

**Frustrated by a protracted war, Pakistani tribesmen pressing divided Taliban into peace talks**  
**By Riaz Khan**  
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PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Five years after setting up an umbrella organization to unite violent militant groups in the nation's tribal regions, the Pakistani Taliban is fractured, strapped for cash and losing support of local tribesmen frustrated by a protracted war that has forced thousands from their homes, analysts and residents say.

The temperamental chief of the group known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hakimullah Mehsud, recently offered to start peace talks with the government, raising the prospect of a negotiated end to Pakistan's war against insurgents in a lawless region that runs the length of the border with Afghanistan.

The group's offer of sanctuary to Afghanistan's Taliban has been one of the most divisive issues in U.S.-Pakistan relations and has confounded efforts to get the upper hand against Afghan insurgents after more than 11 years of war.

Pakistan denies providing outright military and financial help to militants fighting in Afghanistan. With 120,000 Pakistani soldiers deployed in the tribal regions, Pakistan has waged its own bloody battle against insurgents that has left more than 4,000 soldiers dead.

In interviews with analysts, residents and militant experts, Mehsud's network has emerged as a narrow collection of insurgents — often with links to criminal gangs — that has only limited influence in a vast tribal region overrun by scores of insurgent groups led by commanders with disparate agendas and varying loyalties.

Rather than a precursor to peace, Mehsud's offer to talk peace is an attempt to regain stature, silence critics and gain concessions from a weak government heading into nationwide elections, according to those familiar with the militant organization.

Taliban spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan has repeatedly denied reports of divisions within the TTP, including reported challenges to Mehsud's leadership.

But Amir Rana, director of the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, said Mehsud's offer to talk was an attempt to divert attention from internal rifts that are ripping the organization apart and diminishing its influence. Mehsud speaks for fighters restricted to his own tribe, based in North and South Waziristan, he said.

"There is a lot of tension within the TTP. This peace offer I think basically comes from Hakimullah Mehsud and the Mehsud commanders," Rana said.

Some of his most powerful commanders have broken away and set up their own fiefdoms in other parts of the tribal area, he said.

Mehsud's fighters are believed to number in the thousands, but there are no reliable figures to measure the size of his force.

Former intelligence officials, Taliban and residents of the area say Mehsud also has a large number of foreign fighters in his North Waziristan hideouts. Many are Uzbeks and other Central Asians belonging to the outlawed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and mostly disliked by local residents.

"The Taliban's offer for peace talks is more of a ploy to gain legitimacy and a public relations tactic than a sincere move to end violence," militant expert and author Zahid Hussain wrote in a local newspaper this week.

Hussain portrayed Mehsud's Taliban as killers and criminals who are demanding negotiations on their own terms, including the release of prisoners who spearheaded the 2009 Taliban takeover of the Swat region in northeastern Pakistan and who admitted beheading opponents. In brazen disregard for Pakistani law, the video in which they offered peace talks featured convicted killer Adnan Rashid, who escaped from death row during a jailbreak by the Taliban last year.

Hussain called the video a "grotesque joke" and criticized the government's willingness to talk with Mehsud's Taliban.

"Some political leaders are shamelessly calling on the state to surrender to the very criminals who have killed thousands of Pakistanis in suicide bombings, beheaded soldiers and bombed schools," he said.

Two dozen political parties including the ruling Pakistan People's Party agreed in a day-long meeting Thursday to pursue talks with the Taliban, including the secular-leaning Awami National Party that rules the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province where the tribal regions are located. They didn't offer details of how they would go about it.

"We have to try to find peace. It is not a question of giving them legitimacy. Their forces are there and when they come to the negotiation table they are recognizing the writ of the government," provincial information minister Iftikar Hussain, whose son was killed by Taliban insurgents, told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Previous agreements between various Taliban factions have collapsed.

The TTP in North Waziristan is looking for talks because it is losing the support of the local people, according to a privately funded think tank in the Pakistani capital devoted to understanding the tribal regions.

“They are weak, there is infighting,” said Mansour Mehsud, director of research at the FATA Research Center named for the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Pakistan’s tribal regions have a special status under Pakistani law that allows tribal traditions and customs to rule. Many of the laws and rules applying to the tribal area date back to the early 20th century when the British ruled the subcontinent. Unable to control the tribesmen, the British made agreements that allowed them safe passage through tribal territory.

“They used to have the support of most people but not anymore,” said Mehsud, who has no relation to the TTP leader although he shares the same tribal links. “People used to think that they would bring justice based on the Quran but instead fighting has displaced hundreds of thousands of people.”

Mehsud said the Pakistani Taliban also were running out of money and that extortion and kidnappings had become one of their biggest sources of income.

A wealthy trader living on the edge of the tribal area, who was afraid to give his name because he feared retribution, said the Taliban swindled thousands of dollars from him. He said he was threatened, his family was terrorized and then a bomb exploded at his home, seriously wounding his niece.

He said other businessmen told him that they too had paid large sums of money to the Taliban. In his tribal culture, he said it is shameful to admit to being robbed because it is seen as a sign of weakness, so no one has said anything.

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