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November 16, 2008

## **Pitfalls in Pakistan**

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The American support of *mujahideen* “freedom fighters” against the Soviet army in Afghanistan during the 1980s provided a stellar example of the law of unintended consequences. In defeating the Soviet “evil empire” there and thus contributing to its downfall, US actions spawned a new global threat to Western values and power: Islamist jihadi terrorism, symbolically led by former CIA-funded “Arab Afghan” *mujahid* Osama Bin Laden.

It took some time before US officials realized what was happening. Well into the 1990s, fundamentalist militant organizations were allowed to operate from US soil with tax-free status as religious and humanitarian agencies, which collected funds and used the proceeds to travel abroad, recruit followers and advance the cause of jihad.

Successive US administrations had more or less the same approach towards what came to be known as Al Qaeda. As revealed by the US National Commission on Terrorists Attacks, President Bill Clinton and his National Security Advisor Sandy Berger did have a special daily pipeline of reports feeding them the latest updates on Bin Laden's reported location between 1998 and 2001. But apart from a failed missile attack on a suspected encampment, no substantial action was ever taken to capture him and dismantle his network. The Bush Administration proved to be no better. Until the 9/11/01 attacks, it hardly mobilized its domestic agencies to combat the threat posed by Al Qaeda.

Even in the wake of 9/11, Washington has lacked an appropriate strategy. On

the morrow of successfully concluding its military operation in Afghanistan to remove the Al Qaeda-enabling Taliban regime, Washington chose to settle its unfinished business in Iraq, toppling Saddam Husayn's regime by a massive military strike in the name of removing an alleged threat of WMDs and bringing democracy to the Iraqi people. The result, again unintentional, was a boon for Al Qaeda recruiters, both in Iraq itself and for radical groups in Algeria, Central Asia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and India, providing them with ready-made "evidence" that the American "war on terror" was directed against Islam, i.e. against all Muslims who refused to toe the American line.

Another serious pitfall in the American strategy in the post-9/11 landscape has been to expect too much from the Pakistani establishment, officially an ally in the war on jihadi terrorism. In view of the profound influence of religion in Pakistani society and political life, its politicians, sections of the army and the powerful Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) have all sought to placate the clergy so as to broaden their social base, making Pakistan's behavior particularly opaque.

According to knowledgeable sources, the ISI has funded over 1500 madrasas (Islamic religious academies) in the area near its border with India, where the young are being indoctrinated and trained for jihad. Over 2300 Pakistani nationals, including ISI agents, Al Qaeda and Taliban members have infiltrated into India in the last couple of years and lodged themselves in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and parts of Uttar Pradesh. There are an estimated 52 terrorist training camps on the Pakistani side of the border, of which 32 are in Kashmir and Pakistan's northern areas. The army and the ISI have strong connections with approximately 20 anti-Indian bodies, including the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Army, the Jammu and Kashmir Students Liberation Front, Lashkar-e Toiba, and Hizbul Mujahideen. They maintain similar ties with pro-Taliban forces in Afghanistan and Harkat ul Jehadi Islami (HUJI) in Bangladesh. Whatever the pretensions of these anti-Indian Islamist groups, they share the goal of Al Qaeda to drive away the Americans and other non-Muslims from Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Iraq and eventually eliminate them.

No Pakistani establishment can afford to rein in these groups for long. It may be recalled that successive governments have thrived by fanning fundamentalist sentiments. The founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, used religion to create Pakistan. Former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto described Pakistan's loss of Bangladesh in 1971 following India's intervention as the "biggest [defeat] at the hands of the Hindus." He also vowed that Pakistanis

would eat grass in order to enable the building of a nuclear bomb and teach Hindu India a lesson. General Zia-ul Haq, who overthrew Bhutto, encouraged the spread of *Shari`a* laws. In 1996, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto directed her Director-General of Military Operations, General Pervez Musharraf, to rehabilitate Osama Bin Laden (who had recently been expelled from Sudan) in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area. Her predecessor and successor, Nawaz Sharif, was no better. His father was closely associated with the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), which has had a long history of ties with jihadi organizations. During his first tenure as Prime Minister (1990-93), Sharif appointed TJ member Lt.-Gen. (ret.) Javed Nasir as the Director-General of the ISI. During his second tenure (1996-99), he helped engineer the election of TJ member Mohammad Rafique Tarar to the Presidency of Pakistan. Sharif was sympathetic to Osama Bin Laden too. During his second tenure, he repeatedly evaded US pressure to allow its special forces to mount an operation from Pakistani territory into Kandahar to kill or capture Bin Laden.

So powerful is the Islamist influence on the ISI and the Pakistan Army that even General Musharraf could do little to counter it during his presidency. Fearing a threat to his own life following Al Qaeda's call to eliminate him, Musharraf did adopt some tough measures against them. But he had to remain soft towards the Pakistan-based terrorist organizations which threatened India, and towards the Taliban which threatened Afghanistan. Musharraf thus refrained from even limited operations against the jihadi infrastructure which had been built up.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that extremist Pakistani Taliban, known as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are displaying stiff resistance to US-led forces operating in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. It would be naive to assume that the current President, Asif Ali Zardari, his Prime Minister, Yousef Raza Gilani, and Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani could be uncompromisingly tough in their on-going operations against the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM is a constituent unit of TTP) in the Swat Valley of the North-West Frontier Province.

In fact, the Pakistani government's tendency of late has been to renew its dialogue with fundamentalist forces. It has granted permission to re-open the madrasa for boys, and to re-build the one for girls, attached to the Lal Masjid in Islamabad, which had been stormed by government commandos in July 2007. The Gilani regime has withdrawn all cases registered under the Anti-Terrorism Act against those arrested during the raid. There are even reports that the Pakistani Army has made overtures to the TTP, suggesting that peace

in the tribal areas is necessary to enable the army to be effective on the Line of Control in Jammu & Kashmir, and that it will resume assistance to anti-Indian jihadi forces in the region .

In light of Pakistan's complicated and often murky realities, formulating an effective and coherent policy towards the war on terror and towards the Pakistani government is likely to pose a challenge of considerable importance to the incoming Obama Administration.

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***TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation***