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Pakistan's Jihadi Proxies

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Jihad and Dawah: Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat ud Dawah

by Samina Yasmeen

London: Hurst, 315 pp., £35.00

Defeat Is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War

by Myra MacDonald

London: Hurst, 313 pp., £25.00; £15.99 (paper)

Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State

by Madiha Afzal

Brookings Institution Press, 192 pp., \$36.99 (paper)

There was a moment some time ago—however hard it is to imagine now—when Pakistan could have become a center of trade, investment, infrastructure projects, and energy pipelines between South and Central Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan is strategically located and blessed with abundant natural resources. But it has been unable to benefit from these advantages as a result of its frequently disastrous political decisions, which invariably lead to crises. Its security establishment is constantly in conflict with elected civilian governments and is never satisfied with its own immense power. Corruption is rampant at all levels of government, while the country continues to have some of the lowest indices in the world for health, literacy, and nutrition and—as UNICEF recently announced—the worst infant mortality rate in the world.



Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images

Punjabi police commandos standing guard at a political rally for Imran Khan, Faisalabad, Pakistan, May 2013

Pakistan has nuclear weapons but employs jihadist organizations to fight on its behalf in conflicts with foreign countries. It has failed to crack down on terrorist activity at home and encouraged its citizens to adopt views that may make them more receptive to extremist positions. Pakistan has continued to insist, for instance, that India is a constant threat and that only a renewed national commitment to Islam will be able to unite the disparate ethnic groups, tribes, and minorities that coexist within the country. These views are taken to the extreme by Islamic militants, who seek to destroy India altogether and to turn Pakistan into a sharia state governed exclusively by Islamic law.

At a meeting in Paris at the end of February, the thirty-seven-nation Financial Action Task Force (FATF)

approved a motion by the US and Britain to have Pakistan placed back on its “gray list” of countries that have taken inadequate steps to combat terrorist financing. (It had been taken off in 2015.) At the end of June, in another meeting, the FATF officially put Pakistan on the list. This will have significant economic costs: it is likely to discourage foreign investment, force Pakistan to repay its loans, slow down trade, and place a hold on the \$60 billion that China has been giving it for infrastructure projects.

The FATF warned that unless there were major changes in its activities Pakistan could end up on the “black list” of “Non-Cooperative Countries or Territories,” alongside North Korea and Iran. This would entail heavy international sanctions. Even if it manages to avoid that fate, it will fall short of its aspiration to be a modern parliamentary democracy as long as it continues to pander to Islamic extremists and rely on them to carry out its foreign policy.

Three recent books survey the historical development and current state of Pakistan’s relationship with jihadist groups. Encouragingly, two of them are written by authors from Pakistan rather than from Europe or the United States. *Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State*, by the young academic Madiha Afzal, is a remarkably clear, concise, and accessible attempt to dismantle assumptions common among Westerners about public opinion in Pakistan. In one poll, she tells us, 89 percent of Pakistani respondents said that terrorist violence was unjustified. But Afzal not only gives the lie to Western stereotypes about the prevalence of extremist beliefs in Muslim countries; she also looks closely and critically at the ways in which the Pakistani government has encouraged the country’s militarization and what she refers to as its “Islamization.”

Following September 11, Afzal writes, it was commonly assumed that Pakistan was awash with madrasas, or religious schools. Western journalists and scholars frequently cited estimates that between 500,000 and two million students were enrolled in them. Pakistan’s own educational census, on the contrary, shows that only 7 percent of villages have a madrasa, with less than 200,000 enrolled students overall. At the same time, Afzal writes with concern about the ways in which Pakistan’s educational system has supported the country’s extremist factions. The government textbooks students use are steeped in false facts, exaggerations, and outright lies that confirm extremist views. They refer, for instance, to India’s “constant wish to weaken the integrity of Pakistan for one reason or another.” The country’s legal system, too, tends to support extremist thinking. Clauses inserted into the penal code in the 1980s criminalized perceived infractions of Islamic law. These clauses have been used by courts to deprive women of their basic rights.

In some cases Afzal fails to take account of historical information that bears on her case. In her discussion of Sufi Mohammed, an Islamist insurgency leader, she makes no mention of the fact that after September 11 Pakistan allowed him to mobilize 10,000 tribal fighters to help the Taliban resist the US invasion of Afghanistan. But her arguments are persuasive and sensible. She criticizes Pakistan’s government for its inadequate response to local acts of terrorism, which have claimed some 25,000 lives over the past decade:

The Pakistani state has never engaged in a clear conversation with its citizens about the terrorist groups targeting the country—explaining who they were, where they come from, what they say they want, and why they are wrong. It has offered no lessons in history, no clarity or guidance.

The government’s refusal to talk to its people about the background to these terrorist attacks has left room, Afzal shows, for some politicians in Pakistan to blame them on the United States and India. There’s little sign of this changing. In Afzal’s view, the government will not significantly alter its strategy or outlook as long as it “is still convinced it can walk the line between its master narrative”—i.e., that it is doing everything it can to eradicate extremist groups within its borders—“and radicalism.”

In *Jihad and Dawah: Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat ud Dawah*, Samia Yasmeen makes a more specific inquiry into the state's relations with jihadist organizations. A Pakistani professor at the University of Western Australia, Yasmeen has carried out an in-depth study of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), considered to be the largest and most important jihadist group operating in Pakistan and a recipient of substantial governmental support. She has conducted her research largely by studying the group's own published textbooks and sermons.

LeT was founded at the end of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan by the Islamist leader Hafiz Saeed and other professors in Lahore who belonged to the Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam. The Deobandi's affiliation with the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia provided LeT with rich patrons and donors in the Arabian Gulf who believed that the group would, in exchange, proselytize Wahhabism and jihad in South Asia and target India and Iran. Arab and Pakistani donations allowed LeT to expand quickly and set up schools, universities, hospitals, and a free medical and ambulance service—all of which have lent some credibility to the group's claim that it is just a charitable Islamic organization. But the provocative texts it publishes and the textbooks it assigns in schools offer a strictly sectarian interpretation of the Koran and testify to the group's strong belief in jihadist violence. Few modern Islamic states would allow such literature to be read by the young people LeT often addresses.

In addition to Arabian and Pakistani donors, LeT's third main source of support has been Pakistan's military, which shares the group's aim of liberating Indian Kashmir. After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, Yasmeen writes, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency "selected diverse religious-based organizations in Pakistan to be trained on the Afghan front and then to develop sufficient capacity to shape the future directions of the Kashmiri independence movement." Scholars and retired government officials have told me that the party has given military training to tens of thousands of militants since the 1980s.

The relationship between LeT and Pakistan's military was solidified in 1999, when the army chief General Pervez Musharraf, who would soon seize power in a military coup, secretly planned a limited invasion of Indian Kashmir using both regular troops and LeT fighters. Just a few months after India and Pakistan had both tested nuclear devices, Musharraf's forces occupied mountains overlooking strategic towns in Indian Kashmir. He hoped to hold Indian territory long enough for the international community to intervene and force both sides into talks. Pakistan's nuclear arms had opened up space, Yasmeen writes, "for low-level tactical moves that could secure the maximum gains in the form of forcing India to negotiate on the future of Kashmir." Pakistan also considered the occupation revenge for its loss of East Pakistan at the hands of India in 1971.

Musharraf was confident that the threat of nuclear weapons would deter India from retaliating by invading Pakistan. But India drove out the invaders and a war broke out in the Kargil district of Kashmir, resulting in a humiliating defeat for Pakistan's army and the LeT jihadis it had employed. Hundreds of fighters were killed, Pakistan was internationally condemned for warmongering, and its control over its nuclear weapons was put in doubt. Still, however, many retired generals continue to rate Kargil a tactical, if not a strategic, success.

Myra MacDonald, a former Reuters journalist in South Asia and a natural storyteller, has written a superb book about the period leading up to and including the Kargil war. In *Defeat Is an Orphan: How Pakistan Lost the Great South Asian War*, she describes the war as the decisive point at which Pakistan's "downward trend relative to" India became seemingly "irreversible."

After Pakistan developed nuclear capacities, MacDonald writes, it could have taken advantage of its newly achieved parity with India to “put its own house in order.” Instead, Pakistan remained as insecure as ever. It relied on the protection of the nuclear umbrella to pursue its proxy war against India. No longer forced to adapt to the threat of external invasion that might compel it to disarm its Islamist militant proxies, it clung to them ever more tightly.

It was this insecurity that led Pakistan to invade Kargil. The Pakistani army deflected responsibility for the war by blaming its defeat on collusion between the US and India. In MacDonald’s view, that choice ended up strengthening and encouraging jihadist forces. “Defeat at Kargil,” she tells us, “gave jihadi groups one more reason to stoke up outrage against the United States and India.” It became “a powerful recruiting tool.”

Islamic militant groups also blamed the Pakistani state for withdrawing from Kargil. They were “no longer willing to trust the Pakistan Army to deliver on Kashmir,” as a result of which “more and more would go their own way, a process accelerated after September 11, 2001.”

The more the state came to rely on jihadis, the less control it had over them. “By 1999, Pakistan was finding it harder and harder to keep on top of the different militant groups its security establishment had spawned,” MacDonald writes. “It had loosened links down through the chain of command to ensure operational deniability only to discover this also eroded its control.”

Since the Kargil war, LeT has expanded globally. In addition to targeting India, it now gives fighters, intelligence, and technical aid to the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups in Central Asia and elsewhere. In November 2008, over the course of four days, ten terrorists of allegedly Pakistani origin who had been trained by LeT massacred 164 people in Mumbai, including six Americans, and wounded another three hundred. The worst terrorist attack since September 11, it was all the more surprising because it followed some five years of calm between Pakistan and India. The organizers of the attack have not been punished, although some LeT leaders, including Hafiz Saeed, were put under house arrest.

Apparently no changes have been made in the military intelligence hierarchy that supposedly controls LeT. Since 2008 international bodies such as the FATF and the United Nations have designated LeT a terrorist organization and have demanded that Pakistan shut it down. In 2012 the US announced a bounty of \$10 million for information on Saeed; the Pakistani government released him from house arrest last fall.

The army needs a new doctrine. It must make greater use of diplomacy, engage with neighboring states, dismantle jihadist groups, and build a regional network that will enhance trade and investment. China is already investing some \$60 billion in infrastructure development for Pakistan as part of its One Belt One Road economic plan. Yet Pakistan cannot benefit from this sort of investment if it is constantly fighting wars in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and its provinces Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The Pakistani military has maintained its policies despite objections from parliament. Nawaz Sharif was elected prime minister three times (in 1990, 1997, and 2013), but each term was cut short by the military, which distrusted him because of his attempts to shift Pakistan’s foreign policy toward improving relations with India, Afghanistan, China, and the US. The army considered foreign policy its own prerogative; it has declined to make peace with India after losing three wars and continues to support the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In 2017 Sharif was barred from politics for life due to corruption allegations. Just two weeks before the

general election on July 25, 2018, he was sentenced to ten years in prison and a fine of £8 million for allegedly owning property in London beyond his means. His daughter and son-in-law also received substantial prison sentences. The military made clear that it would not tolerate another prime minister from Sharif's Pakistani Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), further making the elections less credible.

In Imran Khan, the winner of this year's general election, the military saw a much more pliable politician whose views were similar to its own. Khan has shown sympathy to the Taliban (the Pakistani media nicknamed him "Taliban Khan"), has often described the Afghan Taliban's war against the US as a jihad, and has been a constant critic of US policies in the region. Khan also supported the army's most controversial step before the elections: allowing Islamic extremist groups—many of them banned by the international community and despised by middle-class Pakistanis—to take part in the elections.

Khan had already worked closely with Islamists. His Justice Party had governed Khyber Pakhtoon Khaw province in northern Pakistan for the past five years, forming a political alliance with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party. Both Khan and the army knew that although extremist groups would not get enough votes to win seats in parliament, they would draw right-wing religious voters away from the PML-N.

Before the election, Donald Trump had cut off \$2 billion in military aid to Pakistan and asked India to increase assistance to Afghanistan—moves that the military and Khan sharply criticized. The army's legitimization of extremist groups just before the elections was a direct rebuke not only to India and Afghanistan but also the US and NATO, which had been trying to pressure Pakistan to push the Taliban into peace talks with the Kabul regime. Some of those extremists taking part in elections were wanted by the US for terrorism.

A few weeks before the elections, the military's intelligence agencies speeded up their attempts to pressure PML-N candidates to change sides and join the Justice Party. The judiciary began to jail more senior members of the PML-N, especially those who were certain to get elected. On election day, as the vote counting started, it became apparent that Sharif's supporters would still win many seats. What followed was a complex manipulation of the vote-counting process, delaying the results for at least two days.

The election revealed Khan's willingness to be a tool of the establishment. As long as he submits to it, and as long as the Pakistan government thinks of its limited wars with India as low-risk adventures, it will not revise its basic military doctrine. Nor will any government make meaningful progress unless the military abandons its rhetoric about being under threat of attack and subversion by India. Pakistan urgently needs a foreign policy that builds trust with its neighbors and the international community. Only then can it hope to improve the lives of its people.

—August 30, 2018