

Danish Embassy Bombing in Islamabad and Pakistan's Security Situation

Introductory remarks at a seminar at NUPI on 11 June 2008 on the repercussions of the Danish Embassy Bombing in Islamabad.

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Introduction

Ever since the original publication of the cartoons satirising the Prophet Mohammad in September 2005, it was commonly feared that reprisal attacks on Danish targets in Denmark or elsewhere were imminent. Protests erupted in many parts of the Islamic world in the form of boycott against Danish goods, and even taking on a violent form as evidenced by the Beirut and Damascus cases where the Danish embassies were set alight in early 2006.

Within Pakistan, unrest was made visible when protest rallies were held in Karachi by the politico-religious party Jamaat-e-Islami, and also in Islamabad and other parts of the country. The Danish embassy was shut briefly in February 2008 after riots which left five people dead. On 2nd June 2008, the day of the attack on the Danish embassy in Islamabad, hordes of Pakistani Islamists marched in demonstration in Multan against the publication of the drawings depicting the Prophet Mohammad.

In one of their periodic messages, Osama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri had threatened of reprisal attacks against Danish targets. Said Zawahiri in April of this year:

“Denmark has done her utmost to demonstrate her hostility towards the Muslims by repeatedly dishonouring our Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him salvation. I admonish and incite every Muslim who is able to do so to cause damage to Denmark in order to show your support for our Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him salvation, and to defend his esteemed honour. We prefer to live underground [i.e. dead] rather than accepting the limited response of boycotting Danish dairy products and goods.”¹

The suicide strike in Islamabad, then, is not overly surprising. Slightly befuddling, however, is why the attack took a long time in coming (the re-printing of the cartoons having taken place in late February 2008). Also, it is difficult to fathom that the terrorists were not aware that most Danish nationals had been withdrawn weeks ago, and that their strike would most likely result in casualties of Pakistanis (fellow Muslims) who had little to do with the “blasphemous” cartoons or Danish troops in Afghanistan. Another mystery is why the bomber, having already entered the embassy gate, did not blow up closer to the official building. Al-Qaeda is known to conduct well-planned terrorist activities against Western targets that are precise and result in a high number of casualties. For a terrorist organisation of its high calibre, the embassy bombing in Islamabad exposes signs of sloppiness.

In spite of this, days after the attack on the Danish embassy in Islamabad, the presumed commander of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, did claim the organisation

¹ Ayman al Zawahiri and the attack on the Danish embassy in Islamabad, Evan Kohlmann, 2 June 2008, *Counterterrorism Blog*, accessed 2 June 2008, http://counterterrorismblog.org/2008/06/ayman_alzawahiri_and_the_attac.php

responsible and announced that the attack was “in revenge against the state of infidelity, called ‘Denmark’, which posted cartoons hostile to the messenger of Allah.” On behalf of al-Qaeda he also congratulated “the Pakistani mujahideen... the pioneers of the religious fervour and Islamic zeal who participated in the attack.”²

This would suggest that al-Qaeda is working in close cooperation with militant elements within Pakistan who are boldly promulgating al-Qaeda’s agenda by striking western targets. Recent years have not seen an increase in attacks against foreign targets in Pakistan, however, in a run up to the suicide strike outside the Danish embassy, the past few months have witnessed a growing trend for preying foreign nationals: the March 15 bombing at an Italian restaurant in Islamabad (killing a Turkish woman and wounding several American diplomats) as well as an abortive attempt in April to kidnap two World Food Program officials in Khyber Agency (in the tribal belt of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, or FATA) testify to this trend.

Below is a chronological outline of attacks against foreigners/foreign targets in Pakistan since the 9-11, taken from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)³:

- *October 28, 2001*: Catholic Church, Bahawalpur. Police personnel and 17 Christians, including five children, killed.
- *January 23, 2002*: Karachi, US journalist Daniel Pearl abducted.
- *March 17, 2002*: Protestant Church, Islamabad. Five persons killed.
- *May 8, 2002*: Sheraton Hotel, Karachi. 10 French and 5 Pakistanis, including the suspected suicide bomber, killed.
- *June 14, 2002*: US Consulate, Karachi. 10 persons, including five women, killed.
- *July 13, 2002*: Archaeological site, Mansehra. 12 persons, including seven Germans, injured.
- *August 5, 2002*: Christian Missionary School, Murree. Six Pakistanis killed
- *August 9, 2002*: Mission Hospital, Taxila. Three women, terrorist killed.
- *September 25, 2002*: Idara Amn-o-Insaaf (Institute for Peace and Justice), a Christian charity, Karachi. Seven Christians killed and three others injured.
- *December 25, 2002*: United Presbyterian Church near Sialkot, Punjab province. Three women killed and 15 persons injured in a grenade attack.
- *February 28, 2003*: United States Consulate in Karachi. Two policemen guarding the Consulate are killed and five others injured by an unidentified gunman.
- *May 15, 2003*: 21 British and US gas stations owned by Royal Dutch/Shell Group and Caltex. Five persons are injured during serial bomb blasts at 21 gas stations.
- *May 3, 2004*: Chinese nationals working on a sea-port project in Gwadar. Three Chinese engineers were killed and 11 persons, including 9 Chinese nationals, sustain injuries in a car bomb attack.

² Al-Qaeda claims Denmark embassy blast, 5 June 2008, *Jihad Unspun*, accessed 5 June 2008, http://www.jihadunspun.com/intheatre_internal.php?article=1002722&list=/index.php&

³ <http://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan>

- *May 26, 2004:* Pakistan-American Cultural Centre and residence of the US Consul-General in Karachi. Two persons are killed and at least 33 others, mostly police and media personnel, are wounded when two car bombs explode in succession.
- *November 15, 2005:* KFC restaurant in Karachi. At least three people are killed and 20 others, including two South African women, sustain injuries in a powerful car bomb explosion in front of the KFC restaurant.
- *March 2, 2006:* US Consulate in Karachi. A US diplomat, identified as David Fyfe, his Pakistani driver and a Rangers official were killed and 54 persons injured in a suicide car bombing near the US Consulate.
- *March 15, 2008:* Luna Caprese restaurant in Islamabad. A bomb blast occurred at the Italian restaurant, killing a Turkish woman and wounding about 15 other foreigners, including some US diplomats.
- *June 2, 2008:* Danish embassy, Islamabad. A suspected suicide bomber blew up his car outside the Danish embassy, killing at least eight persons and injuring 30 others. The Danish Foreign minister said a Pakistani cleaner employed at the embassy and a Danish citizen of Pakistani origin had died and three other local employees were hurt, but the embassy's four Danish staffers were unharmed.

It should be pointed out that despite the target being “western”, the death toll of these attacks consisted mainly of Pakistani citizens. This could be partly due to reduced number of foreign nationals in Pakistan, as well as the low profile, and high level of security, kept by those still remaining in the country. Also, the symbolic value of targeting a western outpost may be more important to the militants than the nationality of those who die. Notwithstanding this, the killing of innocent Pakistani Muslims appears too self-contradictory with regards to al-Qaeda's aims and ideology. It may be a tactless manoeuvre too, since Pakistani militants may not in the future agree to carry out attacks involving the bloodshed of their fellow “brothers” (unless these brothers were decidedly dubbed *munafiqeen* or “apostate”).

All this bodes ominous for Pakistan's internal security and the security of western foreigners in the country. It also raises the question of the expanding role Pakistan plays in al-Qaeda's “global jihad against the Crusaders.”

The suicide car bomb that detonated outside the Danish embassy on June 2, 2008 killed eight people including Pakistani policemen, and injured up to twenty-seven. None of those killed were Danish employees of the embassy; all casualties were suffered by Pakistanis and one Danish of Pakistani origin.

The Danish embassy is situated in a residential area where security has been very tight and most foreign staff moved out in the last year. Terrorists were able to take an explosive-laden vehicle to the vicinity of the Danish embassy building. That an apparently “tightly secured” area in Pakistan's capital city of Islamabad was breached is symptomatic of the general security situation in Pakistan which appears to be in the doldrums. It is known that segments of the Pakistani security personnel sympathise with militants, and so the speculation that some of them might be complicit in making possible an attack on a well guarded target cannot be wholly discarded. Physically guarding buildings and personnel is part of larger security measures – including sharing and disclosing of human intelligence of an impending attack – therefore a thorough investigation into the matter is necessary to know what glitches in the security preparations led to this attack.

The attack on the Danish embassy underlines the problems and flaws in the security apparatus in Pakistan. In recent times Pakistan has become beset with countless security challenges resulting in intractable dilemmas. The growth of radicalism during the Musharraf years has played its expected part in weakening the Pakistani state and democratic institutions, and leaving the

country to be preyed upon more heavily by terrorists. To prolong their rule, military governments have formed domestic alliances with radicals. The security situation has further intensified due to the efforts of the new government to negotiate peace deals with the militants in Waziristan and Swat; these involve acquiescing to the demands of the extremists, and are likely to fuel the dangerous centrifugal forces exploited by groups like al-Qaida. Many independent organisations, like the International Crisis Group, have criticized these negotiations for succeeding only to appease the militants.

The Taliban Threat

The Pakistani Taliban appears to be making a comeback after an apparent spell of silence by staging new attacks against security forces. Just days after the attack on the Danish embassy, Pakistani authorities foiled a major terror plot involving three bomb-laden vehicles, along with their three suspected suicide bombers.

The finicky peace accords between the Pakistani government and militants in Waziristan and Swat have been dragging on for several months with an apparent lack of resolution. Despite efforts by the government to appease militant demands (by releasing Taliban leaders, for example) erratic militant activity continued to take place.

Two days after ordering its militants to “immediately cease their activities” in FATA on 23 April 2008, the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP)⁴ carried out a car bombing near Mardan City Police Station in NWFP. On May 11 TTP again announced an end to the ceasefire. On May 18 a suicide strike occurred against the Punjab Regiment Centre⁵ (PRC) in the Cantonment area of Mardan (NWFP) and killed five security soldiers. Once again on May 28 the Taliban announced a complete cessation of hostilities after holding talks for six days with a peace committee of elders.

On 21 May Taliban militants operating under Fazlullah in Swat district signed a 16-point peace agreement with the Awami National Party-led North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) government, agreeing to disband the militia and discontinue its attacks on security forces. In light of recent statements by the advisor to the Prime Minister on Interior Affairs, Rehman Malik, this deal appears now to have been terminated.

On Monday, 9 June 2008, and in reaction to a statement by Rehman Malik about the “collapse” of the government’s peace deal with militants, Tehrik-e-Taliban spokesperson Maulvi Omar threatened that the TTP would take its “war” to the federal capital and elsewhere should the government scrap peace accords with militants in certain tribal regions. Maulvi Omar reportedly said:

“The US and its allies want the bloodshed to continue on our soil. But we have made it clear that if a war is imposed on us, we will take this war out of tribal areas and NWFP to the rest of the country and will attack security forces and important government functionaries in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and other big cities.”⁶

This may be more than an empty threat; the Pakistani-Taliban is known to have gained more muscle considering that the Tehrik-e-Taliban conglomeration has brought together Baitullah’s group with other local “Taliban” leaders in the different tribal agencies, as well as uniting it with

⁴ The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan was formed in December 2007 under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud who became its *Amir* or head.

⁵ PRC is a base for troops involved in operations against militants in the tribal regions.

⁶ Taliban warns of attack on capital, Mushtaq Yusufzai, 10 June 2008, *The News* online, accessed 10 June 2008, http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=15239

militant groups like Tehrik-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) that is based in Swat and run by Maulana Fazlullah⁷. An overlap between Taliban and other extremist and sectarian groups has also been observed; for instance, militants belonging to the Jaish-e-Mohammad group are known to be active in Swat (TNSM's base) with alleged links to other Taliban commanders.⁸ Jaish-e-Mohammad's online articles and audio messages demonstrate its allegiance to Taliban. This creates an image of the "Pak-Taliban" as being a monster network that could potentially spell disaster for Pakistan and regional security. If Maulvi Omar follows up on his threat, which he might given the recurring violations of the peace agreements, that means Pakistan is potentially facing a lethal, multi-headed monster of militancy that has the power to step out of the Pashtun belt and spread across the rest of Pakistan. The capture, earlier this month, of several members of a terrorist ring in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, and the vehicle-borne improvised explosives devices (VBIED) they were ready to employ, already points to an existing infrastructure of militant activity in the heart of the country.

Hitherto unknown details of the peace agreement between the Pakistani government and militants surfaced recently in the hands of Pakistan's *The Daily Times* newspaper. Key points of the agreement were as follows⁹:

- Foreigners' must leave North Waziristan.
- Al Qaeda operatives can live in North Waziristan "as long as they pledge to remain peaceful."
- The Taliban could not establish a parallel government.
- The Taliban would halt attacks on government and security forces personnel.
- The Taliban "agreed to jointly struggle against extremism and terrorism throughout the agency."
- Disclosing the contents of the peace agreement is prohibited.
- A fine of about \$740,000 will be assessed for anyone violating the terms of the agreement.
- The government would withdraw the Army and turn over security to the paramilitary Frontier Corps.
- The government will release captured Taliban leaders and fighters. (*The Daily Times*)

Despite foreign reservations and chagrin, the Pakistani government since then has released numerous Taliban members (include top brass members), as confirmed by North West Frontier Province's (NWFP) Environment Minister Wajid Ali Khan who is a leading member of the government committee holding talks with the Taliban. Critics of the Pakistani government's attempt to strike a peace accord with the militants have long held that agreements are fatally flawed as they lack any means of enforcement and only result in empowering the extremists.

The second point in the list (above) is of vital concern as it appears to condone the presence of al-Qaeda operatives in North Waziristan. It is unlikely that al-Qaeda will pledge itself to "peace" in practice, and by remaining in Pakistan they are suspected to increase their ideological support base, ally with local militant groups (so to terrorize Pakistan from within), and/or use Pakistan from whence to plot and execute attacks against Western targets. The same can be said for the released Taliban prisoners who, especially in the face of crumbling peace accords with the government, will continue with their militant activities. Leading Taliban members who have been

⁷ Maulana Fazlullah is now a key commander of the Tehrik-e-Taliban, operating from Swat.

⁸ Swat village still militant den, 1 June 2008, *The Daily Times* online, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\06\01\story_1-6-2008_pg1_11

⁹ Government includes media gag in North Waziristan accord, 8 June 2008, *The Daily Times* online, accessed 8 June 2008, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008%5C06%5C08%5Cstory_8-6-2008_pg7_1

released, and feel resentment towards the authorities, will help to further embolden the Taliban “movement” in the country and wreck havoc. The leeway given to militants and the relative freedom with which they can move about in the land forecast a worsening of the security situation in Pakistan.

Separately, the Taliban seems to continue spreading the tentacles of its “Talibanization” across various sections of Pakistan. On Friday, 6 June 2008, Government Girls’ Middle School in Bibyawar (Dir, NWFP) was bombed by the TTP who left a signed letter declaring “We had warned the locals in advance through such letters to ensure *pardab* (veil/modesty) for the school-going girls and female teachers” as it was “un-Islamic” for them to attend school.¹⁰ On May 5 of this year it was reported that deputy TTP, Faqir Mohammad, had banned musical alerts on cellular phones in FATA as well as in vehicles.

Taliban elements are also speedily gaining influence in Khyber Agency, one of the tribal areas believed to have hitherto escaped falling into the grips of the Taliban. The Khyber Agency is strategically important as it borders Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province and provides a road link connecting the two countries. It is named after the famous Khyber Pass, a route leading from the subcontinent to Central Asia via Afghanistan. Rampant militancy in this region does not portend well for security within and outside Pakistan.

Future attacks?

There is no one monolithic militant organisation in Pakistan. It could be said that in Pakistan’s context there are more or less distinct pockets of militancy which occasionally overlap. There is al-Qaida or al-Qaida elements aimed at terrorising Western targets, the Pakistani Taliban which is engrossed in fighting primarily the Pakistani security forces, various militant groups chiefly interested in cross-border violence into India/Kashmir and/or Afghanistan, and sectarian organisations that target members of rival sects. The Pakistani Taliban comprises of Baitullah Mehsud (in Waziristan) and Maulana Fazlullah (in Swat) among others and originates mainly from FATA and NWFP, while groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Sipah-e-Sahaba fall under the latter two categories of militants and belong mainly to Punjab and Sindh. However, the boundaries between these different categories have become blurred with the evolution of the Taliban phenomenon in Pakistan. For instance, Jaish-e-Mohammad is known to have shared its manpower with Taliban. The very definition of Pakistani-Taliban needs to be revised, and more research into the composition and characteristics of the group are required to achieve that.

The government’s efforts at peace negotiations have been limited to the “Pakistani Taliban”, i.e. Waziristan and Swat areas. Even if the accord proved successful – which, as is becoming increasingly obviously, it hasn’t – other militant factions across Pakistan are capable and liable to continue with their agenda and attacks within and outside the boundaries of Pakistan. The Pak-Taliban itself has not hesitated from promising violence in Afghanistan; on 24 May 2008, Baitullah Mehsud had vowed to carry on fighting NATO and US-led troops in Afghanistan regardless of the peace deal with the GoP: “Islam does not recognize frontiers and boundaries. Jihad in Afghanistan will continue.”¹¹

Indeed on 1 May, *BBC* reported that local Taliban leadership had started sending militants into Afghanistan to fight Western forces. This was confirmed to be true when news arrived last week

¹⁰ Taliban bombs girls schools in Dir, 7 June 2008, *The News* online, accessed 7 June 2008, http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=117154

¹¹ Afghan jihad will continue: Mehsud, Alamgir Bhattani, 25 May 2008, *Dawn* online, accessed 1 June 2008, <http://www.dawn.com/2008/05/25/top3.htm>

that many of Baitullah's men were amongst the dead in Afghanistan in the aftermath of airstrike by coalition forces.¹²

Other groups, who have isolated themselves from the Pakistani Taliban but at the same time possess Taliban-like manners, are also gaining momentum in areas like the Khyber Agency. The rise of Mangal Bagh Afridi and his Lashkar-e-Islam in this region has meant the stoning and shooting of two men and a woman on charges of alleged adultery in March of 2007, where a crowd was also summoned via radio broadcasts to watch the executions. In the Bara subdivision of Khyber Agency, Mangal Bagh's reign seems to be total; he has issued his own "code of conduct" to candidates contesting elections in Bara. For example, candidates were warned against holding public meetings; each candidate must use only one vehicle and candidates were not allowed to hoist flags of any political party on their cars and buildings. The group has sought to spread its influence to Peshawar, when its militants (armed with rockets and other heavy weaponry) attacked a village on the suburbs of Peshawar, killing ten. With numerous competing militant outfits, inter- and intra-group fighting and the struggle to become the dominating militant power may also emerge as the new feature to define terrorism in Pakistan's context.

On 10 June 2008, Rehman Malik stated that by capturing 9 suspected terrorists and recovering 1180 kilograms of explosive material in the last few days, the agencies had busted a terror ring operating in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The 1,180 kilograms of explosives were being carried in several vehicle-borne improvised explosives devices (VBIED). Malik informed that the militants' plans were "fully mature" and were close to launching their attack at the time of arrest. As it is difficult to cache and conceal a fully assembled VBIED, once constructed they are quickly deployed. Also it is worth noting that 1,180 kilograms of explosives is a sizable amount – suggesting that the militants responsible are serious about causing destruction on a high level, and possess the resources to continue trying till they succeed.

All this speaks volumes for the level of terrorist activity which threatens the federal capital at this point in time. If in all this time a terrorist ring was able to establish and organise itself to such a level in Islamabad and its twin garrison city, there is reason to believe that militant elements are rooted there and planning their next strike.

Furthermore, the prevailing anti-Western sentiment in Pakistan – regularly fuelled by US and European presence in Afghanistan, Danish cartoon controversy and the Dutch film *Fitna*, the perceived puppeteering of Pakistani officials to Western demands, and the invasion of US drone planes in Pakistan's FATA area – adds more gist to the militant mill. Hence the possibility of future attacks against western targets cannot be discarded.

At the moment in Pakistan there is a new coalition government that is trying to reassert itself. After the shaky peace talks the issue of terrorism in Pakistan now depends a good deal on the next policy step this new government decides to take with regards to tackling militancy.

¹² Several Baitullah's men die in Afghan bombing, 7 June 2008, *The News* online, accessed 7 June 2008, http://thenews.jang.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=15186