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## 9/20: Open War on the State of Pakistan

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If the 9/11 events in 2001 changed the security paradigm in the United States and elsewhere, the 9/20 deadly attack on Islamabad's five-star Marriott Hotel meant the same to the state of Pakistan. It in fact amounts to a watershed in Pakistan's long-held defense strategy that partially relied on proxies as a low-cost mechanism to pursue strategic objectives.

The ghastly strike left about 80 people dead sent all and sundry in a state of shock and awe. This undoubtedly underscored the gravity of what government and military officials meanwhile acknowledge as a "full-fledged insurgency" a war that has killed 10,267 Pakistanis in five years, most of them since January 2007 in nearly 100 suicide attacks. These are 6,000 Pakistani deaths more than the total number of Pakistani lives lost in the Pak-India War of 1965.

Terrorists struck at the Marriott, located in the centre of a largely secure neighborhood, within four hours of President Asif Zardari's avowal to "eliminate terrorists from the face of Pakistan." As if rebuking the challenge thrown by the President, the suicide bomber rammed the six-wheeler dumper truck loaded with 600 kilograms of TNT, RDX explosives including mortars, artillery rounds, mines and aluminum powder – into the barrier of the hotel.

The steady spike in violence and the indiscriminate nature of attacks since early this year – an attack on the assembly of tribal elders at Darra Adamkhel near Peshawar, the

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slaughtering of 22 members of a peace Jirga (assembly) at Jandola near South Waziristan, the attack at the crowded entrance of an ordnance factory and the one on Marriott that also killed the Czech ambassador to Pakistan and two US Marines – denote that the masterminds of the insurgency act in total disregard to tribal or social traditions. Neither are their tactics embedded in nor close to any religious ideology or moral scruples.

Thus far, this was the most consequential attack as far as the war between the Pakistani government and the militants is concerned. The planners chose the high-profile Marriott Hotel as the target, in an obvious attempt to scare foreigners and dent the country's image abroad. Stay

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off Pakistan, was the message delivered through this strike, the third on the hotel within three years.

It is an open political war on Pakistan, a lethal tool to destabilize Pakistan, either to

balkanize it or to throw it under the blanket of religious obscurantism in the name of war against "American imperialism and its allies." The Afghan Taliban had espoused the same system for their country but ended up sinking Afghanistan in terror, theocratic dictatorship and obscurantism based on their tunnel-visioned version of Islam.

The apparent proponents of the same ideology, many of whom are Pakistan's ex-proxies used in the Kashmir insurgency and in Afghanistan, are struggling to suck the soul out of the nation-state called the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Proxies of the past have openly challenged their former mentor i.e. the state of Pakistan. This time around, the litany of such attacks demonstrates that these proxies are acting probably on behalf of external players to cause indiscriminate destruction and sow terror in people's minds.

For the first time, signs of a political insurgency are unmistakably visible. In various interviews and their writings very prominent and respected analysts like Talat Masood, Rasul Bakhsh Raees and Dr.Hassan Askari Rizvi declared the attack as one on "symbols of a functional state." They say "this war knows no social values, no tribal tradition and carries no religious trappings." Nor were attacks on innocent locals and foreigners morally justifiable. The proverb "chickens had come home to roost" fits the events as they had been unfolding in Pakistan for almost seven years; religious zealots whom Pakistan's security apparatus had helped and used as proxies for missions in Afghanistan and Kashmir have turned around to take on its erstwhile mentor. The Godzilla of Jihad has given birth to smaller Godzillas many of whom are on their own – challenging the liberal world which they see as a big impediment in their way. Only an informed and non-emotional national debate can probably help the nation overcome the Godzillas that are now threatening the very existence of Pakistan.

This situation also means additional strain on Pakistan because of the reaction to the latest wave of violence; while the country drew sympathies from governments in the United States as well other capitals, they are also contemplating ways as to how contain the

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violence from spreading beyond Pakistan's geographical territories.

An almost certain consequence of the foreign concern for Pakistan would be greater external involvement, not for development but for containment of the fundamentalist forces. Inherently, this strategy could be even more dangerous if viewed by the majority of 170 million Pakistanis as "foreign-

driven." This could also invite more ferocious reaction by the anti-State elements. The demand of the hour, therefore, is to create a balance between what other countries want of Pakistan on the one hand, and what Pakistan must do itself to prevent the country from descending into more violence and chaos. This also requires a coherent and united approach by the civilian and the military leadership. Slightest divergence on the strategy will expose the state of Pakistan to greater exploitation by the forces it is trying to hunt and eliminate.

**PS: Government agencies picked Jamshed Mursileen and a prayer leader from Gujranwala, Punjab on the night of Sunday September 21. According to Fauzia Habib, People's Party's woman MNA, on Aaj TV on Tuesday September 23 those who helped the logistics were hosted at a mosque in Wah Cantt for ten days where they were taken care of by the prayer leader of that mosque. Both these incidents along with many others depict a certain pattern of the militants using mosques as their ideal hideouts and planning facilities. Government must also closely observe and watch over the mosques that they suspect could be involved in such activities.**