

Defining the Punjabi Taliban Network

By Hassan Abbas

ON MARCH 30, 2009, militants launched a deadly assault on a police training center outside Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's Punjab Province. Eight police cadets were killed.¹ Less than a month earlier, on March 3, gunmen in Lahore ambushed members of the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team, killing at least eight people. Punjab, the most populated of Pakistan's provinces, has largely escaped the bloodshed plaguing the country's troubled northwest.² Yet since 2007, violence has escalated in the province. The bold terrorist attacks in Pakistan's heartland—within Punjab Province and in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad—show that local logistical support for these attacks is attributable to what is often labeled the “Punjabi Taliban” network.³ The major factions of this network include operatives from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan and Jaysh-i-Muhammad—all groups that were previously strictly focused on Kashmir and domestic sectarian violence.

Members of these groups are increasingly supporting Taliban elements from Pakistan's tribal regions to conduct attacks in sensitive cities such as Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Lahore. Ongoing investigations into the Marriott Hotel bombing that rocked Islamabad in September 2008, in which dozens of Punjabi suspects were arrested and interrogated,⁴ demonstrate the

role played by Punjabi militants.⁵ One investigator working on the Marriott attack revealed that “all evidences of the terrorist bombing led to South Waziristan via Jhang [a city in Punjab where Lashkar-i-Jhangvi has strong links]. The truck that was rammed into the hotel was also from Jhang.”

This article attempts to define the Punjabi Taliban network, in addition to profiling the three main factions that contribute to its ranks.

Who are the “Punjabi Taliban”?

The Punjabi Taliban network is a loose conglomeration of members of banned militant groups of Punjabi origin—sectarian as well as those focused on the conflict in Kashmir—that have developed strong connections with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Afghan Taliban and other militant groups based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).⁶ They shuttle between FATA and the rest of Pakistan, providing logistical support to FATA- and Afghan-based militants to conduct terrorist operations deep inside Pakistan. Between March 2005 and March 2007 alone, for example, about 2,000 militants from southern and northern Punjab Province reportedly moved to South Waziristan and started different businesses in an effort to create logistical support networks.⁷ Given their knowledge about Punjabi cities and security structure, they have proved to be valuable partners for the TTP as it targets cities in Punjab, such as Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad.⁸

Perhaps the best explanation of the Punjabi Taliban's structure came from Tariq Pervez, the newly appointed head of Pakistan's nascent National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA): “ideas, logistics, cash [comes] from the Gulf. Arab guys, mainly Egyptians and Saudis, are on hand to provide the

chemistry. Veteran Punjabi extremists plot the attacks, while the Pakistan Taliban provides the martyrs.”⁹

The name “Punjabi Taliban” was first used for ethnic Punjabis associated with Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam (HuJI) who, under the leadership of Qari Saifullah Akhtar, went to support and join the regime of Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s.¹⁰ The second time the name was used was in 2001-2003 when former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf banned some militant and sectarian groups that had a support base in Punjab.¹¹ As a result, some of these elements began moving to FATA to seek safe havens and establish new camps. These Punjabi militants also reportedly established separate training centers in FATA, especially in North Waziristan.¹² The most recent use of the name began in 2007, when Maulvi Nazir, a militant leader who with some official Pakistani support challenged Uzbek foreign fighters residing in South Waziristan, was hailed by some as a leader of the Punjabi Taliban. This allegation arose because Maulvi Nazir attracted many Punjabi recruits from banned organizations to fight Uzbek foreign fighters.¹³ The plan worked, but not without creating another frightening menace in the shape of a reenergized “Punjabi Taliban.”

The current Punjabi Taliban network has a number of key features. First, it lacks any organization or command structure and operates as a loose network of elements from distinct militant groups. Members from Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ), Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Jaysh-i-Muhammad (JeM) and their various

1 Barry Newhouse, “Pakistani Taliban Claim Responsibility in Lahore Police Attack,” *Voice of America*, March 31, 2009.

2 This consists of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province, which both lie near the tumultuous border with Afghanistan.

3 Although Baitullah Mehsud, the head of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), accepted responsibility for the March 30 attack on the police academy, there are witnesses who heard some of the terrorists conversing in Seraiki—a Punjabi dialect spoken in southern Punjab. This suggests that Punjabi militants either orchestrated the attack, or at least collaborated with the TTP. See Sabrina Tavernise and Sharon Otterman, “Militants Claim Responsibility for Pakistan Attack,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2009.

4 The suspects included members of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam.

5 Tariq Butt, “Mastermind of Marriott Bombing Escapes,” *The News*, November 17, 2008.

6 Saeed Shah, “Pakistan Blames Taliban for Lahore Attack Which Leaves 11 Dead,” *Guardian*, March 31, 2009; Rahimullah Yusufzai, “And Now There is Tehrik-e-Taliban Baluchistan,” *The News*, March 4, 2009.

7 Aamir Latif, “Punjabi Taliban Rise in Waziristan,” *IslamOnline.net*, April 22, 2009.

8 This information is based on an assessment shared by a senior official of the Ministry of Interior, Islamabad.

9 Kaustav Chakrabarti, “Taliban Spreads into Pakistan's Heart,” *Rediff.com*, February 13, 2009.

10 Amir Mir, “HUJI Chief Still at Large,” *The News*, September 23, 2008.

11 These groups include: Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Sipah-i-Muhammad (SMP), Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Tehrik-i-Jafria (TeJ), Jaysh-i-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-i-Tayyiba. When some of these groups started operating under new names—TeJ as Islami Tehrik Pakistan, SSP as Millat-i-Islami Pakistan, and JeM as Khudamul Islam—they were also banned in 2003.

12 Pir Zubair Shah and Salamn Masood, “U.S. Reported to Kill 12 in Pakistan,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2008.

13 Mushtaq Yusufzai, “Letter Explains Drive Against Foreign Militants in Waziristan,” *The News*, April 5, 2007.

splinter groups are all considered to be part of this loose network. Small cells unaffiliated with any larger group are also involved. This designation, however, does not apply to all members of LeJ, SSP, and JeM; it only refers to individuals or factions who shifted to FATA or collaborate closely with the TTP, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) and other militant groups from the tribal areas.

Second, many of these militants directly benefited from state patronage¹⁴ in the 1990s (and in some cases even later) and were professionally trained in asymmetrical warfare, guerrilla tactics and sabotage. The Punjabi Taliban are increasingly using heavy weapons and operating independent of the TTP or other militant groups that belong to the area. In late December 2008, for example, five Punjabi Taliban killed in a drone missile attack were observed “patrolling the area [South Waziristan] in pickup trucks mounted with heavy guns and had been firing at drones wherever they spotted them. The vehicles were camouflaged with mud and grass.”¹⁵ Third, most of the groups are Sunni and Salafist in orientation. A recent International Crisis Group report maintained that “violent Deobandi networks in Punjab lie at the root of Pakistan’s militancy problem.”¹⁶ The various components of the Punjabi Taliban owe their ideological training to hardline Deobandi *madrasa* networks that were nurtured and expanded in Punjab during President Zia ul-Haq’s years in office from 1977-1988.

Fourth, Punjabi militants are distinct from traditional Pashtun Taliban—in terms of language, dress and other identifiable features. The Punjabi Taliban are comparatively more educated, better equipped and technologically savvy than their Pashtun counterparts.¹⁷ This is a result of their upbringing in Punjab Province (which has better educational facilities) and urban linkages where

internet access and communications equipment are more readily available.

Fifth, unlike TTP cadres and Afghan Taliban, the Punjabi Taliban are purportedly more prone to mercenary actions. Pakistani intelligence sources claim that the Punjabi Taliban can be hired by domestic as well as regional operators to undertake freelance operations.¹⁸ For instance, it is widely known in Punjab law enforcement circles that many in the Punjabi Taliban began their careers as criminals.¹⁹ They originally moved to FATA (after their organizations were banned) to raise funds through drug smuggling and acquire weapons from the weapons markets of Dara Adam Khel.²⁰

Finally, the Punjabi Taliban are more likely to conduct *fidayin* attacks, which, in the South Asian context, implies that the attacker comes equipped with weapons and ammunition and is willing to fight until death. This is in contrast to suicide bombings, where the death of the attacker is required.

Major Factions of Punjabi Taliban Network

Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LeJ)

Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)

These two associated and banned groups are largely Punjab-based. Estimates place LeJ’s numbers at less than 1,000, and the group is almost entirely composed of militants. The SSP, which is also a political group, has been estimated to have around 100,000 active members, but the number of active fighters is probably in the 2,000-3,000 range.²¹ Although both groups are anti-Shi`a in essence, their members have been involved in pursuing other agendas vis-à-vis Kashmir and Afghanistan. For instance, one of the former members of the SSP, identified as “Commander Tariq,” reportedly heads the local Taliban in Darra Adam Khel, located between the Kohat area in the NWFP and Orakzai Agency in FATA.²²

Tariq, who has been monitored by law enforcement for years, was previously primarily engaged in sectarian attacks on the Shi`a. Lately, however, he has been found involved in kidnappings-for-ransom and attacks on foreigners. He played a central role in the February killing of a Polish engineer who was working in the area for an NGO.²³

Similarly, LeJ is believed to be the “lynchpin of the alignment between al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban and sectarian groups.”²⁴ LeJ was the first Punjab-based militant group to shift its members to Afghanistan during the Taliban era. This allowed it to establish early connections with al-Qa`ida’s leadership in the mid-1990s.

Many mosques and *madrasas* linked with LeJ and SSP in Punjab operate as the networking centers for the Punjabi Taliban.²⁵ After recent police interrogations of LeJ members, Karachi’s police chief publicly maintained that these militants “confessed to involvement in attacks on security forces and NATO suppliers in northern areas” of Pakistan while also admitting that they select “prospective fighters from the city [Karachi] and trains them in Waziristan and Miranshah for combating security forces.”²⁶ Despite being banned, both groups are active throughout Pakistan. Although LeJ has been targeted by Pakistan’s civil and military agencies, the SSP has largely managed to escape such targeting because of its larger support base, evident through the fact that prior SSP candidates have won national assembly seats.

Jaysb-i-Mubammad (JeM)

A splinter group of Harkat-ul Mujahidin (HuM),²⁷ JeM derives its strength from Punjab Province. Although banned in 2001 and having faced internal divisions, it is still operative and

14 This patronage developed because the country’s intelligence agencies utilized them for supporting the insurgency in Kashmir against India.

15 “Twin Drone Strikes Kill 5 Punjabi Taliban,” *Daily Times*, December 23, 2008.

16 International Crisis Group, “Pakistan: The Militant Jihadi Challenge,” March 13, 2009.

17 “Why Mehsud is Claiming Responsibility for Attacks,” *Daily Times*, April 8, 2009.

18 According to this allegation, Punjabi Taliban groups could undertake operations for radical Muslim groups, or even the Afghan or Indian intelligence agencies.

19 Personal interviews, Pakistani police officers, Punjab Province, March 2009.

20 Ibid.

21 These numbers are derived from various reports. They are only general estimates.

22 Personal interviews, Pakistani police officers, Punjab Province, March 2009.

23 Mazhar Tufail, “New Efforts Launched to Recover Remains of Polish Engineer,” *The News*, March 2, 2009.

24 “Pakistan: The Militant Jihadi Challenge.”

25 Saeed Shah, “Pakistan Bombings Spur Hunt for New al Qaeda Boss,” *Globe and Mail*, April 5, 2009.

26 Faraz Khan, “5 Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Activists Arrested,” *Daily Times*, April 9, 2009.

27 HuM, largely dismantled, had linkages with the Kashmir theater as well as with al-Qa`ida. Its leader, Fazlur Rahman Khalil, was a signatory to Usama bin Ladin’s 1998 declaration of war. It largely remains committed to the Kashmiri cause.

changes its name every few years to evade scrutiny. General estimates place its active ranks at around 5,000, with about 1,500-2,000 fighters.²⁸ Part of the reason its cadres are not pursued effectively is due to the incompetence of civilian law enforcement. Pakistani analyst Amir Rana, however, alleges that another factor explains why JeM has retained its strength: "The military wants to keep alive its strategic options in Kashmir."²⁹ Although the government of Pakistan claims they do not know the whereabouts of JeM's chief, Masood Azhar, it is rumored that he is with Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan.³⁰

Conclusion

More information is needed to fully understand the dynamics of the Punjabi Taliban network, but early indicators are that it is still in the initial stages of development. It caters to the aspirations, financial needs and worldview of those militants who believe that they were abandoned by the intelligence agencies in pursuance of Musharraf's directives after 9/11.³¹ Elements from groups such as Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (and its associated group, Jama`at-ud-Da`wa), however, are apparently not linked with the Punjabi Taliban because their command and control as well as hierarchical structure has remained intact over the years. In comparison, LeJ and JeM splintered into smaller groups due to policy differences among leaders and disagreements over properties and finances.

It is unlikely that the Punjabi Taliban network will transform itself into an organized group in the near future. Instead, it will remain a loose coalition of members from more prominent terrorist organizations. The purpose of undertaking operations under the moniker of the "Punjabi Taliban" is that they have the freedom to operate without the level of command and control inherent when working for the more established militant outfits.

Other analysts are less sanguine. Pakistani security analyst Zeenia Satti recently predicted that the "Punjabi chapter of the Tahrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan will emerge with a ferocity that may dwarf the Baitullah Mehsuds and the Mullah Fazlullahs of NWFP."³² This development would amount to a significant danger to Pakistan because Punjab is not only the most populous and prosperous province, but is home to the army headquarters and sensitive nuclear installations. Furthermore, a major component of the Pakistan Army comes from the province; if civil strife or civil war were to escalate and the army was called in to control law and order, it could cause cracks in the army's discipline. Although this is a worst case scenario, it is nevertheless critical to enhance Pakistan's law enforcement capacity and counterterrorism strategy to prevent this outcome from becoming a reality.

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²⁸ These numbers are derived from various reports. They are only general estimates.

²⁹ Chris Brummitt, "Pakistan Militants Strengthen in Heartland," Associated Press, March 23, 2009.

³⁰ A large JeM-controlled *madrassa* cum "physical activity center" in the heart of Masood Azhar's home city of Bahawalpur is still operational. Azhar reportedly launched his new book from there in early 2008.

³¹ Amir Mir, *The True Face of Jibadis: Inside Pakistan's Network of Terror* (Lahore: Mashal Books, 2005).

³² Zeenia Satti, "Post Mumbai Hype," *The News*, March 26, 2009.