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Combating Militants Is Not the Same as Reducing Support for Militant Violence

| [More](#)^[1]

| July 1, 2011

| [Malou Innocent](#)^[2]

Pakistan is unwilling to abandon its support for militarized jihad. [Strategic](#)^[3] [calculations](#)^[4] vis-à-vis India is the main reason, but this secular façade distorts reality. Decades of Pakistani assistance to select militant groups have cemented [ideological sympathies](#)^[5] for radicalism among elements of the country's armed forces. While a stabilized Pakistan does not appear to be on the horizon, so long as Western troops are fighting an all-out war in neighboring Afghanistan, they will be fodder for radical aims.

Pakistani sympathy for jihad has persisted for some time. It became firmly ingrained during and immediately following the anti-Soviet jihad (1979-1989). As Steve Coll writes in his Pulitzer-prize winning book *Ghost Wars*^[5]:

Every Pakistani general, liberal or religious, believed in the jihadists by 1999, not from personal Islamic conviction, in most cases, but because the jihadists had proved themselves over many years as the one force able to frighten, flummox, and bog down the Hindu-dominated Indian Army. [Emphasis the author's]

Naturally, the manipulation worked both ways. As one retired ISI chief told me years ago in Karachi, "The biggest problem with any intelligence agency is when intelligence officers begin identifying with the subject they are dealing with."

Before his [murder](#)^[6] in late May 2011, Pakistani investigative journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad—who had extraordinary access to top-level strategists in al Qaeda and the Taliban—published a [story](#)^[7] on *Asia Times Online* about al Qaeda's infiltration of the Pakistani navy, and its assault on a naval base in Karachi. A senior navy official told the publication:

All armed forces around the world, whether American, British or Indian, take some inspiration from religion to motivate their cadre against the enemy. Pakistan came into existence on the two-nation theory that Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations and therefore no one can separate Islam and Islamic sentiment from the armed forces of Pakistan.

Political debates about the war in Afghanistan inevitably broach Pakistan's disinclination to fight militants. And yet, Islamist extremists from inside of Pakistan have turned against Islamabad for throwing its support behind Washington. In his book, *Inside Al Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11* [8], Shehzad writes:

[A]fter 9/11, there was a tacit agreement between the then director general of Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt-General Mehmood, and Al-Qaeda members (made when Mehmood visited Kandahar to convince Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden) that Pakistan would not be hostile to Al-Qaeda if Al-Qaeda did not harm Pakistan's interests.

But Pakistan launched military operations against al Qaeda strongholds in 2002 and 2003, and played a major role in capturing some high-level figures, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abu Faraj al-Libbi, and Ramzi bin al-Shibh. The post-9/11 U.S.-Pakistan alliance inspired an al Qaeda fatwa against former President Pervez Musharraf, and after the July 2007 siege at Lal Masjid, triggered a broader militant backlash against the Pakistani state. This is why so many within Pakistan believe that they have borne the brunt of fighting "America's war" [9].

Interestingly, many Americans feel that they are fighting "Pakistan's war," complaining that Pakistan-backed militants attack U.S. forces in Afghanistan despite a decade of U.S. economic assistance and military reimbursements to the Pakistani state. But the historical record shows that jihadist sympathies run deep within Pakistan, and remaining in Afghanistan serves al Qaeda's long-term goal of weakening the West militarily and economically. After 10 years of war, hopefully Americans have come to realize that cracking down on jihadist structures is one thing, eradicating an ideology is quite another.

More by

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