

Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of Pakistani Taliban, by Mona Kanwal Sheikh, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 212

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In the recent past, several Islamist movements promising to re-establish the pristine political system dating back to the days of the Prophet have captured the mind of believers. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is one such movement that grew out of the resentment against the established religious parties' failure to implement sharia, coupled with Pakistan's decision to join the war on terror which fuelled religious anxiety that this war was aimed against Islam. Significantly, many Islamists have looked at the erstwhile Taliban regime in Afghanistan as an ideal model to be emulated and replicated. While the Afghan Taliban was a protégé of the Pakistani state and was nurtured in seminaries in Pakistan, the TTP—an umbrella group of smaller jihadi groups operating in the country's tribal area—from its very birth in 2007 was against the state and the army. Several available literatures trace the journey of these radical Islamists operating in the Af-Pak region. While the international community was focused on al-Qaeda and its various protagonists in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan—and later had to contend with the extreme radicalism exhibited by the Islamic State—the Pakistani Taliban was seen as local groups of militants who had a limited agenda against the state and did not have global agenda, though some of its constituents did nurse global ambitions. However, the TTP has posed the greatest challenge to the Pakistani state, forcing it to engage in

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counter-insurgency operations which witnessed several military reverses till finally achieving some success.

Several studies have been published recently that focus on some of the dreaded terrorist groups operating from Pakistan. For example, Farhat Taj's book, *Taliban and Anti-Taliban*,¹ brings out the state collusion in establishing anti-Taliban *lashkars* thereby militarising the society; and Taj's second book, *The Real Pashtun Question*,² is inspired by the narrative that the Taliban are Pashtuns, implying that Pashtuns are terrorists. In this book, Taj not only demolishes this narrative but also provides a glimpse into the society where the Taliban operated with ease. Another study on the subject is the article by Khuram Iqbal and Sara de Silva on 'Terrorist Lifecycles: A Case Study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan'.³ Similarly, Stephel Tankel's *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Toiba*,⁴ Arif Jamali's *Call for Transnational Jihad*⁵ and Salim Shehzad's *Inside Al-Qaeda and Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and Taliban*⁶ are some of the books that provide in-depth analyses of various terrorist groups engaged in jihad that are operating from Pakistan and share the same vision of Islamic state. Mona Kanwal Sheikh's book on the TTP is indeed an addition to the growing literature on jihadi movements, their popular appeal and state responses. However, research on TTP has been scanty as compared to other groups and it is yet to receive the attention it requires considering that they are the only Islamist group to challenge the Pakistan Army successfully in the tribal area in its initial phase. The book's title, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of Pakistani Taliban*, is significant in terms of delving into the issue of radicalism in Pakistan and growth of TTP that found a hospitable ecosystem to grow and expand.

The book has six chapters that deal extensively with the Taliban movement, its growth, its leaders, its regional support network, and narratives and discourses on the ideal Islamic state. Sheikh debunks the theory that the Taliban movement is mainly a Pashtun movement. The main guiding principle was jihad against the 'infidels' rather than Pashtun nationalism or their grievances. The main strategy of the TTP was to expand its network and include groups that espoused similar agendas. The TTP, however, was able to galvanise the movement mostly in the tribal region. Also, at one point of time, the TTP peacefully cohabited with the Pakistan Army which signed several peace deals accepting the group's demands for implementing sharia. Pakistan readily accepted their existence in the tribal region and did not want to provoke

them to expand their area of operation as the war on terror propelled easy recruitment of cadres for the TTP. In fact, the Pakistan Army's operation to flush out the al-Qaeda, at times punishing entire tribes for omissions and commissions, alienated the people living in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA); and the Lal Masjid operation (pp. 86–87) only fuelled the anger within the TTP.

As largely believed, the TTP was not a monolith in its interpretation of Islam. It was divided by tribal affinity; approach towards Pakistan and its army, and also towards Afghanistan; differences over sheltering foreign fighters; and attitude towards various sects as a result of its collaboration with the Sunni sectarian groups. The TTP even managed to garner sympathy from political elites, who derided the military operations and argued for talks with the group but without success. However, the TTP became a brand in Pakistan as epitome of jihadi politics, and many jihadist organisations tried to emulate it. It needs to be emphasised that the TTP drew its cadre from various jihadist groups who took shelter in tribal area after Musharraf government ordered a crackdown on them. Interestingly, Chapter 4 discusses how groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP) with an anti-Shia agenda and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) which is focused on Kashmir, after coming in contact with Taliban, started looking at Pakistan intelligence as their enemy since they were not assisting them to implement sharia but rather using them to fulfil Pakistan's territorial ambitions (p. 104). Taliban's use of media to disseminate and justify their jihad also aimed to weave religious narratives to their action.

The book dwells on the narratives of various other jihadi organisations like the LeT and anti-Shia Punjabi resistance groups and how they perceive TTP as a movement. It also analyses how the narrative on religion defined the threat, conception of justice and legitimacy of jihad. It provides a glimpse into the jihadi mind and how they define threat and their war against infidels. What sets this book apart is the fact that the author has carried out several interviews with leadership of the movement, which itself is not a monolith but an umbrella organisation.

The book, however, does not provide details of TTP's approach to girl's education, what drove the group to kill tribal leaders and the ruthless manner in which it killed people after labelling them informants. Neither has it analysed the several peace deals the TTP concluded with the Pakistan Army. Though the movement cannot entirely be described as a Pashtun movement, the author does not explain the reason for the soldiers of Frontier Corp, drawn from Pashtun areas, refusing to fight the

Taliban. Another interesting facet would have been to analyse Pakistan state's approach to the Taliban. While the state initially supported the idea of implementing sharia in the tribal belt to limit the Taliban movement, it did nothing to provide an alternative narrative of religion. Breaking the Taliban leadership, creating rift and weaning away some of the TTP leaders to its side, the Pakistan Army took the military option after failing to co-opt the group or divert them to fight in Afghanistan. Sheikh's contention that dialogue with the Taliban could have resolved the issue peacefully was probably taking into account the Sharif government's proposal in 2013 to have a dialogue than a military operation. Perhaps this book was written in that context. However, the successful Army operation against the Taliban, elimination of the leadership by drone attacks, and demolishing the militant network and destroying their ability to strike across the country are some of the instances which show that dialogue could not have succeeded. Though the movement is not dead, it is crippled at the moment.

Guardians of God clearly stands out as one of the very few books on the subject. Its value lies in the cogent manner the author has discussed TTP's narratives on Islam, its views on enemy of Islam, the support network it spurred across the country that encompassed previously pro-state jihadi groups, and its ability to draw sympathy from people of Pakistan that made military operations against them difficult until the Peshawar school attack.

NOTES

1. Farhat Taj, *Taliban and Anti-Taliban*, New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.
2. Farhat Taj, *The Real Pashtun Question*, Delhi: Kautilya Books, 2017.
3. Khuram Iqbal and Sara de Silva, 'Terrorist Lifecycles: A Case Study of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013, pp. 72–86.
4. Stephel Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e-Toiba*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
5. Arif Jamali, *Call for Transnational Jihad*, Delhi: Kautilya Books, 2015.
6. Salim Shehzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and Taliban*, London: Pluto Press, 2011.