
Pakistan's Insider Threat

DANIEL MARKEY

Days after the May 2011 U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden in his Abbottabad compound not far from Pakistan's premier military academy, the Pakistani army made a series of disturbing and high profile arrests. A serving officer, Brigadier Ali Khan, and four junior officers were charged with alleged ties to Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), a shadowy Islamist organization banned in Pakistan whose revolutionary aim is to establish a caliphate and re-unify the Islamic world.¹ The arrests sparked rumors that these officers had planned to stage a coup in the disquieting days following the raid.

At the time, the Pakistani army was feeling particularly vulnerable. The world's most notorious terrorist lived in Pakistan for years, a feat made possible only by official Pakistani ineptitude, complicity, or some combination of the two. Not only that, but American Navy SEALs had flown a hundred miles in and out of the country practically undetected. Combined, the episode was an utter humiliation that exposed the top brass to criticism from all sides, including from within the army's own ranks.

PAKISTAN'S MILITARY

Any threat to the army is a big deal in Pakistan. Despite recent democratic elections and the rise of a relatively powerful civilian government, the military remains the country's dominant national political institution and the manager of Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal. This is not to suggest that

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the dominance of the generals has been beneficial to Pakistan. The military, including Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), shares more than a little blame for the country's slide into violence. Decades of army rule, most recently under General Pervez Musharraf, have proven that Pakistan's men in khaki are not effective stewards of the state.

Even when the army has officially taken a back seat to civilian leaders in Islamabad, as is the case today, the generals have called the shots on major defense and foreign policy issues, including Pakistan's support to violent extremist organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (based in Punjab) and the Haqqani network (based along the Afghan border). In addition, the military has jealously guarded its perks and resources that insulate uniformed personnel from many of the economic hardships suffered by

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to enjoy a more effective, consolidated democratic rule, the generals will need to loosen their hold and submit to civilian authority.

For all its faults, as a practical matter the military is also the principal bulwark against the many centrifugal forces of ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and political conflict that might otherwise tear the state apart. As long as the military itself remains unified, the

worst-case scenarios of a collapsed or "failed" nuclear Pakistan remain implausible—even though they cannot be ruled out.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES ON THE MILITARY

Pakistan's military has faced intense pressures in the past. Decades ago, in the aftermath of Pakistan's disastrous 1971 war and bifurcation (East Pakistan became the new state of Bangladesh), the principal threat to the army's political dominance came from Pakistan's politicians. Indeed, during much of his time in office from 1972 to 1977, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto managed to subordinate the military to his rule, but the feat was temporary. It ended with the rise of General Zia-ul-Haq and Bhutto's death by hanging, and it was never again achieved by subsequent politicians.

After the bin Laden operation, few Pakistanis believed that their relatively weak and unpopular civilian politicians could perform a similar trick. The current prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, is unlikely to take an aggressive

approach toward the military, even if he intends to assert greater authority over time and through stealthier means. Sharif's overthrow by General Musharraf in 1999 taught him the dangers of a direct assault.

For the past decade, the army has faced the increasing threat of a homegrown Taliban insurgency along the border with Afghanistan, combined with terrorist attacks throughout the rest of the country. The fight has forced a redeployment of troops from the eastern border with India to the west. Tens of thousands of Pakistanis have been killed. At times, the stresses of that war have tested the military's discipline and unity, particularly because its armed adversaries are often fellow Pakistanis.

Yet it should be noted that the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its allies pose only a limited military threat to the state. Despite alarm bells sounding when the TTP expanded its territorial control to within sixty miles of Islamabad in 2009, those gains were quickly rolled back by the military.²

Their highest profile attacks on military bases since then have been short-lived affairs. The Taliban can draw blood, cause mayhem, and drain resources, but they cannot "take over" in any real sense. Islamabad is not at risk of being overrun by the Taliban as Kabul was in the 1990s.

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THREATS FROM WITHIN

The external pressures on the Pakistani military are thus significant, but not yet overwhelming. Those pressures are compounded, however, by internal threats to the military's unity and discipline. The insider threat takes two general forms. First, there is the problem of anti-state sympathizers infiltrating the military and exposing it to violent attack. Fears along these lines were sparked in May 2011, when a dozen heavily armed TTP fighters raided the Mehran naval base near Karachi, killing thirteen base personnel and destroying two airplanes before being killed themselves.³

The most troubling aspect of the attack was that it bore all the hallmarks of an inside job. Numerous eyewitnesses said the raiders appeared to knowingly navigate the compound and wore military uniforms. The attack thus prompted a chorus of concern from the United States and NATO over the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. This is not to imply that Pakistan's

nuclear installations are easy targets for the terrorists. By all accounts, those installations are far better protected than Mehran was. Moreover, it is a far easier thing to destroy a couple of planes than to make off with a nuclear weapon. Even so, if insiders managed that attack, fears that more sophisticated terrorists could find a way to siphon off fissile material seem within reason.

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The exact nature and scale of the danger posed by Hizb-ut-Tahrir is difficult to determine. On the one hand, HuT has not taken credit for, or been found guilty of, any terrorist attacks either inside Pakistan or abroad. The group's leadership espouses a supreme patience, and for the time being, HuT seems content to gradually recruit high-ranking military officials and others who will be willing, when the time is right, to take revolutionary action.⁴ Nor can anyone say just how many card-carrying members HuT has: estimates range from the hundreds⁵ to "the largest single movement in the Islamic world."⁶ The dearth of solid evidence about HuT's strength and activities in Pakistan has led some commentators to caution against over-reaction, and even to question whether it might be an artificial bogeyman, concocted by the Pakistani military as a means to demonstrate, through timely, high-profile arrests, its commitment to purging the ranks of dangerous Islamists.⁷

Despite HuT's nonviolence, however, the potential threat posed by the group has prompted a crackdown on their activities. In May 2012, Naveed Butt, HuT's Pakistan-based spokesperson, was allegedly kidnapped by the ISI outside his Lahore home. Butt was not apprehended for a violent crime, as when Pakistan arrested Malik Ishaq, the leader of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an anti-Shia terrorist outfit.⁸ Rather, what got Butt into trouble was his Islamist message directed at Pakistan's military. His January 2011 "Open Letter to Pakistan Armed Forces" begins with the exhortation: "Oh, officers of Pakistan's armed forces! You are leading the largest and most capable Muslim armed forces in the world ... You must move now to uproot Pakistan's traitor rulers."⁹ And Butt is no turbaned Talib. He presents a modern and sophisticated image, sporting a short beard and Western-style suit as well as the dark spots on his forehead common to

Muslims who prostrate themselves frequently. His English is impeccable, and everything about him seems tailored specifically to reach a target audience within the Pakistani military.¹⁰

Alongside Butt's disappearance and Brigadier Khan's arrest, a number of other incidents have brought attention to HuT's activities. In April 2012, twenty suspected HuT activists were arrested in Lahore;¹¹ nineteen of them were later booked on sedition charges.¹² According to the police, these men were "professors, serving in leading universities, computer experts, textile engineers and chemical experts with M.Phil and Ph.D. degrees."¹³ Later, in November 2012, two alleged HuT members were arrested by the ISI for "hanging posters and banners inscribed with material against [the] Pakistan Army" in Rawalpindi, where the military is headquartered.¹⁴ And most recently, in October 2013, an HuT activist was convicted of "distributing objectionable pamphlets" in advance of Pakistan's May 2013 elections.¹⁵

It is unclear precisely what this string of arrests adds up to. At the very least, Pakistani authorities are obviously playing close attention to Hizb-ut-Tahrir's development and activities.

FOXES IN THE HENHOUSE

The bottom line is that anti-state sentiment seems to have made inroads, sometimes deep ones, into Pakistan's military. While there is too little information available to judge the immediate seriousness of the threat posed by Hizb-ut-Tahrir in particular, the group nevertheless serves as an example of the type of organization capable of threatening the unity of the military and, by extension, profoundly destabilizing the Pakistani state.

Given the prevailing trends in Pakistani society toward more extreme, often anti-western sentiment, the deeper and longer-term concern is not whether Pakistan's state will be toppled or conquered, but whether the foxes will sneak their way into the henhouse.

If only to gain some greater insight—and possibly a degree of warning—about this insider threat, Washington thus has an interest in maintaining a working relationship with Pakistan's military. As difficult and frustrating as that may be, given ongoing political and strategic differences between the United States and Pakistan, it makes a full diplomatic rupture, or "divorce," well worth avoiding.¹⁶ *f*

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ENDNOTES

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