

AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN BORDER: STOPPING THE TALIBAN

The warlord along NATO's key supply route**Despite many entreaties, he won't align with Taliban. For NATO troops, his independence is no small matter****SAEED SHAH**
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BARA, PAKISTAN -- An Islamist warlord whose fighters are overrunning Pakistan's famous Khyber Pass area may now be the only force stopping the Taliban from swooping in to cut off this key supply route for NATO in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Mangal Bagh, who leads a group called Lashkar-i-Islam, said in an interview that he has rebuffed an offer from Pakistan's Taliban to join them. Although he voiced his disdain for the United States, his independence is likely to be significant for NATO troops fighting in Afghanistan.

Khyber agency is a 2,500-square-kilometre district that is part of Pakistan's tribal belt, and truckloads of food, equipment and fuel for NATO troops wind through it daily to the bustling border at Torkham. Last week, fighting between Mr. Bagh's men and a pocket of resistance around the town of Jamrut closed the Pak-Afghan highway for several days.

Mr. Bagh's stronghold, the market town of Bara, is a 30-minute drive from the city-centre of the provincial capital, Peshawar. An escort of his heavily armed followers is needed to reach his fortified compound in the surrounding countryside.

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"I'm not the ruler of Khyber, I'm the servant," said Mr. Bagh, who had an unexpectedly gentle manner, as he relaxed with his Kalashnikov-toting men, drinking tea. "My aim is to finish all social evils."

There have been repeated entreaties to combine forces from the Pakistani Taliban, who run other parts of the country's wild northwestern border terrain, known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. A traditional *jirga*, a meeting of elders, was held between Lashkar-i-Islam and the Taliban about 40 days ago.

"I told them that what I am doing is enough. It is the right direction. There is no need to join you," he said.

"The Taliban consists of religious scholars. We are fighters for Islam - laypeople. We don't have any religious figures in our organization."

However, he said that the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was "wrong" and that U.S. soldiers must leave.

"While the Americans are in Afghanistan, there is no way to bring peace and prosperity, over there and here," Mr. Bagh said. "We do not want to kill Americans, we just want to make them Muslims."

Locals said that Mr. Bagh would not allow Taliban fighters to cross into Khyber. If they ever got into the area, the Taliban could readily choke the Pakistan-Afghan highway. They showed intent last month with the bombing of fuel trucks waiting at Torkham to cross into Afghanistan.

In contrast to the Taliban, Lashkar-i-Islam is against kidnapping and suicide bombings. Rather than the international *jihad* of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Mr. Bagh's message is more an austere one, that "vices" must end.

Mr. Bagh's group has used its muscle to free some victims from the kidnap gangs that operate in Khyber. But he is violently opposed to worshipping at shrines, a popular tradition that he regards as un-Islamic. Last month, a brutal attack by his men on a shrine in Shaikhani, a settlement near Bara, left 12 villagers dead.

His stand has led to accusations that he has some association with the Pakistani authorities or the country's notorious Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

A senior member of Lashkar-i-Islam, Mistry-Sahib, denied any connection with the Pakistani state.

"We don't want to fight the government; it is our country. We just want peace in our area. We have no connection with the government because their policies are not right," he said.

The state seems to have withdrawn from Bara and much of Khyber agency, and it has taken no recent action to rein in Mr. Bagh. In the town of Bara, the local government office was padlocked and no soldiers or police officers were visible on the streets. Lashkar-i-Islam has, it seems, become the de facto police, with its fighters motoring around in four-wheel-drive vehicles with blue flashing lights.

A local politician, who decline to be identified, said: "If we finish Mangal Bagh, the Taliban will come in. He's a better alternative. At least he will never pick up his gun against Pakistan."

In Bara, there were no women on the streets. The Lashkar-i-Islam's harsh strictures, delivered through a pirate radio station, appear to have driven them indoors. In the market, local people praised Mr. Bagh for cracking down on crime, though it would take a brave person to criticize him openly. Praying five times a day at the mosque is now mandatory. But it is a source of pride for Mr. Bagh that he has left Bara's small but conspicuous Sikh community alone.

One Sikh in Bara market, Sant Singh, said: "Conditions are good. When there is the *azaan* [Islamic call to prayer], people leave their shops open and go to the mosque. There is no theft here any more."

Mr. Bagh belongs to the Afridi tribe, the largest in the Khyber agency, which has a population of about 550,000 and is considered the most developed part of FATA. He said his writ ran over almost the whole of Khyber.

Others suggested that while he has Bara and its surrounding area, his command elsewhere in Khyber is less certain. The fighting in Jamrut, a town famous for its trade in contraband, resulted in an uneasy stalemate between his fighters and the local strongmen, the Kukikhel tribe.

Mr. Bagh, known now as the Emir, said that he has more than 10,000 men under his command and could call upon as many as 120,000 - more than the number of Pakistan army soldiers stationed in the whole of the tribal area. The 35-year-old has built an empire in just three years from humble origins. He used to drive a bus.

Ominously for the rest of Pakistan, Mr. Bagh suggested that his movement could branch out of Khyber.

"Islam is for everyone. We could go to other places where there are social evils. We want peace and Islam everywhere. Our organization is not confined to this area."