

***Islamist Militancy in Pakistan:
A View from the Provinces***

Companion to *Pakistani Public Opinion on the Swat Conflict, Afghanistan and the U.S.*

July 10, 2009

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In Pakistan's struggles with Islamist militant groups—foreign and homegrown—the country's provinces have experienced levels of violence that differ widely by type, severity, and consequences. An analysis of a recent WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of Pakistan reveals that these different provinces vary significantly in their views of militant groups and the recent government actions to an extent that is relevant for policymakers. Of special interest, support for the Pakistani government's efforts and concern about specific militant groups prove to be strong in some unexpected places.

Pakistan is home to numerous ethnic groups, who tend to be clustered in specific provinces, e.g.: Punjabis tends to be clustered in the Punjab, Pashtuns in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Baluch in Baluchistan and Sindhis in Sindh. Of course, there has been tremendous migration within Pakistan. Karachi, in Sindh, is now home to more Pashtuns than any other city in Pakistan and ethnic Punjabis are settled throughout Pakistan. Indeed, these internal demographic changes have often been a source of conflict among different ethnic groups.

While many U.S. analysts focus upon "Pakistan" and "Pakistani opinions," it is useful to consider sub-national analyses of data. For example, provinces differ by voting patterns, access to education and other public services, representation in government institutions (including the armed forces), and literacy, among other factors. These enormous inter-provincial differences tend to be overlooked by policy makers.

This paper begins with the opinion survey's timing, its methodology, and a few caveats on its provincial comparisons. It then offers a brief summary of provincial differences in attitudes. It then considers the provincial responses to specific questions on three topics: beliefs about Islamist militants' activities and objectives; views of the Pakistani government and its response to the militants, especially in Swat; and attitudes toward foreign militant groups, the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda.

The Timing of the Study

In March 2009, the efforts of the NWFP provincial government to strike a deal with the Pakistani Taliban—offering Shari'a courts in Swat in exchange for peace—was formally endorsed by Pakistan's Parliament and President Zardari. In the last week of April the Pakistani Taliban extended its reach, moving into Buner, and the government and army reacted forcefully soon afterward with a major offensive. The survey was fielded in late

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May during a key phase of the army's offensive against the Pakistani Taliban, coinciding with heavy street-to-street fighting in the Swat Valley's main town, Mingora.

Methodology and a Caveat

The differences between provinces selected for discussion in this paper are very large ones. The smallest variations reported here are in the 20-point range; most are in the 30-50 point range. The variations in each question offered are at the $p < .001$ level of significance. The paper seeks to discuss and interpret only these very robust differences.

The survey of the national population of Pakistan was developed by WorldPublicOpinion.org, with the author contributing to the study's conceptualization and the design of the survey instrument. It was carried out by SEDCO (Socio-Economic Development Consultants, Islamabad, Pakistan). All interviewing was conducted in Urdu. A total of 1,000 face-to-face interviews were conducted across 64 primary sampling units in rural areas and 36 in urban areas. In order to properly capture opinion in Baluchistan (a multi-ethnic, sparsely populated province), it was oversampled, using 15 primary sampling units; results were then weighted back to reflect true proportions among provinces. Interviews were conducted between May 17 and 28, 2009. Sampling error for a sample of this size is approximately ± 3.2 percentage points.

Even so, given the sample size, there are limits to how fine disaggregation can be, due to Pakistan's population distribution. For example, Baluchistan is the largest province in geographical size, but it is home to only 5 percent of the country's population, according to the most recent census in 1998. Moreover, Baluchistan is ethnically diverse, including Baluch, Pashtuns and Punjabis with Baluch and Pashtuns concentrated in different parts of the province. While the survey over-sampled Baluchistan, it is still possible that the Baluchistan sample does not perfectly reflect ethnic distributions within the province. Thus tabulations for Baluchistan in particular must be viewed with these caveats in mind. (Similar concerns obtain with Sindh to a lesser degree.)²

That said, it is clear that the study's questions about the Swat crisis, the government's response, and various Islamist militant organizations elicited differences across provinces so large and robust that they merit consideration.

A Brief Summary of Provincial Differences

In general, the NWFP and Punjab have experienced most intensively the ravages of violence from the Pakistani Taliban and allied militant groups (including foreign militants) while also being closest to the state's military and police efforts to counter these militant groups. In contrast, both Sindh and Baluchistan have experienced other kinds of violence in the past, but they have been relatively spared the predations of the

² While here we focus upon inter-provincial differences, we also looked at differences in sample means based upon whether the respondent lived in rural or urban areas. However, we found few notable differences. Thus we do not present those results here.

Pakistani Taliban. Perhaps for these reasons, we see considerable differences across the provinces. This is true for Baluchistan even though the *Afghan* Taliban has long used Baluchistan territory as a sanctuary, without making Baluchistan itself a focus of operations.

The **North West Frontier Province (NWFP)** is the province that has experienced the greatest amount of extremist violence (with Punjab a close second). Since 2004 militant groups have sought to set up micro-emirates in the province (as well as in the nearby Pashtun areas of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)). It includes the actual battlefield of the army's offensive and currently more than 2 million of its population are displaced, according to various estimates.

NWFP respondents were more likely than others to see local Taliban and Islamist militants as critical threats to Pakistan. They were more inclined to see the Pakistani Taliban as holding a nationwide takeover as an objective, and to see this as a real possibility. Though they expressed *some* confidence in the government and army's handling of this situation, they were less likely to express strong confidence.

Punjab is the richest, most highly developed and most populous province in Pakistan. The Punjab is considered by the security elites to be the "heartland" of Pakistan and is home to numerous army corps, intelligence agencies, and industrial and other infrastructure. Abutting India's province of the same name, Punjab remains for many purposes a strategic territory to be fiercely protected and is the cultural center for many of Pakistan's elites, notably the army. While parts of Punjab have long witnessed sectarian violence (between Shi'ia and Sunnis), in recent years Punjab too has witnessed sanguinary attacks on police, military, intelligence and other state targets, including suicide attacks. Thus, Punjab—along with NWFP and the Federal Territory of Islamabad—has become a prized theatre of operations for the Pakistani Taliban.

Punjab respondents were, like those in the NWFP, more likely to see local Taliban and Islamist militants as a critical threat, but—unlike those in the war zone—they were also the most likely to express strong confidence in the government and army's handling of Swat. They also led the provinces in thinking it very unlikely that the Pakistani Taliban could ever take over the country.

Baluchistan has seen almost no violence from the Pakistani Taliban. It has a long history of periodic Baluch insurgencies against the central government, aiming for autonomy or independence. These insurgencies have been organized around ethnic identity, plus grievances against perceived economic exploitation of the province. This is a political problem for Pakistan quite distinct from the better known issue of Islamist militancy. Although the Afghan Taliban has long made its home in Baluchistan, it has never sought to extend its writ in that province through violence; it has kept its focus on Afghanistan instead.

Baluch respondents were somewhat less likely to see religious militants as a critical threat to Pakistan, and almost all thought the Pakistani Taliban has no national aspirations

to power. They were less likely to either sympathize with the government in the Swat conflict, or to show confidence in government handling of the conflict. They were less concerned about al Qaeda--but also less likely to sympathize with its attacks on Americans. When presented the idea of the Pakistani government acting to close down Taliban or al Qaeda camps, they were less likely to be supportive.

Sindh has also seen almost no violence from the Pakistani Taliban with a few notable exceptions. (For example, Baitullah Mehsood may have been responsible for the suicide attack upon Benazir Bhutto in Karachi in the fall of 2007). Sindh has experienced sporadic bouts of ethnic violence among ethnic Sindhis, Muhajjirs, Baluch, Pashtuns and Punjabis as well as sectarian violence among Shi'a and Sunni militias. Notably, individuals who migrated to Pakistan from areas in India either during partition or shortly thereafter (Muhajjirs) have long sought greater autonomy within the province to secure their interests. Muhajjir efforts to appropriate the province have been fiercely resisted by Sindhi ethnics, as well as Pashtuns and Baluch, who also share the province and its burgeoning port city of Karachi. Moreover, Sindh has witnessed decades of sectarian violence as well as organized criminal activity and episodic bouts of severe state efforts, using police, military and paramilitary forces, to roust varied entrepreneurs of violence.

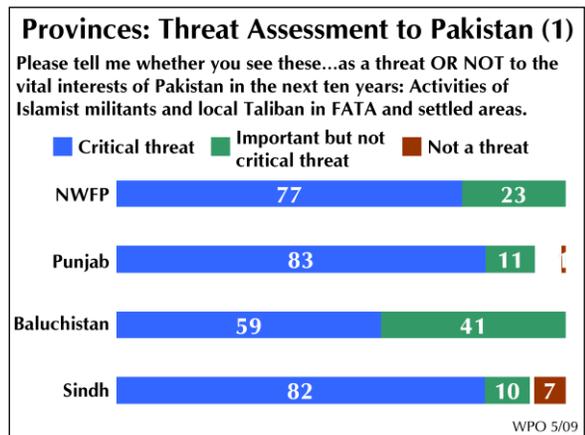
Sindh respondents were the most likely to avoid expressing sympathies with either side in the Swat conflict. However, where Taliban or al Qaeda camps on Pakistani soil are concerned, Sindh respondents were the most likely to support the Pakistani government using force if necessary to close them down.

Beliefs about Islamist Militants' Activities and Objectives

Broadly, the NWFP and Punjab have a considerably stronger belief that Islamist militant groups are a grave threat than the rest of the country has--and this is especially true of these two provinces' perception of the Pakistani Taliban.

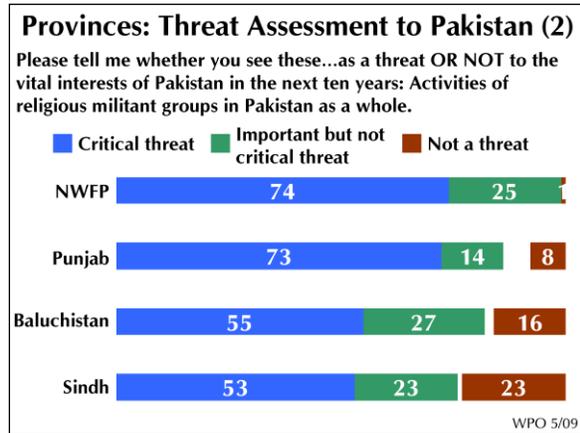
Respondents were asked to evaluate two kinds of threats to Pakistan over the next ten years.

First they were asked whether the "Islamist militants and local Taliban in FATA and the settled areas" posed such a threat. Respondents in the Punjab, Sindh and NWFP overwhelmingly believed they were a "critical threat." Respondents in Baluchistan were less likely to say so. However, when one adds those who indicated that these groups are an "important but not critical threat," solid majorities across all provinces see these groups as a threat to some degree.



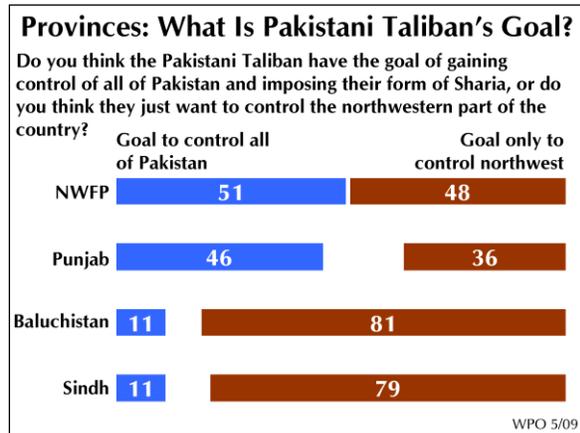
The substantially stronger threat perception in NWFP and Punjab likely reflect the reality that these provinces have borne the brunt of militant violence with a sustained Pakistani Taliban suicide bombing campaign largely focused upon these provinces.

Second, respondents were asked to evaluate whether the “activities of religious militant groups in Pakistan as a whole” posed a critical threat, important but not critical, or not a threat at all. Results were similar to those above with respondents in NWFP and Punjab evidencing a substantially stronger threat perception than those in Baluchistan and Sindh. Again, this is likely because most of the Islamist militant violence has focused upon the NWFP and Punjab in recent years.



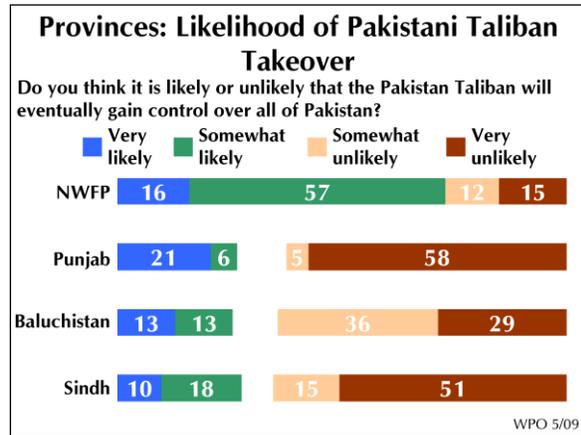
Respondents were also asked a series of questions about the goals of the Pakistan Taliban and their views about this outcome if the Pakistani Taliban were to succeed. It should be recalled that this survey was fielded right after the Taliban reneged on the April 2009 “peace deal” in the settled area of Swat and made startling advances into Buner in absolute breach of that controversial agreement.

Respondents were asked whether they believe the “Pakistani Taliban have the goal of gaining control of *all of Pakistan* and imposing their form of Sharia, or do you think they just want to control *the northwestern* part of the country.” (It should be noted that the northwestern part of Pakistan comprises substantial territory, inclusive of the NWFP, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and possibly part of Baluchistan.)

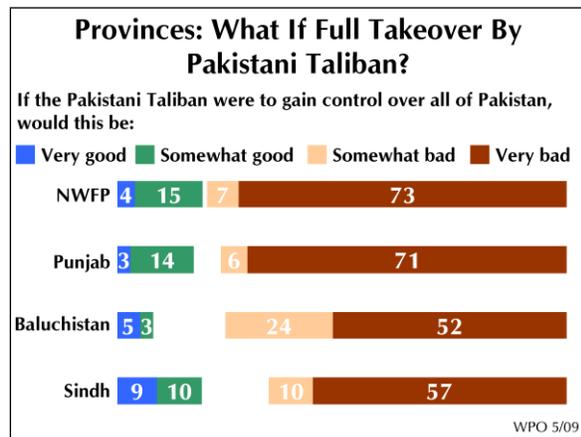


Respondents in the NWFP and the Punjab were much more likely than those in Baluchistan or Sindh to believe that the Pakistani Taliban seeks to control all of Pakistan. Again, this could be due to the fact that NWFP and Punjab are either located in or closer to the theatre of the Pakistani Taliban’s activities.

Respondents were also asked whether or not they believe that “it is likely or unlikely that the Pakistan Taliban will eventually gain control over all of Pakistan.” When one looks at the proportion of respondents indicating that it is either “very likely” or “somewhat likely,” a solid majority of respondents in the NWFP believed it was likely. Again, the NWFP has witnessed the Pakistan Taliban setting up micro-emirates of Sharia since 2004 both in the NWFP and the tribal areas of FATA. Majorities in Punjab, Baluchistan and Sindh thought it was “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” that they would eventually control the country.



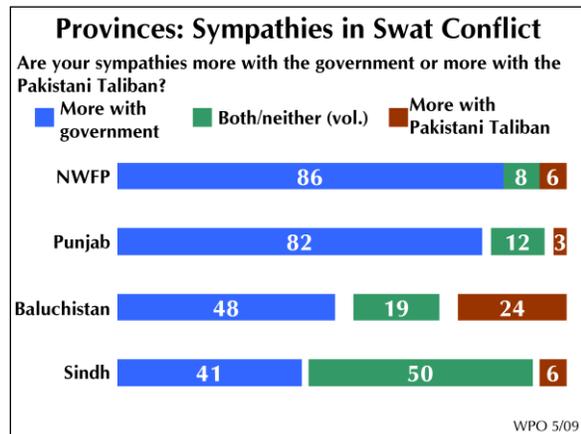
Respondents were next asked about the *outcome* of such a takeover if it were to happen. Solid majorities in all provinces thought that it would be either ‘somewhat bad’ or ‘very bad.’ Again respondents in NWFP and Punjab were much more likely to believe that such an outcome would be “very bad.” However, small minorities (ranging from eight percent to nearly 20 percent) in all provinces believed that such an outcome would be “very good” or “somewhat good.”



Thus the NWFP and Punjab would be most likely to show support for measures that may be taken against the Pakistani Taliban in future, since they are the most inclined to regard the organization as a serious threat.

Views of the Government and its Response

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their views of the Pakistani government and its handling of the militants’ challenge. The NWFP and Punjab both overwhelmingly sympathize with the government in the Swat conflict, but Punjab shows more confidence in the outcome than the NWFP does. Sindh has the least sympathy for the government of all the provinces, and (along with Baluchistan) is most inclined to think it was right thing to try to make an



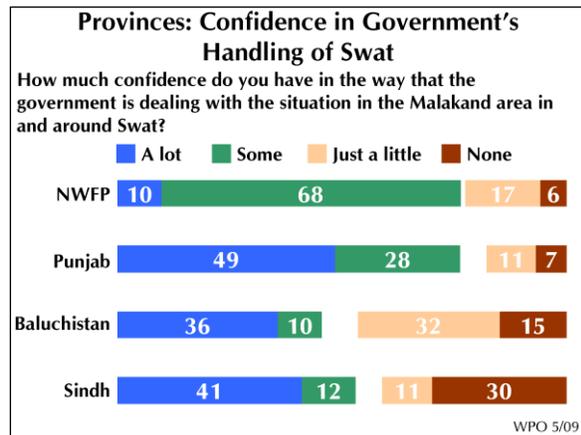
agreement with the Pakistani Taliban.

Respondents were asked whether they “sympathize more with the government or with the Pakistani Taliban.” Respondents could also answer “both” or “neither.” Respondents in the Punjab and the NWFP were most likely to sympathize with the government. Again, NWFP and Punjab have borne the brunt of the violence, and for this reason, respondents in those provinces may be more inclined to support the government’s renewed fight against the Pakistani Taliban in Swat and elsewhere. Conversely, respondents in Sindh and Baluchistan were less likely to sympathize with the government and residents of Baluchistan were most likely to sympathize with the Taliban.

There are two possible explanations for the result in Baluchistan. First, it may be a manifestation of Baluch resentment of the central government. Baluchistan has been the site of a long-standing insurgency wherein various militant groups demand independence or greater autonomy, control over provincial resources and increased access to state institutions. Thus support for the Pakistan Taliban, which targets the state, may be seen as an anti-Pakistan vote. Second, the Afghan Taliban has long made its home in Baluchistan; however, it has never sought to extend its writ in that province through violence. (It is also possible that the Baluchistan sample focused upon Pashtun areas which may be more positively disposed towards both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban.)

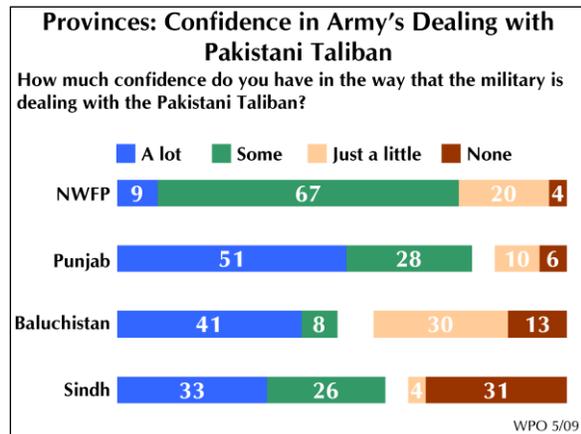
Sindh registers considerable ambivalence towards the government and Taliban, with a plurality indicating that their sympathies lie with “both/neither.” Again, this could register the negative sentiment of some ethnic groups in Sindh. (Sindh has been home to various levels of ethnic violence and ethnic demands for greater autonomy.)

When asked how confident respondents are in how the “government is dealing with the situation in Malakand area in and around Swat,” residents of the NWFP were most unlikely to have “a lot” of confidence. NWFP has experienced sustained--if brutal and devastating--army operations which have demolished vast swaths of residential areas and displaced millions of persons fleeing the army-led and militant-led violence. Moreover, neither the military nor the government has a convincing plan for providing long-term stability or for reconstruction and rehabilitation of the internally displaced persons.

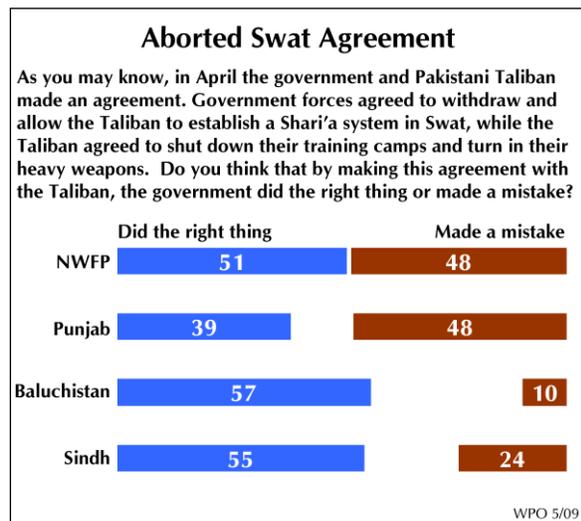


These realities notwithstanding, a solid majority of respondents in the NWFP has some degree of confidence in the government. Respondents in Baluchistan, Sindh and Punjab were most likely to indicate “a lot” of confidence. However, residents in Sindh and Baluchistan were divided, with as many indicating that they have “just a little” or no confidence in the government’s handling.

When asked about their confidence in the way in which the *military* is dealing with the Pakistani Taliban, persons surveyed in Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan were most likely to indicate that they have “a lot” of confidence. Respondents from the NWFP were the least likely to have a lot of confidence in the military’s handling of affairs. That said, a solid majority of respondents in the NWFP indicated that they have “some” confidence. Respondents in Sindh and Baluchistan also had large minorities who had “just a little” or “no” confidence.



Respondents were also asked whether the agreement between the government and the Pakistani Taliban was the “right thing to do” or “whether the government made a mistake.” Respondents in Baluchistan and Sindh were the least likely to view it as a mistake. Baluchistan and Sindh have seen virtually no Pakistani Taliban-related violence. The Punjab had the lowest percentage believing that the deal was the right thing to do. Opinion was divided in the NWFP, with nearly equal numbers believing it was the right thing to do or a mistake. The NWFP’s divided response may be understandable, given that residents there have been battered by the military as well as the Taliban.



Should the government again attempt this type of agreement with an Islamist militant group, it will be important to realize that the two northern provinces, which have seen much of the violence proffered by these groups, have more negative views of such agreements.

Attitudes Toward Foreign Militants: The Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda

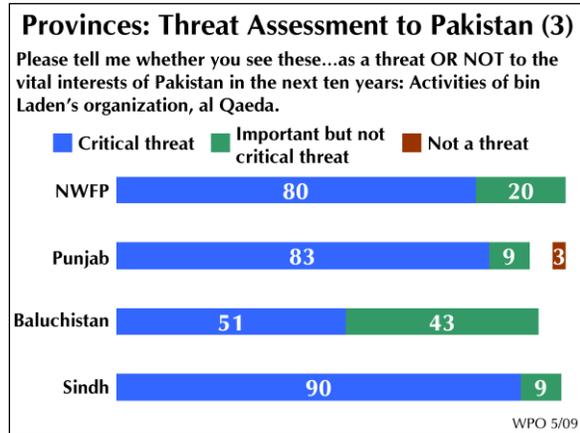
Punjab is the only province where large numbers see al Qaeda as a critical threat to Pakistan, reject al Qaeda’s attacks on Americans, *and* do not agree with its general views of the US. These three attitudes—which to Americans may seem to naturally follow one from another—do not naturally follow for many Pakistanis.

The NWFP is not so uncomfortable with al Qaeda’s attacks and hostility toward the US, but does think al Qaeda is a critical threat to Pakistan. The NWFP would support the

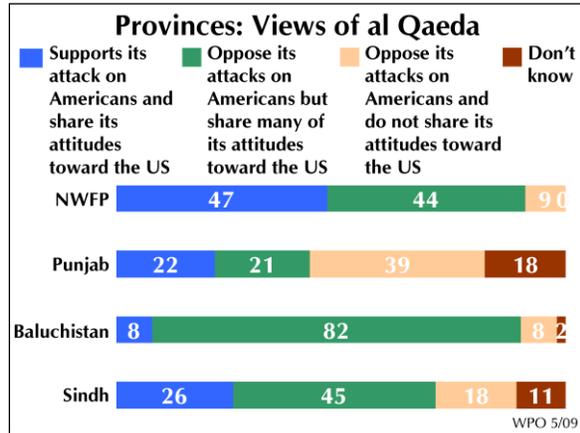
government closing down al Qaeda training camps (and Afghan Taliban bases as well). Views in Sindh are broadly similar to those in the NWFP, though with less sympathy for attacks on Americans.

The Baluch are least likely to see al Qaeda as a critical threat. They tend to reject its attacks on Americans while sharing many of its views of the US, and are divided over the idea of closing down camps and bases within Pakistan.

When asked whether Bin Laden’s organization, al Qaeda, posed a long-term threat to Pakistan itself, respondents in the Punjab, Sindh and NWFP overwhelmingly believed he and his organization posed a “critical threat.” Persons surveyed in Baluchistan were less likely to see him and his outfit as a “critical threat.” However, those who saw him as a “critical” and “important but not critical threat” comprised a solid majority.



Regarding al Qaeda and attacks against the United States, respondents were asked about their views of al Qaeda. Respondents indicated whether they “support its attacks on Americans and share its attitudes towards the US,” “oppose its attacks on Americans but share many of its attitudes towards the US,” or “Oppose its attacks on Americans and do not share its attitudes toward the US.”

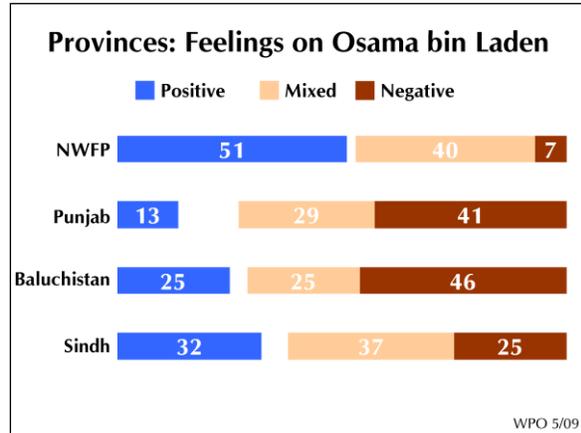


There was considerable variation across the provinces. In the Punjab, more residents (nearly 40%) than any other province indicated that they *both* oppose the attacks and do not share al Qaeda’s views of the US. Approximately one in five in the Punjab indicated that they *both* share al Qaeda’s views of the US and support its attacks on Americans. Another one in five espoused al Qaeda’s views of the US but rejected such attacks.

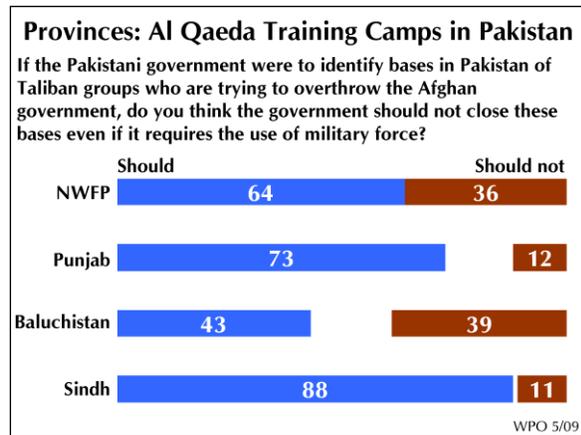
Residents in Sindh, NWFP and Baluchistan were all more likely than those in the Punjab to share many of al Qaeda’s views of the US, but there was considerable difference in support for attacks on the United States. Residents of NWFP who share al Qaeda’s goals were nearly divided between those who support attacks against the United States (47%) and those who do not (44%). Residents of Baluchistan predominantly rejected attacks on the United States but said they shared many of al Qaeda’s views of the US. Again, this is puzzling given Baluchistan’s proximity to the fighting in Afghanistan. One possible explanation is that, having to live cheek by jowl with organizations that include foreign

fighters, many Baluch express sympathy with their goals but do not want to “enlist” with them by supporting attacks.

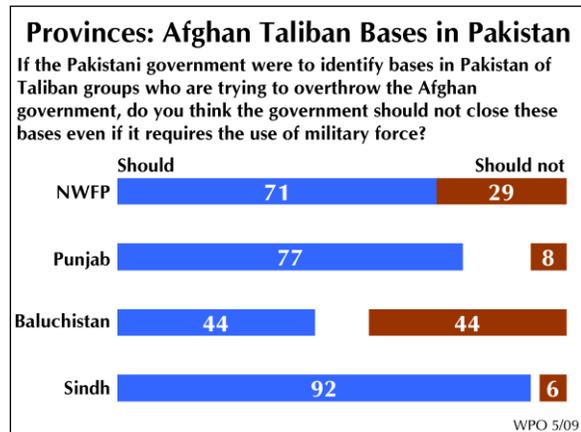
Respondents were also asked whether their feelings towards Osama bin Laden were “positive,” “mixed,” or “negative.” Residents of NWFP were more likely than those in any other province to have positive feelings towards Osama bin Laden (51%)—consistent with their higher approval of al Qaeda’s attacks on Americans. Persons surveyed from the Punjab and Baluchistan were most likely to hold negative views of bin Laden (41% and 46% respectively)—consistent with their lower approval of al Qaeda’s attacks. In Sindh opinion was relatively evenly divided across categories.



Respondents were also asked about al Qaeda training camps in Pakistan. Respondents were asked whether or not the Pakistan government should close camps associated with Bin Laden’s organization, al Qaeda. Respondents in Sindh and the Punjab were most likely to support such measures, followed by those in the NWFP. Those from Baluchistan, however, were divided, with nearly equal numbers supporting and opposing such closures. Perhaps some Baluch respondents were concerned about military measures against al Qaeda spilling more widely into the province’s territory.



Respondents were also asked about Taliban bases in Pakistan: “If the Pakistani government were to identify bases in Pakistan of Taliban groups who are trying to overthrow the Afghan government, do you think the government should or should not close these bases even if it requires the use of military force?” Respondents in Sindh overwhelmingly supported such closures and so did strong majorities in Punjab and in the NWFP (though in the latter a significant 29% disagreed). Baluch were again divided, responding in the same way as they did when asked about closing down al Qaeda training camps.



It appears that popular support for a push to close down foreign Islamist militants' camps in Pakistan would require the national government choosing to do this and offering strong domestic Pakistani reasons for doing it. Most Pakistanis are unlikely to want to join such an effort as part of an “anti-terrorist international”—as it has often been put to them in past years.

Conclusion

These inter-provincial results across several pressing policy issues demonstrate the importance of examining Pakistani views sub-nationally. Clearly there are wide variations in public views about these issues—variations which appear related to different provincial experiences of proximity to war, insurgency, and more scattered violence and intimidation from militant groups.

As the United States tries to craft its information policies towards Pakistan's polity, and as the Pakistan government communicates with its citizenry about its actions, it would be wise for the US and Pakistani governments to better grasp how people across Pakistan variously understand the problems facing their nation, and how they evaluate the state's efforts to contend with its threat environment.