

**Book Launch**

***“The Thistle and the Drone: How  
America’s War on Terror Became a  
Global War on Tribal Islam”***

**and**

**Public Talk on**

***“The Thistle and the Drone: Relations  
between the Center and the Provinces”***

**January 8, 2013**



**THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES,  
ISLAMABAD**

Book Launch "*The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*" and Public Talk on "*The Thistle and the Drone: Relations Between the Center and the Provinces*"

The Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI) organized a book launch, "*The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*," and a Public Talk on "*The Thistle and the Drone: Relations Between the Center and the Provinces*" by Professor Akbar S. Ahmed on January 8, 2014. Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs chaired the book launch.

Director General (ISSI) Dr. Rasul Bakhsh Rais in his welcome remarks said that Professor Akbar Ahmad is one of the few Pakistanis who have attained international recognition.

Professor Akbar S. Ahmed said the drone became a symbol of America's war on terror. Its main targets appeared to be Muslim tribal groups belong to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, on Kurds in Turkey and Tausug in the Philippines. Further, drones are also used by the Britain against the Pukhtun tribes of Afghanistan, by France in northern Mali against the Tuareg, and by Israel in Gaza. Professor Ahmed said that these communities -some of the most impoverished and isolated in the world, with identities that are centuries old had become the targets of the twenty-first centuries most advanced kill technology. He said that drone embodied the weaponry of globalisation: high tech in performance, sleek in appearance and global in reach.

Professor Ahmad briefly talked about tribal societies. He focused on four major groups: the Pukhtun, Yemenis, Somalis and Kurds. According to Professor Ahmed, these communities lived by an ancient code of honor embodied in the behaviour of elders and over the centuries, orally transmitted from generation to generation. He briefly said that as the drone is an appropriate metaphor for the current age of globalisation, the thistle captures the essence of tribal societies.

Professor Ahmed also discussed 'Waziristan Model,' where Wazir and Mehsud tribes living there, closely approximated to the segmentary lineage system. He said that Waziristan Model posits three distinct, overlapping and in some ways mutually interdependent, though often in opposition, sources of authority: 1. tribal elder or malik; 2. Mullah; and 3. Political agent representing central government. Sadly, Professor Ahmed believed that all these three pillars are collapsing. He said that several major developments took place in 2004: 1. President Musharraf weakens political administration; 2. Military invasion in tribal areas; 3. Drone strikes; and 4. Emergence of militant groups in tribal areas. Professor Ahmed said that in apparently ignoring the cultural and historical context of the region, those assaulting the Waziristan failed to appreciate the principles of cause and effect.

Professor Akbar Ahmed also briefly shed light on the relation between center and periphery and the involvement of the United States that has fueled the war on terror. He said that the center and periphery are engaged in a mutually destructive civil war across the globe that has been intensified by the war on terror. No one is immune to this violence—neither school children nor congregations in their houses of worship. Battered by military or drone strikes one day and suicide bombers the next, people on the periphery say, "Every day is like 9/11 for us." He said that center needs to incorporate the periphery in mainstream. He said they are treated with great suspicion. We need to be sensitive regarding how to treat the people from periphery. He said we need to understand the mechanics of the society. We need to restructure and strengthen the basic three pillars mentioned above. He said that the poor relationship between the center and periphery is clearly not confined to Muslim groups but reflects a larger problem concerning the way in which the modern state is conceived and administered.

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Answering a question on how peace can be restored in FATA without use of force and do Taliban really represent the tribal people and whether they can be described as stakeholders, Professor Ahmed said that three pillars mentioned above need to be restructured in tribal areas. He said we cannot allow the writ of the state to collapse. Also there is a need of national consensus with regard to strategy of how to bring back peace in FATA.

To a query that how peace could be managed in North Waziristan and why tribal people are not given an opportunity to look after or rule their area, Professor Ahmed said that unless the government needs to devise a wise long term strategy, it is difficult to create peace in that area. In addition he believed that the government must answer to the long term demands of the tribal people.

In his keynote address, Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, said that the most significant conclusion in this volume is the disastrous impact of the US involvement after 9/11 with a large number of Muslim countries. In these countries, conflicts between the government and their centre of power and the tribal societies on the periphery were already quite serious. But with the US, war on terror and its drone attacks, these conflicts have entered a new and more dangerous phase. There is a need for a dispassionate and serious review of the US policies in pursuit of its war on terror.

In dissecting this conflict, the analogy of thistle and the drone is very revealing. Thistle is a sturdy and rugged plant and its characteristics resemble tribal values (love of freedom i.e to act without external constraints, egalitarianism born out of common ancestors and highly developed code of honor and revenge. These characteristics and their intensity correlates directly to the level of force used by those who wish to subdue these societies.

The use of drones against such tribal people is paradoxical and reflects total ignorance about the values and realities of tribal societies.

Mr. Aziz said that each chapter of the book then elaborates the themes into varying dimensions.

Chapter 3 describes Bin Laden dilemma; have to balance his tribal and Islamic identity because the tribal code called for revenge and Islam advocates balance, forgiveness and compassion. On the issue of killing civilians to take revenge, Bin laden stuck to these tribal values.

Chapter 4, deals with Musharraf dilemma. To establish the writ of state, he ordered the Pakistan army to march into Waziristan and crush the fierce Wazir and Mehsud tribes. In this desperate act to balance the need of the center and periphery, he overlooked the age old arrangement and administration structure build by the British to accommodate the essential needs of the periphery or the tribal areas. The long term consequences of this disastrous change of policies are still unfolding.

Chapter 5, dissects Osama's dilemma in balancing the paramount need for post 9/11 security imperatives with well established American concern for protecting human rights. Whenever this balance between safeguarding states security interests and the society overwhelming commitment to human rights, civil liberties and democracy is upset, the consequences are grave.

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Chapter 6, this is not the way to conduct or win the so called war on terror. We should therefore all ponder over Akbar Ahmed’s main conclusion that “America is fighting the wrong war with wrong methods against the wrong people.

Chairman ISSI, Ambassador (Retd), Khalid Mehmood, in his concluding remarks said that Professor Ahmed's talk was thought provoking, suggesting a new approach to counter terrorism. Professor Ahmed, sees ethnicity or tribal identity, under attack, as the crucial factor. Not the 'Clash of civilizations' but the clash between metropolitan centre and rural peripheries. Tribal system coming under attack everywhere from the forces of modernizing state, aggravated by the growing Globalization phenomenon.

In tribal code - pukhtoonwali - the linkage with Islam is only symbolic. At places it may be contrary to the Sharia law. At best Islam might be a contributory factor to Jihadist extremism but not the primary driver. He said that there are three hallmarks of tribal system: Hospitality, Honor and Revenge. In addition the Chairman said that according to Professor Ahmed, there are three pillars of Authority in the tribal system: tribal Elders - the Maliks, religious leaders - the Mulla and Political Officers - the Political Agents. All have or are crumbling. The Chairman further said that Professor in his book stated that Tribal people terrorized by the militants, pounded by security forces and decimated by drone attacks. This has provoked extreme response against the state, its representatives and its perceived patron - the US. Additionally, he said that peace and stability are not possible unless the three pillars of Tribal authority, with some modifications are restored. Tribal societies can be won over through political, economic and social initiatives in keeping with tribal frame and not by use of force. Force should be used as the last resort.

The Chairman further said that of course some things need to change: respect for the Rights of women, Amendments in the FCR which gives excessive and unchecked powers to political officers. Appointment of honest and neutral political agents who are sensitive to the tribal customs, traditions and codes. More importantly, we need to develop a strong counter narrative offering the affected people a life free from hunger, disease and ignorance, a corruption free society where rule of law prevails.

He said that use of drones which are also inflicting havoc on innocent civilians is not merely a question of legality and constitutional. It is above all a humanitarian question. The US has been fighting the wrong war, with the wrong tactics, against the wrong enemy, and therefore the results can be nothing but wrong.

In the end, the Chairman ISSI, Ambassador (Retd), Khalid Mehmood thanked Professor Akbar Ahmed for giving a highly enlightening and informative talk.

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