

ISAS Brief

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Terrorism's most devastating blow in Pakistan

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On 16 December 2014, the Taliban attacked an army school in Peshawar and killed 132 children. In all 145 persons died. Seven terrorists – among them three Arabs, two Afghans and one Chechen – dressed in military uniform penetrated the well-guarded perimeter of the school and opened fire on the students and school personnel. By assembling an international force, the Taliban sent a powerful signal that their campaign against the Pakistani state and the country's military had wide support. According to a statement issued to the press by Muhammad Khorasani, the Taliban spokesman, the attackers were ordered to kill only those children who were from army families. "Our shura decided to target these enemies of Islam right in their homes so they can feel the pain of losing their children."

The authorities in Pakistan identified Omar Mansoor, the Taliban commander from Peshawar and Darra Adam Khel, a nearby tribal district known for its gunsmiths as the person who sent the

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terrorist to attack the school. While the Peshawar school battle was still underway, the Pakistani military launched a series of air strikes on terrorist hideouts in the Thira Valley on the border with Afghanistan. Military intelligence had concluded that the planning was done by a group operating in that area. The attacks continued and by 21 December, five days after the massacre, 150 terrorists had been killed by the Pakistani military. Sartaj Aziz, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's National Security Advisor, told the press that Afghanistan and Pakistan had agreed to carry out joint operations against the terrorist groups in the border areas. This was the first time the two countries had begun to work together in their campaigns against terrorism.

The Peshawar attack may prove to be a turning point for Pakistan. It appears that after the assault on Pakistan's military, the nation's most respected and powerful institution, the country may finally be ready to resolutely move against all extremist groups. One immediate consequence was the change in the official position in Pakistan that had drawn a distinction between "good" and "bad" Taliban. The former were those who did Pakistan's bidding in its Afghan and India policies. This was one reason two successive governments had not taken any action against the terrorist group *Lashkar-e-Taiba* for having mounted the November 2008 attack on Mumbai India. The Peshawar attack also forced Imran Khan the cricketer-turned-politician to terminate his four-month-old campaign aimed at unseating Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The Taliban had come under pressure from the Pakistan army when in June 2014 it decided to launch *Zarb-e-Azab*, a full-scale operation aimed at eliminating the terrorist hideouts in North Waziristan, one of the tribal areas on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. The border called the "Durand Line" that runs between the two countries was drawn by a British diplomat in 1893 and was imposed on Kabul by India's colonial rulers. To this day, Afghanistan has not recognized the line as the formal border with Pakistan. In fact, Kabul was the only capital that opposed the entry of Pakistan into the United Nations after the latter gained independence from British rule in 1947. This was one of the several reasons why Afghan-Pakistan relations remained strained for almost seven decades. The Peshawar tragedy may finally bring closer the two long-feuding countries.

The Durand Line cuts across a number of Pashtun tribes living in the borderland between the two countries. Among those that got divided were the Mehsuds and the Haqqanis. The former have supplied the leadership and foot-soldiers to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the latter

operated, often with devastating effect, against the government in Kabul and the American and NATO troops fighting in that country. Both groups aimed to undermine the established governing orders in the two countries, replacing them with what they call the “Islamic caliphate”, a system of governance that would follow what they interpreted as the tenets of Islam. The personnel belonging to the two groups freely crossed the poorly patrolled Durand Line. The governments in Islamabad and Kabul did little to remove the sanctuaries established by the two groups on either side of the border.

Three recent developments have altered the environment in which the Islamic extremists have been operating in the two countries. In November 2013, a new officer, Gen. Raheel Sharif, was placed in charge of the army in Pakistan. In a conversation with me in Washington during his almost 2-week long visit to the United States in November 2014 the general was of the view that of the three problems his country faced – Islamic extremism, a poorly performing economy and a political system that was still evolving – the first was by far the most important. He identified Islamic extremism to be his country’s most difficult problem – an existential threat that needed to be faced. He was convinced that Pakistan had the strength – and now also the political will – to move decisively against terrorism that had taken heavy human and economic tolls on the country. He saw the Zarb-e-Azb as a beginning of the effort that will take a while to produce the desired results. “There will be difficulties on the way, and three of them have already occurred”, he said. He referred to the summer 2014 attacks on Karachi’s international airport, on a naval base in the city, and on the crowd that had gathered at Wagah, a town on the India-Pakistan border to witness a well-choreographed and popular display of force by the guards from the two countries, as the types of hiccups the country must be ready to face. Gen. Sharif will no doubt add the Peshawar episode to this lengthening list.

The second development is the result of the prolonged presidential contest in Afghanistan that finally resulted in the start of the Ashraf Ghani presidency, succeeding that of Hamid Karzai. Ghani, a former member of the World Bank staff, was interested in not only finding a durable solution to the problem of Islamic extremism but in setting his country on the path of sustainable economic progress. He was persuaded that he needed Pakistan’s help in both endeavors. Pakistan was the third country he visited after taking office. The first two calls were made to China and Saudi Arabia. One of the first actions taken by the Pakistani authorities after the Peshawar

incident was to approach Kabul and ensure that the escape routes of those involved in planning and executing the attacks were blocked by the Afghan authorities. Gen. Sharif visited President Ghani in Kabul a few hours after the terrorists struck the school in Peshawar. He was accompanied by Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar, the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence. According to one newspaper report, “during a lengthy meeting at the Afghan presidential palace, the Pakistani officials shared intelligence with President Ashraf Ghani and the top American military commander Gen. John F. Campbell. Mr. Ghani condemned the attack on the school and likened it to recent assaults in Afghanistan, including a bombing in the country’s southeast that killed 61 people, and a suicide attack at a French-funded school in Kabul. A statement from the palace said the two countries had agreed on increased mutual cooperation in fighting extremism, offering a glimmer of hope that some positive step would be taken.”²

The third development of great importance for the world’s Muslim countries is the sudden rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS). The IS is not so much an expression of religious belief as that of the tribal traditions that have, over the centuries, been informed by their interpretations of Islam. Much of the trouble in Afghanistan and Pakistan is in the tribal belt. Mainstreaming tribal system and its mores will have to be an important part of the effort the people of Pakistan and its government will need to make. Some conservative elements in Pakistan and across the border in Afghanistan may be attracted to the IS type of ideology. That said the more liberal segments in the population are now alerted to the danger these movements pose for the country. “The situation has never been clearer. It is time to dispense with the delusions of threats from “foreign forces”, and the idea that our problems are elaborate conspiracies hatched by others. Our government does not need to “talk” with the Taliban. It needs to prosecute them,” wrote two Lahore based female journalists in an article published by *The New York Times*.³

² Ismail Khan and Azam Ahmed, “Pakistan urges Afghans to help find Taliban leaders behind massacre,” *The New York Times*, 18 December, 2014, p. A22.

³ Mira Sethi and Sherbano Taseer, “Avenging the children of Peshawar” *The New York Times*, 18 December 2014, p. A33.