistani military, seizing this strategic location effectively seals off the valley, denying access to potential enemy reinforcements arriving from Orakzai. In Murghan and Manato, Pakistani forces faced the stiffest resistance of the campaign, employing infantry forces backed by heavy weapons and airpower as they advanced through town.⁴³ At least 40 militants were killed in



MAP 3 | IDP AND HAQQANI CAMPS

Manato during engagements with Pakistani security forces.⁴⁴ After securing Manato, Pakistani forces backed by the Frontier Corps progressed south in order to establish a link with forces along the Kurram-Hangu border.⁴⁵

Along the border with Hangu and Orakzai, Pakistani security forces pushed north, launching operations in Karawat, Dumbaki, Khalwat, Badama, Saparkat (Spairkach), and Pongey where they also encountered brief but stiff resistance.⁴⁶ Pakistani Army central Kurram Agency Sector Commander, Brigadier Basharat, revealed in a late July interview that his forces in and around Dumbaki were just days away from linking up with Army and Frontier Corps units moving south from Manato. According to Basharat, military operations were nearly complete and should be concluded in early August.⁴⁷ By mid-August, the operation had resulted in more than 200 militants killed.⁴⁸

Although the conflict appears to be winding down, it will be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of Operation Koh-i-Sufaid for some time because the military's reporting is hard to verify and non-military personnel's access to Kurram is severely restricted. It is likely that the Pakistani Army will have to maintain at least a partial presence in Kurram for some time to ensure that militants who fled the area prior to and during the operation do not return. If militants are unable to launch attacks in and around central Kurram or take any actions that threaten to destabilize the Haqqani-backed Sunni-Shia peace deal, then the Pakistani Army will be able to declare Operation Koh-i-Sufaid a success.

IDP CONSEQUENCES?

In late June, the Political Agent of Kurram Agency (administrator for the President of Pakistan), Syed Musadiq Shah, began to establish Internally Displaced Persons camps to house residents who were expected to flee the eighty-square-mile area where the military was preparing to launch Operation Koh-i-Sufaid. The head of Pakistan's disaster management authority in the tribal belt estimated that approximately eight thousand to twelve thousand families or upwards of eighty thousand people could be displaced due to the impending military action.⁴⁹

By early July, approximately four thousand families had arrived in the town of Sadda in central Kurram.⁵⁰ Sadda became home to the largest refugee camp set up by the Pakistani government to accommodate residents fleeing the military operations. The New Durrani IDP camp is located just seven kilometers from the center of Sadda town. Some seven hundred families had been registered in the camp by July 10th, while thousands others fled Kurram altogether, seeking refuge in neighboring Hangu at the Togh Serai camp.⁵¹ The remainder of the 85,000 who fled had sought shelter with friends or family in other parts of

Kurram or in government buildings and schools throughout the area.⁵² By the end of July, the Pakistani military reported that military operations in Kurram were nearly concluded, reports suggested that approximately 100,000 people had been displaced in Kurram, 20,000 more than initial top-line estimates.⁵³ This has led to a shortage of tents, food, and health and washing facilities. Thus far, the Pakistani government has not allowed the United Nations access to the camps because the government could not guarantee UN workers' safety.

As troubling as Kurram's humanitarian crisis is, there are reports that militants may be using the IDP camps as a new base of operations. According to residents of the New Durrani camp, the same militants who terrorized them in their towns and villages are now living among them.⁵⁴ If militants are able to relocate to New Durrani in large numbers, it will be difficult to track their activities and all but impossible to target them with drone strikes. Interestingly, New Durrani is within several kilometers of three known Haqqani network camps in Pir Qayyum, Sateen, and Shasho, where they enjoy support from select portions of the population.⁵⁵ For Afghan-focused insurgents, a base of operations in Kurram's Sadda allows for easy access to Afghanistan's eastern Khost and Paktia provinces, as well as the ability to travel north to upper Kurram, which lies just 100 kilometers southeast of Kabul, a prime target in the Haqqani's ongoing war against the Afghan government.

CONCLUSION

For the Pakistani military establishment, a successful operation in Kurram will be defined as limiting or preventing TTP-linked militant's ability to launch attacks on the Tal-Parachinar road and Shia communities in central Kurram that could directly undermine the fragile Haqqani-backed peace deal of February 2011. As operations wind down, it appears as though they have achieved this objective, at least in the short term. The Pakistani Army is likely to maintain a permanent or semi-permanent presence in lower Kurram's eastern valley in order to ensure Mehsud-linked TTP militants cannot regroup and re-establish safe haven to launch attacks.

As is often the case, though, what is good for Pakistan is not necessarily good for Afghanistan or U.S. and coalition efforts to secure and stabilize the country. As a result of military operations in Kurram, Pakistani military officials have repeatedly stated that militant movement in and out of North Waziristan, the headquarters of the Haqqani network and affiliated fighters, will be severely restricted. In fact, the opposite has been true. The majority of militant movement in and out of North Waziristan to Kurram occurs in the western valley of lower Kurram, which was explicitly avoided by Operation Koh-i-Sufaid. If the Pakistani military can keep Mehsud-linked TTP out of Kurram and prevent them

from destabilizing the peace between Sunni and Shia, it will create even greater space for the Haqqani network to establish operations in the agency and project force into Afghanistan's southeast. Furthermore, if the Pakistani Army maintains a presence in central Kurram and along the Tal-Parachinar road, it will be difficult for U.S. drones to fix and strike targets, and massive IDP camps like New Durrani could provide ample shelter for local and foreign militants looking to keep a low-profile.

The Haqqanis' newly-bolstered alliance with Saeed and his militia is a much-needed force multiplier for the Haqqanis, and it will help them carve out terrain in southwestern Kurram for basing, command and control, and facilitation to upper Kurram from where they can project into Logar and Kabul. If Saeed and his militia re-focus their efforts on the fight in Afghanistan, in partnership with the Haqqanis, that would indicate an increasingly familiar trend in which the Haqqanis are able to convince anti-Pakistan Taliban to cease their attacks on the Pakistani state and instead, aid them in their fight against U.S., coalition, and the Afghan government across the border. The U.S.-led campaign against the Haqqani network in Afghanistan will suffer as a result.

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NOTES

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