



# The Bajaur Offensive

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#### REPORT AUTHORS

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

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Not so long ago, “Counter-Terrorism” was an abstruse word for Pakistan’s military till General Tariq Khan stepped up and was handed over the command of 14 Division and later on Frontier Corps. It was August 2008, when Colonel Nauman (Commandant Bajaur Scouts) informed General Tariq Khan about the deplorable situation in Loe Sam, Bajaur in which FC troops supported by a single tank got ambushed by the militants. It was only after when Colonel Nauman was asked to reach the fort at Khar that he realized that all other administrative and government buildings were fully taken over by the militants. Upon reaching the fort, Nauman, who previously also had served under General Tariq as GSO-I in Armoured Division, explained the situation to the General, who then without any delay requested the Air Force for an airstrike in the region due to which the militants within the radius were obliterated. This was about breaking the Khar siege which then ultimately paved way for the defining battle in Bajaur that restored the military’s credibility and forced the American military officials to praise the ruthless military operation in Bajaur. The former U.S Secretary of Defence Robert Gates said that the United States was ‘encouraged’ by the Bajaur operation.

## **ON-GROUND SITUATION**

Military operations are conducted to achieve a special environment and Bajaur being a strategic region was once under the rule of Afghani Militants. It was before this battle that the provincial government was looking for options to shift its business from Peshawar to Abbottabad and Bajaur itself was run as a separate state by an Afghan militant Qari Zia Rehman. The Indus highway was closed and Khyber international route to Afghanistan was unsafe and vulnerable for NATO logistics. The Corps Commander’s house was even subjected to a number of mortar attacks. Bajaur comprises of four valleys i.e. Chamarkand, Mamund, Salarzai, Utmankhel. The main issue was Chamarkand and Mamund since these both were connected with Afghanistan’s Kunar province. General Tariq Khan wanted Regional Command-East headed by General Curtis Scapparotti to block the movement of militants from Kunar as SIGINT indicated that safe havens were offered to the militants hiding in Afghanistan. Before the military operation in Bajaur, the road from Khar to Loe Sam was heavily infested with tunnels and all roads were controlled by the militants. Bajaur serves as a gateway to Kunar Province in Afghanistan. The militants seized Bajaur and even created a network of interconnected tunnels, equipped with ventilation systems. On various occasions, Pakistan Air Force played a vital role in Bajaur, using 500 and 2000-pound bombs to destroy and break the tunnels and well-structured compounds.

## **OPERATION SHERDIL**

The full-throttle operation began under the command of General Tariq Khan in September 2008 in the month of Ramzan who led the Frontier Corps, Army’s 26 Brigade from the front with the sole aim to open the road to Loesam in the first phase and linking up with Bajaur’s Momand Tehsil in the second phase. The forward battalion moved along with a troop of tanks 21 Horse. Bajaur was such a strong safe haven for the militants that over here they transformed the region into a well secured fortress and constructed a network of tunnels and underground defences. Aerial bombing consisting of 2000-pound bombs, tanks, artillery strikes annihilated everything in Bajaur even though the influx of militants who were mostly Arabs and Central Asians had RPGs and MANPADs such as Strela-2 and the European anti-tank guided missiles such as MILAN along with Russian ammunition

and were well-equipped. Militants in Bajaur relied on Thuraya phone services and the hidden tracks in Bajaur gave them tactical depth. The militants even had the access to Kunar in Afghanistan and when Loesam-Nawagai was captured, the access was denied by the military. It was in the footsteps of Bajaur military operation that operations in other tribal agencies were launched too later on. The Force in Bajaur was hybrid and first in military application too. A joint Frontier Corps and Army battle group was under a military field commander, Brigadier Abid Mumtaz, now Major General but the overall FC command was under General Tariq Khan.

*'As we were about to enter the combat zone and progressed through Tang Khata, we were suddenly ambushed. Bullets went through our vehicle and rocket fire went off all around us. I was most worried about Lieutenant General Farooq Ahmad Khan who was with me and so I pushed him down to protect him. My troops then retaliated with overwhelming fire and suppressed the enemy.'* - Lt. General (R) Tariq Khan

When Army's 26 Brigade came under intense fire by the militants, Frontier Corps then flushed out the militants and even managed to save and rescue the officers of the brigade. When 26 Brigade came under a severe rocket attack, General Khan had to call in 10 AK in order to link up with 26 Brigade. Within a week, 10 AK cleared the area assigned to them and were even successful in linking up with 26 Brigade. Soldiers and officers under the command of the General were so well organized that they made Bajaur as an example to follow. It is certainly not a secret that before the Army and Frontier Corps moved in the region to conduct a decisive military operation, poor governance created the deplorable environment in the tribal belt which ultimately fed militancy and hostile elements in the region.

A township by the name of Inayat Killi was subjected to heavy bombardment by PAF as the town had been developed into hardened bunkers and captured by sniper action. The tanks then moved in under the cover of Cobra gunship helicopters compelling the enemy to leave behind indispensable resources.

This was that crucial period when General Khan just took over the command of an ill-equipped Frontier Corps and then turned it into a relentless force during the passage of time. During the first session of the General as Inspector General Frontier Corps at Bala Hissar Fort, he told his soldiers 'Any battle we would go into, I would accompany the troops'. The battle was initially thought to be an indomitable one by the government and critics but was proved wrong by the only strong bastion of Pakistan. Speaking to Lt. Omar Tirmizi of 63 FF who is now serving as a Major, told about his stint in Bajaur offensive. During the battle, Omar and other soldiers were heavily outnumbered and came under heated firepower by the militants due to which Omar was badly injured and the blood was gushing out from his body after being hit by an RPG.

*'There used to be smell of blood in my room all the time. My bed was like a pool of blood and my uniform which was all bloodied from head-to-toe had to be cut off with a sharp blade.'* - Major Omar

It was in the footsteps of Bajaur offensive, that Operation Rah-e-Rast and Rah-e-Nijat were launched which proved to be a milestone in turning the tide of war, said Major Omar.

The militancy in Bajaur heavily disturbed the socio-psychological fabric of society which was then ultimately buried by the military operation. Bajaur attained tranquillity and its Pashtun culture after a hard-fought battle under the command of General Tariq Khan, a swashbuckling General who was the commanding General of Frontier Corps and the main architect of Pakistan's successful military operation in Bajaur. It was in this very agency, where a woman stood for elections, proving that the stability was a sustained one. The hills of Bajaur overlooking the plains of Afghanistan's Kunar Province was once a centre of hard-core insurgency. The paradigm shift in terms of military application in favour of Pakistan Army & Frontier Corps began from Bajaur. This was the place where the menace of militancy and extremism once flourished, got ultimately buried by the transformed Frontier Corps and Pakistan Army.

#### 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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