

# Killing Pakistan from Within

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Over the last two years, Pakistan has made frequent – albeit less than flattering – appearances in headlines around the world regarding the ongoing escalation within its borders. The growth of Islamic terrorism, the murder of Benazir Bhutto, an upset in the general elections at the beginning of 2008, and President Musharraf's subsequent resignation are some of the events pointing to the country's undermined stability. Pakistan finds itself in the eye of the storm, having to redefine its policy in relation to organizations that until not long ago operated under its auspices but have in recent years become state enemies. An amalgam of local, regional, and international elements, the increasing terrorism in Pakistan is a central link in the global jihad and a major challenge confronting the international struggle against it.

Islamic terrorism based in southern Asia, in particular the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, commands extensive international attention and effort. The close relations between the populations on both sides of the border connect the wars raging in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and their ramifications go far beyond the regional arena. Here, however, radical Islam, which is sweeping many countries around the globe, is joined by a tribal aspect, and what emerges is ethnic identity infused with religious zeal. The relations between the Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan are the basis of both cooperation between the Islamic organizations and recruitment of support among the tribes. The joint Muslim and tribal identity contains the risk of an ethnic-national awakening that is liable to ignite the longstanding territorial conflict between the two neighbors, a conflict that would threaten them both, but Pakistan especially.

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The growing terrorism in Pakistan is closely linked to jihadist organizations that have undermined Afghanistan's foundations for three decades. The Afghan Taliban is essentially a Pakistani creation: most of the leaders are graduates of the Islamic madrasas that proliferated in Pakistan in the 1980s. Pakistan viewed war with Afghanistan as an opportunity to advance its goals in establishing a friendly Pashtun administration, and helped the Afghani mujahideen in their war against the Soviets. In so doing, Pakistan shortsightedly nurtured a jihadist culture in its tribal regions, and is now reaping the fruits of that myopia. In 1997, the American embassy in Pakistan warned that the Taliban brand of Islam taking over Afghanistan might "infect" Pakistan. The same year, a report by Pakistan's Interior Ministry warned that Taliban-inspired Islamic militancy had spread throughout Pakistan's tribal regions and could potentially threaten the rest of the country.<sup>1</sup> However, it appeared as a problem for another day. Yet now, one decade later, the day has arrived: Pakistan is facing the domestic complications that the Taliban has created within the country that undermine its stability. Now, when it has to formulate new policies to reflect a changing reality, voices from the past impede its action. The complex relationship the state forged with the terrorist organizations over the years is a source of confusion and inconsistency in Pakistan's policies vis-à-vis the threat of jihad from within.

### **The Tribal Strip: Fertile Ground for Radical Islam**

With a population of 5.5 million suffering from acute ongoing neglect – the worst rates of poverty, illiteracy, and economic underdevelopment in Pakistan – the tribal regions (Federally Administered Tribal Areas – FATA) are ripe for falling under the control of religious leaders. The process of Islamization started in the 1980s and reached its current peak with local Taliban terrorism created in the image of the brutal fundamentalist Taliban of Afghanistan.

The American invasion of Afghanistan had a decisive effect on the Talibanization of Pakistan and the deterioration of its internal stability. The attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan did not defeat them, nor did it eliminate them. It pushed the Taliban out of Kabul into the south and the east, and channeled their activities to neighboring Pakistan, where operatives found shelter and a base for organizing in the tribal regions

near the Afghan border. The American attack aroused the Pashtun tribes' desire to join the holy war against the foreign invader alongside their Afghan brethren. The Pakistani government and the tribal leaders forbade going to war, thereby arousing the fury of the young, who wondered how politics and economic aid could change the definitions of war: the jihad they waged against the Soviets became terrorism the moment the United States took center stage.

After two years of the war in Afghanistan, the effect on nearby Pakistan grew more severe and the government lost control of the tribal regions. The autonomous region, which was always governed by local leaders with only loose oversight by the state, came under the control of radical religious leaders fomenting anti-government agitation. The tribal strip became a base for coordination and action of various Islamic organizations at the national, regional, and global levels – including not only Afghani and Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives but also Chechens, Uzbeks, and Arabs from various countries – and the trend is only continuing. The war waged by the coalition forces in Afghanistan has run into a dead end: not only has it not resulted in the capture of Osama Bin Laden or the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but in the last two years it is also clear that they have succeeded in regrouping and gaining power, and are in control of significant portions of southern and eastern Afghanistan and areas around Kabul.

A similar process is taking place in Pakistan, reflected in the spread of the Taliban beyond the tribal strip and the hold the organization has taken of the northwestern province (NWFP), the Swat Valley and its surroundings. From here, the threat against the nation's internal security and integrity is becoming ever more severe and concrete.

The Taliban's success in Pakistan has also strengthened al-Qaeda and expanded the organization's room to maneuver and its capability to recruit young fighters – Afghani, Pakistani, and foreign. Chaos is a convenient medium for al-Qaeda, which operates in coordination and even growing operative cooperation with the Taliban. However, alongside the cooperation there is also a

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distinction between the two. Mullah Omar explained the difference by saying that the Taliban's objective is the expulsion of American forces from Afghanistan, while al-Qaeda's objective is jihad. Even if the goals of the Afghan Taliban are broader than those declared by its leader, the distinction is still valid: the Taliban is essentially a national organization, whereas al-Qaeda is an international player. As long as there are foreign, especially Western, forces on the scene, there remains a solid base for cooperation between the two. After the withdrawal of the foreign forces, it is not at all clear that shared goals would continue. The Taliban bore the brunt of America's fury and paid the price for the terrorism of 9/11 carried out by al-Qaeda; it is doubtful they would be willing to do so again. Recently, the Taliban spokesman explained that al-Qaeda is welcome in Afghanistan, but emphasized that the organization is a guest there: "We are the boss," he insisted.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a close yet complex relationship between the two organizations exists on the other side of the border, in Pakistan.

### **Pakistan and Terrorist Organizations: Ambivalence and Shortsightedness**

The Pakistani government under President Asif Ali Zardari is committed to fighting the Muslim militants behind the murder of his wife and head of the People's Party, Benazir Bhutto. However, the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban over the years has been more complex: not only did the state create and cultivate this connection, but over time it viewed the organization as an investment and refused to take significant steps to curb its influence. Elements within the security forces nurtured the anti-Indian organizations active in Kashmir and gave refuge and support to those opposing the Soviets in Afghanistan. Even after the American invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of cooperation with the United States, Pakistan refused to sever its contacts with jihadist groups: the Americans would be here today and gone tomorrow, whereas the Pashtuns, Afghans, and Pakistanis are here to stay. Therefore, it was better to nurture and maintain the relationships with Afghanistan's dominant group as an insurance policy for future relations between the countries, including the preservation of the status quo along the border.

And so, even when Pakistan realizes that it has become a target of jihad, it seems that it prefers to maximize short term gains at the expense of promoting long term goals. Concerned that a defeat in the tribal regions would, with Kabul's encouragement, arouse the Pashtuns to demand separation, Islamabad has distinguished between the local Taliban challenging the regime and the Afghan Taliban, which is currently not viewed as a threat against the state or the army and against which, much to America's dismay, it is investing only limited efforts. According to Pakistan, the real danger lies in an India growing strong to the east, threatening Pakistan much more than any seditious group from within.

However, a closer look at the Taliban groups reveals an even more complex picture. There are differences of opinion within the groups concerning goals, as well as personal rivalries between various leaders. Thus in addition to the difference between the Pakistani and Afghani Taliban, there is also a distinction between those who are engaged in a struggle against the Pakistani regime and those who oppose attacking Muslims and would rather concentrate on a holy war against the foreign forces, NATO soldiers, and the United States. Therefore, Pakistan distinguishes between "good" and "bad" Taliban, and recruits Taliban operatives it considers moderate to help it struggle against groups fighting the military. These operatives do not hide their ties to al-Qaeda or their intention to continue to fight against the Americans.

It is a complex and dangerous game. In addition to a clear conflict of interest with regard to the United States, which is striving to stabilize the border region and excise Taliban terrorism from Afghanistan, cooperation with Taliban groups arouses questions about Pakistan's long term vision. Experience should have taught the countries that tolerance of terrorist organizations, even those that advance the state's goals in the foreseeable future, is liable to strengthen them to the point that control over them is lost and they turn on their former supporters. Such examples are plentiful, even in southern Asia. President Zardari recently expressed his regrets for the active role his country played in creating and nurturing Islamist terrorist organizations as part of its foreign policy with regard to India and Afghanistan: "The terrorists of today were the heroes of yesterday until 9/11, when they began to haunt us as well," he said.<sup>3</sup> This insight would do well to assume

an operational dimension: Pakistan must understand that the Afghan Taliban's ability to continue fighting the United States and NATO in Afghanistan from within safe regions in Pakistan is a threat not only against its neighbor but also against the host. The jihadist culture that has already seeped into Pakistan and started to spread beyond the tribal regions is the true threat to Pakistan's future – its identity, stability, and future territorial integrity.

A key element in the campaign is of course the Pakistani military, which in practice controls foreign and security policy, including Pakistan's nuclear program. Even the powerful intelligence services (ISI), formally subordinate to the government, are to a great extent controlled by the army. In order to maintain its political status publicly, the military relies on a strong external enemy in the form of India and on cultural cohesiveness in the form of Islam. In recent years, the military's central strategy focused on the balance of power vis-à-vis India and launching terrorist operations against it, especially in Kashmir, and creating strategic depth in Afghanistan as a complementary regional strategy. The war against Islamic terrorism at home, which until recently was not seen as an essential threat to the nation, was a tactic not conducted in either a cohesive or a decisive fashion.

While past links of the armed forces and the intelligence services with the terrorist organizations are not doubted, current ties between them are subject to dispute. A troubling assessment is that the military recruits Taliban groups that serve its internal and regional interests; worse still, though less plausible, is that elements within the army and the intelligence services work together with groups actually operating against the state. There are elements in the armed forces that are convinced that the Taliban targets the government only because of the latter's treaty with the United States, yet the moment cooperation with America ceases, the organizations will once again start coordinating their actions with the military, as in the past.

Still, it seems that even the military elite senses that the security apparatus has lost control of the monster it created. This realization process, however, is slow, while the terrorist threats are growing apace. The current anti-Taliban campaign was preceded by different efforts to rein in the rebellious militants. The military stands behind the agreement signed with the Taliban in February of this year, which

allowed them to impose *sharia* law in the Swat Valley. The agreement was preceded by a series of failed military operations conducted in the tribal region since 2004, operations that cost the lives of thousands of soldiers and civilians. These losses not only failed to weaken the Islamic organizations; they even secured their status. A change in the military's attitude to the terrorist organizations started to emerge after the Taliban breached the agreement by failing to meet their commitment to lay down their arms and not to spread beyond the agreed-upon regions in the northwestern province. In recent months it seems that for the first time the army is conducting a determined, well organized war against the terrorist organizations in the northwest and the tribal regions.

However, the defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda is not imminent. The growing pressures on them in the northwestern areas might push them southwards to Baluchistan. For many years, that province, rich in natural gas, has known violent struggles of Baluchi nationalists against the government as well as attacks on neighboring Iran, causing tensions between the countries. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have a history of cooperating with Baluchi terrorist organizations, and this may allow the Pakistani Taliban movement to join forces with the Baluchis and find refuge in Pakistan's largest province. Such a development would move some of the problem of Islamic terrorism to the Pakistan-India border and exacerbate the Baluchi threat to the country's stability.

There is also ambivalence among the wider public with regard to the war on the Taliban. On the one hand, there is basic opposition to Taliban-style radical Islam; on the other hand, there is much fiercer opposition to the internal war being conducted with American sponsorship. Thus, while the public at large and the opposition parties support the military campaign against the Taliban, there is a great deal of hostility at the American attacks within Pakistan's borders. Many Pakistanis blame the United States for the ensuing chaos, first because it financed the mujahideen in the 1980s and then disappeared from the scene as soon as the war in Afghanistan was concluded, and second, because in the aftermath of 9/11, it pushed Pakistan into a war that is viewed as an essentially American campaign.

However, despite the rapid deterioration in internal security, the threat is still not concrete outside the northwestern regions, and a large scale anti-Taliban awakening is not yet in the offing. The little protest

seen so far has been voiced by the educated elites in the urban centers of Islamabad and Lahore, especially as a result of the Taliban expansion into Punjab. In fact, only few believe that the Taliban can take over control of the entire country. At the height of the attack in the Swat Valley, internal surveys indicated that the public ranks the economy as Pakistan's most significant problem, exceeding the threat of terrorism and the problem of the refugees fleeing the embattled regions in the country.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Complexity of the Campaign: Internal Stability, Regional Status, and American Interests**

Confronting the terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan is linked with wider goals advanced by the United States, particularly in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistani policy is largely dependent on American interests, aid, and pressure.

American strategy in the south Asian arena known as Af-Pak stresses the close relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The commander of the American forces in Afghanistan was recently replaced in an effort to inject a more forceful spirit into the military activities. President Obama announced a significant beefing-up of American forces in Afghanistan – adding 21,000 soldiers by the end of the year. Pakistan, by contrast, has no intention of allowing American soldiers into war. While the Afghan army is not yet capable of conducting the war on its own and needs foreign soldiers to conduct the campaign, the Pakistani army is waging war on the terrorist organizations in its country while accepting external assistance such as financing, training, and instruction for the war on terror.

So far, the relationship between the two arenas of battle has harmed Pakistan. The growing American pressure in southern Afghanistan is expected to increase the number of Taliban fighters and Afghani refugees crossing into Pakistan and to escalate the struggle there further. The United States and Britain, the main partner to the campaign in Afghanistan, are aware of this phenomenon, and they are laying out a strategy of coordinated action on both fronts, including improved security and intelligence coordination between the two neighboring countries and the establishment of joint guard posts along the border. The American objective is to stabilize the border region on both its

sides in order to stifle the campaign waged by the Taliban in southern Afghanistan; to this end, it is necessary to apply pressure to the oxygen lines coming from Pakistan. The basic expectation is that Pakistan will stop serving as a safe haven for activity by al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other terrorist organizations operating within as well as from it. The minimalist demand is that the security services sever their ties with the jihadist organizations: that is in the interests of the United States, of neighboring countries, and essentially of Pakistan itself. The importance of Pakistan as a central partner in the war on terror, as defined by the United States, is undergoing a practical test.

While America's involvement is necessary to Pakistan to face the threats of jihad, it is also harmful. The Taliban is essentially a local problem: militants operating in the name of Islam, invoking extremist interpretations, using brutal enforcement methods in a nation lacking widespread support for radical Islamic parties. Foreign involvement is the very catalyst that arouses more identification with them and helps their efforts to spread and recruit new members. The foreign enemy is even encouraging cooperation with al-Qaeda, which deals in global terrorism, and expands the borders of the battlefield. Hence the paradox: while the United States is certainly part of the solution, it is also part of the problem. In Pakistan, there are accusations that the United States not only drove Pakistan into a war serving American goals that has so far cost the lives of over 2,000 Pakistani soldiers, but has also adopted a policy that does not advance Pakistani interests. The United States, it is argued, weakens Pakistan's status in the regional arena, harms its long term investment in Afghanistan, and strengthens India, its primary rival. Islamabad claims that the United States has already sanctioned India's nuclear weapons, is intensifying security relations with India, and is not pressuring it to reach a solution on Kashmir. As if that were not enough, the United States is strengthening the ties between Delhi and Kabul and India's influence over Afghanistan.

### **Conclusion: The Threat against Pakistan**

Within the inner circle, Islamic terrorism is a threat to Pakistan's identity and its territorial integrity. More than the danger that the terrorist organizations will take over the country and its nuclear facility, the concrete threat is long term and is linked to the Islamist culture

spreading beyond the tribal regions and the northwestern province. The thousands of Islamic madrasas operating there must be given particular attention: these are hothouses of radical Islamic growth and ready recruitment centers. Their continued flourishing will only feed the culture of jihad and allow its spread both to defiant Baluchistan and to Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan's most populated and developed provinces.

From an internal point of view, one may say that the Taliban is a more urgent threat than al-Qaeda and other foreign organizations that have found refuge in Pakistan, because the Taliban is a homegrown product, drawing legitimacy and support from parts of Pakistan's own society. The Taliban offers an alternative to the dominant political parties in the tribal regions – the secular Awami National Party and moderate Islamic parties. In fact, it molds an ethno-religious identity: Islamism is part of the Taliban's understanding of Pashtun identity. That operates in addition to the Pashtuns' very loose identification with the state, as the Pashtuns view themselves as part of "Afghania" or "Pashtunistan" and would like to unite with their brethren on the other side of the border who represent the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan.

Therefore, Pakistan's immediate goal is gaining control of the northwest and the tribal strip along the border known as the Durand Line, drawn by the British in the nineteenth century and never recognized by Afghanistan. Such control would in the long run serve one of Pakistan's most important and longstanding interests: preventing a Pashtun separatist struggle. To this end it will have to invest in development of the tribal regions that have traditionally been discriminated against in terms of budgets and infrastructures. As part of political development, it is necessary to strengthen the traditional tribal local leadership and restore its status and legitimacy, while granting political rights that are today denied to the parties in these regions. Creating the link and identification with the state is also dependent on economic development – massive investment in education and reduced poverty and unemployment, factors that arouse hostility and drive many young people to the armed organizations.

The direct regional ramifications of developments in Pakistan concern the future of the Indian-Pakistani conflict and the war in Afghanistan. Taking a wider view, one may also discern influences on

Islamist struggles in other nations in the region, including Uzbekistan and Chechnya. Radical Islam, inspired by and in cooperation with al-Qaeda, seeks to undermine the current order and stability of nations that do not operate on the basis of Islamic law and strives to create a united Islamic nation in central Asia, with Uzbekistan at its center. Continuing the confrontation between Indian and Pakistan suits these larger objectives.

From Pakistan's perspective, India is its most significant threat, and it is interested in arriving at a solution to the conflict over Kashmir. Its ambivalent relationship with the terrorist organizations is a serious hurdle on this road. Delhi claims that Islamabad never ceased its policy of terrorism-by-proxy, and despite steps taken against Kashmiri terrorist organizations since the end of 2001 and despite its consistent statements denouncing terrorism, Pakistan is accused of not having withdrawn its support from its own creation in the preceding two decades. The terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008 raised the tension level between the two rivals yet again and severed the contacts between them, the last in a series of attempts at dialogue that have been made over the years.

Of course, there is also the continuing turmoil in Afghanistan, fed by organizations taking refuge in Pakistani territory. President Karzai has accused Pakistan of not taking decisive steps against the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Such criticism can also be heard in the United States, partly because a significant portion of the billions of dollars in aid Pakistan has received in recent years has found its way to arming Pakistan against India rather than against the Islamists. Now the United States wants to make the financial aid promised by President Obama conditional on increased control of Pakistan's use of the money.

The international community is particularly concerned about the developments in Pakistan because of its nuclear weapons. Certainly the greatest fear is of an Islamic revolution whereby nuclear weapons will fall into the hands of Islamic extremists. Yet while this scenario is not impossible and merits serious concern, it appears that the Pakistani military has a strong hold over the country, certainly the nuclear facilities, such that the threat is not imminent. Pakistan receives technological assistance to safeguard its facilities, without direct military involvement.

The main importance of Pakistan in the war on global terrorism lies in its being the earthquake's epicenter from where shockwaves emanate outwards in far reaching waves – local, regional, and international. Uprooting the Pakistani terrorist infrastructure, starting in the tribal regions of Pakistan and continuing across the border with the south and east of Afghanistan, is thus the first necessary condition in a series of actions and represents a basis for attacking one of the most secure grounds of global jihad. Pakistan, a central link in this chain, faces a strategic decision: to continue playing with fire by cooperating with the terrorist organizations, or to join fully in the international war against them.

The risk of a terrorism spillover from Pakistan – including the leak of nuclear know-how and measures and their immediate impact on Islamic organizations – stands to become a problem in the Middle East. While the Pakistani and Afghani Taliban are engaged in local terrorist activity, the range of various other organizations in Pakistan, chief among them al-Qaeda, is much wider. The spread of Islamic fundamentalism threatens Arab states that are battling to secure their identity as moderate secular Muslim states with multiple international connections, including with the Western world. More than ever, radical Islam threatens these countries' stability. In the age of globalization, it represents a trans-national infrastructure for terror, with the Middle East one of the most dangerous of the world's loci of terror.

## Notes

- 1 Global Research, August 31, 2008, National Archive, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=10015>.
- 2 Robertson, Nic, "Afghan Taliban Spokesman: We Will Win the War," CNN.com/Asia, May 5, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/05/04/robertson.interview.zabiullah.mujahid/index.html>.
- 3 *Wall Street Journal* / India, July 8, 2009, India News, "India News Digest: Pakistan Created and Nurtured Terrorists, Admits Zardari," <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124705009979010945.html>.
- 4 Masood, Salman, "Terrorism Is Not Priority for Pakistanis, Poll Finds," *New York Times*/Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/world/asia/12pstan.html>.