

"We have not taken North Waziristan seriously"

By Farah Zia and Ather Naqvi

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The News on Sunday: In the wake of the attack in New York and the TTP's claim, do you still see the links between al Qaeda and Taliban?

Ahmed Rashid: I think the links between the Taliban - both Punjabi and Pashtun - and the al-Qaeda are very strong. Don't forget al-Qaeda has been living in Fata for the last ten years, since 9/11, and it's been the TTP that has been giving them protection. They have been paid very lavishly for that protection, which is why the TTP is able to raise militias. So, it [TTP] is an ally and also treated like a mercenary force. The TTP has expanded the area under its control and given al-Qaeda an even bigger base to operate from.

TNS: The US is exerting pressure on Pakistan to extend the military operation to North Waziristan. What is actually happening there?

AR: I wrote a piece in Washington Post about that. I see North Waziristan as a melting pot; the leadership of all these groups is taking sanctuary in North Waziristan, be it from Swat, South Waziristan, Bajaur or Orakzai. We have not caught anyone, not even Fazlullah. Besides, the Punjabi groups are all there now. The TTP leadership is there; Hakimullah was able to hide in North Waziristan. We have not taken North Waziristan very seriously. North Waziristan is the adda (centre) of all these groups. I think Pakistan's intelligence is very poor as to what is going on there. The other remarkable thing about North Waziristan right now is that I feel the Haqqani group who were controlling North Waziristan and Gulbahar have lost control of a lot of area because there are so many groups now active in North Waziristan.

TNS: And the military operation has still not begun.

AR: Yes, and everybody is hiding in North Waziristan. I'm the first one to say that we need to go into North Waziristan in some form or the other.

TNS: But are you convinced about the reasons given by the Pakistan military -- that we don't have the wherewithal and we are engaged on the eastern side and that we are not equipped to go there.

AR: Certainly, they [Pakistani army] are overstretched. They have a hundred and fifty thousand troops in Fata, which is more than ever before. They have limited resources, limited helicopters, etc. First of all, I think the army is exaggerating the threat from India which is non-existent at the moment. India with its 9 percent growth rate is not going to attack Pakistan. What is the need for these exercises on the Pakistan borders? No matter what the army says, there is a lot of public resentment in Punjab that at a time when the country has no electricity, no gas and no jobs the army was holding an exercise with fifty thousand troops on the Indian border. We can still afford to move troops from the Indian border to Fata.

Secondly, in North Waziristan, we don't need fifty thousand troops. We need a selective offensive, an unorthodox guerrilla offensive. This should be based on good intelligence where we are able to knock off the leadership of these groups.

TNS: How do you evaluate the military operation in South Waziristan?

AR: None of these offensives has been able to kill or capture the leadership. I think the offensive in South Waziristan was far better planned than any other offensive. And certainly they have managed to kill and capture several hundred militants. But even then we know that the

leadership managed to escape.

TNS: Coming to Afghanistan, do you think the US administration's exit strategy will solve the terrorist problem in the region?

AR: No, in its present shape and form, the July 2011 deadline the Obama administration has given for start of US troops withdrawal will not lead to a total exit. There will be a very slow withdrawal and a slow handover to the Afghan forces. I think they will have to have a political dialogue with the Afghan Taliban. Hamid Karzai is in favour of that already and so is Pakistan. The British favour it very much and so do many other countries of Europe. The big problem is that, so far, Obama has still not signed on for a dialogue with the Taliban. He has signed for what is called "reintegration" which is trying to bring in mid-level commanders and fighters but not a dialogue with the Taliban leadership. I don't believe this conflict with the Taliban can end without a dialogue with the Afghan Taliban.

TNS: Will that solve the problem of the Pakistani Taliban?

AR: No, it will not solve the problem but it will have a hugely negative impact on the Pakistani Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban justify their attacks on the Pakistan army as a defence for Mullah Omar and the Afghan Taliban's jihad. If you eliminate the cause of jihad and you bring about a ceasefire in Afghanistan, what justification is there for the Pakistani Taliban to go and fight? We are a Muslim state, a Muslim army. This is not an occupation army. What legitimacy do they have in killing Pakistani soldiers? None whatsoever. What we have to do is to break their so-called justification. The international community can help us break that by making peace with the Afghan Taliban. I think it will totally discredit the Pakistani Taliban.

TNS: Do you believe the recent wave of terrorism in the US is homegrown, especially in the backdrop of the Faisal Shahzad case. How did he become radicalised?

AR: It is extremely difficult to understand how ten years after 9/11 there is a shift or change taking place in many young American Muslims. There is some kind of radicalisation taking place which took place in Europe after 9/11 amongst European Muslims; we had the London bombings, the Spain bombing and all that. It never happened in America but it is happening in America now. And neither the American media nor the government or the academics have been able to understand or explain it because this is not an isolated phenomenon. We had the five boys in Sargodha, we had Najibullah Zazi -- the Afghan-American who had been convicted of trying to bomb subways in New York. You have got all these half a dozen cases during the last six months most of whom are perfectly reasonable guys, American Muslims, unfortunately Muslims and Pakistanis. They cut across all class background.

Secondly, there is no question that most of these people, especially the Pakistanis, all had links here. And were able to get inspiration, mentors, and training in Pakistan through various groups. Now we cannot deny that role. You can have anti-American views and still live in America. But what makes you actually plant a bomb. That could well be the trigger that took place here: the mentoring, the inspirational speeches, and training camps, etc.

TNS: How will the US now deal with this situation at home?

AR: The US should understand the causes. Is this the second generation of Muslims after 9/11 -- a younger generation of Muslims who suffered from racial profiling? Are they the ones who suffered some of the discriminatory laws that have been passed there? Why is it happening now? I don't think the Americans have properly explored this phenomenon.

TNS: How is the Faisal Shahzad case going to affect Pak-US relations?

AR: The Faisal Shahzad case has led to the visit now by US National Security Advisor James L Jones and CIA Chief Leon Panetta. Obviously, there is going to be enormous pressure on Pakistan to eliminate at least the second part which is the issue of training in North Waziristan.

TNS: People are apprehending there may an aid cut-off to Pakistan.

AR: Certainly, I think if one of the attacks succeeds and kills Americans I think all bets are off with the relationship. Even with the Faisal Shahzad case, there are moves in the US Congress to take away American citizenship from suspected Pakistanis. There could be much greater deportations of Pakistanis from America. So the laws against Pakistanis in America are going to get even tougher.

TNS: Do you think the US administration is now convinced that the Pakistan military is serious about rooting out the Taliban?

AR: No, I don't think so. I still think the US believes there is a double game going on because we are not dealing with certain groups like the Afghan Taliban and the Punjabi Taliban. We are not going after them. We are still being very selective in our approach. And if for example it is found that Faisal Shahzad has been helped by the Punjabi Taliban like Lashkar or Jaish, there will be a huge demand that the army take action against these groups in Punjab which are supposed to be banned but we all know that their leaders are freely operating. Leaders of, for example Jaish, are comfortably sitting at home. If they played a role in this kind of radicalisation process, obviously there will be pressure to do something about them.

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