

Why Pakistanis Support Islamist Militancy

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Overview

The geopolitical reasons for the Pakistani state to tolerate militant groups such as the Afghan Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba are well known. Yet there is precious little evidence about why average Pakistanis tolerate and even support groups that do so much to harm their nation's interests and reputation, as well as the safety of their fellow citizens. Because militant groups cannot survive without some popular backing, understanding why Pakistanis support them is a significant national security challenge for Pakistan, the United States, and the international community.

U.S. and Western policymakers have focused on creating a broad range of initiatives based on the appealing, but ultimately untested, notion that better education and employment opportunities will lead Pakistan's population to stop supporting militant groups. Such policies may be desirable for many reasons, but there is little evidence that they will help to counter support for political violence. Indeed, they fail to account for the hard reality that Pakistanis support particular militant groups for specific political reasons.

Key Findings

Data from a recent national survey of urban Pakistanis challenge the four conventional wisdoms that continue to motivate policy initiatives designed to stem Pakistani support for militant groups. The first is that poverty is a root cause of support for militancy, or at least that poorer and less-educated individuals are more prone to militants' appeals. The second is that personal religiosity and support for sharia law are strongly correlated with support for Islamist militancy. The third is that support for political goals espoused by legal Islamist parties predicts support for militant organizations. The fourth is that those who support democracy in Pakistan—either in terms of supporting democratic processes such as voting or in terms of valuing core democratic principles—oppose Islamism and militancy.

The results of the national survey of urban Pakistanis suggest, however, that the four conventional wisdoms—upon which many of the United States' policies rest—are ill founded at best and misguided at worst. Below are the key findings of the survey.

- Pakistanis' support for militant organizations is not correlated among different types of militant groups. In other words, just because an individual supports one kind of militant group does not mean that the same individual will support another. For example, a supporter of Lashkar-e-Taiba will not necessarily be a supporter of al-Qaida. Far from it, Pakistanis appear to distinguish among these groups rather well.
- Popular prescriptions that Pakistanis will stop supporting militancy when they feel confident in their own economic prospects, or their country's, are not grounded in the data. Respondents who come from economically successful areas or who believe that Pakistan is doing well economically compared to India were more likely to support militant groups, not less.

- Religiosity is a poor predictor of Pakistani support for militant organizations. A preference for more sharia law does not predict support for these groups. What matters most is dissatisfaction with sharia's current role in Pakistan. Pakistanis who want a greater role for sharia and those who want a lesser role for it are more supportive of Islamist militant groups than those satisfied with the status quo.
- Similarly, identifying strongly as a Muslim does not predict support for Taliban militants fighting in Afghanistan or for al-Qaida. Although strongly identifying as a Muslim does predict support for militant groups operating in Kashmir, the relationship disappears when respondents' support for other groups is taken into account. Whatever the common factor driving support for different militant organizations operating in Pakistan is, it is not religion per se.
- There is no discernible relationship between respondents' faith in democracy or support for core democratic rights and their disapproval of the Taliban or al-Qaida. The much-heralded call for greater democratization in Pakistan as a palliative for militancy may therefore be unfounded.

Implications for Policymakers

Three main implications follow from the analysis.

Current policies, such as those embodied in the Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation, are formulated upon the premise that some groups of Pakistanis support "militancy" writ large. This is clearly wrong. Factors that help to explain support for one militant group generally do not do so for others. The implication is that policies that mitigate support for the Afghan Taliban may exacerbate or have no effect on support for groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. Policymakers therefore need to prioritize the groups of interest and focus on policies to diminish support for the most important ones.

Second, overly simplistic notions linking broad-based social ills to support for militancy should not drive policy. Increasing access to education and supporting economic development in Pakistan are laudable goals, but it is a mistake to believe that achieving them will do much to reduce Pakistanis' support for violent militant groups. To reduce this support, policymakers must pay greater attention to supporters' political concerns and grievances. This is good news. Achieving meaningful improvements in Pakistan's socioeconomic development is a generations-long task, but politics can change much more quickly.

Third, policymakers and analysts need to keep in mind that studies relying on public opinion data do not address decisionmakers' preeminent concern—the supply of militant violence. Unfortunately, there is no solid research to support the notion that decreases in the support for militant groups will translate into a reduction in Islamist violence in the near term. This does not mean that surveys of Pakistanis' political views are unimportant. Far from it. Data on popular attitudes should be linked with data on violence to test whether decreasing support does, in fact, lead to lower levels of violence. Over the longer term, understanding the sources of support for specific militant groups may lead to policies that can deprive them of the popular support they require to bring in new recruits, attract financial backing, and maintain operational security.

Conclusion

Urban Pakistanis are relatively discerning when it comes to supporting militancy. They appear to support small militant organizations when those organizations use violence to achieve political goals the individual cares about, and when violence makes sense as a way to attain those goals given Pakistanis' understanding of the strategic environment. This is sensible. Small militant organizations such as al-Qaida or even the Pakistani Taliban have no real chance of taking over the Pakistani state. Therefore, support for

militant groups is unlikely to be determined by big-picture issues such as the role of Islamic law in Pakistani governance, much less by al-Qaida's purported goal of reestablishing the Caliphate.

The international community's ability to influence Pakistanis' religious views and economic status is negligible. Much can be done, however, to address political factors that drive support for militancy, such as corruption, human rights abuses, lack of security, limited access to the rule of law, and long-standing geopolitical disputes. Attempts to reduce support for violent political groups should be focused where they belong—on politics.

Suggested Readings

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