

**Godless gods –
The Peshawar School Attack and the Formidable Adversary**

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It was a day that memorialised the 43rd anniversary of the Instrument of Surrender – a written agreement whereby West Pakistan’s forces surrendered during the revolutionary independence war of 1971 that created the Republic of Bangladesh – marking the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan.² Juxtaposed against this lingering melancholy, the 16th of December 2014 also marked one of the blackest days in the lives of more than a hundred mothers in Peshawar. Around 10:00 am, six armed men disguised as soldiers stormed the Army Public School in the capital city of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP), indiscriminately firing on school children as they raided classroom after classroom.³

Terrorist attacks have claimed thousands of innocent lives in Pakistan over the last several years, but the school children’s massacre is the bloodiest in the Nation’s recent history.⁴ It has also sparked unparalleled shock across the country and abroad – as people disbelievingly grieve the loss of young children attending an otherwise normal day in school.⁵

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who took responsibility for the attack, claimed that it was undertaken as revenge for the ongoing military operation in Pakistan’s tribal areas since summer 2014, which has killed almost a 1,000 militants and left tens of thousands people displaced.⁶ The brutality of this incident lends crucial insights into the perils of negotiating with radical elements. The Pakistani Government’s policy to root out terrorists has been two-pronged and polarized – the government has sought to either negotiate with the TTP in the hope of salvaging peace through a deal – or when such peace deals have failed, the army has launched military operations to exterminate the Taliban, as was the case with the Swat operation in 2009 when the Malakand Accord broke down.⁷ The Malakand Accord,

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² Zahoor Ahmad Rather, *Victory Day in Golden Letters – War of Liberation*, 2 GLOBAL J. RESEARCH ANALYSIS 218, 218–21 (2013).

³ See e.g., *Pakistan Taliban: Peshawar School Attack Leaves 141 Dead*, BBC NEWS ASIA (Dec. 16, 2014), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-30491435>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Jon Boone & Ewen MacAskill, *Pakistan Responds to Peshawar School Massacre with strikes on Taliban*, THE GUARDIAN (Dec. 16, 2014), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/16/pakistan-taliban-peshawar-massacre-attack>.

⁷ Dexter Filkins, *Pakistan Pounds Taliban, Swelling Tide of Refugees*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (May 8, 2009), http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/09/world/asia/09pstan.html?ref=global-home&_r=1&.

which was struck between the Pakistani Government and the TTP in February 2009, and involved making concessions to the militants including, *inter alia*, the imposition of a radical form of *Sharia* in the Malakand Division – a large region in the restive KP province – has already exposed the dangers of brokering a peace deal with the Taliban.⁸ The brazenness of the Peshawar school massacre also reveals how the alternative to a negotiated agreement – a military offensive – can be equally treacherous in fanning militants to retaliate.

The difficulty is layered and involves a clash of ideologies – one that subscribes to an abrasive and virulent version of Islam and the other that is less of a religious ideology but tends to use religion as a political tool to further partisan agendas. Both ideologies are thereby fractured and insincere and spell deadlock from the onset. Both also suffer from the “I Really Am Right” problem outlined by Stone, Patton and Heen, Professors of Law at Harvard Law School and the Harvard Negotiation Project, in their seminal work, “Difficult Conversations.”⁹ The authors’ write,

“There’s an old story of two clerics arguing about how to do God’s work. In the spirit of conciliation, one finally says to the other, ‘You and I see things differently, and that’s okay. We don’t need to agree. You can do God’s work your way, and I’ll do God’s work His way.’”¹⁰

The story epitomises the stubborn dogmatism adhered to by the Taliban in their ideological and theological outlook and underscores the perilous terrain that would shape the contours of engaging in discourse with them. It begs the question whether constructive dialogue is even a plausible reality where the adversary conforms to extremist views that remain impregnable to reason. Imran Khan, leader of Pakistan’s Tehreek-e-Insaf party that won the KP province in 2013’s general election, has been persistent in his calls to speak to the Taliban.¹¹ Such calls not only reveal the cricketer-turned-politician’s soft stance towards militant groups but must also be reassessed from the perspective of whether a meaningful exchange with such antagonists is even a remote possibility.

On the other hand, the dangers inherent in a military operation against the TTP have also manifested themselves through the grotesque horror of suicide attacks and blasts that have plagued the country; Pakistan saw a 48% rise in deaths

⁸ See e.g. Bill Roggio, *Pakistan to end military operation and implement sharia in Malakand Division*, THE LONG WAR JOURNAL, (Feb. 15, 2009), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/02/pakistan_to_end_mili.php.

⁹ DOUGLAS STONE, BRUCE PATTON, & SHEILA HEEN, *DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS* (2000).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 41.

¹¹ See e.g. Omar Waraich, *Imran Khan: We need to talk to the Taliban. War is no solution*, THE INDEPENDENT (Feb. 14, 2014), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/imran-khan-we-need-to-talk-to-the-taliban-war-is-no-solution-9129536.html>.

in terrorists attacks in 2009¹² following the launch of the army offensive in Swat and Waziristan provoking a backlash from the Taliban – with terror attacks having claimed 70,000 lives in the past 13 years.¹³ With those numbers in place, Pakistan's watershed moment is not readily decipherable, but the macabre scene that unfolded in December 2014 in Peshawar is being termed the strongest contender. And thus, more than ever today, the failure of these approaches to eradicate the TTP and other militant groups demands the adoption of a more feasible strategy that could work towards driving out extremists, addressing both the physical and ideological extermination of terrorists. However, the challenge remains: what *form* would such a strategy take?

One might ask whether Pakistan is in need of a revolution, and while the answer may be a resounding 'yes' – a revolution styled along the lines of the Arab Spring will prove to be an abject failure. It will do no more than reinforce the status quo and entrench what has become a mockery of an Islamic State. Indeed, Islam is seen smoldering in every corner in Pakistan – its spirit and letter having been defiled to the core. Pakistan's extremists have become the self-appointed warders of religion and have emptied the Divine from divinity and stand antithetical to everything that God stands for. If religion is to be adulterated both at the hands of extremists and at the hands of political forces as a contrivance, then Pakistan may be better off with an Atatürk-style revolution¹⁴, transforming the country from a pseudo-religious Islamic State into a secular one. The worrying fact is that even if Pakistan does manage to alleviate the TTP internally, as the Peshawar shooting has shown (some of the attackers who spoke Arabic were foreigners¹⁵), forces are joining their ranks from militant groups abroad. The ruthlessness of these "Godless gods" have led Pakistan into its nuclear winter and far from a Pakistani Spring being the antidote, an upheaval of great proportions may be required to counter this growing threat to the country's survival.

¹² Declan Walsh, *Pakistan suffers record number of deaths due to militant violence*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 11, 2010), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/11/pakistan-militant-violence-death-toll>.

¹³ Aamer Ahmed Khan, *Peshawar school massacre: Pakistan's watershed Taliban moment?*, BBC NEWS ASIA (Dec. 18, 2014), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-30532846>.

¹⁴ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was a Turkish nationalist leader and founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey. He initiated a series of social and political reforms in the 1920s to modernize Turkey following the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate.

¹⁵ See *Attackers were speaking Arabic, says witness*, DUNYA NEWS (Dec. 16, 2014), <http://dunyanews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/250263-Attackers-were-speaking-Arabic-says-witness->.