

Strategic Measures to Counter Suicide Terrorism in Pakistan

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Suicide attacks continue to hit Pakistan unabated. Government's efforts to counter suicide terrorism are excessively focused on engaging religious clerics to issue religious decrees against suicide attacks while paying little attention to enhance the operational capabilities of its law enforcement agencies.

Pakistan continues to witness suicide attacks despite sustained efforts by the government to counter the deadly tactic which the terrorists increasingly rely upon to hit both military and non-military targets in the country. A total of 216 suicide attacks were reported in Pakistan until December 2009, which killed thousands of innocent civilians, government officials and security personnel.

An Overview of Suicide Terrorism in 2009

The government's successive military operations in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), starting from as early as 2004, have destroyed a number of training facilities of the militants, including those meant for indoctrinating and training the suicide bombers, but the trained bombers continued to strike their targets at their will and choice. According to Pakistan Security Report 2009, prepared and published by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), a total number of 86 suicide attacks struck Pakistan during 2009, which killed 1,299 persons and wounded 3,633 others. The highest number of suicide attacks was witnessed in the month of December, when 15 such attacks were recorded. A steady increase was noticed in suicide attacks in the aftermath of *Operation Rah-e-Nijat* that was launched in October against Pakistani Taliban in South Waziristan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates responded with desperate suicide attacks in the mainland Pakistan.

The suicide attacks in 2009 also surpassed the previous years in term of casualties. Nearly 1,299 persons lost their lives in these attacks in 2009, compared to 967 in 2008. The highest number of casualties in 2009 was attributed to the civilians; 1,155 killed and 3,361 injured. A total of 254 security personnel were killed. A sharp rise in civilian casualties in comparison to the previous year was due to more such attacks this year on public places and markets.

The choice of the targets of the suicide bombers also widened. The year 2009 witnessed the first ever suicide bombing targeting a university in Islamabad on 20 October. More than 64 percent of all the suicide attacks during 2009 targeted security forces and law enforcement agencies. Also, three suicide attacks specifically targeted offices of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's premium intelligence agency. These attacks were conducted in Lahore (May), Peshawar (November) and Multan (December). Three suicide attacks targeted mosques in Dir, Khyber and Rawalpindi. Similarly, other soft targets of such attacks included public markets, funerals, religious scholars and the members of anti-Taliban peace committees in FATA and NWFP.

In 2009, the terrorists extended their cycle of violence to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), where two suicide attacks were reported – one against the security forces and the other targeted a procession of Shia mourners during Muharram in December. Another attack was foiled in a counter-terrorism operation by the Kashmiri law enforcement agencies. The TTP claimed responsibility for the attacks and attempted to show that it had not been weakened by recent strikes on its suspected hideouts in South Waziristan. The TTP also called the suicide attack “a revenge for the Waziristan operation and air strikes”.

The NWFP remained the worst-hit province, which faced 52 suicide attacks, followed by Punjab that experienced 15 suicide bombings. The suicide attacks in FATA declined sharply, which reported only seven such incidents compared to 16 in 2008. Also five suicide attacks targeted Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, during 2009. One such attack targeted an office of the United Nations World Food Program (UNWFP). Karachi, the commercial hub of Pakistan, remained safe of suicide attacks during 2009. Balochistan, which had not witnessed any suicide attack until 2008, also recorded two attacks in 2009. All the attacks were attributed to the Taliban, and the ethno-nationalist Baloch militant groups operating in Balochistan province have not yet resorted to suicide attacks.

The TTP retains its reputation in terms of carrying out the most suicide bombings in the country. Similarly, six out of 86 suicide attacks were of sectarian nature, which were claimed by the radical Sunni sectarian outfit, Lashkar-e-Jhangwi. Lashkar-e-Islam, a militant group based in Khyber Agency that refrained from carrying out suicide attacks until 2008, was also found involved in a suicide attack in Peshawar. Some previously unknown militant outfits such as Abdullah Azzam Brigade, also came forward to claim some of the most devastating suicide attacks including those on Marriott Hotel, Islamabad, Pearl Continental, Peshawar and the suicide attack near Torkham border.

What Counter Measures to be Adopted?

Following a steep rise in suicide attacks in the post-military operation against the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007, the government adopted some loosely coordinated operational and strategic measures to curb suicide terrorism. Pakistan’s moves to counter suicide terrorism remained excessively focused on engaging religious clerics to issue religious decrees against suicide attacks while paying little attention to enhance the operational capabilities of its law enforcement agencies (LEAs). Pakistani LEAs lack modern equipment to identify an approaching suicide bomber, minimize the effects and after-effects of suicide bombings. Police forensic labs are not equipped with facilities for DNA test and the system to check identity of suspects. Investigators did not have permanent mortuary, where they could preserve body parts of suspected suicide bombers, collected from the crime scene.

While the support of religious clergy is imperative to curb suicide terrorism in Pakistan, operational capabilities also need to be enhanced to stop suicide attacks from taking place.

The government needs to invest heavily in equipping Pakistani law enforcement agencies with modern technologies to probe suicide attacks. On operational level, government's counter measures must also involve hard and dedicated work by intelligence services to unearth the networks of suicide bombers in tribal areas and mainland Pakistan.

On strategic level, it needs to be mentioned that suicide terrorism in Pakistan is not merely motivated by religion, but a multi-dimensional phenomenon involving political, cultural, economic and social factors as well. Hence it cannot be dealt with religious decrees alone. Various studies conducted on suicide terrorism in Pakistan reveal that revenge factor, disenchantment with the government's policies and poverty, which result in lack of educational facilities, unemployment and lack of basic amenities for youths between the age of 14 to 23 and hailing from the conflict zones of FATA, NWFP and Southern Punjab, have tended to make them prone for recruitment as suicide bombers. For a long-term solution to suicide bombings in Pakistan, the government needs to address the above mentioned factors. There is also a need to mobilize grassroots support against militants in order to create hostile environment for aspiring suicide bombers. In this regard, print and electronic media could be used as a powerful tool to wage a sustained campaign to educate the public about the social and religious consequences of suicide bombings. Without well-coordinated and sustained efforts, Pakistan would continue to experience suicide bombings.

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