The rise of militant Islam in Pakistan ranks among countless examples of short-term political gain sacrificing long-term stability. In the 70s, the Zia government manipulated religious symbols in order to raise a holy army and shore up its own domestic support. However, after the war against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan ended, militant Islam could not be sealed away. Now in the year 2009, the Pakistani state is fighting for its survival against Islamic militias borne of the Taliban’s ideology.

2. The Rise of General Zia
The Pakistani state has always been tied to Islam. It is, after all, originally a homeland for the Muslims of colonial India. Up until the 1970s, Pakistan’s Islamic identity was able to co-exist relatively peacefully with secular politics. However, a coup in 1977 began a process that would eventually change the complexion of Islam in Pakistan, transforming it from a moderate interpretation to the militant version that is now rising to challenge the state.

In 1977, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq seized power in Islamabad, overthrowing the democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. After taking power, General Zia, a staunch Islamist and anti-communist, found himself presiding over a government that had no constitutional mandate to rule [2]. Furthermore, large portions of the population continued to support the deposed President Bhutto and his Pakistani People's Party (PPP). To overcome this deficit in popular support, General Zia adopted two strategies that still resonate in present day Pakistani politics: relying on the military to prop up his regime and the manipulation of Islamic symbols for political ends [1, 2].

3. The Mujahideen in Afghanistan

In 1978, a coup in Afghanistan brought the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) into power. To the Zia government, the PDPA represented both an external threat from the Soviet Union as well as the potential for internal subversion from ethnic Balochs, Pashtuns living along the Durand line, and leftist PPP members [1]. In response to these threats, the Zia government began to organize and train disparate Afghan ethnic groups under the inclusive flag of Islam, a strategy that was facilitated by the ‘godless’ nature of the Soviet-backed PDPA regime. Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had even occurred, several Mujahideen training camps existed in Pakistan [3]. Most of these camps were located in the Northwest Frontier Provinces (NWFP) and federally administered Tribal Areas (FATA), two regions where the present-day Taliban’s hold is strongest [1].

When the Soviets eventually invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) responded by intensifying efforts to organize Afghan partisans in Pakistani training camps [3]. The period from 1979-1989 was marked by the establishment of an intricate indoctrination and training system for Mujahideen fighters in Pakistan, lubricated by U.S. aid, and comprised of a network of madrassas and training camps situated along the Durand line and beyond [1, 2]. In the end, General Zia's strategy of championing Islam to secure his shaky regime was successful, though it came at a cost of blurring the line between civilian and military rule and the creation of a network devoted to the propagation of radical Islam.

4. Pakistan support for the Taliban in the Afghan civil war

After the unifying symbol of the Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan, the ethnic and religious groups that made up the Mujahideen began to fracture, eventually plunging Afghanistan into civil war. The Pakistani government’s patron of choice during this time came to be the Taliban. Their reasons were as follows:

- The Taliban were Sunni and had educational and training links to Pakistan's Mujahideen infrastructure. They could be used to counter Indian or Iranian influenced ethnic groups such as the Hazara, thus avoiding the persistent
danger of Indian encirclement [1, 4].

- The Taliban were rivals to the Jamaat-e-Islami, a faction that Benazir Bhutto believed was complicit in her father’s execution [6].

- A sympathetic Taliban government in Kabul was not likely to press Pakistan on the Durand line or pan-Pashtun nationalism [4].

Pakistan’s support for the Taliban ended abruptly after September 11th, 2001, a policy reversal that, while precipitated by geopolitical necessity, also had the effect of driving a wedge into Pakistani society by alienating sections of the population who lamented the abandonment of their Islamic brothers in Afghanistan.

5. The Taliban movement turns on the Pakistani state

From 2001 onwards, militants flooded across the Pakistani border into Afghanistan to launch attacks against coalition forces. By 2007 however, things began to change and the Taliban instead embarked on a violent campaign within Pakistan targeted at state institutions [4]. The reason for their shift in emphasis is likely twofold.

First, when fighting a guerilla war, it is reasonable and expected to fall back across the porous Durand line to re-group far from the reach of coalition troops. The second and far more important reason concerns the Taliban’s identity and goals. At some point during the civil war in Afghanistan, the Taliban became detached from Afghan nationalism and adopted the mantle of a wider religious movement [1]. Around this time, Mullah Omar started identifying himself as the ‘Commander of the Faithful’ [1]. This identity shift resulted in the Taliban starting to look beyond Kabul and set their sights on ‘infidels’ in the wider Muslim world and beyond.

Thus, the emergence of native Taliban movements in Pakistan should come as no surprise. They are the result of post-Zia ‘Islamisation’ of Pakistan, the spiritual appeal of the Taliban’s brand of Wahabism, anti-American sentiment, and finally popular disillusionment towards a Pakistani government that fails to provide basic services or job opportunities [1, 5, 3].

6. The ’Pakistan Taliban’

Islamist groups operating in Pakistan are primarily based in the FATA or the NWFP regions, areas where government control is tenuous at best. From 2001 onward, the Pakistani government’s strategy to counter ’Talibanisation’ has rotated between launching disastrous military campaigns and brokering peace deals that exchange Sharia law and prisoners for a ceasefire [4]. A few of the major groups:

- **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP):** An umbrella organization of homegrown Taliban groups in Pakistan, the TTP was at one point said to control seven agencies of the FATA and seven districts of the Malakand Division [6]. The
group was headed by Baitullah Mehsud, believed to be behind the Benazir Bhutto assassination and recently reported killed by a US drone strike in the FATA [8].

- **Tehreek Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM):** Sufi Muhammad, leader of the TNSM, brokered the abortive 2009 Sharia-for-peace deal in Swat. TNSM goals call for the establishment of Sharia law throughout Pakistan [9].

7. Terrorist attacks in Pakistan

Terrorist violence is trending upwards in Pakistan. In 2003, terrorism was behind 164 civilian and security forces deaths. By 2008, the number had risen to 2,809 [7]. Attacks are predominantly targeted at state personnel and institutions. For example, after government forces stormed the pro-Taliban Lal Masjid in 2007, local Taliban groups in the NWFP attacked a government office and killed thirteen people [4]. While the attacks are too numerous to list, most of them share the common goal of undermining state authority.

8. Islamabad’s challenge moving forward

Taliban influence continues to fill the vacuum left by weak state institutions in the FATA and NWFP, and if the state remains compromised, ‘Talibanisation’ could make inroads into the ‘settled’ areas of Pakistan. Therefore, it follows that the key to reversing encroaching Taliban influence is to strengthen the legitimacy and institutions of the Pakistani state.

This is no easy task, for the Pakistani government remains torn between domestic and international obligations. Support for U.S. foreign policy ventures costs valuable political support at home. Moreover, economic crisis in Pakistan has made it even harder for the government to provide basic services. Apathy is widespread in Pakistan. Citizens are loath to choose between a government perceived to be an American puppet in Islamabad and fundamentalist Taliban groups in the frontier provinces [4].

However, there are signs that the Pakistani government has turned a corner in their fight against Islamic militancy. The breakdown of the 2009 Swat deal and subsequent issuance of an arrest warrant for TNSM leader Sufi Muhammad indicate that, at least for the time being, Islamabad is no longer willing to pursue an appeasement policy.

9. End Notes


