What Pakistan's war in the north reveals about post-conflict landscapes and the future of Syria

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*As the conflict in Syria unfolds **Adam Weinstein** argues there are increasing parallels with the conflict in north-west Pakistan. He writes that lessons learned by the US military in Afghanistan and their counterparts in Pakistan, when applied to current events in Syria show that no military strategy will defeat ISIS unless it is coordinated with key regional actors.*

At first glance, the borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan have little in common with Syria beyond bloody conflicts and large outflows of refugees. However, as the conflict in Syria develops, it increasingly mirrors some significant aspects of the last fifteen years of conflict in the tribal areas of Pakistan. The central governments of each face a crisis of legitimacy on the periphery of their borders and are heavily reliant on foreign military aid. Outside the major cities both countries are largely controlled by radical Islamists acting as *de facto* states. Perhaps most significantly, both the Pakistani Taliban and ISIS enjoy a freedom of movement across arbitrary colonial-era borders that provide access to a continuous stream of money and weapons through illicit trade in oil or opium. Even the religious demographics of Syria and Pakistan are similar as both contain a significant Shia minority within an increasingly Salafised Sunni majority (it is a conveniently forgotten fact among many Pakistanis that founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a Shiite by birth). Despite major differences with the conflict unfolding in Syria, lessons learned by the US military in Afghanistan and their counterparts in Pakistan, when applied to current events in Syria show that no military strategy will defeat ISIS—no matter how strong the coalition—if it lacks a coordinated strategy with regional actors.

The Durand Agreement of 1893 created an arbitrary and contested border between Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan). Ever since West Bengal seceded in 1971 to become Bangladesh, the Pakistani government has feared that secessionist movements might succeed in creating a *Pashtunistan* or *Balochistan*. Therefore Islamabad likely sees the establishment of a strong Afghanistan as an existential threat. Like Pakistan and Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq share an equally arbitrary border created by the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922 which effectively implemented the earlier Sykes-Picot Agreement to allocate spheres of influence in the Middle East between the UK and France. The dissolution of colonial borders has played a central role in ISIS propaganda. Meanwhile Turkey sees the coalescence of Kurdish militias in Syria and Iraq as an irredentist threat to its territory comparable to Pakistan's fear of a *Pashtunistan*. While Syria and Iraq do not share the same competitive dynamic as Pakistan and Afghanistan, eastern Syria and al-Anbar in Iraq both contain a tribal Sunni population that is reluctant to answer to an Alawite Damascus or Shiite Baghdad. These Sunnis are therefore vulnerable to ISIS control just as the Pashtuns in Pakistan are vulnerable to Taliban control. Washington certainly sees the analogous circumstances of Pakistan/Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria and the Iraqi army's inability to maintain control of key cities spurred President Obama to leave at least 5,000 troops in Afghanistan after 2015.

In recent months, many in the West have called for a more robust bombing campaign and deployment of troops in Syria to eliminate ISIS. This same strategy failed against the Taliban. Despite the influx of hundreds of thousands of foreign ground troops in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army lacks real control over the rural areas that are home to the majority of Afghans. Afghanistan today functions as a scattering of city-states and no-man's lands, with Kabul little more than a city-wide "Green Zone." The same can be said for Peshawar and Quetta where the dominion of militants and tribal leaders begins at the outskirts of the cities. Furthermore, Pashtuns in Peshawar and Jalalabad share greater allegiances to one another than with their respective nation states. In Syria, as Bashar al-Assad consolidates military resources to Damascus, Latakia and Homs, and ISIS gains territory, it too faces the "city-state syndrome" for the foreseeable future.

Could engaging with extremist elements like ISIS or the Taliban and granting them some autonomy improve security? The US position in Afghanistan has been to consistently oppose talks with the Taliban. Nevertheless, the 2014 US prisoner swap in exchange for POW Bowe Bergdahl may have increased trust with the Taliban in preparation for future negotiations. But unlike Islamabad, neither Washington nor Kabul ever deliberately attempted a policy of granting the Taliban *de facto* autonomy. However, Pakistan's traditional stance toward its Pashtun-dominated areas such as Waziristan was just that—*quid pro quo* autonomy for security. It is unclear whether Afghan Pashtuns would accept this system as easily as their counterparts in Pakistan. The latter group understands its position as a minority in a militarised state, whereas the former is a powerful majority within a weak state. Furthermore, Pakistan's strategy was not a success and after attacks in 2014 against a military elementary school in Peshawar and airport in Karachi, Islamabad has traded its hands-off approach for a robust military campaign most notably the ongoing operation Zarb-e-Azb. A strategy of engagement that failed with the Taliban will not work with an organisation like ISIS that, even by the Taliban and al-Qaeda's own account, is more radical. Nevertheless, a cohesive military strategy must work in tandem with any political solution.

Military strategy in Syria cannot work if it excludes powerful regional actors that are there to stay. Again, a lesson can be learned from Pakistan and Afghanistan. The "international" coalition in Afghanistan was extremely Eurocentric, despite the fact the landlocked country's future depended on partnerships with its neighbours, particularly Iran and Pakistan. Initially, Tehran cooperated with the US, however President Bush's inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil" and the election of hardliner President Ahmadinejad destroyed the fragile partnership. Meanwhile Pakistan acted as an unreliable ally and allowed fighters to use it as a final rest stop before the Afghan battlefield in the hopes this would divert the attention of militant Islamists away from Islamabad. This created a pendulum of cross-border safe havens for the Taliban. Erdogan's Turkey has played a very similar and counterproductive role in the fight against ISIS by failing to control its border. The US could heed the lessons of Afghanistan by opening a very limited partnership with Iran against ISIS and pushing for Turkish cooperation.

Victory against ISIS will not come from a coalition of the US, France or even the Gulf alone. If no cooperation, or at minimum coordination, can be achieved between Iran, Turkey, and the US the same cycle of cross-border terrorism seen in the borderlands of Pakistan will plague Syria indefinitely—with or without Assad.

Cover image: U.S. Army sniper on a joint mission with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Border Patrol in the mountains near the Pakistan border in 2011. Credit: flickr/Spc. Ken Scar CC BY 2.0

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