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Challenging the State: Pakistani Militants Form Deadly Alliance

By James M. Dorsey and Azaz Syed

Synopsis

The recent suicide bombing of a popular Sufi shrine in Sindh is the latest operation of a recently formed alliance of militant jihadist and sectarian groups that includes Islamic State (IS) and organisations associated with the Pakistani Taliban.

Commentary

THE BOMBING of the shrine of Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in the southern Pakistani town of Sehwan by a female suicide bomber that killed 83 people, including 20 children, was the alliance's ninth attack in a week. The grouping earlier targeted the Punjabi parliament, military outposts, a TV crew, and a provincial police station. The alliance represents a joining of forces by Pakistani and Afghan jihadists and groups who trace their origins to sectarian organisations that have deep social roots. The alliance's declared aim is to challenge the state at a time that Pakistan is under external pressure to clean-up its counterterrorism act. A recent Pakistani crackdown on militants has been selective, half-hearted, and largely ineffective.

Pakistan has blamed Afghanistan-based militants for the attacks, demanded that Afghanistan hand over 76 militants allegedly associated with the alliance, and closed its border in Afghanistan while it hunts down alliance operatives on its own territory. Counterterrorism officials said the alliance of eight organisations formed late last year included IS, the Pakistani Taliban and some of its associates, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LJA), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and Jundallah.

Wreaking Havoc

Members of the alliance have demonstrated their ability to wreak havoc long before they decided to join forces. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar claimed responsibility for a December 2014 attack on a public military school in which 141 people, including 132 school children, were killed. The attack sparked public outrage and forced the government to announce a national action plan to crack down on militants and political violence. The plan has so far largely proven to be a paper tiger.

LJA and IS said they carried out an attack last October on a police academy in Quetta that left 62 cadets dead. In August, JuA wiped out a generation of Baluch lawyers who had gathered at a hospital in Quetta to mourn the killing of a colleague, the second one to be assassinated in a week.

The bombings and killings did little to persuade Pakistan's security establishment that long-standing military and intelligence support for groups that did the country's geopolitical bidding in Kashmir and Afghanistan as well as for sectarian and ultra-conservative organisations and religious schools that often also benefitted from Saudi funding was backfiring. The support has allowed some of these groups to garner popular support and make significant inroads into branches of the state.



Crackdown on IS-Pakistan Taliban alliance - Photo: The News

Differing Attitudes

Credible Pakistani media reports, denied by the government as well as the military, said that the attacks had brought out sharp differences between various branches of government and the state over attitudes towards the militants during a meeting last year of civilian, military and intelligence leaders. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his foreign minister Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry were reported to have told military and intelligence commanders that Pakistan risked international isolation because of its failure to enforce the national action plan.

JuA last month announced the alliance's challenging of the state with its declaration of Operation Ghazi, named after Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, a leader of Islamabad's controversial Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, widely viewed as jihadist nerve centre, who was killed in clashes in 2007 with the military. The group said the alliance would target provincial parliaments; security forces, including the military, intelligence and the police; financial institutions; non-Islamic political parties; media; co-ed educational institutions; Shiites and Ahmadis, a group widely viewed by conservative Muslims as heretics that have been declared non-Muslims in Pakistan's constitution.

There is little indication that the formation of the alliance and the launch of its violent campaign will spark a fundamental re-think of its longstanding differentiation between militant groups that do its geopolitical bidding and those that target the Pakistani state.

Business As Usual

Despite the crackdown in the wake of the most recent attacks, Pakistan's refusal to put an end to its selective countering of political violence was evident in an earlier crackdown on groups that are believed to have close ties to the security establishment.

In a bid to prevent a possible inclusion of Pakistan in a re-working by President Donald J. Trump of his troubled ban on travel to the United States from violence-prone Muslim countries, Pakistan last month put leaders of another internationally designated group under house arrest. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global inter-governmental body that combats money laundering and funding of political violence, is expected to discuss Pakistan in the coming days at a meeting in Paris.

In addition to treating the leaders of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), widely seen as a front for Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, with kid's gloves rather than putting them in prison, the government has so far remained silent about the group's intention to resume operations under a new name. The government has also said nothing about the group's plans to register itself as a political party.

To Ban or Not to Ban?

Analysts with close ties to the military have argued that simply banning JuD and seizing its assets would not solve the problem because of the group's widespread popular support. Some analysts draw a comparison to militant Islamist groups in the Middle East such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah in Lebanon that have garnered popular support by functioning both as political parties and social service organisations.

"Ensuring that such groups disavow violence and have a path towards participation in a pluralistic, competitive political environment is more likely to offer the prospect of greater stability. That may work for some groups like JuD but not for those responsible for this week's wave of indiscriminate killing," one analyst said.

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