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New Resolve in the Face of Renewed Terrorism in Pakistan

Pakistan has been hit by a new wave of terrorism. A series of attacks were carried out in February 2017, mostly in the tribal belt along the country's border with Afghanistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and some groups associated with that organization claimed responsibility for most of these incidents. These were followed by a suicide attack in Lahore in front of the Punjab Assembly building and one in rural Sindh. The latter killed almost 100 people who had gone to the popular shrine of Hazrat Shahbaz Qalandar. The Pakistan authorities responded by carrying out a number of operations inside the country in which 100 terrorists were reported to have been killed. On 22 February, the military was called in to help the civilian authorities with the return of large-scale terrorism. This paper examines the portents of these attacks for Pakistan and its political development and its relations with neighbouring Afghanistan.

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Introduction: Some questions about terrorism and its consequences

This paper is an attempt to answer some of the questions about what appears to be the return of large-scale terrorism in Pakistan. The answers to them will provide some indication as to the direction in which the country is headed and how the next phase of what has been a tortuous journey for Pakistan will affect the rest of South Asia and also the entire Muslim world. I will begin by asking the question why terrorism, after a period of relative peace, is recurrent now. Second, are these terrorists linked to the extremist forces operating in the Middle East? Third, will the Pakistan's reading of its domestic situation further sour its relations with Afghanistan, resulting in greater instability in both countries? Fourth, how is Pakistan responding to the current situation? Fifth, and finally, will the response to increased terrorist activities affect the country's progress towards the creation of a liberal and representative democracy?

A new wave of terrorism

Viewed from the angle of domestic terrorism, the year 2017 did not begin well for Pakistan. Considerable progress was made in the two-year period between 2014 and 2016 when the military launched what it called the *Zarb-e-Azb* operation. This succeeded in substantially eliminating the entrenched presence of terrorists in the Pakistani tribal belt that borders Afghanistan. At that time, the military was invited by the country's civilian authority to act, because the Pakistani state and citizenry were shaken by the mass murder of students in an army school in Peshawar in December 2014. The attack killed nearly 150 youngsters and teachers, and the responsibility for it was owned by the *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan*, also known as the Pakistani Taliban. The leadership of the group had slipped into Afghanistan following some operations launched by the Pakistani Army on their hideouts in the country's tribal belt. This strategy was given the title of the National Action Plan (NAP) and represented consensus among all political groups present in the National Assembly.

Terrorism has returned in 2017; in just three days in mid-February, 112 people were killed, most in the areas outside the tribal belt. On 13 February, a suicide bomber killed 15 people by exploding his weapon opposite Punjab's Provincial Assembly building in the heart of Lahore. The attacker took advantage of the presence of a large number of people in the Assembly Square who were protesting against the adoption of some policy by the provincial administration. The responsibility for the attack was owned by the Taliban-linked Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. Two days later, two people died in an attempted bomb attack in Quetta. The Al Alami faction of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi took responsibility for the incident. Terrorist activity returned to the tribal areas when, on 15 February, five persons died, victims of suicide bombers who targeted a government office in the Mohamand tribal agency. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility for the attack. The most devastating terrorist incident occurred on 16 February, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in the ground around Sehwan Sharif shrine that housed the grave of Sufi Saint Shahbaz Qalandar. As many as 88 people were killed. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) proclaimed responsibility. This was the first time that the ISIS had claimed its involvement in a terrorist incident in Pakistan. On the same day, three soldiers were killed as their vehicle hit an improvised explosive device, IED, which was planted by the Baloch Liberation Front.

These were disconcerting developments for several reasons. The terrorists who carried out these attacks in various parts of the country were pursuing a variety of 'causes'. These included the campaigns to establish an Islamic system of governance in the country (the Pakistani Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, and ISIS), or to target the Shiite community (Lashkar-e-Jhangvi), and to seek independence, or at least greater autonomy, for the province of Baluchistan (Baloch Liberation Front). No part of the country was spared.

Possible links with Islamic extremism in the Middle East

Most of the domestic terrorist activities in Afghanistan in the past decade and a half were carried out by the members of the group that operated under the name of Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA). This group was founded in the concluding phase of the war against

the Soviet Union's occupation of the country. Its leader was Mullah Omar, a respected cleric who taught at one of the madrassas (seminaries) established to serve the large refugee population that had gone to Pakistan to escape the brutality of the occupation by the Soviets. Omar's group later stepped into the political vacuum created by Moscow's pullout and the inability of the leaders of the seven Afghan mujahideen clusters to form a viable government in Kabul. By using guile, bribes and religious-nationalism, the Taliban were able to 'march' into Kabul, form an Islamic state, and govern the country for half a dozen years. Overthrown by the Americans who invaded Afghanistan after the 9/11 attack on their country, the Taliban withdrew into the mountainous areas in the country's south and east. These areas border Pakistan. From there – and from the sanctuaries located across the border in Pakistan, they began launching attacks on the government's forces as well as the forces belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This insurrection has lasted for more than a decade and a half, creating instability in the country. The prolonged war waged against the established order led to the splintering of the TTA into several factions. It appears that the increasing weakness of the Afghan state and the divisions among the dissident groups have provided the ISIS with the opportunity to gain a footing in Afghanistan. That will have serious consequences for Pakistan.

It should be pointed out the new United States President Donald Trump Administration's Islamophobia will complicate the developing situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The still-being-formed administration is now being guided by three individuals with strong anti-Islam feelings. Stephen K. Bannon, Donald Trump's chief strategist, and Stephen Miller, an advisor to the President, have been open about their extremely negative views of Islam. They have now brought in Sebastian Gorka into the White House to translate their belief about Islam into state policy. For Gorka, the violence he associates with Islam emanates from the "martial language" of the Quran "which has hard-wired aggression into Islam." According to one assessment "what has been learned during [the] long effort from law enforcement, intelligence community intelligence and an abundance of scholarship on jihadists is that religious doctrine is not their sole or even primary driver...Declaring a religious war now would only validate the jihadist narrative and force fence-sitters to

procure AK-47s.”² There are many such fence sitters in Afghanistan and Pakistan and their recruitment efforts would become easier as a result of the rhetoric and policy initiatives emanating from the Trump White House.

As the ISIS comes under greater military pressure in Iraq and Syria, it is bound to look for other areas to which it could shift its operations. Its ideology – the creation of an Islamic state covering the entire Muslim world – denotes that it would not confine itself to any particular place. This is the reason why it has not accepted the ISIS nomenclature, preferring to be called, instead, as the Islamic State, IS. If Afghanistan – and for that matter Libya, Somalia, and Yemen – do not achieve political and economic stability, one of these countries or all of them would become attractive for the IS. Were that to happen, Pakistan will have to face another type of threat from Islamic extremism.

Pakistani state’s response to the new wave of terrorism

Direct involvement of the military is central to the strategy adopted following the attacks in Lahore and a popular Sufi shrine in Sindh. There are two important elements in the military’s role. The new military command now working under the leadership of General Qamar Javed Bajwa has made its increased involvement contingent on the fight against terrorism to be extended to the province of Punjab, in particular to its southern districts. This area is now the staging ground for domestic terrorists. Whereas extremists from a number Muslim countries and regions were active in the tribal areas, those working out of southern Punjab belong to the area’s local population. Extremism has arrived in south Punjab almost entirely because this region was ignored by the governments working out of Lahore and Islamabad.³ The new operation launched by the military under the name of *Raddul Fassad* was to target groups in Punjab. This is a direct successor to the operation

² Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, “Trump’s Islamophobe,” *The New York Times International Edition*, February 27, 2017, p. 13. The two writers of the article are the authors of *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam’s War Against America*, New York, Random House, 2003.

³ The backwardness of south Punjab was a theme of one of the annual reports issued by the Burki Institute of Public Policy based in Lahore, Pakistan. See *The State of the Economy: The Punjab Story*, 2012.

Zarb-i- Azb carried out by the military, then under the command of General Raheel Sharif. In July 2016, General Sharif announced that the “kinetic prong” of the operation had been completed following the clearance of the tribal areas and the “busting of terrorist linkages and networks.” It was clear to the policy makers that, in spite of the *Zarb-i-Azb* and over 26,000 intelligence-based combing operations (IBOs) launched over the last couple of years, terrorism still continued to inflict a great deal of harm.

The areas that had become active terrorist havens in Punjab were left untouched mostly for political reasons. Some of these places were important political constituencies of the governing Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). As Baqir Sajjad Syed wrote for the newspaper *Dawn*, “the bigger problem of extremist groups was left behind as they went underground and differences with the civilian government at the time also impeded action against these elements. Operations in the militancy-infested Punjab became a virtual ‘red line’ for the civilian government. But the latest wave of attacks forced a rethink in civilian and political circles as to whether the gains made so far could be sustained without addressing urban militancy, which feeds men, resources and logistics to the terror machine.”⁴

According to the list provided by the military to the media, the *Raddul Fasad* is the twelfth army-led anti-terrorism operation in the country since 2002 when the operation *Al Mazan* was launched by the military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf. It was targeted at the members of Al Qaeda operating in the two Waziristan tribal agencies, North and South. Five years later the army was back when in October 2007 it used the operation *Rah-i-Haq* to clear the Swat region of the Taliban as they advanced towards Islamabad. This was followed by *Operation Zalazala* in January 2008 that targeted the TTP leader operating in South Waziristan Tribal Agency. The *Sirat-e-Mustaqeem* operation of June 2008 was aimed at militant groups such as Lashkar-i-Islam led by Mangal Bagh, operating from the Khyber Agency in the tribal belt. Next to come was *Operation Sher Dil*, in the Bijaur Agency in August 2008 against the Pakistani Taliban. Swat area continued to be the

⁴ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Army’s major urban counterterrorism operation launched,” *Dawn*, February 23, 2017, p. 1.

focus of attention by the military as it launched its second operation there in May 2009. It was called *Rah-i-Rast* and was aimed at the Taliban remnants who continued to mount attacks on civilians. A month later, Operation *Rah-i-Nijat* was launched against the Haqqani network. In October 2009, the military began *Operation Black Thunderstorm* that covered a wide area in Buner, Lower Dir, Swat and Shangla. The TTP was the focus again. In November 2009, the TTP was targeted by the army in Operation Bterkhna, followed in June 2011 by Operation *Koh-i-Safaid* in the Kurram Agency in response to an escalation in attacks by the TTP on commercial vehicles. There was then a three-year lull, broken in June 2014 by the beginning of the Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* that was to last for more than two years.

This list of operations by the military is revealing, for a number of reasons. The Pakistani Taliban was the focus of almost all the efforts by the army but they were episodic, lacking continuity. They were launched in response to a particular attack. It was only after the attack on the Army School in Peshawar in December 2014 that the government of the day adopted a strategic long-term approach. Parsing the announcement by the army that followed the launch of *Raddul Fasad*, it appears that a more comprehensive approach is being adopted this time around. Announcing the beginning of the operation, the army issued a statement saying that its purpose was to “indiscriminately eliminate residual threat of terrorism, consolidate gains of operations made thus far and further secure our borders. All armed forces would take part in this broad spectrum security/counter terrorism operation.”

As the weekly *Friday Times* pointed out in an editorial that appeared in its issue of 24 February, three words/phrases in the announcement are significant – indiscriminately, residual and broad spectrum. It suggests that some terrorist groups and elements were spared in earlier operations but this will not be the case this time around. Residual means that a lot of work has already been done; this time the focus will be on cleaning and mopping up. “Broad spectrum” implies that the operation will not be limited to the tribal

areas and Karachi but will cover all parts of the country, in particular the southern districts of Punjab.⁵

Relations with Afghanistan

Ever since Pakistan achieved independence, it has had uneasy relations with its neighbor to the north. Afghanistan was the only country that did not support the entry of Pakistan into the United Nations. Kabul did not accept Pakistan as a nation-state, contending that at least one of the boundaries Pakistan claimed it had inherited from the British rule was not legitimate. Kabul was of the view that the “Durand Line” Pakistan saw as its border with Afghanistan was not a real border; it had been imposed on a weak Afghan government by the British-ruled India. The line had divided the Pakhtun people (also known as the Pashtuns or the Pathans) into two groups. Kabul wanted the new border to place the entire Pakhtun population in Afghanistan even though a majority of these people lived in Pakistan. Of the world’s 45 million Pakhtun people, only 16 million are citizens of Afghanistan while 27 million reside in Pakistan. The remaining 2 million are scattered all over the world.⁶

Pakistan got deeply involved in Afghan affairs after the Soviet Union invaded the neighbouring country. Working with the United States and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan organized seven groups of Afghan freedom fighters who were able to inflict heavy damage on the invading army. Ten years after Moscow sent in its troops, it decided to pull out, leaving Afghanistan in a state of total chaos. What followed the arrival of the next invading army – the Americans and their NATO allies – was a decade and a half of insurgency mounted by the Taliban. Some of the insurgents had found sanctuaries in Pakistan. As the United States decided to pull out from the country, Kabul decided to punish Pakistan for

⁵ *The Friday Times*, “Editorial: Radd-ul-Fassad,” February 24, 2017, p. 1.

⁶ Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan are covered in some detail in the book I coauthored with two colleagues from the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. See Shahid Javed Burki, Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Riaz Hassan, *Afghanistan: The Next Phase*, Melbourne, Australia, Melbourne University Press, 2015.

hosting some of the groups that had fought the Americans to a standstill. Kabul's response took the form of supporting some of the February 2017 terrorist attacks on Pakistan.

There was an angry response from Pakistan – in particular from the country's military – when it became clear that some of the February attacks were orchestrated by operators stationed in Afghanistan. The Afghan ambassador was called to the headquarters of the Pakistani army in Rawalpindi and handed over a list of 76 persons it claimed were working to carry out terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Shelling by the Pakistani artillery in the border districts of the Afghan province of Nangarhar increased tensions between the two countries. "Afghanistan may not be a match for Pakistan, but somehow the Afghans did try to muster the rhetoric," wrote Syeda Mamoon Rubab, a Pakistan-based journalist well-versed in Afghan-Pakistan relations. "So when Pakistan Army began moving its big guns to the border, similar intentions were expressed by the people in Kabul. The debate about their capabilities notwithstanding, the Afghan media quoted unnamed official saying: 'Fresh troops and heavy weapons had been sent to the zero point area of Nangarhar border with Pakistan. Forces were ordered to be on standby and respond in case of more rocket attacks by Pakistan.'" But wiser counsels prevailed. "When General Qamar Bajwa sat down to review the situation after days of blowing hot, he appeared to be realizing that cooperation not confrontation can make Afghanistan deliver." The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff told his fellow officers: "Pakistan and Afghanistan ... shall continue their effort together. Enhanced security arrangements along the Pak-Afghan border were fighting a common enemy."⁷ This sentiment was repeated by the civilian leadership.

Conclusion: Consequences for political development

Will some in Pakistan conclude that the return of domestic terrorism suggests that the state in Pakistan remains weak and the liberal democracy as it had developed is not equal to the task of dealing with this scourge? The fact that the military was assigned a central role in

⁷ Syeda Mamoon Rubab, "My brother's keeper," *The Friday Times*, February 24, 2017, p. 4.

dealing with the problem is one indication that the state does not have the instruments needed to handle it. Most of what the men and women in uniform are likely to do as they carry out the *Radd-ul-Fassad* operation will be done without political oversight. That is not the only encroachment by the armed forces. At the time of this writing, political parties are debating the need to give military courts – and hence military justice – another lease of life. This was done when the NAP was adopted. It led to the passage of the 21st Amendment to the Constitution that authorized the establishment of military courts that could try and sentence those accused of terrorist activities. The courts tried hundreds of cases, sentenced a large number of people to death and executed a dozen of those convicted.

That said, it seems safe to suggest that the progress made by Pakistan since 2007 in developing a representative and reasonably inclusive political system will continue. In fact, Pakistan may emerge as a model for the Muslim world most of which is troubled by the rise of extremism. Most Muslim nations have found it difficult to keep the military out of power and to prevent authoritarianism from taking over the political system. The promise of the “Arab Spring of 2011” was not realized.

Pakistan is likely to move in a different direction. The country has the military strength to meet the challenge posed by extremism. Since the Peshawar attack in December 2014 that killed a large number of students and the more recent assault on a Sufi shrine in Sindh, the citizenry is now prepared to countenance the use of “hard power” to deal with the terrorist threat. If this is combined with the development of “soft power” – education, social development and political progress Pakistan may have found a way of overcoming extremism.

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