

Al-Qa`ida's Resurgence in Pakistan

By Bruce Riedel

AL-QA`IDA HAS MADE a spectacular resurrection in Pakistan during the last five years. In 2002, the terrorist group had been driven from its base in Afghanistan, their Taliban ally was discredited and defeated and their key operatives were being hunted down and arrested. Today, however, al-Qa`ida has a secure operating base in the country, its leadership is issuing constant guidance to its global supporters, it is threatening NATO's position in Afghanistan through its Taliban allies and it is now a growing force in Pakistan itself. The current political crisis in Pakistan is endangering the secular democratic forces in the country, polarizing the debate about the country's future and strengthening al-Qa`ida's Islamist partners. Al-Qa`ida's room to operate in the country is expanding, not contracting.

The conventional wisdom is that al-Qa`ida leaders Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri are operating in the border lands along the Afghan border in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); however, there are many more areas of the country that are now increasingly out of the control of the central government and are essentially lawless. From Balochistan to Kashmir, much of western Pakistan is sympathetic to al-Qa`ida's message and remains an open field where they can operate. Even in the urban areas, al-Qa`ida operatives have been able to attack key targets, including military posts, with increasingly deadly results.¹

Most concerning is that the resurgence of the al-Qa`ida-Taliban alliance in Pakistan has created a safe operating base for the global jihadist movement to train and recruit operatives from Western Europe (especially from the United Kingdom) to strike in London and other major European cities. There is little doubt that they are also hoping to strike American targets.

1 As long ago as July 1, 2005, Ahmed Rashid pointed out that Bin Ladin could be anywhere from the Karakoram Mountains near China to the Balochi desert among Kashmiris, Pashtuns and Balochs angry with Musharraf.

Factors Behind al-Qa`ida's Ability to Regroup Before September 11, 2001, Pakistan and al-Qa`ida were in practice de facto allies. Both supported the Taliban and Kashmiri terrorist groups in a complex nexus of terror with which the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was intimately familiar but did not fully control. After General Pervez Musharraf took power in a coup in October 1999, he promised to crack down on al-Qa`ida, but in actuality he did little. To the contrary, in December 1999 Kashmiri terrorists working closely with the Taliban, ISI and al-Qa`ida hijacked an Indian airliner to Kandahar to free prisoners in India in an operation that underscored the intimate connections between Pakistan and the terrorist network inside Afghanistan.²

Al-Qa`ida and the Taliban were stunned by the speed of the collapse of their forces in late 2001 when the U.S.-led coalition moved into Afghanistan. They had expected the Northern Alliance to disintegrate after assassinating its leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and thought that Pakistan would stand by its Taliban protégé. Instead, by the end of the year Pakistan had withdrawn its logistical support and pulled out the thousands of advisers and experts that kept the Taliban war machine running. Bin Ladin, Zawahiri and their followers fled into Pakistan. An American-Afghan hammer was poised to crush them against a Pakistani anvil.

In what amounted to a costly diversion, however, the United States concentrated its operations on Iraq, and key Special Forces units and CIA operatives were taken off the Afghan battlefield and were prepared for engagement in the Middle East. The new Afghan government was left with only the leanest of forces to pursue its enemies and stabilize the country. Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Mahmud Durrani, has noted that "we had almost licked al-Qa`ida after 9/11 because of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan...But what happened? The focus shifted to Iraq big time. This was a rebirth of al-Qa`ida."³

2 Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2007), p. 238.

3 Durrani interview in "Pakistan: Fall Guy or Failure," *The Washington Diplomat* 14:11 (2007); See also the account by Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*

In addition, the situation in Pakistan changed. On December 13, 2001, five Kashmiri terrorists from groups long associated with Bin Ladin attacked the Indian parliament in New Delhi. India blamed Pakistan for harboring the terrorist leadership that ordered the attack, which followed dozens of others. India mobilized along the border, causing Pakistan to mobilize in turn; this development meant that Pakistani troops that were needed in the west were turned to the east. For the next year, almost one million soldiers faced each other in a nervous showdown.

It is not clear if diverting forces from the hunt for Bin Ladin was one of the intentions of the planners of the attack on the Indian parliament, nor is it clear who was the real mastermind behind the attack—the Kashmiris on their own, the ISI which had created them, Musharraf and the generals, or al-Qa`ida. Yet, the impact was critical. At its moment of greatest peril, al-Qa`ida was free to recover due to U.S. and Pakistani resources diverted away from the hunt. Some important al-Qa`ida figures—Musharraf claims more than 600⁴—were apprehended in Pakistan, including Khalid Shaykh Muhammad and Abu Zubayda, yet the top leadership eluded capture.

These leaders lurked behind the resurgence of the Taliban, which came roaring back. Operating with at least the tacit acquiescence of the ISI, the Taliban quickly recovered and rebuilt. By 2005, it was again in control of much of southern Afghanistan at night. Taliban leaders have consistently said that Bin Ladin has assisted them with their military recovery and, indeed, the Taliban rapidly adopted al-Qa`ida-style tactics. Martyrdom operations were not typical in Afghanistan; in 2002, there were only two in the whole country. Today, however, a suicide attack occurs approximately every three days.⁵ NATO casualties are up sharply, and more Americans have died in Afghanistan this year than any previous one.

(New York: Ballantine, 2005).

4 Pervez Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

5 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "Losing Afghanistan, One Civilian at a Time," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2007.

In addition to helping the Taliban recover, al-Qa`ida in Pakistan also began reaching out to Pakistani diaspora communities around the world to provide an effective means to recruit, indoctrinate and train operatives to strike in Europe and ultimately in the United States. The 800,000-strong Pakistani communities in the United Kingdom (1.3% of the UK's population, 500,000 of whom are Kashmiris) are the favorite targets, but communities in Germany, Denmark, Austria, Italy and elsewhere have also been infiltrated. Every major terrorist operation in the United Kingdom since 9/11, including the July 7, 2005 underground attacks and the foiled 2006 plot to blow up 10 jumbo jets en route to the United States, have had a Pakistani connection back to al-Qa`ida. The head of Britain's domestic security service, the MI5, recently noted that "the command, control and inspiration for attack planning in the UK (for the last five years) have derived from the al-Qa`ida leadership in Pakistan."⁶

Within Pakistan, al-Qa`ida has become an increasingly powerful force. It has tried to assassinate Musharraf several times and is stepping up efforts to remove him from power. In September, after the Pakistani army stormed the Islamist Red Mosque in Islamabad, Bin Ladin and Zawahiri each issued statements calling for his ouster. Bin Ladin said that "it is obligatory for Muslims in Pakistan to carry out jihad to remove Pervez, his government, his army and all those who help him."⁷

Yet, Musharraf is not al-Qa`ida's only target in Pakistan. It seeks to destroy the secular political leadership and civil society that offers an alternative to its extremist Salafist Islamic preaching. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has been a target of al-Qa`ida for more than a decade as she notes in her memoirs, and al-Qa`ida may have been responsible for her assassination attempt when she returned to Pakistan this fall.⁸

6 Jonathan Evans, "Intelligence, Counter Terrorism and Trust," November 5, 2007, available at www.mi5.gov.uk.

7 "Bin Laden Wants Musharraf Removed," al-Jazeera, September 20, 2007.

8 Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of the East: An Autobiography* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

Al-Qa`ida's goal in Pakistan is to polarize the country into warring factions, break the back of civil and secular society and ultimately see its allies in the Pakistani Islamist movement seize power. It wants a broken state, a broken army and broken political parties. From the ashes it dreams of an Islamic emirate emerging, which could unite with the Taliban in Afghanistan, free Kashmir and be the center of a revived caliphate.

This dream, however, is still far from al-Qa`ida's reach. Pakistan's political meltdown has not progressed far enough for the extreme Islamic groups—such as the Taliban, al-Qa`ida, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and others—to take power. Yet, the trends are in their direction and time seems to be on their side as long as the democratic center in Pakistan is suppressed by a military dictatorship. The best antidote to al-Qa`ida in Pakistan would be a legitimately elected government that could pursue the war against al-Qa`ida with the backing of the Pakistani people.

Instead, polls today show that Bin Ladin is more popular than Musharraf among Pakistanis and that the United States has an all time low popularity rating.⁹ Rather than being a bulwark against al-Qa`ida, Musharraf's regime has become a recruiting cry for it. By backing Musharraf, the United States may be losing the battle for the hearts and minds of 170 million Pakistanis.

For its part, the Pakistani military is extremely suspicious of the United States and believes it has been betrayed by Washington many times in the past. It is unlikely to cooperate seriously with American programs designed to increase the U.S. military presence on the ground in FATA, or to "secure" Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. As tensions inevitably mount between the U.S. Congress and Musharraf over his continued rule, pressure will build to constrain further military ties, and suspicions will grow within the army about American reliability.

Conclusion

It is disturbing enough that Pakistan is the real front line in the war against al-Qa`ida. The most frightening concern,

9 "Poll: Bin Laden Tops Musharraf in Pakistan," CNN, September 11, 2007.

however, is al-Qa`ida's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. Pakistan is the world's only Muslim state with nuclear weapons. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Pakistan has an estimated 50-90 nuclear weapons.¹⁰ The former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, George Tenet, in his memoirs laid out in great detail al-Qa`ida's efforts during the last decade to get its hands on a Pakistani nuclear device.¹¹ If Pakistan becomes more destabilized, it is likely that al-Qa`ida will make every effort to get one.

Bruce Riedel is Senior Fellow for Political Transitions in the Middle East and South Asia in the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. He retired in 2006 after 30 years service at the Central Intelligence Agency including postings overseas. He was a senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to the last three Presidents of the United States in the staff of the National Security Council at the White House. He was also Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Near East and South Asia at the Pentagon and a senior advisor at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Brussels. Mr. Riedel is a graduate of Brown and Harvard Universities and the Royal College of Defense Studies in London. He teaches at Georgetown University on security issues in South Asia and the Middle East.

10 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Nuclear Black Markets: Pakistan, AQ Khan and the Rise of Proliferation Networks* (London: Hastings Print, 2007).

11 George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).