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## The suicide-bomb capital of the world

By Amir Mir

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Ten years down the road since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror launched by the United States, Pakistan seems to have been turned into the suicide bombing capital of the world, with the country's security forces, especially the army and the police, often being targeted by lethal human bombs.

In 303 suicide attacks carried out in almost every nook and corner of Pakistan 4,808 people were killed and 10,149 others injured in the decade to September 11, 2011, according to Ministry of Interior data.

Statistically speaking, that staggering death toll means that on average, suicide bombers have killed 480 people and injured 1,014 others every year across Pakistan since September 11, 2011 - though, post-9/11, the phenomenon first struck in 2002. Likewise, Pakistan has suffered an average 30 suicide bombings every year of the decade, or four attacks a month.

In comparison, in Iraq, suicide bombers have killed more than 12,000 civilians and wounded more than 30,000 since the war began in 2003, according to study released by the British medical journal Lancet.

The study found that 1,003 documented suicide bombings accounted for 12,284 of 108,624 Iraqi civilian deaths, 11% of those killed between March 20, 2003, and December 31, 2010. During the same period from 2003 to 2010, 79 documented suicide bomb attacks were responsible for the deaths of 200 coalition troops, the study found.

However, attacks have tapered off dramatically over the past year, while those in Pakistan are on the increase.

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, in the decade since September 9, 2001 - the killing of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud by al-Qaeda suicide bombers - a total of 736 suicide attacks have killed 3,755 people, the India-based Institute of Conflict Management and its South Asia Terrorism Portal report.

Pakistan, which the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) hired during the tyrannical rule of military dictator General Zia ul-Haq to spearhead the so-called Afghan jihad against Russian occupation troops, suffered just one suicide bomb prior to the past decade. That was an attack on the the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad in 1995.

Human bombs used to be just puzzling headlines until 9/11, a part of stories of death and destruction elsewhere. It was after the US-led invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in October 2001 that Pakistan began experience the devastation a person strapped with lethal explosives could unleash. Suicide bombers have since made whole swathes of the land their laboratory - from rugged, lawless terrain of the tribal areas out west to the well-kept environs of Islamabad.

With the avowed aim of eliminating all those who side with "the forces of the infidel", the new breed of highly-trained and equally motivated suicide bombers strike not only Western targets, but also Pakistani security personnel, intelligence agencies and the police.

The nation's security situation is in utter turmoil today. The highly-secured headquarters of the army and navy, the offices of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), police stations, military training academies, check posts, government buildings - particularly the symbols of the state - and mosques, imambargas, churches, hospitals, schools and markets have all become targets of the ruthless suicide bombers.

Suicide bombers actually came to Pakistan in force in 2002. The first attack of its kind occurred on March 16 that year, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in a church in Islamabad, killing five people and injuring 40 others.

Fifteen people died and 35 others were injured on May 8 that year when a bomber rammed his explosive-laden vehicle into a bus near the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi. Those killed in the attack included nine French engineers and five Pakistanis technicians who were working on a naval project. The attacks placed Pakistan on the world map of countries marred by suicide bombings.

The prime motive behind these attacks was the fact that in the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan became a key US ally in the "war on terror" by reversing its previous decade's policy of trying to influence Afghan politics through the Taliban militia.

The reversal brought the Pakistani military establishment into conflict with jihadi organizations active in Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir. For years, these groups had been ideologically motivated, mobilized and trained in Pakistan.

The next year, in 2003, a total of 70 people were killed and 114 injured in three suicide attacks, two targeting the president, General Pervez Musharraf in December and one targeting former prime minister Shaukat Aziz in June.

In 2004, 91 people were killed and 393 injured in seven incidents. The death toll in 2005 was 86 people killed and 219 injured in four strikes, while 161 people were killed and 352 injured in seven attacks in 2006.

The following year saw an unprecedented rise in suicide attacks, in the wake of the army's gory Operation Silence against fanatical Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) clerics and their followers in the heart of Islamabad. A record number of 766 people were killed and 1,677 injured in 56 attacks in 2007.

The perilous trend of suicide strikes targeting the Pakistani security forces touched alarming heights that year, averaging more than one hit a week as the military establishment lost control of extremist jihadi networks and the leaders it had nurtured to advance its agenda in Afghanistan and India.

The intensity of the aftermath of the July 2007 siege of Lal Masjid could be gauged from the fact that Musharraf, as commander-in-chief, directed the armed forces not to wear their uniforms in public, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for fear of an extremist backlash.

Pro-al-Qaeda tribal leaders exploited the Lal Masjid operation to provoke attacks against the army and demoralize troops. The idea was to convince the intensively Islamized military rank and file realize that the army was making a mistake by following the American dictates under the leadership of a "faithless" Musharraf and his fellow generals.

The number of suicide bombings multiplied further next year - in 2008 - killing 895 people and injuring 1873 in 60 such incidents. There were 78 suicide attacks in 2009, killing 951 people and wounding 2,361. The ugly phenomenon peaked in 2010, when 1,172 people were killed and 2,204 injured in 51 such incidents.

It seems to be on the decline, with 601 people killed and 842 others injured in 36 incidents this year to the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, compared to the lives of 857 Pakistanis lost in who had lost their lives in 41 incidents between January 1, 2010 and September 11, 2010.

In a grim monthly break-down of the suicide bomb statistics for 2011, 45 people were killed in four incidents, 39 people were killed in three suicide attacks in February, 127 more lost their lives in six suicide attacks in March; another 65 were killed in April, 154 people lost their lives at the hands of human bombs in five such incidents in May, 66 more Pakistanis perished in four attacks in June, 11 people were killed in three attacks in July, and 71 Pakistanis lost their lives in four suicide bombings in August. This month 24 people have killed so far in one suicide attack in Quetta on September 7.

Al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked Pakistani terrorists learned their deadly skills from their Afghan counterparts. Afghan Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah Akhund was seen as the main architect behind the increasing number of suicide missions against the US-led allied forces in Afghanistan.

Though Dadullah was killed in May 2007 in a military raid by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops in Kandahar, the suicide bombing trend he introduced continues to terrify the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

It was Qari Hussain Mehsud who had encouraged *fidayeen*-style suicide bombings in Pakistan in the wake of Operation Silence. Before being killed in a US drone attack in North Waziristan in October 2010, Qari Hussain was known in the Pakistani security circles as the master trainer of young suicide bombers and thus referred to as the *Ustad-e-Fidayeen*, or the teacher of the suicide bomber.

Trained by his Afghan counterparts, Qari Hussain had established a *fidayeen* camp in North Waziristan where he used to recruit, train and indoctrinate youths in order to multiply the number of suicide bombings.

Those he trained not only carried out barbaric suicide bombings in Pakistan but also across the border in Afghanistan. Qari Hussain, the cousin of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) *amir* commander Hakeemullah Mehsud, had also formed the Fidayeen-e-Islam (FeI), a special squad of highly-trained suicide bombers specifically assigned to target security forces and military installations.

Even after Qari Hussain's death, the TTP is believed to have at least 2,000 trained suicide bombers across the country. "Our *ulemas* [Muslim legal scholars] have termed suicide attacks as an elite form of jihad," says TTP spokesperson Azam Tariq. "*Fidayeen* is a sophisticated weapon of the mujahideen; our enemies have no idea how to counter these lethal bombers. Suicide attacks have made the mujahideen invincible".

Investigations carried out by the Pakistani security and intelligence agencies show that several kinds of jihadi groups are involved in the ongoing spate of suicide strikes. Along with TTP and FeI, they include the Asmatullah Maaviya and Qari Zafar groups of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Brigade 313 of Ilyas Kashmiri, the Badar Mansoor Group of Harkatul Mujahideen (HM), the Qari Saifullah and Amjad Farooqi groups of Harkatul Jihadul Islami (HUJI), Lal Masjid Brigade (LLB), Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Jamaatul Furqaan (JuF), Jaishul-Islami (JuI), and Abdullah Azzam Shaheed Brigade (ASB).

The human bombs of the Lal Masjid Brigade are those who either had been linked with Lal Masjid or its Jamia Fareedia for boys or had ideological affinity with the fanatic clerics of the Red Mosque. While some had been students of these clerics, some were the relatives of those killed during Operation Silence.

Authorities probing the spate of suicide bombings following the army raid at the mosque believe that most of the attacks in Rawalpindi and Islamabad were carried out by young men in their twenties who hailed from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of the tribal agencies of South Waziristan and North Waziristan.

As soon as Operation Silence came to an end, the agencies had warned the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad could be targets, as over 500 potential suicide bombers who had been studying at the Lal Masjid-run Jamia Hafsa and Jamia Fareedia had not returned to their homes.

Potential bombers, the agencies warned, were hiding in several *madrassas* and mosques in and around the twin cities and were primed to blow themselves up anytime, anywhere to avenge the killing of their loved ones.

Hardly a few weeks after the operation ended, an 18-year-old human bomber killed 22 highly trained commandos of the Special Services Group (SSG) of the army by targeting their Tarbela Ghazi mess, almost 100 km south of Islamabad on September 13, 2007. The bomber turned out to be the brother of a female student at the Lal Masjid-run Jamia Hafsa who had killed during the operation, carried out by Karar Company of the SSG.

The second kind of extremists involved in suicide attacks are those linked to the al-Qaeda and Taliban network based in the Waziristan in the Pak-Afghan tribal belt.

In that rocky and far-flung region, Islamic rebels allied to both groups have taken control of almost the entire North Waziristan area on the Pak-Afghan border, and gained a significant base from which to wage their resistance against the US-led international forces in Afghanistan and against Pakistani troops. Intelligence sources say the Pakistani security forces have mostly been targeted by bombers trained and dispatched by the TTP, led by Commander Baitullah Mehsud, chief of the Mehsud tribe in South Waziristan.

A senior official of the elite Special Investigation Group (SIG) says that from 26 suicide attacks from where the heads of the bombers were recovered in 2007, most of the bombers were from just one tribe - the Mehsuds of central Waziristan, and all were boys aged 16 to 20. In fact, most of the suicide bombings carried out after the Pakistan army launched Operation Rah-e-Haq in the Swat valley in 2009 had been claimed by Baitullah Mehsud, who was eventually killed in a drone attack.

Another important sectarian-cum-jihadi group involved in suicide attacks across Pakistan is Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) - a Sunni Deobandi jihadi group, launched in 1996. The Lashkar today is the most violent al-Qaeda terrorist group operating in Pakistan with the help of a lethal suicide squad supervised by Mattiur Rehman, who has become a trusted member of al-Qaeda's hardline inner circle due to his acquaintance with Hakeemullah Mehsud. North Waziristan-based Mattiur is the most sought after al-Qaeda terrorist and is reportedly trying to target key strategic installations belonging to the ISI and the army.

Then next in line is the Swat chapter of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (Maulana Fazlullah Group) which is accused of carrying out several suicide attacks against the Pakistani security forces. The first was carried out on November 8, 2006 when 45 Pakistan army recruits undergoing training were killed at the Punjab Regimental Centre in Dargai, 100 kilometers north of Peshawar. The attack came following a warning by Fazlullah against the deployment of security forces.

Then there are a few relatively unknown jihadi organizations like Jaishul-Islami, Fidayeen-e-Islam and Abdullah Azam Shaheed Brigade which had claimed several major suicide hits.

Three other jihadi groups have not yet claimed any suicide attack in Pakistan but have been found to be involved in several such attacks in the past. Jaish-e-Mohammad is led by Maulana Masood Azhar, while the second group, Harkatul Jihadul Islami, is led by Qari Saifullah Akhtar. The third, Jamaatul Furqaan, is led by Maulana Abdul Jabbar, alias Umar Farooq, once the chief operational commander of Jaish-e-Mohammad and a close associate of Masood Azhar.

Pakistani investigators all groups involved in suicide attacks follow their own techniques to achieve their objectives and use different mechanisms to hit targets.

The authorities say the manufacture of suicide belts has become a cottage industry in Waziristan, with one household making the detonator, another sewing the belt, a third moulding ball-bearings, and so on. These are then collected and paid for by the Taliban, who claim in their propaganda that they have hundreds of willing youngsters lined up and ready to die.

There are reckoned to be some definite patterns in the suicide attacks carried out in Pakistan. The suicide bomber generally never comes alone; he is charged up, carefully brainwashed to the last moment, highly indoctrinated and fanatically intoxicated till the last moment by his handler, who makes sure that the tempo and temper of the suicide bomber reaches a climax just as he approaches his target.

Pakistan's mighty military and intelligence establishment for years used to indoctrinate, motivate and train jihadi cadres for export in the neighborhood - to the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Afghanistan. Those human bombs had, however, excluded their home ground from the scope of their so-called holy war. But in recent years there has been a sharp decline in suicide attacks carried out in Jammu and Kashmir, as Pakistan as emerged a preferred target.

As things stand, it appears that suicide bombers, who the Pakistani establishment originally designed to rip apart the "enemies of Islam and Pakistan" are now exploding themselves inside their own country. In short, it appears that Pakistan's chickens have finally come home to roost.