

Target Pakistan: Washington's next war has already started

Sunday 28 September 2008, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 17 September 2008).

Contents

- [Sunni-Shia conflict](#)
- ['Assent' from Pakistan](#)
- [How Washington created the \(...\)](#)
- [Pakistan military divided \(...\)](#)

September 17, 2008 — Washington's next war is already on the go. It is as yet undeclared. However, it is not unapproved. Classified orders'', according to September 11 {New York Times}, were passed by President Bush last July. And surprise of surprises! The target is not "axis of evil''-fame Iran. It is Washington's close ally in the war on terror'', Pakistan.

At the time of writing, news is pouring in from the Waziristan (tribal areas) region of Pakistan of yet another US attack that has left another five "Taliban" dead. Only a week ago, 20 "Taliban" were killed in another US attack. Between August 13 and September 12, at least 79 "Taliban" have been killed in nine US attacks on Pakistan's tribal areas. Since January 29 (the year's first attack claimed 12 lives), more than 150 people have been killed.

Besides the rising death toll, a large-scale displacement is taking place across tribal areas. From Bajour district alone, more than 30,000 people have migrated to the relative safety of the neighbouring districts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). True, the large-scale displacement also owes much to the Shia-Sunni conflict that has flared up in the tribal areas, which has claimed more than 1500 lives in Kurram Agency alone in last year.

The massive military operation launched against Taliban by the Pakistan army under US pressure, continuing since 2003, has driven people out of their homes. The Taliban's successful attempt to capture and turn Pakistan's tribal areas into "Talibanistan" has, no doubt, also inflicted misery (beheadings, amputations, displacement, harsh dress codes) on the residents of tribal areas, which has also led to displacement. However, it was the US invasion of Afghanistan that has reduced the tribal areas to a battlefield for multipronged war, with Shias fighting Sunnis, the Taliban pitched against the Pakistan military and US missiles and air drones pounding Pakistan.

Sunni-Shia conflict

The Shia-Sunni conflict began plaguing Pakistan in 1980s. The recent Shia-Sunni clashes in the tribal areas partly reflect the wider problem afflicting Pakistan. However, the immediate cause is the Talibanisation-at-gunpoint of the tribal areas. Staunchly anti-Shia, the Taliban when at the helm of Kabul in the late 1990s brought Afghanistan to the brink of war with Iran owing to its anti-Shia crusades. Reportedly, 5000 Shias were massacred by the Taliban when it was in power. But

attributing the Taliban's campaigns against the Kurram Agency Shias to mere confessional fanaticism would be a half truth. This well-planned campaign is part of the wider Taliban strategy.

The strategy is to Talibanise, politically and administratively, the tribal areas. The writ of the Pakistan state over the tribal areas has effectively been replaced by Talibanised Sharia (Islamic law). Having defeated and expelled the state apparatus (police, civil administration, courts), Taliban militias have established their own courts to dispense speedy justice. They have established toll posts to levy road taxes on transport. This is a major source of income. Maliks (tribal elders) might pose a challenge to Taliban authority. Hence, public beheadings of "US spies" eliminated some and silenced others. Largely to subdue the local population and partly to win support of conservative elements, men were told to grow beards (standard length = 5 centimetres). Women were told to either stay home or hide themselves in blue burkas. "Adulterers" were duly stoned to death. Whippings were dispensed for not fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Thieves had their hands amputated. Having learned from their experience in Afghanistan, the Taliban do not shutdown girls' schools lest one day "infidels" defeat them and re-open the schools. They simply burn them. The tally so far is 500.

(A digression: the neo-cons in the US and their liberal cousins in Pakistan may invoke this information as a rationale to justify a future US invasion of tribal areas. But this information is meant for those on the left that hails the Taliban's mindless violence as "anti-imperialism, resistance and liberation".)

The Shia tribes are alarmed at the Taliban occupation of the tribal areas. The Shia massacre in Afghanistan is fresh in their minds. They have decided to resist tooth and nail. Iranian backing has also proved decisive. Hence, despite losses, the Shia tribes have stood their ground. The Shia resistance to the Taliban was not the only impediment the Taliban faced. They have encountered acts of resistance non-stop. A brave woman, refused to quit her job as school teacher and stay home. Villagers formed militias and resisted, though unsuccessfully. The local tribes at first were no match for the Taliban and al Qaeda cadre trained in the 1980s with CIA-provided manuals. However, the Shia resistance proved inspiring. It became an impetus for others. The tribes have now formed their own militia and have begun liberating their villages from the Taliban.

'Assent' from Pakistan

While tribes have been left on their own to defend themselves against the Taliban, the *New York Times* on September 11 quoted a senior US official as saying that the Pakistan government had "privately assented to the general concept of limited ground assaults by [US] Special Operations forces against significant militant targets, but that it did not approve each mission". The official did not say which members of the government gave the approval.

Though the present Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government has denied such assertions, there is a general feeling in Pakistan that such an "assent to the general concept of limited ground assaults" exists. During the rule of Pervez Musharraf, every time the US attacked [inside Pakistan], the regime would claim responsibility instead. Now every US attack is followed by a protest statement by the Pakistan government and every protest statement is followed by another US attack.

This whole mess might confuse many outside Pakistan as Pakistan has committed up to 90,000 troops to the tribal areas and has lost more than 1000 soldiers fighting the Taliban since 2003. Meanwhile, Bush administration keeps lashing out at Islamabad for not doing enough to flush al Qaeda out of the tribal areas.

The US accuse-and-attack policy in fact is nothing but a farcical repeat of history: unable to defeat

the North Vietnamese army, Nixon dispatched troops to Cambodia. Tariq Ali accurately points out: "When in doubt, escalate the war is an old imperial motto".

Islamabad's role, however, in the tribal areas is complicated. The 27,200 square-kilometre tribal belt, officially known as the Federal Autonomous Tribal Area, or FATA, is home to 3.3 million Pashtun tribes. The Pashtuns constitute the world's largest tribal group. Imperial Britain divided them with an artificial border, the Durand Line, which went on to become Afghanistan-Pakistan border. When Pakistan was created in 1947, the Pashtuns were split between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

How Washington created the Taliban

In the wake of the radical 1978 "Saur revolution" in Afghanistan, when the USA decided to give the Soviet Union its "Vietnam", the tribal areas and parts of the NWFP bordering Afghanistan, were turned by the CIA into a safe heaven for the "Mujahideen", the Taliban's forerunners.

Society in the tribal areas suffered immensely as a result. It was brutalised, criminalised and militarised as the weapons and drug trade became a major source of funding for the anti-Soviet "jihad". When the Soviet Union withdrew, Afghan leader Dr Najibullah was able to hold the Mujahideen out for another three years. But in 1993, he gave in. The Mujahideen reduced Afghanistan to rubble in their attempt to capture Kabul. The unending chaos was finally put to an end with imperial help. Says Benazir Bhutto: "Weapons were supplied to the Taliban by the USA and Britain with money from Saudi Arabia... Pakistan's territory was used to train solely the Afghan refugees -- Pushtoons, who made up the backbone of Taliban movement."

Even if Benazir's statement is treated cautiously, tacit US approval for the Talibanised fighters take over has been documented in detail by a number of writers. Taliban control of Kabul was the Pakistan military's first success on an external front. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's notorious military intelligence service, was the architect of the Taliban victory.

The Taliban-ISI duo were not merely tactical brothers. Both also had an ideological affinity. During the "jihad" against Soviets, the Pakistan military too was "radicalised". When after 9/11, Washington told Pakistan GHQ (military headquarters) to give the Taliban up, it reluctantly but obediently followed the instructions. A section of the military, however, refused to give up. The then ISI chief told the Taliban to resist the US invasion. He was duly removed by General Musharraf. But support for the Taliban was not limited to the ISI chief. It was/is widespread among the army ranks in general. Serious attempts on Musharraf's life were connived, if not planned, by military personnel. Some of them were executed after summary trials by military courts.

Pakistan military divided over support for 'Talibanistan'

The Taliban could not hold out for long as they had no social base left in Afghanistan. Not a single person came to their defence. The pro-Taliban elements in the Pakistan military establishment, however, were able to mobilise and dispatch thousands of lashkaris (mercenaries) from Pakistan to aid the Taliban in its defence of Kabul.

Ironically, many of the lashkaris ended up in Guantanamo Bay while the Taliban escaped to the safety of Pakistan's tribal areas. Here, assisted by their military masters, they regrouped. The plan was to launch a proxy war as was the case in the 1980s, with the only difference being that the USA was on the other side this time. The region was skilfully Talibanised over a period of time. The GHQ

under Musharraf's leadership was indecisive. It most likely gave assent to this proxy war initially. However, a siege of The tribal areas began when Washington exerted pressure. Hence, the situation has pitched sections of the Pakistan military (following US dictates) against other sections of Pakistan military (patronising Taliban) in the tribal areas. This divide in the army was reflected most nakedly in the wake of the Red Mosque operation in June 2007 when a series of suicide attacks on military targets shook Pakistan.

Thus, the situation is indeed complex. There are military hawks who have "faith" in driving the "infidel" out of Kabul and reTalibanising it. They are miscalculating. Capturing Kabul through a proxy war in 1997 against a ragtag freemasonry of Mujahideen defending Kabul was one thing. Snatching it from NATO is a recipe for disaster. Most likely, the Taliban not being able to march westward will spread eastward. Already, districts neighbouring the tribal areas, particularly the scenic valleys of Swat, have become a venue for pitched battles between the Taliban and the Pakistan military. Kohat, Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan have received warning shots.

However, neither succesful Talibanisation nor the presence of Taliban hide-outs should serve as an excuse for an imperialist invasion of Pakistan. It will further plunge this region into chaos. The stability of the region cannot be guaranteed until the US occupation of Afghanistan (the mother of all instabilities) is ended. Talibanisation can be best fought against by the masses. The US presence in the region will only delay the Taliban's defeat.

Unfortunately, the signs coming out of Washington suggest otherwise. On Fox News on July 6, Bill Kristol recounted that in a 90-minute, mostly off-the-record, meeting with a small group of journalists. Kristol said that Bush "conveyed the ... impression that he thought the next president's biggest challenge would not be Iraq, which he thinks he'll leave in pretty good shape, and would not be Afghanistan, which is manageable by itself... It's Pakistan... [We have] a sort of friendly government that sort of cooperates and sort of doesn't. It's really a complicated and difficult situation."

P.S.

* From Links - International Journal of Socialist Renewal:

<http://links.org.au/node/638>

* Farooq Sulehria is a member of the Labour Party Pakistan resident in Sweden.