



The Lahore Terrorist Attack and the Sanctimony of the Pakistani Leadership

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While Pakistan keeps on breeding terrorists and terrorist groups against its neighbours, it has been incessantly targeted by home grown terrorists domestically. Though it keeps on backing major terrorist groups and individuals, it pays a high price by losing its own innocent women and children in this strategic blunder of a policy that they have not abandoned. In a major terrorist attack, which is comparable to that of the Peshawar school attacks, a suicide bomber blew himself up in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park in Lahore, a crowded recreation facility, killing at least 70 people, including women and children, and injuring around 340 on March 29th 2016. Majority of the dead and injured were children and women, who were celebrating Easter Sunday there.¹ Though, initially, many accused the hands of foreign intelligence agencies in the attacks, making bleak attempts to shed off their own lacunae in preventing such attacks from taking place, the attack was claimed by Jamaatul Ahrar faction of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claiming that they targeted Christians.² Though there was intelligence regarding terrorists planning to carry out such attacks on soft targets, which was provided to local law enforcement agencies, but no action was taken, which could have prevented such slaughter of women and children in a children's recreation facility. The army stated that it had been long pushing the government to initiate action against Punjab-based extremist and terrorist groups, but the civilian government had shown lack of interest and wanted local law enforcement agencies to curb such groups, which they have miserably failed to do. That is the reason why the military, without consulting with the

civilian authorities, went ahead with a large-scale effect-based operation, using all resources available at its disposal.³ It widened the rift that already existed between the civilian and military leaderships. The conflict was brought in front of the general masses when in a joint press conference, the government and military spokesmen diverged over who could decide about engaging the army.⁴ However, with the direct initiative of the Prime Minister, there have been efforts of rapprochement between the two sides.

After the attacks at Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park, as per media reports, initially a list of 1600 terrorists and their facilitators was finalised from 63 outlawed and banned militant organizations operating in Punjab only, not assessing the rest of the country, which might come out with numbers that might astonish the Pakistani administrators themselves. The Punjab province has around 13,300 seminaries in which the Punjab police has given clean chit to only 540 seminaries. The suspect, Mohammad Yusuf, also belonged to such a local unassessed seminary, which was managed by Sipah-e-Sahaba, a militant group which has shown allegiance to the Islamic State (IS).⁵ The role and growth of these religious seminaries, and the people associated with it, remain a serious cause of worry not only for internal peace and stability of Pakistan, but also for the neighbours of Pakistan.

It can be noted here that Pakistani Intelligence remains worried about the growing presence of terrorists from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Sajna group) and the militant Islamic State group on the Afghan side of the border near Kurram Agency.⁶ Such religious seminaries remain breeding ground for sympathisers of such terrorist groups as well as base for new recruits. Prime Minister Sharif, facing such a crisis at hand as well as countering domestic political agitations, cancelled his proposed US visit for attending the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, where there was a proposal that he might meet his Indian counterpart on the sidelines of the Summit. The Prime Minister, in consultation with the Army, also decided to apprehend all individuals included in the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act. The Fourth Schedule comprises the elements found to be or suspected to be involved in anti-state activities, delivering hate speeches and/or activists of religious outfits not yet banned, but related with militancy in any way.⁷ However, such state policies also remain biased and selective in nature, and target and detain those individuals and groups, who threaten Pakistani state policy, not terrorism per se.

It should also be noted that most of the civilians who died in the recent attack belonged to the miniscule Christian minority (as per government reports, the present Christian population in Pakistan remain 1.59% of the total population)⁸, who have been targeted now and then by radicalized groups and organizations. Seventeen people were killed and 80 injured in two terrorist attacks on churches at Youhanabad on March 2015, where instead of arresting the perpetrators who committed such a crime, the government was swift to decry the lynching of two Muslim youth by an angry mob, which took place after the attacks and the local law enforcement agents went on harassing Christian families living in the area for some time after the attack.⁹ It can be noted here that most of the reports that has been published has mostly avoided raising the threat that is persistent to the religious minorities in the country.¹⁰ The issue of targeted persecution of the Christian minority was brought up by various reports and news. But when Governor Salman Taseer was assassinated, as he protected a Christian woman from death penalty, as she was accused of blasphemy, his assassinator, Mumtaz Qadri's execution created significant ripples in various corners of Pakistan declaring Qadri to be a martyr, showing the deep seated hatred towards religious minorities and the fast radicalization of Pakistani society.¹¹ The Chehlum¹² of Mumtaz Qadri, that was held last week, created a challenge for law enforcement agencies when they ransacked government buildings in Islamabad, where protesters clashed with the police and other law-enforcement personnel all day long. According to a police estimate, at least 60 people were injured in clashes with the unruly mob. They included 13 FC, 11 Rangers and 17 police personnel. The army was called in to protect important buildings, such as Parliament House, the Presidency, the Prime Minister's House and the Supreme Court, under Article 245 of the Constitution.¹³ Such incidents occurred while the Easter Sunday attack was taking place.

To defer attention from the failure to curb terrorist attacks in major cities as well as growing radicalization of Pakistani society, the government claimed to have detained an Indian intelligence agent by the name of Kulbhushan Yadav, alias Hussain Mubarik Patel, who was allegedly deputed to promote unrest in Balochistan and Karachi, and was functioning from Chabahar, Iran, where he had an established jewellery business.¹⁴ Pakistan formally asked the Iranian government for proactive support in dismantling the alleged Indian intelligence network that is said to be operating from Chabahar.¹⁵ To complicate issues further, without giving due diligence to inquire about such arrests, the Indian High Commissioner Gautam Bambawale was summoned to the Foreign Office for receiving the protest of the Pakistani government, while the

matter was also raised with visiting Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, though the Pakistani allegation was denied by the Iranian administration. In a hurry, the issue was also intimated to P-5 and EU members through the Pakistani missions there.¹⁶ The manner in which the issue of catching an intelligence operative was highlighted in front of international leaders and media was criticized even by Pakistani intelligentsia. Former Foreign Minister Sardar Asif Ahmad Ali has also stated that Pakistan hurriedly brought the issue of the Indian spy Kulbhushan Yadav's confessional statement to media a few days prior to an important visit by the Iranian President to Pakistan, which damaged Pak-Iran relations. He further stated that Pakistan, either on its own or at the behest of some other countries, committed a blunder regarding making such allegations.¹⁷ However, in a press conference convened later, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan expressed confidence that Tehran would never act against Pakistan. He deplored attempts to create an impression that Iran was facilitating actions of Indian intelligence agencies against Pakistan.¹⁸ The spy imbroglio further became messier when the former German ambassador to Bahrain, Kuwait, and Syria, Gunter Mulack, made the claim while giving a speech in Karachi that Kulbhushan Yadav, was kidnapped "by the Taliban and sold" to Pakistani intelligence.¹⁹ The Pakistani Foreign Office has even briefed diplomats from Arab and ASEAN countries on April 15th and called upon New Delhi to stop interference for regional peace and stability.²⁰

Pakistan has used China to prevent Maulana Masood Azhar, the founder of Jaish-e-Muhammed and mastermind behind many terrorist attacks in India, along with that on the Indian Parliament in 2001, from being branded as a terrorist in the United Nations shows the lack of spine the Pakistani decision makers suffer from by using China more than once to veto the ban from getting passed. Fourteen out of fifteen nations, which include the US, UK and France, backed the ban to be implemented, but virtual veto used by China blocked the ban from taking place.

China has vetoed Azhar from being labelled as a terrorist, though Jaish-e-Muhammed has been branded as a terrorist organisation by the UN. It claimed that Azhar did not fit the technicalities and requirements that have been laid down by the Security Council, without providing any details for such a virtual veto that they exercised. The External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj raised the issue with the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi at a bilateral meeting in Moscow on the sidelines of the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral meeting. She stated the importance of listing of Masood Azhar in the UN 1267 Committee and emphasised that as

common victims of terrorism, China and India should cooperate in combating this challenge, and agreed to remain in touch on this matter and the need for both the ministers to meet more frequently.²¹

There is no doubt in saying that Pakistan will be witnessing such attacks in the future within its territory, as it protects Masood Azhar and his associates with more vigil and tenacity than its own citizens, women, children and the religious minorities. It still distinguishes between good and bad terrorists, maintaining an ambiguity within its own counter terrorist operations and policies.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

Endnotes:

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¹¹ Mumtaz Qadri was an Elite Commando and was a part of the special bodyguards for the governor.

¹² Chehlum is a Shia Muslim religious observance that occurs forty days after the Day of Ashura. It commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad, which falls on the 20th day of the month of Safar.

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