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Recent attacks on Shia places of worship in Quetta and Karachi, a bold assassination attempt against the Corp Commander of Karachi, and growing unrest among Pashtoons following military operations in South Waziristan all suggest that some three years after September 11, 2001 extremist Islamist forces in Pakistan are resurgent, and are gaining in sophistication and strength, all of which poses a threat to political stability in Pakistan.

This brief addresses three issues. First, what are the root causes of religious extremism in Pakistan. Second, what has been done to date to contain extremism, and has it been successful? What is the extent of extremist threat to Pakistan and its surrounding region? Third, what additional steps can be taken to deal with extremism?

Root Causes of Extremism

Religious extremism in Pakistan has its roots in the Afghan war. The campaign against the Soviet occupation, and the subsequent battle for dominance in Afghanistan both radicalized various Islamist groups and produced an infrastructure for jihadi activism that supported the network of militants that extended from religious seminaries and recruiting nodes in Pakistan to training camps in Afghanistan. This network produced and supported the Taliban, jihadi fighters in Kashmir [Hizb ul-Ansar/Hizb ul-Mujahedin (HUA/HUM), Jaish Muhammad (JM) or Lashkar Tayiba (LeT)], and Sunni sectarian groups in Pakistan [Sipah Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) or Lashkar Jhangvi (LJ)].* These groups drew their followers from the same madrasahs (seminaries) in Pakistan's NWFP, Baluchistan and Punjab provinces (mostly from Deobandi seminaries), shared in the same hard-line interpretation of Islamism that was focused on jihad, advocated a narrow interpretation of Islamic law and vehement opposition to Shi'ism that represented a new form of Islamic activism, and in many regards was influenced and inspired by Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism.

The extremist network from inception had ties with the Arab fighters in Afghanistan that later coalesced around al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and enjoyed financial support of Saudi Arabia. More important it also enjoyed support of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which since the mid-1980s saw extremism as a strategic tool for controlling Afghanistan (giving Pakistan strategic depth), keeping India under

* There has also existed Shia extremist groups in Pakistan such as Sipah Muhammad (SM), but they were not tied to the same infrastructure of support, and have not been at the center of the extremist threat to Pakistan in recent years.

pressure in Kashmir (as was evident in the Kargil operation), and helping the military manipulate domestic politics in Pakistan.

The extremist network was also viewed as a strategic asset by Saudi Arabia in its attempt to contain Iran's influence in the region. The Saudi-Pakistani management of the extremist forces was designed to promote militant Sunni identity across the region that would be anti-Shia and hence, anti-Iranian, and thereby create a militantly Sunni wall around Iran that would extend from the Persian Gulf into Central Asia. To this end much was invested in madrasahs that would train a new breed of firebrand preachers as well as a generation of activists and militant fighters that would serve as the leaders and foot soldiers of the Taliban, jihadi fighters in Kashmir and anti-Shia sectarian forces in Pakistan. Although madrasahs belonging to all schools of Islam in Pakistan were involved in this enterprise, madrasahs associated with the Deoband tradition which is particularly influential among Pashtoons (and is also a force in Punjab) were most prominent in the rise of the new extremism. Deobandis who support a large network of madrasahs developed close financial, organizational and ideological ties with Saudi Arabia to propagate a militant and pro-Wahhabi view of Islam in the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor, and to enable Riyadh to project power in the region.

The extremist network became particularly prominent during the 1994-2001 period when the Taliban's ascendance in Afghanistan also convinced Pakistan of the greater fighting efficiency of jihadi forces, and hence their utility as a strategic weapon. By 1994 it was clear that the various Mujahedin factions were unable to work together and to control Afghanistan. The fall of Kabul to the Tajik Mujahedin commander Ahmad Shah Masud and his Northern Alliance troops too seriously challenged Pakistan's position in Afghanistan, and raised the ire of Pakistan's Pashtoons who account for about 15% of the military's officer corps. It was in this context that in 1994 Pakistan abandoned its erstwhile Mujahedin clients such as Gulbidin Hikmatyar and turned to the Taliban. During the 1994-96 time period Pakistan military was instrumental in creating the regional structure of support for the Taliban, and in organizing militant Sunni madrasah students into Taliban and other extremist groups for Pakistan-backed operations in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

The Taliban's control of large parts of Afghanistan in the late-1990s also provided the extremist forces of all hues with the ability to more freely operate, train, and implement their objectives. These groups included Arab fighters, but more important, graduates of Afghan and Pakistani madrasahs who shared ideological and institutional ties and in many regards represented different manifestations of the same phenomenon. These groups worked closely together. For instance, following the Taliban's capture of the Shia towns of Mazar-i Sharif and Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 1997-98 thousands of Shias were massacred by Taliban, Arab fighters and Pakistani SSP and LJ fighters. Many of these groups also shared fighters—allowing groups to expand and contract in response to the needs of various theaters of conflict. It is often said that when in Kashmir or Afghanistan extremists are jihadi fighters, and when they come back to Pakistan they become anti-Shia sectarian militants. Sectarian extremist groups such as SSP and LJ have routinely provided fighters for Taliban campaigns and operations in Kashmir.

By September 11, 2001 state support for extremism had produced a sustained momentum for jihadi activism that supported surging extremism in the region. The growing number of religious seminaries had created a large pool of extremists who supplied various jihadi groups with foot soldiers and also helped carry their views into mosques, schools, and various other social institutions.

The events of September 11, 2001 led to an international intervention in Afghanistan that dismantled the Taliban regime and downgraded the institutional bases of jihadi activism, but it did not reverse the rising tide of jihadi activism, nor provide the basis for absorbing the jihadi manpower that was the product of the rise in religious activism during the previous decade.

Deobandis had since the 1980s developed close ties with Saudi Arabia, and were promoting a more militant view of Sunnism in Pakistan in keeping with Wahhabi teachings. This trend would become more evident as Deobandi madrasahs became central to the military's project in the 1990s. Over a decade these madrasahs trained upwards of one hundred thousand students. Although not all graduates have joined extremist groups, they have helped provide the support structure for militancy, and propagated jihadi ideals across a broad cross section of society. In the late-1990s with the help of the military the Deobandi model was also replicated in other traditions, producing new groups such as LeT that hail from Ahl-i Hadith madrasahs—which are also close to Saudi Arabia. The madrasahs meanwhile were responding to financial incentives provided by Saudi and ISI funding in escalating militancy in their education systems and encouraging jihadi activity among their students. The military-madrasah combine accounts for the success to date of LeT, as well as Deobandi jihadi outfits such as JM or SSP.

The events of September 11, 2001 complicated the ties between the military, the madrasahs and the jihadis; forcing jihadis out of public arena, and disturbing the financial linkages that supported their operations. For instance, the collection boxes that dotted bazaars and were a staple of many shops are now gone. Similarly overt funding from outside through charities or financial networks centered in Persian Gulf states have dried up. Still, since September 11 there has been more money available in Pakistan. The flow of funds back to Pakistan after September 11 has provided many more domestic sources of funding that avoid international financial networks.

The Military and Extremism After September 11

September 11 changed the strategic scene in the Pakistan-Afghanistan corridor. Most important, it forced the Pakistan military to abandon its overt patronage of the jihadi network, and to accept the demise of the Taliban. The military also agreed to cooperate with the United States in the war on terror. However, Pakistan military's cooperation did not reflect new strategic thinking on Islamabad's part. The military's policy, at least until December 2003 when General Musharraf became the target of two al-Qaeda assassination attempts, was to only contain and "moth-ball" extremists—

especially those active in Kashmir—rather than eradicate them. The military distinguished al-Qaeda and the Taliban from extremist forces that are active in Kashmir and sectarian groups inside Pakistan. The military cooperated with the United States in suppressing the former, while protecting the latter. In fact, Pakistan continues to distinguish between terrorists (al-Qaeda operatives) and freedom fighters (those involved in the jihad in Kashmir). Pakistan also distinguishes between extremists tied to al-Qaeda such as JM or LJ and extremists that the military believes are free of al-Qaeda ties, such as SSP or LeT. Hence, the military is not concerned with all expressions of extremism, but only with particular extremist groups. Given the deep linkages between various strands of extremism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor, this policy has allowed various activists to shift from one organization to another.

The military has also showed greater lenience in allowing prominent leaders of extremist groups such as Azam Tariq of SSP, Fazlur Rahman Khalil of HUM or Hafiz Idris of LeT (both of whom were only briefly under house arrest in 2001-02) to operate in the open. Khalil gave a Friday prayer sermon in the government owned Red Mosque of Islamabad in September 2003. In October 2003 LeT held a large public rally in Muridke in Punjab, which was attended by an estimated 100,000 supporters and retired military leaders. The rally openly defended the organization's right to wage jihad in Kashmir. Key recruiters and educators associated with various madrasahs were never the target of government clamp-downs. For instance, Mawlana Shamzai (who was the rector of a leading extremist madrasah in Karachi, and who was an ardent supporter of JM and the Taliban, and had been instrumental in their recruitment efforts in Pakistani madrasahs throughout the 1990s) continued his pro-jihadi activity up until his assassination last month. Similarly, after September 11 extremist organizations such as SSP, JM or LeT which became the target of international condemnation, were allowed voluntary disband, and then to apply for new charters and operate under new names.

There was also little done to reduce the power and influence of madrasahs which continue to produce extremists. Although sources of funding for madrasahs and jihadi groups were disrupted, little was done to either reduce the scope of madrasah influence or to reform their curricula. Since September 11 the number of madrasahs has remained unchanged, and whereas their funding has become constrained none has faced closure as a result financial troubles.

The reason for the military's position was that while the military had felt compelled to cooperate with the United States in the war on terror, it did not view the American campaign in Pakistan's strategic interest. Operation Enduring Freedom had eliminated Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, opened Afghanistan to Indian influence, and brought to power a government in Kabul that Pakistanis view as hostile to their interests. In the absence of any security guarantees from the United States Pakistan has viewed the post-September 11 balance of power in the region as inimical to its national interest.

Pakistan's military leaders remain ill-at-ease with the implications of changes in the regional balance of power after September 11, 2001. They are also concerned with

Pakistan's position in the region once the war on terror comes to an end and the United States turns its attention away from the region. Pakistan views itself as more vulnerable to Indian pressure with the loss of Afghanistan. Consequently, Pakistan is by and large a revisionist player in the region—a power that has lost ground in the recent changes and has little vested interest in the new order. This revisionist posture has led to continued interest in extremist forces, which remain Pakistan's only viable instruments for influencing Afghan politics. Pakistan has viewed its participation in the war on terror as merely a defensive measure meant to protect its position and assets during a time of regional tumult, and also to gain from a tactical relationship with the United States, as it also had in during the Afghan Jihad in the 1980s.

Although in 2001 General Musharraf made a personal commitment to reign in extremism in Pakistan, his position is not reflected in the military's position as a whole. The Pakistan military continues to view extremist forces as an asset in maximizing Pakistan's regional interests. Extremism at its core is a military project that has taken a wrong turn. It is closely tied to the military, institutionally as well as strategically. This fact has been reinforced by challenges that President Musharraf has faced as a result of the military's continued presence in the center of politics. Although initially the Musharraf regime promised to uproot extremism, it is evident that the military continues to be part of the problem rather than the solution. The reasons for this ambiguity in the military's attitude are as follows:

First, the military in Pakistan continues to view extremist groups as an effective weapon in managing regional interests—protecting Pakistan's position in Afghanistan and keeping India engaged in Kashmir. The reasons why Pakistan used jihadis in the 1990s to achieve its domestic and regional goals have not changed. Pakistan was able at the time to perpetuate its regional interests by adroitly using extremism with minimal investment in resources. That Pakistan's strategic outlook on the Afghanistan and Kashmir issues has not changed suggests that the military is likely to continue to use extremism to achieve its strategic objectives. Islamabad has little interest in the current set-up in Afghanistan—viewing the new regime in Kabul as hostile to Pakistan's interest. Pakistan would like to limit Kabul's influence in Southwestern Afghanistan and to prevent India from gaining a foothold there. For Pakistan the ideal outcome would be a sphere of influence in Southwestern Afghanistan akin to the Iranian zone of influence in Herat. To achieve these goals Pakistan is likely to continue to rely on extremists to alter the status quo and promote Pakistan's position.

The key issue is how will Pakistan manage to balance its strategy of preserving its jihadi assets (and even deploying them) while supporting the war on terror, and how will it manage jihadis without that policy effecting Pakistan's own society and politics, and General Musharraf's goals of economic development and social modernization. Moreover, the military has continued to believe that it can best control groups such as SSP and LeT by maintaining a patron-client relationship with them—to allow them to operate under the military's supervision. Even when that control has weakened as is the case in the military's relations with JM and LJ, the military has sought to use extremism to fight extremism—which has helped the military in dealing with particular groups but

with the consequence of expanding the scope of extremist activism. For instance, the recent escalation in sectarian violence in Karachi is associated with the regrouping of the militant Shia Sipah-i Muhammad (SM), which has been a client of ISI, and which is being used in Karachi to put pressure on JM and LJ over whom the military has lost control.

Second, many in the military, especially among junior officers and soldiers are sympathetic to Islamic extremism and hold anti-American attitudes. The war in Iraq has only accentuated this trend. The presence of these attitudes in the military has made it more difficult for the senior commanders to more effectively suppress extremism without risking a breach within the military. It was for this reason that the military has proved reluctant to aggressively pursue extremists in South Waziristan, and was quick to publicly seek a truce with the tribal forces there after the failure of its operations in Wana. The problem is all the more sensitive as it has now become evident that extremist groups have infiltrated the military, and have been able to use intelligence provided from within the military to organize assassination attempts against General Musharraf.

Third, since he rose to power in 1999 General Musharraf has been primarily concerned with legitimating military rule over Pakistan and extricating the influence of secular civilian parties (Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Benazir Bhutto's PPP) from national politics, and was by comparison relatively indifferent to containing Islamism. In fact, the general continues to view civilian parties—and not Islamists—as the principle threat to the military's position in politics, and his determination to continue to rule Pakistan.

It was for this reason that in the elections of 2002 the military's suppression of PML and PPP candidates and change of electoral rules to favor Islamic parties produced a strong showing for Islamic parties in the MMA coalition. Still, the election results vindicated the General's fears as the rump of Nawaz Sharif's PML and Benazir Bhutto's PPP put together garnered most number of votes. Since 2002 the military has had closer relations with MMA in the parliament than it has had with those civilian parties, leading many to facetiously characterize the MMA as the "Musharraf-Mullah Alliance." For instance, between 2002 and 2003 when he was assassinated, Azam Tariq the leader of SSP—one of Pakistan's most murderous extremist groups that is responsible for the bombing and assassination of many Shias and participated in the Taliban massacre of Shias in Mazar-i Sharif in 1997—was General Musharraf's closest Islamic ally.

The reliance on Islamic parties to bolster the military's position and off-set the pressure from secular civilian parties for the return of democracy led the General to back away from contending with extremism including adopting policies for reform of madrasah curricula, greater control of funding for extremist causes, and constricting the ability of extremists to recruit, train and operate. The military's policies remained limited to dealing with only specific acts of violence and explicitly al-Qaeda activists, and leaving other expressions of extremism free to function as before. General Musharraf's failure to contend with extremism over the course of past three years is therefore

reflective of the political imperatives that face a military that is determined to control the civilian political process.

The time and space that the military provided extremist groups over the past three years has proved crucial in allowing them to reorganize their financing, to develop recruitment and training outside of the military's control, and to function with greater autonomy from the military. Whereas until 2001 the military had strong control of extremist outfits today some groups have deliberately severed ties with the military (fearing that it will eventually bow to outside pressure and shut them down completely) and have found means to grow and function independently. This has created a problem in that the military's dithering in dealing with extremism has served to augment its threat to Pakistan and the region, and contending with the problem today is far more challenging than it was in 2001.

The problem of extremism is also compounded by changes in Pashtoon politics since 2001. Between 1994 and 2001 the Taliban had largely served as an expression of Pashtoon nationalism. This trend began with the Afghan jihad and was later closely associated with Jami'at Ulama Islam (JUI)—the Deobandi political party that has a strong following in both Afghanistan and Pakistan's Pashtoon areas, and whose *madrasahs* were important to the rise of the Taliban. Although the Taliban was an Islamist force, its rank-and-file were all Pashtoos, and its center of power in Kandahar lay in the Pashtoon heartland. Finally, the Taliban's drive to capture Kabul was fuelled by the belief that Afghanistan must be ruled by Pashtoos.

The fall of the Taliban has been viewed as the disenfranchisement of Pashtoos before the ascendance of Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks under the banner of the Northern Alliance. That both the United States and Pakistan are viewed as complicit in this development has turned Pashtoon nationalism anti-American and also critical of Pakistan military's leadership. For instance, in the 2002 elections in Pakistan the Islamic parties did very well in the Pashtoon areas of West and Northwest Pakistan (and also Karachi, which is today Pakistan's second largest Pashtoon city). In many regards the Islamism of MMA and activism of extremist forces in Pakistan are expressions of Pashtoon frustration. MMA has been entrenching its support by manipulating Pashtoon anger, and fanning the flames of opposition to United States' policy in Afghanistan. MMA has helped create alliances between the rump of Taliban and other extremist Pashtoon forces such as that of Gulbidin Hikmatyar, who has been behind attacks on the Karzai regime in Kabul.

This is a source of concern in that it is suggestive of "Talibanization" of Pashtoon politics in Pakistan. Talibanization in Afghanistan meant extremist and jihadi activism. It also meant Islamization of Pashtoon nationalism. It is this meaning of Talibanization—Islamization of Pashtoon nationalism—that is what is at work in Pakistan. The rise of MMA suggests that Deobandis have completed their domination of Pashtoon politics and nationalism in Pakistan in the manner that the Taliban had done in Afghanistan. The Deobandi ascendancy in NWFP and Baluchistan and Afghanistan has in effect created an Islamist-Pashtoon belt that stretches from Kandahar in Afghanistan to Quetta and

Peshawar in Pakistan. The tenor of politics in this belt is extremist and anti-American. It is bitter about the disenfranchisement of the Pashtoons in Afghanistan, is hostile to the Karzai regime, and is increasingly at odds with the leadership of Pakistan military. The extent of this disagreement has become evident during the recent operations in South Waziristan. The Pashtoon belt will continue to supply extremist recruits, and as tensions with the Pakistan military escalate (and possibly anger mounts after the Afghan elections over consolidation of power under Karzai), Pashtoon nationalism can become a destabilizing force in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It can also impact the cohesion of the Pakistan military which has a significant Pashtoon component.

Another important issue is that extremism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor is becoming more overtly anti-American. Whereas in the 1990s extremists were primarily concerned with regional issues and saw the United States as a distant and secondary concern, today the reverse is true. Extremists view the United States as their main enemy and the principal obstacle to the realization of their aims. The United States dismantled the Taliban and is the main source of support for the Musharraf regime which some extremists view with opprobrium as an “American puppet”. Developments in Iraq, most notably the empowerment of Shias—who Pakistani extremists view as infidels and who have been the focus of much violence in Pakistan—has reinforced the belief that it is the United States that is the impediment to the realization of their aims, and the adversary that is most likely to threaten their existence.

Extremist activism is today on the rise in the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor. It draws on an entrenched infrastructure of support in the region, and continues to recruit from among the large number of students that have come out of madrasahs over the past decade (and continue to do so). It is poised to take advantage of instability in the larger region—possible failure of the Karzai regime in Kabul and growing anti-Americanism as a result of the war in Iraq. In addition, extremism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor is based on ideas that have resonance elsewhere, and as such can create ties with other extremist forces. Revisionist nationalism against the new political order, anti-Americanism, and anti-Shi’ism are all staples of extremism in Pakistan, which have an echo in the burgeoning extremism of the Middle East. Al-Qaeda and Pakistani extremists have shared ideas and training, and may well connect to extend their reach. Already there is suggestions that JM fighters may have found their way to Iraq. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s attacks on Shia targets in Najaf and Karbala have an eerie resemblance to attacks on Shia places of worship in Pakistan. The Ashura bombings in Najaf, Baghdad, and Quetta on March 2, 2004 are indicative of these linkages.

What More Can Be Done?

Extremism in Pakistan must be dealt with by both short run and long run strategies—contending with immediate security issues while looking to address underlying causes of and sources of support for extremism.

In the short run more needs to be done to constrict extremism. This would mean a blanket policy of opposing all expressions of extremism. The government in Pakistan must also do more to disarm extremist groups and limit the space for their recruitment, training and organization. The government must also take reform of madrasahs more seriously, and more effectively limit jihadi propaganda and ability to disseminate their ideas through newspapers and other publications. The success of these measures greatly depends on changes in the broader political climate of Pakistan.

A key issue to consider is that the military in Pakistan has only been partially successful in accomplishing its stated goal of containing—if not eradicating—extremism. One can excuse this shortcoming in terms of inertia within the military, and limits to general Musharraf’s ability to change the culture and strategic thinking in the military. It is, however, important to note that the fact that the military insists on ruling over Pakistan reduces its ability to contend with extremism, and in fact necessitates that it undertake compromises that benefit extremism. Far from the proverbial “bulwark” against extremism the nature of politics that is fostered by the military’s domination of politics has encouraged extremism. Whereas for the United States extremism remains the primary concern for the Pakistan military it is legitimating military rule that matters most. For instance, in order to secure the agreement of the MMA Islamic alliance (which is a major voice in the parliament and also controls the governments of NWFP and Baluchistan) to General Musharraf to remaining both president and head of the army in contravention to the constitution, the military relaxed its pressure on religious activism, and backed away from the reform of extremist madrasahs (which are closely linked with constituent parties of MMA, and most notably the Deobandi JUI), and also shied away from pursuing al-Qaeda activists in South Waziristan earlier. The military will be far more effective in dealing with extremism if it were not distracted by imperatives of politics, and was not duly concerned with political consequences of its security decisions. Conversely, civilian parties when not hindered by the military have done a better job of eroding the Islamic forces’ base of support.

To the extent that the culture of the Pakistan military is tolerant of Islamic activism, General Musharraf must continue to reform the military and clean it of supporters of extremism. Two factors will help him in this regard. First, a military command that is not encumbered by constraints of ruling the country will have a freer hand to address security and cultural issues within its own ranks, and to enforce professionalism to a degree that is currently not possible. Second, Pakistan military continues to view United States’ security considerations with suspicion, believing that in the absence of greater guarantees regarding Pakistan’s long run security interests it is dangerous to more forcefully confront Islamic forces and to remove the threat of extremism to Kabul and Delhi. Eradicating extremism would be tantamount to dismantling a weapons system without countervailing concessions from India or Afghanistan. The United States must address Pakistan’s strategic concerns as a part of the war on terror.

Much of the economic assistance to Pakistan since 2001 has not found its way to the lower and lower middle classes. In fact, even the salaried middle class is losing

ground as a consequence of economic reforms. The impact of economic restructuring—as witnessed in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and the 1990s—has not only made it difficult to wean away the youth from extremism and to absorb the products of madrasahs into the economy, but has created a convergence between socioeconomic disgruntlement and extremist tendencies. More must be done to make sure that aid directly impacts those social classes most at risk of embracing extremism.

Pakistan military must be encouraged to put forth a serious plan for return of power to civilian politicians. Opposition to “authoritarianism” is on the rise in Pakistan. It will constrict the military’s ability to contend with the security challenges before it, and it can provide extremists with the kind of environment that they need to recruit and operate more freely. The problem is likely to grow after a technocrat hand-picked by General Musharraf takes over the job of prime minister later this year, and the general backs away from the agreement he made with the parliament to relinquish his leadership of the military in December 2004. A confirmation of military rule at that time can lead to serious political instability in Pakistan with direct consequences for the security operations there. The main beneficiaries of such a development will be the extremists. The war on terror should not be a license for authoritarianism, for no more important reason than that it is likely to make the fight against extremism less effective.