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Drivers of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

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Pakistan has the third highest number of suicide bombings in the world. The drivers behind the lethal trend of suicide bombings need to be explored and dealt with through a multi-dimensional strategy.

IN 2007, there were a total of 60 suicide attacks in Pakistan, placing the country third in the league of suicide terrorism, right behind Iraq and Afghanistan. Suicide attacks, mostly targeting security forces, killed at least 770 people and injured 1574 others.

Militant groups brought suicide bombing to Afghanistan and Iraq after foreign forces occupied those countries in October 2001 and March 2003 respectively. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the phenomenon of suicide attacks has been primarily motivated by the presence of foreign forces in these two Muslim countries.

In Iraq, many suicide bombers are themselves foreigners. Yet the wills and statements left by the bombers indicate that they felt a strong claim on Iraq as a Muslim land, and believed that their acts were a powerful tool of liberation.

Why the trend in Pakistan?

But if there is no foreign occupation in Pakistan, why has the country become a hunting ground for the “death squads”? Is this really a manifestation of rising Islamic extremism in Pakistan, or an expression of revenge against the government’s counter-measures that are perceived to be extensive? Is suicide bombing a strategy used by desperate militant groups against a stronger enemy, or a tactic to get rid of key political figures involved in the government’s counter terrorism campaign? Some possible motivations and causes behind the rise in suicide terrorism in Pakistan need to be explored in order to answer these critical questions.

Common belief holds that the phenomenon of suicide terrorism in Pakistan is motivated by the desire for 72 virgins and the various other fruits of paradise. Recruiters are said to encourage the aspiring bombers by emphasizing the “higher place” a *shaheed*, or martyr, enjoys in heaven. However, the “wills” of suicide bombers, video-taped or written personal statements, readily available in the

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), invariably stress political grievances such as “an Islamic country like Pakistan under high influence of anti-Islam forces”.

Responsibility for most suicide attacks in Pakistan has been claimed by organisations that have clearly made a tactical decision to use suicide bombing against an unpopular government that is perceived as pro-US. These organizations, such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jamiat al-Furqan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, have been vocal in calling the Musharraf government “an American puppet”.

Consequence of Large Scale “Collateral Damage”

Large scale “collateral damage” during military operations in FATA and its adjacent area suggest that the Pakistani government’s counter-measures are mostly based on the extensive use of force in dealing with the terrorist organisations. The use of force without any remedial steps to alleviate social and political issues alienates civil society and the perceived “tyranny” provides terrorist masterminds with fodder for their propaganda against the Musharraf government, motivating potential suicide attackers.

The spate of suicide bombings after the Musharraf government’s mishandling of the Red Mosque (“Lal Masjid”) incident in July 2007, which many believe resulted in the deaths of more than 100 women and children, demonstrates that regime heavy-handedness correlates with increased suicide terrorism. Though there was wide-spread support for the security operation, its actual conduct has been deemed heavy-handed. The continuing effect of the Red Mosque operation was felt throughout the rest of 2007, as the country suffered 47 suicide bombings in the last six months of the year. Until then, there had been only 14 suicide attacks in the 60 years history of Pakistan.

The Strategic Logic

Law enforcement investigations indicate that suicide bombings is the work of multiple militant and terrorist outfits like the local Taliban, Al Qaeda, and groups affiliated with Al Qaeda such as Jamiat al-Furqan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi . The evidence they have collected shows that Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups in Pakistan have used suicide terrorism to obtain specific strategic goals against the government.

Whenever the government initiated military offensives against Al Qaeda elements in FATA, militants launched deadly suicide attacks targeting Army and law enforcement agencies in the settled (non-tribal) areas of Pakistan. Some examples were the deadly suicide attacks against the Special Services Group (SSG) Commandos in Tarbela in September 2007; against the Pakistan Air Force in Sargodha in November 2007; and against the police in Lahore in January 2008. These attacks came at times when Pakistani security forces were engaged in heavy military offensives against the pro-Al Qaeda militants in FATA. After each of the suicide attacks against security forces in major cities, the government had to halt its military operations in FATA.

Besides inflicting massive damage on the security forces, the motive of these suicide bombings is to weaken the resolve of the security forces to fight militancy and extremism in the country, and to compel them to question the rational and vision of the Pakistani leadership regarding their alliance with the US-led war on terror.

Suicide bombers have targeted President Musharraf and his formal and informal political allies. The former Interior Minister of Pakistan, Mr Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, who spearheaded the government’s campaign against Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups, has been targeted twice by suicide bombers.

Similarly, Al Qaeda is thought to be behind the brutal killing of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 who invited the ire of foreign and local militants operating in Pakistan when she publicly came out

against extremism and militancy in the country and supported military operation against the Red Mosque. These attacks suggest that suicide terrorism is a tactical and strategic response from terrorist outfits to the uncertain conditions prevailing in Pakistan and are not necessarily the result of a rising attraction to what some have called a global jihadist ideology.

Needed: A Comprehensive Counter Strategy

In fact diverse elements contribute to shape the destructive trend of suicide terrorism that is posing a new security threat to the entire Pakistani society. A multi-dimensional phenomenon needs to be tackled by a multi-dimensional strategy involving political, social and economic reforms along with use of force. Collateral damage during military operations must be minimised.

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