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## The Pashtun factor in Pakistan's insurgency

By Luqman Saeed

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The influx of al-Qaeda to the tribal areas of Pakistan from sanctuaries in Afghanistan brought Pashtuns as an ethnic group under the intense scrutiny of political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists. The fact that al Qaeda and the Taliban were not just able to establish themselves in the tribal areas of Pakistan but successfully initiated a bloody insurgency against the US-supported regimes in Kabul and Pakistan has led scholars seeking to explain the Islamist violence to develop diverging hypotheses, some of which maintain that Pashtun culture itself contains an element that would readily use violence as a means to win a political causes.

Since al-Qaeda and Taliban overtly push religion to justify their violence and these groups thrive in some Pashtun areas that have their own religiously charged social outlook, some scholars see Pashtun culture as largely compatible with the political values propagated by militant groups.

It is true that Pashtun regions, specifically the tribal areas and in Balochistan, which borders Afghanistan, have provided significant numbers of foot soldiers to the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the main support has come in the form of students-cum-jihadis provided by the networks of seminaries that were established with Pakistan and United States funding to support the Afghan jihad during the 1980s.

These seminaries had been the main source of accommodation and education for the children who came as refugees to Af-Pak borders during that first Afghan jihad. This was the generation

that grew up in a social and political environment that was instigated by Pakistan, the United States and allies to support the holy war against the Soviet Union. This was the generation that grew up in the violent shadows of the first Afghan jihad. The tragic political fallout is a generation brought up to see violence as the only meaningful political approach.

Despite such stereotyping about the Pashtuns, empirical facts seem to speak against any general cultural trend that may explain some of the Pashtuns' support for religious violence. A study by a team from Princeton, Georgetown and Stanford universities shows that Pashtun areas in Pakistan are the least supportive of terrorists' groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This is because it's the Pashtuns who have paid the heaviest human, social and economic cost at the hands of terrorist violence during the past decade.

In one of my recent studies, profiles of 329 terrorists were collected from the Counter Terrorism Wing of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of regional police offices in Pakistan. The data describes in detail the demographic and socio-economic background of the terrorists.

Final statistics show Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is home to almost 13% of Pakistan's total population, contributed only 10% of the terrorists in the sample. That implies that Pashtuns are not over-represented in the terrorists living in the Pashtun-dominated province. However, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), another Pashtun-dominated region, they are over-represented by a margin of approximately 6%.

Since there are varieties of terrorism organizations which operate in Pakistan, I further disaggregated that data to determine whether there is any overrepresentation among Pashtuns in the case of religious terrorists such as Taliban or al-Qaeda. Again, the results show that it's the Punjab and FATA regions that contributed most to the sample of religious militants. Specifically, when terrorists, who are simultaneously affiliated with Taliban as well as other religious organizations such as al-Qaeda are taken into account, the share of Punjab increases to 78%.

FATA region is over-represented, whereas Khyber Pakhtunkhwa does not indicate any unique cultural pattern among Pashtuns as being religiously more violent. Even in the case of FATA, there is no uniform pattern to explain religious violence. For example, not all Taliban fighters in FATA condone that fight against the state apparatus of Pakistan. Also, not all Taliban condone the global jihad ideology of al-Qaeda.

Lack of any evidence for a uniform pattern of recruitment to religious terrorist organizations among Pashtuns implies that the roots of terror are not located in cultural factors. The specific economic and political profile of FATA further implies the necessity to look at the root causes that make some people give allegiance to violent organizations such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda instead of the state.

A report was published recently on District Education Ranking in Pakistan by an Islamabad-based team of education professionals who run the Alif Ailaan campaign (which aims "to bring together and empower all those Pakistanis who want to respond to the country's education emergency, and equip our children to succeed for themselves and for Pakistan").

They developed an index for the quality of education, the availability of infrastructure and level of learning. According to the report, North and South Waziristan, the two most affected regions, score abysmally low. That is just one statistic that shows the terrible absence of one of the basic fundamental rights of FATA people as supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of United Nations.

Successive governments of Pakistan, whether military or democratic, have been unwilling to abolish the Frontier Crime Regulation, an oppressive ordinance that legalizes the use of collective punishment, through which the state has ruled FATA. It is the absence of the basic necessities of life and any political stake in the system that has led some people to support the radicalizing solutions offered by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Instead of looking at cultural reasons and then fall into hopelessness about a political solution to the crisis, the war against terror requires addressing the fundamental issues that cause people to look to terrorist organizations for answers.