



Could the Taliban Take Over Pakistan's Punjab Province?

By Ahmad Majidiyar

While Washington and Islamabad have directed considerable attention and resources to fighting terrorism in Pakistan's tribal areas, rising militant activity and growing Taliban and al Qaeda influence in the country's most populous province of Punjab have been largely ignored. Under increasing pressure from U.S. drone attacks and the Pakistani Army's continuing offensives in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Taliban and al Qaeda are looking to Pakistan's political and military heartland for refuge, revenge, and new alliances. Banned Punjabi terrorist groups—such as Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), the alleged recruiter of Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad, and Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT), responsible for high-profile attacks in India and Afghanistan—are operating freely across the province and have deepened ties with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al Qaeda. Despite the growing threat, Punjabi politicians court the militants for votes, and the military and intelligence services protect them for “strategic depth” in the conflict zones of Kashmir and Afghanistan. Although Punjab is not in imminent danger of a Taliban takeover, the growth of terrorist activity in the region, if unchecked, could have serious consequences for Pakistan's stability, the war in Afghanistan, India-Pakistan relations, and international terrorism.

The Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda fighters based in the FATA have suffered significantly over the past two years. U.S. drone strikes have killed over five hundred militants since the summer of 2008,¹ including high-value targets such as Baitullah Mehsud, head of the TTP, and Mustafa al-Yazid, al Qaeda's number three official and top commander in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover, the Pakistani Army has recaptured the key Taliban strongholds of Swat Valley, Bajaur Agency, and South Waziristan, is consolidating its power in Orakzai Agency, and is mulling an offensive into North Waziristan, the key power base of Pakistani Taliban groups, the Afghan Taliban's Haqqani network, and al Qaeda.² (See map inset.)

U.S. Central Command and the Pakistani Army focus on the FATA and regions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (formerly North-West

Frontier Province, see NWFP on the map), but these areas are considered traditionally lawless and peripheral. The FATA represents just 4 million of Pakistan's total population of approximately 170 million.³ When Pakistani military officers sent to the FATA talk of their desire to return to the “mainland,” they often mean Punjab. With

Key points in this Outlook:

- Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and al Qaeda have teamed up with Punjabi militant and sectarian groups to destabilize Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province.
- Although the militants have yet to assert the same control in southern Punjab that they did in Swat Valley or Waziristan, there are signs that such a scenario is possible.
- Counterterrorism, intelligence, and police operations are more likely to make inroads than outright military operations.

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94 million people, it is the most populous province in Pakistan and is traditionally the center of political, economic, and cultural gravity. For Pakistani leaders, violence and militancy in the FATA are irritants. The same in the more populous Punjab would rock the Pakistani state to its core.

Punjabi militancy is a growing concern because it threatens U.S. national security. The four major militant groups operating from Punjab—JeM, LeT, Sipah-e Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), and Lashkar-e Jhangvi (LeJ)—have deepened ties with al Qaeda and are engaged in plots against Western targets in the region and globally. JeM has openly declared war against the United States, and, according to the Institute for Conflict Management—a nongovernmental organization in New Delhi studying terrorism and conflicts in South Asia—the LeT has sleeper cells in the United States and Australia and has ties with Islamic militant groups in the Arab world, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁴ In March 2009, a British parliamentary committee found that LeT had

trained an al Qaeda member involved in the July 7, 2005, attacks in London.⁵

A History of Punjabi Terrorism

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Punjab. Jihadist organizations and sectarian groups have existed in Punjab for nearly three decades. In the 1980s, Pakistan's military dictator, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, nurtured radical Sunni militant groups as terrorist proxies against India over the control of Kashmir, for Pakistan had been defeated in the three conventional wars with India since the 1947 partition. Zia-ul-Haq also used these groups to suppress Pakistan's twenty-Shia minority, whom the Pakistani government saw as a security threat in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Punjabi militants also took an active part in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets and, after 1994, helped the Taliban and al Qaeda establish a puritanical Islamic state in Afghanistan.

The U.S. military's support for the Taliban's ouster in 2001, however, was a setback for Punjabi militants. U.S. air raids and Northern Alliance fighting killed hundreds of Punjabi fighters in Afghanistan. In 2002, Islamabad succumbed to U.S. pressure and banned five prominent militant organizations: LeT and JeM, which were responsible for the December 2001 Indian Parliament attack, as well as SSP, Tehrik-e-Jafaria, and Tehrik-e-Nifaze Shariat Mohammadi. Pakistani security arrested over two thousand militants, the majority from Punjab.⁶ For militant Punjabis, the arrests were only a hiccup: Pakistani jails have revolving doors, and even high-profile detainees like JeM leader Maulana Masood Azhar and LeT chief Hafiz Muhammad Saeed were soon free men. Banned organizations resurfaced under new names or as charities, and several smaller groups split and relocated to the FATA, where they joined Pashtun terrorists and al Qaeda and established their own training camps.⁷

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Pakistani offensives over the past year in Swat and South Waziristan have further cemented ties between the Punjabi militants and Pashtun Taliban. "Connections that have always existed are becoming tighter and more public than they have in the past," explains Bruce Riedel, coauthor of the Obama administration's Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy review last year.⁸ Qari Zafar, the Punjabi Taliban leader reportedly killed in a February 2010 U.S. missile strike, merged his organization Badar Mansoor into the TTP just before the Pakistani Army launched its offensive in South Waziristan,⁹ where there were between three and five thousand Punjabi fighters before the army moved in.¹⁰ Many Punjabi militant groups have now officially merged into the Taliban. Their commanders serve in the TTP's leadership *shura*, the umbrella council of about forty top militant commanders supervising Taliban activities in Pakistan.¹¹

The fighting is not limited to the FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa anymore. To avenge losses and force the army to halt operations in the FATA, the TTP and al Qaeda have teamed up with Punjabi militant and sectarian

groups to destabilize Punjab. "A new series of suicide attacks will take place soon," Qari Hussain Mehsud, TTP's deputy chief and head of suicide bombing, warned on March 31, adding, "The attacks will be carried out across the country, but the focus would be on Punjab where policies are made—attacks inside Punjab have more influence than in the rest of the country."¹² On May 11, Pakistani intelligence agencies warned that militants from Orakzai and Waziristan had entered Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and other Punjabi cities to carry out terrorist attacks and trigger sectarian violence and rioting in key population centers (see map).¹³ The U.S. embassy in Islamabad was listed as a prime target.¹⁴ The May 28 Lahore assaults killing over eighty worshippers from the minority Ahmadi community¹⁵ and the June 8 Taliban ambush just outside Islamabad torching fifty U.S. and NATO supply trucks heading to Afghanistan¹⁶ were a testament to TTP's claim that it is now focusing on destabilizing Punjab.

Terrorist attacks inside Punjab have increased markedly since the army's offensive into South Waziristan last October. On March 8, 2010, a suicide bomber attacked the Special Investigation Agency in Lahore, killing and wounding over one hundred people.¹⁷ Both the TTP and al Qaeda's Al-Jihad group in Punjab claimed responsibility.¹⁸ "If the government does not halt military operation in the tribal area and drone attacks continue, the TTP will continue suicide bombings" at government installations, TTP spokesman Azam Tariq warned.¹⁹ Four days later, coordinated suicide bombings rocked Lahore again, killing at least fifty-seven and injuring over one hundred soldiers and civilians.²⁰ Punjabi militants belonging to LeJ carried out the attack, but the TTP leadership in Waziristan claimed credit for the strikes.²¹ In the following days, police uncovered 4.5 tons of explosives and arms in residential areas in Lahore²² and arrested over fifty local residents with links to militants in southern Punjab.²³ These incidents were alarming as they signaled not only the militants' reach in Pakistan's heartland, but also the growing nexus between the Pashtun Taliban, al Qaeda network, and Punjabi militant groups. Pakistani investigations showed that planning and arrangements for the attacks had originated in Lahore.²⁴ In a cabinet briefing on March 17, Pakistani interior minister Rehman Malik confirmed that Punjabi militant groups had joined forces with the Waziristan-based Taliban to strike in Punjab.²⁵

Analysts have long defined the Taliban as Mullah Mohammad Omar's Afghan Taliban and the TTP based in Waziristan. Just over a year ago, security specialists

added the Punjabi Taliban to the mix after a previously unknown Punjabi group, Tehrik-e Taliban Punjab, claimed credit for a series of attacks inside Punjab, including a deadly assault on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore and a suicide bombing targeting the army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi.²⁶ The Punjabi Taliban network, as respected Pakistani scholar Hassan Abbas explains, is "a loose conglomeration of members of banned militant groups of Punjabi origin—sectarian as well as those focused on the conflict in Kashmir—that have developed strong connections with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Afghan Taliban and other militant groups based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP)."²⁷

South Punjab: New Terrorism Base

Rural districts in southern Punjab have become sanctuaries and training areas for both banned Punjabi terrorist groups and Pashtun and al Qaeda fighters escaping the FATA. "The militants who were hiding in south Punjab are now surfacing. . . . These people [Le], SSP, and JeM] are enemies of the country and are part of the TTP and al Qaeda," Malik said in a rare admission after the May 28 attacks in Lahore.²⁸ Although the militants have yet to assert the same control in southern Punjab that they did in Swat or Waziristan, there are signs that such a scenario is possible. Grinding poverty, corrupt and ineffective police, extremist religious seminaries, a frustrated population, and provincial leaders' toleration for and even promotion of terrorist groups provide a recipe for militants' takeover of the region.²⁹ The number of people living below the poverty line in southern and western Punjab is more than that in the three provinces of Sindh, Baluchistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa combined.³⁰ In certain southern Punjabi villages, the extremists openly demand Islamic law, denounce the government authority as incompetent and corrupt,³¹ ban video and music shops, and urge the local population to prepare for an Islamic revolution,³² the same process that preceded the Taliban seizure of Swat.

Moreover, in contrast to northern and central Punjab, the Pakistani government does not effectively control certain southern areas. Last year, the Interior Ministry stationed only about sixty thousand of the one hundred sixty thousand police officers in the province in rural areas, leaving border regions almost unguarded from cross-border infiltration.³³ The Pakistan Rangers, a paramilitary force guarding Punjab's southern borders, are poorly

trained and take orders chiefly from local elites.³⁴ In Dera Ghazi Khan—the largest district in Punjab, host to a uranium processing plant, and gateway between central Punjab and Taliban strongholds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan—the government's weak presence has allowed terrorists to find refuge.³⁵ "No one is serious about preventing the Talibanization of our area," Khawaja Mudasar Mehmood, a local politician with the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP), said last November. "We face spillover from South Waziristan. Taliban militants are already passing into this area, and the border military police can't prevent it."³⁶ Extremist groups such as JeM actively recruit fighters from hundreds of *madrasas* in the district for the war against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.³⁷

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The Taliban influence is also increasing in the district of Bahawalpur, location of JeM's headquarters. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, there were already between fifteen and twenty thousand trained militants in the district. Following Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf's 2002 crackdown, many took cover as charity organizations or created private schools and media outlets as fronts.³⁸ The groups are now back with a vengeance. According to respected Pakistani defense analyst Ayesha Siddiq, militants have established training bases in Bahawalpur, while law enforcement forces are unable or unwilling to tackle the problem.³⁹ Last year, the police attempted to arrest a JeM commander in a Bahawalpur hospital after he had been wounded in a U.S. predator strike, but they backed down after his fighters threatened to blow up police stations and schools if the arrest went ahead. A JeM *madrasa* in Bahawalpur then offered him safe haven.⁴⁰ He had many *madrasas* from which to choose: the district has the largest number of religious seminaries in Pakistan, housing over eighty thousand students.⁴¹

Southern Punjab may be the core base for the militants, but they have spread throughout the province.⁴²

The Sargodha district, located in central Punjab and host to the Pakistani Air Force's Central Air Command, is a safe haven and recruiting area for militants. According to Sargodha police chief Usman Anwar, people from the area are recruited locally and then sent to North Waziristan for training.⁴³ Police say al Qaeda, under the banner of the Punjabi Taliban, poses a serious threat to the region and that local militant groups, such as SSP, facilitate al Qaeda's infiltration into the area.⁴⁴ The Taliban and al Qaeda network is also expanding in Jhang, known as the hotbed of sectarianism with a population of about 4 million Sunnis and Shia. According to the Jhang police, former local JeM head "Dr. Imran" runs the TTP network in the district and has close connections with al Qaeda.⁴⁵ Taliban leaders used a *madrasa* construction site in the district on May 1 to call for reviving the spirit of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s.⁴⁶

A More Serious Threat

The Punjabi militants pose a more serious threat to Pakistan's stability and global security than the Pashtun Taliban. "They are more hard-line, more fundamentalist and more connected to a global agenda," says Imtiaz Ali, a Pakistani analyst of jihadist groups.⁴⁷ Punjabi groups now operate beyond their traditional South Asian operational zones and have become a direct threat to Europe and the United States. They are also better trained in terrorism as they have received years of al Qaeda training and decades of state patronage. While the army is battling the Taliban in the FATA, it protects militant groups in Punjab for the sake of its own "strategic depth" in the Kashmir conflict, even as these groups hamper peace between Pakistan and India and could spark a war between the two nuclear states. On March 17, Indian defense minister A. K. Antony alleged, "There are forty-two terror camps in Pakistan [and] all the terrorist camps are active."⁴⁸ Pakistan has both refused Washington's demand to take action against LeT until Islamabad's relations with New Delhi improve⁴⁹ and turned down Interpol's request to arrest JeM chief Maulana Masood Azhar.⁵⁰ "In Punjab, the military is working hand in glove with militants," Siddiqi notes.⁵¹ She alleges that the military indoctrinates low-ranking army officers in extremist ideology and in the belief that terrorism in Punjab is the work of foreign agents, particularly India, the United States, and Israel.⁵²

Many army officers have joined the ranks of the militants.⁵³ Muhammad Aqeel, who uses the nom de guerre Dr. Usman and who masterminded the attack on the

Sri Lankan cricket team, was an ethnic Punjabi who formerly served in the army medical corps. Muhammad Ilyas Kashmiri, a Punjabi militant leader known as the chief operational commander and strategist of al Qaeda in Pakistan, was once a Pakistani army commando.⁵⁴ Last December, Colonel Shahid Nazir, a senior officer in Pakistan's Army Engineering Corps and former Pakistani Air Force pilot, faced court martial for leaking secret information to terrorists plotting to attack Pakistan's Shamsi airbase,⁵⁵ used by U.S. Predator drones to strike terrorist groups in Pakistan's tribal areas.⁵⁶ On May 18, Pakistani authorities reported the arrest of a Pakistani army major linked to Times Square plotter Faisal Shahzad, who himself is the son of a retired air vice marshal.⁵⁷ These developments are dangerous as almost 50 percent of the army's recruitment is from Punjab and the militants and the army recruit from the same Punjabi families.

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President Asif Ali Zardari has taken a tough stance against terrorism since taking office in September 2008, but Punjab's civilian government run by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's opposition party has sought reconciliation with the militants. "Since political parties are unable to eliminate militants or most politicians are sympathetic toward the militants, they tend to curb their activities through political deal-making," Siddiqi explains.⁵⁸ On February 21, Rana Sanaullah, Punjab's provincial law minister and a member of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), campaigned for the by-election in the Jhang district together with Maulana Muhammad Ahmad Ludhianvi, the leader of banned terrorist organization SSP, in an official vehicle escorted jointly by police and militants.⁵⁹ "The Sharifs are creating a potential bomb here in Punjab," warns Salman Taseer, Punjab's governor from the ruling PPP. In March, Taseer demanded action against Sanaullah for releasing two convicted SSP terrorists, Talib Qiamat and Siddiqui Jopoo, ahead of the by-election in Jhang to get their votes.⁶⁰ Sanaullah, whose appeal to the militants helped PML-N win elections in Jhang, defended his "political right," arguing not all members of banned groups were terrorists.⁶¹

Following the Lahore attacks in March, Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz Sharif's brother and the chief minister of Punjab, appealed to the Taliban to "spare Punjab" because PML-N shared the Taliban's anti-American stance.

"General Musharraf planned a bloodbath of innocent Muslims at the behest of others only to prolong his rule, but we in the PML-N opposed his policies and rejected dictation from abroad," Shahbaz Sharif told a gathering in Lahore after the attacks. "If the Taliban are also fighting for the same cause, then they should not carry out acts of terror in Punjab," he pleaded.⁶² Pakistan Seraiki Party chief Taj Muhammad Langah says the Sharif brothers are ideologically aligned with the militant groups: "The [Sharif] brothers are mawlawis [revered Muslims] without beard and they are followers of Ahle Hadith. Lashkar-e Taiba [are] also adherents of Ahle Hadith."⁶³ On May 18, Punjab's Home Department directed security authorities to beef up security for the LeT leader, who had reportedly received death threats.⁶⁴ Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that attacks continue in Punjab. Both the Punjabi Taliban and al Qaeda's Punjab wing took credit for the May 28 bombing in Lahore.⁶⁵

What Can Be Done?

The increasing Taliban and al Qaeda influence in Punjab suggests that the terror fight in Pakistan will not end when terrorists are expelled from their strongholds in the tribal areas. Predator strikes soon will not be enough to combat Taliban and al Qaeda affiliates holed up in Pakistan. Pakistani leaders must prepare to counter the growing terrorist threat in the Pakistani heartland. And, barring effective Pakistani action, Washington must plan for a greater terrorist threat emanating from Pakistan over the horizon. Indeed, terrorist attacks in Punjab doubled in 2009 over the previous year,⁶⁶ and this year will likely be even deadlier. Southern Punjab has become a safe haven for different terrorist groups, and in some areas, al Qaeda has already taken over leadership of local groups.⁶⁷ Punjab houses over 40 percent of Pakistan's twenty thousand *madrastas*, many of which train and harbor terrorists.⁶⁸ Punjabi militant groups, according to former director of national intelligence Dennis Blair, have become a direct threat to the United States and are "placing Western targets in Europe in [their] sights."⁶⁹

What can be done to tackle the Punjab threat? Unlike the Taliban entrenchment in Waziristan, Punjabi militants are not concentrated in a single region but are

scattered across a province larger than many countries. The Pakistani Army's military operations and U.S. drone attacks employed in the tribal areas are thus unfeasible in Punjab. In addition, the Punjabi-dominated army is unwilling to fight their brethren. A military operation in Punjab could provoke divisions within the army because of predominant provincial and ethnic loyalties.

Rather than outright military operations, counterterrorism, intelligence, and police operations are more likely to make inroads. Any such undertaking, however, will require Punjab's civilian government and the army to reassess their "strategic relationship" with terrorist groups and end their selective and discriminatory approach toward terrorist organizations. It will also require reinforcing and training the Punjabi police, who are ill equipped and untrained for counterterrorism operations. Indeed, had they heeded clear intelligence, they might have prevented the recent Lahore attacks. Now that Punjabi groups have also been implicated in a direct attack on U.S. soil (Times Square), the Obama administration must not allow diplomatic sensitivity to sidetrack unceasing pressure to force Pakistan to curb terrorism in its heartland. If Punjab becomes an effective terrorist safe haven, the global war on terrorism will become exponentially more difficult.

Notes

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