

A Curse from God? The Consequences of the Floods on Jihadist Influence in Pakistan

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Abstract

The recent floods in Pakistan have been one of the most terrible natural disasters the country has had to deal with since the Partition. It happened at a time of strong local tensions between radical Islamist groups, in particular, of course, the ‘Pakistani Taliban’, and the central government. This paper examines the implications of the floods for jihadist influence in Pakistan.

Introduction

The catastrophic floods in Pakistan will probably be remembered as one of the most dramatic test this country has had to endure since the Partition in 1947. Beyond the terrible impact on millions of people, such a calamity can have important political consequences. And in the many countries involved in the coalition fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, there have been many expressions of fear that the floods will help the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its allies. Even if too often the jihadist issue is linked to each story related to Pakistan in the international media, the anguish on this matter is legitimate. There is a need to clearly answer the question – are the floodings an opportunity for the jihadists, i.e. the Taliban and their allies?

To answer this question, one needs to have in mind the exact situation of Pakistan today, after the floods. Once the general situation is ascertained, two questions need to be answered: what

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do we know for sure about the importance and impact of the help given by groups that could be related to jihadism?² And what does the flooding mean for the TTP? From those answers, it will be possible to obtain a pretty accurate picture of the situation.

The Flooding as a ‘Slow-motion Tsunami’: Impact and Reactions

No analysis about the political consequences of the flooding can be done without taking into account the impact of this natural catastrophe on the South Asian nation. Even before this summer, Pakistan has had a difficult economic situation. It suffered from a two-year financial crisis, and its energy shortages were already having a very negative impact. For example, the textile industry [8.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP)] was only working at half its capacity.³ Besides, it was not the only problem, natural or man-made, that Pakistan had to deal with. After all, the fight against the TTP has also been a burden. Indeed, this local ‘War on Terror’ has cost more than US\$30 billion.⁴ Islamabad was already weakened, so the shock of the flooding, on the government and the people, has been all the more violent.

And the shock has been enormous: an area larger than England, one-fifth of the country, has suffered from the floods. At the end of August 2010, 20 million Pakistanis were affected, four million were without shelter, and eight million were in urgent need of immediate help. At the beginning of September 2010, the numbers had risen: five to six million, at least, were without shelter, and ten million were in urgent need of help.⁵ It is reported that at least

² What ‘jihadism’ refers to here is the Islamist tendency that chooses explicitly violence as a way to impose its ideology politically. Such a strategic orientation does not mean that jihadist groups are only involved in guerrilla/terrorist actions and military training of militants. They can also choose, like other Islamist groups, to be active at a social/humanitarian level. But contrary to those other groups that could accept to play the game of democracy, or to share power, at the end of the day, they do not have a ‘bottom-up’ agenda, i.e. convincing a large number of the population for political goals. To be a jihadist means a rejection of democratic system or compromises for gains, and a focus on violence in order to impose political/geopolitical views. It makes them radically different from other, more important Islamist movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood, and even from radical but non-violent entities, like the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation, especially influent in Central Asia and in the West). For a security analyst, jihadists, contrary to non-violent ideologues, are a concrete threat. Indeed, Islamist groups with a radical view of the world can attract some individuals who will later feel that the only way to win politically would be through violence. But if some individuals are indeed doing such an ideological journey towards more radicalisation, it does not appear that it is supported by non-violent Islamist groups. In fact, it appears that the non-violent extremist groups strongly oppose the jihadist point of view. Hence, here the goal in this paper will be to focus on the people that could really mean security trouble for Pakistani stability. Indeed, if to focus on Islamism as a whole could seem simpler, intellectually and academically, it would not make much sense. On this subject, see for example Didier Chaudet, ‘Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Islamist Threat to Central Asia?’, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.26, no.1 (April 2006).

³ Shuja Nawaz, ‘Is there any way to fix Pakistan’, *AfPak Channel – Foreign Policy* (21 October 2010), www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/10/21/is_there_any_way_to_fix_pakistan?page=0,2. Accessed on 25 October 2010.

⁴ G. Shabbir Cheema, ‘U.S. response to Pakistan flood is an investment in trust’, *East West Center* (25 August 2010), www.eastwestcenter.org/news-center/east-west-wire/us-response-to-pakistan-floods-is-an-investment-in-trust/. Accessed on 29 August 2010.

⁵ Numbers given by the *New York Times* on its general analysis of the floods on 7 September 2010. See http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/f/floods/2010_pakistan_floods/index.html.

100,000 women had to give birth in the worst unsanitary conditions.⁶ And this is so because by the end of August 2010, 400 hospitals had been destroyed, as well as 7,000 schools and 5,000 miles of railways and roads. In order to understand the financial implications that the floods will have for the future, one has to compare with the situation in Afghanistan, where USAID has spent US\$700 million to build only 500 miles of road, 19 health facilities and 56 schools.⁷ Huge losses have been recorded in terms of cash crops (tobacco, cotton, rice, sugarcane, in particular). Grain stocks have been devastated, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁸ 14 per cent of the cultivable areas were flooded, 200,000 livestock were killed.⁹ The damages on electricity and power sectors have been particularly important, as the floods destroyed US\$125 million worth of equipment. Last but not least, 70 per cent of the bridges in the areas affected have been destroyed.

Indeed, it is important to understand that for a significant number of Pakistani citizens, the trauma caused by the floods can be compared with the shock of the Partition. This is particularly the case for people from the countryside, who were already in a bad economic shape. In view of such a situation, all political actors, national and international, can only help to avoid seeing the state becoming too weak. But are the two main actors here, i.e. the United States (US) and the Pakistani government, up to the challenge?

For the US, as cynical as it may sound, the floods appeared like an opportunity to show to the Pakistanis a gentler side of the American power.¹⁰ With the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004, and the earthquake in Pakistani Kashmir in 2005, the help from the US was able to win 'hearts and minds', at least for a time. The US has been at the forefront of the international humanitarian aid effort, and it has been lobbying other countries to do more. But this aid is plagued by weaknesses. First, it is focusing on the areas where the TTP has been active, not the south, that also suffered.¹¹ It appears that the US is only helping the part of Pakistan that is related to the fight in Afghanistan, a situation that will not help to win the 'hearts and minds'.¹² Besides, historically, the American aid to Pakistan has often been related to short-

⁶ Chris Allbritton, 'Down the River: What Is to Be Done?', *Reuters* (5 September 2010), <http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2010/09/05/down-the-river-what-is-to-be-done/>. Accessed on 7 September 2010.

⁷ 'Pakistan Flood Sets Back Infrastructure by Years', *New York Times* (26 August 2010).

⁸ 'Pakistan floods cause huge losses to crops', *BBC* (12 August 2010), www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10948275. Accessed on 15 August, 2010.

⁹ Web Chat: Pakistan's Flood Emergency, with Elisa Ferris, Brookings Institution (15 September 2010), www.brookings-tsinghua.cn/sitecore/content/Home/opinions/2010/0915_pakistan_flood_chat.aspx. Accessed on 21 September 2010.

¹⁰ See the analysis of Anthony Cordesman in 'UN warns of militant threat in Pakistan floods', *The Jordan Times* (12 August 2010), www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=29116. Accessed on 30 August 2010.

¹¹ Daniyal Mueenuddin, 'Don't Forget the South', *New York Times* (23 August 2010), www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/08/23/can-us-disaster-aid-weaken-the-taliban-in-pakistan/dont-forget-southern-pakistanis. Accessed on 10 September 2010.

¹² Indeed, in the fight against the radical elements in Pakistan, such actions are often seen as a proof of hypocrisy, or at least of an opportunistic attitude from the US. It could negate, in the minds of the Pakistani people, the humanitarian support given by the Americans, hence making the differences of means between the Pakistani Taliban and the anti-Taliban foreigners less relevant. This accusation of hypocrisy could have an impact on the more nationalist side of the Pakistani public opinion. Even more as it has been fed by some

term political interests, and it seems that it is still the same approach that is dominating.¹³ The initial US reaction has been good, but what Pakistan needs is long term help, and it is not sure that the American leadership will be eager to offer it.

As for the Pakistani central government, it is clearly in a fragile position. The present situation is not without precedent in the country. Indeed, East Pakistan, today's Bangladesh, felt disaffection from Islamabad first when it suffered from a devastating typhoon and that no real help came from West Pakistan.¹⁴ There is a fear that the government would find itself in the same situation in the North West of the country in particular. With the flooding, all the work done to reassert state authority in the areas affected by the TTP has been thwarted. Besides, there are numerous criticisms of bad governance in the national and international press, and they are based on facts that show a lack of prevention from the bureaucracy.¹⁵ Only the army is seen positively for the important job done on relief help. It is fair to say that any government, being confronted with such a tragedy, would be in a very difficult situation. But indeed, to deal with the consequences of the calamity, Islamabad will need all the help it can get. The fear from Washington is to see this situation become a 'divine surprise' for the Islamist movements.

Making a Difference between Propaganda and Reality: JuD and the Islamist Humanitarian Help

Indeed, when one reads about the possible impact of the jihadist groups on the populations that suffered from the flooding, it seems that everybody has the same thoughts. It appears as a given that the Jihadists will necessarily benefit from this catastrophe, and that they are doing an excellent job in helping the victims. For some, the radical Islamist groups helping them

American blunders. An example of this tactlessness can be found in the US criticism of China about Beijing's supposed insufficient support to Pakistan during the floods. It appears that such criticism has given proof to some that with its help, as usual, the US was playing Great Power politics, and was not acting out of humanitarian concerns. It would be a mistake, of course, to think that such blunder could mean immediate gains for the Pakistani Taliban. But a weaker impact on the American aid in the long term means a stronger anti-Americanism, so a lack of trust between the US and Pakistan, and a continuity of the difficulties for Islamabad and Washington to work together. A lack of coordination between the forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan is what the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban need to win on their respective battlefields. On the American criticism of China about the humanitarian help, see Joe Lauria, 'U.S. Presses China on Pakistan Floods', *The Wall Street Journal* (19 August 2010), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703791804575439613818191990.html>. Accessed on 21 August 2010. For a Pakistani criticism, see 'Unfair US criticism of Chinese aid', *The Daily Mail* (30 August 2010), http://dailymailnews.com/0810/30/Editorial_Column/DMEditorial.php. Accessed on 2 September 2010.

¹³ Homi Kharas, 'US Aid to Pakistan: Time for a New Approach', *Brookings Institution* (25 August 2010), www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0825_pakistan_aid_kharas.aspx. Accessed on 29 August 2010.

¹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, 'How to fix flood-hit Pakistan', *BBC* (7 September 2010), www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11200179. Accessed on 11 September 2010.

¹⁵ Ardeshir Cowasjee, 'Fact or fiction?', *Dawn* (19 September 2010), <http://66.219.30.205/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/columnists/ardeshir-cowasjee-fact-or-fiction-990>. Accessed on 25 September 2010.

and the Taliban are nearly the same, and what is done by the first will necessarily benefit the latter.

The problem with such an approach is that it is based on a misunderstanding of the victims, of the radical Islamists in charge of the humanitarian aid, and of the strengths and weaknesses of the Jihadists.

First, the main group that has attracted international attention and fears about its involvement is Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) – the social welfare wing of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). It is known, thanks to numerous reports from Pakistani and foreign journalists, that the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) has also been giving humanitarian aid.¹⁶ But to see these two groups as connected to the Pakistani Taliban is a mistake. Indeed, LeT has been accused of the Mumbai attack, among other terrorist actions. And it has been active fighting on Indian territory in Kashmir and in Afghanistan. But its relations with the TTP have always been difficult. State control over this group has historically been strong, and the leadership of this organisation has criticised the choice of the TTP and Al-Qaeda to see Islamabad as an enemy.¹⁷ In fact there is more than a lack of confidence between the TTP and the LeT, as they have sometimes fought one another. One of the most well-known examples of those tensions was the rivalry that turned violent between the TTM (Tehreek-e-Taliban Mohmand), affiliated to the TTP, and the Khalid Sahib Shah group, a LeT local cell in the Mohmand agency.¹⁸ So even if they have common enemies, the idea that the Lashkar and the Pakistani Taliban are one and the same just does not make any sense. As for the JI, its relations with the TTP have been at least as difficult. In June 2010, two JI leaders were killed by the TTP, and on 19 April of the same year, a suicide bombing targeted the JI leaders of Peshawar during a rally.¹⁹ Of course, here again, there is a complex situation of commonality of goals with the more violent groups, but also a refusal to choose violence to oppose Islamabad. It is the position of Syed Munamar Hassan, the leader of the JI – he has supported the desire of the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) to impose Sharia Law in the Swat area, but opposed its violent actions against the Pakistani government.²⁰ From the terrorist actions of the Pakistani Taliban against the JI, it is clear that some common ideological goals are not enough to talk about a united front.

Hence, the Islamist organisations that have been able to have an impact on the aid given to the flood victims are not against Pakistan as a state, and cannot be seen as a ‘humanitarian

¹⁶ See for example, ‘JI distributed dry ration, medicines among the victims’, www.onepakistan.com (8 September 2010). Accessed on 12 September 2010.

¹⁷ Stephen Tankel, ‘Lashkar-e-Taiba in Perspective’, *New America Foundation* (February 2010), p.2-3, www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/tankel.pdf. Accessed on 30 June 2010.

¹⁸ Imtiaz Gul, *The Most Dangerous Place. Pakistan's Lawless Frontier* (New York: Viking, 2010), pp.100-101.

¹⁹ Kashi Nath Pandita, ‘Beleaguered Jamaat-i-Islami of Pakistan’, *Geopolitical Analysis* (27 July 2010), <http://geopolitics.world-citizenship.org/wp-archive/323>. Accessed on 13 September 2010.

²⁰ ‘JI Never Support Taliban: Syed Munawar Hassan’, *Pakistanviews.com* (26 May 2009), www.pakistanviews.com/politics/ji-never-support-taliban-syed-munawar-hassan.html. Accessed on 2 June 2010.

wing' of the TTP. There is not a unified radical Islamist front in Pakistan. On the contrary, it seems that the JuD and the JI are able to help only because the Pakistani army has accepted them to do so. But it has showed who is in charge when it closed at least 16 aid camps run by the JuD at the end of August 2010.²¹ Clearly, the Islamists are seen at best as an auxiliary for aid relief by the army on the ground.

Moreover, it appears that to buy into the idea that the Islamists are the best in humanitarian aid is only to fall for the propaganda of groups like the JuD. As proven by a Policy Research Working Paper of the World Bank, the help given by the Islamists during such natural disasters are much more modest than they would like the international community to believe.²² This report is the only real survey on the impact of different local and foreign groups on the victims of the 2005 earthquake. The results are striking: a quarter of the targeted population saw the international groups as helping them, and just one per cent saw the JuD as involved in the help to the victims. In fact, the JuD does not really have the resources to provide food and shelter wherever the flooding strikes. It clearly does not have the capacity to be active at the level the LeT appears to be in the minds of quite a few foreign journalists.²³ The Islamists place themselves as competitors on the humanitarian aid with the government,²⁴ so the alarmist approach giving them too much influence is indeed in their interest. But outside the areas where they traditionally have a presence, it would be a mistake to assume they have more impact than the army of the international community.

Floods: Implications for the TTP

Unfortunately, the fact that the Islamist humanitarian aid is not linked to the TTP and does not have such an important impact does not mean that the TTP is not benefiting from the floods, at least in the short term. 60,000 Pakistani troops, that have been used previously in the fight against the TTP, have been affected by the problems related to floods. Besides, helicopter activity has been reduced and the destruction of infrastructures is not really a problem for them, as the jihadist fighting groups are much more independent and

²¹ 'Pakistan closes militant-run aid camps', *The Telegraph* (24 August 2010), www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/7962109/Pakistan-closes-militant-run-aid-camps.html. Accessed on 5 September 2010.

²² See Tahir Andrabi and Jishnu Das, 'In Aid We Trust: Hearts and Minds and the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005' (September 2010), www.cgdev.org/doc/events/9.14.10/InAidWeTrust.pdf. Accessed on 29 September 2010. For a short analysis of this report, see Christine Fair, 'Not at the forefront of flood relief', *AfPak Channel* – *Foreign Policy* (20 September 2010), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/20/not_at_the_forefront_of_flood_relief. Accessed on 30 September 2010.

²³ Myra MacDonald and Kamran Haider, 'Islamist charity aims to be Pakistanis' salvation', *Reuters* (3 September 2010), www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6822MN20100903. Accessed on 4 September 2010.

²⁴ See for example Aisha Toor, 'Militants Use Flood Aid To Seek Support', *CSIS* (2 September 2010), <http://csis.org/blog/militants-use-flood-aid-seek-support>. Accessed 11 September 2010.

decentralised than the units of the national army.²⁵ Because of its desire to secure the border with India and to deal with the insurgency of the TTP at the same time, the military had already a lot on its plate before this summer. Now it is not far from being overstretched. The Defense Secretary Robert Gates has acknowledged when he accepted the idea that because of the situation, Pakistan would not be able to target the Taliban in North Waziristan, something that was important in the US-Pakistani discussions in the past few months.²⁶ The US itself, during the flooding, had to give the TTP a rest and stop its strikes in the tribal areas. Even if the Taliban suffered from the floods, this situation has given them the possibility to regroup and organise themselves for attacks against a weakened state.

It explains why the TTP has been on the offensive lately. During the first week of September 2010, their terrorist cells have killed 120 people, striking in Lahore, Karachi, Quetta, and of course Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. It is interesting to see that the Pakistani religious minorities, the Ahmadis and the Shia Muslims, have been part of the main targets of those terrorist acts. It seems to be a confirmation of the coordination between the Pakistani Taliban and the Punjabi Sunni supremacist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Another fact that needs to be kept in mind is that in its attack of the security forces during this period, the TTP has had no problem to be the cause of 'collateral damages'. Indeed, numerous civilians have been killed by their actions. Hence, the flooding has not weakened the TTP. On the contrary, it clearly appears that it wants to nurture the chaos and the fears that arose because of this calamity, and to put as much pressure as possible on the security forces by attacking 'soft' targets.²⁷ With such a goal in mind, it is very possible to see an ever greater reliance on Sunni supremacists and anti-Shia groups in the fight against the state, giving the situation an even stronger taste of civil war.

But at the end of the day, the floods will be a long-term unexpected gift for the TTP only if the populations, especially the ones in the North West, give it support. There is some room for optimism since the Taliban do not have the means to really help the victims of the floods financially. Their proposal to give US\$20 million (and their call to the Pakistani government to reject the international help) does not make a lot of sense when one has in mind the costs to rebuild the devastated areas. The fact that they threatened to attack the members of western non-government organisations (NGOs), and their tendency to kill civilians, will not help them to win the local hearts and minds. Besides, there is another element that can make the international community hopeful – the fact that the flood victims are not necessarily inclined to follow the TTP's ideology. It seems that it is only prejudice towards the Pashtun

²⁵ 'Pakistan floods could give Taliban time to regroup', *Dawn* (12 August 2010), <http://news.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan-floods-could-give-taliban-time-to-regroup-jd-04>. Accessed on 15 August 2010.

²⁶ 'Floods likely to delay Pakistan anti-Taliban moves', *The Star* (3 September 2010), http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2010/9/3/worldupdates/2010-09-03T181651Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_-512678-1&sec=Worldupdates. Accessed on 4 September 2010.

²⁷ Imtiaz Gul, 'New attacks stun Pakistan', *AfPak Channel – Foreign Policy* (10 September 2010), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/10/new_attacks_stun_pakistan. Accessed on 12 September 2010.

populations that would make us think otherwise. Indeed the Taliban, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have been first and foremost coming from this population. But not all the Pashtuns are Taliban, and indeed, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the TTP did not have the support of the majority of the locals, as it did not hesitate to use terror to impose itself. The few journalists and analysts who have been on the field did not meet victims ready to be radicalised, but people eager to rebuild their lives, especially their houses, without any interest for ideological debate or support for a particular vision of Islam. They do not care who is providing help as long as help is provided, in order for them to escape the nightmare they are living.²⁸ It will not have an impact on their allegiances, as historically, people who have been struck by the flooding never joined the terrorist groups or the fight against the TTP. They are peasants and small farmers who have not been a 'strategic interest' for anybody so far because they are focusing on their present survival, nothing more.²⁹

Nevertheless, the TTP could possibly win part of the population over through help in the longer term. As it does not have enough money, to be active on the ground to help the communities, especially where Islamabad is unable to assert its sovereignty, is its best way to have an impact. Local Pashtuns are afraid to be abandoned by the state. After all, the rebellion of the TTP has been historically fuelled by disaffection with the central government, and local people who feel they are second-class citizens. And protests already erupted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in reaction to what is seen as insufficient action from the government. If the government is not active enough, the TTP could win followers not because it is able to win 'hearts and minds', but because it is able to use and manipulate those local grievances. A Pakistani parliamentarian has made a scary calculation to explain the potential possibilities for recruitment by the TTP. The most vulnerable persons after the flooding in FATA are the people who were already unemployed. There are two million in this area, so even if the TTP is able to convince a small minority, such as two per cent, to join them, it would mean 40,000 new militants.³⁰ The number is quite impressive when one keeps in mind that Baitullah Mehsud, the former leader of the TTP, had 20,000 men under his command.³¹

²⁸ Myra MacDonald, 'Giving a voice to Pakistan's flood victims', *Reuters* (8 September 2010), <http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2010/09/08/giving-a-voice-to-pakistans-flood-victims/>. Accessed on 15 September 2010.

²⁹ Mohammed Hanif, 'Food, Not Ideology', *New York Times* (23 August 2010), www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2010/08/23/can-us-disaster-aid-weaken-the-taliban-in-pakistan/the-hearts-and-minds-of-pakistan-dont-have-a-price-tag. Accessed on 25 August 2010.

³⁰ 'The link with governance', *Dawn* (1 August 2010), <http://news.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/columnists/19-huma-yusuf-the-link-with-governance-180-hh-06>. Accessed on 2 September 2010.

³¹ 'Obituary: Baitullah Mehsud', *BBC* (25 August 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7163626.stm. Accessed on 12 September 2010.

Conclusion

Hence, it appears that the responsibility of the evolution on the field depends in no small part in the ways the Pakistani central government and the US will deal with the long-term consequences of the floods. If the US is serious about a meaningful strategic partnership, whoever the next president will be, and if the central government is able to show signs of better governance in the months to come, there is a chance that the TTP will not be able to benefit from the floods.

Another lesson that can be found in the analysis of the floods in Pakistan is to avoid falling for the propaganda of the Islamist and Jihadist groups in this country. Too often, those movements are portrayed in the international media as all-powerful, with always a better relation to the local population than the other actors being the Pakistani army, the western NGOs or the international community. It is far from the reality on the ground. Last but not least, there is a need to differentiate between the different Islamist and Jihadist groups, and to evaluate their strengths separately. Such an analysis can help to better judge the security situation in Pakistan and to avoid an alarmist vision.

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