

***Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban.* Sheikh, Mona Kanwal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.**

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Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban is the first comprehensive study of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as a movement and an ideology, evidently written by someone who has a very clear understanding of the complexity of the conflict between the TTP and state of Pakistan. The book focuses on conflict resolution in terms of jihadi movements, with a particular focus on the Pakistani Taliban. It is an astute account of the TTP since its inception in 2007. With a complex hierarchy, the author follows how the group has morphed into a fragmented one with different factions operating under it with diverging ideologies, which more often than enough has led to fragmentation of the group and emergence of new splinter groups.

The study is a result of several years of research, which the author, Mona Kanwal Sheikh, conducted in Pakistan through direct interviews with the key TTP leaders as well as common members of the group. In her work, Sheikh traces the events that led to the inception of the TTP and identifies the distinct characteristics of the group. She talks about the fragmented nature of the TTP, as well as the limited religious and ideological underpinnings that unite the group. Yet she points out that the TTP has never had strong ideological or intellectual roots (p.41). Talking about the TTP, the author states that due to rapidly changing alliances and leadership of the group, it is difficult to provide a ‘snapshot’ of the TTP and its affiliated groups. Despite being “a highly decentralised phenomenon, it is hard to describe using conventional organisations diagrams (p.29).” The author categorises the group into three distinct categories: Arkan – core members; Mutaffiq – affiliates and Hamdars – the sympathisers. While the TTP is the largest umbrella network, Sheikh describes some of the major

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groups that fall under the Pakistani Taliban – the TTP, Muqami-Tehrik Taliban (MTT) and the urban Taliban.

While she does not necessarily agree with the TTP's rationale for employing violence, she does, however, highlight the need to understand the mindset and narratives of the group, as well as their grievances and justification (if at all) of the TTP. A better understanding of the TTP's agenda and use of violence as a tool to achieve their objectives, according to Sheikh, does not imply that the group's violence is acceptable or should be acknowledged (p.187). On the contrary, by immersing into the TTP's world view, it can help policy makers develop a better understanding of the group itself, as well as holistic strategies to deal with religious movements, millennialism and terrorism (p.188). This approach, according to the author, is essential to find a solution to limit the spread of the group. For an effective political approach, it is imperative to understand the character and dynamics of the conflict. At the same time, she stresses the need for a critical self evaluation of the policies embraced by the international community and Pakistan; if there is a sincere and serious commitment on the part of the international community to break with the dynamics that uphold the threat of terrorism – not just the TTP but all terrorist movements across the world (p.194).

The author also highlights that her interaction with the TTP has reinforced the belief that it is essential to understand the logic and rationale of one's adversaries to effectively contain the conflict, and she stresses, the role of the academia in this regard (p.185). According to the author, the policies adopted by the international community have played a substantial role in sustaining the TTP movements, as well as the group's fears (p.184). The TTP's use of violence, according to the author, primarily stems from the group's fear of the elimination of Islam and the threat they perceive at the hands of the West.

Sheikh, in her book, refers to the TTP as a group that is transforming and whose future, at the same time, remains unknown. Even though the TTP's interpretation of Sharia and religion is unlikely to gain traction amongst the masses, the fact is that group is here to stay (p.188). While the group opposes the concept of democracy, their dislike for it has never been the group's main agenda rather the main justification for their 'war' against the West is mainly due to "Western antagonism towards the religious-

political autonomy of the Muslims.” The group’s conflict with Pakistan stems from the country’s decision to become a part of the US war on terror and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. In fact, Sheikh is of the view that the TTP’s violence is a direct consequence of the invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan army’s operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). She recalls a conversation she had with a TTP member, who clearly stated that once the US withdraws from Afghanistan, the group would ‘go to sleep peacefully.’ However, despite the withdrawal of the majority of the US troops from Afghanistan, the TTP is still at large and continue to target the government and people of Pakistan. Hence, unlike the Afghan Taliban, the TTP’s agenda is not fixed and alters with changing realities. Hence, while the future of the TTP as an outfit, is yet to be determined whether the group will become a part of Pakistan’s mainstream political discourse, solely lies on how the group is able to define itself as a movement and the manner in which the Pakistani government deal with it.

The author does not justify the agenda of the group or its use of violence, but she is of the view that military action also is not a solution to the conflict. She makes references to the numerous offensives waged against the TTP by Pakistan’s military, which she believes ‘made things worse’ as was witnessed in 2002-2004, when the military went into FATA. The author states that the militaristic approach employed by the government to deal with the TTP has only resulted in the ‘multiplication of Taliban movements’ in Pakistan. Hence, Sheikh is of the view that the only way to address the conflict for the government is to push for negotiations and keep engaging the TTP in peace talks. She highlights that the TTP’s agenda is a mix of religious and secular narratives, which “contradicts a clear-cut divide between religious and secular motivations of the TTP for employing violence.” This, she asserts, can provide the government an opening for initiating talks with the group. Additionally, pushing for peace talks, according to the author, delegitimises the ‘last resort’ narrative, the TTP so often employs to justify their violence as the only option since the government does not acknowledge their grievances.

Overall, the book is insightful and provides a balanced account of the TTP in Pakistan. The most interesting aspect of the book which makes it unique is that it presents the TTP not merely as the enemy and an aggressor but a group, despite all its shortfalls, as human as its victims and whose justifications need to be heard even if they do not enjoy popular support.

While the book may not offer any ‘sensational’ findings, but it certainly helps diminish the narrative, which are prevalent particularly in the international community, that all terrorist outfits are the same — and should be dealt with in a similar manner. While throughout her book, Sheikh opposes the violence employed by the group and feels that the groups’ justifications need to be heard even if one does not agree with them in order to find a solution to the conflict. The book is an essential reading for anyone who is interested in to understand issue of Terrorism in Pakistan.