

# Radicalisation of the Pakistan Army

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A division of forces between the proposed Indian and Pakistani dominions and creation of a separate military establishment for the latter was necessitated by the partitioning of British India. An explosion of communal violence, triggered and later fuelled by the impending partition and the ethnic cleansing of the Hindus and Sikhs that preceded it in West Punjab, the mass migration of a very large number of population from and to Pakistan, the outbreak of war with India over Kashmir and the subsequent 'Crush-India' campaigns gave impetus to this requirement.

However, despite obvious religious and jihadist connotations, the founding fathers of Pakistan did not want the army to be overly influenced by religious dogma, unlike the new nation itself. Instead, they and the military commanders wanted to preserve the Sandhurst traditions in the army in the initial phases and later adopted the West Point pattern, ethos and practices. Senior generals like Ayub Khan not only appeared to behave like the erstwhile British sahibs, they wanted others also to follow suit. Sectarian secularism and not Islamic zeal seemed to be the guiding spirit of the army of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

There was a conscious effort not to allow a greater role for religion in the army than what had been the British practice. Religion was used to bind fresh recruits to their units through oaths and to indoctrinate them in virtuosity and religion, which was supposed to be helpful for maintaining discipline and cohesive military behaviour. However, this use of religion was never encouraged to go beyond this a restricted parameter for fear that any over emphasis may make troops more receptive to outside religious sentiments and movements. In fact, within a unit the Maulavi used to be more of a comical figure than the one who inspired awe and respect.<sup>2</sup> At their regimental centres, the new recruits were taught a brief and doctored history of Pakistan, seeking to condition them into believing that they were part of a nationalist (Pakistani) army and not an Islamic army. Islamic and Quranic injunctions were, however, regularly used to train and motivate them and inculcate a sense of pride in country's pan-Islamic links.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there were aberrations also. As far as India was concerned, religion and jihad became intermixed with state policies and functions. The new nation needed

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a strong diversionary factor to overcome serious and fundamental flaws in its political foundations, which were sought to be overcome by generating a thinly veneered religious frenzy over Kashmir and India. The Pakistani Army did not remain immune from this phenomenon and despite its secularist orientation it did not clearly disown the idea of 'jihad' in the context of its role in the 'Crush India' like campaigns. Religion and religious wars were invoked to motivate the soldiers to train and fight the 'Kafirs', i.e. India. The tendency to exploit religion to motivate soldiers for the anticipated war with India was not limited just to unit level formations, it went right to the top. On the eve of launching of Operation 'Gibraltar', followed by Operation 'Grand Slam', General Ayub Khan exhorted his commanders by speaking disparagingly about 'Hindu' fighting spirit and morale.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, General/s Tikka Khan and Yahya Khan freely resorted to exploiting the call of Islam to exhort Pakistani troops in erstwhile East Pakistan during East Pakistan crisis.

The officers of the young Pakistani Army were better educated and more westernized. They were also more aware of their country's affairs. This encouraged introspection, particularly in the aftermath of country's repeated failures to defeat India in various wars since independence and the final debacle in Dhaka (December 1971). Many of them found an explanation for this in their blindly following western military models and moving away from their own religious roots.<sup>5</sup> They tended to agree with Mohammad Iqbal that the problem with the West was that it had lost touch with its spiritual Christian moorings and in a future Muslim state in South Asia, such trends could not be allowed to manifest.<sup>6</sup>

This process acted as catalyst for some changes to give Pakistan a distinct Islamic orientation under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Rightist political parties were quick to utilise these strains of thought and forced Bhutto in acquiescing into ushering a few Islamic provisions in the country, which had their reverberations in the Army also.<sup>7</sup> The first visible impact of the creeping Islamic ethos was in the Officers' Messes where public consumption of alcohol began to be frowned upon despite the fact that there were many military Officers who never hid their liking for a few drinks. The new anti-alcoholic environment in Unit lines was in consonance with Bhutto's official policy to strictly regulate sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The mass compulsory prayers in a Unit on Fridays, a practice inherited from the British era, acquired more importance and became almost compelling events. At the same time, young officers began to question the established practices and policies of the military institutions. There were cadets at Staff College Quetta, who criticized the college and the entire Pak Army as having a "distinct aroma of subjugation suited to a colonial power", as seen in the College's emblem of Owl, restriction on Army Officers wearing Pakistan's ethnic attire of *sherwani* in public and insistence on western formal dinner dress at ceremonial dinners. The Officer faced no action for openly expressing such views.<sup>8</sup> Along with these open manifestations of swing

to the rightist Islamic influences, there were some more subtle changes. The most important being the decline in military bonhomie and interaction between western (read American) and Pakistani military establishments and, consequently, lessening in cultural western inspiration.

The creeping process of Islamization became an open and mass movement after Zia ul-Haq's advent on the national political scene. Many have argued that Zia's Islamization drive was perhaps as much inspired by his personal religious convictions, as by the political compulsion to create for himself a civilian constituency which could hold its ground against Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's popularity and mass appeal. His Islamization programme brought him closer to rightist 'Islam Pasand' political parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and turned their cadres into his storm troopers on the streets and campuses to keep PPP supporters somewhat countered and balanced. His Islamization of the armed forces could also have been a means to tighten his control over the Army and keep any lurking sympathies for Bhutto under check. This is borne out of the fact that during his 10 year plus rule, there were a number of botched up violent attempts to dislodge Zia from power by sections of the Army sympathetic to Bhutto and his PPP.

Zia's 'Islamization' programme took shelter behind Mohammad Iqbal's concept of "the religious ideal of Islam"<sup>9</sup> and was prima-facie sought to rebuild national policies in accordance with that concept. Under the ambit of this larger policy, religiously inclined measures in the armed forces were made more strict and enforced vigorously. Prohibition became more complete and officious. Apart from the usual Friday *namaz*, offering of regular daily *namaz* became the favoured practice. It was loudly proclaimed that Pakistan was being converted into a pure Islamic nation in accordance with the ethos of the Pakistan Movement and its Army had become the 'guardians of its ideological frontiers'. In this capacity identification of external and internal 'enemies of Islam' and liquidating them without remorse became the prime missions of the Pak Army. The heraldic slogan of Pakistan Army from Jinnah's days - "Unity, Faith and Discipline" was changed to "Iman, Taqwa, Jihad fi Sabeelillah" (Faith, Obedience of God and Struggle for the path of Allah).<sup>10</sup> For the first time the Army began to recruit madrassa products as officers and soldiers. According to a senior Indian defence expert nearly 35 to 40% Army recruitments at various levels during Zia years went to madrassa pass-outs.<sup>11</sup> Not only visits by Tabligh Jamaats to Army Units began to be allowed for the first time, no adverse notice was also taken if a member of the rank and file requested leave for going to *tabligh*. Observance of religious practices and beliefs became an important part of Annual Confidential Reports of the rank and file and became a major determining factor in career progression. The old and often ridiculed office of *maulavi* in a unit appeared to have acquired greater significance and relevance with his recommendations possibly becoming a major source of input for determining the religious conduct of personnel of the unit. Since Jamaat-e-Islami was a key ally

of the regime on the one hand and of the Saudis on the other, it could successfully make inroads in the Army ranks and became a medium for spreading radical Saudi *Wahabi* influence in it through the institution of Unit *Maulavis*.

The Islamic training and thought were also introduced as part of the training courses at various regimental and training centres in addition to the western oriented training courses and programmes. They, however, did not totally replace them. The attempt was to create an army with western operating procedures but with an Islamic mind and heart.<sup>12</sup> The issues of *jihad* and adoption of an 'Islamic Pakistani strategy' that had not been focussed upon earlier, became more clearly defined and integrated with the country's military strategies. Such strategies did not require western military concepts and technologies to be completely abandoned, but to develop a synthesis of Islamic and western theories of warfare by rejecting, or radically interpreting, basic tenets of western military thoughts. Some attempts were made to interpret *Quran* and *Sunnah* to develop Islamic doctrines of war and strategy. A number of serving and retired military officers emerged who regularly wrote on tactical and strategic aspects of famous Islamic battles and relationship between Islam and Pakistan's evolving strategic doctrines.

The best example of the impact of new Islamic concepts of warfare on the prevailing Pakistani military doctrine and strategies comes from the book 'Quranic Concepts of War' by Brig. (then serving) S.K. Malik. The significance of this book and its theories should be obvious from the fact that it had a foreword by Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and a preface by Zia's chief legal adviser A.K. Brohi. According to Malik, Islam divided the world into two camps – the *Dar-ul Islam* (the world of Islam in which the people had submitted to *Allah* and his commandments) and the *Dar-ul Harb* (in which people were still defiant of *Allah* and the *Quran*). As a result, repeated conflicts between the believers and the non-believers became inevitable, until the latter were made subservient to *Allah*. While Islam placed certain restrictions on use of force in a war, it did not visualize a war being prosecuted with half hearted efforts. While initially Muslims were granted the permission to fight in self-defence, with passage of time they were ordained to fight in support of *jihad* which had become a religious duty and obligation.

One of the most crucial aspects of Malik's work was the emphasis he laid on the requisite preparation before a military conflict began. In this aspect of *jihad*, non-military section of the Muslim society had an important role to play and make any war against the *Kafirs* a total war. It was in the ambit of this idea of total war that use of "terror" was integrated with the new military doctrine.<sup>13</sup> "Terror struck into the hearts of the enemies is not only a means, it is the end in itself", Malik contended with quotations from *Quran*.<sup>14</sup> He repeatedly emphasised the place "terror" occupied in military strategy and suggested that terror should be instilled in the heart of enemy to such an extent that it psychologically weakened him so

much that no military conflict might be necessary. Naturally enough, Malik never missed an opportunity to cite India as an example in propounding his treatise. 1971 war and the detentions of Pakistani POWs in India were the important sore-points with him.

Zia recommended a serious study of the work by soldiers and civilians alike. According to him, *jihad* did not concern just an Islamic Army, citizens of an Islamic state too had an equally important role to play in it. He hoped that Malik's book would go a long way towards making everybody, particularly the civilians, understand the importance of their contributions. A.K. Brohi, in his preface, stated that the book made it clear that the unbeliever – the “cancerous malformation” – must be removed from the world through “surgical means”, if necessary.

The integration of “terror” into military concepts of war and strategy and involvement of civilians in a total holy war naturally led to evolution of the idea of non-state players who could be acting in concert with the military as part of their pre-action preparations, including striking “terror” in the hearts of the enemy. The launching of various civilian militant groups during Zia-ul Haq's time could be traced to the evolution of this military doctrine. *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan* (SSP) and its militant wing the *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* were floated to quell Shiite and Christian opposition to pro-Sunni Islamization measures and the promulgation of Blasphemy Law, respectively. Pretty soon this doctrine of “terror” was married to 1976 White Paper on Kashmir<sup>15</sup> brought out by Z.A. Bhutto regime and Kashmir specific terror groups were launched, beginning with JKLF and then JI floated *Hizb-ul Mujahideen* and others.

The integration of terrorist operations by civilian participants in a total war gained pan-Islamic and even western acceptance and support during the Afghan Jihad against the Soviets. Pakistan's political parties and NGOs with pan-Islamic links, particularly the *Jamaat-e-Islami* became important cogs in the wheel of pan-Islamic effort to bring in volunteers and resources to sustain the *jihad* against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. They developed strong links with hard line and radical Islamic groups from Morocco to Philippines and acted in close concert with Saudi pan-Islamic groups like the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). Since they were acting under overall direction of the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence and the GHQ, the latter also developed important linkages with radical Islamic groups active in different parts of the world. The US and other western countries, seeking to ‘bleed Soviet Union white’ in Afghanistan acquiesced with the Pakistani approach and gave a modicum of international acceptability and recognition to its concept of total war and the involvement of non-state players with it. This continued even after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan until the first attack on the World Trade Centre in the early 90s. The emergence of Taliban regime in

Kabul and the close association with Al-Qaeda further alarmed the west and many began to question Pakistani military concepts and strategies.

In the post-Zia period in Pakistan there appeared to be not much change in the process of Islamization of armed forces. If anything, Mirza Aslam Beg, Zia's successor in Army, appeared to be taking the theory of total war to new heights by adding the concept of "strategic depth" for Pakistan in Afghanistan and the *Zerb-e-Momin* like exercises. According to Pakistani author Hassan Abbas, Beg did make a presentation to Benazir Bhutto (who had become the Prime minister of Pakistan through the post-Zia 1988 elections) on a military plan to attack Kashmir through a combined and concerted operation of the *jihadi* groups and the Pakistan Army. The *jihadi* groups were supposed to sufficiently disrupt Indian Army's deployment and supply lines and demoralise the normal administrative machinery through terrorist incidents before the Pak Army launched its massive blow (*Zerb*) to settle the Kashmir issue. Benazir Bhutto vetoed the plan out of fear that this would trigger an all-out Indo-Pak war.<sup>16</sup>

In the subsequent period there appeared to be a lessening in Islamic ardour in regulating life in the army garrisons. According to a knowledgeable observer of the Pakistani scene, by the time General Jehangir Karamat took-over as the COAS, many of the Islamic measures had been watered down in the Army. The column on observance of religious practices by rank and file had been reduced in importance and was no longer a key criterion to decide career progression. Similarly, according to another knowledgeable observer of Pakistani scene, the emphasis on offering regular namaz in a unit had come down to the level of personal predilection of a unit CO. If the CO was very religious minded, namaz congregations under his command continued to be compelling events. However, if the CO was not very particular, attendance in namaz congregations had become a matter of choice. A conscious effort had commenced much before General Musharraf became COAS and took over power in Pakistan, to reduce the influence of religious organisations in Pakistani Armed Forces. Practices like soldiers going for *tabligh* were no longer being encouraged. Officers and rank recruited during Islamization years were being carefully examined before being given key postings.

Yet, the policy of marrying jihadi activities of non-state players with the operational doctrine of the military appear to have been continuing and had impacted on religious and Jihadist orientation of the rank and file. Despite attempts to weed out or segregate religious hard liners, there were many officers who secretly colluded with Islamic hard liners. In 2010 a few retired and serving military officers were arrested and court marshalled for passing on information relating to Shamsi air-base in Baluchistan from where US drone flights were being launched against targets in FATA and adjoining areas of Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>. It may also be noted that despite efforts to screen out Islamic radicals from the ranks of the Pakistani

Armed Forces, at least one of the attempts on Musharraf's life was plotted in the Air Force barracks in Islamabad and was carried out by Army soldiers hailing from the Tribal Areas. According to knowledgeable European and Pakistani experts having direct interaction with the Pakistani armed forces, who have spoken on condition of anonymity, the Pakistan Army's top brass is very concerned about the penetration of the radical influence in the Army's rank and file.

A fairly large section of the soldiery and many officers going up to the rank of Brigadiers harbour strong radical views and cannot be trusted to vigorously confront the Jihadists in the society, who despite having been initially reared and supported by the Army, have now gone under the Al-Qqida influence. Nothing underlines this shift better than the killings of Col. (Retd.) Sultan Amir *alias* 'Col. Imam' and Sqn. Ldr. Khalid Khwaja, ISI's main contacts and 'Advisers' with Taliban, in January 2011.<sup>18</sup> They were kidnapped in April 2010 along with a Pak origin British journalist Asad Qureishi while on a mission to patch up between the TTP leadership and the ISI/Pak Army and later possibly open a dialogue with the Americans. While the ISI retains the hope to revive links with them at some stage in future due to their common religious links, past association and the common anti-India factor, Pakistani observers who have had close interaction with most TTP leaders feel that even though many Islamic radicals may not be willing to confront the Pak Army in a direct fight due to the Islamic factor and the fear of Army reprisals against them, they are unwilling to cooperate with it. They are not willing to join hands with the Pakistan Army, but wish its destruction through sabotage and subversion of loyalties. Beheading of the captured Pakistani soldiers and officers by some elements of the TTP and the silence of all others over it is indicative of the rift that has come to exist between the Jihadists and the Pakistan Army. The militant strike on Pakistan Navy's Aviation base at Mehran near Karachi, the hostile reaction in the Army to US raid on Osama bin-Laden in Abbottabad are all close reminders of the increasing radicalization of the Pakistani Army, which, according to Pervez Hoodbhoy, the leading Pakistani physicist and thinker, may already be vertically split between jihadist and the traditionalists.<sup>19</sup>

Pakistan Army, like the Pakistani nation, is at the cross-roads. They both have nurtured and unleashed forces they can not control now. Too much emphasis on religion at the cost of a balanced approach to nation building encouraged sectarianism and eventually radicalised the society on theological lines. The sectarian pulls and pressures have now deepened the theological fault-lines to such an extent that there are serious doubts about continuation of Pakistan in its present political/constitutional format. On its part the Army, which appeared to be the only surviving national institution in the country, has itself taken a sharp turn towards religious dogma from Zia-ul Haq's time and now finds it difficult to truly and comprehensively reverse the trend. The non-state players whom it created as its operational allies have now turned against it and there is now a

sense of nervousness in taking them on. Various other political and administrative apparatus of the state having failed to successfully reach out to Islamic radicals of *Deobandi/Al-Qqida* variety, the Pakistan Army was seen as the ultimate institution which could thwart them.

Pakistan Army today does not appear to be as professional, secularist and non-sectarian as it used to be in the past. Nor it has a strategy, or the mindset to deal with this problem. Army's plans to keep the Islamic radicals at bay for the present through the traditional 'iron-fisted' response (as was done in Baluchistan and in erstwhile East Pakistan) and then let the time smoothen the ruffled feathers, does not seem to be producing the expected results. Recruitment data from the GHQ shows that since the 1970s recruitment process has moved from the traditional districts to new cities and urbanised communities that are cash rich thanks to inflow of Gulf remittances. The new found affluence of these centres, particularly in Punjab, has created a new and relatively deprived class of people living on the fringes of these areas, who have increasingly become the new recruiting ground for the Army due to the economic and social benefits flowing from it rather than the traditional military values. Islamic radical groups have also been active in them and radiate their influence into the Army through their 'boys' joining the Army often on active encouragement.<sup>20</sup>

Apparently, this gradually transforming Pakistan Army has changed so much by now that any prospect of the traditionalists regaining full control over it does not inspire much hope. The number of radical elements in Pak Army has steadily been increasing even after Zia period, periodic exercises to weed such elements out notwithstanding. Whichever direction the Pakistan Army, and the nation, take from this crossroad, they seem destined to pay a heavy price for their forays into religious affairs. The first scenario is that Pakistan Army's conflict with Islamic radicals continues unabated as per the current trend. This would entail paying a heavy cost in terms of resources and lives and severely eroding its efficacy and structure. Yet, the Islamists remain untamed, leading to drastically change the present contours of the Pakistani nation. The other scenario is that Army is forced by circumstances to change its India-centric mindset, it substantially pulls out its forces from the Eastern borders and takes on the Islamists with total resources and determination. This may broadly preserve the Pakistan as we know it today. But the cost of this achievement would again be too high and may also force the Pakistan Army to change its complexion. The decision which direction events take is in the hands of Allah and the Army.

## Notes:

- 1 Cloughley, Brian, *A History of the Pakistan Army: Wars and Insurrections*, Karachi, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.27-30.
- 2 Cohen, Stephen, *The Pakistan Army*, Karachi, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Wolpert, Zulfi, S., *Bhutto of Pakistan: His Life and Times*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- 5 This phenomenon could be compared with the beginning of Islamic renaissance in Egypt that was triggered by repeated defeats of the 'nationalist and socialist' Egyptian Army at the hands of Israelis who were firmly rooted in Judaism and its spirit.
- 6 Iqbal, Mohammad, *Islamic Modernism*.
- 7 Cohen, *The Pakistan Army*, Op. Cit.
- 3 Ibid.
- 9 Bary, Theodore De, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, compilation of essays, New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.
- 10 Nawaz, Shuza, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- 11 Lt. Gen. (Retired) Shankar Prasad in a TV interview on 'Times Now' on March 2, 2011.
- 13 Kanwal, Gurmeet and Ghosh, Samarjit, "Misinterpreting *Quran* to justify *Jihad*", *CLAWS, Issue Brief*, No. 13, December 2009.
- 14 Malik, S.K., *The Quranic Concept of War*, New Delhi: Himalayan Books, 1986.
- 15 The 1976 White Paper on Kashmir set-out future Kashmir policy in the light of an analysis of past events. It propounded the thesis that Pakistan's efforts should primarily focus on encouraging notions of Kashmiri separatism on the basis of religion, nurture a feeling of alienation and resentment against India in Kashmiri masses, which should lead to a home grown separatist movement. This movement should be militarised and when the internal conflict in Kashmir intensified, draw international attention to it and prepare a ground for 'legitimate' Pakistani intervention into the turmoil.
- 16 Nawaz, Shuza, *Crossed Swords*, Op. Cit. According to Hassan Abbas, also this plan was once initially floated during Zia-ul-Haq's period. Zia rejected it outright as it would have led to a full-scale war with India. The plan however continued to resurface time and again until General Musharraf gave it the go ahead and the Kargil war ensued. Abbas, Hassan, *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror*, New York: M E Sharpe Inc, 1st edition, 2004.
- 17 Available at [www.nation.com/pk08/07/2010](http://www.nation.com/pk08/07/2010).
- 18 *The News*, online edition, April 22, 2010; *Daily News*, online edition, January 24, 2011.
- 19 *Viewpointonline*, August 12, 2011.
- 20 Nawaz, Shuza, *Crossed Swords*, Op. Cit.; And, Haqqani, Hussein, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and The Military*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.