

tactical to strategic shifts, greater resistance will be encountered.

The Pakistan military's learning and adaptation has been characterized by many analysts inside and outside of Pakistan as a cumulative "learning by doing" process,⁵⁵ suggesting that there will be gradual adjustments over time within Pakistan's approach to counterinsurgency rather than a dramatic doctrinal shift⁵⁶ or wholesale adoption of Western militaries' "best practices" by way of U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24. This seemingly languid pace of Pakistani adaptation will continue to be the result of finite and overstretched resources,⁵⁷ the inherently difficult pace of organizational adaptation,⁵⁸ and the divergence of Pakistani strategic interests in the region from the United States and NATO.⁵⁹

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tegic leadership was coming to terms with this insight, made by outside observers including Johnson and Mason, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Durrani; Stephen P. Cohen and Shuja Nawaz, "Mastering Counterinsurgency: A Workshop Report," Brookings Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series, July 7, 2009.

⁵⁶ Mullick argues this indicates a doctrinal shift (p. 23) but conversations with other analysts including Shuja Nawaz and Moeed Yusuf imply otherwise—that this is a more graduated adaptation and that doctrinal shift will not occur without a serious investment in retraining through the establishment of a staff college or local counterinsurgency training school.

⁵⁷ Durrani; Lalwani.

⁵⁸ Austin Long, "Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence: The U.S. Military and Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1960-1970 and 2003-2006," RAND Counterinsurgency Study, No. 6, 2008.

⁵⁹ Moeed Yusuf, "Rational Institutional Design, Perverse Incentives, and the US-Pakistan Partnership in post-9/11," *Defence Against Terrorism Review* 2:1 (2009).

Karachi Becoming a Taliban Safe Haven?

By Imtiaz Ali

KARACHI IS THE backbone of Pakistan's economy and the country's largest city of 18 million people.¹ The city has a history of ethnic and sectarian violence, yet in the last few years it has managed to maintain relative peace. Since 2009, however, there has been an uptick in violent activity in Karachi, culminating with the December 28, 2009 bombing of a Shi'a Ashura religious procession that left more than 30 people dead.² The attack was not only followed by an unprecedented level of looting, but it plunged Karachi into a fresh wave of targeted killings.³

These developments are alarming because the destabilization of Karachi would have profound effects on Pakistan. Karachi houses Pakistan's central bank and its largest stock exchange, and generates 68% of the government's revenue and 25% of the country's gross domestic product.⁴

It is clear that fighters from multiple Taliban factions are increasingly moving to the city. Militants continue to flee U.S. drone strikes and Pakistani military operations in the country's northwest tribal regions. In fact, two months ago news reports speculated that Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar himself shifted his base from Quetta to Karachi.⁵ Between late

¹ Pamela Constable, "Bombing and Fire Disrupt a Fragile Peace in Karachi, Pakistan," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2010.

² A faction of the Pakistani Taliban initially took credit for the attack, but the government blamed Lashkar-i-Jhangvi. See "Suicide Bombing in Karachi Kills 30," CBS News, December 28, 2009; "Taliban Claim Karachi Suicide Attack Responsibility," *The Nation*, December 30, 2009; Geo TV, December 28, 2009; Amir Wasim, "Malik Blames LJ for Karachi Ashura Blast," *Dawn*, January 15, 2010.

³ Salis bin Perwaiz, "Political Violence Continues on Fourth Day," *The News*, January 11, 2010.

⁴ Faisal Aziz and Robert Birsel, "Pakistan's Karachi the Taliban Revenue Engine – Mayor," Reuters, December 2, 2009.

⁵ "Mullah Omar in Karachi: Report," *The Nation*, November 20, 2009; Eli Lake, Sara A. Carter and Barbara Slavin, "Taliban Chief Hides in Karachi," *Washington Times*, November 20, 2009; Ron Moreau, "Sheltered in

October and early November 2009, Karachi police arrested more than 450 illegal foreign residents, mostly Afghan and Uzbek citizens suspected of having ties to militants.⁶ Moreover, 70 militants with access to suicide jackets, rocket launchers and other explosives were arrested in the closing months of 2009.⁷

This article will provide background on the city of Karachi, including how it is home to jihadist and sectarian groups, as well as explaining why Taliban fighters are increasingly moving to the city.

Brief Demography of Karachi

Karachi is Pakistan's financial hub and its most populated city. It was the country's first capital after it achieved independence in 1947, until it was moved to Rawalpindi in 1958 and then Islamabad in 1960. Karachi is located in a strategic geographic position. It is on the shores of the Indian Ocean and is a major Pakistani port. It is a primary entryway for supplies to U.S. and NATO troops in neighboring Afghanistan. Its population has grown to more than 18 million, and it is home to several different ethnicities and religions.⁸ Although 96% of the city is Muslim, it is estimated that 30% of that number ascribes to the minority Shi'a faith; this has resulted in sectarian violence over the years between minority Shi'a and majority Sunni Muslims.⁹ Karachi is home to a sprawling network of *madrasas* (religious schools) and jihadist militant groups.

The city is home to the world's largest number of Pashtuns. In Karachi, the more than 3.5 million Pashtuns¹⁰ are second only to the Urdu-speaking Muhajir,¹¹ who are the biggest ethnic

Karachi," *Newsweek*, November 28, 2009.

⁶ Farhan Sharif and Naveen Mangi, "Karachi Police Hunt Terror Cells as Taliban Flee Army," Bloomberg, November 6, 2009.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Aziz and Birsel.

⁹ This is according to Pakistan's 1998 census. For details, see www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/pdfs/Karachi.pdf.

¹⁰ "Editorial: Prospects of a 'Quick Finish' in Swat," *Daily Times*, May 13, 2009.

¹¹ Muhajir, politically organized into the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), are the descendants of Urdu-speaking Indians who migrated from India after the creation of Pakistan in 1947. They are the biggest com-

community in Karachi, dominate the city's administration, are constantly at odds with the Pashtuns, and are ardently anti-Taliban. Karachi's demography has been changing rapidly, attracting people due to its vast business opportunities and educational facilities—both secular and religious. The city suffers from high ethnic tensions and cultural and religious divisions. Karachi's police estimate that there are more than 5,000 armed militants from various jihadist groups located in the city, which has further disrupted the complex fabric of society.¹² Once known as the "Paris of Asia" or the "City of Lights," Karachi is unfortunately quickly turning into a lawless city where banks are looted and businessmen kidnapped for ransom.

Home to Jihadist and Sectarian Groups

Since the early 1990s, Karachi has been a safe haven for leaders of several militant groups such as Harkat-ul-Mujahidin (HuM), Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LJ), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI), Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Jaysh-i-Muhammad (JM), Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (LT) and lately Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Al-Qa`ida operatives have also been found in the city, seen through the arrest of Ramzi bin al-Shibh on September 11, 2002. U.S. journalist Daniel Pearl was abducted and beheaded in Karachi in 2002. Moreover, when leading politician Benazir Bhutto's convoy was traveling through Karachi in 2007, she narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in which more than 100 people were killed. Karachi was also used as a launching point for the LT militants who attacked India's financial hub of Mumbai in 2008; moreover, the Mumbai militants reportedly coordinated their assault via cellular telephone with a contact in Karachi.¹³

Karachi has also witnessed several bloody conflicts in recent decades. Three of these conflicts—in 1986, 1994 and

munity in Karachi and dominate the city's administration. During the 1990s, the MQM was involved in bloody factional clashes. Now, however, they are part of the coalition government in Pakistan's parliament. They are anti-Taliban.

12 Huma Yusuf, "The Karachi Question: Ethnicity or Extremism?" *Dawn*, April 30, 2009.

13 Huma Yusuf, "Launch Point for Mumbai Attacks, Karachi Faces Rising Militancy," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2009.

2007—were serious and hundreds of people were killed. Conflicts in Karachi generally erupt over ethnic issues and the struggle for power and resources in the city. Muhajir, Pashtuns and Sindhis have been at the center of the clashes. During the last 15 years, however, the nature of the violence in Karachi has shifted toward sectarianism and jihadism. The Afghan jihad of the 1980s left a deep impact on the city. Karachi attracted not only thousands of Afghan refugees, but it was overrun with weapons and jihadist outfits as well as sectarian militant groups. Since the mid-1990s, Sunni and Shi`a sectarian groups have fought each other in bloody battles. Even groups within the Sunni sect have engaged one another.

Almost all of the sectarian and jihadist outfits in Karachi trace their background to the city's leading *madrasas* where they received ideological and financial support during the anti-Soviet jihad and in the post-jihad era. These *madrasas* may be playing a similar role today.

Madrasa Networks

During General Zia-ul-Haq's 11-year rule, Karachi experienced the tremendous growth of *madrasa* networks. According to government estimates, out of a total of 1,248 *madrasas* in Sindh Province, at least 869 of these exist in Karachi.¹⁴ The Madrasa Federation of Deobandi Wafaq al-Madaris, however, claims to have 1,872 *madrasas* in Karachi.¹⁵ It also puts the number of Deobandi *madrasas* at 1,500, Barevi *madrasas* at 300 and Shi`a and Ahl-e-Hadith at 36 each.

Deobandi *madrasas* have played a leading role in violence.¹⁶ The Binori town *madrasa* in Karachi has always been at the forefront of jihad. Jihadist leaders from Afghanistan and Pakistan, and some from Arab countries, frequently visited Binori for religious and spiritual guidance during the 1980s and 1990s. The leader of the Binori town *madrasa*, Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai (who was killed in Karachi in 2004) enjoyed close relations with the Taliban and

al-Qa`ida leaders in Afghanistan, including Mullah Omar and Usama bin Laden.¹⁷ The Binori *madrasa* is also accused of fanning anti-Shi`a and anti-Barelvi violence. Four leading scholars of the *madrasa* were killed in retaliation by other sects.¹⁸ The Binori *madrasa* is known for helping to sustain a number of jihadist outfits, including HuM, JM and SSP.¹⁹

Jamiatul Rasheed Ehsanabad, Jamia Ashraful Madaris, Jamia Ehsanul Uloom, Jamia Anwarul Quran, Madrasa Khalid Bin Walid, and Darul Uloom Rehmania are some of the prominent *madrasas* in Karachi that are suspected of having links to sectarian and jihadist groups.²⁰ These *madrasas* have

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attracted thousands of foreign students. According to government reports in 2003, 10,905 foreign students were in Karachi studying at *madrasas*.²¹ Due to strict government policies in recent years, their numbers have been significantly reduced, but the exact number of foreign students in Pakistani *madrasas* today is not known. As Taliban fighters move to Karachi, it is likely that they will find support from within the *madrasa* network.

17 Zarar Khan, "Senior Sunni Muslim Cleric Gunned Down in Karachi, Sparking Unrest," Associated Press, May 30, 2004.

18 "Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism," International Crisis Group, March 29, 2007.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 "Karachi: 11,000 Foreigners in Sindh Madaris."

Growing Taliban Activity in Karachi

U.S. drone attacks are proving to be one of the biggest challenges al-Qa`ida operatives and Taliban leaders have ever faced. Multiple al-Qa`ida and Taliban leaders have been killed by the drones, including the former head of the TTP, Baitullah Mehsud. The U.S. government has clearly increased its intelligence assets in the tribal region, evidenced by the rising number of successful strikes. As a result, al-Qa`ida and especially Taliban operatives find the only way to avoid such strikes is to limit their militant activities or shift to safer locations such as in Quetta and Karachi. According to local police officials in Karachi, TTP militants are heading to the city to seek shelter and rest, as well

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as funding. One Taliban source told reporters last year that Karachi is one of their main destinations for rest and to receive medical treatment. According to the source, every month a group of 20-25 militants arrive in Karachi where they rest for a month while a fresh group of militants replaces them in the region to fight.²²

Taliban fighters and other militant groups have long considered Karachi a safe location because it is unlikely the city would ever face a major military operation or drone attacks. Such a development could cause huge political and economic fallout and the ultimate destabilization of Pakistan.

Karachi’s municipal government, which is run by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), has warned about the possibility of the Taliban taking control of Karachi. There has been an alarming increase in bank robberies and kidnapping-for-ransom, both of which are considered major revenue

²² “Fear of Taliban Influx Looms in Karachi,” *Dawn*, May 17, 2009; Ashraf Khan and Nahal Toosi, “Taliban Finding Safety in Karachi,” Associated Press, May 17, 2009.

generators for the Taliban. There are also a rising number of incidences of Taliban militants threatening music and CD shop owners. In Pashtun-dominated areas such as Sohrab Goth and Baldia Town, walls and bridges carry graffiti such as “Long Live the Taliban” and “Welcome to the Taliban.”²³ The Pashtun community denounces the Taliban and claims that the MQM is exaggerating the level of Taliban activity in Karachi for political reasons.

When Taliban militants from the tribal areas come to Karachi, they reportedly have taken refuge in the city’s *kacha abadi* (slums) such as Quid Abad, Sohrab Goth and Kiamaree, and in the hills of Manghopir and Orangi town and other low-income areas. Taliban militants such as Hasan Mahmood, a senior aide in the TTP, was reportedly arrested in Karachi.²⁴ Karachi police have arrested many militants associated with the TTP, including one militant identified as the TTP’s Karachi chief, Bahadar Khan (known as Sadiq), from the crowded Sohrab Goth area of the city.²⁵ Hundreds of thousands of displaced Pakistanis and Afghan refugees are based in these slums.

An increase in instability in Karachi could put supplies to Afghanistan at risk. The major slums are located on the outskirts of Karachi on the main eastern and western entry points into the city. Sohrab Goth, for example, is next to the super highway that is used for U.S. and NATO supply convoys that travel from Karachi to the Torkham border crossing into Afghanistan. In the past two years, these supplies have been occasionally disrupted in Karachi, allegedly by members of the TTP and other militant groups; insurgents have threatened supply drivers against carrying fuel supplies to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.²⁶ These disruptions, along with ethnic violence between Sindhi and Muhajir, and between Pashtun and

²³ Naveen A. Mangi and Farhan Sharif, “Taliban Hole Up in Karachi as Pakistan Weeds Out Swat Valley,” *Bloomberg*, June 19, 2009.

²⁴ Samir Quraish, “CID Report Reveals Taliban Presence in Karachi,” *Daily Times*, February 28, 2009.

²⁵ “Three More TTP Militants Arrested,” *Daily Times*, November 2, 2009.

²⁶ “Taliban Warn Truckers to Stop Supplying Fuel to NATO Forces in Afghanistan,” *Asian News International*, June 21, 2008.

Muhajir, have led to shutdowns of the super highway.

It has not been easy for the police to arrest Taliban suspects in Karachi. Approximately 200,000 displaced refugees from the conflict zones in the North-West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas have migrated to Karachi in the last year due to ongoing military operations. This makes it difficult for the police to identify militants.

Conclusion

Karachi is a vital city for Pakistan as well as for its allies. The city has a complex demography suffering from ethnic tension and sectarian clashes. Both the MQM and jihadist groups have a large cache of arms and ammunition in Karachi.²⁷ It is home to various militant and sectarian groups, and violence between them could easily flare. Approximately 70% of supplies for U.S. and NATO forces in neighboring Afghanistan depend on this port city.²⁸

Despite these important concerns, the Taliban are not close to overtaking the city. Karachi has a powerful and liberal civil society and progressive political parties. It is a modern, Westernized city with a large education base that should repulse trends of Talibanization. Nevertheless, if left unchecked, the growing influence of the Taliban in Karachi could spark violent clashes and eventual destabilization, which would have powerful ramifications for Pakistan.

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²⁷ A large amount of arms and ammunition is available in Karachi because of the city’s large size, and its role in ethnic and sectarian violence during past decades.

²⁸ Imtiaz Gul, “US-NATO in the Eye of Taliban Storm,” *Weekly Pulse* [Islamabad], December 18, 2008.