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Shiite deal gives militants new Afghan access

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Shiite Muslim militias in Pakistan's tribal regions are helping some of NATO's fiercest enemies evade missile attacks from U.S. drones to cross safely into Afghanistan, a tribal activist told The Associated Press.

Shiites, who control a key piece of tribal real estate, cut a deal with the deadly Haqqani network to give insurgents a safe, alternative route to Afghanistan through Pakistan's Kurram tribal region, said Munir Bangash, who is familiar with the deal. A second tribesman from Kurram confirmed the deal but spoke only on condition of anonymity fearing retribution from the Taliban and from fellow tribesmen.

The deal underlines the problems of shutting down the Haqqani network's access to its bases in Afghanistan from its refuges in Pakistan.

The Haqqani network is blamed for many of the deadliest attacks on US troops in Afghanistan. Washington has been pressing Pakistan to launch a military operation against the Haqqani network in North Waziristan but so far the military has held back, saying its 140,000 soldiers deployed across the tribal belt are already stretched too thin.

Analysts and Afghan government officials have accused Pakistan of protecting the Haqqani network as allies who could be of use after the Americans and their allies leave Afghanistan.

The deal in Kurram was brokered two months ago during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. A delegation of Shiite elders and Shiite militiamen from Kurram met representatives of the Haqqani network and laid the groundwork for the deal, said Bangash, who is the chairman of the Community Rights Program, an independent organization trying to broker peace between Kurram's Shiites and Sunnis while bringing development to their areas.

Under the agreement, the Shiites gave the Haqqani network safe passage through Kurram from its Pakistan strongholds in neighboring North and South Waziristan across the border to its Afghan bases in Khost and Paktia provinces, Bangash said.

In return, the Haqqanis intervened with the Sunni Muslim militants to get them to agree to a truce with the Shiites in Kurram. The two sects have been engaged in brutal tit-for-tat killings, although most of the dead have been Shiite Muslim. Rival Sunni Muslims have also blocked the only highway connecting Kurram to Pakistan's Khyber Pukhtunkhwa provincial capital of Peshawar.

Bangash said hundreds of Haqqani insurgents as well as Pakistani Taliban have taken refuge in Kurram to escape attacks by U.S. drones in North Waziristan as well as a Pakistan military offensive in South Waziristan and Orakzai tribal regions.

Kurram's Shiites had an intense interest in striking a deal for local reasons.

Kurram is divided between a northern half bordering Afghanistan controlled by Shiites and a Sunni-dominated southern half, which includes the only road connection to Peshawar and the rest of Pakistan.

Hundreds have been killed in fighting between militias run by the each sect. Divisions between the communities worsened with the growing influence in the area of the Pakistani Taliban, allied with the Sunni radical group Lashkar-e-Janghvi, known for its attacks on Shiites around Pakistan, said Bangash.

The bloodletting peaked in 2007 when Shiites drove Sunnis out of Parachinar, the regional government headquarters. Sunni Muslims retaliated by denying Shiite Muslims access to road. In some instances, Sunni militants have stopped buses on the road, taken out Shiite passengers and executed them.

The Shiite militias had to turn to the Haqqanis to strike a deal "because they are so strong. No one else is as strong," Bangash said.

Neither Bangash nor other Kurram tribesmen could say whether negotiations involved a member of the Haqqani family. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the network's operational head, was in Kurram in September, according to the Long War Journal, a U.S.-based Web periodical which tracks insurgent activity.

While Kurram's Sunnis have come under Taliban sway, its Shiites have come under the influence of two local militias called Hezbollah and the Mehdi militia — unrelated to the militant groups of the same name in Lebanon and Iraq, respectively — Bangash said.

"The Shiites are held hostage to the Hezbollah and Mehdi militias, like the Sunnis are held hostage to the Taliban," said Bangash.

The agreement brokered during Ramadan is an uneasy one, says Bangash. Relatives of Shiites killed by their Sunni rivals oppose the dealmaking with the Haqqani network.

"About a week ago some of Haqqanis representatives came to Parachinar to talk to the elders to try to keep the deal in place," said Bangash.