

TESTIMONY

From Strategy to Implementation: Strengthening U.S.-Pakistan Relations Understanding the Character of Jihadist Militancy in Pakistan

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Subcommittee on International Security

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First, I would like to thank Chairman Carper, Ranking Member McCain, and other members of the subcommittee who have gathered today. I am honored by this incredible opportunity to share some thoughts on the subject of strengthening U.S.-Pakistan relations, with a specific focus on explaining the character and dynamics of jihadist militancy in Pakistan.

The United States is dependent on Pakistan for accomplishing its objectives in Afghanistan. Policy makers, diplomats and senior military officials seem increasingly aware of this fact; the wholesale adoption of the phrase “AfPak” offers one piece of evidence. But we now run the risk of conflating the prevailing issues, problems, and opportunities in both countries.

A colleague at the New America Foundation recently shared an analysis that embodies the dilemma of conceptualizing these two countries too closely together. While 100 percent of American casualties will be taken in Afghanistan, he said, the overwhelming majority of American interests – including the leadership of al-Qaeda and concerns over nuclear proliferation – reside in Pakistan, where we have, unfortunately, very little influence.

Many of the insurgents fighting against American soldiers in Afghanistan are either based in Pakistan or being commanded from Pakistan. Top Afghan Taliban leaders use Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Baluchistan province, as their headquarters, from where they direct operations in southern Afghanistan. And insurgents in eastern Afghanistan are being supported and led by networks based in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and to a lesser extent, the North-West Frontier Province.

But I am going to focus my testimony today on those insurgents and jihadists fighting against the Pakistani government; recent al-Qaeda communiqués have outlined the group’s goals of overthrowing the Pakistani government and seizing its nuclear weapons. I often hear U.S. military officials describe their adversaries along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in general terms as “the enemy,” while, in the same sentence, proposing to isolate specific “irreconcilable” militants from specific “reconcilable” ones. But what is the character of the jihadist threat in Pakistan? I will use the next few minutes to answer this question in three parts:

1. Who constitutes “the enemy” in Pakistan?

2. How do the cultural, tribal and religious dynamics along the border play in to the militants’ strengths and weaknesses?

3. How does the Pakistani military conceptualize “the enemy?”

1. Who are the jihadists and insurgents fighting against the Pakistani government?

The Pakistani militants are not a monolithic, disciplined entity. In fact, they are probably best understood as belonging to one of three categories, each with different safe havens, objectives and vulnerabilities. Those three groups are:

1. Foreign al-Qaeda militants
2. Kashmiri and sectarian militants
3. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or “the Pakistani Taliban Movement”

The foreign militants – which are predominantly Arabs and Uzbeks, with smaller numbers of Turks, Chechens, Africans and some Europeans – can be classified as al-Qaeda and are estimated to account for several hundred fighters. They are suspected of being based in South Waziristan, North Waziristan, Mohmand, Bajaur, and Swat. Owing to their international backgrounds, most of them have international aims, whether it’s committing terrorism abroad, committing terrorism against international targets in Pakistan and Afghanistan, or, in order to consolidate their own control over these areas, committing violence against the traditional tribal authorities. In that respect, there are even some distinguishing characteristics of these foreign militants, with the Chechens and Uzbeks reportedly being more involved in the drug trade, the Uzbeks being constantly involved in skirmishes and tribal disputes, and the Arabs, who founded and continue to dominate the leadership of al-Qaeda, being more observant of tribal norms and yet seemingly more intent using the FATA as a base for global, catastrophic acts of terrorism. Of the three categories of militants in Pakistan, these are, by far, the least interested in reconciliation.

The Kashmiri and sectarian groups have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the Pakistani state. In the mid-1980s, the main anti-Shia outfit, Sipah-e-Sahaba, was formed under the supervision of General Zia ul Haq’s military regime. Haq, a Sunni Muslim with close ties to the leading Islamist parties, sought to transform Pakistan from being a Muslim state to a Sunni Muslim state. While their goals were – and are – more focused on removing Shia influences from Pakistan, members of the group spent considerable time in Afghanistan during the Taliban era, participating in pogroms against Afghanistan’s Shia Hazara minority. A Sipah-e-Sahaba splinter group, known as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, was created in the early 1990s with an even more ambitious and murderous agenda. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants have been implicated in the abduction and murder of Daniel Pearl, in the bombing of a church in Islamabad in 2002, and in

the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. While their goals are more social and religious than, say, the political goals of al-Qaeda, Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are the homegrown, Pakistani equivalent of the sectarian death squads that have terrorized Iraq for years.

Within this second category are also the Kashmiri militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harakat-ul-Jihadi-Islami and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. Most of these groups - Kashmiri and sectarian ones alike - are based in southern Punjab, in and around Multan, Bahawalpur, and Jhang. Like the sectarian groups, each of the Kashmiri groups received substantial support from Pakistani intelligence agencies to carry out attacks against Indian forces in Kashmir. This support and training has made them particularly dangerous. So unlike many of the Pashtuns who now call themselves Taliban, these fighters are more than simply disgruntled men with guns. They have long-standing contacts in the intelligence agencies, some of who sympathize more with the jihadists than with the government. These contacts enabled Jaish-e-Mohammad, for instance, to carry out two destructive assassination attempts on Pervez Musharraf in late 2003.

You may be wondering why, with all this support and training from the state, they've now turned against it? To understand this, it's best to look back to Lal Masjid, or the Red Mosque. In July 2007, Pakistani commandos besieged the mosque, where hundreds of jihadists remained inside. This incident was critical for many reasons. First, it brought together sectarian and Kashmiri militants from southern Punjab, Pashtuns from the border, and Arab jihadist ideologues. But second, and perhaps most importantly, it exposed that the limitations of the intelligence agencies. While senior leaders of the state-supported jihadist groups went to the mosque to plea with the brothers in charge to halt their activities, the foot soldiers from these state-supported jihadist groups had already switched sides. In other words, the state may have succeeded in its bid to reconcile the leaders of some groups, but what good is a leader with no one to lead? Those who survived the final raid on the mosque ultimately fled to the tribal areas, where they joined Pakistani Taliban groups in their campaign against the government.

This brings us to the Pakistani Taliban, which have evolved into the lethal force they've become primarily because they represent a fusion of al-Qaeda, Kashmiri and sectarian jihadist groups, and Pashtun discontent. Consider the case of Baitullah Mehsud and his organization, based in the Mehsud areas of South Waziristan. Some news reports to the contrary, Mehsud is *not* a "tribal chieftain." He is a young fighter in his 30s who, through coercion and assassinations of legitimate tribal chiefs (many of which were believed to be carried out by Mehsud's Uzbek allies) and budding rivals, emerged as the most powerful man in the Mehsud tribe. The other weapon Mehsud possesses is a platoon of suicide bombers, many of whom are kids. Mehsud's deputy, Qari Hussein, is regarded as "Ostad-e-fedayeen," or the Teacher of Martyrs. Hussein also belongs to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the anti-Shia sectarian group. When his men kidnapped almost 200 Pakistani soldiers in August 2007, they looked through the soldiers' gear, found at least one of them who was carrying Shia literature, and proceeded to have his head cut off - by a teenage boy with a knife. This sectarian facet is critical to understand. Most of the fighting in Kurram Agency in the FATA has been between Sunni Talibs, under the command of another Mehsud lieutenant, and the large Shia population in the agency.

So who is reconcilable? There are two groups of combatants who fall into this category: those Pashtuns currently fighting alongside the Taliban who joined the Taliban out of a sense of

ethnic identity and Pashtun nationalism; and those bandits and criminals who realized that donning a turban and a beard provided some legitimacy to actions otherwise considered “banditry.” But the most important group that the Pakistani government should be targeting with aid and security are those Pashtun-populated areas in the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan where the Taliban are *not* a significant presence yet. The more that Islamabad can portray the insurgency as being led by foreign, religious extremists, and not by local Pashtuns, the better chance it has of success.

2. How do the cultural, tribal and religious dynamics along the border play in to the militants’ strengths and weaknesses?

While South Waziristan is self-evidently *not* Swat, the importance of understanding the distinction between the two areas cannot be overemphasized. I’ve detected a great amount of satisfaction and appreciation from U.S. military officials for the Pakistani army’s recent offensive in Swat, coupled with an expectation and desire that they go charging into South Waziristan next. In Swat, Dir, and Buner, the “northern districts” of the North West Frontier Province, and to some extent in Bajaur, the northern agency in the FATA, we’ve seen a certain amount of tribal- and community-based resistance to the Taliban. It is unquestionably a positive development, and it goes to show that the Taliban are a PR nightmare and their own worst enemy. But I fear that there is an expectation in South Waziristan that tribes and rivals of Mehsud will emerge to help lead the Pakistani army to victory there. About three weeks ago, a Talib stepped up and gave a series of interviews in which he proclaimed his intention (backed by thousands of fighters) to side with the army against Mehsud. Ten days later, he was shot and killed.

Waziristan has long been a source of trouble. At the turn of the 20th century, the British Viceroy of India declared, “No patchwork scheme will settle the Waziristan problem. Not until the military steamroller has passed over the country from end to end, will there be peace. But I do not want to be there person to start that machine.” Unlike Swat, where the Taliban only recently seized power, South Waziristan has been under Taliban rule for the most of the past decade. Resistance is more tribal-based than religious-based. The culture is, simply put, a martial one. Whereas, in the northern districts of NWFP, the people are less eager to fight, even while the appeal of pan-Islamic ideologies is greater. In Swat, Dir, Bajaur and Malakand, a group called the Tehrik-e-Nifaz Shariat Mohammadi, or the Movement for the Implementation of Sharia, preceded the Taliban. TNSM, as the group is best known, was itself preceded by Jamaat-i-Islami, the Pakistani variant of the Muslim Brotherhood. Violence is less entrenched in local culture in the northern districts than compared to Waziristan, a distinction that should be recognized before urging the Pakistani army, which is still trying to subdue the Taliban in Swat, to invade South Waziristan.

3. How does the Pakistani military conceptualize “the enemy?”

Publicly, the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment has maintained a certain amount of confidence that it can pit various jihadist groups, tribes or rival factions against one another, while remaining firmly in control. And yet in private conversations I had with intelligence officials during repeated trips to NWFP in late 2007, I was told, in no uncertain

terms, that they had lost control over their sources, contacts and assets. That said, the Pakistani government continues to foster a dual set of priorities in dealing with the Pakistani Taliban.

Not all Talibs based in Pakistan are openly against the government. Therefore, in the Pakistani threat perception, there are “good” and “bad” Taliban. For instance, the Haqqani network based in North Waziristan and Khost, Afghanistan, is entirely oriented towards attacking NATO forces and government targets in Afghanistan. The same goes for Maulvi Nazir, a top Taliban commander in South Waziristan. Both are considered “good” Talibs. Nazir’s case is particularly instructive since the Pakistani army has announced that it is planning to pursue Taliban camps in South Waziristan. This operation is bound to lay bare how the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment distinguishes between “good” and “bad” Taliban, like Mehsud.

South Waziristan is divided into two tribes: Wazirs and Mehsuds. Maulvi Nazir endeared himself to the officer corps when he expelled hundreds of Uzbek militants from the Waziri areas in March 2007 (they landed in the Mehsud areas). I was traveling just outside of South Waziristan in those days, and rumors were rife that the army was aiding Nazir. Then, a year later, I met the general who had been in charge of the area during the fighting and I asked him about the reports that his men had been arming and supporting Nazir’s Taliban. Without pause, he confirmed the rumors. From his vantage point, Nazir was a Pakistani who needed aid in driving foreigners out of his area. Consequently, the general commanded his men to remove their uniforms, wear local clothes, and fight alongside the Taliban, backed by air and artillery support from the army.

This story should show that the newfound vigor on display by the Pakistani army only pertains to some militant factions. Though Nazir might have driven the Uzbeks out, he has continued hosting senior Arab al-Qaeda leaders. Numerous drone strikes have landed in his safe-havens over recent months, which is just further evidence that while the U.S.-Pakistani partnership has improved in some areas, incompatible objectives remain in others.