BROOKINGS

Applying Counterinsurgency Principles in Pakistan's Frontier

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Brookings *Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series*, No. 2

Pakistan is facing a complex insurgent threat in its North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This threat does not emerge from one cohesive insurgency, but rather from a number of distinct and locally-oriented groups, many of which have taken the name "Taliban." These local insurgencies, moreover, are often limited in their aims, seeking to displace government presence rather than replace it outright. In this sense, the U.S. State Department's definition of insurgency — which emphasizes attempts by anti-state groups to "seize, nullify, or challenge political control over a region" — is more subtle and applicable to the present frontier context than the more sweeping definition used by the Defense Department — which focuses bluntly on attempts to "overthrow... a constituted government."

These distinctions are important, because any attempt at counterinsurgency in the Pakistani frontier needs to begin by recognizing the fragmented and often localized nature of the insurgencies which are challenging and gradually displacing the state. In light of these dynamics, and the sheer complexity of the Taliban threat, this paper will take a closer look at the ways in which Pakistan, in its partnership with the United States, might better apply counterinsurgency (COIN) principles in the frontier.

The discussion which follows is based on two presumptions. First, that it is the government of Pakistan, and not the United States, which best understands the local context of the frontier. The Pakistani government should therefore take responsibility for dealing with the insurgencies which have emerged there, and which threaten both the Pakistani state and its allies. And second, that there are a number of ways in which the United States can support these efforts by way of training, equipment, and targeted development efforts.

Since this discussion focuses largely on counterinsurgency cooperation between the Pakistani and American governments, the analysis which follows takes as its point of departure eight "Principles of American COIN," as outlined in the paper presented by Dr. Janine Davidson.[1] These principles, while framed in reference to American efforts vis-à-vis a "host government," nonetheless capture in general terms a number of the critical characteristics of successful counterinsurgency campaigns, and provide a useful starting point for discussing joint efforts that might be effective in the context of the Pakistani frontier.

One final and important qualification: the analysis which follows is weighted heavily toward issues of governance, security sector reform, and programmatic cooperation between the United States and Pakistan. It gives relatively less attention to the religious and ideological drivers of the insurgency, and relatively more attention to the nature of state response to insurgency. Both dimensions of COIN are, of course, salient in the frontier. Analyses which underestimate

[1] Janine Davidson, "Principles of Modern American Counterinsurgency: Evolution and Debate," The Brookings Institution, Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series, No. 1, June 8, 2009.

ideological factors end up dealing forever with symptoms rather than root causes, while those which focus predominantly on ideology tend to underestimate the degree to which insurgencies can move beyond their original motivations to take on political and social lives of their own. The Taliban insurgency in the Pakistani frontier quite clearly owes its success both to the appeal of a unique and powerful religio-cultural ideology, and also to the manifest weakness of the state in controlling its own territory. It is this latter problem — the challenge of ameliorating systemic state weakness — that is the focus of the discussion below.

(I) A long-term political strategy focused on creating a viable, sustainable stability — through building or enhancing local government effectiveness and legitimacy — while marginalizing insurgents and winning over their sympathizers.

Successful counterinsurgency involves political strategies. For these to be carried out, the local government needs to be present, legitimate, and effective in pushing back against insurgent advances. Thus far, Pakistan has not been particularly effective at using local government efforts to delegitimize insurgent groups. There are, however, ways in which it could begin to do so. It is well known that in places such as the Swat valley, discontent with the government has been driven in large part by the failure of the local judicial system to provide timely resolution of disputes — particularly over land and inheritance questions. The Nizam-e-Adl regulations put forward by the government were, in part, an attempt to deal with this source of local discontent, and use the language of *shariah* to build support for the state.

While this approach of dealing with local grievances has some merit, new *shariah* regulations can be deeply problematic for overall state legitimacy. In particular, they can carve out special systems of governance outside the customary system of law; encourage religious parties and other Islamist groups to agitate for more rigorous Islamization measures; disenfranchise or discriminate against minority religious groups and women; or create a space for local Taliban to carry out their own brand of "justice." The Pakistani government's use of the Nizam-e-Adl as a cover by which to abdicate state authority in northern NWFP brought about precisely these problems.

In the FATA, building state legitimacy is a much more daunting prospect. The government, despite its promises over the last year, has not demonstrated that it has a coherent political strategy for extending the reach of the state in the tribal areas. Often, discussion of FATA reform is dominated by two opposing viewpoints: 1) that the state should take dramatic steps to integrate the tribal areas into Pakistan's modern system of governance; or 2) that any attempt by the state to reform the tribal system of governance is bound to fail because of the unchanging nature of *Pashtunwali.* In reality, there are many steps that the government could take to begin gradually extending its political legitimacy and effectiveness in the FATA; these might not bear fruit immediately, but would begin changing the impression that the state has little to offer the tribal population.

> *First steps.* In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:
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> 1) Focus intently on building judicial capacity in regions like Swat, and track monthly metrics on this issue (cases outstanding, cases resolved, etc.) with the same consistency that it tracks operational military metrics.
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> 2) Conduct basic field surveys about local grievances, targeted particularly to vulnerable regions of the NWFP in which the Taliban are likely to expand their writ (e.g., Bannu, Buner, Dir, Karak, Kohat, Malakand, and Tank). These surveys, conducted every three or

six months, could be used to help the government address high-priority grievances at the district or *tehsil* level of which the Taliban may seek to take advantage. In particular, the surveys could be a helpful tool for teasing out the ways in which local populations associate particular governance activities (or grievances over governance failures) with *shariah* rhetoric that the Taliban are likely to employ.

3) Begin elementary and symbolic reforms in the FATA. These might include the long-overdue passage of the Political Parties Act, and basic revisions to the most egregious sections of the 1901 Frontier Crimes Regulation. These reforms in and of themselves would have little immediate value, but would be a signal to the local population that the *status quo* is no longer acceptable, and would pave the way for localized reform zones that integrate development, security, and governance reforms (see section II below). Given the long history of hands-off policies with respect to the FATA, the government needs to find ways to gradually give itself a greater excuse to maintain a presence there.

(II) Integrated civilian-military effort based on a common assessment of the situation and which synchronizes development, governance and security efforts to support the political strategy. COIN is said to be 80% political, 20% military.

There is perhaps no other region in Pakistan in which coordination of local security efforts is as complex as in the NWFP/FATA frontier areas. Within a relatively small geographic space, the government has to work across a number of divergent and historically-conditioned systems of governance: 1) the "settled" system that predominates in the NWFP, in which the state levies taxes and provides services common to modern systems of governance; 2) the FATA system under the Frontier Crimes Regulation, in which a political agent essentially bargains on behalf of the state, and has wide, extra-legal latitude to represent state interests; 3) the Frontier Regions (FR) system which sits (geographically) between settled and FATA regions, and resembles the latter but with reporting authority through the former; 4) and the various Provincially Administered Tribal Area (PATA) systems, which are hybrids of the settled and FATA models, and in which only limited government services and citizen tax obligations apply.

Simply trying to coordinate *civilian* response to local security issues in this context can be extraordinarily difficult. When military response is added to the mix, it is obvious why civilian-military coordination is often dysfunctional. That said, such coordination is extraordinarily important. Insurgent groups regularly operate across the artificial lines which divide the settled, FATA, FR, and PATA areas, and the civilian and military authorities need to be able to operate effectively across these boundaries as well.

The first element of civilian-military synchronization in the frontier should focus on the *graduated hand-off* from civilian to military authorities in the context of a localized insurgency. Too often, the Pakistani government has watched insurgents take root in a village or a small region, and done very little with government or police forces to resist such a move until the problem becomes dire. (Swat is but one example of this trend.) At that point, the government launches a full-fledged military response, including artillery and helicopter gunships, which inevitably causes blowback among the population. The process by which the civilian and military authorities plan in advance a ladder of escalation that begins with local government, police, and intelligence agencies (those under the Interior Ministry, for example); moves to paramilitary activities and elite police forces as the problem escalates; and requires regular army action only if the previous efforts are insufficient is therefore critical to a local counterinsurgency strategy.

The second element should focus in practical ways on the *integration* of development, governance, and security efforts. This is always more difficult than it sounds. Moreover, there is a strong case to be made that this kind of integration works best, and is most effective, in small zones rather than across large regions. When working across large regions, development efforts tend to be overly diffuse, and it is difficult to point to tangible effects. Integrating security, too, with development becomes challenging over wide areas. Such integration often makes the most sense in small, relatively defensible zones such as major urban areas, places occupied by a single tribal group, or environments in which the topography provides high levels of natural protection.

First steps. In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:

1) Develop distinct planning documents for each major subregion of the frontier (e.g., the erstwhile Malakand division, Bannu division, Peshawar and environs, Waziristan, mid and northern FATA, etc.) that outline the ladder of escalation from local civilian authorities to military intervention, and identify gaps in that process that can be addressed in advance. These plans should attempt to answer questions like: Who responds in this region, and how, and within what period of time if: a) a police station is bombed? b) a small group of locally-known "Taliban" begin threatening businesses or politicians? c) unknown "Taliban" (perhaps from Waziristan, Punjab, or elsewhere) begin threatening local institutions? d) large groups (20 or more) of "Taliban" engage police or paramilitary forces? e) militants begin shuttering girls schools? f) local Islamist groups begin using widespread radio propaganda? etc. Local government and police forces are the first line of defense in any counterinsurgency, but the state also needs to plan in advance for a gradual process of escalation, so that it does not under- or over-react to a growing threat.

2) Consider setting up small demonstration zones in the FATA (preferably ones which are contiguous to the settled or FR regions) in which to focus intently on synchronizing development, governance, and security efforts, consistent with "inkspot" principles of counterinsurgency theory. Within these zones, the government and its foreign aid partners could provide substantial and highly visible development, and support population-centric security efforts with increased and better-equipped Frontier Corps (FC) deployments. In return, the plan would incentivize local tribal populations to accept modest new governance reforms that would gradually begin to link the FATA with the bureaucracy in NWFP, create elected councils which would decide on development priorities, encourage a new generation of legitimate leadership, and give the state an excuse to expand its presence without threatening to violate important tribal (*rivaj*) and religious (*shariah*) values. It is, arguably, only by setting up small reform zones that the state can learn how to integrate development, governance, and security in the face of an insurgency, and create a "demonstration effect" that has wider impact in shaping public views of the government throughout the FATA.

(III) A close and genuine partnership with the host nation government in the lead and which builds self-reliant, independently functioning institutions over time.

There has been an increasing trend toward cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan in the frontier, most notably in terms of American support for training and equipping the FC and the FATA Secretariat. Both of these are worthwhile initiatives and can be expanded. But attention should also be paid to supporting the newly established Regional Coordination Officer (RCO) mechanisms. The RCOs are civil officers with authority over multiple districts or tribal agencies, and their broad oversight role has helped to mitigate some of the coordination problems identified

above. All the same, the office of the RCO needs to be strengthened and better supported so that it can serve as the focal point for rapid decision-making when a new threat emerges in a particular region of the frontier.

In addition, the United States and Pakistan need to think seriously about what kind of institutions can reasonably become "independently functioning" in the FATA, both in the short-term and the long-term. Elected councils modeled off of *jirgas* could eventually take on an important political role in integrating the tribal areas into the Pakistani mainstream. But in the short-term, the institutions that are likely to be most effective are those that provide government services. and do so not simply through the office of a political agent, but directly. Much attention has been paid to "capacity building" for the FATA Secretariat, but a focus on capacity building and institutionalization within the FATA itself is arguably the more important (and heretofore neglected) factor.

> *First steps.* In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:
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> 1) Expand the resources and discretionary authority of the RCO, and see to it that they can serve as a focal point for decision-making on law and order issues, as well as a point of liaison in the field between civilian and military/paramilitary leaders.
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> 2) Reevaluate FATA development programs in light of the need for capacity building and institutionalization within the tribal areas themselves. Focus initially on the provision of government services and the establishment of greater state presence in the FATA.

(IV) Population-centric security founded on the presence of security forces (military and/or police), local community partnerships, self-defending populations, and small-unit operations that keep the enemy off balance and make the people feel safe.

The concept of population-centric security seems intuitive, but is difficult to carry out with conventional military forces. For one, it is often incompatible with traditional approaches to clearing territory, such as making heavy use of artillery. And second, it requires that military forces be forward deployed and maintain a regular presence among the population. While, by some accounts, the Pakistani army made greater efforts than in past years to account for public sentiment during its operations in Swat, Buner, and Bajaur, those operations nonetheless alienated local populations rather than bringing them on board. The military was often able to clear parts of the Swat valley, but when it pulled back to its garrisons, insurgent forces were easily able to reestablish their previous positions.

The second part of this principle is the concept of self-defending populations. The reality is that many communities in the frontier are well equipped with small arms such as Kalashnikovs. But they have few incentives to form *lashkars* (*ad hoc* militias) because they have little expectation that the government would come to their support, or even coordinate its own actions based on their community efforts. *Lashkars* could, therefore, conceivably form a potent supplemental force for state counterinsurgency efforts in some regions of the frontier, but generally what they lack is not arms but practical incentives to work with the state against insurgents.

> *First steps.* In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:

1) Experiment with equipping and training small units which would specialize in forward deploying into villages; conducting patrols; mobilizing community leaders, particularly local clerics and influential religious figures; and interfacing with local police, civilian officials, and intelligence services. In many armies, such skills are compartmentalized into "civil affairs units," but counterinsurgency best practice requires that they be diffused broadly, and operationalized by way of units that operate forward of major garrisons. The availability of such units in an environment like Swat (or the Darra Adam Khel PATA area south of Peshawar) could have allowed the army to gradually expand the territory under its control from the population centers to the nearby semi-rural areas, and regain the trust of the population one region at a time. These units could be set up as part of the regular army structure, or could be constituted as specialized Frontier Corps units which are embedded with the army during military operations, but which remain deployed in the area of operation after the army has pulled back to its barracks.

2) Create a new rapid-response police force, under the command of the relevant RCO, whose primary purpose would be to come alongside *lashkars* and community groups in order to promote self-defending populations — particularly as a strategy for containing the spread of Taliban groups outside of their current areas of control. Many of the elite police and paramilitary forces currently operating in the frontier are focused on counterterrorism or VIP protection. If a small, focused, and well-equipped force were mobilized and made available to, e.g., RCO Malakand and RCO Bannu; and if local populations had a reasonable expectation that such a force would be able to arrive in their locale within 48 hours of a Taliban advance, then community and tribal leaders would gradually become more inclined to side with the government instead of acquiesce to insurgents.

(V) Continuity and commitment of key personnel, with sufficient authority and resources to do the job.

Counterinsurgency campaigns can be lengthy, and dealing with the insurgencies which are operating in the frontier — localized and limited as they may at times be — requires a continuity of leadership which is a challenge for any system, much less one like Pakistan's which historically has high turnover in elected leadership. The government has taken positive steps in recent years, especially with the creation of the RCO offices, and the ongoing initiatives to professionalize the Frontier Corps and improve its appeal as a posting for regular army officers. Still, there is more that can be done to support these two important institutions.

First steps. In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:

1) Prioritize extended terms for critical civil officers. As it now stands, the posting of District Management Group officers in the NWFP is often highly politicized, and officers in critical sub-secretary posts are often rotated far too frequently. Consistency of civil officers — especially RCOs, District Coordination Officers (DCOs), and key district-level police officials — is important in environments in which the state is confronting a full-blown insurgency. It is, arguably, even more important in environments in which insurgents are gradually expanding their reach but have not yet displaced state authority in a systematic way. The government could provide monetary and promotional incentives for extended postings by DCOs, RCOs, and senior police officials in high-priority districts.

2) Continue the professionalization of the Frontier Corps. Much of this work is already underway, as the Corps has expanded, and the government has found ways to incentivize postings in its ranks by regular army officers. More could be done on this front, however. Commanding an FC unit is still seen as an undesirable post for career-minded army officers, and the army can do more to create incentives to bring high quality officers into the Corps on rotation.

3) Work out new military procurement and financing mechanisms with the United States government to prioritize counterinsurgency-oriented equipment. The current channels by which the United States makes available military equipment to Pakistan, such as the Foreign Military Financing program, are valuable but often inordinately slow, and insufficiently targeted to equipment which is relevant for counterinsurgency operations. In this respect, the new Pakistan Counterinsurgency Capability Fund is a step in the right direction, providing the relevant U.S. combatant commander with the flexibility to directly program counterinsurgency-oriented equipment and training.

(VI) A strong emphasis on building effective and legitimate local security forces, balanced by the ability to provide direct security to the population (engaging the enemy in direct combat where needed) while these security forces are being built.

As mentioned above, the government needs to forward deploy forces into Taliban-contested local communities if it is to hold territory and secure the population. The military, however, often faces a dilemma: local populations believe that army presence may be legitimate over the short-term for the purposes of "clearing" militants and troublemakers, but not over the mid- and long-term for "holding" territory. Particularly in the FATA and PATA regions, there is a strong local sentiment against army presence.

It is therefore important over the long-term that the government — insofar as possible — find ways to conduct stabilization operations under the rubric of police or paramilitary forces rather than regular army units. This is in part a matter of political optics, that is, choosing to equip the kind of force that is likely to have a high level of legitimacy rather than one that is likely to be suspect and overstay its welcome. Clearly, police and paramilitary forces will often be better received by local populations than regular army troops. But the challenge is to train and equip police and paramilitary forces to conduct stability operations at the very same time that the army is heavily engaged in such operations, in places like Swat, Bajaur, and Mohmand.

First steps. In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:

1) Expand training of select army and police/paramilitary units in stabilization operations, with a focus on village-level patrolling; liaison with political, tribal, and religious leaders; targeted use of quick-response, high-impact development projects; and making use of local *lashkars* and *ad hoc* community defense forces. The bulk of these units, even if heavily armed, should fall under the command of the FC or the police, which — by virtue of history and tradition — have greater local legitimacy than the army.

2) Work to embed FC units within larger regular army units operating in the frontier. Increasing the interaction between FC and army units in the field may be one mechanism for promoting the professionalization of the Corps, while at the same time providing army units with the local expertise that comes from the presence of Pashtun soldiers.

(VII) A region-wide approach that disrupts insurgent safe havens, controls borders and frontier regions, and undermines terrorist infrastructure in neighboring countries (note, this requires alliances with regional allies to be most effective).

Both the physical and human terrain of the Pakistani frontier are in many ways conducive to insurgent activity. The ongoing Taliban insurgencies take advantage of the presence of many geographically isolated or inaccessible regions, longstanding tribal divisions, and a tradition of minimal state presence in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Pakistani cooperation with the Afghan government in quelling the cross-border aspects of the Taliban insurgency has unfortunately been quite limited: the Pakistanis blame the Afghans (and the presence of U.S. and NATO troops on Afghan territory) for radicalizing the Pashtun population east of the Durand Line, while Afghans blame the Pakistanis for neglecting what has become an active safe haven in the FATA for Taliban insurgents which target the government in Kabul. Given the profound trust deficit which has developed between Islamabad and Kabul, it will take time and significant effort to bring about substantive cross-border coordination.

> *First steps.* In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:
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> 1) Develop technical and political mechanisms by which the Pakistan military can be the lead organization conducting unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operations in the tribal areas. It is widely acknowledged that the U.S. UAV strikes in the FATA create political blowback for the government of Pakistan, and make it more difficult for the government to take on Taliban organizations without being seen as an American lackey. While it would undoubtedly be difficult — for technical, political, and legal reasons — for the United States to develop a workable mechanism by which the Pakistani military publicly controlled (even nominally) such operations, such a mechanism could, over time, shift public perceptions about the government's own stake in acting against Taliban groups in the FATA.
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> 2) Apply lessons-learned from the Border Coordination Centers in the NWFP and FATA to Balochistan. The Balochistan segment of the Pak-Afghan border is likely to receive greater attention by both U.S. and Pakistani policymakers in the coming year, particularly in light of the expected U.S. troop increase in NATO's Regional Command South. While the Centers are still relatively nascent along the northern (NWFP/FATA) segments of the Pak-Afghan border, it may be possible to apply lessons-learned to the Baloch border context, particularly on the issues of tactical intelligence sharing. The institutional decision-making apparatus for dealing with border issues in Balochistan is substantially simpler and dominated more directly by the military than it is in the NWFP.

(VIII) A Host Nation government that has a basic level of legitimacy among the population and is willing to make appropriate adjustments to address root causes of the insurgency.

At the end of the day, counterinsurgency is essentially a contestation over the political legitimacy of a given government. The legitimacy of the Pakistani state and its institutions is therefore an important factor in its ability to counter localized insurgencies in the frontier. State legitimacy is especially important in the settled and PATA regions, which have a history of state presence and a set of expectations about the kind of services that the government will — or ought to — provide to local populations. Legitimacy is therefore based both on *what* the state does, and *how* the state does it. In the context of the frontier, the "what" involves providing critical services like health,

education, and especially local security; and the "how" involves the patterns by which the state deals with local grievances.

In theory, making deals with Taliban groups can bolster the legitimacy of the state, and give it greater leeway to use force to confront intransigent insurgents. For example, the Swat deal in the spring of 2008, while tactically a failure, and problematic in a number of respects, did provide the government with public legitimacy for its use of military force once the deal fell apart.

But this approach also comes with risks. The easiest time for the government to make a deal is immediately after it has been proven to be weak or ineffective. The government of Pakistan has unfortunately not shown an inclination to coordinate its "political track" with its "military track" in dealing with localized insurgencies. The result has been a number of deals that, on balance, advantaged insurgents instead of the state.

> *First steps.* In the short-term, the government could, in cooperation with the United States:
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> 1) Focus on coordinating political and military operations. Rather than considering peace deals in the context of demonstrated state weakness, such as the recent deal in Swat, the government should focus on deals that can be made on the heels of demonstrations of relative strength, such as the recent operations in Bajaur and Mohmand. Such deals are less likely to be seen by domestic and international audiences as "capitulation," and are more likely to solidify army and paramilitary gains in the long-term. It should be noted that even the best of these deals would probably need to be framed in terms of *shariah*, and ideally would attempt to respond to the legitimate grievances expressed by the population in question.
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> 2) Focus on deals that are geographically limited. A number of deals conducted by the government have been far too broad. An emphasis on tactical deals which focus on small subregions (even the *tehsil* level) could prove to be productive, especially if they follow small tactical gains by military or paramilitary forces. The most recent Swat agreement, for example, inexplicably covered not only the southern Swat valley (i.e., the actively contested region), but also the entire erstwhile Malakand division, along with neighboring Kohistan district — areas in which there was little agitation for *shariah* law, or little opposition to state authority. A narrowly-tailored deal would, on balance, be more likely to address real local concerns; allow the government, along with domestic and international observers, to assess the progress and political impact of the agreement; and permit coordination of political and security efforts by the state.
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> 3) Use targeted development to incentivize political ends. An ancillary benefit of a political strategy that focuses as narrowly as possible on specific regions and specific Taliban groups is that it enables the state to use targeted development programs to build its own legitimacy at the expense of that of the insurgents. The government's promises of development aid — particularly when made as part of a political process designed to deal with insurgency — have often been far too vague and geographically dispersed. If local populations cannot see tangible and timely impact on the ground, then the development has little political value. Ideally, forward deployed stabilization forces such as police and paramilitary would be in a position to identify specific development needs requested by specific at-risk villages, and would bring *those* demands into the deal-making process — rather than simply accounting for the various demands of the Taliban who claim to speak for the population at large.

4) Take local demands for *shariah* seriously, but also work to delegitimize the religious pretentions of the Taliban. Neither Pakistan nor the U.S. have invested nearly enough time or resources to deconstructing the myth of Taliban religiosity in the frontier. While the Taliban have developed highly effective radio propaganda campaigns, the government has been exceptionally slow to engage in radio jamming, much less set up credible counter-programming efforts. Nor has the government been effective at taking advantage of the increasingly non-ideological and opportunistic character of the Pakistani Taliban. The fact that many "Taliban" are now seen by local populations as little more than black-turban-wearing criminals and drug smugglers presents a huge opportunity: the religious arguments against Taliban insurgents are potentially much clearer and more politically potent today than in the past. At the same time that the state is seeking to bring "reconcilable" elements into the political process, it needs to focus greater efforts on delegitimizing the "irreconcilables," by showing them to be poorly educated in religious matters, financially opportunistic, and disrespectful of both Islamic and Pashtun norms of behavior.

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