

## Book review: 'Pakistan on the Brink' by Ahmed Rashid

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Five years ago, on a trip to South Asia, I asked a former Pakistani ambassador where [Osama bin Laden](#) was hiding. The ambassador replied that he would be found in a safe house built by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, near a military headquarters. I was taken aback, but the ambassador expressed complete confidence in this speculation. Clearly, Pakistanis understood their complex relationships with terror and with Washington; Americans took years to catch up.

Ahmed Rashid, one of Pakistan's premier journalists and analysts, knows the region's pressures better than most. He literally wrote the book on the Taliban and now has added a superb work on the future of Pakistan, a country many people deem the world's most dangerous. "[Pakistan on the Brink](#)" depicts a nation with a severe socioeconomic crisis, and with political leadership that has neither the courage nor the will to carry out essential reforms and is building the fastest-growing nuclear arsenal on the globe. The U.S.-Pakistan relationship is in a state of virtual meltdown, Rashid rightly contends, with both sides to blame.

[The relationship is so bad](#) that "the United States and Pakistan are just short of going to war," Rashid writes.

Much of the growing enmity between the two countries can be traced to the U.S. raid that killed bin Laden — and that's where Rashid begins his tale. It did not enhance trust for the United States to discover that the al-Qaeda leader was hiding less than a mile from Pakistan's premier military academy and had been there running his global terror network for at least five years. According to The Washington Post's reporting on [the material found in his hideout](#), he was in regular communication with other jihadists, including the Afghan Taliban leader, Mohammad Omar. His hideout had been built by a contracting firm often used by the ISI.

Rashid argues that there is a complex syndicate of jihadi terrorists operating today in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda gets the most attention in the United States, but it is a relatively small organization in a much larger network. Lashkar-i-Taiba, the militant Islamist terror group that attacked [Mumbai in 2008](#), for example, has a much bigger and very overt presence in Pakistan. It routinely holds large demonstrations in Pakistan's cities that attract tens of thousands of supporters.

Its leader, [Hafiz Mohammad Saeed](#), openly mourned bin Laden's death last May and called for revenge on America. He and bin Laden had been close partners in terror stretching back to the 1980s, when the Saudi helped fund the creation of Lashkar-i-Taiba. The two men were in communication until the SEALs killed bin Laden in his hideout in Abbottabad, according to the materials found there.

So while al-Qaeda may be on the defensive thanks to U.S. drones and Navy SEALs, Rashid writes that its much larger allies are thriving and widening the terrain for its operations.

Pakistan is the epicenter of this jihadist syndicate, and Rashid does a great job of describing how the Pakistani army and the ISI helped build this Frankenstein's monster over the past four decades. As he notes, the obsession of Pakistani generals with India has been the driving force behind this creation, which is increasingly out of control. But as he establishes, the army has not changed its fundamental approach of supporting jihad. We now know that the Mumbai plot, for example, was led by Lashkar-i-Taiba but funded by the ISI and inspired by al-Qaeda. The Pakistani American who helped plan the attack, [David Headley](#), has confessed in court to how this deadly cocktail was put together.

Rashid's focus is on how the United States has tried to defeat jihadist extremists and work with Pakistan to build stability in South Asia. President Obama embarked on a strategic engagement with Pakistan when he entered the Oval Office just months after the Mumbai massacre. There was also a new elected civilian government in Islamabad led by Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of [Benazir Bhutto](#), who was killed in an al-Qaeda plot abetted by the ISI in 2007. Zardari promised to put an end to Pakistan's policy of taking both sides in the

war on terror and to go after the jihadists.

As Rashid eloquently describes, it has not turned out that way. Zardari has never had any control of the ISI. He was clueless about bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad and out of the loop on Mumbai. The generals want to get rid of him, but he is holding on to his office in spite of their plots.

Tension has always existed between Obama's engagement strategy and the unilateral U.S. strikes on the al-Qaeda infrastructure in Pakistan. U.S. drones that violate Pakistani sovereignty every day have created a backlash in the country, and Pakistani enmity reached a crescendo after American commandos found bin Laden. Polls show that three out of four Pakistanis opposed the raid. Pakistanis see the United States as an arrogant superpower that views their country as a killing field. Americans see Pakistan as duplicitous and dangerous. Both are right.

Rashid also highlights the strains within Obama's camp and the infighting among his lieutenants. Dealing with Pakistan was always going to be tough, and internal bickering has made it all the harder. Rashid argues that Obama and his team bear the majority of blame for the deterioration in Pakistan because of their failure to work together, lack of clarity and contradictory statements. Much of the friction arose around the late envoy [Richard Holbrooke](#), who Rashid says was "hated" and "snubbed" by the White House.

But he overstates the impact of the inner White House tensions. Pakistan's problems are mostly a result of Pakistani machinations and conspiracies. The United States has often made the situation worse by backing generals over civilians, but as long as Pakistanis blame someone else for their troubles, their country will only go further toward the brink.

Obama was planning to visit Pakistan in 2011; instead, it was the year the U.S.-Pakistan relationship fell apart. The collapse occurred for many reasons, but the deadliest blow was the realization that high-value target No. 1, bin Laden, was not holed up in a cave but in a villa near a military academy, operating as the chief executive of a global terror empire. Until we know who was helping him hide in the heart of the Pakistani national security system, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship will only deteriorate further.

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