

MITIGATING MILITANCY IN NORTHWEST PAKISTAN

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Nearly three months on from the launch of Operation Zarb e Azb by Pakistan's armed forces, this policy brief explores the problem of militancy in North Waziristan in northwest Pakistan. The author argues that a more comprehensive strategy focusing on de-radicalization and reintegration of IDPs and non-combatant militants is needed if the military offensive is to prove more than a short-term fix.

On June 15, 2014, Islamabad launched the military offensive “Operation Zarb e Azb (Sword of the Prophet)” in the North Waziristan Agency (NWA) of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) against militant groups. While the government has announced “success” in destroying terrorist infrastructure, it is clear that is facing shortcomings on two fronts: the changing nature of the militancy which is making it harder to effectively combat, and the lack of efforts regarding de-radicalization and reintegration, especially of the more than one million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that are estimated to have been generated by Operation Zarb e Azb.

Background to Operation Zarb e Azb

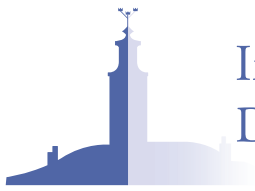
From the Soviet war in Afghanistan to “Operation Enduring Freedom” in 2001, conflicts in Afghanistan have enormously impacted the internal security paradigm in Pakistan. North Waziristan—bordering Afghanistan—is one of seven agencies of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan that have become a safe haven and breeding ground for militants. Militant groups reportedly active in North Waziristan have included: Gul Bahadur Group, Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Haqqani network, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Group (IJG), the Punjabi Taliban, and Abu Akasha Group. NWA further attracted an influx of militants after “Operation Rah e Nijat” in South Waziristan Agency (SWA) and “Operation Rah e Rast” in Swat Valley in 2009 conducted by Pakistani forces, ejected militants who subsequently took refuge in NWA.

The new Pakistan government in 2013 put negotiations with militant groups on its agenda. In particular, the government invited Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan—the most militant of the groups—to the peace negotiation table on

January 29, 2014. However, after the audacious attack on Jinnah International Airport in Karachi on June 8, Pakistan’s military resolved to eliminate all terrorist groups, with Operation Zarb e Azb subsequently being launched in NWA. Two weeks after air strikes a ground battle was waged in Miranshah; the XI Corp’s 7th Infantry Division (7 Div) is garrisoned in North Waziristan and has been deployed there already for several years in the districts of Mirali and Miranshah. Estimates of the force strength in NWA vary widely between 20,000-30,000 to as many as 80,000 soldiers. Ground forces receive heavy cover from Pakistan army gunships and air force fighter bombers. The Pakistani military also claims to be using its own drones for conducting airfield surveillance and intelligence gathering. The U.S. is continuing to deploy drones in NWA and gathering intelligence that could be used by Pakistani forces. Notwithstanding, nearly three months into the offensive, it is clear that it is meeting with little success.

Limitations of Military Offensive

The failure of peace talks and the relatively little resistance by militants to the army in NWA has led many to believe that many militants have fled the area. Prior to the launch of Operation Zarb e Azb, militants are believed to have left for safe havens across the border in Afghanistan as well as Baluchistan and other tribal agencies. It is reported, for example, that Pakistan pulled out guards from a section of the border with Afghanistan’s Khost province, leaving it unmanned for nearly two weeks. In addition, the modus operandi of militants is evolving. Instead of getting into a direct confrontation with military forces, they evacuate the operation areas and conduct terrorist activities elsewhere in the country. FATA militants have entrenched themselves in urban centers of the country including Karachi.



De-radicalization and Reintegration

The military effectiveness of the operation aside, of greater long-term significance is the fact that NWA has been overlooked both politically and socio-economically with its populace not granted the same civil and political rights as other citizens of Pakistan. This has been further exacerbated by the military operation which is estimated to have led to over one million people having become internally displaced, some 100,000 of whom have fled over the border to Afghanistan. Such IDPs are particularly vulnerable to terrorist literature and activities in the tribal areas. However, the federal government has so far failed to pay sufficient attention to their de-radicalization and reintegration.

While a de-radicalization program is envisaged in the National Internal Security Policy of Pakistan (NISP) 2014-18, nearly seven months on from its unveiling there is little going on to actualize the much needed program. By contrast, in the Swat district—site of Operation Rah e Rast in 2009 – the “Sabwoon Rehabilitation Center” was established by the Pakistan army with the support of the Hum Pakistani Foundation and UNICEF in 2009 to rehabilitate militants, mostly juveniles, apprehended during the operation. Furthermore, while the NISP also talks about reintegration by creating economic opportunities for youths and streamlining the roles of the madrassas (religious educational institutes)—some of which have served to inculcate extremist ideas—by bringing them into the mainstream education system, there appear to be few efforts to bring the policy into action.

Efforts at de-radicalization and reintegration have failed for many obvious reasons. Islamabad has been dealing with militants without a proper and focused strategy. More specifically there has been no “national narrative” on combating militancy. Former President Pervez Musharraf followed the policy of “operations and no dialogues” whilst the Zardari administration (2008-2013) pursued a tumultuous course of failed peace truces and military operations. A lack of efforts aimed at reintegration and de-radicalization will simply result in nonproductive peace deals and restive IDPs vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. While it is to be welcomed that Pakistan’s NISP highlights the need for such measures, these need to be implemented in practice.

Furthermore, the operation has been undermined by Pakistan reportedly discriminating between “good” and “bad” Taliban: militant groups engaged in activities against the Pakistan state are targeted whilst those which strike U.S. troops, Afghan forces, as well as India, are not deemed to

represent the same threat. A case in point is the Haqqani network with many in Afghanistan, U.S. officials, and local tribesmen in NWA, believing that Operation Zarb e Azb will not have any impact on the network. This selective targeting of militant networks serves to undermine the overall agenda of “eliminating militancy and restoring peace.”

Conclusion

The Pakistan military is claiming to have successfully destroyed terrorist infrastructure in NWA. Indeed, militant hideouts, storage houses for armaments, training sites, as well as factories producing explosive devices have all been targeted. However, this belies the fact that the modus operandi of militants is evolving. Furthermore, there has been a failure to adopt the correct policies and strategies aimed at the de-radicalization and reintegration of IDPs and non-combatant militants. Failure to do so will mean that Operation Zarb e Azb will only prove a quick fix and not a long lasting solution to the menace of militancy in Pakistan. The issue of militancy cannot be resolved in isolation either through dialogue with militants or through military operations. The government needs rather to follow through with a comprehensive response plan as envisaged in its National Internal Security Policy. Along with a non-biased military offensive, dialogues with non-combatant militants and active de-radicalization and re-integration plans can help mitigate the militancy.

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