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THE PRISONERS OF EXTREMISM

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How to solve the disease of extremism that has plagued Pakistan and Afghanistan for the past four decades is a million-dollar question. Managing it is more possible than eradicating it. For decades, both nations struggled to address and successfully combat the blossoming seeds of religious extremism, a phenomenon that gave birth to terrorist and extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS in the Middle East and the TTP/Tehreek-e-Taliban (in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban). South, central and southwest Asia are all crippled by the weight of religio-political extremism that dictates both their domestic and international policies. This affects their political reputation in the international community. In the last forty years, Afghanistan has remained the epicenter of political instability, religious extremism and terrorism that has crippled the foundation of the nation, setting back its progress seventy years. This said, all of its neighboring countries realize that the Taliban-led Afghan government has the potential to blow up in their faces, having a toxic extremist impact in the region, eventually damaging their economies and domestic politics, burning through the diplomatic relations they've built with the West over the years. Their reluctance to embrace the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is enough proof to suggest that these nations are tired of the stain -religious extremism that rests on nearly every state within the region/s.

The collective hatred for secularism is the foundation that both the TTP and the TTA reside on. With the constant intervention of a foreign power and foreign governments being accused of playing a game of chess within Central and South West Asia, it is no surprise that religious extremism is on the rise. These ideologies are built on their uniform hatred for the West. This is not only dangerous but also problematic for Pakistan, particularly, which has another threat hanging over it like the sword of Damocles. Afghan Taliban's ability to successfully launch bloody ideological extremist warfare as it already did during its 1996-2001 rule in Pakistan's erstwhile FATA region is a constant looming fear. It was the Afghan Taliban that exported their ideologies, romanticizing extremist, terrorist propaganda in Pakistan that resulted in the birth of numerous extremist-militant groups like TTP, TLP, and now IS-KP of ISIS. Pakistan has been trying earnestly to improve its reputation in the international community. Having an anti-Pakistan terrorist group running rampant within its borders is not a good look. Micromanaging and restricting the ideological and political influence of the TTP is probably the most effective way to combat its increasingly problematic presence in Pakistan. Its dominant and oppressive control over the tribal regions in the south of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (needs to be immediately addressed through diplomatic intervention while simultaneously dealing with the Taliban in Afghanistan). The TTA hasn't attempted to conceal its support for the TTP. From granting them political asylum to providing them with alleged political and military support, which has led them to increase their influx of cross-border attacks and lead a full-fledged gorilla war against Pakistan, they've notably disregarded their main benefactor from 2001 till 2021. Their tolerance towards TTP's violent literature and defiling attitude towards Pakistan is a clear indication of where their loyalties lie. Pakistan doesn't want to fight with the Afghan Taliban, but it cannot afford to give up on an

erstwhile friend. India, with its long history of involvement in the region, must be seen to tread lightly, knowing that whatever happens in Afghanistan will involve it, positively or negatively. In this case, unquestionably optimistic.

However, the real prisoners of extremism are not the governments of these countries but rather the people who have suffered as a result of their actions. Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, the Afghans have been plunged into a record-breaking humanitarian crisis. A nation where 20 million people starve every day, a nation where the economy has collapsed and multiple sectors, including health, education, and employment, have tumbled, a nation where women have been stripped of their fundamental rights is only a nation in denial and decay. This serves as nothing but a reminder to Pakistan of the devastating consequences of undefeated religious extremism.



Photo by Rizky Andar on Unsplash

Between TTP's recent subversive activities in the South of the KP and the Afghan Taliban's anti-Pakistan policies on the border region, Pakistan is caught between a devil and the deep sea. The Afghan Taliban doesn't want to reign the TTP, nor do they want to be portrayed as Pakistan's satellite state. However, the question arises: Do they have a choice? A government that hasn't been formally recognized by any state more than a year and a half into its takeover has limited options. Especially for Afghanistan, which was previously running on foreign aid, accounting for more than half of its annual GDP and eighty percent of its government spending. The Afghan Taliban are desperate for recognition and aid, and Pakistan should/could make good use of this opportunity. Open negotiations and mutually beneficial dealings are the ideal way to deal with this twin-Taliban problem. Granting the Afghan Taliban government with aid while urging them to isolate the TTP and promising them more diplomatic support in return for them to respect the sovereignty of Pakistan is far softer than an all-out war, which neither parties can afford. This approach may be dilated on a regional level along with China, Russia, Iran, and other Central Asian Republics. Late in November last year, Pakistan's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar, met with her male Afghan counterpart to cool the rising tensions between the two countries. The meeting was a good look for the Afghan Taliban to improve their already spoiled reputation and show their diplomacy towards a woman in light of their recent decisions regarding restricting women's education.

Pakistan still has the upper hand. Met with the realization of a looming extremist threat, it has the resources to win over the Afghan Taliban government, urging it to isolate the TTP. Without Afghanistan's political and military support, the TTP will not be hard to contain. Crushing their influence along with the seeds of anti-narrow nationalism will be not only a sign of political strength but also a message to the international community that Pakistan is not a state governed by extremists and romanticized ideals of religious terrorism.