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Will North-Waziristan turn into a Jihadist hub after Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* again?

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ABOUT SADF COMMENTS

The SADF Comment series seeks to contribute innovative and provocative thinking on significant, on-going debates as well as provide immediate, brief analysis and opinion on current occurrences and developments in South Asia. The topics covered are not only directed towards academic experts in South Asian affairs but are also of relevance for professionals across disciplines with a practical interest in region. Therefore, the SADF Comment series serves as a platform for commentators who seek an international audience for opinions that impact state and society in South Asia and beyond.

ABOUT SADF


The Brussels-based South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF) is a non-partisan, autonomous think tank dedicated to objective research on all aspects of democracy and regional co-operation within a contemporary study of South Asia. It aims to reach policy makers, academics as well as the general public. SADF's core goal is to bridge the gap between South Asia and Europe and pull both regional and political worlds closer together in order to increase understanding and cooperation.



On 15 June 2014, Pakistan's Armed Forces launched a major operation against terrorists in North Waziristan, which is part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a remote and restive mountainous region bordering Afghanistan. The military campaign marks the end of a series of fruitless attempts to negotiate with Islamic terrorists. However, after the Jihadists continued their attacks on Pakistani soil, it seems that even Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, known for having a weakness for Islamic fundamentalism, understands that conflicts with Jihadists cannot be resolved through dialogue. In this case, the deadly attack on Karachi's airport a week before *Zarb-e-Azb* started doubtlessly triggered this turning point. *Zarb-e-Azb*, which means 'Strike of the Prophet's Sword'.

The operation's goal was to flush out all foreign and domestic terrorists that were using North Waziristan as a hideout and base for recruiting, training, regrouping and as a platform to launch attacks within the region and beyond. The comprehensive operation, which went on for more than nine months, involved most of the weapon systems available (the ones that are functional in this difficult terrain) like aircrafts, tanks, artillery, as well as a tremendous amount of ground troops (approximately 30,000 soldiers). The main targets of Pakistan's military included among others Al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Haqqani network, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and Bahadur's faction. In this context, the civilian and military leadership spent substantial efforts to emphasize that the military operation has an 'all-inclusive' approach, meaning that it is directed against terrorists of various hues and colours, and was not excluding any specific group such as the Haqqani Network.


After officially declaring the end of *Zarb-e-Azb*, the Army announced that the campaign against terrorism was a major success and that more than 90% of the area had been 'cleared'. According to different sources, between 3000 and 3500 terrorists were killed, and a huge amount of weaponry and explosive devises were seized. Assessing these claims is difficult, since the operation was declared to be an 'internal matter', so that it would not require any 'specific communication'. As a result, no media or neutral observers were allowed to enter the areas in which military activities took place. Therefore, no independent data about *Zarb-e-Azb* is available. Nevertheless, some of the most dramatic outcomes of this campaign are quite visible. The Pakistani Army produced massive collateral damage: not only is it responsible for leaving



large parts of North Waziristan's dwelling areas in ruins, but also for the suffering of one million people subjected to the negative impacts of internal displacement.

After being in a limbo for months, on 31 March 2015 the first internally displaced persons (IDPs) were allowed to return to their area. However, this permission comes with an 'unpleasant price tag'. Not only Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the military authorities refused any international assistance in managing the repatriation of the uprooted people from Waziristan, but also the plan for their homecoming raised much criticism since it seems to make a comprehensive resettlement very unlikely. But it is most important to mention that Islamabad demanded a prerequisite for the repatriation of the IDPs. The tribesmen were forced to accept the so called 'Social Agreement North Waziristan 2015 with the political administration. The non-debatable and mandatory eight page document, which is also known as *Samaji Mohada NWA 2015*, contains a highly controversial annex that has to be signed by each displaced family that wants to go back. The agreement forces the people of North Waziristan to take an 'oath of loyalty' on the country's constitution, as well as to pledge once again their allegiance to local customs and especially the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). The FCR is a discriminating and draconian set of laws introduced by the British colonial rule and continued by its successor, the Pakistani government.

As far as this is concerned, it is crucial to mention that the document asked the people of North Waziristan to cooperate in countering terrorism and it also made them individually and collectively responsible to upkeep peace and security in the area where they live. Furthermore, the tribes are also responsible for eradicating militancy and maintaining law and order in the area. The agreement bound the local people to provide security to the state authorities, including their administration bodies, and to facilitate their functioning. More concretely, the tribesmen must not protect or shelter enemies of Pakistan, keep all foreign militants out, and not allow locals to carry out activities that would destabilize the country. The documents further demand from the tribal people to identify and hand over any anti-state elements, militants and other criminals to law-enforcement agencies. In order to fulfill these requirements, it is also within the responsibilities of the local inhabitants to form militias (locally called *Salweshiti*, a *lashkar* of about 40 men) to protect the area. In brief, the new, ultimate obligation of the tribal people is to




avoid that North Waziristan turns into a terrorist hub once again. If the local population fails and militant groups start to use their soil again to threaten the Pakistani state and its political administration, entire tribes have to face severe consequences in case of any infringement of the agreement, even if a breach is caused just by an individual member. Potential punishments by the government could result in the loss of any right for compensation if their properties are destroyed or damaged through military operations, the cancellation of National Identity Cards (NICs) and passports, confiscation of property, and even the banishment from the area.

There is no doubt that these terms and conditions of the so-called ‘social agreement’ are putting an almost unbearable burden on. To begin with, after coming back to their area, the tribal people are confronted with the double onus of rebuilding their homes as well as guarding the area. Here, it seems obvious that the military authorities have only limited interest in civilian reconstruction and not much passion for the concerns of the local people related to the lack of security.


The government’s rejection of foreign aid for the IDPs resettlement, as well as the very limited domestic support by the political administration for tribes, further worsen the living situation of the indigenous people. Instead of improving the socio-economic environment for the population, the army’s top brass and the civilian leadership insist on tribal efforts in fighting terrorism and subsequently, they urge them to protect the military and its facilities, as well as the political administrative institutions in North Waziristan. Many soldiers believe that a lot of locals collaborate with terrorists, and this entrenched notion further complicates the situation. Nevertheless, the question arising is how can the tribes fulfil the obligation to keep out terrorist groups when the contract does not allow them to form armed groups –besides small, insufficiently equipped militias– and to keep heavy weapons, like rocket launchers and machine guns?

Having said this, the ‘social agreement’ seems to be an illogical and ‘unfair’ document full of contradictions. However, at a deeper level this contract between the tribes of North Waziristan and the political administration follows a crystal-clear political agenda: the ‘social agreement’ paves the path for a shirking of future responsibilities for everything which could happen and



constitutes a burden for the local people in case of a re-emergence of North Waziristan as a hub for terrorism. In other words, this agreement enables Pakistani authorities to blame the local populace for everything that may or may not occur. As such, it is obvious that the contract is an attempt to white-wash the failure –or at least the unsustainability of the military’s achievements of *Zarb-e-Azb*–. If this campaign would really be a success, as it is claimed by the military Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), there would be no need for such an agreement to shift responsibility to the tribal people turning them into scapegoats for past, present and future undesirable trajectories. Besides this, asking the destitute people of North Waziristan to provide peace and security in one of the most war-torn areas in South Asia seems to be an ‘act of despair’ rather than a ‘cunning strategy’ to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the tribal people for closer cooperation in countering terrorism. In this context, one should recall that it is primarily the State that is responsible for protecting its people and not the opposite. Pakistan’s security establishment should seriously rethink its approach towards the people of North Waziristan and re-assess its own role in supporting terrorist groups and their structures in this area.

In sum, the ‘social agreement’ aims at strengthening Islamabad’s grip over the tribal agency. However, the military’s success seems limited since armed encounters and terrorist attacks are still ongoing in North Waziristan and there are increasingly reports that militant groups like the Haqqani Network or Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan are returning from their shelters in other areas in Pakistan or across the Afghan border, at the same time with the IDPs. In this context, the major result of *Zarb-e-Azb* was not the eradication of militancy and Jihadism but the serious weakening of the tribal people, which are one of the most important actors to keep domestic and foreign terrorists operating in North Waziristan at bay. The disarmament of the local people as well as the ban on forming significant armed groups means giving the Taliban and other militant extremist groups a free hand. The latter combined with the inability of the Pakistan Armed Forces to guarantee and to provide protection for the people in addition to the implications of the “social agreement”, means that the government leaves the tribes ‘officially’ at the mercy of terrorists. Subsequently, the country’s soldiers once again left behind a post-operation power vacuum, which will be easily and quickly filled by the militants, who are not only better armed but also outnumber the tribal fighters. In result, being socially, economically and politically more



deprived (and militarily threatened) than ever before, the tribal people are faced with an extraordinarily perilous situation. It is likely that the North Waziristan agency will once again be deeply drawn into the 'economy of terror and Jihadism'.