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Pakistan has been heavily scrutinized over the last few decades due to political instability, questions of nuclear surety, civil violence, terrorism, religious extremism, and its contentious relationship with neighboring India. Amidst the myriad books and articles about Pakistan’s terrorist dilemma, Australian academic Eamon Murphy’s well-written, impeccably researched, and tightly focused work brings together in one tome a multi-disciplinary explanation of how terrorism became a significant part of Pakistan’s existential reality.

Murphy views the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan through multiple prisms: history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, economy, military, and diplomacy. His holistic treatment of the topic provides one of the single best overviews of how Pakistan came to its current position. Any serious follower—academic, military, public sector, private sector, or student of human nature—will find a treasure trove in this petite volume solidly loaded with keen insight.

Murphy undertakes an examination of Pakistan as a terrorism epicenter and Islam’s role in bringing this situation about. He points out that the majority of terrorist victims are Pakistanis due to Muslim-on-Muslim aggression. This sectarian violence is so prevalent it is difficult to distinguish from terrorism. Initially, Muslims (Sunni, Shia, and Sufi) coexisted with Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus in Pakistan. With the rise of political Islam, Muslim-initiated political violence began to increase. In the post-9/11 environment, religious intolerance of non-Wahhabi Muslims has cowed the population into a submissive state of intimidation. Murphy walks the reader through this process, shedding light on the incremental rise of religious extremism that now permeates the country.

Murphy posits that the reader must understand Pakistani history to understand terrorism in Pakistan. The partition that separated India from Pakistan was more disruptive for the latter than the former. India retained most of the infrastructure, industry, and culture, leaving Pakistan to contrive a whole new society. Pakistan was founded as a secular state for South Asian Muslims and was relatively liberal until the 1970s. Murphy correctly emphasizes that Islam is not monolithic, but draws from multiple religious and cultural influences. Numerous Muslim sects coexisted, many of them with syncretic beliefs and practices adapted from local mores.
Communal violence began to increase due to numerous wars between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, and the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh (formerly West and East Pakistan).

Losing every war it has fought with India, Pakistan’s democratic process weakened, leading to sectarian violence, political corruption, and government incompetence. Politicians in Islamabad began to invoke Islam as a way to forge a sense of national identity. This in turn led to debates about whether Pakistan should be a home for Muslims or an Islamic state. As Pakistan alternated between democratic and military rule, leaders of all stripes continued to advocate Islam, which was codified into law as the state religion in 1973.

Military dictator Zia al-Haq was a true believer and supported stricter Islamic mores, using Islam as a way to unify and strengthen Pakistan while he sought to legitimize his regime and solidify his grip on power. As a counterweight to the Shia Iranian revolution in 1979, he welcomed money from Saudi Wahhabis to fund madrassas (Islamic schools), which expanded from 900 to over 33,000. He promoted Islamists in civil service, military, and judiciary circles, enforced blasphemy laws, Islamicized education, rewrote history, and placed more power in the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States and Saudi Arabia propped up Pakistan to wage a proxy war. The United States took a hands-off stance as it provided money, supplies, and arms to the ISI. The ISI, flush with cash, weapons, and materiel, favored the more extremist jihadi factions fighting the Soviets, thereby cutting out factions who were better fighters and more effective combatants. One of the favored jihadis was a young Saudi, Usama bin Ladin (UBL). UBL’s network became one of the most prevalent and due to its ISI connections, one of the most well-endowed. Within Pakistan, Wahhabi madrassas kept producing radical extremists, Afghan refugees flooded the Northwest border region, the ISI grew in capability and influence, and a ‘Kalashnikov culture’ emerged. This left Pakistan more politically unstable as Muslim extremists became more prevalent.

After the Soviets left Afghanistan, thousands of jihadis from all corners of the Muslim world were left in Pakistan. They had training, combat experience, radical ideology, weapons, no place to go, and nothing to do. The ISI, using the recent “victory” against the Soviets, decided to attempt a similar endeavor to “reclaim” Muslim majority Kashmir from Hindu India. For the next ten years, Pakistan incited Muslim militancy as it waged a proxy terrorist war in
Kashmir against India, which nearly led to nuclear war on at least two occasions.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Pakistan, afraid that the United States would ally with India, agreed to assist the United States as it invaded Afghanistan. As it fought terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan continued to sponsor terrorism against India, which nearly led to war. After President Musharraf banned five prominent terrorist groups, there was a modicum of stability for a time. A few months later, the ban was forgotten, leading to a resurgence of sectarian Muslim-on-Muslim violence that continues into the present. Pakistan’s role in the November 2008 multi-day attack on Mumbai, India and the harboring of UBL in Abbottabad, Pakistan confirmed suspicion of a more active, albeit private, role in promulgating terrorism than publicly admitted. To this day, many questions regarding Pakistan’s role in both incidents remain unanswered.

Eamon Murphy has done a masterful job in outlining how events in Pakistan’s history have led to the rise of destabilizing terrorism. He cites as other contributing factors the structural weakness of the Pakistani state, the colonial legacy, the partition with India, the ongoing Kashmiri conflict, internal politics, as well as political corruption and patronage. As long as Wahhabi extremism continues to thrive in Pakistan Muslim-on-Muslim violence will continue unabated. At present, there is no end in sight.

Mark J. Roberts is a subject matter expert