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# Operation Zarb e Azb: A Decisive Strike

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Tackling with the recent yet prolonged wave of terrorism Pakistan security forces have introduced and implemented a multiple of operational strategies, one upon and another. Since 2001 to counter the ever escalating war of terrorism a number of military operations are conducted from area to area seeking and destroying the militants along with their hideouts. After a series of counter terror strikes, the final blow to terrorists took place in the form of operation Zarb-e-Azb. The said operation differed not only in its chronological order but also in its strategy to operate as well as in the objectives outlined. The current Paper is dedicated towards studying the operational formulation of operation Zarb-e-Azb and how the notion of being a comprehensive CT model changed its effectiveness from the previous ones. And lastly the unprecedented objective of “total elimination of terrorism” unlike previous operations is the focus of paper.

## Operation Zarb e Azb

The name of Operation Zarb e Azb is inspired by the sword of the Holy Prophet PBUH which he used in the battle of badar and ohad against the spell of kufar. The literal meaning of the word is “sharp and cutting strike”. The meaning of the operation implies to its qualities as a decisive strike against the elements of “Fitnah” until its complete elimination. The Placement and stress over this objective in operation Zarb e Azb is latter’s another uniqueness, as the previous offenses were only meant to deter and weaken the enemy which ended up usually with peace truces. However in Zarb e Azb the COAS and the political community have reiterated over and over again that the operation will not end till the eradication of militants and will meet its logical conclusion. The strategy employed by the Z.A also takes pride of least collateral damage which is the essence of Muhammadan Revolution i.e. when 2.2 million square miles of area brought under the control of systemic rule, at the cost of mere 1100 lives including 800 non-Muslims.

### Introduction:

Operation Zarb e Azb is a combined armed aggression against multiple terrorists outfits ranging from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan to Haqqani networks including local as well as foreign terrorists of IMU i.e. Uzbek movement and ETIM of Turkestan and banned organizations such as Lashkar-e-jhangwi along with Al

Qaida. The offensive took place on 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 2014 in the area of North Waziristan which is the tribal agency of FATA. The area is proximal to Pakistan-Afghan border where the operation was executed after the deadly attacks in Karachi, Jinnah international airport (Khan A. , 2018) as the ultimate decision to curb terrorism after the Tehrik-e-Taliban and Islamic movement of Uzbekistan accepted the charges. The offensive caused the movement of a large number of people from one place to another i.e. around one lac families comprising over 1 million members.

The number of troops as high as 30,000 took part in this extensive operation with the firm resolve of clearing out all the elements of extremism, belonging to every caste and creed, who had taken refuge in North Waziristan. The operation stood distinguished from the previous operations as the entire nation came on the same page and supported the single narrative. Since 2008 the security conditions had only seen an increase in deterioration and a dearth of improvement however the narrative for operation Zarb-e-Azb and inclusivity led it to an amelioration counted as six years highest. This operation was followed by operation Radul Fasad launched on 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2017 with the revival of terrorists.

#### **NACTA National Counter Terrorism Authority:**

On the legal and administrative front the government of Pakistan took critical decisions such as establishment of executive wing under the ministry of interior in the year 2009. While in 2013 the said administrative body was further endowed with financial, executive and legal autonomy governed by a “Board of Governors” under the leadership of Prime Minister (NACTA Evolution, 2019). The membership of the governing board as per NACTA Act 2013 is to comprise over Ministers of Interior, Defense, law and Finance together with Provincial Chief Ministers (CMs) and of Gilgit Baltistan. The prime minister of AJK with the provincial Chief Secretaries and Inspector Generals (IGs) including AJK and GB are also on panel. The formation of NACTA was so comprehensive that it ensured the representation of houses through one MNA and senator over the recommendation of their respective house leaders. The Minister of Interior is to serve as the leader of administrative body and the National coordinator as secretary to BOG to assist the board. For the sake of enhancing security and ensuring intelligence sharing NACTA included the director Generals of intelligence agencies i.e. ISI, IB, MI and FIA. The JID Joint intelligence Directorate was established as a wing to coordinate the gathered and analyzed information, from the Intelligence Agencies for the purpose of tackling and defeating terrorism (Nacta's mandate, 2017).

#### **National Internal Security Policy 2014-18**

Pakistan has been in war ,at home, since her decision of being the front line ally against the US led war on terror. The war in neighborhood swiftly expand its roots to the adjacent northern territories of Pakistan expedited with cultural and linguistic linkages with the natives. By the start of 2014 the losses were already touching the skies in terms of lives as well as economy i.e. around 50 thousand of

casualties and \$US78 billion cost in the recent decade (Interior, National Internal security Policy 2014-2018, 2014). For the first time in the history of Pakistan a policy manuscript was generated by the Ministry of Interior focusing the internal safety and stability of the state. Perceived and outlined by the Interior and approved by the Government. It emphasized upon the inclusion and the mainstreaming of the Nation's efforts and revolved around three main steps i.e. to negotiate or talk with the concerned parties, to deter the enemy through strengthening the law enforcement agencies and lastly to isolate the terror networks and effectively dealing with the refugee crisis (Nisp 2014, 2019). The NISP was divided into soft and hard components i.e. CRP and CDP respectively. The Comprehensive response plan (CRP) comprised over 4Rs i.e. reconstruction, re-conciliation, re-habilitation and re-integration stressing upon the need of re-vising the old strategy. The NISP also suggested de-radicalization projects and building of a national narrative to counter the extremist mindsets. Mainstreaming of the religious seminaries into the national one and physically countering the terrorism through breaking bad over terror networks by cutting the supplies of armaments and finances to terrorists under CACR and CFT. The former refers to the comprehensive arms control regime while the latter is an abbreviation of countering the financing of terrorism. Bringing the necessary legal reforms and the strengthening of law enforcement institutions are the key to meet these objectives. The first NISP replaced by the new security policy formulated for the years 2018-2023. The new policy is broader in vision as ISIS (Islamic state of Iraq and Syria) is also included to be the potential future threat due to its presence in Afghanistan (Nabeel, 2018) (Interior, NISP 2018-2023, 2018). However the basic agenda of tackling the isms i.e. extremism, sectarianism, terrorism continue to occupy the central stage (Gul, 2018) along with 6Rs of reorient, reconstruct, reintegrate, redistribute, recognize and regional while facilitating the rehabilitation (Yusuf, 2018).

### **National Action Plan:**

After the deadly terror attacks on Army public school in Peshawar, which the COAS defined as "the attack on the heart of Pakistan" a revival of policy and its firmer implementation was required. The coldest massacre of school kids left every heart crying and demanding for justice. The need for an immediate and furious crack down over the militants stressed upon. A national narrative generated in favour of indiscriminate action against extremists. Though a national internal security policy was already carved out by the government but the scope of the policy was broader with long-term objectives however the incident demanded a focused, measurable and time restricted response on national level (Khan, 2019). For that purpose a 20 points agenda was formulated to curb extremist and militant elements (National Action Plan-2014). The National Action Plan (NAP) was framed under NACTA (The interior ministry) in correspondence with the other shareholders. The legislature approved the said policy on 24<sup>th</sup> of December after a week of the killings (Khan & Saeed, 2018). After the NISP it was the second

policy manuscript generated by consensus and sanctioned by the state. The policy outlined briefly the goals specific to eradicate terrorism from the country.

**NAP Composition and Execution:**

Over the directions of the PM the ministry of interior was asked to formulate and administer a supervision system to ensure the execution which would involve central and provincial administrations. NACTA would perform observation of NAP implementation and more specifically its DG(CVE) will be the “monitor” with the assistance of Director and staff members for National Action Plan (Waqar, 2017). The Plan outlined the points as

1. Removing the moratorium over the death penalties of sentenced terrorists.
2. For the period of two years the establishment of specialized military courts.
3. Zero tolerance for the extremist and belligerent organizations to function in territory.
4. The strengthening of NACTA to eliminate terrorism
5. Implementation of hate speech laws in stricto sensu
6. Tracing and suffocating the financial supply lines of terrorists
7. Tacking adequate measures to prevent regrowth of banned outfits.
8. Developing and employing a specialized force to fight the menace of terrorism
9. Discouraging the acts and elements of religious discrimination
10. Mainstreaming and documentation of the madrassa(Educational institutions)
11. Prohibiting the Publicity of the extremist groups through any medium nationwide (Butt, 2016)
12. Special emphasis over rehabilitation of IDPs through systemic and structural reforms in FATA administration
13. To rip apart the militants communication grid
14. Misuse of social and digital media to be discouraged
15. No acceptance of any growth of extremism in Punjab

16. Bringing the Karachi operation to its rational conclusion
17. Empowering the Baluchistan government to decide for political settlements independently
18. Tackling strictly with the sectarianism as already outlined in NISP
19. Designing a procedure for Regularization of the refugees through documentation of identities
20. Restructuring and improving the criminal legal system

The National action plan's 20 points agenda is certainly a milestone however its true implementation alone can bring the fruits it envisioned. Therefore the suggested policies shall be enforced and strictly supervised by the Prime Minister taking a lead directly as a panel discussion suggested over the topic of "National Action Plan (NAP): Imperatives and Impediments" organized and attended by IPRI, PILDAT and Army welfare Trust (AWT) (IPRI, 2018). Ayesha Riaz, Joint Director of PILDAT, quoted the statement of NACTA in IPRI discussion that "NAP has so far been successful in reducing the terror events and the consequent death rate as per the Global terrorism index in 2017 it reduced 12 % marking the lowest in last decade and descended to 5<sup>th</sup> rank" (IEP, 2017).

### **An account of Previous Operations:**

The trail of operations started with the launch of first armed offensive in 2001 and it continues up till now. The earlier significant military actions include Operation al-Mizan, Operation Zalzalaa and Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan, Operation Sher-e-Dil in Bajaur Agency, Operation Rah-e-Rast and Operation Rah-e-Haq in Swat valley (Javaid, 2015). Due to the preceding operations the militants from the neighboring agencies started to infiltrate into the North Waziristan agency. This made the NWA a base camp sheltering all the terrorists received by adjacent agencies and thus the most exasperated area of all.

### **Strategy of Zarb-e-Azb:**

The operation Z.A differs from the previous operations on account of its strategy and composition. Pakistan administered an innovative blend of policy by incorporating the elements of Vietnam war and Iraq war. The new strategy determined by the Pakistan armed forces was to seek, destroy, clear and hold. The first and second half of the strategy are borrowed by Vietnam and Iraq war respectively. As per the opinion of Seth G. Jones in his book "Counter Insurgency in Pakistan" the Pakistan's military improved its capacity to hold the area over time and lack of which in the previous operations strengthened the militants. The settlements for peace through compensations and permissions "like small arms ownership" to the militant groups allowed them to penetrate deep. However the decision to hold the territory even after the completion of seek, destroy and clear

components enabled the military to prevent the regrouping and return of the militants back to their once safe havens.

“The operation Zarb-e-Azb” the then army chief General Raheel Sharif quotes “is a concept than an operation” as it involved not merely the physical clearance of terrorists from the area but beating the extremist narrative with a national counter narrative nationwide as main objective (Khan A. U., Counter-Terrorism Instruments, 2016). Abdullah Khan MD of Pakistan Institute of Conflict Studies stated that developing a counter narrative to extremist ideology is what will make the accomplishment of operation durable. (Mahmood, 2016) To materialize this ideology a multi-faceted line of attack incorporating armed and law enforcement authorities has been espoused under an “assimilated security system”.

### **Z.A as a Comprehensive Model:**

There are 4 models to counter terrorism, each addressing a typical aspect of Terrorism, these are defensive, reconciliatory, criminal justice and war. A comprehensive CT strategy is formulated through a combination of two or more of these models designed to deal a given situation. Thus each comprehensive CT model is a mix of policies essentially unique and novel in its character and structured to work under specific circumstances. The effectiveness of any of such model is evaluated on the level of success it claimed, on practical grounds, and achievement of defined targets. Operation Zarb-e-Azb is one of its kind in terms of challenges faced and resultant strategies opted by state.

### **Objectives outlined by COAS and their Implementation:**

The chief of armed staff issued the guidelines for the new operation stating there would be no discrimination and favoritism among the militants. The operation will be conducted keeping in view the cultural and traditional dignity of the locals. It was affirmed that the use of force will be “minimum but efficient” to achieve the objectives in the shortest timeframe and the possibility of collateral damage due to air strikes will be shunned. It was also highly stressed upon that no human rights violation shall be allowed under the excuse of operation and therefore tackling the IDPs crisis on urgent basis placed as a priority.

### **Phases of Operation Z.A:**

There were four phases of the operation containing a number of sub operations along with various area specific operations covering the span of 2 years.

#### **Phase 1 (10<sup>th</sup> June -20 August):**

Operation comprised on 7 sub operations. Resulted in the clearance of Miran shaw, Mir ali, Data khel, Boya, Degan, Razmak and Dosali (NWA)

#### **Phase 2 (21 Aug-11 September):**

In Phase 2 the Operation comprised of 3 sub operations. The offensive resulted in the clearance of Ghulam Khan, Jhallar, Bichi areas of (NWA).

**Phase 3 (11-26 September):**

In this Phase Operation comprised of 3 sub operations which resulted in the clearance of Spinwam and Shewa (NWA)

**Phase 4 (25 October- 2 November):**

The operation resulted in the clearance of Gharlamai(NWA)

**Operation Khyber I&II**

The operation Zarb e Azb extended to the Khyber agency in order to clear Khyber agency and adjoining areas

**Troops:**

21 artillery division, frontier corps Khyber pakhtoonkhaw took part in the operation.

Following Effects were achieved under the operation:

- Substantial security to Peshawar.
- Surrender by approximately 400 x hardcore fighters including important commanders and killing of over 200 x terrorists.
- Elimination of bases of all brands of terrorist organizations from Bara and Tirah valley.
- Visible change in the attitude of public/fence sitter tribes/terrorists.
- Enhanced confidence on security forces
- 2387 kilometer area brought under control
- Terrorists' networks dismantled.
- 108 officers and soldiers embraced martyrdom while 385 officers and soldiers were injured in operations.

**Year of Victory:**

After the completion of a year an annual report over the advancement of Zarb e Azb submitted. According to DG ISPR 2763 terrorists were shot down in the past year out of whom 218 were the militant leaders by conducting 9 thousand Intelligence based operations. Around 837 militants' sanctuaries were demolished and the recovery of explosives was made. The military also took into its custody 18 thousand weapons ranging from light to heavy machine guns,snipers and even rocket launchers. Asim saleem bajwa also told that thousands of militants were captured with their safe havens demolished and networks broken. However along this tough path 347 military troops and officers sacrificed their lives and received martyrdom.

The then Pakistani defense minister regarded it as a "year of victory"and zarb e azb as a demonstration of Pakistan's commitment to eradicate terrorism.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> year of Zarb-e-Azb**

As the Chief of Armed staff Raheel Sharif stated that to be the commander of a skilled and battle tested military is a privilege and we won't stop unless our goals are accomplished. Over a period of only a year and a half Zarb-e-Azb had attained remarkable success. The terrorists networks disrupted, infrastructures demolished and finally the safe havens near Afghan border destroyed corking the last tunnels. Intelligence based operations sought and smashed sleeper cells. 3400 militants eliminated along with their 837 sanctuaries where they used to take refuge. In a span of 18 months around 13200 intelligence based operations were conducted across the state claiming the lives of 183 high valued militants and arrests of 21,193 (Nation, 2015) (ISPR, 2015).

As the two years of operation Zarb-e-Azb completion approached 490 officers and the troops of army, FC KPK, Baluchistan and Sindh rangers had sacrificed their lives to motherland while the number of wounded is 1914. According to DGISPR 3500 terrorists had been eliminated and 992 safe havens were demolished by the end of June 2016 (Tribune, 2016).

According to ISSI report operation Zarb-e-Azb killed 5000 terrorists (ISSI, 2016) and a total of 11 military courts were established with 142 cases being referred. Out of whom 55 cases are resolved and 87 are still pending. The number of militants executed is 31. The area adjoining the Afghan border that served as the terrorists' channel 'into' the Pakistan and out of former, escaping any counter terror strike. During the military operation Pakistan armed forces made significant advancements in the area and cleared out most nearest points adjacent to the turbulent border. The Pakistan military briefed about their success and the impending strategies about the ongoing operation to the army chief on his visit to the North and south agencies.

### **IDP's Management:**

The operation resulted in mass displacement of the locals as around 80302 families comprising of 929859 members moved out of their homes according to their registration with government offices. To facilitate the IDP's food, basic necessities as well as economic assistance was provided and those among the nation who wished to assist their brothers in need could reach them through about 60 donation spots all around the country managed by army.

At this point of time amidst the pressure over economy of financing the war on terror and dealing the aftermaths such as rebuilding the infrastructure destroyed by the terrorism, Pakistan made a critical decision to regard the honor of the IDP's. The government of Pakistan decided to seek no foreign aid for the restoration and recuperation of the IDP's. It was reiterated by the foreign office representative Tasnim Aslam that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has clearly denounced for any international aid and reiterated whatever the cost may be, will be tolerated by country's own capitals.

Nonetheless it is also informed that USA assigned 31 million dollars for the displaced persons and 9.3 million for other necessities such as health, cleanliness and sanitization of the public as well as cattle. The UAE as well reportedly granted



20.5 million for humanitarian assistance. According to the figures quoted by Ishaq Dar to the American Senator Jack reed the war expenses had reached 40 billion already and will likely to touch 130 billion rupees in future.

#### Repatriation of IDP's:

By 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2014 the 4<sup>th</sup> phase of the operation Zarb-e-Azb had successfully completed and on 8<sup>th</sup> December the military ratified the return of IDP's to home. Restoration of the IDP's and resettlement in their homelands has been the utmost preference of the government. The areas recovered from the militants after the clearance operations were advised by the officials to be opened for IDP's resettlement. The process of return initiated at the end of March 2015 and on 31<sup>st</sup> march alone 62 families returned to North Waziristan agency to the areas declared under army's control. To make sure the ease of the families returning home financial help, covering as well the transport charges, 35000 rupees were given to each. Along with that families were also given food items for 6 months and other household stuff. It was also ensured that kids, leaving back home, stay safe from diseases by providing proper vaccination against Polio and measles according their age.

Till 4<sup>th</sup> may 2015 only 230 families out of 80 thousand were sent back home. Though it was clearly stated by the authorities overseeing the rehabilitation program that the delay is only due to non-clearance of the area under war and after that it shall take no longer than a month to repatriate all the 80,000 of families. However 63 thousand of the families returned to their homes and repatriated by the December 2016 as per the figures quoted by the political representatives(1,350 TDPs to return to homes in North Waziristan today, 2016).

#### **Conclusion:**

So far the operation Z.A is the second last among the series of operations, continued since the 2001, clearing the menace created as a repercussion of Pakistan's decision to join the Alliance. A hasty decision of entering the war which it didn't own and a decision well exploited by the enemy. The Alliance came down with a package of aid as well as the losses far bigger than the aids. The losses ranged from infrastructure to costing the national image and from instability to life losses which could never be compensated by any means. The decision of going to war over one's own land and resources was certainly a bitter and tough decision by the authorities however it was administered for the restoration of peace and releasing people from the physical and psychological clenches of terrorism. However the decision of opting for military action followed rounds of negotiations, nonetheless the eventual failure of the belligerent groups to keep up to the ceasefire agreements and constant attacks over unarmed civilians left the government with no other option.

It is important to note that the National Internal Security Policy of 2014-2018 and of 2018-2023 outline the contemporary as well as the longterm objectives of national security. By focusing to eliminate the immediate causes of instability and the causes that can be overcome with time alone. Both documents represent a

broader vision of the policy makers in consultation with the Government machinery for ensuring sustainable peace and security.

The NAP in this regard is another representation of policy focus and will of the Government to eradicate every terror outfit on its soil. Alongwith that the reconstruction and repatriation of IDPs followed by mainstreaming of once marginalized community into the national spectrum reflected the way forward. The recent developments such as the absorption of FATA into Khyber pakhtunkhaw granted the locals with their long pending National status. And the conduction of peaceful elections for the first time in the history of FATA is another remarkable achievement. The Locals turn out to choose their electorates who will now represent their people in the provincial legislature as well.

There is a streak of operations starting since 2001 countreing the menace of terrorism (Khan Z. A., 2014), all these operations engaged a significant number of troops and planning to acquire the set objectives. It is of no question that these operations were not successful however the degree of their success or the ability to maintain the peace after operation can be debated. As most of the times the terrorists managed to revive their strongholds and bounced back.

The operation Zarb-e-Azb is greeted with many claims such as attaining remarkable achievements, asserting unprecedented success or even surpassing the expectations. However there is more that meets the eye as like the previous operations Zarb-e-Azb also claimed the lives of many high valued terrorists and contributed significantly to restore the peace of the land by bringing down the attacks or even threats to an all-time low. Abdullah Khan, managing director of the Pakistan Institute for Conflict Security Studies (PICSS), stated that the casualty rate in 2016 has decreased to the lowest in last 8 years and sustaining the success of offensive is the actual trial.

The success can be asserted, firstly, by Zarb-e-Azb's strong commitment to the objectives, the COAS narrated as guidelines to the operation. These may include the respect of the local culture and their safe evacuation from the troubled area. The use of Ariel bombing before landing the ground troops to minimize the life losses. The strategy of seek, destroy and clearing the area employed with a bigger stress over "holding the area" to prevent the revival of terrorists. The establishment of Military trial courts and removal of the suspension over death penalty are the critical steps. Formulation of Pakistan's first ever National Security Policy document and its monitoring mechanism with dedicated Counter-terror forces. The management and surveillance of the Afghan border as well as targeting the sleeper cells in urban areas nationwide served as key to operation's effectiveness. The strict check over publication and spread of provocative substances, promoting hate speech and radicalism are some of the strategy shifts employed by Zarb-e-Azb.

The success of the operation can be determined by its immediate and long-term effects achieved. The restoration of peace and order as well as the registration and repatriation of the IDPs and TDPs with reasonable amount of cash and ration, the conduction of de-radicalization projects and development of a national

counter narrative to beat the extremist mindset. A major victory registered in terms of absorption of FATA into Kpk, the allocation of separate budget for the once marginalized and the conduction of peaceful election for FATA's first ever provincial representation .The construction of roads in attempts to connect this area with rest of the country and allocating quota to the natives for recruitment in Army. The surveillance of Afghan border at best to avoid the terrorists' infiltration back into the adjacent areas. These are some of the indicators to determine the success of operation.

The military has done its part by defeating the armed enemy, now its uphill task for each Pakistani to fight the war of perspectives, narratives and mindsets to integrate the long marginalized and ignored factions of Pakistan.

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