

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**


PD in Pakistan, and Why Al Qaeda Knows Something the U.S. Could Learn ^[1]

One of the mysteries of our day is that American hard power has been so ineffective for so many years in apprehending Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri), leaving the group free to use public diplomacy to speak to Muslim publics — especially to a Pakistani nation that distrusts the United States.

Somehow, recorded messages keep making their way to the media, most recently when al-Zawahiri released an audio message warning Pakistanis that the United States plans to "break up this nuclear-capable country and transform it into tiny fragments, loyal to and dependent on the neo-crusaders."

I cannot even guess how effective such messages will be at a time when the Pakistani public has finally stopped seeing Al Qaeda and the Taliban as bold foils to a rotten United States and has started to see them as menaces in their own right. New surveys by WorldPublicOpinion.org show that 81 percent of the Pakistani public views religious extremists as a major threat, a rise of 34 percentage points in a little over 18 months. Barack Obama represents an improvement over George W. Bush (30 percent have some or great confidence in him, compared to 7 percent for Bush), yet seven out of 10 Pakistanis still view the U.S. unfavorably — with a staggering six out of 10 viewing it "very" unfavorably.

In light of this, al-Zawahiri shows cunning political instincts here. Tapping into the fear of America stealing Pakistan's nukes is merely to tap into a grand fear long shared by many people in that conspiracy-minded nation.

In discussing why Pakistan has been designated "the world's most dangerous place" by so many experts in the media , I usually trace it back to the country's obsession with its larger sibling India. Pakistan tore itself from India in a bloody independence conflict, fought several wars against it, and to this day is convinced that India seeks to annex, or at least bully, it into submission.

That explains the twin dimensions of the Pakistan problem: (1) Fear of Indian nuclear power pushed Pakistan to work to develop (and steal) its own nuclear capability, even in the face of U.S. sanctions that accomplished nothing other than to convince ordinary Pakistanis that Americans were fickle friends, and (2) fear of Indian geopolitical influence on Pakistan's western border pushed Pakistanis to accommodate the Taliban longer than the U.S. had chosen to (and let's remember that the United States did not always view Taliban forces the way we currently do). As Daniel Markey of the Council of Foreign Relations has noted, Pakistani leaders — even moderates such as Benazir Bhutto — and the military saw the anti-Indian Taliban as a better guard against Indian influence in Afghanistan than more pro-Indian forces in that land.

Western commentators are flummoxed that nuclear maverick AQ Khan could be a hero in Pakistan, yet it should not be so surprising. Every nation places its perceived existential imperatives above all other niceties. Many American experts wrongly attribute the India fixation to the Pakistani army. They are wrong — it is a widespread obsession on the part of most all Pakistanis, though it has been exploited by leaders as a way to focus on outside devils rather than internal devils.

This brings up why Al Qaeda knows something about public diplomacy toward Pakistanis that the United States does not. Al Qaeda speaks to Pakistanis' fear of survival, along with their aspirations as a Muslim society. This won't win back the hearts of the 81 percent of Pakistanis who now fear Al Qaeda, the Taliban and other related extremists, but it could rally the hardcore militants there.

But most importantly for the U.S. and the West, it should remind us of what is on the minds of ordinary Pakistanis. Americans have spent years wondering why Pakistanis don't want to be more vigorous in fighting extremists and preventing nuclear proliferation. But we must remember that those are *our* existential fears, not theirs.

Yes, Pakistanis want jobs and education and opportunity at home and peace abroad. But most of all, they want survival, and they believe that is linked to an ability to fight India. For the U.S. to make progress in that part of the world, our public diplomacy and formal diplomacy must tackle the mutual distrust between Pakistan and India and must acknowledge the particular motivations felt by both the Pakistani elite and "the street."
