The Youngest Casualties

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Panel: 9/11: 10 Years Later
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So many Pakistanis born in the age of the War on Terror have died in these ten years that it’s easy to imagine Pakistan as haunted by the children who never made it through the decade between September 11, 2001 and the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. But after the ones that have died, including the 160 children the UK-based Bureau for Investigative Journalism claims have been killed in US drone strikes since 2004, it’s the children who lived through and still live within the conflict areas that are the hardest-hit victims of the war and its violent blowback throughout Pakistan.

It began with death and ended with death, this decade of terrorism, of Al Qaeda, of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the spillover war into Pakistan. A Pakistani child born in 2001 would be ten years old today, facing a dangerous present and an uncertain future in a country tottering on the brink of civil war, economic failure, and political self-destruction. A childhood in Pakistan is one that seethes with anxiety and fear, violence and horror, and for a child to negotiate this unforgiving landscape without attaining permanent scars is an impossible feat.

Children hold a special place in most Pakistanis’ hearts: this family-oriented society regards children as amanat - a trust from God - as well as barkat - a blessing from God. Pakistanis adore their children, indulge them in most if not all of their wishes, and pour their affection, hopes, and desires for a better future into the relationships they have with them. Yet poverty prevents many Pakistani parents from educating their children and invites exploitation and abuse into their young lives: take a drive on Karachi’s streets to see hundreds of child-beggars, selling flowers, washing windshields, weaving light-footed through lanes of heavy traffic. A Pakistani childhood is, for millions of its children, nowhere near an ideal one.

In the last decade, Pakistan has been infected by the virulence of the War on Terror, morphing its extreme poverty and lack of education (a dangerous combination under any circumstances) into conditions never before encountered by previous generations. The Pakistani Taliban and other militant extremist groups have recruited young boys from madressas, the informal Islamic educational system tied to the mosques and often bankrolled by Saudi Wahabi money, to fight their distorted idea of “jihad” against the Pakistani army and Western troops in Afghanistan. They have blown up dozens of girls’ schools, depriving them of their education, and forcing them into seclusion, illiteracy, and despair.

To be a child in Pakistan is dangerous business, whether she lives in the heart of the conflict zone in the tribal areas, labors in the rural areas in an economic downturn brought about by the cost of fighting the war on terror, or resides in one of Pakistan’s cities, brought to a halt by unexpected terrorist attacks and continual ethnic strife.

Ghost Children of the North

The Emmy-winning documentary Children of the Taliban, produced in 2009, was the hardest-hitting look at the realities of children’s lives in the conflict-ridden northern areas of Pakistan. Millions in America watched Frontline on PBS one April evening to see a tiny girl talk about
seeing the body of a Taliban-executed policeman hanging from a telephone pole, his head dangling between his legs. Her expression is flat as she describes the situation in the Swati village from which she had to flee, her skin paper thin, her eyes haunted. When she describes how much she misses her sister, who died along with many members of her extended family when a mortar bomb landed on her house, she smiles shyly and intones, “There is nothing we can do.”

A thirteen-year-old boy in Swat explains how he had been recruited to join the Taliban, trained to fight using Kalashnikovs, and conduct suicide attacks. Another boy, fourteen and in Karachi, describes how Sharia law - or the Taliban interpretation of that law - means that women and girls should stay home, unseen and “unused” like discarded plastic bags. He exhibits genuine admiration for the bravery of the Taliban and their “terrific” attacks; of course, they will not teach him in his madressa that “terror” and “terrific” have the same root, the Latin word terrere, meaning “to fill with fear, frighten”. These children learn their lessons on the streets, bringing home the body parts of relatives in bags, losing family members in a bombing or a drone attack.

Obaid-Chinoy firmly attributes the spread of extremist attitudes in Pakistani children to the madressas. No government or educational authority monitors the curriculum, and uneducated clerics are free to instill hardline attitudes in the students, usually boys from low-income backgrounds. “Children trained by the Taliban are basically brainwashed - taught in complete isolation from the outside world in order for them to serve as live ammunition for their war against the ‘infidels,’” explains Obaid-Chinoy.

The Taliban exploit their vulnerable targets’ deprivation by bribing poor families to send their children to the madressas. From there, it’s a quick journey to an extremist training camp, often one made under duress. Then the extremists embark upon a five-point method of indoctrination that endeavors to erase everything that the children know and replace it with the Taliban’s own version of reality.

Children are first separated from their parents and promised food and shelter if they leave their family homes to join the madressas. Separation is followed by a complete information blackout: no television, radio, newspapers allowed. Instead, children memorize the Quran in Arabic, understanding nothing but what they are told it says by their teachers, the interpretations distorted to suit the extremists’ own needs and purposes. No child is allowed to challenge a teacher’s opinion, and without exposure to any other outside source of information, such challenge is rendered impossible.

The teachers then continue brainwashing their charges, teaching them to hate the world they live in. The children are urged to focus on the next world and the “reward” guaranteed them by fighting this “holy” war. Obaid-Chinoy explains, “These opinions are reiterated by older students, and by videos that demonstrate how collateral damage is not a concern that dominates the agenda of Western countries - which is why the life of a civilian should not dominate their ‘holy purpose’ either.”

The end result is a child who feels he has no choice but to sacrifice himself for the greater cause of the war against the Western occupiers of Afghanistan and the Pakistan Army. At the hands of their trainers, themselves veterans of jihads in Afghanistan under Soviet rule and Kashmir under Indian occupation, these Pakistani children become the walking dead, living according to Obaid-Chinoy in “hope for an afterlife that is more glorious than the one they live in.” They are the ghost children of Pakistan.
Cities of Insecurity

The Pakistani army has fought back ferociously in the War on Terror, throwing the Taliban out of Swat and launching massive counteroffensives against insurgents in South Waziristan and other strongholds. When the extremists were repulsed in the north, they went underground, emerging to strike at the softer underbellies of Pakistan’s cities. As a result, Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi have all born the brunt of attacks on military targets, which are interspersed with civilian areas throughout all cities of Pakistan.

During a terrorist attack, residential neighborhoods are cordoned off from military cantonments, schools close their doors to their students at least three or four days out of every month, and people cower indoors whenever a military base is attacked, a Navy bus is blown up, a police building is razed to the ground by a powerful bomb.

Also, over the last ten years, the onslaught of the Taliban has forced thousands of Northern residents to flee to the cities. The sudden influx of Pashtuns into Karachi upset the delicate ethnic balance between them and the city’s Urdu-speaking population, causing an upswing in the brutal ethnic violence that has always been a part of Karachi’s urban landscape.

Karachi-based psychologist Ishma Alvi explains the psychological effects of the War on Terror and related violence on Karachi’s children. “There has been a marked increase in anxiety disorders, especially Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) as well as agoraphobia, the fear of going to spaces where the sufferer might feel threatened, where there appears to be little escape and where one might have a panic attack.” She notes an increase in major depressive disorder, or clinical depression. “Not only have these disorders been appearing more frequently, but they have been presenting themselves in younger groups - teenagers to young adults.”

Alvi sees a distinction between girls’ and boys’ coping mechanisms. The female sex is more susceptible to these two sets of disorders; girls, therefore, are more likely to visit Alvi’s clinic for psychological help and counseling. Boys on the other hand are less likely to be presented with specific disorders and will avoid seeking professional help (true of boys and men globally, not just in Pakistan). Young Pakistani men and boys have a greater social network to rely on for support than their female counterparts, but act out their distress by becoming physically and verbally aggressive, and turning to substance abuse, behaviors that Pakistani girls and women do not tend to emulate.

Just like their children, Pakistani parents have succumbed to anxiety and depression due to a lack of control and the perception that they cannot protect their children from the events around them. “The helplessness is acted out by parents trying to maintain control over what they are able to, such as setting curfews and providing cell phones to younger and younger children,” says Alvi. These are the actions of the affluent, who can afford to buy their children Blackberries and hire bodyguards to accompany their children to school. The middle class, the working class, and the economic underclass are unable to resort to such “safeguards;” they turn to God and prayer to protect their children from the bloodshed of the last ten years.

The events of 9/11 and the War on Terror may hold some distance for Karachi’s children, but the events that happen at home present an immediate threat, invoking greater fear. Political parties that represent ethnic groups such as the Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Urdu-speaking Mohajirs regularly show their animosity towards one another in the form of target killings and violent strikes,
forcing markets, schools, and public transportation to close. “Whatever was being felt post 9/11 has been compounded by the current events of local terror and the decline of personal security within the city over the last two to three years,” says Alvi.

Background and class are no barriers to the effects of the War on Terror on the psyches of Pakistani children. Ammara Nasir, a schoolteacher at a private school in Karachi, relates asking her five-year-old students where they had gone for their summer vacations. Uzair responded that he and his family had gone to the United States. His classmates shouted out, “Wow, you got the visa! Nobody gets the American visa because they think we’re bad people.” A seven-year-old child in Nabiha Meher Shaikh’s schoolroom in Lahore expressed happiness that Americans were being killed. “My father says it’s a very good thing, because they are killing Muslims.” Ishma Alvi relates the story of administering an ability test to a child from Lyari, a violence-riddled working class area of Karachi, where heroin use is rampant and political groups no better than street gangs fight violent gun battles over territory and drug profits. “I asked him what the four seasons of the year were,” she says, “and he replied, ‘sardi, garmi, hangama, hartal.’” (winter, summer, riots, strikes)

A Place of Safety

The assault on the safety and security of Pakistan’s children in the decade since 9/11 is indicative of where Pakistan - its people, society, economy, ideology - stands today. “Children reflect society in a way that adults do not,” says Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy. “They tell you how they feel, unfiltered.” She remarks that with forty-eight percent of Pakistan’s population under the age of eighteen, and a grand total of seven percent of Pakistan’s budget spent on education, chances are that extremism will continue to foment in the minds of young people faced with limited employment opportunities. Economic deprivation ensures that they will continue to turn to terrorism as a way of ensuring survival for their families.

Mindful of this ongoing threat, the Pakistan Army, during their 2009 operation in Swat, removed dozens of teenage boys who had been trained as suicide bombers from Taliban training camps. Instead of jailing them or inflicting brutal punishments on them for falling in line with the Taliban’s violent ideology, they enlisted Dr. Feriha Peracha, a popular psychologist with a lucrative private practice in Lahore, to assess 12 of these boys. Then, they proposed that she run a school aimed at rehabilitating them, and Dr. Peracha agreed. Thirty-five children and teenagers were enrolled in this school, called Sabaoon, the Pashto word for the first ray of light in the morning.

The school was heavily guarded, and remotely located - security a top priority for such a delicate operation. The program was administered by Dr. Peracha’s organization, the UNICEF-funded Hum Pakistani Foundation. “The Pakistan Army provides overall security. Induction is our prerogative - for example, I refuse admission to boys who are over eighteen, or who are deemed to be very low risk.” There was no interference from the Army on any other aspect of the program, which included mainstream academic intervention and vocational training “for those who are unable to keep up with academics but continue with education at their own individual levels of achievement, starting with basic literacy,” says Dr. Peracha. Classroom education was supplemented with nature expeditions, art and drawing sessions, and time to play sports, in order to give the boys a taste of the childhood that was snatched from them during the Taliban occupation of their villages and towns and their time in the training camps.
Religious academic and Swat University Vice Chancellor Dr. Mohammed Farooq Khan visited the school once a week to teach the boys an Islam free from the distortions the Taliban had taught them. Undoing the damage inflicted upon the boys’ psyches – the five-point program of indoctrination – was going to take months, if not years. Rather than interrogating them or laying blame for their willingness to kill in the name of God, Dr. Khan treated them as children who had undergone major psychological trauma, and attempted to educate and counsel them, helping them to understand how the Taliban had distorted their perceptions of religion and the West.

Sabaoon received media attention for its groundbreaking efforts and seemed to be off to a good start. Even the most severely indoctrinated children had begun to understand that the Taliban, far from being warriors and saviors, had brought death and destruction to their once peaceful valley. Then, one day in October 2009, the Taliban came to Dr. Khan’s clinic and shot him in the head as he ate lunch with his assistant.

The murder has been linked to the ideological changes that Dr. Khan had been attempting to institute in Swat University, which had become a hotbed of religious extremism during the days of the Taliban invasion of Swat, but his death had direct repercussions for Sabaoon and the boys in the school’s care. “He was with me just two days before at the school,” says Dr. Peracha, “and I had given some books to him about empathy training and requested him to use the parables and other narratives from the Quran to teach the same concept to the boys...”

Dr. Peracha acknowledges the vacuum created by Dr. Khan’s death, but it has not deterred her from her mission. She has hired another religious scholar, Dr. Mohammed Amin (also a PhD in herbal medicine, specializing in allergic asthma), as well as regular Islamic studies teachers to continue the work of Dr. Khan..She feels that the combination of religious education and psycho-social intervention is key to saving her charges from a path that no child should ever have to tread.

While danger continues to be a constant companion for Pakistan and its people, the key to surviving its psychological onslaught is to cultivate a place of safety within. Ishma Alvi urges parents to talk honestly to their children about the events and circumstances around them: “Most parents do not answer questions in a way that satisfies children. If the topic [of terrorism] is broached, questions should be answered as simply as possible, with calm emphasis on sources of security.” She adds that parents must endeavor to keep calm in the moments of crisis that regularly erupt in Karachi and elsewhere in Pakistan’s restive cities. “That doesn’t mean they should fake calm, but that they should maintain calm despite fear.”

As long as Pakistan remains on the high wire, barely maintaining its balance as domestic and international violence continues to pull it towards the ground, the physical, mental, and emotional damage that has been inflicted upon the children of Pakistan over the last ten years will not be easily undone. Can Pakistanis even imagine a time when Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta and Islamabad will be called cities of security again, when the children of the tribal belt and the Swat Valley will be able to go to school without fear? For the sake of its children, Pakistan has no choice but to heal itself, so that its children can learn to replace the last two seasons of its year with autumn and finally, one day soon, spring.