

Institute for Policy Reforms  
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## Government must take lead to create a narrative against terrorism

The Institute for Policy Reforms held a seminar on Pakistan's terrorism challenge. Welcoming the participants Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan, Chairman of the IPR Board said that the Institute organized the event because of its critical importance for the country. Even while an operation was taking place, it was important to discuss counter-terrorism strategy including how to address the issues that would arise from it. He said that two considerations were particularly important. The first that sleeper cells in urban centres are potentially a threat for large populations. Second, that political leadership had made no effort to prepare government departments and coordinate among them to respond to the likely fallout from any military action. Past record in this respect showed weak capacity.

Dr. Moeed Yusuf, Director of the South Asia Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington and well-known media commentator, was the main speaker. Participants comprised largely retired senior civil and military officers, intellectuals, and known media personalities.

Dr. Yusuf discussed the North Waziristan operation and stressed that there is a long road ahead and that the next phase against terrorism will be fought to clear out the cities of terrorist cells. He argued that it will be the performance of the police and the legal system that will ultimately determine how quickly the state is able to win this upcoming phase. He worried about their track record.

Dr. Yusuf referred to his research on insurgencies and counterinsurgencies in other South Asian countries and highlighted lessons applicable to Pakistan. He said that many states fighting terrorism use force and negotiate with the terrorists as part of their strategy. However, talks very seldom worked in South Asian unless the state approaches these from a clear position of strength. The TTP certainly could not have been characterized as a clear loser in Pakistan's case when the negotiations began and so he never felt there was any hope of success in these talks.

He argued that states that win insurgencies create a narrative against the enemy supported by the most influential segments of society for a long period of time. This is crucial to create clarity in the minds of state organs responsible for executing all aspects of counterinsurgency. No South Asian state seems to have won an insurgency without winning the narrative war unequivocally.

He painted a fairly bleak picture in terms of where Pakistan stood in this regard. His number one finding is the great confusion among the population and, even parts of the state apparatus on "who the enemy is." He said that the confusion about internal and external hands in the unrest in Pakistan, the status of terrorism in Afghanistan versus Pakistan in the religious context, and the pervasive anti-Americanism in the minds of average Pakistanis is replicated within the state apparatus. Experiences in and outside South Asia suggest that this is detrimental for the state and could undermine its ability to ensure sustainable peace.

Yusuf worried that the growing intolerance of religious, sectarian, and ethnic diversity in Pakistan and the obvious lack of ability of the state apparatus to provide day-to-day security as well as its failure to deliver basic needs to the people had discredited government departments and limited acceptance of their action.

Dr. Yusuf said that we must not forget the fact that operations such as North Waziristan, even when successful, hit the physical center of gravity of the enemy and thereby create space to pursue non-kinetic policies that would eliminate their ability to re-strengthen their ranks permanently. He opined that Pakistan's challenge is especially deep as he saw that the state of confusion about the enemy meant that the public wavered in its support for state's strategies. Sentiments on the street have switched often-favoring operations and talks. He argued that this cannot change overnight and thus we should manage the society's expectations about the operation. If the backlash is high and terrorism in cities continues for some months, some political parties may cash in and motivate the public to again push for halting operations before terrorists are decisively weakened.

The speaker recommended that the state must prioritize three strategies to overcome terrorism for the long term: a. improve performance and capacity of the police and criminal justice system; b. promote moderate religious clerics to challenge the Islamist narrative; and remove the confusion in the Pakistani minds about who the real enemy is and what strategy is being employed to eliminate terrorists of all kinds from Pakistani soil. So far, we see no leadership in this regard.

Other participants made some important contributions.