



## **News of Pakistan's doom greatly exaggerated**

**Analysis: Fears that the Taliban are about to overrun Pakistan's seat of power seem unfounded.**

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NEW YORK — A bronze statue of Giuseppe Garibaldi stands in Washington Square Park, recognizing the 19th-century Italian war hero who assembled the first recruits for his Red Shirts militia here in New York City.

The fighters, known for their matching flannel outfits, traveled to Italy by sea to help Garibaldi fight in the Italian unification wars that led to the creation of the modern European nation state.

The Red Shirts became the inspiration for Mussolini's Black Shirts and Hitler's Brown Shirts, the armed groups that muscled the fascist political parties to power in a warring Europe decades later.

While the Taliban in Pakistan prefer the traditional shalwar-kameez to flannel and don't bother much with matching outfits, they do bear some resemblance to the armed bands that brought revolutionary change in Europe in the past century.

I flew back to New York last month after a six-month reporting tour in Pakistan. During my time in the Islamic republic I covered more than a few major-league fiascoes — the attacks in Mumbai that ignited an international political crisis in nuclear South Asia; the march by hundreds of thousands of lawyers and political activists on the capital while threatening to overthrow the government; the day that terrorists took to the streets of Pakistan's second largest city, Lahore, in broad daylight and machine gunned a busload of international athletes.

But the biggest news was often about the encroaching Taliban militias in the north, the same militias that have now reportedly reached within 60 miles of the capital, Islamabad.

Incredibly, the sense of impending doom felt by those outside the country was rarely felt from within. While based in Islamabad — with its wide tree-lined avenues, glitzy restaurants and sky-high real estate market — or while visiting Lahore — a city of 10 million with a thriving art and music scene — or reporting from Karachi — with its buzzing nightlife and daytime financial bustle — or even inside the war-torn tribal areas or in the city of Peshawar that is under the barrel of the Taliban gun — I never feared that the country would soon be ruled by the small Pashtun guerrilla force.

Maybe because it likely won't.

Try telling that to the powers that be in Washington, however.

"I think that we cannot underscore the seriousness of the existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan by continuing advances, now within hours of Islamabad, that are being made by a loosely confederated group of terrorists and others who are seeking the overthrow of the Pakistani state, a nuclear-armed state," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee late last month.

Meanwhile, General David Petraeus warned that the next two weeks were critical for Pakistan. And it's almost been a week since he said that. The clock is running down.

But how would the Taliban go from being a rag-tag guerrilla army in the mountains to rulers of the second largest Muslim country in the world? It's a fantastically tall order.

First they would have to cross a mountain range to enter at the northern gates of Islamabad and run over the modern capital of nearly 2 million people. In the process, they would presumably encounter one of the most advanced armies in the world — and on the military's home turf for a change.

From there, Lahore (a city of 10 million people) is a three-hour drive down an eight-lane highway that runs through some densely populated green agricultural plains — not the Taliban's pick for a battle field.

Moreover, Lahore is the capital of the Pakistani heartland Punjab — if the province of 81 million people were a country it would be the 15th most populous in the world, just behind Germany. Even if the Punjab goes, there would be places like the southern port city of Karachi, the third largest city in the world, that could prove to be logistical nightmares for the Taliban, who have yet to control a town of more than a few hundred thousand in Pakistan.

So what will happen in the sixth largest country in the world — which shares borders with China, India and Iran, and which has a nearly 700-mile Arabian Sea coastline touching the Persian Gulf, and which only three years ago was clocking the third fastest growing economy in Asia? Will it fall out of sheer carelessness, and deliver a ready nuclear arsenal into the hands of a force whose most potent weapon to date is humans strapped with bombs?

The figures don't suggest this.

The Taliban today control something less than 5 percent of Pakistan's landmass and perhaps an even smaller percentage of the population is under their rule. This is not very impressive when compared to other guerrilla forces like the FARC, which has operated in Colombia for three decades and has controlled anywhere between a fifth to a quarter of Colombian territory. Or consider the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, also a force slowly built

over three decades that at its height of power occupied the entire northern tip of the island nation.

The Taliban can't even really compare in volume to the Maoist Naxalites of India, who are spread over nearly a quarter of the administrative districts of India.

Perhaps the real potential of the Taliban is not their capacity to overrun the state, but their capacity to create enough panic and hysteria to allow for opportunistic political forces to jump in. Perhaps the Taliban, like Garibaldi's Red Shirts, Mussolini's Black Shirts and Hitler's Brown Shirts, is a group that will leave a path of destruction for others.

Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the leader of Pakistan's oldest political party, the Islamist Jamat-e-Islami, offered in a rare newspaper op-ed the "complete Islamisation [sic] of Pakistan" as "the appropriate answer to the lurking fears of Talibanisation [sic], growing rapidly with every passing day."

Maulana Fazlur Rahman — another Islamist politician, close to the Taliban in Afghanistan and who is now in coalition with President Zardari's ruling party — warned in Parliament last week that: "If the Taliban continue to move at this pace they will soon be knocking at the doors of Islamabad." He said the hills surrounding Islamabad were "the only hurdle in their march toward the federal capital." His solution to the problem was also to enforce sharia law in Pakistan. These suggestions quietly assume a greater share in the power set-up for the Islamists.

But they are just offering to help where the government has failed. Last month the government agreed to impose sharia law in some northern districts of Pakistan where the Taliban had a stronghold. The deal with the Taliban was not alarming in its content (Pakistan is an Islamic republic, after all, whose constitution states that all laws be in compliance with Islam) but in the fact that the state willingly abdicated its religious authority to a militia that had no real claim to it. It is the kind of incoherence that Washington might be more alarmed at than Taliban advances in the poor rural Pashtun sectors of Pakistan.

The Taliban have never expressed interest in ruling from Islamabad. But they are exposing weaknesses of the Pakistani state and its constitution in a way that hasn't been seen in Pakistan's 60-year history. Meanwhile, in Washington the focus is on what the Taliban could be and might be rather than what they are.

And what are they? European revolutionary history may hold some clues.