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# Analyzing Suicide Attacks in Pakistan

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### Introduction

Suicide attacks<sup>1</sup> are a terrorist tactic aimed at achieving broader political objectives.<sup>2</sup> On September 11, 2001, there was a series of coordinated suicide attacks by terrorists in the United States which killed more than 3,000 civilians. The 9/11 attacks led to the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. This focused the attention of many eminent scholars, prominent among them noted American political scientist Professor Robert A. Pape,<sup>3</sup> on understanding the strategic logic of suicide terrorism. In this paper, I will argue that Professor Pape's thesis about the genesis of suicide terrorism, which he developed through analysis of an extensive database of suicide attacks in many countries, is not valid in the case of Pakistan and there is a need to look for other explanations for suicide attacks in the country.

The US and Pakistan are facing incessant successful and attempted terrorist attacks. However, suicide terrorism is a formidable challenge for Pakistan because of three factors. First, the country has been the prime target of suicide terrorism in the world in recent years. In 2009, 3,021 Pakistanis were killed in terrorist attacks, many of them suicide attacks. The figure was 33 percent higher than 2008.<sup>4</sup> From 2002 to July 1, 2010, 3,719 people had been killed in 257 suicide attacks in Pakistan, while another 9,464 had been injured.<sup>5</sup> Second, Pakistan has a predominantly Muslim population and religious narratives are overwhelmingly used in everyday life. Departure from the religious narratives is not easy for any government in Pakistan. Third, the state has been instrumental in exploiting the religious narrative for national security paradigms in the past, mainly during the Soviet-Afghan war. All three factors are closely linked. It is important to analyze suicide attacks in Pakistan, not only because the country has been a victim of suicide attacks, but also because many of the failed terrorist attempts in the US and elsewhere in the West have been linked to Pakistan in one way or another.<sup>6</sup>

### Robert Pape's Thesis and Pakistan

In his seminal study explaining the appeal of suicide attacks to groups, Pape argued that organized groups use suicide attacks strategically in order to execute a larger campaign waged to achieve specific political objectives.<sup>7</sup> One of his most important observations is that the genesis of most suicide attack campaigns in his database can be accounted for by three developments: a real or perceived occupation, an armed rebellion against that occupation, and a difference in the religion of the occupier and the occupied. As such, the religious nature of the groups who use suicide attacks offers little explanation for its use other than the difference in the religions of the occupier and occupied.<sup>8</sup> In Pakistan's case, this premise is not applicable due to different variables.

### 1. Role of Religion in Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

Many experts have differed from Pape's thesis. Mia Bloom points to the case of communist Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and Turkey in opposition to Pape's point of view. Bloom opines, "While it is a

mistake to assume that only religious groups use suicide terror, it is equally faulty to view suicide terror as devoid of any religious content.”<sup>9</sup> I will argue that Pape’s argument of religious difference between the perpetrator of suicide attack and the victims is not applicable in case of Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda conduct suicide attacks against the Pakistani people and law enforcement personnel. The targets and the attackers share the same faith, often the same nationality, and occasionally the same ethnicity and neighborhood. It is the same in Iraq and Afghanistan, where law enforcement agents or people at public places are targeted, both the victims and the perpetrators are Muslim.

There is evidence that religion may be extremely useful to group efforts to select, recruit and train individuals for suicide missions. The religious narrative provides recruiters with powerful imagery of spiritual rewards that will always exceed mundane opportunities. Religion also offers a solid basis for the formation of group identity.<sup>10</sup> In order to diversify the recruitment base, it is important for Al Qaeda and the Taliban to appeal from a religious platform. That is the most logical option for recruiting a Pakistani (Punjabi, Balochi, Kashmiri, Sindhi or Pashtun), Somali, Yemeni, or an American or British Muslim, because the religious narrative transcends all ethnic, linguistic and geographical boundaries. This rationale applies to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq and even to the 7/7 London bombings and the failed terrorist plots in the US.<sup>11</sup>

Religion acts as a catalyst to many other factors including frustration, helplessness or personal grievances (such as loss of a close relative or friend) as a result of state policy.<sup>12</sup> Interviews with failed suicide attackers reveal that some of them were highly educated in religious teaching and others were barely aware of the message of Islam and of the logic of and essentials for jihad. One boy, on his first day of interviewing, gave an elaborate lecture with references from the Quran about the logic and necessity of suicide attacks but he was also able to quote verses of the Quran in opposition to suicide attacks with authentic references of scholarly works.<sup>13</sup> Two teenaged boys from Karachi, who were fond of cricket and Indian movies, were ready to launch suicide attacks because of grievances against the military operation in South Waziristan in January 2008.<sup>14</sup> A young man of Kashmiri origin had never been a practicing Muslim but he wanted to take revenge from the government for the killing of girls and women in the July 2007 Lal Masjid operation by the security forces in Islamabad.<sup>15</sup> Aitzaz Shah, the first person arrested in murder case of Benazir Bhutto in District Dera Ismail Khan on January 19, 2008, also claimed that Benazir was working against Islam and was a partner of non-Muslim Western Alliance and America and it was justified to kill her.<sup>16</sup> In all these cases, religion was the main motivation tool available to the recruiters or to the self-motivated individuals.

## 2. Democracy and Suicide Attacks

Pape has also suggested that democracies are more vulnerable to suicide campaigns.<sup>17</sup> In another study, Wade and Reiter found that autocratic Muslim states in particular are much more likely to be so targeted than free or partly free Muslim states.<sup>18</sup> It seems that regime type may not matter when it comes to suicide attacks in a country. Libya and Saudi Arabia do not have democratic governments whereas France and the United Kingdom have been democracies for hundreds of years, but all these countries are able to prevent suicide attacks on their soil regardless of regime types.

In Pakistan, there has been little difference in the frequency or intensity of suicide attacks during the regime of military ruler Pervez Musharraf or that of democratically elected President Asif Ali Zardari. Though support for US policies in Afghanistan is a common factor for the two regimes, but tactically the Taliban have cited different reasons for their actions. In the Musharraf era, they blamed him for the killings at Lal Masjid, whereas in the case of President Zardari they cited the military operations and US drone attacks targeting the militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as reasons for their suicide attacks.<sup>19</sup>

In my opinion, it is not the regime type that makes some states more prone to such attacks. The states in which public policy is influenced by public opinion are more vulnerable to extremist tactics used by the opponents of those states. If there is a direct correlation between loss of life of citizens of a state and public sentiments, like in the US and other western countries, then suicide attacks may be a very effective strategy for terrorists or guerillas to dictate their terms, as is evident from what happened in Lebanon in 1982. Presently, pressure on the US government by the US electorate to pull out of Afghanistan supports this proposition. On the other hand, in Pakistan, a change in the public opinion against the Taliban after suicide attacks in Islamabad, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Karachi has encouraged the military to take decisive action in Swat and South Waziristan Agency in FATA.

### 3. Occupation and Suicide Attacks

The third observation by Pape that real or perceived occupation of a country triggers suicide attacks also does not sufficiently explain the suicide attacks in Pakistan. American influence on Pakistani politics is not a new phenomenon but it has never reached the level of occupation, real or perceived. It may be said that presence of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan is tantamount to occupation and Pakistan is directly affected by that. But the US and NATO forces had been present in Afghanistan since 2002 but suicide attacks in Pakistan increased after Islamabad started taking action against the militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas neighboring Afghanistan in 2004.<sup>20</sup>

A detailed analysis of suicide attacks in Pakistan reveals a phenomenal increase in such attacks after the Lal Masjid operation by the security forces in July 2007.<sup>21</sup> Before the Lal Masjid operation there had been only 42 suicide attacks in Pakistan, but after the operation, in the remaining six months of 2007, there were 47 suicide attacks in major cities of the country. Since then, 234 suicide attacks have been recorded in Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, 100 percent more suicide attacks were employed in Pakistan by anti-state elements as a reaction to the policies of the military government of Pervez Musharraf in 2007. He was under pressure from the international community to prevent use of Pakistani territory as a sanctuary for Al Qaeda and Taliban to wage war in Afghanistan against the US and NATO forces. Since the launch of Operation Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Salvation) by the military in FATA in 2009, there has been a visible increase in suicide attacks in Pakistan compared to previous years. In 2009, there were 77 suicide attacks in Pakistan, more than in any previous year.<sup>23</sup> Pakistan has been a target of suicide attacks not because of occupation but for being an ally of the US and NATO. This applies to other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has experienced numerous suicide attacks by Al Qaeda operatives in response to Riyadh's policy of siding with the US in the war against terrorism.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates that all three of Pape's observations are not valid in Pakistan's case. Political issues of Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq are fomenting radicalization in Pakistan. It is not the type of regime but the decisions of the state to take action against terrorist organization in the country that have elicited extreme violent responses such as suicide attacks from the militants. Religion is a powerful instrument to motivate, recruit and deploy suicide attackers for terrorist activities in Pakistan. Unregulated activities in the religious sector need attention of the state to ensure that religious premises and religious narratives are not used for fomenting anti-state activities. It will be vital to expose the fallacy of the aims and objectives of terrorist organizations in order to prevent suicide terrorism and mass radicalization in Pakistan.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A suicide attack is one in which execution and success of the mission is contingent upon death of the attacker. Similar definitions are used by many scholars like Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Mohammad M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom*, (USIP: Washington D.C., forthcoming 2007); Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, (New York: Random House, 2005); Assaf Moghadam, "Defining Suicide Terrorism," in Ami Pedahzur, ed., *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom* (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 13-24.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert A. Pape is professor of political science at the University of Chicago specializing in international security affairs. His publications include *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, (Random House 2005); *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War*, (Cornell 1996), "Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work," *International Security* (1997), "The Determinants of International Moral Action," *International Organization* (1999); "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* (2003); and "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* (2005). <http://political-science.uchicago.edu/faculty/pape.shtml>.
- <sup>4</sup> Khuram Iqbal says in his report on evolution of suicide terrorism that in 2009 Pakistan was target of 86 suicide attacks compared to 63 in 2008 (See *Conflict and Peace Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Islamabad: PIPS, 2010), whereas [www.pakistanbodycount.com](http://www.pakistanbodycount.com) by Dr. Zeeshan Ul Hassan Usmani has slightly different figures of suicide attacks; 77 and 64 in the two years, respectively.
- <sup>5</sup> Dr. Zeeshan Ul Hassan Usmani, <http://www.pakistanbodycount.org/bla.php>.
- <sup>6</sup> Anne E. Kornblut, Jerry Markon and Spencer S. Hsu, "Pakistan native arrested in Time Square Bomb case," *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/03/AR2010050300847.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- <sup>10</sup> Ibn-e-Khaldun (1332-1406), *Muqaddma*, Assabia, group identity is based upon belonging to common set of values and objectives rather than ethnicity, race, caste or creed. <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/klf.htm>.
- <sup>11</sup> Anne E. Kornblut, Jerry Markon and Spencer S. Hsu, "Pakistan native arrested in Time Square Bomb case."
- <sup>12</sup> Maiese, Michelle, 'Suicide Bombers', The Conflict Resolution Information Source, June 2005 [www.crinfor.com](http://www.crinfor.com).
- <sup>13</sup> Author's interview with a suspected terrorist, Dera Ismail Khan, February 2008.
- <sup>14</sup> Author's interview with two boys who were questioned in Dera Ismail Khan, February 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Author's interview with failed suicide attacker Shahbaz Ali Khalid who was arrested from Mianwali with a strapped on suicide jacket as he wore an all-enveloping *burqa*, June 2009.
- <sup>16</sup> Author's interview with the accused Aitzaz Shah, January 20, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> Pape mentions this word but Christine Fair also raises the point in her work that "campaign" is not defined in Pape's thesis.
- <sup>18</sup> Wade, Sara Jackson and Dan Reiter, "Does Democracy Matter: Regime Type and Suicide Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 2, April 2007.
- <sup>19</sup> Wade and Reiter found that type of government per se has little (statistically significant) correlation with the occurrence of suicide attacks when the country in question has no religiously distinct minorities at risk.
- <sup>20</sup> Dr. Zeeshan Ul Hassan Usmani.
- <sup>21</sup> Qudisia Akhlaque, "Its Operation Sunrise, not Silence," *Dawn*, July 11, 2007, <http://www.dawn.com/2007/07/12/top7.htm>.
- <sup>22</sup> Dr. Zeeshan Ul Hassan, year-wise distribution is 2002 (2 attacks), 2003 (2), 2004 (7), 2005 (4), 2006 (12), 2007 (60), 2008 (64), 2009 (77) and until November 26, 2010, (45).
- <sup>23</sup> Khuram Iqbal, "Strategic measures to counter suicide terrorism in Pakistan," Pak Institute for Peace Studies Report, February 15, 2010, [http://san-pips.com/index.php?action=ra&id=pvt\\_list\\_1](http://san-pips.com/index.php?action=ra&id=pvt_list_1).
- <sup>24</sup> Mia Bloom, "Dying to Win: Motivations for Suicide Terrorism," in Ami Pedahzur ed., *Root Causes of Suicide Terrorism: The Globalization of Martyrdom*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), quoted by C. Christine Fair.

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