

Pakistan, & the Myth of Islamic Terrorism

President Musharraf has supposedly been fighting Islamic terrorism since he took control of Pakistan in a coup eight years ago. Benazir Bhutto repeatedly justified her role in a future Pakistan by claiming to be a champion of democracy; Nawaz Sharif is also citing to his highly dubious democratic credentials at every opportunity on the campaign trail.

In Washington, both Republicans and Democrats regularly reiterate the link between Islamic radicalism in Pakistan and the safety of the American homeland. Across the porous border in Afghanistan, NATO forces also claim to be fighting Islamic insurgents. And just recently, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that India was facing a common threat with Pakistan, the threat emanating from religious extremism.

But who exactly are these Muslim men (and women, in some instances) who have been painted with the broad terrorist brush since 9/11?

Following a recent trip to the restive Swat Valley, a student leader of the Peshawar-based Awami National Party said that “virtually every single armed follower of Mullah Radio [Mullah Fazlullah] comes from the most marginalized section of society; these men don’t have jobs, their families find it difficult to put two meals on the table, and they have been in some form of bondage—to warlords, landowners or smugglers—for decades. They are the ones being killed in the face of a brutal onslaught by the Pakistani army.”

So let’s get the facts out first; we will get to religious fanaticism later. Which segment of the Pakistani population do these “terrorists” come from?

Firstly, the armed fighters in the North West Frontier Province are essentially landless and unemployed men who are caught up in the vicious nexus of deeply-entrenched commercial interests representing the Pakistani army, large landowners, market traders, village mullahs and drug kingpins.

Secondly, those taking orders from warlords in the neighbouring tribal areas are not only landless and unemployed; they are, for all practical purposes, living under the worst form of modern-day feudalism, whether in Pakistan or in Afghanistan. In fact, in the days following the Taliban’s downfall in late-2001, a veteran spokeswoman for the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) had warned that “the complete failure of governments in this part of the world to resolve basic issues like land titles, and to implement genuine land reforms, has already created an economy which is entirely conditioned by the trade in drugs and arms; our young men have nowhere else to go in order to find work and to fend for their families.”

In effect, the so-called Islamic militants are, in fact, **unwilling mercenaries**, within the context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre. They may or not be devout Muslims, but they certainly are not committed to the destruction of Pakistan, India or the West. As harsh and alarming as it may seem, more than 95% of them are paid, directly or indirectly, to protect or further vested commercial interests.

Shortly after the Soviet Army marched out of Afghanistan, a veteran Peshawar politician (who dare not speak on the subject openly today) was left wondering whether anybody in the West understood that “the Great Jihad of the 1980s was a myth, and that people like Osama Bin Laden and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar were basically running mercenary operations and protection rackets with money from the Gulf and from Saudi Arabia, with arms provided by the CIA and MI6, and with the protection of Pakistan’s notorious Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) agency.”

To take the example of Swat, there are some disturbing underlying economic issues which have been demanding urgent attention ever since the establishment of Pakistan. It is common knowledge that nearly 85% of the 1.7 million residents of Swat’s seven sub-districts live below the poverty line. Unemployment rates exceed 75% in many parts of Swat, if underemployment (casual and seasonal labour) is adequately recognized, regardless of misleading government data. Agricultural productivity has actually diminished during the previous three decades, dictated no doubt by minimal inputs in infrastructure in low-lying areas and by the exploitation of forests in the mountains. Swat’s relatively small market centres are in a state of total decay. Corruption in the police and bureaucracy has deep roots.

In the midst of this already depressing scenario, the rebel cleric, Mullah Fazlullah, allowed his gangs to collect tariffs and taxes, to organize Sharia courts and to impose strict restrictions on women. Mullah Fazlullah himself obviously claims to be implementing God’s laws, but the facts suggest otherwise. Mullah Soofi Mohammed, Mullah Fazlullah’s father-in-law, was known to have the backing of powerful local smugglers. “The same smugglers who backed Mullah Soofi are now backing Mullah Radio,” the Awami National Party student leader confirmed. “The battle in Swat is nothing but a turf war, between the alliance of smugglers, loggers and clerics on one hand and the collective interests of the bureaucracy, the police and small-city businessmen and traders on the other.”

Outside observers have been questioning why the Pakistani Army delayed entering the fray to restore a semblance of order for so many months;

interestingly, today, the snowbound mountains to the west and north of Swat have already curtailed mobility, and the route leading to the Karakoram Highway is under the control of armed criminal groups [also called Islamic militants] owing allegiance to renowned Swat-based smugglers and loggers. As a result, the much-publicized drive to bring peace to Swat by the Pakistan Army is unlikely to produce anything sustainable.

For that matter, over 10 long years, the West has failed to recognize that, that the Islamabad establishment and Pakistan's mainstream political parties have been fundamentally misrepresenting the true nature of the social fabric in the badlands of Waziristan.

The reality of Swat speaks for itself. "Nobody expects anything to change out here," a Swat sub-district official, who is currently packing up to go back to his hometown of Lahore, told an Al Jazeera stringer last week. "The Army is not going to dismantle the power structures here, a few hundred armed men and civilians will die, and then the local, low-intensity conflicts will continue, like nothing ever happened."

Now for the critical question: **Is the West pursuing phantom terrorists in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre?** The answer is an unequivocal YES.

An overwhelming proportion of those pitted against regular military forces are not Islamic militants; in fact, Islam has got nothing to do with their compulsion to work for warlords, smugglers, intelligence agencies or the Pakistan Army's vast industrial empire. Devout, mosque-going Muslims they might be; but it is not religion which is driving them to kill and destroy.

If anything, the terrorism which we need to be concerned about is the terrorism to which the people of Swat, the rest of the North West Frontier Province, the tribal areas and, to set the record state, the rest of Pakistan are being subject to in their daily lives; the kind of terrorism only poverty can bring---malnourished children, abused women, dismal healthcare, impaired education, high unemployment and ever-rising levels of household debt owing to local money lenders.

The true nature of Al Qaeda and the Taliban needs to be thoroughly reviewed, without spin and propaganda. Are these loosely knit outfits, at the end of the day, mercenary outfits using religion simply as a convenient cover for personal gains?

The threat from the phenomenon of Political Islam—i.e. from parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami—is an entirely different type of threat altogether, rooted in the lower middle classes in the towns and cities of Pakistan. That threat can easily, and only, be countered if the struggle of impoverished Pakistanis in the countryside gathers momentum.

India offers a unique insight into that threat: without a genuine and powerful indigenous movement to resolve poverty and marginalization in the rural context, nothing can stop right-wing Hindu groups, backed by huge sections of the urban middle class and led by people like Narendra Modi, from sharply increasing their influence over Indian society within the next 1-2 years.

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