

# Pakistan, the Army and the Conflict Within

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Pakistan's generals are besieged on all sides. Like never before, they are at odds with their own rank and file. According to the *New York Times*, the discontent with the top brass is so great as to evoke concerns of a colonels' coup. The army also is losing support from its domestic political allies and subject to the increasing hostility of the Pakistani public. The generals are even at risk of being dumped by their oldest and most generous supporter, the United States.

Pakistani army chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani and other military leaders know it is wise to stop digging when in a hole. But it is not clear if the generals can stop. On July 5, the *New York Times* reported that US officials hold senior officers of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the military intelligence agency, responsible for the kidnapping, torture and murder of Pakistani journalist Saleem Shahzad. Shahzad was well known for his reporting on the military's ties with militant Islamist groups.

The immediate cause of this crisis was the successful US operation to discover Osama bin Laden's hiding place in Pakistan, stealthily enter the country and kill him. But, in reality, the generals have been brought to these dire straits by army policies, particularly those enacted over the past three decades, which have left the army, and Pakistan, deeply divided. Keeping the army and the country together is part of the same challenge.

## Khaki Nightmares

A little past midnight on May 2, a team of US Navy commandos quietly slipped into Pakistan from Afghanistan by helicopter. They flew across the country to the city of Abbottabad, home of the Pakistan Military Academy. In a house that the CIA had been silently watching for months, the commandos found and killed Osama bin Laden and took the body. By the time Pakistan's air defenses were able to respond, the US force had left Pakistan's airspace. Only when the Navy SEALs were clear did US authorities tell Pakistan's military and civilian leaders of the operation. For Pakistan it was, as former army officer, parliamentarian and newspaper columnist Ayaz Amir put it, the mother of all embarrassments.

The US operation unleashed a tsunami of blame from every quarter. Stung by the criticism and seeking to raise morale, Gen. Kayani has been stumping the garrisons, where he faces junior officers angry and upset enough to confront their superiors. The *Express Tribune* quotes an unnamed young officer who told the army chief: "Sir, I am ashamed of what happened in Abbottabad." Replied Kayani, "So am I." But beyond the shame there are the hard questions. Kayani was asked why the Pakistani military failed to detect and destroy the airborne invaders and who had sheltered bin Laden in Pakistan for all the years while the army has been fighting and dying in the war against al-Qaeda and its allies in the tribal areas on the Afghan border.

The many civilian cheerleaders for the army, carefully cultivated over the years by the generals, are outraged that their ballyhooed military is not what they believed it to be. Pakistan's army has long consumed the bulk of the nation's resources, with the promise that such largesse was necessary to sustain a world-class fighting force, but when the fancy radar and other equipment was put to the test, it proved woefully incapable.

The Pakistani public, too, has started to turn on the army. Derision and profanity are replacing awe and fear. Recently, in Islamabad's Aabpara market -- just a short walk from the main ISI headquarters -- protesters ripped down a huge military-sponsored banner praising the army and its vaunted spy agency. The onlookers cheered. Such scenes have not been witnessed since the 1971 war with India, in which 90,000 Pakistan soldiers surrendered in a bitter defeat.

## True Stories

The US success at finding and killing bin Laden, and keeping Pakistan's army and ISI in the dark, however, is only the latest blow to the image and self-esteem of the military institution. In the spring of 2011, revelations of double-dealing had already diminished the army's moral authority.

Officially, the army strongly objects to the CIA Predator drone attacks in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the swath of the mountainous northwest that became a no-go zone shortly after the massive influx of al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban fighters fleeing the US invasion in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. But Pakistanis have long suspected that the condemnations were insincere. Collusion and complicity seemed evident. Wikileaked documents, obtained by a leading newspaper, *Dawn*, have confirmed these suspicions.

Internal State Department cables released by Wikileaks show that, in fact, the Pakistani high command actively supported the program of drone strikes. In a meeting on January 22, 2008 with Adm. William J. Fallon, then head of CENTCOM, Gen. Kayani asked for "continuous Predator coverage of the conflict area" in South Waziristan where the army was conducting operations against militants. The request is detailed in a classified message sent by US Ambassador Anne Patterson from Islamabad to Washington on February 11 of that year. Later, in early March, in a meeting with Adm. Mike Mullen, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kayani was asked for his help "in approving a third Restricted Operating Zone for US aircraft over the FATA." The request -- detailed in a cable from the US Embassy in Islamabad on March 24 -- clearly indicates that two "corridors" for US drones had already been approved.

While the Pakistani army vowed that American boots would not touch Pakistani ground, the Wikileaks cables published by *Dawn* reveal that elite US units were in fact working closely with Pakistani troops on intelligence gathering and other joint operations in Pakistani territory. Patterson reported to the State Department in May 2009: "We have created Intelligence Fusion cells with embedded US Special Forces with both SSG and Frontier Corps (Bala Hisar, Peshawar) with the Rover equipment ready to deploy."

## **The War Within**

Far more important for the crisis of confidence in the Pakistani army is its continuing inability to defend its own leaders, troops and assets from the homegrown jihadi menace. Gen. Kayani's predecessor as chief of army staff, Pervez Musharraf, was the target of repeated assassination attempts by Islamist guerrillas, some of whom had insider help. More recent incidents include a successful attack on army general headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009, the destruction of three ISI regional nerve centers by suicide bombers and the May 2011 assault by a handful of fighters on the naval base at Mehran, as part of which the raiders fought off hundreds of security forces long enough to destroy two anti-submarine P3C Orion aircraft, worth \$36 million apiece.

The Pakistani military -- and the country that it runs -- is bleeding from a thousand cuts inflicted by the relentless foot soldiers of supercharged religious militancy. As the violence grows, pessimism about the country's future has descended upon the intelligentsia and investor class, prompting professionals and financial capital to flee the country.

It is ironic that things should have turned out this way. The army's plan, hatched decades ago, was to leech India in a proxy war to be waged on Pakistan's behalf by Islamist militants. At least since Gen. Aslam Beg, who held the post from 1988-1991, one army chief after another has endorsed the covert war against India as the core of army strategy. The strategy has seemed safe enough -- Pakistan's nuclear weapons are supposed to deter India. And it has seemed to work, on at least two occasions: after the December 13, 1999 attack on the Indian parliament by jihadis of the Jaish-e Muhammad and after the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Lashkar-e Taiba, India protested vigorously but did not retaliate (at least, not directly). Even today, there seems to be continuity in this policy. A score of militant outfits based in Muridke, Bahawalpur, Mansehra and elsewhere are left free to plan attacks on India at times and places of their own choosing.

The several Islamist militant groups have their own agendas, however, which are driven by ideological fervor and often diverge radically from those of the Pakistani state. Some target the US empire, which explains why Pakistan was the refuge of choice for bin Laden and other remnants of al-Qaeda. Others focus on the more limited goal of "liberating" Kashmir from India. Still other groups, like Lashkar-i Jhangvi and Sipah-e Sahaba, are sectarian warriors seeking to purge Islam of the Shi'a and other minorities, while the fighters of Khatm-e Nabuhat desire to exterminate "Qadianis," the slur they use to denigrate the Ahmadiyya sect, whose nineteenth-century founder was born in the town of Qadian. These outfits dispatch suicide bombers to hit mosques, shrines and markets, murdering religious leaders and prominent figures in the various minority communities. They are united only in support of the killing of such "blasphemers" and those who stand up for their rights.

## **Divided They Stand**

Religion divides Pakistan, and Pakistanis, and increasingly divides the Pakistani military. The worst-kept secret in the ranks is that, in fact, there are now two armies. The first is headed by Gen. Kayani and is a national army. The second, as of now, has no known leader and sees itself as God's army. The same division is to be found in the ISI, maybe even within the Strategic Plans Division, which has custody of Pakistan's atomic arsenal.

Army-One and ISI-One, and Army-Two and ISI-Two, have similar but distinct mindsets. The officers and soldiers in both, like all Pakistanis, were reared on the "two-nation theory," the belief of Pakistan's founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah that Hindus and Muslims can never live together as equals in peace. Both sets of soldiers are steeped in anti-Indian prejudice, a sentiment instilled early on in the army cadet colleges at Petaro and Hasan Abdal, and also share a deep-rooted contempt for civilians. They differ on religion, however.

Since the days of Gen. Zia ul Haq, Pakistan's ruler in the 1980s, recruiting centers have been festooned with banners reading "*iman, taqwa, jihad fi sabil Allah*" (faith, piety and jihad in the way of God). For Army-One and ISI-One, religion is largely a matter of culture and identity. They are believers by lineage and upbringing; Islam offers a way to live one's life; prayer and fasting are worthy goals and marks of the pious; and Sufis and Shi'a are fellow, if heterodox, Muslims.

Army-Two and ISI-Two, on the other hand, are jihadis, for whom Islam and the state are inseparable. They are strict in matters of ritual and communal conformity: They pray regularly, insist upon strict segregation of officers and their wives, and keep an eye out for colleagues who furtively drink alcohol. Their political philosophy draws inspiration from the works of Maulana Abul Ala Mawdudi, the twentieth-century thinker and founder of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami party, who insisted that seventh-century Arab Islam provides a complete blueprint for society and politics. Capturing state power is a means toward creating the ideal society along the lines of Medina in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. They have antipathy for science as a mode of inquiry but welcome modern technology as a tool for their battles.

The majority of the Two corps are of Wahhabi, *salafi* and Deobandi persuasion. Muslims of this combined Wahhabi-*salafi*-Deobandi persuasion fiercely decry the syncretism of popular Islam, claiming that it arises from ignorance of Qur'anic teachings.

Wahhabism, which originated in eighteenth-century Arabia, was in part a reaction to the beliefs of Shi'is and Sufis and their veneration of 'Ali, Husayn and other saints. In the early years of Wahhabism, its adherents razed Shi'i and Sufi shrines and monuments and destroyed relics as a way to cleanse the faith of so-called impurities. This way of thinking has been steadily imported into Pakistan since the early 1970s, with the migration of Pakistani workers to the Arab Gulf states. Every major Shi'i holy place in Pakistan (some of which Sunnis also frequent) has either been attacked or is under threat. In June 2010, two suicide bombers struck the widely visited shrine of Data Darbar in Lahore, killing over 50 worshippers.

The *salafis* -- a broad term for those who want to return to the Islam they imagine was practiced by the Prophet and his companions -- are often prone to violent extremism. Among the most extreme manifestations of *salafi* tendencies is al-Takfir wa al-Hijra. In 1996, this group is said to have plotted to assassinate Osama bin Laden because he was too lax a Muslim. Lashkar-e Taiba, a prominent Pakistani jihadi organization with *salafi* sympathies, has close ties to the ISI.

Deobandis, finally, are followers of a school of jurisprudence established at Deoband in British India. The Pakistani Deobandis, as distinguished from Indian Deobandis, do not condemn suicide bombings and are strongly pro-Taliban.

Rather than the face the implications of the widening gap within Pakistani society and army, the loyalists of Army-One and ISI-One staunchly defend the myth of national and army unity, insisting that officers and enlisted men who are involved in jihadi attacks are isolated, misguided individuals. Religiously motivated terrorism is taken to be a passing squall, though it has claimed more Pakistani lives than all of the wars with India together. The storm will calm, the One corps partisans aver, when the US leaves Afghanistan and regional power relations return to normal.

## Exploring Fundamentalism

For Pakistan, however, it is not clear what normal means for the generation that has grown up in the 2000s, a decade of war next door, and Islamist violence and civil strife at home. Sixty-four years after the partition of British India, key questions stand unresolved. Are Pakistanis Arabs or South Asians? Is there a Pakistani culture? Should the country be run according to Islamic law? Can Hindus, Christians and “Qadianis” be proper Pakistanis? What will be the next generation’s answers?

A recent survey of 2,000 Pakistanis in the 18-27 age group found that three quarters identify first as Muslims and only second as Pakistanis. Just 14 percent of respondents chose to define themselves as citizens of Pakistan first. This result should be no surprise. Pakistani schoolchildren learn to chant in unison: *Pakistan ka matlab kya? La ilah illa Allah!* (What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no god but God!)

Excited by mullahs, the military and the media into embracing wild passions, and lacking opportunities for more progressive and democratic types of political engagement, Pakistan’s youth have become less educated about the world and less able to reason in an informed and thoughtful way. At the same time, they are increasingly worried by lack of employment, inflation, corruption and violence. But these factors are insufficient to account for the meteoric rise of religious enthusiasm in Pakistan.

Religious fundamentalism and the resort to violence are not a direct response to poverty, joblessness, uneven application of justice, lack of proper schooling or other quotidian sufferings of the working class. These ingredients are, of course, among the many that make up the explosive mix. It is obvious that people condemned to lives of little hope are terribly vulnerable to religious demagogues who, in exchange for unquestioning

obedience, offer a happier hereafter. By this means orphans and impoverished madrassa-educated lads in Pakistan can be readily turned into suicide bombers. But they are mere pawns used by those with better education and skills, whose drive and visions stem from factors other than misery and powerlessness.

It is also true that Islamic radicalism owes much to anger generated by Western dominance over Muslim societies -- US hegemony in much of the Arab world for six decades has cast a big shadow. Then there is the occupation of Palestine, and more recently of Iraq and Afghanistan. But such resentments are not unique to Islamists. A private survey carried out by a European embassy based in Islamabad found that only 4 percent of Pakistanis polled speak well of America, with 96 percent inveighing against it. The US has the dubious distinction of being Pakistan's number one enemy, having displaced India from its long-held position.

The rise of hardline Islam in Pakistan also has deeper roots. Perhaps the most relevant lies in wounded pride. Faced by manifest decline from a peak of greatness many centuries ago, and afflicted by cultural dislocation in the age of globalization, Muslim societies became ripe for religious resurgence. Pakistanis live in the ruins of the defeat of the Muslim Mughal Empire in India by British colonial power in the mid-nineteenth century. Their version of history is nostalgic for a time when Muslims ruled over India and were carriers of a great civilization. Pakistan has little presence in today's world affairs, in science or in culture. Some blame this fall on Muslims having strayed from the faith.

There is also the matter of money. The ascendancy of Wahhabism in Pakistan has been paid for by rich Arabs and their governments. In November 2008, Bryan Hunt, principal officer at the US Consulate in Lahore, relayed a cable to the State Department reporting discussions with local government and non-governmental sources in the cities of Multan and Bahawalpur. The note, released by Wikileaks, states that "financial support estimated at nearly \$100 million annually was making its way to Deobandi and Ahl-i Hadith clerics in south Punjab from organizations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ostensibly with the direct support of those governments." These funds fuel the fire that is consuming Pakistan.

## **What Is to Be Done?**

It is said that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. For Pakistan's political class, the bin Laden operation and the subsequent crisis offered an opportunity to confront the power of the army. But instead of taking such a bold initiative, Pakistan's civilian leaders proved too weak, compromised and inept to do much of anything. They stood paralyzed in their all too familiar role as the humble servants of the men in uniform.

As the story of the bin Laden operation broke on Pakistani news channels, the elected government was stunned into speechlessness. There was no official Pakistani reaction for hours after President Barack Obama had announced the success of the US mission.

Tongue-tied for 36 hours, the president and prime minister in Islamabad awaited pointers from the army, following them dutifully after they were received.

The army decided to condemn the raid. Thus prodded, a full eight days after the incident Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani broke his silence to absolve the ISI and army of “either complicity or incompetence.” Before an incredulous world, he claimed in a statement that both suggestions were “absurd.” Attempting to spread the blame, he declared in Paris before a meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, “This is an intelligence failure of the whole world, not Pakistan alone.”

Nawaz Sharif, the de factor leader of the parliamentary opposition, eventually demanded that the army change its mindset. It was a breath of fresh air. But the exhortation was vague: What change was he talking about? That the military should suborn itself to the politicians and elected government, as the constitution stipulates? Or merely protect its bases, bombs and assets better?

The single most important change needed is that the army must stop seeing everything through the prism of competition and war with India. Six decades of this policy has left Pakistan exhausted and indifferent to its own suffering. To prosper, Pakistan needs to go further. It must overcome its hatred for India; and leave Kashmir as a problem to be solved by Kashmiris. Pakistan needs to put all its energies into improving governance and dealing with its myriad internal issues, most particularly ending the Islamist violence and rolling back the fundamentalist political and cultural currents that are overwhelming its society. The military’s role in this effort must be limited to defending the people of Pakistan from violence and to ensuring that their constitutional and civil rights are protected.