

*New York Times* even called the arrests a “strategic coup for Pakistan” because it restores control over the Taliban, draws applause from the United States and even releases U.S. money.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

For Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban remain a card to be played after an expected departure of most Western troops from Afghanistan. The arrests epitomize the ISI’s strategic manipulation of its assets in Afghanistan and might result in the emergence of an entirely new Taliban leadership that would replace the founders’ generation.<sup>24</sup> The new leadership would be composed of unknown and likely younger, more radical newcomers trained in Pakistani *madrasas*. These militants would be less in touch with Afghanistan’s realities than the older Taliban generation that participated in the anti-Soviet war, and they would be more prone to listening to Pakistan’s military and intelligence services. They would, in effect, be the real “neo-Taliban.” Pakistan’s “strategic depth” strategy, which has officially been discarded, is very much alive.

For Afghanistan, however, the arrests have at least temporarily closed the window of opportunity for direct talks with the Afghan Taliban leadership. As a result, the fighting in Afghanistan will continue and President Karzai’s peace *jirga* announced for mid-spring may run aground before it even begins.

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auffliegen,” *Salzburger Nachrichten*, February 17, 2010.

23 Carlotta Gall and Souad Mekhennet, “Arrest of Taliban Chief May Be Crucial for Pakistanis,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2010.

24 Similarly, immediately before the Afghan presidential elections of August 2009, the author received reports that the ISI had pressured Taliban commanders to go fight inside Afghanistan or otherwise be handed over to the United States and sent to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

## Untangling the Punjabi Taliban Network

By Raheel Khan

SINCE 2006, PAKISTAN has been victim to rising terrorist violence from a nexus of militant factions consisting of al-Qa`ida, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and fighters from Punjab-based militant groups.<sup>1</sup> All three entities share a common, violent Islamist ideology, and they have solidified bonds in response to Pakistan limiting its operations against Indian-administered Kashmir, while at the same time expanding operations against Pakistani Taliban factions in its northwest.<sup>2</sup> These factors have caused previously disparate groups to join together against a common enemy, the Pakistani government, which is allied with the United States and NATO in the “war on terrorism.” As a result of these developments, Punjab Province itself is increasingly at risk. Punjabi militants have established cells across the province, and according to security officials are running their own training facilities in southern Punjab.<sup>3</sup> The March 12, 2010 twin suicide blasts that killed at least 45 people in a high security area of Lahore underscored this concern.<sup>4</sup>

Punjab Province is Pakistan’s most critical region. Geographically, it is Pakistan’s heartland and the country’s most populated province.<sup>5</sup> It contains a

number of strategically significant cities, such as the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan and Gujranwala. Moreover, the country’s civil and military recruits are drawn mainly from the province. Any destabilization of Punjab Province would have dire ramifications for Pakistan and would also endanger international coalition operations in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

The threat has become increasingly serious. In September 2008, alleged militants of Punjabi origin were interrogated in the wake of the al-Qa`ida-linked Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad that killed more than 50 people.<sup>7</sup> On March 3, 2009, Punjabi militants attacked the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team in the Punjab capital city of Lahore, killing eight people.<sup>8</sup> On March 30, 2009, a police training center just outside Lahore was attacked and eight people killed.<sup>9</sup> The unprecedented assault on the military’s General Headquarters (GHQ) in the garrison city of Rawalpindi on October 10, 2009 displayed the growing sophistication and intent of the network.<sup>10</sup> Finally, on October 15, 2009, three teams of militants launched a coordinated assault in Lahore, attacking the regional headquarters of the Federal Investigation Agency, the Manawan Police Training School, and the Elite Police Academy; the combined assault killed more than 30 people.<sup>11</sup> Attacks have continued into 2010.

This nexus of militants has evolved significantly since it first emerged in 2006-2007. Although the sophistication and intensity of their

million people live in Punjab Province.

6 Sabrina Tavernise, Richard A. Opiel Jr. and Eric Schmitt, “United Militants Threaten Pakistan’s Populous Heart,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2009.

7 The suspected militants were alleged members of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam. For details, see Amir Mir, “South Punjab Threat,” *The News International*, October 25, 2009. For the al-Qa`ida-link, see “Pakistan al-Qaeda Leaders ‘Dead,’” BBC, January 9, 2009.

8 Ibid. Also see “‘Cricket Attacker’ Held in Lahore,” BBC, June 17, 2009.

9 “Siege at Pakistan Police Academy,” BBC, March 30, 2009.

10 “Six Soldiers, Four Assailants Killed in Attack on GHQ,” *Dawn*, October 10, 2009.

11 Jane Perlez, “Pakistan Attacks Show Tighter Militant Links,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2009.

1 The Punjabi Taliban comprise members from a number of Punjab-based groups that were formerly focused on Indian-administered Kashmir or on sectarian attacks against the Shi`a community in Pakistan. The Punjabi Taliban include members from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Jaysh-i-Muhammad and Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan—fighters from other Punjab-based groups may be involved as well. For more details, see Issam Ahmed, “Why Pakistan’s Old Jihadis Pose New Threat—At Home and in Afghanistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 8, 2009; Kachan Lakshman, “Heartland Trauma,” *Kashmir Herald*, February 7, 2010; Raza Khan and Ayesha Nasir, “Punjabi Taliban Threat is Growing, Pakistan Fears Shift in Control,” *Washington Times*, October 21, 2009.

2 Pakistan’s northwest consists of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and North-West Frontier Province.

3 Alex Rodriguez, “Taliban Taps the Punjab Heartland,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2009.

4 Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for the attack. For details, see “At Least 37 Killed in Pakistan Bombings,” CNN, March 12, 2010; “TTP Claim Lahore Bombings; 39 Dead,” Geo TV, March 12, 2010.

5 According to 1998 census numbers, approximately 72

operations reached new levels in 2009, the higher frequency of attacks also shed more clarity on the network. This article will revisit the formation of the Punjabi Taliban network and show how its disparate militant groups are coordinating operations.<sup>12</sup>

### Merging the Agendas

From 2001-2006, militancy in Pakistan was largely divided into two different agendas. In the country's northwest region, Taliban factions focused on fighting international and Afghan forces in Afghanistan, and other Western targets in Pakistan. To the east, Punjab-based militant groups such as Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Sipah-i-Sahaba and Jaysh-i-Muhammad focused their attacks on Indian forces in the disputed region of Kashmir or on Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

In 2006-2007, however, this dynamic was altered in response to Pakistan ceasing support for militancy in Indian-administered Kashmir.<sup>14</sup> In response, many Kashmir-focused militants joined forces with Taliban factions in Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> The two agendas have partly merged, and this became especially evident after the Pakistan government's military operations against Islamic hardliners at the *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in mid-2007.<sup>16</sup> The mosque was operated by Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, both strong supporters of the Taliban and allied Islamist movements.<sup>17</sup> The Punjab-based militant groups—particularly Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaysh-i-Muhammad—were also associated with *Lal Masjid*, and some of their members turned against the state after the siege.<sup>18</sup>

Based on rough estimates, more than 5,000 individuals from the seminaries in southern and northern Punjab Province joined terrorist training camps in North and South Waziristan in the wake of the military operation against *Lal Masjid*.<sup>19</sup> Fighters now part of this loose collaboration among Taliban factions in Pakistan's northwest and formerly Kashmir- or sectarian-focused militants in the east and northeast are now referred to as the "Punjabi Taliban."<sup>20</sup> Restrained from continuing activities in Indian-held Kashmir, members of Punjab-based militant groups joined forces with the TTP and al-Qa`ida to undertake joint operations in Pakistan. As described by Dr. Ayesha Siddiqi, an Islamabad-based analyst, Punjab has been turned into a "factory where suicide bombers are produced. Punjab has become a major recruiting ground and hub for the planning of terrorist attacks, and it's a human resource for the fighting in Afghanistan."<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, there is evidence that during this period al-Qa`ida operatives escalated efforts to engage Punjabi militants and draw them into their fight against Pakistani security forces. Senior al-Qa`ida stalwarts such as Shaykh `Isa al-Masri reportedly recruited Punjabi and Kashmiri jihadists into the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qa`ida, engaging recruits from Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, Jaysh-i-Muhammad and Harkat-ul-Mujahidin.<sup>22</sup>

The cooperation among the groups has developed to the point that leaders of the Punjabi Taliban network are represented in the TTP's 40-member *shura* (council).<sup>23</sup>

This fact was revealed in October 2009, after Pakistani security forces arrested Iqbal and Gul Muhammad, purportedly two high-ranking Punjabi Taliban members. According to a journalist for Pakistan's *Dawn*,

The two, who were in charge of militancy in Punjab, officials claim, served as the link between Taliban's main leadership in Waziristan and the increasingly threatening Punjabi Taliban network, a grouping of sectarian and Kashmir focused militant groups responsible for the Taliban hits in Punjab and the federal capital.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, "Dr. Usman," the alias of the militant who was arrested during the October 2009 attack on Pakistan's GHQ, was also reportedly a member of the TTP's *shura*.<sup>25</sup>

### Joint Operations

Al-Qa`ida, the TTP and the Punjabi Taliban network have cooperated to strike targets deep inside Punjab Province.<sup>26</sup> U.S. and Pakistani authorities believe that the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in September 2008 and the deadly attack on Sri Lanka's cricket team in Lahore in March 2009 were examples of combined operations.<sup>27</sup> The deployment of seasoned operative Dr. Usman, who has links to al-Qa`ida, to lead the attack on the GHQ in Rawalpindi in October 2009 was a demonstration of power by this coalition, which many thought was weakened by military offensives in the Swat Valley.<sup>28</sup>

Rehman Malik, Pakistan's interior minister, warned in the *Financial Times* in June 2009 that a Swat-like situation could emerge in southern Punjab if terrorists fleeing military operations and U.S. drone strikes take shelter in southern Punjab under the protection of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Jaysh-i-Muhammad.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of the latest

tured," *Dawn*, October 23, 2009.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Tavernise et al., "Pakistan al-Qaeda Leaders 'Dead.'" 27 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 "Dr. Usman: Last Desperate Act," *Daily Times*, October 13, 2009.

29 Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan Puts Southern Provinces on Alert as Taliban Threat Grows," *Financial Times*, June

12 Ibid.

13 Rodriguez, "Taliban Taps the Punjab Heartland."

14 Regardless of whether Pakistan has ceased all support for operations in India or Indian-administered Kashmir, it has certainly reduced its support dramatically.

15 Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Pakistan's Militants Ready for More," *Asia Times Online*, March 5, 2009.

16 Aoun Sahi, "Ulterior Motives," *The News International*, October 25, 2009; Tavernise et al.

17 Bill Roggio, "Red Mosque Leader Abdul Rasheed Ghazi Killed During Assault," *The Long War Journal*, July 10, 2007.

18 Personal interview, Tahir Khan, editor at News Network International and correspondent for BBC, Islamabad, Pakistan, March 12, 2010.

19 Mir, "South Punjab Threat."

20 Alex Rodriguez, "Pakistani Extremists in Punjab Seen as Rising Threat," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2009. For one of the first articles that discussed the Punjabi Taliban, see Hassan Abbas, "Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network," *CTC Sentinel* 2:4 (2009).

21 Ibid.

22 Bill Roggio, "Senior Al Qaeda Leader Leaves Pakistan, Directs Iraq Operations from Syria," *The Long War Journal*, August 21, 2009. For an in-depth profile of Shaykh `Isa al-Masri and his role in violence in Pakistan, see Erich Marquardt and Abdul Hameed Bakier, "An Ideological and Operational Threat: Abu `Amr/Shaykh `Isa," *CTC Sentinel* 1:8 (2008).

23 The TTP *shura* is a 40-member umbrella council of top militant commanders that coordinates and supervises TTP operations in Pakistan. For more details, see Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Top Guns of Punjabi Taliban Cap-

military offensive in South Waziristan at the end of 2009, it is believed that some middle and lower rank militants may have shifted to southern Punjab, while the core leadership is strongly believed to be hiding in North Waziristan.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the deadly alliance has increased the number of attacks in Punjab, and it appears that Punjabi militant leaders are exercising control over Taliban fighters who fled the military operations in the northwest.<sup>31</sup>

Following the well-planned attack on the Pakistan Army's GHQ, the army admitted the scale of the threat it faces from this nexus, whose ranks include soldiers from the Pakistan military.<sup>32</sup> Dr. Usman, for example, the sole surviving attacker on the GHQ, was a former army medical corps soldier from Kahuta, a town in the heartland of Punjab Province.<sup>33</sup> After leaving the army, Dr. Usman first joined Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, and then later Jaysh-i-Muhammad.<sup>34</sup> From there, he became a member of the TTP and remained a close associate of Ilyas Kashmiri, the chief of al-Qa`ida's paramilitary operations in Pakistan.<sup>35</sup>

The case of Iqbal and Gul Muhammad also revealed the connections between Punjabi militant groups and Pakistani Taliban fighters in the northwest. Authorities believe that Iqbal and Gul Muhammad, who were captured in October 2009, were in charge of militancy in Punjab, serving as the link between the central TTP leadership in Waziristan and the Punjabi Taliban

responsible for attacks in Punjab.<sup>36</sup> It is also thought that the two had a role in most of the major attacks in Punjab, including the three coordinated attacks in Lahore and the one on the GHQ in October.<sup>37</sup>

These attacks clearly displayed the increased strategic, operational and tactical level of collaboration among the groups.<sup>38</sup> In December 2009, it is believed that the deadly alliance targeted Pakistan's main intelligence agency, the ISI, with a car bomb in Multan, killing 12 people including security personnel.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the busy Moon market in Lahore was targeted by this same network as well, resulting in the deaths of 49 civilians.<sup>40</sup> Militants bombed a high-profile military mosque in Rawalpindi in December 2009, killing senior military officers and their families, including a major-general, brigadier, and many officers; a total of 40 people died in that attack, including 17 children.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, the nexus has started violent attacks in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. From June 2009 to January 2010, 20 people have been killed and 125 injured—mostly security personnel—in five terrorist attacks in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.<sup>42</sup> The attacks have included suicide bombings. It is ironic that the same militants who previously focused their operations on Indian-administered Kashmir are now targeting their own side of the border.

### Conclusion

Al-Qa`ida, the TTP and the Punjabi Taliban network are driven by a shared Islamist ideology. Nevertheless, authorities believe that the relationship largely remains tactical. The Pashtun Taliban and the Arab-led al-Qa`ida

organization provide money, sanctuary, training facilities and suicide bombers, while Punjabi Taliban factions provide logistical support in Punjabi cities, including target identification and managing and assisting suicide bombers from the northwest.<sup>43</sup>

The nexus reportedly share each others' seminaries, sanctuaries, training facilities and jihadist cadres to conduct terrorist activities across Pakistan.<sup>44</sup> South Asia analyst Bruce Riedel explained, "These groups are fighting for recruits from the same Punjabi families and clans that the Pakistani army recruits from for its officer corps."<sup>45</sup> Military operations in FATA—particularly the October 2009 military offensive in South Waziristan—and drone attacks on Taliban safe houses have dispossessed the militants from their land and destroyed their physical infrastructure. This may be one reason why the battlefield has shifted to Punjab.

As stated by Pakistani defense analyst Lieutenant-General (retired) Talat Masood, "the increasing cooperation among the three groups is a serious threat to Pakistan but the Pakistan army and the intelligence agencies are aware of it."<sup>46</sup> While the political government is playing down the threat, Pakistan's army accepts that these militants have joined forces and claims that the military is fully cognizant of this new development.<sup>47</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether Pakistan's security forces will be able to turn back the tide of jihadist violence sweeping across the country.

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26, 2009; Tavernise et al.

30 Personal interview, Khan.

31 Perlez; Khan et al., "Punjabi Taliban Threat is Growing, Pakistan Fears Shift in Control."

32 Declan Walsh, "Pakistani Army Facing Threat from Punjabi, al-Qaeda and Taliban Militants," *Guardian*, October 12, 2009.

33 Ibid.

34 Amir Mir, "Punjabi Taliban Avenge Qari Zafar's Death," *The News International*, March 9, 2010.

35 Ilyas Kashmiri was thought to have died in a U.S. drone strike in South Waziristan in September 2009. It appears, however, that he survived the strike and is still active. For other details, see Hassan Abbas, "Deciphering the Attack on Pakistan's Army Headquarters," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2009; Alex Rodriguez and Zulfikar Ali, "Pakistani Al Qaeda Leader Killed in U.S. Strike," *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2009; "Ilyas Kashmiri Alive, Lays Out Future Terror Strategy," *Daily Times*, October 15, 2009; Eli Lake, "Dead" al-Qaeda Terrorist Surfaces for Media," *Washington Times*, October 15, 2009.

36 Sajjad Syed.

37 Ibid.

38 Alex Rodriguez, "Militants Attack 3 Police Sites in Lahore, Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2009.

39 "12 Die in Attack on ISI Offices in Multan," *The News International*, December 9, 2009.

40 Syed Saleem Shahzad, "Taliban Expand Terror Campaign in Pakistan's Punjab," *Thaindian News*, December 9, 2009.

41 Pamela Constable and Shaiq Hussain, "At Least 40 People Killed in Pakistan Attack," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2009.

42 Zafar Iqbal, "Taliban Reach Kashmir," *GroundReport.com*, January 19, 2010.

43 Tavernise et al.

44 Mir, "South Punjab Threat."

45 Khan et al., "Punjabi Taliban Threat is Growing, Pakistan Fears Shift in Control."

46 Rabeel Khan, "Al-Qaeda-TTP and Punjabi Taliban Forge Strong Connections," *CentralAsiaOnline.com*, March 1, 2010.

47 Ibid.