

# Roundtable Discussion: Counterterrorism strategy in Pakistan

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The Institute of Strategic Studies (ISSI) organized a roundtable discussion on July 12, 2011 on the subject of counterterrorism strategy in Pakistan. The agenda divided the event in three interlinked areas of interest within the political frameworks, organizational perspectives and historical and geopolitical contexts to develop a more cohesive and comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. It also shed light on the deteriorating Pakistan-US relations especially after Washington put a halt to USD 800 million worth of military aid. The ISSI hosted Mr. Stephen Tankel, a Visiting Fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace at the event and he was warmly welcomed by the Director General ISSI Ambassador Ashraf Jehangir Qazi and Chairman Ambassador Gul Haneef, who introduced the subject and provided the essential foundation on which to build the discussion.

Other participants included experienced journalist Mr. Moazzam Ali Hasmi; Lt Col Hassan, Institute for Strategic Studies, Research & Analysis (ISSRA), NDU; Mr. Babar Sattar, a lawyer and freelance analyst; Mr. Reza Ali from NACTA; Mr. Imtiaz Gul, Director of the *Centre* for Research and Security Studies; Ms. Suzanna Koster, a freelance journalist; Barrister Shahzan Akbar; Mr. Aqab Malik, NDU; Mr. Habib Malik Orakzai, Founder & Chairman Mutahida Qabail Party (MQP) and Ms. Shaheen Akhtar, Research Fellow, Institute of Regional Studies (IRS). Researchers from the ISSI, including Simbal Khan, Director (Central Asia and Afghanistan), Fazal-ur-Rahman, Director (China Study Center) and Research Fellows Waqas Sajjad, Amina Khan and Amina Khokhar were also involved in the discussion.

# Session 1: Understanding the problem

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The first session of the event focused understanding the multidimensional threats posed by terrorism and the relevant responses by state and non-state institutions. The main agenda of the conference was to understand militancy and terrorism in a broader context to better formulate and understand Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy. Different opinions were discussed on the floor and while it was expressed that there was a lack of understanding among the Americans about the threats faced by Pakistan, the notion of ineffective Pakistani efforts was also put forward. The discussion also went into more micro issues like understanding the Punjabi outfits that posed a major threat to Pakistan. Militancy in Punjab is seen as a grey zone as some of the groups are no different than those established in South Waziristan since they are formed only on a Jihadist formula, while others have different motives including political or ethnic struggles. It was recommended that in order to better understand these groups, their family trees should be traced and by determining the founder of each group, one could figure out its aims. Essentially, it was pointed out that understanding the inception and evolution of militancy in Punjab is crucial to solve the "grey zone puzzle".

The discussion also went into the history of the current problems facing Pakistan. During the 1980s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan saw major groups formed to recruit people from Punjab to fight in Afghanistan. Later when the war was over, the organizations did not vanish but started acting as anti-state agents. When the leaderships of these organizations were dismantled, they broke into smaller groups, all with new leaders and agendas different from their parent organizations. This blurred the lines between pro-state and anti-state agents. Threatening groups would be banned but they kept surfacing with different names and multiple identities. While some of the groups claim Jihad, others are strictly against the Americans or maybe even the Pakistani government. Currently, there is not even a single legitimate Jihadist organization in Pakistan and thus, all of these groups are banned. Another factor that has increased the number of groups operating in Punjab is the rising number of madrasas, both

registered and unregistered. Since the government is incompetent in keeping a strict check on curriculum and activities of these madrasas, militant groups effectively use them for funding and managing their activities. There is a strong need of madrasa reform in Pakistan as a part of a counter terrorism strategy.

## Session 2: Barriers to Action

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The Pakistani military, the major force behind the counterterrorism strategy is blamed for neglecting the ideological issues that these groups are injecting in the society. Thus a lack of understanding becomes a basic barrier to positive action. The military has viewed these groups as radicalized entities, ignoring their psyches and social constructs. Moreover, the environment within which it functions is layers with multiple stakeholders and does not allow for a completely indigenous strategy since there is a strong presence and interference by external actors. After the operation that led to the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, there is increased animosity between the US and Pakistan. While Washington blames Pakistan military of double game, this duplicity on part of Washington is also becoming a hindrance in making relations better. The lost faith will also affect Pakistan's effort to marginalize terrorists and thus is also detrimental to its continuing counterterrorism efforts. The Americans want a quick fix to this situation but this is simply not a possibility.

Pakistanis are also skeptical about US efforts in effectively dealing with their country. Washington is viewed as having no respect for Pakistan's sovereignty and cases such as the bin Laden raid, the handling of the Raymond Davis affair, and the continuing drone attacks have aggravated Pakistani public and only led to worsening the American image. The amount of American aid to Pakistan is insufficient in these circumstances to build up better ties given the scale of operations and the backlash from the society.

Other more local barriers to effective action, regardless of the intentions, also lie with the social, economic and political problems in Pakistan. Lately the problem of terrorism is viewed under the lens of socioeconomics and many have called for a change in the overall

counterterrorism strategy in order to refocus it to eliminate the root causes of the problem. The need for better education, more employment, and better standard of living will eventually provide the right incentives and ensure that Punjabis and Pushtoons are not attracted to illegitimate radicalized bodies. Ultimately, there also needs to be a focus on mainstreaming of marginalized groups – even those that are recognized as radical in the current age. The problem can be trimmed down if they are given political voice and hence legitimized. It is true that religious parties have never had success in Pakistani politics, but their sustainability means that they have a role and a representation and that needs to be accounted for.

One of the main problems while viewing counterterrorism strategies and Pakistan-US relations is the incompetence exhibited by Pakistani institutions. A self critical Pakistani government has not dealt effectively with the public and with Washington and has failed to remove the trust deficit that exists in both these spaces. The government has no aim when it defines its counter terrorism strategy, and no ambition in combating the groups situated in North Waziristan. There is inertia when it comes to formulating policies against terrorism and NACTA, an organization made to make this communication easier, has itself faced multiple disputes. The question of bringing it under the Interior Ministry or the Prime Minister implies that power struggles, personal agendas and political interests are more important than the dynamic and serious problems faced by the country today. The government is also blamed as an accomplice to some terrorist organizations that work in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Some also express the notion that Kashmir, Pakistan-based militancy and Afghanistan are all one problem and none of them can be solved until all three are solved.

## Session 3: Solutions

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There is a need to change the perception of the security establishments, primarily to formulate an effective counterterrorism strategy, and to bridge the gap between civilian and military perspectives. There is also a strong need to integrate recommendations of think tanks, political experts, news agencies and the intellectual community of Pakistan. This requires the formation of a cohesive body that acts as a middle ground between civilian government and

military/security establishments. The political leadership has to show a stronger will when implementing reforms that have been suggested or agreed upon. For example, the madrasa reform is in place but it has not been intensively implemented.

The American dream of a quick fix is not a good solution to the problem. In an attempt to clear the mess as quickly as possible, US is moving very quickly and missing out on the important points that also need to be looked at. There is a need to understand the phenomenon of radicalization and figure out what causes people to be inclined to it. This discourse also needs to be expanded to include social and economic factors as well as perceptions. The collateral damage faced by Pakistan needs to be acknowledged by the American government and it needs to appreciate sacrifices made by Pakistan in this war against terrorism. Pakistan government on the other hand has to show more transparency and an honest approach in adopting a clear counterterrorism strategy. It is only through such means that success can be achieved.

Pakistan's problems are indigenous and so should be the solution. Foreign entities have been enablers of many problems but they can act as enablers of solutions as well. However, it is the Pakistani institutions that need to take the initiative and sort the mess they find themselves in. The US, given its position, needs to do more in establishing Pakistan as a coalition partner and address its economic and social problems by engaging with the government, the military and the people of Pakistan. It should make it a priority to engage in the efforts of changing the perception of the Pakistani populace.

The blame game and continued hostility will only make the counterterrorism strategy counterproductive. For the sake of Pakistan's future, and for the sake of the economic, social and political stability of its most populated province Punjab, these measures are necessary if a future free for extremism is to be sought. The discussion ended with a positive note and Ms. Simbal Khan thanked the participants for their engaging remarks and hoped that a policy framework would emerge out of such constructive discussions.