



As the 1980s Arab-Afghan Jihad against the Soviets helped to spawn the al-Qaida movement, so too has the post-9/11 fight against the al-Qaida-Taliban nexus in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal regions accelerated the projection of Salafi Jihadist terrorism and political violence on a global scale. Jihadist violence emanating from this conflict zone has manifested itself not only in the Bhutto assassination and other attacks throughout the subcontinent, but also further afield in Western Europe where associated cells have intended to carry out widespread terrorist violence.

Just as bin Laden and Zawahiri advocated terrorism against the 'far enemy' as a means to undercut the 'near enemy' so now does it appear that al-Qaida and allied Jihadists – namely, Baitullah Mehsud's Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan – may be following this same tack against the 'crusader' West – while, at the same time, orchestrating calculated bursts of political violence and terrorism to further destabilize the Pakistani state. An intended outcome of such a strategy could be to ensure the sanctuary for Jihadist leadership in the Pakistan tribal regions, which has become a veritable Petri dish of al-Qaida, Pakistani Taliban and affiliated Jihadist elements.

Jihadist leaders in Pakistan's tribal areas and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) may believe that a calibrated terrorist campaign against Europe could undermine public support within key NATO member states and result in a withdrawal from Afghanistan in a manner similar to the way Spain withdrew from the US-led coalition in Iraq following the March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid.

In addition, a persistent campaign of terrorist violence against Pakistan in the lead up to the 18 February presidential election could exacerbate the already volatile political situation and incrementally decrease the odds of an aggressive Pakistani military policy taken against the Jihadists in the tribal regions.

#### THE FAR ENEMY

Europe remains a key target for the al-Qaida Taliban nexus in Pakistan. The recent arrest of an associated cell in Spain that has links to Baitullah Mehsud, the Tehrik-i-Taliban commander who the CIA and the Pakistani ISI have accused of ordering the assassination of the former Pakistani Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. On 19 January, Spanish authorities detained members of an al-Qaida cell they had been monitoring when their informant indicated that an attack was imminent.

The subsequent arrests thwarted what could have been a series of spectacular attacks on public transportation in Barcelona, Spain, in addition to Germany, France, Portugal and the UK.

All of the attacks were planned to occur within a 48-hour timeframe and members of the network – some still at large – had already taken positions in the various countries before the Barcelona cell was disrupted.

According to one intelligence official, the Barcelona cell closely resembled the cell that carried out the 7 July 2005 tube bombing in London, which many informed observers believe had links to Pakistani Jihadists in the tribal region.

Ten Pakistani men have been arrested in Spain and an additional six have been detained in the UK upon the cell's arrival from Barcelona. The attacks would have taken place in close proximity to the upcoming 9 March elections in Spain, a factor that the Jihadists almost certainly would have considered considering their past success in influencing the 2004 elections and policy following their attack in March of that year.

The Spanish authorities revealed to Madrid's *El Pais* newspaper that the informant – who was jointly run with the French DGSE – had trained in the South Waziristan camp of Pakistani Taliban commander Baitullah Mehsud. One of those arrested reportedly remarked that Baitullah had affection for the informant and would have made him an explosives expert rather than a suicide bomber [had he completed training at Mehsud's camp]; thus indicating that Mehsud had at a minimum exerted some influence over members of the cell.

Additionally, the informant claimed that another cell member had stated that Mehsud was planning to claim responsibility for the cell's first attack on behalf of al-Qaida and make demands. If those demands were not met immediately, the cells in the other European countries were to undertake a second and third wave of attacks. European and American intelligence officials are currently investigating these links with Baitullah Mehsud.

Based on Baitullah Mehsud's recent statements and other available information, it seems quite plausible that the al-Qaida-funded leader aims to extend the scope of operations to include the 'far enemy' in Europe and the US. Baitullah Mehsud remarked in an interview recently that his organization's "main aim is to finish Britain, the United States and to crush the pride of the Kufr (infidels)...We pray to God to give us the ability to destroy the White House, New York and London."<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NEAR ENEMY

If the specter of Jihadist violence looms in the West, its thrust can be acutely felt in Pakistan. The assassination of the former premier and chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) the largest political party in the country, Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007, could be termed as a watershed in the political history of the country. Benazir's father and her brothers were also assassinated.

Yet Bhutto's killing is still shrouded in mystery. While the government claims that the terrorist act was orchestrated by Al-Qaida-Pakistani Taliban nexus headed by Baitullah Mehsud, political leadership across the spectrum of the country believes it to be the work of the rogue elements within the Pakistani establishment. The decision to allow the Scotland Yard to investigate the killing was an attempt by the government to counter the allegations of its involvement in the murder.

Benazir's life was, allegedly, threatened by religious extremist forces based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan even before she returned from her self-imposed exile in Dubai in October 2007.

Maulana Saleh Shah, a senator from the South Waziristan Agency, a close associate of Baitullah Mehsud said that the Taliban leader threatened suicide attacks against Bhutto, saying that his suicide bombers were waiting in the wings to "welcome her when she returns"<sup>2</sup> - an allegation he latter denied. Mehsud had also been reportedly involved in other assassination attempts such as the suicide attack on Pakistan Interior Minister, Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao, in April 2007.

The reason for the militants' anathema towards Bhutto could be attributed to her strong position to extirpate Al-Qaida and Taliban forces operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Bhutto had also supported military operations against the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007 – an unpopular position among religious extremists.

Similarly, the reported proximity between Bhutto and the US-led West and the rumors that she was going to join the government after the February 2008 elections under a power sharing deal with Musharraf were raising alarm amongst extremist forces in the country that their current stronghold in the tribal area might be jeopardized.

1. See Baitullah Mehsud's Interview with Al Jazeera's Ahmad Zaidan, in Arabic, minute 21:00-22:00, January 25 2008.

2. 'Baitullah Executes Three Soldiers: Says His Bombers are Waiting For Benazir Bhutto', Daily Times, October 5, 2007.

Soon after Benazir's assassination, Al-Qaida's head of Finance Committee and head of Al-Qaida in Afghanistan (Tanzim al-Qaida fi al-Jihad fi al-Khorasan), Mustafa Abu-Yazid aka Abu Saeed al-Masri claimed responsibility for killing Bhutto in a statement released to Italian news agency, Adnkonos International.<sup>3</sup> The statement further quoted Yazid as saying that they "have eliminated the most precious American asset which vowed to defeat the Mujahideen."<sup>4</sup>

Egyptian Al-Qaida leader, Aiman Zawahiri, in October 2007, also announced an intention to kill Bhutto. An Al-Qaida and Baitullah Mehsud-linked organisation, Jundullah (Army of God), has also claimed responsibility for the attack, which was reportedly being run by a nephew of Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, the 9/11 mastermind.<sup>5</sup>

There are many mainland terrorist individuals and organisations in Pakistan that are linked to Al-Qaida, such as the weakened Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Jamiatul Furqan, Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM), Harkat- ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HUJI), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen-al-Alami (HUMA), and breakaway factions of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) aka Khuddam-ul-Islam and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT).

These organisations have remained operational in the Punjab and Sindh Provinces of Pakistan, and had been receiving directives from Al-Qaida leader, Abu Faraj al-Libbi, who was based in Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan until his capture in May 2005 from the border town of Mardan in North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Libbi was the mastermind of the two attacks against President Musharraf in December 2003, which were carried out by Amjad Farooqi, an ex-leader of JeM. After al-Libbi's capture, he has been replaced by Abu-Ali al-Tunisi, who is an Al-Qaida leader based in North Waziristan Agency of FATA.<sup>7</sup>

An analysis of the twin tactics – suicide attack and snipers – employed in assassinating Bhutto reveals a pattern among a number of militant Pakistani groups with respect to their use of twin attacks tactics.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ), Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Jamiatul Furqan, Harkatul Mujahideen (HuM), Harkat- ul-Jihad-e-Islami (HUJI), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen-al-Alami (HUMA), and breakaway factions of Jaish-e-Muhammad aka Khuddam-ul-Islam and Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) have all employed twin attack tactics in the past to eliminate their opponents. Al-Qaida's sponsored attack against President Musharraf on 25 December 2003 involved two vehicle-borne suicide bombers.

Similarly, the failed attempt to assassinate the Corp Commander of Karachi, Lt. Gen. Hayat, also involved using a twin attack -- a road-side bomb blast and an ambush. The Pakistani government and the US intelligence community have claimed that Baitullah Mehsud was behind the attack.<sup>8</sup>

This could be possible since most of the mainland terrorist groups such as LJ, SSP, HUJI, HUMI, HuM and breakaway factions of JeM and LeT are presently taking sanctuary in the South Waziristan Agency, and are operating from there. There are reports that Baitullah Mehsud is being helped by Al-Qaida in the sphere of finance and logistical advice.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a prominent Jundallah informant has revealed that the group carries out robberies of foreign banks in Karachi to help finance Mehsud's operations.

On the basis of mutual interests in protecting their stronghold in the tribal region and a history of operational linkages, it is quite plausible that there was coordination between Baitullah Mehsud, Al-Qaida and these mainland terrorist groups in assassinating Bhutto.

3. "Official: Al-Qaida Claims Responsibility for Bhutto Killing", *CNN*, December 27, 2007.

4. Ibid.

5. "Jundallah Men Given In Custody" *Dawn*, June 25, 2004.

6. "Pakistan Seizes Al-Qaida No.3", *CNN*, May 5, 2005.

7. 'Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, "Democracy Under Threat in Pakistan?", RSIS Commentary, October 29, 2007.

8. 'CIA Blames Baitullah and Al-Qaida: Assassination of Benazir', *Dawn*, January 19, 2008.

9. 'Qaida May be Financing Baitullah Mehsud', *The Post*, January 28, 2007.

The recent capture of a Baitullah-linked Taliban militant from the North Western Frontier Province and his admittance of involvement in the assassination of Bhutto further supports the theory that Mehsud had been involved in the assassination.<sup>10</sup>

The killing of Bhutto has left a void in the political landscape of the country. As the head of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), the largest political party of Pakistan, it may witness a leadership crisis at least in the short term. Similarly, the Taliban's onslaught against leading political figures in the country will probably not end soon. In recent months, many political leaders have received death threat including Nawaz Sharif, head of Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N); Maulana Fazlur Rehman, head of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F); and Asfandiyar Wali Khan, head of Pushtun-nationalist Awami National Party (ANP).

The former Interior Minister of Pakistan and head of Pakistan Peoples Party Sharpao Group (PPP-S) has been attacked twice in 2007. Similar attempts were also made against the head of the provincial chapter of Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q). All of these incidents signify that the Taliban are not randomly attacking people, but pursuing a broad agenda and employing a systematic strategy to eliminate secular political leadership in Pakistan.

## CONCLUSION

The Al-Qaida Pakistani Taliban nexus likely intends to perpetuate terrorist violence both in Pakistan and in the West in order to consolidate and secure its stronghold in the Pakistani tribal region. Operations in Europe and the US have certainly been planned and progressed to advanced stages, and attacks in Pakistan continue to take place regularly.

While it will be necessary to target the al-Qaida and Taliban leadership that constitutes the locus of Jihad globally, a military strategy to achieve this aim does not seem likely and until another solution is found, the world -- West and East -- can anticipate more terrorist violence to ensue.

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10. 'Teen suspect in Benazir's murder arrested in DIK', *Daily Times*, January 20, 2008.