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Islamabad, Pakistan: Factory and Sanctuary of Jihad, Inc.

By Robert Cassidy
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“By 2005 the Taliban had resurfaced in Afghanistan. American intelligence discovered once again that the Taliban’s activities were being directed from Pakistan while, as before, Pakistan denied its involvement.” - Husain Haqqani

“In its support of the Taliban, Pakistan was indirectly strengthening al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Pakistani militants were providing manpower for both the Taliban and al Qaeda and running a vast logistics, communication, and transit network in Pakistan on behalf of al Qaeda.” - Ahmed Rashid

The wars against Islamist militants inimical to secular democracies will not end until the West and its genuine friends forge the will to shut down the factories and sanctuaries that generate and sustain the most abominable strains of Salafi-Wahhabi jihadists.

For over four decades Pakistan has been a breeder and sponsor of Islamist terrorists. 20 designated terrorist organizations operate in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, while seven are based in Pakistan. These wars will not end until the U.S. and like-minded states shut down Pakistan, as the foremost producer of Jihad Inc.

Pakistan, with the abetment of a number of Gulf States, has been the principal, persistent, prodigious, and most pernicious producer of apocalyptic Islamist fanatics. It continues to be the most prolific factory and sanctuary for the world’s largest constellation of murderous militants,

for the longest time. To be sure, other states and non-state groups have contributed and continue to contribute to the proliferation of jihadists either advertently or inadvertently, including the U.S. with its nearly blind support of the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War, and with the unfathomably added decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Iraq catalyzed and attracted militants in excess.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) has been either principally or generally responsible for creating, cultivating, and colluding with the likes of the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Righteous), Hizb-e-Islami (Party of Islam) Gulbuddin (HIG), al Qaeda, and the Taliban, to name only a few of the most vile groups of zealots. Pakistan has been responsible for proliferating nuclear weapons technology to nefarious states. Pakistan's senior leadership has lied and continues to lie outright to our senior interlocutors, denying its odious duplicity. Just this April, in the same week that Pakistan's leadership dissembled and denied support of the Taliban and the Haqqanis to America's National Security Advisor during his visit there, the ISI was most likely complicit in helping sponsor one of the most egregious proxy attacks on an Afghan Army since 2001, when proxy terrorists infiltrated a mosque in Mazar-e-Sharif, killing over 140 Afghan soldiers.

The war in Afghanistan will not end, or it will end badly unless we muster the will and resources to compel and coerce Pakistan to cease its malign conduct. The wars against myriad Islamist zealot groups across the globe will not end unless we force Pakistan and other states to stop offering succor and sanctuary. Too much time has passed, too many people have died and suffered. For too long, The West has indulged insidious behavior from states that deceive with the delusion that they can work with us and benefit from our funding, while concurrently harboring and proliferating Islamist militants who intend to kill our citizens and undermine the Westphalian system of states.

What eludes sanity is that even while the U.S.-led Coalition has endured the mendacity that Pakistan has been doing all it could to support the war against terrorists, senior leaders and annual Defense Department reporting have consistently decried Pakistan's shameless duplicity, in open-source statements and documents, almost every year since at least 2003. A steady but candid motif has been that Pakistan's support and sanctuary for the Taliban prevent their defeat.

In 2003, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General John Vines, for example, publicly stated that Pakistan's sanctuaries were allowing the Taliban to regroup. A report about the situation in 2008 noted that the Taliban regrouped and "coalesced into a resilient and evolving insurgency." An increase in violence was then attributed to an increase in attacks emanating from sanctuaries in the Pakistan.

A 2013 report about the situation in Afghanistan just over four years later observed that Afghanistan still confronted an insurgency that continued to benefit from sanctuaries in Pakistan to regain lost ground through high-profile attacks. The principal reason why the insurgency persisted was that Pakistan's security establishment continued to sustain sanctuary and support for the Taliban, preventing the Taliban's defeat.

The most recently published DoD report about the security situation in Afghanistan during 2016 stated that “Afghanistan faces a pervasive threat to its stability from extremist groups operating from Pakistan’s sanctuaries.” It then explains that the greatest threat to U.S., Coalition and Afghan forces remains the Haqqani network, which continues to be a critical enabler of al Qaeda. Both the Taliban and Haqqani senior leadership “retain freedom of action from sanctuary inside Pakistani territory.”

Most DoD reporting also identifies the Haqqani network as the most lethal Islamist instrument that Pakistan favors. This network retains the ability to conduct high-profile attacks directed at Afghan and coalition targets in Kabul, with the Pakistani security establishment’s sponsorship. Earlier this year, the U.S. regional commander and the theater commander for Afghanistan stated before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Haqqanis were the greatest threat to Coalition forces and that Pakistan’s sanctuary was the biggest obstacle to long-term stability and success in Afghanistan.

It is clear that, if we hold what we have, in how the NATO Coalition approaches the complex strategic interaction in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it will continue to pay the butcher’s bill in Afghan and Coalition blood for the next 15 or 30 years. Dig a hole, fill a hole, dig a hole—the U.S. and its partners in Afghanistan will continue to abide a strategic stalemate, just as they have done for the last nearly 16 years.

When facing an insurgency compounded with terrorism, if the counterinsurgents are not winning, they are losing. The insurgents win by not losing. Our side has won many battles and succeeded in many actions, but this means nothing when facing a stalemate stemming from strategic asymmetry. Pakistan’s perfidy is the main reason for this.

The costs stemming from Pakistan’s treachery has been high in blood spilled, resources spent, and the number of years at war. Pakistan’s deliberate deceit and our continued hopefulness that the Pakistani security elites can be our friends will lead to more of the same over the next 15 years without a major change in how we see and respond to Pakistan. It would be hard to imagine a worse friend, and it boggles the mind that after attacks on 9/11 and before 9/11, with Pakistan’s direct or indirect complicity, the U.S. would choose to ally with the only country on the planet with its capital city named after Islam, the country that has played the singularly significant role in creating Islamist terrorists over the last four-plus decades.

Continuing to pay out money to Pakistan for its support in the war against terrorists while Pakistan, the enemy, is employing and sustaining its Taliban proxies and other militants to kill and maim Afghan and Coalition partners is strategically bankrupt. If unchanged, the war in Afghanistan and wars like it against Islamists will end badly.

Colonel Robert Cassidy, Ph.D., U.S. Army, has served in Afghanistan four times. He has written a number of books and articles on irregular warfare and Afghanistan. The works of Charles Allen, Chris Fair, Husain Haqqani, Ahmed Rashid, and Bruce Riedel helped inform this essay. The views herein derive from the author’s experience and studies, and do not reflect the views of the U.S. Army or the U.S. Naval War College.