

Road to Salvation? The Military Offensive in South Waziristan and the Pakistani Nexus of Global Terrorism (ARI)

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Theme: The authorities in Pakistan have launched a military offensive in South Waziristan in an effort to neutralise the threat that *Therik e Taliban Pakistan* and al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups pose for the political stability and social cohesion of a country that has nuclear weapons. But the terrorism nexus that these groups represent is more complicated than appears at first glance, and confronting the challenge that these extremists pose means the army's intervention must be complemented with other kinds of measures on the part of the government.

Summary: Pakistan's tribal regions, and particularly the South Waziristan agency, as the regions are formally known, serve as both the main stronghold of *Therik e Taliban Pakistan* and as a haven for al-Qaeda and its associated groups and organisations. The Pakistani authorities have launched a military offensive to neutralise the serious threat posed by these interconnected forces, a peril manifested through the violent campaigns they carry out. But the terrorism nexus that these groups represent is more complex than it appears: it not only benefits from the spreading pro-Taliban sentiment that is visible in certain sectors of Pakistani society, but has also maintained links with the State. Furthermore, north-west Pakistan serves as a staging ground for insurgent activities and terrorism in Afghanistan, while attacks outside the region, even in some countries of the EU, have been conceived and planned there. So it is important for the Pakistani offensive to achieve the desired results. However, addressing the internal and external challenges that these extremists raise also requires that the offensive be backed up with other kinds of measures by the State. And this is not easy, given the tense relations between the military and civilian authorities in Pakistan.

Analysis: 'Road to Salvation' is an approximate translation of the Urdu words whose transcription would be *Rah e Nijat*; it is also the name that the Pakistani army has given to the military operation it launched late on 16 October in the so-called tribal zones of the north-west of the country, more specifically in South Waziristan. These tribal areas have served as a haven for al-Qaeda and a series of armed groups associated with the terrorist network, although in both cases most of the members are foreigners, mainly of Arab and Central Asian origin. It is an area in which Osama bin Laden and his followers were able to rebuild much of their organisation after losing the infrastructure they had had in

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Afghanistan since the mid-1990s. This loss came as the US hit back after the attacks of 11 September 2001 and toppled the Taliban government, which had allowed the groups to operate in the country. The re-building was made possible through the support of Pakistani Taliban, who control much of the tribal areas. These Taliban emerged as such in 2004 and since 2007 they have acted in an alliance, more nominal than operative, that is called *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan* (the TTP, or Taliban Movement of Pakistan).

Pakistan's FATA, or Federally Administered Tribal Areas, escape the effective control of the State. They are home to Pashtun who follow a rigorous, exclusive and bellicose concept of Islam and have established and extended their iron-fisted control through collective violence. To a large extent, they managed this through agreements that the provincial and national authorities accepted after repeatedly failing to exert control by military means over various districts of the region. If the idea was to re-instate the rule of law and replace brutal religious tribunals, halt the spread of extremists and isolate al-Qaeda, negotiating with the Taliban –as Pakistan's leaders have done several times– turned out to be counter-productive. Pakistan's deeply divided ruling elite, and much of its population, have only recently come to acknowledge the magnitude of the internal challenge that comes with such a state of affairs. It seems that the events of this past spring in the Swat Valley, when the Taliban got to within barely 100 kilometres of Islamabad, did much to change the public perception of the problem and force a re-evaluation of what the government should be doing in response.

A New Perception of the Extremists

A reliable study of public opinion in Pakistan was carried out by the Pew Research Center as part of its Global Attitudes Project. After polling a significant sample of adults who were interviewed between late May and early June 2009, it showed the degree to which Islamic extremism has become one of the people's main worries in Pakistan. Up to 69% of those interviewed this year said they feared extremists could seize power in Pakistan. A total of 70% said they had an unfavourable opinion of the Taliban, whereas in 2008 those who felt this way did not exceed 33%. Up to 61% had a negative opinion of al-Qaeda, while a year earlier the proportion was only 34%. The study also showed that the higher the level of education, the worse the opinion of Pakistanis is of the Taliban and al-Qaeda; and that these groups are unpopular even among 75% of those who live in the North-West Frontier Province and by 67% of those in the Punjab. What is more, only 5% of those interviewed now think that suicide terrorist attacks against civilian targets with the stated goal of defending Islam have some kind of justification. The corresponding figure was 41% in a similar survey carried out in 2004.

But it is also quite likely that another factor leading to the change in perspective of the Pakistani authorities was the new US counter-terrorism strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan that was made public in March of this year. This is because the situation in the tribal areas of Pakistan is not only a threat to national security. A campaign of terrorism that has hit many of its localities and killed thousands of people was planned there. Since 2008 the monthly average for terrorist attacks in Pakistan stands at over 100. This shows us Pakistan is one of the countries that most suffers from this scourge anywhere in the world. Beyond its areas of origin, *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan* has received help in carrying out its terrorist attacks, many of them by suicide bombings, from Pakistani terrorist groups of a *deobandi* orientation, such as *Jaish e Mohamed* and *Lashkar e Jangvi*, which are active on the Kashmir issue or in attacking Shiites, respectively, or from members of al-Qaeda who blend into Pakistani cities, frequently along with other militants who belong to *Harakat ul Yihad Islami*. But in the tribal areas themselves, refuge is also granted to the

Afghan Taliban. Support is given for their insurgent activity in general and terror attacks in particular on the other side of the border.

Furthermore, over the past eight years, attacks in other parts of the world, including the US and some countries of the EU, have been prepared or facilitated in that region of Pakistan. The Pakistani connection –specifically with the tribal areas of the north-west of the country and with al-Qaeda itself, was confirmed by the suicide attacks staged in London on 7 June 2005. There is also a Pakistani link in the failed plan to blow up at least seven commercial jetliners flying out of Heathrow airport towards several US cities. The plot was foiled in August 2006. It has also been shown that a cell linked to the Islamic Jihad Union, a group associated with al-Qaeda and established in the tribal areas of Pakistan, was preparing to carry out terrorist attacks in Germany when several of its members were arrested in the autumn of 2007. Also, in January 2008 police in Barcelona arrested several individuals who were allegedly linked to Pakistan and supposedly planning suicide attacks there and in other major European cities. An informer, slipped into the group by a European intelligence service, latter a protected witness under Spain's legislation, even revealed links with Baitullah Mehsud himself, leader of the Pakistani Taliban until he was killed in the summer of 2009.

Breaking the Terrorist Nexus?

In all of this, South Waziristan is especially important. It is a remote and mountainous area within the tribal zone and the target of the large-scale military operation that the Pakistani army has decided to launch in order to end the threat that *Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan* poses for the political stability and social cohesion of a nuclear-armed country. Supposedly the operation is also designed to rid the area of the presence of al-Qaeda and other related terrorist organisations. The Pakistani Taliban have their main stronghold there; so much so that the leadership of that umbrella grouping for armed rebellion has always gone to prominent people from the Mehsud tribe, located in the northern and central parts of South Waziristan. Al-Qaeda established its operational centre in the area in 2003 and, like some associated groups that sometimes compete with it for limited resources, also created training facilities in the Shakai valley. This is in the same area although under the protection of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe. In late 2004, with the permission of the Utmanzai Wazir, al-Qaeda moved these facilities to neighbouring North Waziristan. As of a few months ago some of its leaders were still believed to be there.

These tribal areas are now the epicentre of global terrorism, and within it Waziristan is the stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban, who are closely linked to their Afghan counterparts or other terrorist groups established in a territory that have managed to dominate by killing hundreds of tribal elders or local elders who oppose them and imposing a regime of social intimidation. However, the context surrounding all of this is just as worrying. In the rest of Pakistan there are myriad groups whose members sometimes belong to two or more of them, and that regularly commit terrorist attacks inside and outside the country, particularly in India. Some of them were created by or came to be run by the intelligence service or specialised units of the Pakistani army. The best known example is *Lashkar e Tayiba*, which after being outlawed in 2002 operates under the cover of *Jamaat ul Dawa*, which is blamed –with evidence to back it up– for the November 2008 attacks that killed 172 people in Bombay. The problem is that this terrorist organisation and others, which are sponsored by the State, have maintained and continue to maintain links both with al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban.

These alarming links point to the limitations of the military offensive undertaken in South Waziristan by some 30,000 Pakistani troops with the goal of neutralising the Taliban forces that have their main stronghold there, but not their only one. At the very least, such is the case if the idea is also to wipe out al-Qaeda and its related groups, which carry out terrorist activities inside the country or use it to stage attacks in neighbouring or far-flung ones. That is, unless the military offensive, which may or may not succeed, amounts to a renunciation by the Pakistani State or part of it of the use of terrorism as a tool of foreign policy with respect to its immediate neighbours. Another problem is the fact that al-Qaeda, besides being present in north-west Pakistan, has spread its reach into major cities. And here must be noted the link between poverty and terrorism due to an unparalleled variable. To wit, the existence of so many Koranic schools, that will hardly disappear over the short or medium term, not even through military measures, and which indoctrinate tens if not hundreds of thousands of children in an ideology of violence. Will measures be taken to stop the *Talibanisation* of significant sectors of Pakistani society while the Taliban are being fought on the wild frontier of our globalised world?

Conclusion: The authorities in Pakistan have launched a military offensive in South Waziristan in an effort to neutralise the threat that both *Therik e Taliban Pakistan* and al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups pose for the country's political stability and social cohesion. This agency in the so-called tribal areas is home both to the main stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban and part of the infrastructure of those other forces of global terrorism. Furthermore, from these areas support is provided for insurgent and terrorist activity in Afghanistan, and at the same time they have been and still are a staging ground for attacks outside the region. But the terrorism nexus that these groups represent is more complicated than it appears at first glance, and confronting the challenge that these extremists pose means the army's intervention must be complemented with other kinds of measures by the government. On the one hand, these steps must be designed to counter the ideological radicalisation that is taking hold of certain sectors of Pakistani society. At the same time they must modify the approach that the Islamabad government takes in its foreign policy and some of the tools through which it is applied, especially with regard to Kashmir and Pakistan's obsession with India.

In the two weeks prior to the much-anticipated army operation in South Waziristan, several Pakistani cities were hit by suicide attacks that were particularly spectacular and bloody. All signs are that they were carried out by Pakistani Taliban and their Punjabi or Kashmiri associates. There was even a worrying attack on the army headquarters in Rawalpindi. Although the goal of that wave of attacks may have been to dissuade the authorities from launching the land offensive in the tribal zones, it must be viewed as part of a strategy ultimately designed to topple the government of Islamabad, take over the country's main institutions and impose a strict brand of Islamic rule throughout the country. A few days before the military offensive began, the current leader of *Therik e Taliban Pakistan*, Hakimullah Mehsud, made this clear in a video recording carried by *As Sahab*, al-Qaeda's propaganda broadcaster. This also demonstrates how close al-Qaeda is to the Pakistani Taliban. In July 2009 none other than Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's number two, issued an appeal to Pakistani Muslims to support the 'jihadist forces' in their country.

These ambitions place Pakistan at a critical intersection of two of today's main threats to international security: terrorism and nuclear weapons. In a worst-case scenario, the two could combine in the threat of nuclear terrorism. For this and other reasons that affect the stability of the region and the development of localised conflicts such as the one in

Afghanistan, the international community in general and Western societies in particular are keen to see the battle for control over South Waziristan end with the defeat of the Pakistani Taliban. Over the short term this would not eliminate the grave terrorist threat that hangs over Pakistan, nor would it ease the danger that global terrorism poses for North America and Western Europe, as well as other regions of the world. But it would mark some significant progress towards mitigating it and eventually eradicating it over the mid or long term. Another thing altogether is how the international community, and in particular the countries with which Pakistan maintains a close partnership, are going to transform that interest into effective cooperation. Nor can it be forgotten that the authorities in Islamabad can and must make decisions to prevent and combat terrorism that accompany or complement the offensive in South Waziristan.

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