



# Operation Black Thunderstorm

Briefing Paper  
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“Military Perspective: An Interview with Lt. General Masood Aslam (Retired)” was researched, compiled and written by **Faisal Aijaz**, Senior Analyst.

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The following analysis is the first part of a two-part series on Pakistan military operation famously known as "Operation Black Thunderstorm".

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."--WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HENRY IV

Insurgencies and shadow wars are fought without any defined battle space. April-2009 brings back memories when the rise in terrorism and militancy generated obstacle after obstacle for Pakistan's survival. How quickly we tend to forget when the Army, Frontier Corps, elements of Special Forces faced a full-blown insurgency and were cluttered in the most crucial battles, starting from the military offensive in Bajaur (2008), which I discussed previously by putting special emphasis on its tactical side.

The Army and Frontier Corps saw the rise in terrorism & militancy, and the people unfortunately dubbed the war itself as an "American War", failing to realize that the war on terror provided an opportunity for Pakistan and its military. The civilian population went on quickly to term the United States as an adversary; failing to realize that Pakistan was immersed in a non-linear war, in which the zones of war and peace are not defined and that the threat was active in tribal areas prior to 9/11.

Before 2008, the military deployed its troops in the area without any battle training for conducting operations in such an unforgiving terrain. Post-2008, counter-terrorism (CT) training centers were envisaged and established by the former commander CENT-COM Lt. General Tariq Khan, who was then commanding 14 Division. Before assessing military operations in FATA, we must appreciate the environment of this conflict. It requires a comprehensive understanding of the entire campaign against terrorism by Pakistani military. Things must be seen in true perspective and not in isolation.

In fact, no military operation can or should be seen in isolation. When the military deployed to FATA in 2002, it was ill-prepared to tackle the insurgency. There was no CT doctrine and its training was purely traditional. The turn in CT Operations came when 14 Division was handed over the charge to lead Operation Zalzal in South Waziristan Agency. Pre-induction training was imparted to troops and special emphasis was put on new fighting techniques & CT schools. That was the time, when Baitullah Mehsud, the Emir of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), declared war against Pakistan, because 14 Division was inducted in South Waziristan. Before Lt. General Tariq Khan (Retired) took over the command of Frontier Corps in 2008, the dimension of the combat capacity of the Frontier Corps was different and was definitely not there to conduct CT Ops in FATA and other districts.

Let us, briefly, review the situation [2006-2007] before the full-fledged military operations, which began in early 2008:

1. The Indus Highway was inaccessible
2. The Kohat Tunnel was blocked.
3. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Government was in the process to move to Abbottabad from Peshawar.
4. The Peshawar Airport was closed.
5. Corps Commander house in Peshawar was subjected to mortar attacks.

6. Mohmand Agency was a no-go area.
7. Bajaur Agency was governed by Afghan militants, using Afghan currency in the local revenue system till Frontier Corps under the command of Lt. General Tariq Khan (Retired), conducted Operation Sherdil in August 2008. Read my previous piece: [The Bajaur Offensive](#)
8. Dir & Buner were occupied by the TTP and came close to occupy Margalla Hills.
9. The ICRC declared Dir as a war zone.
10. Swat had its own constitution and was governed by TNSM.

I have argued in my previous piece that although the military application alone is not the solution to an insurgency, they do create an indispensable space for the administrative and development work such as political integration, development, opportunity-building and the de-radicalization of society. Had Pakistan not conducted the military operations post-2007, we would have muddled-up in an abyss without an exit. One can surely analyze the insurgency campaign waged by JVP in Sri Lanka, led by Rohana Wijeweera. Military operations conducted under the watch of then General Sepala Attygalle during the 1971 insurgency, paved way for the government to establish their writ in the area.

This is how David Kilcullen described insurgencies in his book *The Accidental Guerrilla*: “In mid-2005, Eliot Cohen invited me to a private conference, held at a beautiful resort on the leafy shore of a lake in the far northern United States. There I met Hank Crumpton, a legendary figure in the Central Intelligence Agency, an old Africa hand who had many years’ experience in counterterrorism and had led the Agency’s in Afghanistan after 9/11. We discovered that we saw the conflict in very similar terms, and diagnosed the key challenge—the complexity of fighting local “small wars” in the midst of a globalized conflict, while better integrating the military and non-military aspects of national power—very similarly.”

Remember: The capture of physical space in CT operations, cannot be used as the only benchmark for measuring success.

Let us now analyze the military resources the Frontier Corps and the Army had while entering Dir and launching Operation Black Thunderstorm.

## **Military Preparation**

For those who are not familiar with the area, Dir has two main portions: Lower Dir and Upper Dir. However, Lower Dir has an inner valley and outer valley distinguished by a ring of mountains. The center of the inner valley consists of Lal Qila and the HQ of the Dir Scouts lies in Timergara. The outer valley slopes towards the Peo Char Valley of Swat. Barawal, which is connected with Panakot, leads all the way to the tunnel to Chitral.

Frontier Corps under the command of then IGFC-Major General Tariq Khan, began getting the intelligence reports on the militants' movement in Dir. This was an area where the militants virtually controlled everything, running their own courts and collecting taxes from the local population. Reports received by the General, indicated an undisturbed access that terrorists had towards Swat and Kohistan and also regarding Lal Qila, which was taken over by the TTP - Dir and turned into their own HQ. The General quickly fortified Dir Scouts with two battalions, a wing of the Swat Scouts along with a squadron of tanks from 21 Horse. The general subsequently raised a lashkar and tasked them to clear their own area in DoK Darra which was quite high and dominated the entrance to Swat and Chitral. When the lashkar initiated operations, the General integrated the efforts by placing 130 mm in Panakot and also supported them with attack helicopters.

"The Army is equipped and trained for snow line operations, the enemy is not. The militant is reduced to fighting in snow wearing joggers with routes limited to only frequented ones that can easily be interdicted. It has been proven over and over again that inclement weather favors the Army, yet we so willingly forfeit our tactical advantage because of a thunderous argument presented on a power point in a comfortable room."—Lieutenant General Tariq Khan (Retired)

## **The Battle Begins**

**"There is no better place to assess an officer than in combat."-Former Commander CENTCOM Lt. General Tariq Khan (Retired)**

Operation Black Thunderstorm was launched under the command of the then Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Kyani. Frontier Corps, under the then IG Frontier Corps, Major General Tariq Khan, began military operation in Dir on May 9th with tanks from 21 Horse leading the officers and soldiers. Lt. Col Suleiman, CO of 21 Horse lead the troops himself. The tanks eventually ran the enemy up to Lal Qila but the Swat Scouts while marching on the road got ambushed, and the commanding officer got shot in the head by a glancing bullet. When the battle heated up, Lt. Col Sulaiman was left ruptured in Lal Qila and the roads leading towards were all cut off. Worrying about the logistics, the General rallied up and sent 9 AK on its route; a battalion with whom General Tariq had been the Brigade Major in 1990 and was famous for the Leepa and Chumak Operations. Although 9 AK's CO was injured during the first day in battle and despite his evacuation, he returned and joined the battle till the very end. During the battle, one of the tanks from 21 Horse was subjected to an IED, resulting in the death of the tank's crew. Due to limited logistics, the Frontier Corps linked up with 21 Horse after almost 5 days in Lal Qila.

During the on-going battle, two separate phases of battle also took place where the Frontier Corps cleared the passes and eventually established their own check posts at Sar Lara & Kalpani, along with communication towers, which were established at Bin Shahi sector. The consolidation phase in Dir took place by the end of June. This impeccable military feat always compels me to quote Shakespeare's Richard III, Act V, Scene III: Bosworth Field:

O Thou! whose captain I account myself, Look on my forces with a gracious eye; Put in their hands thy brushing irons of wrath, That they may crush down with a heavy fall The usurping helmets of our adversaries

## Psychological Operations

The need to protect the civilian population is the cornerstone of COIN. While combating the TTP propaganda, the Frontier Corps used FM radio stations effectively, challenging the Maulvis and their reprehensible ideology profusely. A new dial-in system was introduced which allowed people to interact live. Young boys and girls were exhilarated and gladly took on the so-called defenders of Islam. On getting a ruling, the Frontier Corps handed over the Radio Stations and its facilities to ISPR. The move itself was highly successfully in presenting a counter narrative, but we are sometimes consumed by our own shadows.

Patrolling in a conflict zone, is an indispensable part of establishing a parameter of tactical influence and also provides depth to early warning. It is crucial to maintain 'Lines of Communication,' unlike previously in case of XI Corps, when 9 Division's lines of communication came through Baluchistan via Zhob. During the consolidation phase, the roads in Dir were handed over to the Levies. However, the civil administration disrupted the overall plan for socio-economic development in the region, which forced the Frontier Corps to take control of the situation.

What I want to say is that without creating enabling environment, military operations don't bear fruits.

It includes political integration, ownership, resolve and adequate resources in terms of troops and finances for post-operation rehabilitation and reconstruction. It is a collective effort of all in the chain that we stand where we are today. Unfortunately, we haven't done well in the domain of socio-economic development, due to corruption, political instability, ethnic conflict etc. As a nation, we must sit down, and measure the success of military operations in a conflict zone.

When military operations began in 2007, as a country, we were fighting this war for our own survival. Today, the terrorists are fighting for their survival. This huge paradigm shift must be appreciated.

The former commander CENTCOM Lt. General Tariq Khan, established a formula to measure military success in the region and it was based on four imperative questions his officers had to answer:

1. Do you control access, to and for, to your AOR (Area of Responsibility)?
2. Is the writ of the government established, i.e.: Are the courts & PA functioning?
3. Do you control the Lines of Communication?
4. Are you popular with the local population?

The offensive in Dir was one of the biggest military combats (the other in Buner), which allowed the Army to conduct an operation in Swat later on, termed as 'Operation Rah-i-Rast'.

In a nutshell, to understand the true essence of simmering conflicts, Pakistanis should whitewash the notion that the operation in North Waziristan 'Zarb e Azb' was some final

battle. The perpendicular elucidation of simmering conflicts must be taken into consideration and that is: It has no defined zones of war and peace.

The enemy is mercurial and its objective is to disrupt the state apparatus.

Speaking of simmering conflicts, this is what the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Gilles de Kerchove said, "You will never prevent someone leaving his apartment, taking a knife in the kitchen and killing someone in the street."

In the next analysis on Buner, I will evaluate the environment & security situation, in which the Frontier Corps & Special Service Group re-grouped to capture and control one of the difficult terrains of the world.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faisal Aijaz brings his hard-charging and reliable analysis to spearhead the domains of counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and national security. He brings a great deal of understanding about military affairs, strategy and tactics, helping his team to better analyze the current and potential security situations in the region.

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