New phase of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan

The election on November 7, 2013 by the TTP Shura (council) in North Waziristan of Maulana Fazlullah, as the new leader of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan (TTP) makes significant adjustments in the activities of the organization, and the political situation in Pakistan, the Pakistan-Afghan border, and in the whole region.

Originally, the Shura actually endorsed the candidature of Hafiz Saeed Khan as the leader of the TTP, but later events followed a different scenario. Although rebel groups expressed their readiness to support Maulana Fazlullah’s leadership, they were still not entirely happy with this solution. They would much rather have had these nominations come from Waziristan agencies. However, possible differences within the ranks of the TTP forced them to accept the decision of the Shura.

Among those who supported Maulana Fazlullah were the Al-Fatah group, Saddiq Akbar group, Jaish Arab group, Lashkar e Usama, and Ilyas Kashmiri group. In general, these groups emerged and operate outside the administrative borders of the FATA. Despite the fact that the candidate Hafiz Saeed Khan received a greater number of votes, he got no official recognition. It should be explained that in recent years, due to the growing influence of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan, and its strengthening of ties with the Afghan Taliban in the region, Pakistani insurgents are increasingly being drawn into the orbit of regional militant activity, where the leading positions are occupied by Mullah Omar (emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 1996–2001 years, who fled to Pakistan). His vote was decisive. Official notification of the appointment of Fazlullah as the new leader of the TTP was made on November 8, 2013 by a telephone call of Press Secretary Shahidullah Shahid from Afghanistan.

Thus, with the election of Maulana Fazlullah as the leader, the TTP leadership centre is currently moving to the Swat Valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan, and therefore goes beyond the administrative borders of the FATA and moves into the interior of the country. The transfer of the movement’s leadership, to another tribe and agencies, has already led to the exit of a number of TTP groups, who openly disagree with the decision of the Shura. In the future, this may lead to further division and therefore decentralization and growth in uncontrollable militias. In addition, experts are predicting a scenario in which Maulana Fazlullah will resign his positions, if he is unable to control the internal divisions in the TTP.

The first time the Pakistani media loudly talked about Maulana Fazlullah was in 2009. Under his command were the local Taliban militants in Pakistan (Swat) in the administrative districts of Malakand, Swat Valley of the North-West Frontier Province (from April 2010 – the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The group became affiliated with the TTP in 2007-2009. He is also known by the nickname of ‘Mullah Radio’ for his anti-government sermons.

In the NWFP in the 2008-2009 years, the Movement for the Establishment of Sharia (MES) was reactivated, headed by Maulana Sufi Muhammad (father-in-law of Maulana Fazlullah). The demands of MES and TTP include the introduction of Sharia courts in areas inhabited by Sunni Muslims in the southern part of the province. The
movements resorted to acts of violence against the local population. Through negotiations and assurances of a unilateral ceasefire, they were able to get the federal government and President Asif Ali Zarlari to sign a decree on a partial introduction of Sharia law and justice – the Nifaz-e-Nizam-e-Sharia (“moderate” version of Sharia) on April 13, 2009, applicable in several areas of NWFP of Pakistan. It was assumed that the sharia courts would operate in parallel with the civil proceedings in Malakand.

Federal authorities have considered the agreement as part of a deal with the Islamists that gave hope to end militancy and terrorism in the Upper and Lower Dir Districts of the Swat Valley. However, in April 2009, Sufi Muhammad said that “democracy is incompatible with Sharia law”, and the political system of Pakistan is contrary to the Koran. Militias moved towards Islamabad. The federal army sent troops into Malakand. Fazlullah fled to Afghanistan, and from there headed the TTP in Swat Valley. The then-Interior Minister Rehman Malik warned of a possible operation on the territory of the neighbouring country against Maulana Fazlullah, if he did not stop terrorist activities in Pakistan.

Pakistani media in November 2013 named the reasons for Fazlullah’s election: “… he has two advantages: he has a lot of money behind him, as well as the Afghan Taliban.” In reality, this means not only strengthening further links with Afghanistan’s militant centre, but maybe a change of strategy of the TTP in Pakistan. The first signs of change in their goals are already evident – Fazlullah threats issued against the security forces, government institutions, new political leaders, police and the Sharif family, which is based in the Punjab. This is the most populous and economically developed province in the country. In previous years, the militant groups avoided the Punjab, except, perhaps, Lahore. This was helped by the policy pursued by Nawaz Sharif towards the Taliban, in which there was no criticism of the TTP.

Taliban Movement of Pakistan is an organization uniting, as of November 1, 2013, 81 militant groups. Pakistani Taliban from the outset was represented by independent militant detachments, united by extremist beliefs. The spearheads of their struggle they directed against the federal government and the army, accusing the latter in pro-American policies, aimed at supporting the occupation forces in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, they acted relatively independently of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who are fighting against the coalition forces of the U.S.A. and NATO. However, the recent dramatic changes in the composition of the TTP leadership, indicates that the Afghan Taliban is making the TTP not an internal Pakistani organization, but a regional branch of the Taliban Movement. In the Pakistani press, they expressed the opinion that the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaida saw this as an opportunity to expand geographically their activities, and further mobilize militias from Pakistan, and thus strengthen its position in the region, which will be particularly important during the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan in 2014

Despite the appointment, Maulana Fazlullah remains in the Afghan province of Nuristan. The operations of the Movement in Pakistan will be directed by his deputy, Deputy Ameer of TTP Sheikh Khalid Haqqani, who also hails from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Swabi District.

Revival of terrorist activity, particularly in the Punjab, the use of additional combat reserve in the form of various armed groups (Sipah-i-Sahaba, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaish-i-Mohammad), illegally based in the province, will lead to a new wave of terrorist activity not only in the country but, according to these organizations, in neighbouring India. Especially because some of them (according to Pakistani press) were formed to fight against Indian troops in the Kashmir. In recent years, due to the growing impact of the TTP, and its strengthening ties with the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani insurgents in the region are increasingly being drawn into the orbit of regional militancy.

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