Book Reviews


Reviewed by Madeleine Gruen

Terrorist groups based in Pakistan pose one of the biggest threats to international security. Dozens of terrorist and insurgent groups use Pakistan, particularly its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), as a base to launch operations in Afghanistan and terrorist attacks worldwide. In *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero*, Rohan Gunaratna (Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, and a well-known Al-Qaeda expert) and Khuram Iqbal (former head of research at the Pakistani Institute for Peace Studies in Islamabad, currently working towards his PhD at the University of Wollongong) clearly explain the conditions that make Pakistan a “Terrorist Disneyland.” The threat cannot be terminated simply by surgically removing Al-Qaeda (AQ) from the FATA. Rather, the authors argue, any viable solution to contain the threat will include consideration of the myriad of complexities at play, and will have to address the decades of bad governance, illiteracy, poverty, lack of development, lack of healthcare, and political corruption that have contributed to the creation of the ground that is likely to support ideological extremism and terrorism for years to come.

The book covers the broad scope of the threat in seven chapters; from the systematic negligence of the FATA since the time of British Colonial rule, to how the spider web of non-state actors have challenged Pakistan’s ability to juggle internal and external threats with pressure from the international community to take more sustained action.

Some readers may be put off by the introduction to the book, in which Gunaratna and Iqbal assert the US precipitated the global spread of terrorism, and the escalation of terrorist attacks in Pakistan itself, by stirring the horns’ nest in its retaliation for 9/11 and by not neutralizing the ideological source of the threat (p.14). In this context, the authors fail to mention that Pakistan had been the headquarters for the “global jihad” for years before 9/11. Fortunately, the authors leave this point behind, and make clear in the rest of the book the FATA was “kept backwards” (p. 21) by the state, which has not contributed enough towards its development and stability. The authors also do not hold back their criticism of the state’s weak stop-and-start military and humanitarian campaigns to eject foreign terrorists from the FATA.

Scholars and counterterrorism analysts will appreciate the detailed profiles of the major terrorist and insurgent groups operating in Pakistan, including Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Tehrik
Lashkar-e-Islami (LI), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Gunaratna and Iqbal do an outstanding job teasing out the differences between the groups so readers can picture the TTP, for example, not as a single, monolithic organization, but as a network of groups, a few of which are allied with AQ in its war against the “far enemy”, some of which are concerned with ejecting U.S. and coalition troops from Afghanistan, while some others are focused entirely on attacking the host state. The authors also provide important details about each group’s leadership, financing, intentions and capabilities, and the nature of their cooperation with other groups.

A full chapter covers terrorism in Karachi, introducing the added complications brought on by sectarian violence between the Sunni and the Shi’a; tensions that have been exacerbated by Iran and Saudi Arabia in the course of promoting their own interests (pp. 111-121). To that end, the authors continually remind readers throughout the book of the broader implications of militancy in Pakistan, providing solid examples of how the threat has spilled over to neighboring South Asian, Central Asian, and Western countries.

Gunaratna and Iqbal’s assessment can serve as a valuable tool to shape a comprehensive strategic policy to defeat terrorism in Pakistan. The book also provides counterterrorism analysts with a much-needed roadmap of the multiple variables and subtleties in action that have affected, and will undoubtedly continue to affect, much of the rest of the world.

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