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Pakistan Taliban shift focus to Afghanistan

By Amir Mir
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ISLAMABAD - With the Pakistan Taliban finally holding peace talks with a government in Islamabad that is increasingly seen at odds with the United States in the aftermath of the November 26 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strike that killed 25 soldiers, Pakistani suicide bombers seem to have shifted the focus of their deadly attacks from their homeland to neighboring Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has seen a sharp increase in suicide bombings in recent months, the latest being the December 6 attack targeting Shi'ite worshippers at a Kabul mosque, killing 56 people.

It was the first major anti-Shi'ite attack in Afghanistan since the fall of the Afghan Taliban a decade ago in 2001. The bombing took place on the concluding day of the Bonn conference on Afghanistan that was boycotted by Pakistan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has blamed the Pakistan-based sectarian jihadi group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) for the Kabul attack, demanding justice from Islamabad. Pakistan has responded by asking Kabul to provide evidence to support allegations that the LeJ was responsible. "Lashkar-e-Jhangvi is a banned organization. We would encourage Kabul to share with us evidence through official channels," Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit said.

The fact, however, remains that Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi - an offshoot of the LeJ, an anti-Shi'ite sectarian-cum-jihadi group, has already claimed responsibility for the attack.

A spokesman for the LeJ (Almi) claimed the Kabul attack in a phone call to Radio Mashaal, a Pashto language radio station in Afghanistan. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi is reportedly based in Pakistan's tribal areas on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and is considered a radical offshoot of the LeJ. Both groups act as surrogates for al-Qaeda.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistan Taliban - TTP) has its roots in anti-Shi'ite violence, with the LeJ acting as a training ground for many of its anti-Shi'ite leaders, including Hakeemullah Mehsud and his first cousin, Qari Hussain Mehsud.

The LeJ was launched in 1996 by a breakaway faction of Sunni Deobandi extremists, including Ishaq, Riaz Basra and Akram Lahori, who walked out of the outfit after accusing the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) leadership of deviating from the ideals of its founder, Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, who was killed by Shi'ite rivals in February 1990.

But many terrorism experts believe that the SSP is in fact the mother organization that has provided human fodder to the cauldron of the region's multi-layered violence in the name of Islam.

Having ideological affinity with the Taliban, the SSP aims at restoring the caliphate system and has declared the Shi'ite minority to be non-Muslim. The SSP and the LeJ, which is considered to be the military wing of the SSP, were once strategic assets of Pakistan and have linked with al-Qaeda as its ancillary warriors, killing Pakistani citizens and targeting the security forces to dissuade Pakistan from fighting the "war against terror" as a United States ally.

The LeJ still has deep links with al-Qaeda and the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and is considered to be the most violent terrorist organization operating in Pakistan, with the help of its suicide squads.

As with most Sunni Deobandi sectarian and militant groups, almost the entire LeJ leadership is made up of people who have fought in Afghanistan with the backing of the Pakistani security establishment and most of its cadre are drawn from the numerous Sunni *madrassas* (seminaries) in Pakistan.

The Lashkar stands out for its secrecy, lethality and unrelenting pursuit of its core objectives - targeting Western interests in Pakistan and the Shi'ite community as a way to the eventual transformation of the country into a Taliban-style Islamic state. It has become the group of choice for hardcore militants who are adamant in pursuing their jihadi agenda in Pakistan.

According to Interior Ministry circles in Islamabad, the LeJ consists of eight loosely coordinated cells spread across Pakistan with independent chiefs for each cell. Headed by a fugitive Punjabi Taliban leader, Maulana Abdul Khalil, who comes from the central Punjab, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi is largely believed to be the international wing of the LeJ which operates mostly in the central parts of Punjab and the tribal areas on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Incidentally, the Kabul bombing (already claimed by the LeJ) took place the day Pakistan's

Interior Minister Rehman Malik publicly thanked the Pakistani Taliban for maintaining peace during the Shi'ite ritual of Ashura and for not staging terrorist attacks this year. This gives credence to earlier media reports that the TTP had declared a temporary ceasefire with the government in Islamabad to pave the way for peace talks. The anti-Shi'ite TTP has frequently bombed Shi'ite processions in Pakistan during Ashura in the past.

Although the Pakistani authorities have already declared war on the TTP for targeting the security forces and intelligence agencies' personnel, there have been unofficial reports in recent weeks of peace talks between the two sides, which have been refuted by both the Pakistani military and the militants.

But the December 6 statement by Malik indicated that there was more to this than meets the eye. Talking to newsmen in Islamabad on December 6, Malik disclosed that he had appealed to the TTP to respect Shi'ite observances this year and spare their processions.

"And they responded positively to my appeal. This is a good sign and I am confident that the security situation will further improve in future. I am thankful to the Taliban who did not carry out any attack on Shi'ites and showed respect to their rituals. I hope they will also remain peaceful in the future, lay down arms and work together with us for the security of the country," Malik said.

Three days after Malik's statement (December 10), a senior Taliban commander and deputy leader of the TTP, Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, claimed that the peace talks were on between the government and the Pakistan Taliban. He further claimed that the government had already released 145 members of the militant organization as a goodwill gesture and halted the military operation in the Bajaur tribal region.

Pakistan's leading English daily The News quoted Faqir as speaking from somewhere in Afghanistan by phone:

Our talks with the government are going in the right direction. If we succeed in signing a peace agreement in Bajaur, then the Taliban in other places such as Swat, Mohmand, Orakzai, Darra Adamkhel, Kurram and South Waziristan tribal regions will also ink peace accords with the government in their respective areas. Bajaur will be a role model for other areas and if our talks prove fruitful, the same formula will be applied in all other areas where the Taliban are fighting against the government and its armed forces.

In Bajaur, Maulana Faqir Mohammad said the government and the Taliban had already ceased fighting to give peace a chance and to enable a *jirga* (tribal council) comprising notables from the tribal areas and settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and some government and security officials to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

He said the government, after a long time, had shown some courage in the recently held All Parties Conference in Islamabad that helped restore the trust of the Pakistan Taliban groups in state institutions.

The Taliban, Mohammad added, were earlier reluctant to seriously consider the peace offers of

the government as it had lost its credibility by arresting some senior Taliban commanders in Swat invited for peace talks:

We have no wish to fight against our armed forces and destroy our country. If the government stops killing its own people and pulls out of the US-led war against humanity, then there is no need for us to fight against the state. There has been some major development in our previous rounds of peace talks but the government will have to show flexibility and restore trust of the Taliban groups by releasing our prisoners and stopping military operations in FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas].

However, another militant commander introducing himself as Mullah Dadullah and claiming to be the Taliban leader in Bajaur rejected Mohammad's statement and denied peace talks with the government.

He said it was Mohammad's personal decision to enter into talks with the government and this should not be considered as a unanimous decision of the Bajaur Taliban or the TTP. The next one to deny the TTP-government peace talks was Ehsanullah Ehsan, the official spokesman of the TTP, who said there would be no negotiations until the government imposed Islamic law, or *sharia*, in the country. "Talks by a handful of people with the government cannot be deemed as the Taliban talking," Ehsan told The Associated Press by telephone from an undisclosed location.

Malik, who often makes controversial statements on key issues of national importance, spoke on December 11, categorically stating that the government was not holding any talks with the TTP, adding that negotiations could not take place until terrorists surrendered themselves before the authorities.

While facing media flak in Islamabad for thanking the Taliban, he denied reports about negotiations between the government and the TTP, saying:

I talked to stakeholders in Bajaur to confirm that there are no talks with them. If Maulvi Faqir Muhammad wants to hold talks with the government, he should come down from the hills, lay down his arms and surrender. If the TTP surrenders, the government will definitely consider talks.

Commenting on reports that some Taliban fighters had been released, he said there was no truth to this and Faqir was spreading disinformation in this regard.

It may be recalled that TTP chief Hakeemullah Mehsud rejected Malik's November 6 offer of peace talks by vowing to carry out more attacks on the state of Pakistan. The offer was made in accordance with a resolution adopted at an all-party conference on October 18 in Islamabad that endorsed peace talks with the Taliban.

But well-informed circles in the Ministry of Interior claim that the TTP had actually set some pre-requisites to initiate talks with the government, most of which have been accepted in the aftermath of the November 26 NATO air attack on two Pakistani check posts on the AfPak border.

Pakistan reacted sharply to the NATO strike by announcing a review of Pakistan-US ties, suspending NATO supply lines through Pakistan to Afghanistan and giving a 15-day deadline to the Americans to vacate the Shamsi air base in Balochistan province.

All three Pakistani actions correspond closely with the November 19 pre-conditions made public by a TTP spokesman for entering into peace negotiations with the federal government. Therefore, unlike in neighboring Afghanistan where a suicide bomber killed more than 50 Shi'ite worshipers on December 6, the Ashura observances passed peacefully in Pakistan without any terrorist activity, resulting in the interior minister publicly thanking the Taliban for responding to his appeal.

Government circles in Islamabad say following the deaths of TTP founder Baitullah Mehsud and the chief of the group's suicide bomb squad, Qari Hussain Mehsud, the TTP are relatively weakened and are ready to hold peace talks with a government that has increasingly been at odds with the US since the May 2 Abbottabad raid in which al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed by US special forces.

As a result, the rhythm of suicide attacks has changed dramatically in Pakistan, which has not experienced any major attacks September 15 when a suicide bomber killed 46 people at a funeral in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, with the Pakistani human bombs shifting the focus of their deadly attacks to neighboring Afghanistan.