Policy Intervention in FATA: Why Discourse Matters

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Introduction

In focusing on the counterterrorist operations in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA, this article takes issue with the notion

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that an exclusively military focus can succeed in eliminating militancy and extremism. Its central thesis is that while nonmilitary methods encompassing a variety of development initiatives are necessary steps in the right direction, it is critically important to incorporate within these nonmilitary strategies attention to discourse as a causal factor in militancy. The article begins by offering a brief historical context of militancy in FATA and an evaluation of the ongoing counterterrorist operation. Following this background analysis, the argument considers conflict transformation literature as an important reference point or framework within which long-term and sustainable peace may be envisioned. In focusing on transforming the dynamics of conflict, the article suggests that understanding discourse and representation as potential "platforms of change" and important parts of a multipronged, multidimensional nonmilitary strategy can have a substantial impact on reducing the accommodation and toleration of, and recruitment into, militancy.

The Cultivation of Militancy in FATA

Pakistan's Northwestern tribal belt, although nominally included in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, has had a peculiar semiautonomous status for much of its history. Following Pakistan's independence in 1947, it was agreed that the region would accede to Pakistan on the condition that it was granted a unique semiautonomous status. This autonomy translated into minimal central governance and administration. In particular, the notorious colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) was maintained in FATA, which bestowed extensive executive, judicial, and revenue powers on a federally appointed Political Agent (PA). The concentration of power in the office of the Political Agent was instrumental in disenfranchising local populations and entrenching a system in which the PA, largely on the basis of patronage, selectively distributed development funds and resources. In the post-independence timeframe and in the absence of accountability, audit, and effective governance, FATA remained the least-developed region in Pakistan, with around sixty percent of its residents living below the poverty line.[1] In addition, lack of a state apparatus meant that tribal populations made and implemented their own laws and administration based on tribal codes and traditional institutions. As a result, FATA became akin to America's Wild West, in that all powers, including carrying out the law and meting out justice, resided at a local level.

The 1980s proved a decade of change for FATA. The expansion of Soviet influence in Afghanistan brought the adjoining FATA region into the international limelight. The United States, amid its Cold War with the

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Soviet Union, took a renewed interest in the tribal belt. Its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) joined forces with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), along with Saudi donors, to fund, train, and arm FATA residents.[2] Indeed, as has been well-documented, FATA's "Islamic soldiers," or mujahideen, were deliberately and consistently infused with a particular brand of violent jihadist fervor to incite a holy war against the expansion of Soviet communism in neighboring Afghanistan.[3] As Pakistani scholar Tariq Amin-Khan has noted, this external funding and interest in Islamisizing Pakistan's largely secular public realm was unprecedented.[4] Subsequently, young men, imbued with religious passion, migrated to Pakistan from all over the world to fight and oust the Soviets from the region. Adding fuel to the fire, the CIA's funding of Islamic extremism in FATA coincided with General Muhammad Zia's rigorous policy to Islamisize the rest of Pakistani society by allowing, among other things, the mushroom-like growth of unregulated *mudrassas*, or religious schools.[5]

By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet threat had dissipated and FATA, having served its strategic purpose, was no longer useful. These new realities prompted a hasty withdrawal of U.S. interest and funds from the region. As former President Pervez Musharraf notes, this was perhaps one of the most disastrous steps that could have been taken at the time. He argues: "We helped create the mujahideen, fired them with religious zeal in seminaries, armed them, paid them, fed them, and sent then to a jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. We did not stop to think how we would divert them to productive life after the jihad was won."[6]

FATA's mujahideen, unfortunately, were forgotten until the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001. Suddenly, in the post-9/11 timeframe, FATA once again became the subject of intense international scrutiny. This time, however, Pakistan's tribal belt was viewed in an extremely negative light: as a hotbed of extremism, militancy, and, not least of all, the primary hideout of America's most wanted man, Usama bin Ladin. Consequently, the inauguration of the U.S.-led War on Terror entailed a combined U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorist effort to root out from FATA the Islamic militancy and extremism that had deliberately been cultivated during the 1980s. Without regulation and governance, Pakistan's tribal belt had been an easy target for the uninhibited flow of militant discourse and ideologies.[7]

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Evaluating Counterterrorism in FATA

Since commencement of the War on Terror, Pakistan's tribal belt has been infused with funds and subjected to a long military operation to root out militancy.[8] This effort has resulted in some successes—for example, the capture or killing of key terrorist leaders—and has paved the way for the establishment of some government control over parts of FATA.[9] Indeed, Pakistan's military has gradually managed to gain control of large swaths of territory, thus reducing the space in which militants can operate. The cost of the military operation, however, has been devastatingly high in human terms. Official reports indicate that Pakistan's security forces have lost over 3,000 personnel and suffered many more injuries.[10] One may add to this cost, tens of thousands of people displaced from FATA and scores of civilian causalities resulting from CIA-led drone attacks.[11]

One of the chief features of the combined U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorist operations in FATA has been the way in which it has been crudely defined in terms of good and evil. This good-bad dichotomy, reminiscent of President Bush's "axis of evil" formulation, posits the War on Terror in terms of a simple conflict between civilization and barbarianism, sans any gray areas.[12] Such a framing justifies and normalizes the "good" and employing military methods to physically eliminate the "bad." Moreover, and more critically, a simplistic good-versus-bad dichotomy requires little need to examine the social complexities and finer details of the problem. Indeed, popular conceptions of FATA's militancy are often implicitly embedded within the "new terrorism thesis" and a larger global jihad framework.[13] This inhibits a deeper understanding of the militancy. A focus on global connections, for instance, and the tendency to simplistically assume all FATA groups are affiliates of al-Qaida, hinder seeing local events as perhaps related to structural violence or a lack of governance. By operating from this worldview, the bulk of U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorist operations has focused on identifying terrorist elements and their hosts and hideouts, then methodically eliminating them through firepower.

Despite its costs, however, the military campaign in FATA has—even at the best of times—provided only a precarious grip on the territories. The region continues to be susceptible to periodic outbursts of militancy.[14] Militant elements in FATA have attracted a seemingly endless supply of recruits, and there are alarming indications that extremism is spreading from FATA to Southern Punjab.[15] Given this situation, it has become imperative to take stock and evaluate the extent to which the objectives of counterterrorist operations have been achieved, and to consider whether

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an alternative approach might be more successful in eradicating militancy in FATA.

Conflict Transformation as an Alternative Approach

The peace studies field is notable for bringing a critical orientation to orthodox conceptualizations of conflict and peace, and a deeper reflection on the causes and drivers of conflict.[16] Rather than viewing conflict simply in terms of good and bad, peace researchers focus on the quality of systemic relationships, so that conflict is seen as something caused, enabled, and reproduced by particular social structures and institutions. From this perspective, local and contextual factors are seen as the key to both sustaining and reproducing conflict in society.

While peace studies has many sub-fields and competing visions of "what matters," one area that has much to offer in terms of both understanding conflicts, as well as prescribing strategies to achieve long-term sustainable peace, is the sub-field of "conflict transformation."[17] As its name suggests, this approach focuses on changing conflict dynamics. It has three main components.

First, conflict transformation takes a holistic view of conflict in society, treating violence as an expression of the larger system of relationship patterns. Second, it shifts from focusing exclusively on resolving "presenting issues" and moves toward the much broader tasks of achieving reconciliation, restoring relationships, and sustaining peace. Third, it emphasizes building indigenous "cultures of peace," taking a bottom-up peace-building approach, as opposed to a top-down strategy that imposes peace through external military means. From the perspective of conflict transformation, top-down strategies provide only short-term peace.[18]

Scholar John Paul Lederach is perhaps one of the best-known proponents of the conflict transformation approach.[19] He maintains that developing sustainable peace requires simultaneously engaging with three levels of leadership within society, illustrated in the pyramid below.[20]

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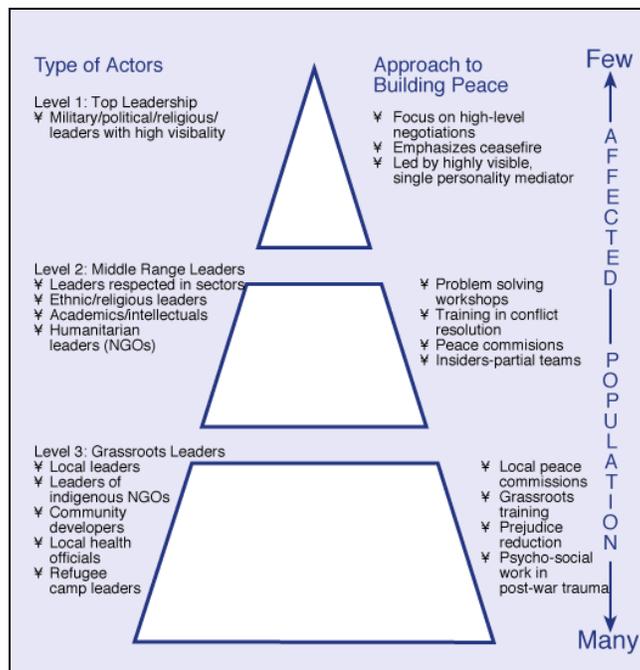
In the case of FATA, using Lederach's pyramid as a problem-solving framework would entail engaging with the region's middle-range leadership, incorporating tribal elders, religious clerics, and formal and informal education providers. It would also involve eliciting clear commitment from, and genuine peacekeeping efforts by, top-level national and international leaders, Lederach also stresses engaging with communities and individuals to foster long-term sustainable conflict transformation, rather than merely managing or containing conflict through political settlements. This approach recognizes the need not only to integrate efforts at all three tiers of society but to concentrate on engaging with society. Indeed, the pyramid's larger base indicates this focus.

Development initiatives in FATA, although ad hoc and often uncoordinated, have been introduced.[21] There is some indication that attention is being paid to alleviating poverty and unemployment, and dealing with disenfranchisement, illiteracy, and the lack of governance as well as socio-economic marginalization.[22] More recently, President Obama's Afghanistan-Pakistan (aka "Af-Pak") strategy has also begun recognizing, and engaging with, human and physical development issues.[23] While attention to development initiatives and empowering local communities is

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commendable and needs to be extended, an important aspect of the conflict has hitherto been largely neglected in terms of intervention.[24] On this account, and in light of Lederach's ideas regarding the value of transforming conflicts vis-à-vis containment, it is surprising that little attention has been paid to the role of discourse as a cause of militancy in FATA.

Viewing Militancy in FATA through the Discourse Lens

A large body of academic literature theorizes about, and empirically demonstrates, the intimate links between popular discourse and concrete social practice. Some of this work concentrates on how representation regulates individual behavior, while a portion examines the enabling and constraining effects of strategic cultures and discursive frameworks on state-level decision making.[25, 26] While there is much debate over the extent to which discourse and representation are more or less relevant than other explanatory factors, such as material power, there is nevertheless broad consensus that discourse—or the way in which we frame and interpret the world, as individuals and collectives—has a powerful effect on how we behave and respond. In a nutshell, we may say that human actions and practices are preceded by narratives, interpretations, or discourses that enable or constrain the action under question. For many analysts, war and conflict are neither natural nor necessary, but essentially products of militarized discursive economies. Carolyn Nordstrom argues that violence in war is "a culture-bound system of learned rules, ethics, and actions (and) like all culture, these rules are made, enforced, reinforced, and changed through human interaction."[27]

In employing the same discourse lens to FATA, we are able to understand that what we witness today, in terms of the pockets of extremism and militancy, were actually preceded by a discourse, or language patterns, that accommodated the legitimacy of violence. For instance, the presence of foreign mujahideen in the territories for prolonged periods following the Cold War's end, as well as their introduction of radical forms of Islam into the region, was instrumental in normalizing a discourse that propagated a natural association between Islam, jihad, and violence. Encouraging an association between Islam and violent jihad had been acceptable during the Cold War. This representation, in the absence of a state apparatus and regulation, was left intact in the tribal region and allowed to grow and flourish. Thus, without central authority and credible educational institutions, tribal populations were left amid confusing and mixed messages.

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Moreover, widespread poverty and genuine political grievances com-pounded frustration and drew recruits into radical groups that promised a better future (but ultimately failed to deliver).

If we acknowledge the powerful role of discourse in legitimizing and nor-malizing behavior, it is possible to argue that the endemic militancy in FATA society indicates violent, exclusionist, and extremist discourses continue to have a foothold there. The accommodation, or at the very least the toleration, of militancy and extremism indicates that particular language structures are embedded in the society. Unless these underlying discourses become the focus of sustained policy intervention, military and nonmilitary measures in FATA likely will have limited long-term effects. In this region, however, inattention to the role of language may have resulted partly from the popularity of the "new terrorism thesis" that ter-rorists are incorrigible. If militants are thought, at their very core, to be impervious to reason and negotiation, the use of force becomes the only available option.[28]

To this point, counterterrorist policy has lacked intervention at the level of popular discourse. In FATA, for instance, illegal radio broadcasts by groups allied with the banned terrorist organization Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) continued to spew extremist propaganda well into 2009 and 2010.[29] Pakistani authorities largely ignored the infamous broadcasts by Maulana Fazlullah, also known as "FM Mullah," that played a critical role in reproducing and legitimizing violence.[30] Social space occupied by extremist discourses reproduces, accommodates, legitimizes, and assists recruitment into militancy. Thus, while building basic infrastructure, reducing poverty, and physically eliminating terrorist outfits are important goals, it is equally—if not more—important, as a first step, to focus on discourse as a causal variable facilitating militancy. In a culture of toleration, it is difficult to see how other grassroots measures can be successful.[31]

Discourse Intervention: A Platform of Change?

The significance of discourse becomes apparent only within critically ori-entated approaches to problem-solving that, on the one hand, focus on a more complex and holistic understanding of militancy in FATA and, on the other, avoid *a priori* assumptions based on a dichotomous civilisa-tional/barbarian narrative.[32] A better approach would be to understand how discourses and ideology played a historical role in producing mili-tancy in the first place, and, how they continue to play a role in reproduc-ing and sustaining militant practices. If violent conflict and militancy are

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partly social products that reflect a public space dominated by exclusionist and hegemonic discourse, a long-term and sustainable solution for FATA requires, besides wider socioeconomic uplift, an emphasis on altering the ideological environment and focusing on embedding transformative counterdiscourses.[33]

In FATA, traditional Islamic and indigenous cultural practices provide ample resources that run counter to militant extremist worldviews. Moreover, policy should consider Lederach's conflict transformation prescription of engaging genuinely and intensively at the grassroots level—of transforming conflicts in ways that give rise to a sustainable and long-term peaceful society, as opposed to simply managing or containing conflict. Lederach's insistence on using indigenous resources to initiate transformation provides a useful generic framework and vision, within which the attention to discourse can be embedded. This vision of change and transformation is something that must come from within communities, as opposed to something imposed from outside, has important implications for policy and practice.

The purpose here is not to suggest that a wide-scale discourse intervention strategy is the solution. Rather, the argument put forward is that an attention to the productive role of language and discourse as a causal factor in FATA's militancy must form an essential part of an overall nonmilitary strategy. While military intervention is important in the sense that it provides for physical security, it must nevertheless co-exist and work alongside strategies and interventions that focus on a multiplicity of causal factors.

Conclusion

The notion of the incorrigible militant underpinning the War on Terror has led to counterterrorist strategies focused on identifying and physically eliminating terrorists. While the purpose here has not been to criticize such methods, this article has nevertheless sought to critically question the extent to which such strategies can reach their objectives. In FATA, for instance, an evaluation of counterterrorist operations reveals the limitations of a "firefighting" approach that seeks to temporarily extinguish the visible problem without addressing the underlying factors sustaining militancy.

In seeking to offer a different problem-solving perspective, this article suggests a need to move away from viewing FATA's militancy through a constraining global-jihad prism. Instead, in drawing on the conflict trans-

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formation literature, the article argues for a more intensive understanding of the local contexts, dynamics, and drivers of militancy. A framework that focuses on transformation as a precursor to sustainable peace draws attention to, among other things, the productive role of discourse and representation in facilitating violence and militancy.

In FATA, as part of a nonmilitary approach focused on democratization, national integration, and development activities, it is critical to address embedded perceptions that allow the recruitment, hospitality, and accommodation of militants. Indeed, a credible and indigenous discourse intervention strategy must be put into place, as a military strategy alone is unlikely to eliminate militancy in FATA. In terms of a viable counterterrorism policy, this translates into the need for a wide-scale, deliberate, well-thought-out strategy to counter extremist discourse. If counterterrorism policy aims to achieve a sustainable peace, then rather than being a minor add-on to existing nonmilitary strategy, discourse intervention must be a central and important part of the counterterrorism plan in FATA.

About the Author

Dr. Nazya Fiaz, assistant professor of international relations, joined the Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad, Pakistan) in September 2010, following completion of her doctoral thesis at the University of Bradford (UK). Dr. Fiaz teaches postgraduate courses on strategy studies, security studies, and international relations. She holds a master's degree in research methodology and trains civil servants at the Kashmir Institute of Management in the area of research methods and philosophy. Dr. Fiaz's current research interest focuses on critical approaches to international relations and security, specifically vis-à-vis Pakistan. The author may be reached for comment at: *nazyafiaz@hotmail.com*.

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3 Religious schools, or *mudrassas*, in the FATA region were to be taught a violent and extremist curriculum produced in the United States by the University of Nebraska, Omaha; see Craig Davis, "A is for Allah, J is for Jihad," *World Policy Journal* 19:1 (2002): 90–94.

4 Tariq Amin-Khan, "The Rise of Militant Islam and the Security State in the Era of the Long War," *Third World Quarterly* 30:4 (2009): 813–28. There is also ample literature that tends to view the rise of militant Islam as a consequence of U.S. imperialism in the world. For example, see: Ali, Tariq, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002); and Johnson, Chalmers, *The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

5 Hussain, Zahid, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam* (London: I B Tauris, 2007).

6 Musharraf, Pervez, *In the Line of Fire* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 208.

7 See Rashid, Ahmed, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (London: I B Tauris, 2008).

8 The level of Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. has been the subject of much concern in Pakistan, especially the deployment of CIA-operated drones in the FATA regions. While drone attacks can target Taliban and al-Qaida leadership—use of these weapons is not, despite counterclaims, a precise science. Drones have been implicated in causing much "collateral damage," a crude term referring to the unwitting killing of innocent citizens.

9 In this respect, Ijaz Khan argues that Pakistan's government is concerned with containing the conflict in FATA, as opposed to eliminating militancy entirely. See Ijaz Khan, "Challenges Facing Development in Pakistan's FATA," *NBR Analysis* 19:3 (August 2008).

10 Iftikar A. Khan, "Pakistan Lost Two Brigades in War on Terror," *Dawn*, October 20, 2011, available at: *http://tinyurl.com/7jbbh5m (www.dawn.com/2011/10/20/pakistan-lost-two-brigades-in-war-on-terror.html)*.

11 See International Crisis Group Asia Report No. 178, *Pakistan: Countering Militancy in FATA*, October 21, 2009.

12 Jackson, Richard, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

13 This approach to dealing with militancy also reflects the emergence, in the 1990s, of the "new terrorism thesis," outlined in great depth by Bruce Hoffman. The thesis posits the notion that Islamic terrorists are beyond negotiation and reason. This incorrigibility assumption encourages seeing physical elimination as the only solution to halting militancy. See Hoffman, Bruce, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

14 Much debate has arisen over why FATA remains susceptible to militancy. On the one hand, the U.S. has questioned the level of Pakistan's commitment to reining in the Taliban. On the other, Pakistan, perennially concerned over India, arguably has found it difficult to completely sever ties with the Taliban. For Pakistani insecurity regarding India, see Jean-Luc Racine, "Pakistan and the India Syndrome: Between Kashmir and the Nuclear Predicament," in Jaffrelot, Christophe, *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation?* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2002), 195–229. For a view that sees FATA's militancy in the context of a lack of governance, see Haider, Ziad, "Mainstreaming Pakistan's Tribal Belt: A human rights and security imperative," *Belfer Center Student Paper Series #09-01*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, January 2009.

15 See, for example: U.S. Department of State, *Country Report on Terrorism 2010*, available at: *http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/*.

16 For a very readable introduction to peace studies see Barash, David (ed.), *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also useful here is Miall, Hugh, Oliver Ramsbotham, and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity Press Ltd, 1999).

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18 The concepts of positive and negative peace, developed by Johan Galtung, have been seminal in conflict and peace research. In brief, positive peace is the integration of human society, as opposed to negative peace, which simply denotes the absence of overt violence in society. See Galtung, Johan, "Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking and Peacebuilding," in Johan Galtung (ed.), *Peace, War and Defense—Essays in Peace Research, Vol 2* (Copenhagen: Christian Ejliers, 1975), 282–304; Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27:3 (1990): 291–305.

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20 Source: Lederach, John Paul, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1997).

21 Intense debate remains concerning the extent to which poverty and illiteracy, as causal variables, are relevant to militancy in FATA. For instance, some writers suggest little connection between the two: Jacob N. Shapiro and Christine Fair, "Understanding Support for Islamist Militancy in Pakistan," *International Security* 34:3 (Winter 2009/10): 79–118. Conversely, some writers argue that socioeconomic variables are important. See Safiya Aftab, "Poverty and Militancy," *Conflict and Peace Studies (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies)* 1:1 (October–December 2008): 1–18.

22 See for instance, the development activities of the Community Appraisal and Motivation Programme (CAMP) set up in 2002, which has field offices in the FATA region. Also see Pakistan government initiatives outlined in the *FATA Sustainable Development Plan 2007–2015*, available at: *http://tinyurl.com/84pc2ds (www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/documents/Booklet_on_FATA_SDP_2006_-_15.pdf)*.

23 Shahid Javed Burki, "A welcome Change," *Dawn* (June 9, 2009).

24 For a critique of the idea that stalled development has caused militancy in FATA see Nosheen Ali, who argues against reducing FATA's militancy to poverty and illiteracy. Rather, she suggests a close relationship between imperial actions and the militancy. See Nosheen Ali, "Bombs vs. Books? Humanitarian Development and the Narrative of Terror in Northern Pakistan," *Third World Quarterly* 31:4 (2010): 541–559. It is essential to recognize that the extent of the collateral damage caused by CIA-operated drone attacks in FATA provide important justification for extremist and anti-Western discourses. In March 2010, for example, forty innocent tribesmen conducting a peaceful meeting were unwittingly killed by a drone attack. Such events are arguably counterproductive and give rise to further alienation, despondency, and justification for anti-Pakistan and anti-American discourse and action.

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27 Carolyn Nordstrom, "Deadly Myths of Aggression," *Aggressive Behaviour* 24 (1998): 147–159.

28 Op. Cit.

29 Yusuf Huma, "Pakistan's Airways: On Militant Turf, Radio Kyber Offers a Softer Voice," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 13, 2009, available at: *http://tinyurl.com/86rb4qa (www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2009/0313/p01s01-wosc.html)*.

30 Shaheen Buneri, "Pakistan Falters Against Taliban in Swat Valley," *World Politics Review*, January 26, 2009, available at: *http://tinyurl.com/7ujhk7l (www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/3207/pakistan-falters-against-taliban-in-swat-valley)*.

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31 Development activities often come under attack by militants. For example, by March 2011, around 320 schools had been destroyed. See *http://www.pakstudy.com/web/node/9429*.

32 More recently, the development of critical terrorism studies as an academic field has brought renewed attention to the interface between critical social theories and the study of terrorism. A useful introduction to the field is: Jackson, Richard, Marie Breen Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

33 Christia and Michael Semple's 2009 piece, "Flipping the Taliban," offers a similar prescription in that they argue for less focus on killing militants and increased attention to strategies that "flip" their allegiance, which potentially can lead to defection from militant groups. Although the piece cannot be equated with Lederach's ideas of the need to cultivate genuine reconciliation and "cultures of peace," there are some interesting ideas here, particularly relating to the examples of "flipping" the allegiance of Iraqi Sunni militia. See Fotini Christia and Michael Semple, "Flipping the Taliban," *Foreign Affairs* 88:4 (July/August 2009), available at: *http://tinyurl.com/q7wd26 (www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65151/fotini-christia-and-michael-semple/flipping-the-taliban).*

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