
The Ideological Battle: Insight from Pakistan

By Shazadi Beg

On a cloudless day in a large field in Aurakzai Tribal Agency, six thousand heavily armed militants gather. Sixty gunmen wearing suicide jackets in case of attack guard the perimeter of the field.[1] The leader of the group is Maulana Hakimullah, a deputy leader of the Terik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TPP) headed by Baituallah Mehsud. The latter is now the most prominent Taliban leader in Pakistan's tribal belt, and a prime suspect in the murder of Benazir Bhutto. The date is 9 May 2008.

Maulana Hakimullah excites the crowd consisting of men and boys aged 13 to 75 by telling them that the Americans are killing innocent Afghans. He asks, "Are we to stand by and let it happen?" to the roar of, "No" from the crowd.[2] He tells them that the next target will be them. After a rabble-rousing speech, he asks who wants to perform jihad in Afghanistan. The entire audience say they do. He tells them that they have no planes or artillery weapons, in fact very little firepower. He tells them that they only really have their bodies to make into live bombs.

Maulana Hakimullah then asks the crowd who wants to become a shahid (martyr). Around 40% of the group, aged between 13 and 25, shout "we do". He tells them that they will receive honour in this life and the next. He tells them that they will receive religious education and training in weapons in South Waziristan. He praises the Mehsud tribe for their focus and commitment to the cause as compared to the Aurakzai tribe.

No mention of money is made, but all know of the unspoken rule that the families of suicide bombers will be paid. Maulana Hakimullah tells the crowd that there have been kidnappings by militants that are spoiling and polluting both their image and their jihad. He says criminal elements must be eliminated.

The new recruits are told that if they cannot reach their target they must blow themselves up rather than be captured alive. He tells them that their mission will still qualify as martyrdom if that was their intention when they set out on the mission. Insults are shouted against Musharraf for siding with the Americans in the war to liberate Islam. They are told they must not trust anything said by the political leaders because all are handicapped by the external pressures on them.

The meeting was not publicised in the Pakistani press. It is unclear whether the army knew of it. This is not the first time that armed militants gathered in a field in Pakistan's tribal areas. Maulana Faqir Mohammed was shown addressing the cameras with hundreds of fighters when the government of Prime Minister Gilani announced that it was ready to have dialogue with tribesmen. [3] Deobandi religious gatherings in Raiwind, outside Lahore, annually see a gathering of around 1 million men, many of whom are on the government's most wanted list. [4]

The meeting on 9th May demonstrated that the strength of the militants lies in human capital. Both Pakistan and the West must understand that neither military operations nor even intelligence gathering will defeat global terrorism. Rather, it will be the ability to break the chain of recruitment. Well-structured interventions, striking at the core of the militants' ideology, can significantly impact on both the supply and demand sides of suicide bombers.

The presence of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and sectarian groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan the country's strategic geographical location close to Afghanistan, Iran and the Central Asian narcotics corridor arguably makes it the most dangerous place in the world. There remain serious concerns over the flow of weapons and the Talibanisation of parts of the tribal belt and the settled areas.

Militants recruited in the tribal belt tend to be under the age of 30; many are teenagers living in areas of abject poverty. Their destitution makes them believe that they have nothing to live for, but everything to die for. The Salafi ideology that indoctrinates most recruits advocates a Puritan version of Islam and espouses the creation of a worldwide Caliphate. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the injustices meted out to Muslims in places like Palestine, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, also play significant roles in the process of radicalisation. [5]

The abundance of idle manpower in an area where unemployment is running at 50% works in favour of militant groups, which are known to pay recruits more than the Afghan national Army pays its regular soldiers. Unemployed teenagers are easier to indoctrinate because they are often unable to read a literal interpretation of the Quran in Urdu or Pashtu. Many are illiterate and make a commitment to religion without the ability to make rational or informed choices for themselves. Indoctrination takes place both inside madrassas, as well as in the local community. This process is eased by the fact that some militant madrassas remain unregistered, refuse to disclose the source of donations, and continue to teach the Deobandi school of Islam. [6]

The motivations for suicide bombers is a belief in martyrdom and its posthumous rewards, funds for the family, the notion of "badla" or revenge in the Pastunwali code of conduct, and the reward of being part of the liberation of Islam. Young men are made to feel empowered by being given weapons. Increasingly public beheadings, including one by a boy of 12, [7] of those perceived to be American spies has worked both to instil fear into local populations and recruit boys into a profession equated with manhood.

Letters and videos left behind by suicide bombers indicate that they have been made to believe that the killing of fellow Muslims is acceptable as jihad if they have been deemed kufirs (unbelievers). The last letter written by Abid Hunzala to his wife Fatima on 8.9.07 reads :

“Dear Fatima

Allah has given us life and I am sacrificing my life for the promotion of Allah’s religion. The world of kufr is trying to wipe out Islam. One million Muslims have been killed in Iraq. The Islamic government of Afghanistan has been ousted. Muslims are being killed in every part of the world. And in Pakistan which was created in the name of Islam, true Muslims are being killed, detained or being handed over to infidel America. What did the people of Lal Majid do to deserve being brutally killed and bathed in blood? In this situation Islam is seeking sacrifice... I know this will grieve you as God has blessed us with a child after 10 years of marriage... I advise you to make my son a Hafiz e Quran and send him on jihad when he grows up. This is the path of sahabah and is the only way of salvation and promotion of Islam...”

Abid Hunzala bombed a Pakistan Air Force bus in Sargodha in November of 2007 during a suicide mission intended specifically to kill Air force personnel. [8]

In many parts of the Muslim world, there is clear recognition that indoctrination is happening behind closed doors. Only dialogue can prevent this. In countries such as Yemen, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia there are re-education or rehabilitation programmes to “turn around” the militant mindset away from violent extremism. Some of the programs have used former militants as the most effective means of communication. At the centre of the debate has been the new work of the Egyptian Sayed Imam Abdulaziz al-Sharif (Dr Fadl), “Tarshid al-amal al-jihad wa al-alam (Rationalizing the Jihadi Action in Egypt and the World). In this work, he re-assesses the Salafi jihadi ideology that he himself propagated in the 1980’s and 1990’s. [9]

Sayed Imam’s defection poses a grave threat to al-Qaeda. The recent fundamentally important work comes from a man considered to stand at the heart of the jihadi ideology, and whose previous work promoting jihad contributed in no small measure to global terrorism. Yet his defection has not affected Pakistan. Poverty and illiteracy has worked to prevent Sayed Imam’s re-assessment of jihad from reaching militant rural communities. Pakistan has no formal disengagement or rehabilitation program despite the fact that it now has the largest and fastest growing number of militants recruited anywhere in the world. The reformation of Islam that we are living through must open up the debate on radical Islam in Pakistan as it is beginning to be done in the rest of the world.

Pakistan’s answer to addressing the issue of militancy has been in the form of Peace Agreements with the tribesmen. The Agreements promote the cessation of hostilities and the ousting of foreign militants. Compensation is often paid by the government for loss of life and demolition of homes. Over the years agreements have broken down several times with allegations of breaches on both sides. The West has criticised the Peace Agreements as providing a breathing space to militants to re-group and re-arm. Sections of the Pakistan army have been accused of secretly supporting some militant groups both because of anti American feeling (a recent poll by a Washington think tank found that

more than half the country thinks that the USA is more of a threat than al-Qaeda[10] and for services rendered in the past, for example in Kashmir.

The freeing of Sufi Mohammed of Swat recently was criticised by many outside Pakistan. The Peace Agreement signed in May of 2008 with the TNSM under the leadership of Maulana Sufi Mohammad in Swat, saw the controversial prisoner exchanges, where militants had far greater numbers released than kidnapped security personnel. Questions were also raised as to whether militants should be “rewarded” for abductions. Militants also laid down a condition that they should not be prevented from promoting Sharia law through radio stations. Since Swat is not part of the Tribal belt, the government claims that different considerations apply. It states that Maulana Sufi Mohammed has been persuaded that there is nothing in the Constitution of Pakistan which is contrary to Sharia.[11] As a result of accepting this, he is now under threat from other militants and is being protected by the authorities. Militants have long realised that their strength lies in reaching people through their brand of Islam.

The bombing of Damadola village in Bajaur by US drones on May 14th, 2008 [12] was widely seen as an attempt to derail the signing of a strategically important Peace Agreement. The bombing in Bajaur in November 2006 in which 82 young students were killed outright while asleep in their beds was also seen as an attempt to derail a Peace Agreement which was to be signed the day the bombing took place. With every American bombing the influence of the Taliban increases resulting in more recruitment into militancy.

The recent attack earlier this month by NATO and the US on paramilitary soldiers of the Frontier Corp has led to anger within the Army, which described it as “cowardly and unprovoked”. It has resulted in more anti American feeling in the country. It has been viewed as deliberate, a “testing of the water” for a future all out assault on tribal areas. The most significant fallout has been further recruitment for the Taliban. It has also succeeded in pushing the Taliban into the arms of al-Qaeda. The attack was quickly followed by a confident Karzai threatening to attack Taliban safe havens inside Pakistan! To make matters worse, British forces in Afghanistan have now begun to use one of the most controversial and deadly missiles known as Hellfire AGM – 114N against the Taliban. This thermobaric weapon “creates a pressure wave which sucks the air out of victims, shreds their internal organs and crushes their bodies”.[13] This brutal weapon makes it virtually impossible for any civilians in the target building to survive. The more brutal methods of warfare employed and the more innocent blood spilled, the more jihadis are willing to take ‘jihad of the sword’ (jihad al Asghar) into Afghanistan and beyond.

What was the objective of going into Afghanistan in the first place? If it was to punish the Taliban for hosting Bin Laden and to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for al-Qaeda, seven years on the question remains have we succeeded? A long-term strategy continues to be sacrificed for short term gains. No insurgency has been won without the support of the people. Though Peace Agreements have been criticised the importance of dialogue in tribal jirgas and Pashtunwali code of conduct must be

recognised in a region of ancient history. How many Taliban can be killed when they are part of and sometimes indistinguishable from the indigenous civilian population? Moreover, making the tribal maliks (more than 300 have been killed) insignificant succeeds in filling the vacuum with the power of the militant mullah.

The ceasefires provide opportunities for socio-economic reforms. In North Waziristan, the Peace Agreement concluded 2 months ago, was signed by 300 tribesmen. For the first time in 10 years the Pakistani government could go into villages to distribute books to boys' schools. [14] Only promised development will take away some of the influence of the militants. Conflicts in Kashmir and against the Soviets in Afghanistan left behind damaged infrastructures. These have been exploited by battle hardened youths raised on a diet of weapons, war and the glorification of jihad, the seeds of which were planted by the Saudis, the Americans and the Pakistan Army in a tripartite partnership to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan. Military dominance and corrupt civilian administrations further retarded institution building.

The CIA has repeatedly stated that if there is an attack on the US mainland it will inevitably lead to Pakistan's tribal areas. [15] Any attack by the US in a "surge" to dismantle al-Qaeda and Taliban safe havens will be catastrophic in unleashing a new breed of jihadis. It is also likely to have unintended consequences in fracturing the Army as an institution and promoting a dangerous fallout in Western capitals.

Pakistan continues to be bribed with dollars, which has only resulted in a strengthened Taliban. Islamabad recognises that it must restore respect for tribal autonomy. This is the only incentive for the Pashtuns to reject al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Across the border, Southern Afghanistan, considered the hub of insurgency and narcotics, is unlikely to be secured by the Allies against some of the most ferocious fighters in the world. The lack of coordination between NATO members partly results from different objectives by different countries. With some countries reluctant to engage in offensive strikes for fear of repercussions in their own countries; clearly not everyone is pulling in the same direction. [16] NATO is also aware that the British are not averse to talking to the Taliban and Karzai is cutting deals with provincial commanders for control of territory outside Kabul and forge alliances with local militants. In this game of realpolitik some NATO members cannot be blamed for wondering what are their soldiers dying for?

In the meantime recruitment in Pakistan's tribal belt goes on unabated with a recent discovery of a "suicide nursery" in South Waziristan for 9-12 year olds. [17] The Mehsud area of Spinkai remains deserted since people fled a military operation known as "zalzala". Computers, videos and literature were seized from a house. Some videos show young boys carrying out an execution, a classroom of 10-12 year olds wearing white headbands with verses of the Quran on their foreheads and training in how to make and detonate IEDs.

Training for these young recruits is said to be organised by Qari Hussain, who in turn is protected by Baitullah Mehsud. Last August he was involved in the kidnapping of 260 soldiers. [18] He is affiliated with the banned sectarian group Sipah-i-Sahaba, and is a

graduate of a Karachi madrassa. Qari Hussain specialises in indoctrinating children into violent extremism in the name of Islam. There is little challenge to his creation of “martyrdom cults”.

The boys in his training camp are not permitted to debate sacred texts. No one tells them that jihad of the sword is only permitted in limited circumstances in defensive actions where a Muslim is turned out from his home or prohibited from practising his religion or where he is fighting oppression. [19] Pre-conditions for jihad preclude the performance of jihad by children or the use of funds obtained through ill gotten gains.

There is increasing evidence that some teenagers coerced into jihad are seeking help to prevent themselves from being “stranded” in jihad. Recently, suicide jackets from those who had second thoughts were found in a dried up river along the Pakistan/Afghanistan border. [20] This cry for help is being unheard by the authorities who continue to be sidetracked by Peace Agreements, pressure from the US to do more, and a debilitating turf war between the ISI and other law enforcement agencies, which accuse the former of pandering to their “favourite” militants. [21] In the meantime the “Punjabi Taliban”, with leadership in Harkatul mujahideen and Jaish-i-Mohammad, have linked up with other militant groups to take in the length and breadth of the country. Southern Punjab is now considered the “factory” that increasingly churns out IEDs and suicide jackets.

Pakistan’s slide into violent extremism cannot be stemmed until religious ideology is challenged directly and credibly. Collective and individual disengagement from terrorism will only succeed if there is societal support for the opening up of the jihadi debate and a well-structured system of rehabilitation for those in detention and on the cusp. Suicide attacks especially must be shown to be the acts of psychological warfare that they are, indiscriminate violence that kills and maims, traumatising entire communities and perpetuating a fear of crowded places. A nuclear Pakistan is the decisive battleground where the end game will be played out. After the monumental mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan, we can no longer afford to get it wrong.

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Notes

[1] An eye witness account relayed to interviewee who was interviewed on 12.5.08 in Rawalpindi. He wishes to remain anonymous.

[2] Article in The Times in London on 22.6.08

[3] Faqir Mohammed was shown on Geo TV on 25.3.08 shortly after the swearing in of Prime Minister Gilani.

[4] Interview with senior FIA official on 11.5.08 Islamabad.

[5] Interview with Maliks of the Khyber Agency in November 2006.

[6] A radical and austere school of Islamic teaching emanating historically from India but now closely aligned with the Taliban.

[7] Dawn newspaper 28.8.07

[8] Interview with senior FIA official on 11.5.08 Islamabad

[9] “The Rebellion Within” – The New Yorker 2.6.08 by Lawrence Wright.

[10] “Pakistani Public Opinion on Democracy, Islamist Militancy, and Relations with the U.S.” Joint Study with World Public Opinion.org and the United States Institute of Peace February, 2008.

[11] Interview with senior Army Commander stationed in Peshawar on 13.6.08

[12] The Daily Times. 14.5.08

[13] The Times newspaper London 22.6.08

- [14] Interview with the Governor of NWFP, Owais Ghani, 14.5.05
- [15] CIA:Clear and Present Danger in Remote Region. Director Michael Hayden says Afghan/Pakistan border is still Al Qaeda Home base. 30.3.08 CBS News Interactive (wbztv.com)
- [16] Col @ Saffet Akkaya- Middle Eastern University Ankara
- [17] Dawn newspaper 19.5.08
- [18] Dawn newspaper 29.8.07
- [19] Quran Surah Al-Baqarah, Ch 2 verses 190,191 and 193. Surah Nisaa, Ch 4 verses 74 and 75.
- [20] Interview with Governor NWFP, Owais Ghani 14.5.08
- [21] Interview with senior official of Frontier Constabulary 12.5.08