

The Islamist

# Targeting the US

Pakistan's New Generation of Militants

by [James M. Dorsey](#) — 08 May 2010

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With the foiled Times Square bombing focusing attention on broadening ambitions of Pakistani jihadist groups, counter-terrorism officials and experts are realizing that they face a new generation of militants far more independent of their former Pakistani intelligence handlers. If anything, this new generation of fighters distrusts governments and their intelligence services.

These jihadis no longer see themselves as did their predecessors as actors allied with a state like Pakistan that supported them in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Instead they perceive themselves as religious warriors seeking to overthrow infidel governments. They view violence as a means in and of itself rather than as politics by other means. Distrust of Pakistani intelligence received a boost with the 2007 storming of the Islamist-controlled Red Mosque in Islamabad by Pakistani troops in which 154 people were killed.

Recruited at far younger ages than their predecessors, this new generation of militants is often trained from age five onwards in madrassahs, Koran schools operated by the Pakistani Taliban and other jihadist groups. They learn to recite the Koran by heart in Arabic, a language they do not understand, are instilled with a militant interpretation of the holy book, familiarized with weapons and taught suicide bombing skills. Many get advanced training by Al Qa'ida operatives in Pakistan's tribal areas, according to Rohan Gunaratna, head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

In a documentary produced for Britain's Channel 4, Pakistani-born journalist Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy interviews kids and teenagers attending Taliban-operated madrassahs in the tribal areas as well as in Pakistan's main port city of Karachi. Shahid, a would-be teenage suicide bomber, dreams of sacrificing himself in the struggle against the infidels beyond Pakistan's borders. "Where there are lots of cruel infidels, that is where I would do a suicide attack," he says sitting cross-legged on the floor of a madrassah, an open Koran in his lap. Inspired by suicide bombers his age and younger, Shahid imagines justifying his deed to God on the Day of Judgement. "God will ask me: Why did you do that? I will answer: My Lord, only to make you happy... Than God will look at my intention. If my intent was to eradicate evil for Islam, than I will be rewarded with paradise," he says. Speaking in an off-camera recording, one of Shahid's teachers laughs as he boasts: "No matter how many Muslims die, we will never run out of sacrificial lambs."

With the new generation and increased Pakistani and US military pressure, groups tend to fracture more easily and cooperate with one another when needed on an ad hoc basis. As a result, some counterterrorism officials and analysts say that the post-9/11 strategy of focusing on a core group such as Al Qaeda no longer will work. With militants controlling areas in the tribal northwest of Pakistan as well as South Punjab, the officials and analysts argue that the counter-terrorism efforts need to target the broader plethora of jihadist groups in those regions. The fragmentation has allowed Al Qaeda, hunted and on the defensive, to effectively use a host of groups to carry out operations that serves its purpose. "Today al-Qaeda's greatest strength is...the ability to infiltrate and co-opt other militant groups that have existing operational capability. That way al-Qaeda doesn't have to build that capability on its own, and it can use folks that already have logistics in place, people in place," says Brian Fishman, a research fellow with the Counter Terrorism Center (CTC) of the US Military Academy at West Point in an interview with the Council of Foreign Affairs.

Far more distrustful of intelligence agencies and authorities and more viscerally anti-American as a result of deadly drone attacks, these militants' recently developed focus on US targets have expanded what Animesh Roul, executive director of research at the New Delhi-based Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, calls The Karachi Project to include not only India but also the United States and Europe. A brainchild of ISI, The Karachi Project initially was designed to complicate the uncovering of planned attacks in India by using Indian rather than Pakistani nationals as perpetrators. That approach has now been expanded to looking for homegrown associates like foiled Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad in the US and Europe.

It also poses, however, a challenge to the militants. Some officials and analysts believe that the militants distrust of the outside world makes them wary of volunteers from the US and Europe who knock on their doors. These volunteers, the officials and analysts say, are often given cursory training and sent on their way in the belief that they win if the individual launches an attack and nothing is lost if he turns out to be a Western intelligence ploy. Faisal Shahzad, these officials and analysts say, may well be an example of someone the militants did not really trust, but who served their purpose.

If the past stream of volunteers hailed primarily from Europe – Britain, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Sweden – the more recent crops appears to a greater number of Americans. Several Pakistani and Afghan Americans have been arrested and charged with supporting Pakistani Jihadi groups. Five Americans are on trial in Pakistan for wanting to join the Taliban.

The trend is not restricted to Pakistan but extends to other groups associated with Al Qaeda. The FBI is probing at least 20 Somali-Americans who left Minneapolis to join Somalia's jihadi Al-Shabab while the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service are investigating whether six Somali-Canadians who left Toronto in the past year months were also recruited by Al-Shabab. In February of last year, a naturalized U.S. citizen, 27-year-old Shirwa Ahmed of Minneapolis killed himself and many others in a suicide bombing in Somalia. A US Senate Foreign Relations report

in January quoted law enforcement and intelligence officials as saying that some of the 36 Americans who last year travelled to Yemen to study Arabic had disappeared and were suspected of having gone to Al Qaeda training camps. The officials expressed similar concerns about another group of Americans who had moved to Yemen, embraced a radical interpretation of Islam and married local women.

While Pakistani jihadis and Al Qaeda have earned brownie points with the attempted Times Square bombing and the foiled Christmas Day bombing of a Detroit-bound US airliner by a Nigerian national, the failure of these two incidents to wreak death and destruction is prompting concern in Islamist chat rooms that could damage jihadi credibility and ability to recruit. Some Islamists argue that trying is not good enough and that failure makes the jihadis look weak. “I think people should be more careful when they plan operations, try fertilizer, not firecrackers, inshallah (God willing),” said Younous Abdullah Muhammed in a chatroom on RevolutionMuslim. They also offer intelligence agencies an opportunity to counter jihadi appeal. “We need to make sure that folks that might be recruited into this movement think about these guys not as heroic warriors, but as untrained and angry, bitter individuals, without a cohesive ideology,” Fishman says.

Many of those interviewed in Obaid-Chinoy’s documentary said they wanted to join the Taliban after having witnessed death and destruction as well as the loss of loved ones in Pakistani assaults on Islamist village strongholds and targeted US drone attacks. In recent video appearances, Pakistan Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, who was originally believed to have been killed in a drone attack earlier this year, linked his warning that his fighters would target the US to US attacks on his group. Some analysts trace the flow of Somali-Americans to Al-Shabab to the US-backed botched 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia that was supposed to defeat the Islamists and associated US strikes against Al Qaeda operatives in Somalia.

“There was little consideration of how this would look to nationalistic Somali-Americans living in the United States,” says Daniel L. Byman of the Brookings Institute’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy. “..the FBI and local police must have strong ties to local ethnic communities. If al-Qaida is relying more on affiliates, then knowing leaders of these communities— Yemenis, Pakistanis, and so on—and helping them police themselves is essential. None of these steps will solve the problem, but together they can help the United States manage the danger more effectively.”