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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Radio-Free Swat Valley

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ON March 5, in the outskirts of Peshawar, Pakistan, forces believed to be affiliated with the Taliban bombed the shrine of Rahman Baba (born around 1650), the most revered Pashtun poet. The attack evokes one of the grosser Taliban outrages from the pre-9/11 era: the dynamiting in 2001 of the enormous stone Buddhas in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Valley.

This use of bombs as cultural commentary is especially notable in that the shrine was sacred to other Muslims. It reminds the world, and especially complacent Muslims, that the Islamist extremists' war is a civil war within Islam — and not just a “holy war” against other religions and the United States. It should show American policymakers the wisdom of working to persuade Pashtuns to reject the Taliban.

The bombers took aim at the poet's shrine because it represented Sufism, the mystical form of Islam that has long been predominant in India and Pakistan. The Sufism of Rahman Baba generally stresses a believer's personal relationship with God and de-emphasizes the importance of the mosque. It refrains from exalting violence and war and praises such virtues as tolerance, devotion and love. Its practice relies extensively on dance, music and poetry. Some of Sufism's most esteemed poets and scholars are women.

The extremists are determined to destroy Pakistan's moderate Sufi tradition — by claiming the exclusive right to fly the banner of Islam and asserting this claim through cultural, educational and violent means. Through intimidation, they silence musicians, still dancers and oppress women. As a result, artists and performers are leaving Pakistan's Swat Valley and the North-West Frontier Province in droves.

Though the Sufi tradition has been widely followed for centuries in South Asia, its hold is weakening as the extremists flex their muscles. Pakistan's inability to enforce its laws in the border region with Afghanistan has allowed extremists to threaten dominance in northwestern Pakistan.

The United States may be able to help Pakistan prevent this, however, by supporting Pashtun opposition to the extremists. The Pashtuns who oppose the Taliban need protection. The extremists have gunned down, bombed and hanged those who have worked against them. It would help to improve the government's schools in the region and thus reduce the appeal and influence of Taliban-run madrassas. And by building roads and creating jobs and business opportunities for the Pashtuns, the Pakistani government, with American help, could counter the money and other material blandishments offered by the extremists.

It is a costly failing that the American government has been unable to communicate quickly with the Pashtun community about the attack on the Rahman Baba shrine. Congress has provided trillions of dollars to support military action in the fight against terrorism, but it has not yet provided resources for a strategic communications capacity that could be the key to victory.

If it had the equipment and personnel for the job, the United States could broadcast radio programs for the Pashtuns commemorating Rahman Baba's life and poetry, thus helping to revive the collective memory of Sufism and inspiring opposition to the Taliban. Other programs could highlight the cultural and physical devastation wrought by the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

The United States conducted impressive strategic communications during the cold war. Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and other programs conveyed information and ideas that contributed to the discrediting and ultimate defeat of Soviet communism.

Pakistan's Islamist extremists apparently know the value of strategic communications. They preach and broadcast, understanding that every non-extremist school they close, every artist they force to move, every moderate tribal leader they kill and every Sufi shrine they destroy can increase their powers of intimidation and persuasion.

The problem along the Afghan border is not mass support for Islamist extremism. Rather it is widespread acquiescence by people who are fearful and demoralized. As the extremists work to demonstrate that only they represent the true Islam, Pashtuns can reflect on the warnings against cruelty and violence that Rahman Baba outlined in "Sow Flowers":

Sow flowers to make a garden bloom around you,

The thorns you sow will prick your own feet.

Arrows shot at others

Will return to hit you as they fall.

You yourself will come to teeter on the lip

Of a well dug to undermine another.

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