

Al-Qa`ida's Pakistan Strategy

By Don Rassler

AL-QA`IDA'S STRATEGY IN Pakistan remains intentionally opaque, but has demonstrably shifted in recent years to promote increased confrontation with the Pakistani state. Al-Qa`ida's fighters originally used Pakistan as a key logistics base and facilitation point for the Afghan and Arab mujahidin during the 1980s, but since 2001 Pakistan has served primarily as an operational safe haven where al-Qa`ida and its affiliates can plan local, regional and international terrorist attacks. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and smaller parts of Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) comprise al-Qa`ida's physical center of gravity. Increasingly, however, al-Qa`ida has utilized its media prowess and ideological authority to discredit the Pakistani state and promote cooperation among a variety of Pakistani militants to challenge the state's authority and undermine its support for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

A review of al-Qa`ida's statements pertaining to Pakistan, militant activity in the country, and the alliances al-Qa`ida has fostered among Pakistani factions reveals that the group is acting to shape Pakistan's militant environment and foster jihad against the Pakistani government, even while taking a secondary role in the organization and operationalization of violence. Al-Qa`ida accomplishes this in three primary ways: 1) by providing religious "justification" and rallying support for anti-government militancy; 2) acting as a force multiplier for violent activities by providing specific expertise; and 3) serving as a mediator and coalition builder for militant groups within Pakistan to further al-Qa`ida's aims.

Western counterterrorism analysts assessing al-Qa`ida's operations in Pakistan typically focus their attention on al-Qa`ida's "external" activities, primarily its support for terrorist attacks and plots in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the United States. Although this perspective is important, the focus on al-Qa`ida's direct role in

the conduct of violence has obscured the critical, but largely behind-the-scenes, role that al-Qa`ida is playing to foster militancy in Pakistan. The Pakistan example is important not only because it threatens a critical U.S. ally, but because it illustrates the dangerous role that al-Qa`ida can play even when it is not primarily responsible for violent operations.

Calls for Action: Justifying and Rallying Support for the Pakistan Jihad

Since 9/11, al-Qa`ida's attention in South Asia has mainly focused on facilitating and supporting the jihad in Afghanistan.¹ Similarly, al-Qa`ida's messages directed at Pakistani audiences focused on Pakistan's role in supporting U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Al-Qa`ida devoted significant energy attempting to portray former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf as an apostate, the Pakistani government as an un-Islamic regime, and the Pakistani Army as a servant of the United States' campaign in Afghanistan.² A review of statements made by senior al-Qa`ida leaders from 2001 to September 2008 reveals that the group's calls for Musharraf's ouster were fairly consistent and continued with great regularity from 2003 until his departure from office in 2008.

Al-Qa`ida has targeted these messages to a variety of Pakistani audiences depending on current events and has pressed three basic themes: the need to target Pakistan, the Pakistani government's "un-Islamic" character, and the need for unified opposition to the state. As part of that campaign, al-Qa`ida's communications have attempted to divide state resources by urging soldiers of the Pakistani Army to revolt against the entity they committed to protect.³ Al-Qa`ida's calls for violent action against the Pakistani government were limited in scope until the *Lal Masjid*

(Red Mosque) conflict erupted in July 2007. Recognizing an opportunity to broaden its support, al-Qa`ida seized upon the event and used it to renew calls for jihad in Pakistan. In a statement issued in response to the *Lal Masjid* event, Usama bin Ladin publicly acknowledged al-Qa`ida's failure to prioritize the jihad in Pakistan, noting: "the obligation on us [al-Qa`ida] remains, and we have been extremely late in carrying it [jihad] out, six years having passed, so we should make up for lost time."⁴ Appeals urging jihad against the Pakistani government have become more frequent and direct since the *Lal Masjid* incident.⁵

Al-Qa`ida's post-*Lal Masjid* statements have been more religiously focused than those made beforehand. One important statement made in September 2007 attempted to nullify targeting distinctions between "near" and "far" enemies, which in the past have served as a point of disagreement among jihadist groups in Pakistan. As notable al-Qa`ida figure Abu Yahya al-Libi argued:

There is no doubt that the original, confirmed ruling laid down by the nobles and attested by the biography of the Prophet, peace and prayers be upon Him...is that we begin fighting the nearest [enemy], then the next nearest [enemy]. But this is when the situation is uniform and regular.⁶

Further contextualizing his distinction, al-Libi added that

the question of special nearness and farness in our modern age does not have the same significance it once had...The relations which tie the major infidel states to the statelets [sic] and their apostate governments are close, overlapping relations.

Therefore, he concluded, "they [the United States, Pakistan, Afghanistan] are a single entity, a single enemy, and

1 The jihad in Afghanistan has primarily been led by Mullah Omar and the now Baluchistan-based Quetta *shura* council. There are, however, multiple actors involved in the insurgency, each responsible for different areas.

2 See, for example, OSC, "Second Round of 'Open Interview' with al-Zawahiri Released," April 22, 2008; "Al-Zawahiri Attacks Pakistani President, Urges Army to Topple Him," al-Jazeera, March 25, 2004.

3 "Al-Zawahiri Praises Iraq's Al-Qa`ida, Urges Pakistani Soldiers to Disobey Orders," al-Sahab, April 29, 2006.

4 Usama bin Ladin, "Remove the Apostate," posted on the al-Buraq Islamic Network website, September 20, 2007.

5 The author identifies at least four such statements released since the *Lal Masjid* event.

6 OSC, "Abu Yahya al-Libi, 'No Room' for International Legitimacy," September 10, 2007.

a single army.”⁷ Al-Qa`ida’s conflation of the near and far enemy target sets is an attempt to re-frame the jihad in Pakistan as one that is both local and global. In doing so, al-Qa`ida is trying to obviate the differences among Pakistani militant groups that vary widely in their commitment to global jihad, the war in Afghanistan, sectarianism, and the fight against India in Kashmir. This reflects an important ideational shift within al-Qa`ida that has significant implications for its strategic goals and tactical objectives.

Force Multiplier: Facilitating Attacks Against Pakistan

Many observers expect al-Qa`ida to take a leadership role in regions where it develops a major presence, but the Pakistani example belies that expectation. Perhaps counterintuitively, al-Qa`ida has chosen to remain in the background in Pakistan while fostering support for attacks against the Pakistani state and supporting Pakistani militants by providing technical expertise and capabilities.⁸ Since its return to the tribal areas of Pakistan in late 2001, al-Qa`ida has been “lying low” within Pakistan and deferring leadership roles to local militant leaders. Given the U.S. focus on al-Qa`ida in Pakistan, the group might not have any other choice. Working in the background not only protects al-Qa`ida’s leadership, but it also helps to protect its safe haven in the Pakistani tribal areas by not offending the multitude of jihadist and Taliban groups sheltering al-Qa`ida’s activities. A less overt presence in Pakistan also makes it easier for al-Qa`ida to manage local perceptions and deny involvement in controversial terrorist attacks within the country.

Although al-Qa`ida has only claimed responsibility for a small number of attacks in Pakistan, it is suspected of working with and through local groups to actively fight the Pakistani government. Al-Qa`ida has a deep history with many local Pakistan-based groups, including its primary partner in the fight, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associated elements. While the precise nature of al-Qa`ida’s operational relationships

with groups such as Lashkar-i-Jhangvi or elements of the TTP are less than clear, these groups share a similar cause.⁹ In 2003, for example, al-Qa`ida operative Abu Faraj al-Libi allegedly ordered an assassination attempt (one of two attempted during December 2003) against Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani president at the time.¹⁰ The double suicide attack that was executed on December 25, 2003 was reportedly planned by al-Qa`ida but executed by the Kashmiri group Jaysh-i-Muhammad.¹¹ More recently, in June 2009 a “major terrorist cell” with plans

“Al-Qa`ida aims to destabilize the Pakistani government, divert U.S. attention from the fight in Afghanistan, and undermine Islamabad’s alliance with the United States.”

to target Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and a number of provincial chief ministers was disrupted in Karachi.¹² According to analyst Bruce Riedel, the group was led by a troika comprised of “one member of the Pakistani Taliban, one member of Lashkar-e-Taiba, and one member of al Qaeda.”¹³ Other attacks, such as the September 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad, went unclaimed by al-Qa`ida, but have

9 Christine Fair, “Militant Recruitment in Pakistan: Implications for Al Qaeda and Other Organizations,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27:6 (2004): pp. 489-504.

10 “Attack on Musharraf; 5 Get Capital Punishment,” *Pakistan Times*, August 28, 2005; “Arrests Follow Musharraf Attack,” BBC, December 27, 2003.

11 B. Raman, “Jihadis Strike at Pak Army and ISI Again,” *South Asia Analysis Group*, November 25, 2007.

12 “Seven Qaida Commanders Enter Pakistan,” *Daily Times*, June 4, 2009; “ISI is Not a Rogue Agency: Riedel,” *Dawn*, June 6, 2009. The Long War Journal claims that Prime Minister Gilani and General Kiyani were also targets. For more, see Bill Roggio, “Al Qaeda Operatives Targeting Pakistani Leaders,” *The Long War Journal*, June 4, 2009.

13 *Ibid.* It should also be noted that significant disagreements exist among academics and counterterrorism professionals about the strength of the links between al-Qa`ida and Lashkar-i-Tayyiba.

hallmarks of an al-Qa`ida attack.¹⁴ These instances suggest that al-Qa`ida is operating under a model distinct from that expected by most analysts, who seem to assume that al-Qa`ida will attempt to seize operational and political control of a militant environment, as its franchise did in Iraq. Such an assumption is misguided. Al-Qa`ida does not need to conduct bombings itself in order to be dangerous; in fact, al-Qa`ida is more likely to produce successful revolutionary movements when it defers to local groups to do the bulk of the fighting.

Al-Qa`ida as Mediator and Coalition Builder

To further its strategic aims, al-Qa`ida has assumed a role as mediator and coalition builder among various Pakistani militant group factions by promoting the unification of entities that have opposed one another or had conflicting ideas about whether to target the Pakistani state. For example, from December 2007 to mid-2008 Pakistani Taliban groups led by Mullah Nazir Ahmed and Hafiz Gul Bahadur were in violent conflict with Baitullah Mehsud’s anti-government TTP.¹⁵ The hostilities between the two rival factions threatened to distract them from conducting attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, collectively hindering the efforts of al-Qa`ida, the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban.¹⁶ In an effort to protect his own interests, Mullah Omar reportedly urged both factions to reconcile their differences; he also fostered the creation of the Shura Ittihad-i-Mujahidin, an umbrella group led by Baitullah Mehsud with Gul Bahadur serving as deputy *amir*.¹⁷ Al-Qa`ida served a critical role certifying the new relationship. In early April 2009, al-Qa`ida’s media production arm al-Sahab released a 56-minute video interview with Mullah Nazir, in which he was specifically asked about his cooperation with other Taliban groups in Waziristan.¹⁸ The question was an

14 An unknown Pakistani group, Fidayin-i-Islam, claimed responsibility for the attack. See “Fedayeen’ Claims Responsibility,” *Dawn*, September 23, 2008.

15 The author thanks Vahid Brown for this point. Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Plot To Divide the Taliban Foiled,” *Asia Times Online*, July 22, 2008.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Carlotta Gal, “Afghan and Pakistan Taliban Close Ranks,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2009.

18 “Interview with the Amir of Mujihadeen in South

7 *Ibid.*

8 Dr. Bruce Hoffman, discussion at the Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, March 4, 2009.

indirect reference to his conflict with Baitullah Mehsud. Nazir's response is telling: "We [the Pakistani Taliban] have forgotten all of our differences and merged this alliance as one. There shall be no more disputes in the future."¹⁹

As a mediator, al-Qa`ida is able to exert additional influence upon other groups, foster militant coalitions, and shape Pakistan's militant environment in ways that benefit its strategic vision and goals. Mullah Nazir's own view of the jihad waged by the Pakistani Taliban reflects the depth of al-Qa`ida's influence. "Our jihad is not limited to Pakistan or Afghanistan," Nazir explained. "Our jihad is a global jihad."²⁰ A "united" Pakistani Taliban waging a three-front global war against Pakistan, the Afghan government, and the United States and its allies in Afghanistan is undoubtedly in al-Qa`ida's interests.

Conclusion

Al-Qa`ida recognizes the critical role Pakistan plays for the United States in its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and the broader region. As Abu Yahya al-Libi noted this past April, "the United States, despite its strength and its developed equipment, cannot go forward or backward without the support of Pakistan in the war against Muslims in Afghanistan and Pakistan."²¹ With that in mind, al-Qa`ida has redirected substantial energy toward promoting the cooperation and effectiveness of local Pakistani groups opposed to the Pakistani state. Al-Qa`ida has recognized that by promoting violence against this "near" enemy, it can inflict severe pain on U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Al-Qa`ida aims to destabilize the Pakistani government, divert U.S. attention from the fight in Afghanistan, and undermine Islamabad's alliance with the United States. By rallying support for jihad in Pakistan, helping to facilitate attacks against the Pakistani state, and serving as a mediator, al-Qa`ida has positioned itself to play an important role within Pakistan in the future. The U.S. and international community's focus on

al-Qa`ida's "external" posture must therefore be accompanied by an increased focus on the group's "internal" posture and the implications of al-Qa`ida's willingness to take a supporting rather than primary role in the anti-government insurgency in Pakistan. Such techniques are more subtle and sophisticated than the activities generally expected of al-Qa`ida, and thus the U.S. policy response will have to be similarly nuanced.

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Waziristan / Mullah Nazir Ahmed," Jamia Hafsa Forum, April 7, 2009.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Sharpening the Blades of Battle Against the Government and Army of Pakistan," al-Fajr Media Center, April 30, 2009.