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Opinion Piece - Thinking about the 'Law of Unintended Consequences'

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The United State's now-not-so-covert drone based program targeting Al Qaeda (AQ) and Taliban commanders based in Pakistan's inhospitable and hostile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FETA) has been operational since 2004. However, US air strikes in Pakistan's tribal belt have steadily escalated over the past three years. The US has claimed that these attacks have successfully decimated core Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. This past September alone the US military conducted 26 drone strikes in Pakistan, racking up a figure that the BBC is calling the "highest monthly total for the past six years". Not only do these steadily escalating drone strikes raise some pertinent questions about US/NATO successes claimed under the rubric of the Global War on Terror (or if you prefer, the Overseas Contingency Operations) but they also shed some light on the deteriorating political situation in Pakistan.

In a classic example of what Peter S. Probst terms the 'law of unintended consequences' drone strikes in the Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa (former NWFP) and FATA seems to have achieved no more than strengthening the hand of radical Islamist movement in Pakistan. Of course, Pakistani authorities have had long-standing ties with various militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban. It is a well known fact that after the loss of East Pakistan (i.e. Bangladesh) in 1971, Pakistan took a series of measures to counter the perceived threat from both the Indian state as well as Pashtun nationalism. These measures included an increasing Islamisation of Pakistani society as reflected in a growing numbers of *madrassas* as well as increased support for various militant, Islamist groups that could then be used as proxies to safeguard Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and India. The Pakistani ISI not only played an instrumental role in the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan but Pakistan also politically supported the Taliban regime. Ahmed Rashid outlines how this support extended well beyond providing arms, ammunition and fuel to include economic assistance and the provision of military advisors and trainers. So much so, that even in 2001, ISI supply trucks were crossing the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan in what was a direct breach of US-imposed sanctions.

Since 2007, several Islamist militant groups based in north-west Pakistan have coalesced under the banner of the *Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan* (i.e. the TTP or the Pakistani Taliban). Many of

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these militant groups, once fostered by the Pakistani state, are now increasingly targeting the very hand that fed them. A direct result of this has been Pakistani military operations in FATA and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa undertaken to dismantle these networks. This pressure, along with US drone strikes in this area, have served to push both Al Qaeda's top leadership and external operations network as well as the Afghan Taliban out of Pakistan's tribal belt into the heartland. This also holds true of the TTP and various other Islamist militant groups. In short, groups that were originally based in the Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa and FATA are now steadily moving into Punjab and Pakistan's urban areas.

The fact that rural districts in southern Punjab are emerging as new sanctuaries and training areas is not surprising. For one this is a drone-free area that offers better sanctuary to Pashtun and AQ fighters than Pakistan's tribal belt. For another it is an immensely over-populated, poverty-ridden area with a deeply entrenched *madrassa* culture where local leaders tolerate, and even support, militant Islamist groups. Corruption is rampant, the population frustrated and the Pakistani authority exerts what can be best described as a tenuous hold on large parts of this area. In other words, southern Punjab represents both a sanctuary and fertile recruiting grounds for Pakistan's various Islamist groups. At the same time it also offers easy access to Islamabad and the heart of the Pakistani state in a way that the traditionally lawless and peripheral tribal areas do not. This is not good news.

Moving into southern Punjab means that AQ and the Afghan Taliban are coming into increasing contact with a wide variety of Pakistani militant groups. There is increasing cross-pollination between AQ, Pashtun and TTP fighters. Given that banned Punjabi groups operate freely across the Punjab province it is not surprising that they have deepened ties with both the AQ and the Afghan Taliban, which are also looking for new alliances and refuge in Pakistan's political and military heartland. Of course, Punjabi militants have a long history in Pakistan. They were first nurtured by Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s as proxies for strategic depth in conflicts in Kashmir and Afghanistan and used against Pakistan's Shia minority, which were viewed as a credible threat to internal security after the 1979 Iranian revolution. These militants also actively participated in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets and helped establish a Taliban regime in Afghanistan post-1994. Punjabi groups like *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Mohammad* (JeM) have conducted a series of spectacular terror attacks in the region, including the 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament.

LeT, for example, is believed to not have only shared training camps with AQ in Afghanistan but also contribute fighters to Al Qaeda in Iraq during the US invasion. The obvious outcome of such



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active participation in Iraq was that LeT fighters returned to South Asia trained in state-of-the-art urban guerilla warfare techniques and more ostensibly mimicking AQ operations. This was more than obvious in the 2008 Mumbai attacks where LeT moved away from its traditional frontal assault tactics towards the hallmark AQ-style of simultaneous attacks on soft targets. The ideological hybridisation between the two groups is also evident when we see the shifts in LeT objectives. Historically, an anti-Indian group active and fully focussed on a jihad in Kashmir, LeT has steadily evolved and developed global links and ambitions. Various counter-terrorism and intelligence agencies believe that LeT today has ties with militant groups in the Arab world and sleeper cells in the US and Australia. In March 2009, a British parliamentary committee discovered that LeT had trained an AQ operative involved in the 7/7 London attacks while various agencies believe that LeT also trained the Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad.

Closer contacts between AQ, the Pashtun Taliban, the TTP and Punjabi militants are the direct result of US and Pakistani strikes in FATA and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa. Closer contacts between groups like LeT and AQ in the Pakistani heartland translate into a whole host of new challenges for Pakistan – and concurrently new and more frightening challenges for both regional and global security. Local Punjabi groups that operate independently (outside Pakistani control) with a global jihadi agenda undoubtedly poses a serious threat to the political security and stability of the Pakistani state. But, according to some analysts, the threat does not end at the borders of the Pakistani state as Punjabi militants pose much greater problems for regional and global security than either the TTP or the Pashtun Taliban. A key reason for this is because as Imtiaz Ali, a Pakistani analyst states, Punjabi militants are on the whole "more hard-line, more fundamentalist and more connected to a global agenda". Thus, as they spread their areas of operation beyond South Asia they are emerging as a key threat to both European and US security. At the same time, unlike the Pashtun Taliban, Punjabi militants tend to be more educated and better informed and therefore more able to move freely across international borders. They are also better trained, thanks to years of working alongside AQ in training camps across Afghanistan and decades of state patronage. In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq they have also emerged as battle-hardened fighters who can more than hold their own against the poorly-trained and badly-equipped Pakistani police forces. In short, as these virulent groups facilitate AQ's infiltration into the Pakistani heartland and develop agendas independent of the Pakistani state, they promises to pose a more dire threat to the longterm stability and security of both the Pakistani state and world security. There is something to be said for thinking about the "unintended consequences" of our actions.



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