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ISLAMABAD: A drone is a semi-autonomous, self-propelled system controlled by an external intelligence. Suitably equipped handlers guide it towards an assigned target. The MQ-1B General Dynamics Predator, connected to high-flying US military surveillance satellites, differs from the low-tech mullah-trained human drone produced in Pakistani madrassas. But they share a common characteristic. Neither asks why they must kill.

Drones, machine and human, have drenched Pakistan with the blood of innocents. In 2006, a bevy of MQ-1Bs hovering over Damadola launched a barrage of 10 Hellfire missiles, costing \$60,000 apiece, at the village below. They blew up 18 local people, including five women and five children. The blame was put on faulty local intelligence. The same year, a Hellfire missile hit a madrasa in Bajaur killing between 80 and 85 people, mostly students. Pervez Musharraf's credibility stood so low that few believed his claim that those killed were training to become Al-Qaida militants. Indeed, while these space-age weapons have occasionally eliminated a few Al-Qaida men, such as Abu Laith al-Libi in January 2008, the more usual outcome has been flattened houses, dead and maimed children, and a growing tribal population that seeks revenge against Pakistan and the US.

The indigenous human drone, equipped with an explosive vest surrounded with ball bearings and nails, has left a far bloodier trail. Six suicide attacks in 2006 turned into 62 in 2007. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, at least 1,523 civilians were killed in terror-related violence last year. Those praying in mosques or at funerals have been no safer than others at political rallies. Beards, and prayer marks on foreheads, are no protection either.

This drone does not need to know why and who he must kill. Only how. A spine-chilling suicide bomber training video illustrates this. It is one

of the several videos that freely circulate in Pakistan's tribal areas, watched by a population hostile to Pakistan's armed forces. About 30 masked fighters are filmed in this video, training in some barren, mountainous area. One fighter, randomly selected by their leader, proceeds to climb a huge rock, perhaps 100 feet high. He reaches the highest point, and then stands motionless. His arms are outstretched as though on a diving board, awaiting the signal from below. Subsequently, without hesitation, and without closing his eyes, he launches himself onto the ground below.

The camera cuts to the still body lying on the blood-soaked ground. It then slowly pans over the faces of the other masked fighters. Their eyes betray no emotion. A second signal from the leader, and they trot military-style to the body, dig a shallow grave, toss their dead comrade into it, and cover it up. They then march over the grave several times, chanting Quranic verses. Why sacrifice a human life for a few minutes of footage? English subtitles make obvious that this is for propaganda. The message: this group's fighters have overcome the fear of death, and have willingly surrendered to the group leader their individual powers to reason and decide.

While the murder of innocents by the MQ-1B has led to much condemnation in Pakistan, the far greater carnage left by suicide bombers has provoked only mild criticism. A few editorials, mostly in English language newspapers, have been forthright but there have been no street protests.

On the other hand, implicit justifications abound. In January 2008, 30 leading Deobandi religious scholars, while declaring suicide attacks "haram", rationalised these as a mere reaction to the government's wrong policies in the tribal areas. They concluded: "A peaceful demand for implementing Shariah was not only rejected but the government was also not willing to give ear to any reasoning based on Qur'an and Sunna in support of the sharia demand. Apparently, these circumstances led some minds to the frustration that manifested itself in suicide attacks".

What message are these ulema sending?

That Pakistanis should surrender to Islamic extremists and adopt the sharia to avoid being attacked? This amounts to encouragement and incitement. Why do Pakistanis suddenly lose their voice when it comes to suicide bombings? First, the bomber - even if he kills pious Muslims or even those in the act of prayer - kills in the name of Islam. Therefore, people mute their criticism lest they be regarded as irreligious or even blasphemous.

Second, many believe that suicide attacks will disappear if Pakistan withdraws from a war against terror that is not Pakistan's but America's. But most of the dead and wounded are perfectly ordinary people. They had nothing to do with American or Pakistani forces. Even if America retreats - which is unlikely - Pakistan is now unable to escape the terrible consequences of a weapon developed to bleed India and to secure Afghanistan for "strategic depth".

Unfortunately, few Pakistanis accept that more and more crazed mullahs have created cults around themselves and seized control over the minds of worshippers. An enabling environment of poverty, deprivation, lack of justice and extreme differences of wealth is perfect for demagogues.

As the mullah's indoctrination gains strength, the power to reason weakens. The world of the follower becomes increasingly divided into absolute good and absolute evil. Doubt is replaced by certainty, moral sensibilities are blunted, the sensation of pain to oneself and others disappears, and the metamorphosis from human to drone becomes complete. The writer teaches at Quaid-e-Azam University.

P.S.

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