

I played make-believe with the Pakistani military

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A soldier secure an area as other troops move toward a forward base during a military operation against militants in Pakistan. (AP Photo/Mohammad Zubair)

Written by

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In the summer of 2010, I was teaching at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. When I was not teaching, I was conducting research for my book [*Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*](#).

Pakistan's army and various intelligence agencies organized a series of visits to important facilities and regions where military and anti-terror operations are ongoing, including the Swat valley and North and South Waziristan.

The army routinely uses these tours to cultivate observers, in hopes that they will believe Islamabad's various party lines, namely: that they are fighting a serious war on terrorism; that they are victims themselves of terrorism; that these terrorists are backed by Indian, Afghan, Israeli, and even American intelligence agencies; and that, therefore, Pakistan cannot possibly be supporting terrorism in any way.

Once you take up the state's hospitality, the generals and spymasters assume that you are not just imbedded, but "in bed" with the Pakistan military. Of course, Pakistan is not the only one to use the embed approach: the United States did this with journalists in Iraq, and again in Afghanistan with its NATO allies. Afraid of losing precious access, observers smile and play the game.

It's a practice the Pakistanis have taken a liking to.

Green Books

On one day, I met with the inspector general of training and evaluation command, who is responsible for ensuring that the Pakistan learns lessons from past and current engagements. While meeting him, I first came across the army's "Green Book" which, until recently, was published every two years since 1990. They are not doctrine, but they do represent internal conversations that the army has about key issues. I knew immediately that these volumes would be a treasure trove. He assured me that I could get them and that he would write a letter in support of it. Later that day, I met the commandant of the National Defense University. He too said he would support me obtaining the Green Books. Finally, the ISI also agreed that I should

have whatever copies of past issues of Green Books are available. And then I waited—somewhat dubious that they would arrive.

Meanwhile, the protocol officer who accompanied me on all of these trips was a little fellow named Khaled who wore his jeans high up on his waist. He incessantly queried during our long car rides why it was that I had no boyfriend. That I was married was inadequate, he claimed, because I am an atheist. After all, without the threat of hell or the prospect of heaven, atheists have no incentive to behave morally.

These repeated conversations were tedious, and I endured them with as much aplomb as I could muster—my mustachioed minder ultimately proved quite useful. After suffering a concussion while exercising in my hotel room in Swat, I was recuperating in an Islamabad “nail saloon,” as they are called in Pakistan, where Khaled solicitously brought me several copies of the Green Book in a paper bag. (These books, among numerous other sources that I curated over several years, would comprise the empirical basis of *Fighting to the End*.)

Later, embarrassed by the provocative content of the Green Books, which I detailed in my own book, and their own apparent oversight in making the elaborate arrangements to provide them to me, the men in khaki began a whisper campaign alleging that I copied them [surreptitiously](#) from the National Defense University library during my two hour visit—which would have been physically impossible—or, in another version, that I outright stole them. But the ladies in the nail saloon know better.

The Frontier Corps

On another occasion, I visited the Frontier Corps training facility, a short distance outside of Peshawar in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. At the time, US personnel on-site expressed exasperation that the Pakistanis were [slow-balling the training](#). The facility could train several hundred personnel, yet it was at one-fifth capacity or less. At that rate, it would take literally decades to adequately train all of the Frontier Corps.

And the men in the Frontier Corps, many of them ethnic Pashtuns, were already poorly positioned to survive a standoff with insurgents. They had no hazardous environment first-aid skills. If they were hit, their colleagues would toss them in the back of a Hilux pickup truck and speed back to base while they most likely bled out. If they somehow managed to survive the drive, there were only crude medical facilities awaiting them. I wanted to give them tampons, which are amazingly effectively in preventing a bleed out. But I didn’t think such a gesture would be appreciated.

What’s more, despite the incessant claims that Pashtuns are born shooters, corpsmen are, in fact, hopelessly reliant on ineffectual “spray-and-pray” techniques. Consequently, their foes were better trained and equipped than they were. Ironically, many of these “miscreants,” as the men shooting at them were called, had been trained by Pakistan’s own military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

This American-provided training aimed to help the corpsmen improve upon their shooting skills to better combat their adversaries. The Americans even provided highly specialized sniper training to those who proved themselves capable. Few were selected for the program and fewer yet graduated. Those who managed to graduate garnered an incredibly useful skill and a US model sniper rifle. Yet, it seemed, that the Pakistan army was working to keep the numbers of corpsmen trained low.

Some time earlier, I had vigorous arguments about this program with staff overseeing it in the Pentagon. I warned them that this program would go nowhere for several reasons. For one, the Frontier Corps had been long used by Pakistan's army and the ISI to train militants for operations in Afghanistan. The men in Rawalpindi, where the army is headquartered, would be loath to give the Americans any kind of insight into organization.

Second, Pashtuns in Pakistan have long nursed episodic dreams of being merged with co-ethnics in Afghanistan into some kind of a greater Pashtunistan. During the subcontinental independence movement, some Pashtuns did not even want to join Pakistan; rather, they wanted to join India. While most Pashtuns are loyal citizens, Pakistan's elites in and out of uniform have eyed Pashtuns with suspicion—not people to throw equipment and effective military training at.

US special forces were ousted in early 2011, when Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor, shot and killed [two alleged ISI contractors](#) in Lahore. Since US special operators were running this program, it was the first to go. The ones who suffered from this policy were the Frontier Corpsmen, who continue to confront an enemy better positioned to battle them—now with even less training and few snipers.

Waziristan

On another occasion, I traveled to North and South Waziristan with the army and two other journalists. We were informed that they began evacuating the valley in 2009 in preparation for [Operation Rah-e-Nijat](#), which was true. The logic, according to our briefer, was that anyone remaining in the area would be intent on fighting, and thus the Pakistani forces did not need to concern themselves with “collateral damage.”

Of course, it should be noted that the militants who wanted to fight another day just “squirreled out,” in military parlance, with the civilians. And as soon as residents returned, the fighters would return with them, and the gains would be lost.

In South Waziristan, we were shown the redoubts of the terrorists and the litter they left behind. We were told that Indian medicines were discovered as well as other supposedly telltale signs of Indian support to the Pakistani Taliban. Despite repeated requests for evidence over two months, Pakistani military personnel never provided it to me.

This wasn't the only story that didn't add up. We were told the Pakistanis essentially razed the area, but there was entirely too much infrastructure remaining for that to be the case. If they had genuinely hammered the place with F-16s and other combat aircraft, there should have been nothing. Instead, most of the buildings were still standing, albeit a bit worse for the wear. And

the craters supposedly left by bombers were oddly placed, as if by design. It all seemed as if this was a well put-together war diorama for us—the war tourists.

The next series of plausible fictions were relayed when we visited a facility that the army claimed was used by commander Qari Hussain, the master trainer of Pakistani suicide bombers. I noticed various inscriptions that proclaimed the presence of numerous other commanders but none for commander Qari. I speak Urdu, and when I asked my handler to clarify he looked at me with puzzlement and queried, “Madam! You read Pashto?” The word “commander” is the same in Pashto as Urdu, as he knew full well. He made no effort to provide proof of this important claim, and led us to the next exhibit.

We were led to a room where, according to our handlers, young boys were indoctrinated to blow themselves up. We saw various pictures of women engaging in domestic acts, like cleaning clothes and washing dishes in the river. The women’s eyes were scratched out. I asked my be-khakied tour guide why these women were painted on the walls in this way. He responded with the confidence that comes from repeating a canard over and over, that these were depictions of the *houris*, or celestial virgins, who would be waiting for the young bombers upon successful completion of their missions. But because the terrorists are staunch Muslims, the women could have no eyes. I rhetorically queried my guide, “Why they would paint them with eyes only to scratch them out? This makes no sense.” He had no response, as I suspected.

With increasing annoyance, I exclaimed “Who would want their celestial virgins cleaning their clothes and doing their laundry? Is it their mothers they want in heaven, or vixens?” Clearly these women were not painted on these walls to lure the young men to the gates of paradise. Other paintings suggested a more plausible explanation: this partially bombed out building had probably been a guesthouse.

Mangla

The final establishment I visited was the anti-terrorism training center at Mangla. All Pakistan military personnel undergo training at this facility before being deployed to tribal areas for military operations.

There, I came to appreciate one thing in particular: Pakistani military personnel who had not been deployed used the word “miscreant” for the killers that were savaging their country. After being deployed to the tribal areas and having been shot at by these proxies-gone wild, soldiers and officers no longer called them “miscreants.” They were “terrorists.”

First in a series of demonstrations, they showed me how they clear a room in a house in which militants were hiding without killing any present civilians. Having explained the objective, the men demonstrated their learning: one man approached the door and tossed in several grenades whereupon the rest of his unit entered the house. I asked just how this would prevent civilian casualties. My guide explained that they had already discerned that no civilians were in the house. Anything is possible with imagination, I suppose.

Next, the soldiers demonstrated how they would use a rope to climb a hill. During my orientation, I was told that Mangla “has a terrain that is absolutely like Waziristan.” I pointed out that was observably untrue. Waziristan is unforgivingly mountainous, but apparently because Mangla has a few hills, it was close enough.

One by one, they grabbed hold of the rope and, placing one hand above the other, they hauled themselves up the hill. I think I could’ve climbed that hill in a pair of flip flops, sans rope. I was puzzled, to say the least.

I asked my guide the obvious question of who would put the ropes in place in Waziristan. He declared “Madam! That is a good question. Presumably someone would land atop the mountain in a helicopter and emplace the rope.” I then asked why wouldn’t they just put everyone on the helicopter and deposit them on the hill, thus dispensing with the rope drama altogether. He was not amused.

My guide was relieved when we reached the final ride at the carnival: the Improvised Explosive Device Learning Center (IEDLC). For us both, the end was near. We were both frazzled and irritated: me at being lied to like a child, and him at being cornered about lying to me like a child. As we walked into the IEDLC library, there were tables placed along the walls of the room. The tables displayed items that are typically used in the manufacture of an IED used by insurgents.

They included pressure cookers, parkas, among other quotidian household items. But an item at the far left of the first table caught my eye: a black, strapless brassiere. This was the smallest black bra I had ever seen. Anywhere.

I had seen trainer bras that would accommodate more décolletage than this “[made in China,](#)” [32AAA](#) number. You could not fit any significant amount of C-4 (military grade explosives) into it, and you certainly couldn’t cram in ball bearings, bolts, nails, or other sundries that become the deadly shrapnel. The pull cords to detonate the device were placed where playful tassels would be, if a stripper could somehow fit into this thing. I was livid at this final insult to common sense, as well as my wallet. After all, this dog and pony show too had been paid for by my tax dollars.

Really, I felt terribly for the men in Pakistan’s uniform, whether they were Pakistan’s regular forces or the Frontier Corps. Mostly these men, and many of their commanding officers, had no understanding that the people doing their best to kill them were the legitimate and illegitimate offspring of the purported strategic thinkers in the army and ISI. Even [within the ISI](#) itself, some were doing their best to eliminate those militants who began targeting the state, while others within the same organization were creating, aiding and abetting other terrorists and insurgents.

But I was exhausted, and frustrated at being repeatedly lied to. I couldn’t help but ask how such a preposterous “brassier-born IED” could wreak even the slightest damage—by which time my game-show host had too grown exhausted with me. Without an appreciation of irony or humor, he exclaimed in exasperation, “Madam! Maybe it was a booby trap?”

Indeed. Maybe it was.

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