



Al Qaeda and Taliban Nexus: Trends in Terrorism in Pakistan

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Abstract *Pakistan is located in a volatile region where non-state actors are involved in sabotage activities at large. For the last four decades, Afghanistan remained the epicenter of militant activities in the region as well as in the rest of the world. Before 9/11, dozens of militant groups have found this land a safe haven for their terrorist activities and threaten the peace of the region at large. Pakistan is the most affected country in the world inter of human and financial loss. Due to the Afghan crisis, thousands of militants shifted their activities towards FATA and the rest of the country. Taliban and Al Qaeda are the two important groups who have martyred thousands of innocent people in Pakistan, especially Pashtun, and damaged the already vulnerable economy further. This paper will analyze the factors responsible for the nexus of the militant group and also their effect on Pakistan.*

Key Words: Al Qaeda, Taliban, Pakistan, Terrorism, FATA

Introduction

During the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s, the concept of global Jihad was preached in the entire Muslim world to wage a Holy War against a superpower "Infidel." The religious elements were at the forefront against the Soviet Union, generously funded by the United States and the Arab world. When the Soviets decided to retreat, the leaderships of the Jihadi group decided not to leave Afghanistan and will continue their activities from the platform of Al Qaeda. Soon after the death of Azzam, Bin Laden became the leader of Al Qaeda by the end of the 1980s (Haroon, 2011).

To fight a war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, thousands of foreigners were shifted from around the world to the Pak-Afghan region especially in the tribal areas. After the Soviet collapse, the majority of them preferred to stay there to continue their

struggle for the holy cause. This had created a consistent security threat to the security forces of Pakistan and the global as well (Lodhi, 2011). The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 unleashed chaos and Intra-Afghan violence. The pakhtun citizens of Afghanistan worked hard to start a new chapter in the history of their country, as has been seen a clear shift in the power echelon in Afghanistan. This pakhtun was led by those Sufi's elders who fought against Soviet aggression in the past. They were commonly known as Taliban. Those Taliban were educated in a manner that had more focus on resistance and considered the Afghan government unIslamic (Abbas, 2011).

Taliban and Al Qaeda

The Taliban and Al-Qaeda quickly formed a cooperative partnership. The Taliban provided

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a huge safe haven for Bin Laden and his allies to conduct their desired activities, as this organization has become the only military and financial base for the Taliban ([Hagerty, 2004](#)). As a result of this cooperation, Al Qaeda constructed their sites started training the new entrant for terrorist acts between 1996 and 2001, and Afghanistan became a terrorism sponsor state in the globe. The Maktab Al Khidmat, which was founded to provide Arab volunteers for the Soviet-Afghan war, was turned into the Al Qaeda organization in order to disseminate extreme Islam's doctrine over the world.

Many of the types of organizations had established their operational camps in Afghanistan with the support of Al Qaeda for Jihad against the US. These ties grew stronger as Afghans and militants gained closer through personal connections, such as Afghan women marrying Arab males. With the support of Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, the Pakistani Taliban performed a prominent role in the Afghan civil war, now has enough power to wrest control of the area from the traditional leaders. Other disaffected groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad continuously targeted Pakistan through their terrorist attacks by keeping strong ties with Al Qaeda.

The decision to join the US war on terror was the turning point in the spreading of violence in Pakistan in general and tribal areas in particular. Before the US attack on Afghanistan, the situation in the tribal areas was totally different from the post-Soviet withdrawal. There was peace and never developed in these areas, such an uncertain law and order situation. After the Soviet withdrawal, some militants developed relationships with the tribal people in marrying on the one side while the tribal people also gave them respect as guests and soldiers of Islam on the other. They lived there for a long time with the local people while the state administration did not give attention to their activities. With the passage of time, they influenced the people from their ideology and hence created a battalion of soldiers for their future activities from which the state was unaware.

Traditionally, Pakhtun loved religion and were influenced by the religious leaders more than any other leaders. Historically, they

successfully fought a war against the foreign forces in the name of religion and motivated a large segment of society. It was also a tradition in society to give shelter to those who are in trouble and sometimes endanger their own lives at the cost of others without any worldly rewards. It is also evident from the fact that many criminal people had shifted to the tribal areas from the rest of the country to escape the security forces after committing crimes there. It became a safe haven for those who were wanted to the state institutions. This practice was continued because of its tribal structure and administration. The tribal people not only gave shelter to the Arab and other militants but fully supported their cause and mission a war against the infidel and those of their supporters. The government, on all these activities of those foreign elements, took no decisive step to stop them and their presence in the areas and also took no notice of their relationships between them and the tribal peoples. Pakhtun is living in a tribal structure, dominated by the traditional code of life and religion, which further strengthens the bonds of unity in the tribalism with the religious extremism ([Stepanova, 2008](#)). Pakistan and Afghanistan are close neighbors, and both are directly linked. Besides, situations in one country have a direct effect on the other, in general, and on FATA in particular in the last three decades in the strengthening of radical organizations. They have closed links and have become closer for a global cause, i.e., the introduction and establishment of Islamic Sharia in the region. The Islamic order established in Afghan proved to be a 'Role Model' for an Islamic State where the principles of Islam along the Deobandi School of Thought would be implemented. Talibanization of Pakistan by the Sunni hardliners was the future plan (Talbot, 2007).

After being defeated by the US forces in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda and Taliban shifted their activities from this side of the border in the Pakistan tribal areas where a conducive environment had already been structured in the last thirty years ([Tellis, 2009](#)). After their expulsion, they entered this region of Pakistan. The support and attachment of Pakhtun extended to them led the US to compel Pakistan to launch a decisive battle against them, resulting from an internal strife inside

Pakistan. ([Lieven, 2011](#)). These developments and also the shifting of Taliban and Al Qaeda from neighbor countries into FATA to greater extent increased the insecurity of the region.

Al Qaeda got support from the Taliban in the tribal areas, provided them logistic and human resources to support their activities here in Pakistan and in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2008). To an academician: "Pakistan and Afghanistan are linked together in peace and vice versa. Historically, there are sympathizers of Taliban in FATA, and thus they establish their networks there and become a hub of all militants in the region" ([Ayaz, 2013](#)).

Regardless of their origin or ethnicity, the militants formed these bonds as a result of a shared philosophy. Al-Qaeda returned with a vengeance in this safe haven of Pakistan along with other militants from different parts of the world. These, combined with those peoples who alienations toward Taliban, started training of the youth of Pakistan and Muslims around the Europe. (Jalal, 2011). Linked to the Afghan Taliban by bonds of tribal affiliation, Pakthun identity, they have the same ideological affiliation with the Al Qaeda, so it encouraged them to start their activities in the tribal areas. This development created a direct confrontation between the security forces and militants and declared the former as 'agent' of the US (Jalal, 2011).

While keeping in mind the demographic position of the region, both sides of the border were occupied by Pakhtuns residents. This war on terror developed a sense of hatred among these locals and compelled them to stand united against the Allied Forces in the region. These anti-American sentiments further provide ground for the local people to enter into their camps which were warmly welcomed by the militant groups who have no track record in the past. These developments were steps towards radicalization in Tribal Areas.

The historical association among various elements of militants on both sides' warriors was one of the primary components in establishing the militant network in these parts of the province. These FATA warriors were Pakthun fighters who took an active part in the war against USSR. Following the Soviet withdrawal of soldiers from Afghanistan, they returned to their homeland, accompanied by a

large number of foreign mujahedeen allies such as Arabs, Chechens, and Uzbeks. They remained there for a long time, and this enabled them to get married to the women of the area and start their own lives in an open area with no official authority. The creation of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, followed by the seizure of the country in the hands of not fully trained locals, made their counterpart on the other side of the border to become part of them. From the Soviet invasions until the Taliban's conquest of Kabul, FATA has continued a tranquil element with less discernible impact on the local structure. However, in one way or another, a wave of Taliban authority was brewing in the minds of those battle mujahedeen, but they lacked the appropriate environment or circumstances to prompt such a massive leap.

With the American's invasion of Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, militants, local or foreigners, shifted to this region, where they stayed, as it was not a safe haven for them because they were unconcerned about the Durand Line. It was a violation of state laws, but the host tribes welcomed them into their lands and provided shelter for them, not realizing that it was a violation of state law, disputing the writ of the state. As they have more respect to their traditions, that is why they extended support to them at the expense of state laws.

The local tribesmen had a great attachment with the religion easily mixed the Taliban as long as the latter firmly gained ground in the region. The Afghan fighters, after their shifting to Pakistan, started establishing links with the local Taliban and waged war against their common enemy. These ties further cemented as they met with search operations launched against them by the armed forces of Pakistan. This move of the forces further developed their belief of insecurity on their own soil on which, from the last sixty years had no such military movement was seen in the area against them. This uneasiness and insecure conditions transformed a strong sense of unity and resistance, which caused armed struggle against the Pakistan Army. As a result, they decided to unite under the umbrella of an organization on the type of Afghanistan to show its combined power to their enemies.

The lack of US troops in the border regions mean that on forces of Pakistan got the opportunity to get closer to them, but they were out of their reach ([Wazir, 2011](#)). The situation was exploited by the Al Qaeda in shaping other recruitment in a group to save herself from total destruction. The Al Qaeda leadership not only had spiritual and ideological linkages to the militant groups but also supported them financially to continue their activities to achieve their goals (Hussain, 2011). The situation was explained by a renowned author: "The tribal system is based on revenge against the enemy, and Taliban insurgency should also be seen in that perspective in mind." ([Ahmad, 2014](#)).

"There was confusion in the military how to deal with the militants in the tribal areas. They have not adopted such policies which could restrict this war limited to the border, and this had created problems in Pakistan." ([Jaspal, 2013](#)). The step to uproot Taliban by the US and its ally Pakistan met with a greater challenge in the form of insurgency that broke out as a result of the US onslaught on Afghanistan. A "war economy" has continued in these areas, supporting the militants. They challenged and violated the state authority by confirming writ over the local areas. The leadership of the Taliban used Islamic principles as declarations to provide the legal core to their action against those who challenge their authority internally and externally. Such a move of the leadership remained fruitful about their control over the occupied territory and stopped any intervention. FATA emerged as an extremely difficult region as a writ of the state was almost non-existent, and militancy was on its peak ([Hussain, 2007](#)).

Terrorism in Pakistan

The US decision to keep onboard Pakistan, especially Musharraf, to tackle these elements and root out their hideouts in such time was a hard task to tackle for Pakistan. It needs proper planning and prior intelligence reports to enter into such a dangerous endeavor. Before taking the initiative, there needs to study of tribal structure, local norms into consideration. The chief leadership, when they observed the intentions of military leaders in terms of search

operation, quickly left for the settle areas of their support base in the rest of the cautery. However, a great number of foreign militants were caught and exterminated but not completely rooted out as they were active in the area.

To track down, Al Qaeda was a test case for Pakistan as the latter caught itself more than one complication. It was obvious that such activities of the US would develop hostile sentiments among the locals against the superpower. Besides, militants of Al Qaeda mixed in the locality, long and high mountains, scarcity of sophisticated warfare equipment and latest helicopters that would prove sentimental was not available ([Samad, 2011](#)).

The more Islamabad aligned itself with the United States, in retaliation, the militant turned more aggressive towards the state. This was evident from the fact that many militant groups were formed immediately when the old one was banned. This was also the reason for continued violence in the country despite the dozens of military operations in the country. They responded with zeal and enthusiasm and were difficult to capture when their numbers were small (Hussain, 2011). The Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) was launched in 1996 by breaking away with the Sunni- Deobandi extremists of the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). The Lashkar today is believed to have deep links with Al Qaeda and the Taliban and is considered to be the most violent terrorist organization operating in Pakistan with the help of its lethal suicide squad. The government of Pakistan designated the LeJ a terrorist organization in August 2001, and the US declared it as a foreign terrorist organization in January 2003.

Pakistan initially banned a dozen of militant groups, sealed their offices, and arrested many of their leaders, still remains a grave threat to the country and security forces at large. They remained active and changed their identity to avoid arrest from the law enforcement agencies. They achieved their goals when and where they had planned to achieve them. To improve their images in the public, many militant platforms established charity and welfare wings under their organizations. This has not only given them a support base in the community but also expanded their financial and logistic bases in

operations throughout the country (Rana, 2012). Al-Qaeda is now not alone in its activities in Pakistan. Pakistani Taliban and Punjab-based militant groups like LeT and LeJ have deep links with Al Qaeda.

The most important event in an escalation of violence and terrorism was the operation against the inmate of 'Lal Masjid' in Islamabad in July 2007. It was the turning point for the militant groups in Pakistan that a strong reaction was erupted against the state of Pakistan. After the Lal Masjid Operation, a wave of violence erupted throughout Pakistan. The domestic terrorism campaign had begun. The terrorist attacks that took place in the immediate aftermath of Lal Masjid were an explosive reaction to the storming of the mosque complex, the use of terror against domestic targets was destined to develop into a major weapon in the war between the Pakistani Taliban and the Army that was about to begin (Schmidt, 2011). Pamphlets distributed in Miran shah at the end of July warned that suicide bombs would bring soldiers "the gift of death". The pamphlet carried the message that we are aware of your working for our enemy, i.e., US, because you have sold by the then Army Chief your religion for bread and shelter. (Schofield, 2011).

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The creation of TTP was the outcome of the incident of 'Lal Masjid' operation. On December 14, 2007, some forty militant commanders gathered in South Waziristan to form a united platform against the US and Pakistan government under the banner of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, Students Movement of Pakistan). Baitullah Mahsud was nominated as the Amir (leader) of the TTP. The Shura was attended by almost all the Taliban or militant leaders in their respective areas, not only from the tribal areas but also of some settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The TTP also declared that they were fighting a defensive Jihad against the Pakistani government in the country.

From such nexus of the Al Qaeda, TTP or Taliban, and other militant groups, Pakistan faces an existential militant Islamist threat that its elected government is trying to combat in collaboration with the Army. Militants have

targeted all the state institutions irrespective of their nature and status, creating fear among the people on the one hand and insecurity at large on the other hand in the country. They considered the government as an enemy of Islam because of its support to the US forces in Afghanistan. It was the time when the security forces were in direct conflict with the TTP in the tribal areas- once a launching ground for the recruitment of those militants against the Soviets in the 1980s (Haider, 2011).

Pakistan has not only faced the highest numbers of terrorist attacks in the country but also its degree too. A group of all those militants made an umbrella or alliance to closely link their activities with each other. We saw an alliance among the Al Qaeda, TTP, and Afghan Taliban (Hussain, 2011). The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan establishment has two main benefits to the Taliban. One that now their activities are coordinated and well established and, the second that the efforts to support one another in different parts of the FATA are coordinated under one central Amir (Franco, 2009).

All these operations in different parts of the country led to more violence and terrorism in the country on state institutions and personnel. The years from 2007 to 2009 turned out to be especially violent in Pakistan, with thousands of people killed in frequent suicide bombing attacks, targeting rallies, hotels, public places, military personnel, policemen, and security staff. The frequency of these terrorist attacks throughout 2008 and 2009 demonstrated the resourcefulness and commitment of their planners and perpetrators while turning Pakistan into an unsafe place (Franco, 2009).

Conclusion

The militant organizations are the products of the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s and flourish with the passage of time because of the chaos and instability in the region, especially in Afghanistan. No government in the international community had given priority and focused on curbing them. Pakistan was the prime target of those militant groups because of its support to the international community on the one hand and to secure its people and border, on the other hand, deteriorated the

situation. The targets were the people like the soft target to create fear on the one hand and the paramilitary and police forces to destabilize the country on the other hand in hundreds of terrorist attacks. All such elements have their camps and roots in those areas where there is poverty and lack of opportunity for the young people to feed their families. If the government is serious about curbing such elements and groups, there must be a solution of mainstreaming those areas and people on the one hand and giving the masses at large opportunities of earning at the doorstep immediately. Universal education, business opportunities, political awareness and space to the young people, and a policy of reconciliation and restraint are also being the part of state policies towards curbing militancy in the country.

Border management or border control is an important step to restrict the movement of militant on both sides of the border. This will also discourage illegal business and smuggling, which are the main sources of income for the militant groups and whose money is used for terrorist activities in Pakistan. The mainstreaming of tribal areas is the most important step towards peace, stability, and empowerment of the people at large. It will also be important to note that the foreign policy of the country, which is contrary to the interests of the masses some times made the situation worse. Therefore, the role of the Parliament is profound in deciding a course of action while signing a treaty or pact with the international community.

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