

Kerry presses Pakistan to intensify anti-Taliban war

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Just days after US Secretary of State John Kerry made a two-day visit to Islamabad, Pakistan announced it is planning to ban the Haqqani Network, an Islamist militia allied to the Afghan Taliban and that is playing a leading role in the armed resistance to the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

Washington has long demanded Islamabad specifically target and destroy the Haqqani Network, which for a decade or more has been based in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal agency. During his Pakistan trip Kerry publicly reiterated this demand while otherwise lauding the offensive that the Pakistani military has been mounting in North Waziristan for the past seven months.

US State Department spokesperson Marie Harf welcomed the impending ban at a press briefing Thursday, while pointedly noting "this was just an announcement that this is planning to happen."

Kerry's visit was touted as part of a regular "strategic dialogue" between Washington and Islamabad. This dialogue was put on hold for much of 2013-2014 due to popular anger in Pakistan over the US's illegal drone war and US objections to Islamabad's attempts to hold peace talks with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—an Islamacist militia that arose in response to the Pakistani military's invasion of the traditionally autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) a decade ago as part of Islamabad's support for the US's Afghan war.

Since Islamabad launched its invasion of North Waziristan last June in close coordination with the Pentagon, there has been a pronounced warming of US-Pakistan ties. After meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif January 12, Kerry said that they had "agreed that a reinvigorated" partnership is "a way to work through" any differences and "establish our

priorities together." "I'm pleased to report," he continued, "that we are making progress on those goals."

US officials have frequently complained that while the TTP has been subjected to punishing attacks by the Pakistani military during its North Waziristan offensive, the Haqqani Network has only been "disrupted." No doubt these complaints were one of the "differences" Kerry raised with Sharif.

Kerry was joined on his trip by the head of the US Central Command, General Lloyd J. Austin. The duo met Sharif and top leaders of his government and the military, including army chief General Raheel Sharif.

According to Harf's press briefing, about 10 other groups will also soon be banned by Pakistan. This is part of a wave of measures adopted by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government in the wake of the December 16 attack on a Peshawar school by the TTP that left more than 150 people, including 133 school children, dead.

Earlier this month the government rushed through legislation establishing military courts to try civilians charged under Pakistan's draconian "anti-terrorism" laws. This included amending the country's constitution so as to suspend the basic rights of the accused and remove any right of appeal. The government has also lifted a moratorium on the death penalty claiming it "encouraged extremists."

Just hours before held Kerry a joint press conference with Sharif's top national security and foreign affairs advisor, Sartaj Aziz, Pakistani authorities simultaneously hanged seven people at four different prisons. One of them had been convicted of participating in a 2003 attack on the US consulate in Karachi and two others of attempting to assassinate the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, also in

2003.

As attested by Kerry's visit and his praise of Pakistan's "resolve" in fighting terrorism, the Obama administration fully supports the resurrection of military courts, the restoration of the death penalty, and the Pakistani military's increasingly obtrusive role in determining government policy.

In this, Washington is far from alone. A January 6 article in the London-based *Financial Times* noted broad support for the "military courts" among Western diplomats in Islamabad, with many claiming they "may help in the short term to deal with gaps left behind by a dysfunctional judicial system."

The Pakistan military is notorious for torture, "enforced disappearances," summary executions and other gross human rights abuses. It has employed similarly criminal methods in its North Waziristan offensive. The offensive was launched with three days of indiscriminate bombardment of towns and villages and a blanket shoot-on-sight curfew. The entire population were then given a matter of days to evacuate, with the military announcing that anyone who remained would be considered a terrorist.

Seven months on, more than a million people from North Waziristan and the nearby Khyber agency, to which the offensive was recently expanded, are living in squalid conditions in displaced persons camps without any prospect of returning to their villages in the near future.

The TTP sought to justify last month's murderous assault on the Peshawar school by pointing to the military's atrocities against the people of FATA.

Kerry, for his part, lavishly praised these operations while pressing for the bloodletting to be intensified. He said the military "deserve enormous credit" and its offensive has "already produced significant results;" then added, "But make no mistake—the task is ... not done."

In addition to the Haqqani Network, Kerry reportedly pressed for Islamabad to crack down on the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamist militia known for launching attacks in India and on Indian interests in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani elite has long used Islamacist militias to advance its reactionary geo-political interests. At least until recently, it retained ties with the Haqqani Network—first forged when the ISI, the premier Pakistani military intelligence agency, was serving as

the conduit for US arms to the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s—so as to disrupt Indian influence in Afghanistan and otherwise ensure it had a means of exerting "non-diplomatic" pressure on Kabul.

While Kerry chided his Pakistani hosts for having taken time to recognize the "importance of combating all terrorists," the US itself worked closely with the Haqqani Network during the war it fomented against the pro-Soviet government in Afghanistan, just as it did with Al Qaeda and many of those who went on to found the Taliban. And whenever it suits its interests, Washington continues to make use of Islamacists as its proxies in "regime change" wars as it has done Libya and Syria during this decade.

Kerry made a show of deploring the Peshawar school attack, condemning the TTP for its "utter disregard for human life and for freedom." This from the spokesman of a government that is mounting an illegal drone war that has terrorized the population of FATA and routinely showers death on Pakistani villagers killing hundreds if not thousands of civilians, including women and children.



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