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Issue Brief

The Phenomenon of Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

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The recent wave of suicide terror strikes in Pakistan killing nearly 4, 550 people and targeting mosques, market places, government buildings and even the highly-secured headquarters of the country's Army and Navy has brought to the fore not just the tenacity of the Jihadi outfits but their ability to destabilise the nuclear-armed state. Since its decision to join the US-led war on terror, the surge of suicide attacks has turned Pakistan into what a commentator describes, "suicide bombing capital of the world."[i] As Pakistan strives to cope with the terror wave, many wonder whether it will succeed as long as the political and ideological factors that spawned this menace remain unaddressed. This paper attempts to explain the role of state ideology and policy of sponsoring Jihadi brand of terrorism in the proliferation of suicide bombings in Pakistan.

Definition and Evolution

Suicide terrorism has spurred global concerns since the events of September 11 for its rising frequency and ability to cause fear and mayhem. The main reason why such attacks are increasing steadily is because they are of high-impact and cost-effective as compared to more traditional terrorist tactics such as car bombings and assassinations. With the exception of weapons of mass destruction, there is no other type of attack that is more effective in terms of inflicting the greatest possible damage on the opponents with the least number of cadres.[ii] Suicide attacks worldwide, according to some analysts, represent only 3 to 4 percent of all terrorist attacks but

account for more than 30 percent of all terrorism related deaths.[iii] Apart from communicating strategic message to the target audience, suicide attacks help enhance legitimacy of the terrorist groups among their constituent publics. In other words, suicide terrorism not only serves distinct political and strategic goals of the organizations which use this tactic, but also conveys symbolic message to various audiences. It is thus a complex combination of *instrumental* and *expressive* violence (ritualistic, symbolic and communicative), which has meaning both for the victims (anxiety and humiliation) and for the perpetrators (status, prestige and reputation).[iv] All of this explains why suicide attack as a weapon of terror is usually chosen by weaker parties against materially stronger opponents.

Suicide terrorism can be defined as a premeditated attack by an individual who willingly uses himself or herself to carry or deliver explosives to attack or kill or maim others. Central to this definition is the requirement of self-immolation to execute an operation, which means the death of the perpetrator is the precondition for the success of the attack.[v] However, suicide terrorism is not a *sui generis* phenomenon because it is similar to terrorism, which has a main priority of creating an environment of anarchy and unpredictability just as regular terrorism does.[vi]

In any case, suicide terrorism is not a new phenomenon. In the modern world, it was first introduced by the Japanese *Kamikaze* pilots who rammed fully fueled fighter planes into the U. S. naval fleet in the Pacific towards the end of the World War II.[vii] In its current form, targeting both military as well as civilian, suicide terrorism made its first appearance in Lebanon in the early 1980s. The killing of nearly 300 American and French peacekeeping forces by a truck-bomb in October 1983 in Beirut marked the rebirth of a 'new' weapon in the terrorist's arsenal.[viii] In the following decades, suicide terrorism spread to other countries and became a permanent element of various theatres of conflict around the world, notably Sri Lanka, Israel, Russia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Structural and Ideological Factors

In explaining the phenomenon of suicide terrorism, analysts have identified a variety of factors, which, they argue account for its recent proliferation in the conflict-

prone regions of the world. While some view this as a product of religious extremism, particularly the radical Islamic fundamentalism, others argue that the root cause is not religion, which only serves the instrumental function in recruiting and motivating potential suicide terrorists, and mobilising public support for such missions. It is, instead, attributed either to foreign occupation or aspirational deprivation and denial of basic human needs such as identity and security or to a combination of all.[ix] However, the role played by Islamic extremism in the recent upsurge of suicide terror cannot be ignored. The radical Muslim thinkers and activists have not only legitimised suicide attacks as the "highest form of jihad.", but also glorified such acts by infusing the culture of "martyrdom" and idolising the perpetrators as *istishhadis* (self-chosen martyrs).[x] In Pakistan, for instance, the suicide bombers are told that they are superior to other Jihadists because the *fidai* (suicide bomber) makes supreme sacrifice for Allah.[xi]

In contrast, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka who produced more suicide bombers in the 1990s than their counterparts in the West Asia were not motivated by religion. Likewise, the terrorist groups active in the region during the 1960s and 1970s that had secular nationalist goals or revolutionary ideals, many deriving their inspiration from the ideas of Marx and Lenin. Further, terrorists in the past selected their victims carefully, whereas in contemporary terrorism, there exists no selecting of victims as such since the victims could be anyone. Thus, with the nature of terrorism changing overtime, the cause, motives and even the strategy of terrorists have changed.[xii] If suicide attacks have become the terrorists' weapon of choice, this is partly because of its lethality and publicity it evokes. As noted, the primary target of the suicide attack is not those actually killed or injured in the attack, but those made to witness it. In greater part, however, it is the disproportionate socio-psychological impact that suicide terror strikes have on the enemy makes them an attractive option for the terrorist groups. Each successful incident has inspired 'copycat groups' to adopt suicide terror as a strategy either to augment their profiles or to 'outbid' others.[xiii] As the martyrdom operations, for instance, became the basis for mobilization in the wake of the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Islamist outfits based in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) turned to suicide terror as tactic to ensure their presence and not to lose out in an environment of competitive Jihadi-centred politics.

The Pakistani Case

In examining the causation of the phenomenon, Robert Pape, a noted expert on suicide terrorism has concluded that religion is rarely the root cause of suicide terrorism; it is instead a response to foreign occupation. Suicide terrorist campaigns, according to Pape, are primarily nationalistic, not religious.[xiv] Based on the contention that suicide terrorism occurs when there is a military occupation, some analysts have attributed the recent surge of suicide attacks in Pakistan to its decision to support the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.[xv] It is also argued that the American drone strikes in the northwestern tribal areas of Pakistan, which is awash with Taliban and Al-Qaeda-linked networks, together with Pakistani army's incursion to hunt down the militants triggered the spurt of suicide terror with the emergence of the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP), a coalition of thirteen disparate militant groups under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud from South Waziristan. Among various other factors identified by many Pakistani analysts that account for the (FATA) and North Western Frontier Provinces (NWFP) turning into the "factories of suicide bombers" include the geographic proximity to Afghanistan, poor governance, poverty, political and economic injustices which have fuelled terrorist violence in the area.[xvi]

The factors listed above have no doubt contributed in varying degrees to the rise of the phenomenon of suicide terrorism in Pakistan. However, what needs to be taken into consideration for a fuller explanation is the state-sponsored Jihadi brand of Islamist ideology, using it as an instrument of its external policy until it was forced in the aftermath of September 11 events to join the US-led war on terror. With the state turning against the "Army of Islam" it created and sustained for long, the Islamist outfits were in the risk of losing legitimacy and along with it, the political leverage they had enjoyed in the past. Further, when the state having failed to rein in them by pitting one against another sought to pacify them through the use of force, most of the Jihadi groups already feeling disillusioned and betrayed directed their wrath against their former patron. As a Pakistani columnist has recently commented, "The banned organizations, which were once acknowledged as strategic assets of the state, have nurtured narratives of extremism or destruction. Although their focus initially was on delivering the Muslims of Kashmir, Afghanistan and other regions from tyrannical

rule, a review of their literature and stated objectives lays bare sectarian motives and ambition for achieving an ultra-orthodox theocracy in Pakistan."[xvii]

With the shift in the Jihadists' strategy after the Lal Masjid assault in July 2007, the government became a primary target for them. More than 500 armed forces personnel were killed in the suicide attacks in the 13 months following the incident, while only 79 deaths were reported between July 2006 and July 2007. As compared to the total of 14 suicide attacks in Pakistan's 60 years history, the country suffered 47 suicide bombings in the last six months of the year 2007.[xviii] It is thus arguable that central to the issue of suicide terror in Pakistan is the role of the Pakistani state in creating an 'Islamic Frankenstein' it could no longer control. In fact, Pakistani promotion of the ideology of jihad and logistical support to Taliban in Afghanistan fractured the social mosaic by setting off the cycle of sectarian violence. This, together with proliferation of small arms and intervention of external powers, turned Pakistan a "failed state" in popular perceptions. If Pakistan has become the global centre of 'martyrdom missions' or the haunting ground for the death squads of various inter-linked terrorist outfits, it is largely the result of the state-led Islamisation programme initiated in the 1970s with a devastating impact on the country's social landscape.

As a recent study of Pakistani curriculum and textbooks titled *The Subtle Subversion* carried out by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) reveals, it is not only the *madrassas* which are indoctrinating children in the politics of hate and bigotry, but the country's public schools are equally responsible for the rise of militancy and regressive thought. According to the SDPI report, curriculum and textbooks are the "distortion of facts and omissions that serve to substantially alter the nature and significance of actual events in our history; insensitivity to the existing religious diversity of the nation; incitement to militancy and violence, including encouragement of jihad and *shahadat*, perspectives that encourage prejudice, bigotry and discrimination towards fellow citizens, especially women and religious minorities, and other nations, a glorification of war and the use of force."[xix] For example, the 9th standard students of 'Pakistan Studies' are being taught that "one of the reasons of the downfall of the Muslims in the sub-continent was the lack of the spirit of jihad. In Islam, Jihad is very important - - - The person who offers his life

never dies. All the prayers nurture one's passion of Jihad."[xx] According to an article published in *Newsline* magazine, the school going children in Pakistan are growing up learning that the Urdu equivalent of the alphabet A stands for *Allah*, B for *bandook* (gun) and J for *jihad*. Likewise, the Urdu letter for the T stands for *takrao* (collide), K for *khunjar* (dagger), H for *hijab* (veil) and Z for *zunoob* (sins) - which includes watching television, playing musical instruments and flying kites.[xxi] Under pressures from the West, when President Pervez Musharaff initiated reforms in the education system, he faced stiff resistance from the fundamentalist organisations and powerful clerics who demanded the status quo to be maintained. Interestingly, two most famous books used in suicide bomber training camps located at north and south Waziristan for religious lessons include the *Islam aur Fidai Hamlay* (Islam and Suicide Attacks) written by Mufti Abdul Bashar Qasmi and *Fazail-e-Jihad* (Virtues of Jihad) by Maulana Masood Azhar.[xxii]

Conclusion

It is thus fair to argue that unless sincere efforts are directed towards de-radicalizing the ideological basis of the contemporary of Pakistani state by changing the national discourse and official narratives, the use of military mite alone will not be adequate in combating the menace in the days ahead. Nor will the exploratory peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban represented by the TTP, which maintains a symbiotic relationship with Al-Qaeda, yield any tangible results, just as the past peace pacts did precious little in reducing violence. As long as certain religious authorities justify and provide credibility for this form of violence, and the ideological basis of the state undergoes a fundamental transformation, the phenomenon of suicide terrorism will likely persist with the ordinary Pakistanis suffering the consequences.

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[i] Amir Mir, "Pakistan Turned into Suicide Capital of the World", *Middle East Transparent*, July 3, 2009 available from http://www.metranspareent.com

[ii] Rod Nordland, Babak Dehghanpisheh and Larry Kaplow, "Surge of Suicide Bombers", *Newsweek,* Vol.150, Issue 5, August 13, 2007, pp. 30-32.

[iii] Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, no. 3 (August 2003), p. 343.

[iv] Christopher Coker, *Globalisation and Insecurity in the Twenty-first Century: NATO and the Management of Risk* (Adelhi Paper No. 345), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 40.

[v] The perpetrator's readiness to die in the process of committing a terrorist act is the acceptable definition of suicide terrorism among the scholars though they differ over the motivation and causation. See Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Assaf Mogahadam, "Defining Suicide Terrorism" in Ami Pedahzur (ed.), *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 13-24.

[vi] Bruce Hoffman, "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism", *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2003, pp. 40-47.

[vii] Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), , p. 13.

[viii] See Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 52-55.

[ix] For details, see Aswini K. Mohapatra, "Accounting for Religious Terrorism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia and Europe*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January-June 2004), pp. 54-67

[x] Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 140-142; David Bukay, "The Religious Foundations of Suicide Bombings', *Middle East Quarterly,* Vol. 13, Issue 4, Fall 2006, pp. 27-36

[xi] S. H. Tajik, "Insight into A Suicide Bomber Training Camp in Waziristan", *Combating Terrorism Centre*, West Point, March 2, 2010 available from < www.ctc.usma.edu/.../**insight-into-a-suicide-bomber-training**-camp-in>

[xii] Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 11-30.

[xiii] Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, p. 29-33.

[xiv] Pape, *Dying to Win*, pp. 21-30

[xv] Rohan Gunaratna and Khuran Iqbal, *Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero* (London: Raktion Books Ltd., 2011), pp. 17-45.

[xvi] "The Suicidal Attacks and Terrorist Threat in Pakistan: A report" available from www.victimsof**terror**.info/wp-content/.../Khurram-Paper-editted.pdf

[xvii] Muhammad Amir Rana, "Threat Perception", *Dawn,* October 24, 2011.

[xviii] See Manzar Zaidi, "Demographics of suicide terrorism", *Dawn*, August 5, 2011.

[xix] A. H. Nayyar and Ahmad Salim (eds.), *The Subtle Subversion: The State of*

Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan (Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Initiative, 2003) available at www.sdpi.org

[xx] Class 9-10; *Pakistan Studies,* p. 7 & 10 quoted in Farrrukh Saleem, "Curriculum of Hate", *The News,* June 8, 2008.

[xxi] "For Pak Kids, J is for Jihad", *Times of India,* January 14, 2009.

[xxii] S. H Tajik, "Insight into A Suicide Bomber."