

Pakistan needs a clear narrative for confronting terrorism

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By [Ahmed Rashid](#).

Pakistanis are sitting on a volcano. Unless the country's principal stakeholders - the army, the politicians and the mullahs - get their act together and declare zero tolerance for violent militant behaviour, Pakistan will lose its war against extremism and terrorism.

Over 200 people were killed last week in terrorist attacks that included the killing of an army general, 85 Christian worshippers in Peshawar, housewives in Karachi. On Sunday a [massive car bomb](#) killed 40 people in Peshawar- the third terrorist attack in the city in a week.

The country has never undergone such a baptism of fire by a range of secular and religious extremists who have taken the law into their own hands. Nawaz Sharif, prime minister, has been forced to reverse his earlier [call for talks](#) with the Pakistani Taliban, hinting now at a more robust policy. Yet it remains unclear what policy he will pursue.

Such uncertainty has already fuelled tensions between Islamabad and its neighbours - two of which, India and Afghanistan, have called Pakistan the epicentre of regional terrorism in the region - as well as alienated the international community.

Pakistan is beset with three major insurgencies. In the North West the Pakistani Taliban are attacking the army and vulnerable elements of society such as Shia and Christian minorities. Further south separatists are trying to create an independent Balochistan. Karachi is a maelstrom of militias, mafias and malcontents whose violent ways have deeply undermined the country's main port and trading centre.

The spate of terrorist attacks and the lack of a serious counter terrorism strategy has exposed the continuing deep fissures between the army and the civilian government.

Even though the army has been viciously targeted - a general and colonel were killed by the Taliban in mid-September - the military has long maintained a two track policy towards the militants. On the one hand there are those militants judged not to be enemies of Pakistan and who are allowed to fight in Indian Kashmir or Afghanistan; on the other hand there are those committed to undermining the Pakistani state, and who are targeted by the army.

Right now, the army is not in favour of direct talks with the anti-state Pakistani Taliban factions, although it has not spoken out against Mr Sharif's call for talks. However, the military is also unwilling to launch an offensive against the Pakistani Taliban in their bases in North Waziristan, because that would affect the Afghan Taliban, whom they see as "friendly" - the army wants to continue using the Afghan Taliban as a proxy force for influencing the future political make-up of Afghanistan.

Similarly, the country's main political parties also pursue a twin-track approach towards militants, protecting those seen as supporting their interests. Political parties try not to arouse militant groups based in their heartlands - for example, the Punjab, stronghold of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League. Groups having sanctuary in Punjab include the virulent anti-Shia group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi which has massacred hundreds of Shias across the country and Lashkar-e-Toiba, which continues to fight in Indian Kashmir.

In Karachi where everyday violence can claim two dozen victims, political parties also protect the districts that they govern by cutting deals with militants or mafias. In recent months Karachi has faced a new threat too - an increase in Taliban-initiated bank robberies, kidnappings for ransom, protection rackets and killings.

For some politicians the alternative is evidently too scary to contemplate. The leadership of the Awami National Party, which is vehemently anti-Taliban, has been virtually wiped out by Taliban suicide attacks - a

strategy that has terrified politicians, judges, police and paralysed state machinery.

Meanwhile the heads of Islamic and other conservative, religious-based parties, even question the existence of such groups as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, blaming terrorist attacks on some alleged US-Indian-Zionist-Afghan conspiracy. Similar views are also shared and articulated by mainstream politicians, including Imran Khan, the former cricketer, which creates only further confusion in the public's mind.

Neither the politicians, the army nor the ulema - religious leaders - have articulated a clear and consistent narrative to the public which explains why and how these groups have expanded in Pakistan, nor do they condemn by name their murderous actions nor offer a countervailing strategy to deal with the threat.

The lack of a clear narrative supported by all parts of the state - civil and military - has led to the present confusion, fear and denial amongst a deeply disturbed public, which is also trying to deal with a severe economic downturn, acute unemployment among the young and the lack of electricity. The violence is having a devastating effect on Mr Sharif's efforts to revive a slumped economy and to improve its relations with its neighbours, with whom Pakistan needs to improve trade.

There were [high hopes](#) in June when Mr Sharif was elected and began an intensive dialogue with the military, politicians and civilian experts about developing a coherent counter-terrorism strategy. Such an initiative, he hinted, would include the creation of a National Security Council, the sharing of intelligence between the military and civilian agencies, and a comprehensive strategy that would include several multi-dimensional tactics including the use of force, economic development and potential dialogue with some Taliban.

But in the end Mr Sharif resorted to what he and his party have practised in the past in Punjab province - the path of least resistance - an entire strategy based on talking to the Taliban, even as they expressed no interest in talks and continued their murderous spree.

Until there is a zero tolerance policy for extremism strongly expressed and acted upon by all civil and military elements, violence in Pakistan is likely to lead to much larger social eruptions which could ultimately become uncontrollable.