

Pakistan: Another martyr of conscience

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While the Pakistan Navy is preparing to award Nishan-e Haider to its brave officer who lost his life defending the PNS base attacked by a militant group, mainly because his institution failed to protect it. Is there any award for the courageous journalist who sacrificed his life for his conscience and integrity in exposing the same institution?

Another Pakistani journalist has been added to the list of martyrs of conscience this week. Syed Saleem Shahzad, the Islamabad Bureau Chief of Asia Times, a brilliant and fearless investigative reporter who was kidnaped from Islamabad last Sunday, was tortured and assassinated near Mandi Bahauddin for his stunning revelations on how Pakistan Navy handles extremists within their own ranks.

Saleem is the third journalist killed this year so far in the line of duty. Wali Khan Baber, associated with GEO TV was shot dead on January 13 in Karachi who was on his way home after covering a police operation. Nasrullah Afridi was the second journalists killed in a bomb explosion in Peshawar on May 10. A native of Khyber Agency, he was reporting for the Peshawar based Urdu newspaper *Mashriq*.

Saleem was interrogated by ISI in 2010 for his report on the background of how Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban commander in Afghanistan, to initiate talks with the U.S. through the Pakistan army. Saleem rejected the ISI demands to reveal his sources and disclaim his own information in his paper.

The immediate reason for his murder, however, seems to be his recent article in Asia Times revealing the stunning circumstances leading to the recent attack on the Mehran Navy base in Karachi.

Saleem Shehzad published in *Asia Times* painstaking details of the background wheeling and dealing of navy officers with al-Qaeda which ostensibly led to the not-so-surprise-attack on the base. As it appears, the navy was investigating some extremists in its own ranks and was warned by al-Qaeda for dire consequences if they were not released. The disagreement finally resulted in the attack destroying two expensive surveillance planes and several lives on the Mehran base. Shockingly, the attack was accomplished with the help of “insiders at PNS Mehran (who) provided maps, pictures, of different exit and entry routes taken in daylight and at night...” the article disclosed.

Although the article revealed existence of al-Qaeda sleeper cells within the lower ranks of navy, it also disclosed navy's efforts in rooting out these militants. The most embarrassing revelation, however, was navy's insufficient security on the base, knowing there was an open threat posed by al-Qaeda which they communicated to the navy in advance.

As Asma Jahangir correctly pointed out in a TV interview the other day, you do not expect vigilance and professionalism from a navy who is running wedding halls in the vicinity of its strategically located base. Probably, running profitable business seems to be more important for our armed forces these days than securing their sensitive installations!

More significantly, it was the unnoticeable, tiny line at the end of the article that became more fatalistic for Saleem Shehzad than the article itself: "Next: Recruitment and training of militants." He was assassinated before he would bring more 'damaging' information to the public in his next article.

In a surprise move, however, ISI has denied any involvement in the murder sympathizing with Saleem's family members. Although few would believe, their explanation might be a new PR strategy of the agency to calm down the worldwide reaction to the murder which also includes the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who condemned the heinous crime. It is unusual for an intelligence agency to express its guilt publicly.

Saleem was a thorough professional and a daring reporter, a rare combination for journalists these days. As author of the book "Inside al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond bin Laden and 9/11" he was also a known authority on militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Working on extremism and radical groups in Pakistan, Saleem knew threats to his life but he never compromised. He once emailed back to his editor, who advised him to keep a low profile for some time, that sipping a cup of tea in the comfort of his drawing room was not his style. After his assassination his editor wrote "Shahzad never took sides, he often feared for his life both at the hands of militants and at the hands of the state."

While the Pakistan Navy is preparing to award Nishan-e Haider to its brave officer who lost his life defending the PNS base attacked by a militant group, mainly because his institution failed to protect it. Sadly there is no reward for the courageous journalist who sacrificed his life for his conscience and integrity in exposing the same institution. No surprise!

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