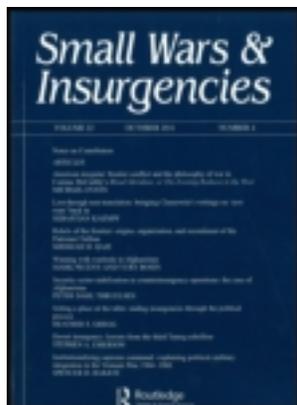


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Taliban and Anti-Taliban

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BOOK REVIEWS

Taliban and Anti-Taliban, by Farhat Taj, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 219 pages, appendix, glossary, notes, \$59.99, ISBN (10): 1-4438-2960-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2960-1

Few topics have aroused as much recent controversy as the precise standing of Pakistan with respect to the various insurgent and terrorist groups of South Asia. Farhat Taj, a Pakistani journalist who has worked recently in Europe, falls emphatically into the camp which finds Pakistan implicated – specifically, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – in much that is both deplorable and decidedly nasty. What makes the book worth perusing is that rather than ISI's alleged actions in India or Afghanistan, Taj discusses ISI-sponsored violence against fellow Pakistanis in tribal areas of contention, FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) and Waziristan.

Taj is from the former, and she uses her linguistic and regional competence to journey deep into the conflicts she assesses in order to make a number of startling assertions. Among these are: (1) Some of the West's most cited accounts involving FATA and Waziristan, authored by well known academics, suffer from an embarrassing lack of first-hand experience, as well as an unwarranted privileging of Pakistani (as opposed to tribal) sources. (2) The result is a consistent line which claims the tribal peoples have welcomed and provided sanctuary for violent radical extremists, when in reality it is these same tribals who are overwhelmingly victims of and have endeavored to resist the extremists. (3) Time and again, tribal efforts to mount self-defense have been betrayed by the Pakistani military and ISI. (4) The result is entire areas where traditional leaders and structures have been eliminated, allowing terrorist and insurgent groups to dominate economic, social, and political facets of tribal life.

The indictment is damning. Taj 'names names', cites dates, establishes localities, and is withering in her highlighting of the sheer improbability that 'chance' is at work as her subjects are often killed during the very process of her interacting with them. The common denominator is that they have endeavored to collaborate with the authorities in resisting the intrusion of armed radicals into their midst. There can be no doubt the process she details is at work. The challenge lies in bringing the circle round.

For the numerous facts and incidents are overwhelmingly a chronicle of brutalization and victimization. And the survivors indeed finger ISI as involved. Yet there is very little which actually ties ISI (or Pakistani regulars) to the incidents in any manner that would hold up before skeptical interrogation.

This is unfortunate, since there is no doubt as to the pressing nature of the subject under consideration. Media attention has certainly fanned the condemnatory fires

which have burned bright since the May 2011 raid that neutralized Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad.¹ Regardless of the high quality of much that the media has advanced, coincidence does not necessarily establish causation. As is the case with all significant media efforts of late, in making the transition from journalism to scholarship, Taj does not sufficiently consider two possibilities for the savaging of local resistance that has occurred within Pakistan: radical competence and state lack thereof.

Failure to give credence to the first factor surfaces time and again, not only in scholarship but also in matters of operations. The second factor can be broadened to move beyond only the negative. Incompetence, to be sure, could be a factor, to include rigidity and hubris.

Of more immediate concern is how thinly stretched Pakistani forces are in the areas of conflict. They are simply unable to generate adequate 'density' for the task at hand.

This is, of course, a difficulty of Pakistan's own making. Its continuing, questionable effort to portray India as its primary foe has led to both the deployment of most forces for that contingency, as well as a lack of preparation of forces deployed in conflict areas for irregular warfare. (One thinks of Peru doing the same throughout its life and death struggle against Sendero Luminoso, when fully 85% of the military remained deployed on the borders, ready to engage imaginary international foes.)

Also of Pakistan's own making is its apparent failure to take seriously the degree to which its forces have been infiltrated by radical elements. This returns us to Taj's key point. If ISI, in fact, is as involved with the continuing support of radicalism as the author and her sources claim, not only the conflict areas but Pakistani society itself is in a fight for its very life.

Note

1. Notable is Goldberg and Ambinder, 'The Ally From Hell'. The piece opens with the memorable lines: 'Pakistan lies. It hosted Osama bin Laden (knowingly or not). Its government is barely functional. It hates the democracy next door. It is home to both radical jihadists and a large and growing nuclear arsenal (which it fears the U.S. will seize). Its intelligence service sponsors terrorists who attack American troops. With a friend like this, who needs enemies?'

Bibliography

Goldberg, Jeffrey and Ambinder, Marc. 'The Ally From Hell'. *The Atlantic* (December 2011). <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/12/the-ally-from-hell/8730/>.

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