

BOOK REVIEW

***Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero.* Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal. London: Reaktion Books, 2010. Pp. 352**

The book “Pakistan Terrorism Ground Zero” considers the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent relocation of Al-Qaeda to FATA as the square one of terrorism in Pakistan. Rohan Gunaratna and Khuram Iqbal have made a formidable effort to comprehensively highlight the issue of terrorism in Pakistan. Notably, the book provides key insights into the organisational and operational aspects of terrorist activity in Pakistan. However, undertaking a critical appraisal of this book, I find certain limitations and gaps in engaging with the broader narrative on extremism and radicalisation in Pakistan; a product of which is terrorism. Nonetheless, “Pakistan Terrorism Ground Zero” offers a valuable understanding of the terrorist groups operating in Pakistan and presents a narrative where, more than an architect, Pakistan is a victim of terrorism.

The preface of the book states, “If international community is to win the battle against ideological extremism and operational terrorism around the world, then Pakistan must be in the forefront of the battle”. This book published in 2010 finds more relevance in present context, where the Pakistani military has commissioned a decisive action in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). But declaring Pakistan as the epicenter and ground zero of terrorism is an over simplification. As mentioned on (p. 217) India ranks highest in the world for hosting indigenous terrorist groups. Does that make India an epicenter of terrorism? If not, than what actually makes Pakistan the epicenter of terrorism?

The world changed drastically after 9/11, and terrorism nowadays is a transnational phenomenon, with no boundaries, color, religion or creed. The War on Terror led to the invasion of Afghanistan and since then terrorism has spread like wild fire to the Middle East, Africa, and even to Europe. In contrast to the title of the book that projects Pakistan as ground zero of terrorism, the narrative inside views terrorism from an action and reaction prism. It seeks to internalise the problem, rather than externalising

it. For example explaining terrorist threat to India, Gunaratna recommends, “The first step towards resolution is the recognition that India faces a domestic problem from its own communities.” (p.218)

Rohan Gunaratna, who also is the author of the book “Inside Al-Qaeda”, underlines the role Al-Qaeda played in providing an ideological orientation to terrorist outfits in Pakistan. In addition, Al-Qaeda played a vital role in crafting a network of small, fractured groups into a formidable force, later known as Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The book establishes the fact that Tehreek-i-Tablian is a “non-monolithic” entity.

The book starts with presenting a background of the political economy of the tribal areas. The continuation of colonial legacies, lack of socio-economic development and sustained violence has transformed the social fabric of the tribal areas. The State negligence to address FATA’s grievances has instilled a feeling of alienation and disillusionment amongst the populace. Al-Qaeda and other like-minded entities exploited these frustrations and capitalised on these socio-cultural factors to harness public support in tribal areas, thereby; turning FATA into a safe heaven for terrorist groups.

The second chapter of the book is devoted to understanding of the term ‘Pakistani Taliban’ that first came to notice in 2003 (p.36). It gives an account of how societal *fault lines* were used to form alliances among different tribes. The author quotes Al-Zawahri’s marriage to a woman from Mohmand agency, which was undertaken to strengthen the relationship with the leadership of Tehreek-Nifaz-Shariat-Muhammadi (TSNM) in Bajaur agency (p.26). Under the tribal system TTP acquired cultural and religious legitimacy, and soon became popular by providing speedy justice according to professed Sharia laws.

The book provides a detailed account of TTP’s formation, its leadership and other affiliates. Furthermore it offers an insight into TTP’s military capabilities and its expansionist policy of forging new alliances. The book rightly criticises Pakistan’s counter-strategy against TTP that used military operations to attain leverage against these groups, rather than taking an all-out decisive action.

Another important dimension of Al-Qaeda's expansionist policy is its fortification in urban centers, and the classic case of 'Talibanisation' of Karachi. The book underlines the Political-Criminal-Terrorist nexus, which is operational in Karachi and has become a major challenge to handle for the law enforcement agencies. The on-going targeted sectarian killing has made Karachi into a battlefield for Shia-Sunni rivalry. Karachi also serves as a forward base for channeling funds and managing international operations and alliances.

Both authors undertook an extensive field-based research for mapping terrorist groups and to identify their characteristics. The fourth chapter of the book is devoted to an extensive profiling of these outfits with detailed notes on their origin, characteristics, leadership, funding, military capabilities and tactics, affiliation with other groups, and their ideological objectives. The book presents a comprehensive account of terrorist groups operating on Pakistani soil that include, Lashkar-e-Taiba (Let), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HUJI), Jundullah, Al-Qaeda and its various factions, Tehrik-e-Islami Lashkar-e-Muhammadi (TILM), Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen al- Almi (HUMA), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and most surprisingly Sunni Tehreek and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM).

The last two organisations are not categorically outlawed terrorist organisations, but registered political organisations. Though they are alleged of maintaining militant wings, still equating these organisations at par with other extremist terrorist groups raises question on the criteria of classification used by Gunaratna and Iqbal. Some of these also maintain a public profile and are actively involved in philanthropic efforts. In this regard, both authors remain tight-lipped and give no account of military's involvement, if any.

As one reads through these profiles certain trends and patterns start to emerge. For instance, most of these groups depend on criminal activities to generate funds; their ideological objectives derive legitimacy from religion and thrive on anti-American sentiment. They indulge in guerrilla warfare and are adopting modern technology for conducting attacks. For

example to planes and other Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were used by Lashkar-e-Taiba to conduct attacks (p.155). Also noteworthy are their ideological objectives that are inspired by Al-Qaeda's political philosophy and they adhere to similar war tactics, i.e. suicide missions. Al-Qaeda became a trendsetter for suicide bombing and others used it as a strategic weapon for spreading chaos and insecurity in the society.

The concluding chapter of the book, "Is Pakistan the ground zero of terrorism?" does not answer this question in black and white. Instead it builds a case, advocating that the international community needs to realise the complicated nature of war and give all-out support to Pakistan (p.260). Undoubtedly, terrorism poses a serious threat to Pakistan's stability and progress, and Pakistan has responded with unparalleled responsibility. The recent enactment of the 21st Amendment in the Constitution and the National Action Plan are practical efforts undertaken to counter this menace of terrorism. Still it took Pakistan half a decade to understand what Gunaratna and Iqbal transcribed in this book. The book "Pakistan Terrorism Ground Zero" offers a valuable understanding of the threat we face today and leaves the reader pondering what Counter-Terrorism strategy we should adopt. But one cannot be ignorant of factors leading to violent extremism and radicalisation in the society. They are a much bigger threat and require sustainable long-term strategy.

Ahmad Saffee, Research Fellow,
Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.
