

BOOK REVIEW

Zahid Hussain, *The Scorpion's Tail: The Relentless Rise of Islamic Militants in Pakistan – And How It Threatens The World*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

As the global war on terror continues in the battlegrounds of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the relentless rise of Islamic groups and militants has drawn immense interest and raised questions regarding their evolution, funding and power to implement a rigid, militant-driven agenda. The book presents an extensive account of the violent insurgency currently being waged on the Af-Pak border. Uncovering critical facts about the blowback effects of the war in Afghanistan, the author discusses how it continues to affect the Pakistani state. The insurgency in Pakistan's tribal belt has fuelled discontent among the population and the rising tide of religious extremism and militancy has the Pakistani nation in a grip. With the government unwilling to take ownership of the war on terror, Zahid Hussain establishes that militancy has penetrated into the mindset of the urban and rural populace.

Hussain narrates a brief yet turbulent history of the Pakistani state and explains how the ruling elite exploited Islam to legitimize their rule and influence. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan paved the way for radical Islamic thinking to take root in Pakistan. The Zia regime, in collaboration with the CIA, launched a full-fledged jihad against the Soviets. This led to state patronage of seminary students who were trained and encouraged to fight the infidels. While detailing carefully the state-sponsored creation of Islamist militant groups, the author provides a deep insight into the implications of repeated military coups on a fledgling democracy and explores the influence the military wields over Pakistan's political landscape.

Islamist militant groups in Pakistan that function under different banners have gained strength and have challenged the writ of the state. Finding itself increasingly weak, the state in return has had to undertake military operations to reestablish its lost writ. Further complicating the crisis has been the government's own inability and mishandling of affairs that in turn has provided legitimacy to militant groups. Hussain also explains how the long-standing links between the Pakistan military establishment and the Lal Masjid clerics grew hostile due to the government's alliance with the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent military operations that ensued. He also reveals how the

loosely knit Pakistani Taliban groups converged as a result of the military operations conducted by the government.

Unlike other literature exploring the rise of the Taliban, this book stands apart for the approach it adopts and the insight it provides. The author draws upon his personal reporting from the frontline and his first-hand observations of military operations such as the Lal Masjid siege. Providing further context to his arguments, Hussain draws upon his interviews with militant commanders like Muslim Khan and potential young suicide bombers thus providing an insider's perspective and revealing the severity of the insurgency.

The chronology of events presented in this book is useful for those trying to understand the complexities of this war. Although the author argues that counter-terrorism policies have spread discontent and weakened the Pakistani state, the book fails to cite the reasons behind the failure of such policies intended to root out militancy and extremism. Simultaneously, U.S. drone strikes have led to a rise in anti-Americanism and as a result have increased the number of militant recruits. Drone strikes in the tribal belt are said to have been directly responsible for the creation of a new creed of educated, middle class militants.

The book provides a detailed and insightful account of the events that have taken place since the beginning of the insurgency and with great detail explains how volatile the Af-Pak region has become. While the blowback effects of the U.S. war are discussed, the required analysis explaining why the current military strategy has failed, is lacking. The book traces the current turmoil back to 1989 when the United States abandoned Afghanistan thus creating a vacuum that was promptly filled by the Mujahideen groups, previously recruited to fight the Red Army. The strength of the militant groups is illustrated in their repeated violation of peace accords and ability to readily regroup. The author concludes that the result is the weakening of the Pakistani state, which finds itself stretched thin, fighting an internal battle with the militants and waging a seemingly unending and unwinnable war on the global front.

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