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Responding to Taliban's Terrorism: A Strategic Analysis of the Courting Pashtun Mashra'n Campaign in Pakistan

ABSTRACT

This article examines one of the key responses to terrorism in Af-Pak—courting Pashtun Mashra'n (commonly known as elders such as Khan, Maliks, tribal chieftains and influentials) — to counter Taliban militancy in the Pashtun region of Pakistan, comprising FATA and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. The aim of this article is to discuss both the successes and failures of the strategy in various parts of the region especially forming peace committees/militias (lashkars) as a counter-insurgency strategy. The analysis evaluates the strategy which initially focuses on strengthening the local influentials rather than combating Taliban. However, the flaws in this strategy have never been fully acknowledged. Instead of counter-insurgency measures, the government's initial approach was to protect the local influential's on one hand and close its eyes to the Jihadi groups on the other. This strategy paved the way to strengthen the former jihadi and religious figures and finally produce an insurgent movement. This has created suspicion amongst people and particularly in Pashtun traditional elites. The Pakistani government has resorted to military operations in various parts of the region. As part of the strategy, government has tried to court Pashtun elites and help create local militias/lashkars to combat Taliban. However, the situation in Swat and FATA shows that Pashtun elites no longer enjoy support in society at large. They are dependent on the state to protect them, their families and property. The strategy of facilitating and arming local influential's brings fewer gains as Pashtun elites are unable to stand up to militants because of their social base. The emergences of new social forces on Pashtun soil have consequently destabilized society as whole. Despite military operations in various parts of the region, the law and order situation has deteriorated and progress towards peace is still far from being achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Militancy and militants groups in Pakistan have not only posed a significant domestic threat, but also threaten the United State and other countries [1] including Afghanistan and India. Pakistan is a frontline state against the global war on terrorism (GWOT). Different militants' outfits operating in the country share some common agendas as well as differing on others issues but the main objective of all militants' groups is a jihad against foreign troops in Afghanistan. [2]

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Almost all political and militants groups in Pakistan want the imposition of Sharia law and are opposed to Afghan occupation but their attitude to the Pakistani security forces take different directions. Some militants groups launch attacks on the Pakistani security forces while others only concentrate on conflict within Afghanistan.[3] It is a pervasive view that presents crisis is prevalent because of Pakistan's will to fight terrorism. [4] Resistance from militants has resulted in the division of ruling classes. These contradictions are reflected in the counterinsurgency strategy.

DIVIDE RULING ELITES

The division in the state is reflected in division of the state institutions—the parliament, administration and judiciary. According to Owen Bennett-Jones '...the Pakistan's civil and military elites are so divided and dysfunctional. Privately, government ministers argue that the army's total control of security policy means it is unreasonable for the generals to expect the civilians to take responsibility for what the army decides to do.' [5] Despite recognising the militants' threats, it is not reflected in a consistent counterinsurgency policy.[6] Pakistani government and political leadership even found themselves 'in a real fix' over the death of Hakim Ullah Masud the TTP chief, in a drone attack.[7]

Though it is simply naïve to think that 'distinction' between 'good and bad' Taliban 'was never clear in minds ...of Pakistan's policy makers' [8], yet it is right to some extent that 'Often co-operating organisationally and operationally, the continuously splintering Taliban groups continued to benefit from the fruits of Pakistan's policy confusion. In the process, they consolidated their bases in the country's lawless tribal belt unchecked.' [9] A report by International Crisis Group (ICG) suggested 'secular forces in the tribal areas require political, not armed, mobilisation.' [10] Instead of spending time in their respective constituencies, parliamentarians for various reasons prefer to stay at Islamabad. [11]

In the pre-9/11 era, political agents in FATA had to man oeuvre : extending support to Mujahidin—a new breed of generation of militants—and at the same time providing protection to Pashtun Mashra'n as well. In the process madrassa owners and Mujahidin commanders emerged as a social group [12] challenging the traditional elite, thanks to Afghan jihad, an increase in smuggling, drugs and arms trafficking. Nonetheless, the most important role in the rise of the middle class has been played by migrations [13] to big cities and Gulf, Europe, North America and Far East. Remittances and the rise of the middle class have significantly changed the dynamics of Pashtun society. [14]

CONTROVERSY OVER COUNTERINSURGENCY

According to the Pakistan Army, the 'problem of the Taliban lies in Afghanistan [where] the Taliban do have some support.' [15] In testimony before the Senate in 2007, John Negroponte gave the best definition of the contradictory nature of Pakistan's position. According to Negroponte although Pakistan is a frontline state in the war on terror, it remains a main source of Islamic radicalism. [16]

The contradictory policy of conducting operation against some groups and at the same time nurturing others creates confusion amongst those fighting as pro-government agents. Pakistani security forces and politicians follow contradictory policies on various issues including lashkars. When the PPP and ANP coalition government decided to arm the lashkars, a military commander of the Pashtun belt showed his concerns:

'We have not really supported that concept (formation of lashkars), because someday they may come to haunt you," said Lt. Gen. Asif Yasin Malik, the Peshawar-based army commander for troops in Pakistan's northwest.' [17] Nonetheless, the army is actively involved in setting up lashkars in Swat and where army officers have addressed the lashkars. [18] However, those involved in anti-insurgents lashkars complain that it has cost them dearly and desperation is growing as militants continue to target pro-government agents. [19]

Although the US government assistance does not provide any special funds for lashkars in Pakistan as it does in Afghanistan, the US termed the strategy of lashkars as a 'promising sign of Pakistani resistance to the Taliban.' [20] Pashtun elites argue lashkars are part of a self-defence mechanism at the same time as demanding backing from government. Former federal minister for frontier regions, Najmuddin Khan, said government was 'providing full monetary, material and moral support to these lashkars. In interviews, however, security officials acknowledged that the program was never systematised and that arms, training and payment were given only on a case-by-case basis.' [21] In 2009, Chief Minister KPK Haider Khan Hoti announced that government would distribute 30,000 rifles confiscated by police to 'peaceful individuals' and organised groups of 'Village Defence Rifles.' [22]

The rifles were distributed to lashkars that were formed to defend Peshawar. Zia Ur Rehman [23] said that Peshawar region was guarded from three sides: Michani from Mohmand agency, Jamrud /Hayat Abad from Khyber Agency and Matanai, Adezai, and Badaber from Dara Adam Khel. Though guns were initially distributed they were later taken back as it was reported that people from lashkars were involved in personal hostilities and misuse of the weapons.

In Swat, a forced watch and ward system is operated. According to Zia 'in NepkiKheland Charbagh, Swat, people are forced to provide watch and ward services in neighborhoods. In case someone cannot provide such services personally he has to make arrangement to pay Rs. 1000 to people of a lower status to accomplish the task.' Zia said that government has offered Mehsuds from South Waziristan a 'conditional return' –they have to form a lashkar against militants on their return to agency—while Taliban distributed pamphlets and prohibited people from returning. Only 5 per cent of the population covering six villages managed to return to the agency in areas near to F.R Tank (Jandola).

PAKISTAN COUNTERINSURGENCY POLICY AND SOCIAL GROUPS

Counterinsurgency strategy presupposes a group of people that are willing to extend their support to government or security forces in their fight against insurgents. Without the substantial support of a section of population, no army can imagine even the smallest victory against militants. In the Pashtun belt such groups are comprised of Pashtun traditional classes—Maliks, tribal chieftains, landlords, traditional merchants and traders. Although this group is no longer economically and socially dominant, yet it maintains its hegemony through state institutions: from their hold on 'Thana and Tehsil.' [24] This group faces an aggressive challenge from emerging middle and professional classes on one hand and rural poor on the other hand. I have discussed these developments elsewhere. [25] To win over the middle and lower classes, Pakistan has considerably changed its strategy. This includes a decision to 'initiate administrative measures and carry out development works' [26] in Swat and Waziristan especially in the field of infrastructure, education and health to win hearts and minds.

Since entering FATA in 2003, Pakistan security forces have conducted 161 major and minor operations besides following a 'four pronged strategy' including 'imitating apolitical process to get people on board.' [27] It seems Pakistan has pursued a policy to accommodate the emerging middle classes by initiating FATA reforms since 1996. [28]

However, these reforms have resulted in a weakening of the traditional classes in FATA. Consequently, the Taliban have taken advantage of this situation as Mashra'n have been left with little support in and become an easy target. The Taliban has been systematically targeting Maliks and Khans since 2003 to eliminate traditional elites resulting in the collapse of older order. [29] The government has had to fall back upon the old traditional classes for support as middle classes first rallied round the

opposition Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal or MMA (the United Action Front)—coalition of main religious political parties— against the US-led war on terror and invasion in Afghanistan [30] and then Imran Khan's PTI that organised anti-drone rallies [31] and blocked Nato supplies.[32] Consequently the authorities and traditional classes have been cooperating with each other on the issue of war. But relatively weak as compared to the past, the traditional classes are more vulnerable in the face of stiff resistance from militants. As a result the traditional elites are more dependent on the authorities for their survival and the protection of their families and property.

Despite the suspect motives of powerful secret agencies, the Pashtun elites and nationalist intelligentsia demand support from the same forces to help curb the extremists.[33] It is their class interest that has bound Pashtun elites to the state, organising Jirga and raising lashkars against militants.

LASHKAR AS COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

Most of the literature produced on the nature of Pashtun society can be categorised as misleading and make the case even more problematic for understanding tribal society. Sana Haroon has described most of the ethnographic writings produced in the colonial era as being under the shadow of 'the strategy of frontier construction'.[34] She has referred to the work of many scholars pointing out that such writings helped to construct a tribal mind set shaped through a number of tactics including an allowance based Maliki system[35] with collective punishment playing a crucial role. This system of making alliances through allowances and collective punishment has been reinforced through a number of measures, which are now considered natural and are taken for granted. With tribal areas, Pakistanis not only inherited bureaucratic procedures and legislation but also British trained officials and little mentioned ethnographic and genealogical scholarship. No less problematic are the writings and scholarship written with a specific agenda in mind. Farhat Taj's work is the example of this type. Her attitude of dismissing journalists like Rahimullah Yousaf Zai, Bill Roggio, Jason Motlagh, and Zahid Hussain and their observations on the nature of lashkars is mostly erroneous and extremely one sided. [36]

Most works produced since 9/11 present a static and a historical understanding of tribal society—with no or little change since time immemorial. For most of the tribes 'insiders' include simply family and clan or tribe and other people living in the same area. All others can be counted as 'outsiders' including 'political officers, development officers, the militia men and officers and, most importantly, foreigners.'[37]

Relations with them may exist but are usually based on suspicion.' Maliks might be 'tolerated though for a want of better alternative' [38] especially in times of peace. When opportunities arise in the time of acute crisis or invasion, their inability to resist may create a situation where a new leadership can fight for the hegemonic position with 'insiders' while fighting 'outsiders'. Even a Malik can be included in the category of outsiders when he tries to pursue his interests beyond a certain degree. Pashtuns have a long history of resistance to foreign invasions including modern imperialist powers: the Raj, Soviet Union and currently the US and its allies.

Traditionally, in the absence of a regular, organised and permanent militia, Pashtuns have a system of forming militia in time of need to protect land, people and honour: lashkar and chagha.[39] In the colonial era, however, the institution of jirga and lashkar were strategically manipulated by colonial powers through their agents the Maliks against opponents. Along with many other things Pakistan also inherited this legacy.

Like Pashtun society in the settled districts of the province of Khyber Pakhtun khwa (KPK), the tribal society is neither egalitarian nor are jirga and lashkars natural institutions that represent the interest and will of the common people. My research on lashkars relies not only on the literature but also on having visited KPK several times since the 1980s on observations based on meetings and discussions with journalists, academics and war-affected expatriates from the Pashtun belt since 2001.

I have studied lashkars together with other social institutions in Pashtun society against a background of war and social change. There are six types of lashkars in the Pashtun belt (KPK and FATA):

1. the public/tribal lashkar
2. the government lashkar
3. the forced lashkar
4. the semi-autonomous lashkar
5. the Mashra'n'slashkar
6. the anti-armed invasion lashkar

Various bodies working under the name of Quomi lashkar, Peace Committees, Village Defence Committees (VDC), and Neighborhood Committees can be included in one of the above categories. There might be some variations in the organisation, operations or functions from area to area or simply between the tribal belt and settled districts. In contrast to settled areas, in the tribal belt a legislative and culture based manipulation since colonial period prevails.

However, the boundaries between different kinds of lashkars are blurred and may change accordingly. The public lashkar is nearest to the ideal-type of lashkar discussed in most of the literature produced on the subject. Lashkar might be raised by officials (the government lashkar) or simply backed by government (semi-autonomous lashkar). Influential Mashra'n from an area can organise a lashkar against criminals and outlaws. In the pre-Taliban era, Mashra'n used to organise lashkars for different purpose, sometimes at the 'request of political officials.' Moreover, it must be noted that often officials might extended their support to facilitate a lashkar raised by people or withdraw support previously promised.

In recent times, desperate and fraught people —feeling that there is little that will benefit them in the fight against the Taliban— have left the lashkars, and created a permanent problem for pro- government agent strying to muster people in the Pashtun belt. Between 2003 and 2007 in parts of FATA, even big lashkars with volunteers in the 'thousands' have been destined to fail to expel the militants. In South Waziristan, Taliban managed to target 300 Mashra'n in various attacks. [40] But in places like Salarzai, Bajaur agency, tribal Mashra'n under the leadership of the Khan of Pashat was able to resist the influences of the Taliban and subsequently have borne the brunt of Taliban retaliations. Lashkars in Shia areas[41] of the Pashtun belt who also resisted the Taliban, sometimes with government support, have consequently been targeted by the Taliban. The last category needs some explanation as well. The 'anti-armed invasion lashkar' are established in many areas of the Dir districts and some parts of Pashto speaking region of Hazara, KPK. On the eve of Swat military operation in 2009, in the adjacent areas of Dir district, lashkars were formed to check the militants' entry into Dir. People were apprehensive that any failure might result in bombing the area. Afraid of army operations in Dir and the Tor Ghar area of Hazara region, the Taliban were forced to leave under pressure from public opinions or simply were expelled. Avoiding army intervention, aerial bombing and the consequent mass exodus and punishment at the hands of army, was the prime motive behind these kinds of lashkars.

WAR IS POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

Though paying a heavy price, lashkars organised by local people with the government support did work in places nearer to big cities. As in the colonial era, the prime concern of government has been to secure the big cities from Taliban attacks and terrorism. Government has tried to encourage the local influential's to form lashkars in the suburbs of the

Peshawar city. Nonetheless, the counterinsurgency in Pashtun belt has been marred by a number of issues. The case of lashkars formed in Adezaito defend Peshawar is particularly important as it brought to the surface a number of issues related to counterinsurgency strategy, local politics and state response.

The suburbs of Peshawar (FR Peshawar) became 'no go areas' for police as Taliban activities escalated. Consequently, like others lashkars, the Adezai lashkar was formed on the instructions of government in 2008. Capital City Police Officer Dr Suleman and former commissioner Azam Khan had assured them that authorities would take responsibility for rations, arms and ammunitions. Leaders of the Adezai Qaumi lashkar said that militants attacked them 31 times and caused 80 deaths. [42] Despite rivalries, in the face of the Taliban's militancy, elites buried the hatchet and launched a joint struggle against the militants. Initially, the police provided 10 Kalashnikovs and magazines.[43]

After two and half years, lashkar's leaders announced their decision to withdraw their support from the government. First, they accused the Deputy Superintendent of Police of supporting militants: 'Whenever the volunteers capture Taliban, the DSP releases them.' They also said that government was unable to fulfill its promises. [44] Second, chief of the Adezai peace committee Dilawar Khan was not in any of the ruling parties (ANP, PPP coalition government in the KPK province), but from the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q). Local politics were at play as elected parliamentarians from the ANP in the area did not extend their support to the lashkar. After a bomb blast in a funeral procession, 'Angry Dilawar...announced disbanding his lashkar and withdrawing support to the government against Taliban. He even threatened to join the Taliban and directed his volunteers not to allow police officials and Senior Minister Bashir Ahmad Bilour to visit the blast site.'[45]

The secret agencies, officials and right wing MMA government (2008-13) are also held responsible for helping militants and under mining the counterinsurgency efforts. Various reports on the role of former Commissioner of Malakand also exposed the policy of playing a double game in the region. Above all he was instrumental in dispersing a lashkar that countered militants when the Taliban tried to enter Buner district in April 2008.[46] Fateh Khan, a local Khan, who organised the resistance to the Taliban, was later killed in an attack.

At times, apart from using tribal rivalries, the government was able to take advantage of a rift between Taliban commanders and follow a policy of 'divide and rule.'Haji Turkistan was a former Taliban leader who later

broke with Baitullah Masud after the death of Abdullah Masud and formed the pro-government lashkar in Tank. The Taliban killed 28 pro-government peace committee members as Turkistan narrowly escaped an attempt on his life. The Taliban set ablaze the houses of Haji Turkistan and other tribesmen after a forceful evacuation of the Bhatani tribe from the area in Tank, KPK. According to a tribal leader Mirza Jihadi 'it is a clear warning for those who will cooperate with the government would be met with the same fate.' [47]

There are 42,647 Maliks in FATA seven agencies.[48] In six years (from 2006-2012) the Taliban managed to kill more than one thousand and injured hundreds tribal Mashra'n while hundreds were forced to leave.[49] Agreements with militants are also part of the counterinsurgency when government is unable to defeat them. Although support for a certain groups of militants such as those led by Haji Namdar, Maulvi Nazir, Haji Turkistan, Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Mangal Bagh helped to divide the Taliban and prevent them from forming a coalition, yet it has had greater consequences for Pashtun elites and the writ of the state in those areas where Taliban warlords have established their own rule. After 9/11, the drone attacks, Taliban militancy and army interventions in the region in one way or another have only added to destruction of the culture associated with the older order.[50]

At present, though the Taliban might not be able to carry out a major war against the Pakistan Army in Swat, it can conduct covert operations against security forces and those supporting it –pro government Village Defence Committees (VDCs). After five years of occupation, the Taliban targeted 26 pro-government committees' members last year. Members of pro-government were confined to their homes and forced to enhance their personal security as they have little faith in the security forces and are equally fearful of Taliban. Many think they are caught between the devil and deep blue sea:

'Asked why he doesn't give up his continuing work with the army, Sheer's answer is perhaps instructive of the realities of living in Swat. "If I leave this work [spying, collaboration with army], the killers will come even faster.'" [51] Sher, a local political leader and VDC member from Mingora has left the matter of his protection to God as he has little faith in the military to protect him from the Taliban's attacks.[52] Despite their lack of trust, elites are left with little choice and completely dependent on the security forces.

In Swat more than hundred peace committee members have been killed by the Taliban for siding with government and military. Security forces claim a victory as the Taliban have been excluded from the valley and their activities have been reduced to clandestine attacks and target killings. There are more or less 3,000 VDC members in Swat, 22 of them are the top of the Taliban hit-list. Contrary to VDCs members' point of view, security officials have merely reduced the target killings to old rivalries, enmities and monetary feuds. According to officials out of 91 cases registered in the valley in 2014, of which around 10 can be counted as target killings.[53] The increasing incidents are also closely linked to the rise in opposition to the establishment of army cantonments in Swat.

CONCLUSION

The prevalent opposition to war in the country and the 'distrust and division' amongst various institutions of the state on one hand and opposition from middle and professional classes to traditional elites on the other create a situation where the Taliban have created a space for themselves taking advantage of the US-led coalition's invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's India-centered policy. Though full of uncertainty and mistrust, fearful Pashtun elites have had to offer their support to government against Taliban. The mutual interdependence of state and traditional Pashtun elites has resulted in the formation of pro-government jirga and lashkars. However, these committees are less effective. Under pressure from middle classes since mid-1990s, the government has initiated a programme to create some space for emerging middle classes also weakening the traditional classes. Traditional elites are vulnerable mostly due to their weak social basis. Their hold on society – through Thanaaur Thasil (police station and civil district/sub-divisional administration)—is no longer absolute, as was the case in the past. Tribal administrations and Mashra'n have been unable to halt the growing influence of the Taliban, Central Asian militants and Al-Qaeda fighters in FATA paved the way for army interventions in 2003. As a result militancy not only spread to other parts of tribal belt but also to the settled districts like Swat. It has only contributed to the destruction of an already crumbling older order. Despite military operations in various parts of the region, law and order situation has deteriorated and peace is far from being achieved.

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