Spot Report

Marriott Hotel Suicide Bombing in Islamabad
20 September 2008
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The Incident

On Saturday, 20 September 2008 (at around 7:58 p.m. Pakistan’s Standard Time), a deadly vehicle-borne suicide attack struck Marriott Hotel, which is located in a high security zone in Pakistan’s capital, Islamabad. According to the CCTV image released by the Interior Ministry of Pakistan, a white-colored explosive laden six-wheeler truck tried to enter into the hotel by passing through the fortifications placed at the hotel’s outer entrance. However, the truck could not enter the main premise of the hotel since the steel barrier erected at the outer entrance barred the truck from entering in the hotel’s main entrance. According to some media reports, the suicide bomber driving the truck apparently tried to convince the guards to lower the steel barrier, failing which he blew himself up in the truck's cabin and the front part of the truck caught fire. However, analysis of CCTV footage suggests no such communication taking place between the two sides. The security guards and the other staff of the hotel then tried to put out the fire in the truck. Meanwhile, the rear part of truck that was loaded with huge quantity of explosives caught fire and exploded. It seems that the suicide bomber intended to drive the truck into the lobby of the hotel in which he failed.

Considering the massive scale of human loss and material destruction, the Pakistani media and government officials are describing the terrorist attack as “Pakistan’s 9/11”. The attack killed more than 54 people including some foreigners, including the ambassador of Czech Republic, a diplomat from Vietnam, a Danish intelligence official and two US marines. Nearly 280 people received wounds, including 11 foreigners from the US (4), Saudi Arabia (4), and one each from Lebanon, Britain and Afghanistan. The blast was so powerful that buildings situated as far away as 30 kms from the hotel reverberated with the thunder of the explosion. Almost all the 290 rooms of the hotel were gutted. The blast caused a huge crater measuring 24 feet deep and 59X63 feet in diameter at the outer entrance of the hotel. The entire area turned into rubble. Initially, media reports suggested that the rupturing of a gas pipeline further worsened the situation and kept the hotel building ablaze for hours. However, Marriott Hotel Administration denied the rupturing of the gas pipelines in the bombing.

2 Briefing of Rehman Malik, Advisor of the Interior Ministry to the media persons, assessed at Express News TV on 21 September 2008.
3 CCTV Footage Shown on Aaj TV on 21 September 2008, as well as Email communication with Andy Williams, Regional Security Director of UKI, Middle East, Africa and Continental Europe, Marriott Hotels International Ltd, London, on 29 September 2008.
6 Email communication with Andy Williams, Op. cit.
Some hotel occupants were also seen stranded on the rooftop of the hotel, shouting for help. There are also chances that many people could still be found underneath rubble.

An initial investigation into the attack revealed that 600 kilograms of TNT and RDX explosives were used in the attack.\(^7\) Aluminum powder was also used to trigger fire after the blast.

**VISUAL AIDS**

A CCTV footage of the initial explosion\(^8\)

Marriott Hotel turns into an inferno\(^9\)

\(^7\)“Marriott Blast: 4 Foreigners Among 53 Dead”, *The News*, 21 September 2008
\(^8\) Express News, Pakistan
\(^9\) www.bbcurdu.co.uk
The Target

According to Rehman Malik, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Interior, the actual target of the terrorists was the top political and military leadership of Pakistan, who were supposed to attend a dinner at the Marriott Hotel. However, the venue of the dinner was changed at a latter stage to that of the Prime Minister’s House.\textsuperscript{10} The Marriott Hotel Administration, however, denied Malik’s statement saying that “there was no reservation from the government side … I have checked from the management and the hotel administration, no booking had been made for an official dinner on that day.”\textsuperscript{11}

Initially, various reports indicated that the terrorists intended to blow up the Parliament House where the entire top civil and military leadership of Pakistan gathered to listen to the maiden address of President Asif Ali Zardari earlier in the day.\textsuperscript{12} However, strict security arrangements around the Constitutional Avenue, the street in front of the houses the Parliament House and other important government offices, thwarted the plan.

\textsuperscript{10} “President, PM Were to Dine at Marriott”, \textit{The News}, 23 September 2008
\textsuperscript{11} “Marriott Says no Official Dinner Planned on Bombing Day”, \textit{Daily Times}, 23 September 2008
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid
According to this report, the strict security measures forced the suicide bomber to opt for a comparatively soft target- the Marriott Hotel.\textsuperscript{13}

This is not the first time that Marriott Hotel in Islamabad has come under attack. The hotel has witnessed terrorist attacks, albeit of very low intensity, in October 2004 and January 2007.\textsuperscript{14} Until 2002 the Marriott Hotel was the only 5-star hotel in Islamabad, being joined that year by the 5-star hotel, Serena Hotel, which has made the Marriott a favorite location for diplomats, government officials and others, which makes it an inviting target for terrorists. Additionally the attack could be a continuation of Al-Qaeda’s strategy to target Western interests in Pakistan, a key ally of the US in war on terror. Secondly, the location of Marriott Hotel is very important since it is situated in the F-5 zone of Islamabad that houses key government buildings, such as the parliament house, the President House, the Prime Minister’s Secretariat and House, Pakistan Television (PTV), residential apartments of parliamentarians and various ministries of Pakistan. By striking in a high security zone of the capital, the terrorists have once again demonstrated their will and capability to strike the Pakistani government in the mainland Pakistan while operating from the tribal areas of Pakistan.

According to some media reports, a number of US marines were also staying in the Marriott Hotel, and were scheduled to leave for Kabul on Sunday, 21 September 2008.\textsuperscript{15} The US embassy in Islamabad, however, denied the reports, saying that some of their staff was present at the hotel for dinner, but none was staying at the hotel.\textsuperscript{16} A law enforcement official said in all likelihood “personnel of a US security agency” were the attackers’ target.\textsuperscript{17} If this is so, it would be the second terrorist attack in Islamabad in which terrorists have targeted US security personnel in Pakistan. It is worth mentioning that Trish Gibbs, chief of the FBI Operations in Pakistan survived a terrorist attack in an Italian restaurant, “Luna Caprice”, in Islamabad on 18 March 2008. However, it remains to be seen whether the terrorists were aware of the presence of the US marines, or the Hotel was merely chosen as the target because it was a frequented by foreign nationals. Investigations are still underway and it would be premature to say if the attack was a one-off, or an attack on a specific target.

**Attack Analysis**

According to some reports, the Marriott Hotel bombing involved the use of high quality explosive material, such as RDX and TNT. According to some government officials, the Marriott bombing had close resemblance with the previous suicide attacks in terms of the mode of attack as well as the use of explosives. These previous attacks include the vehicle-borne suicide attack on the ISI’s Hamza Camp in Rawalpindi in November 2007; recovery of two explosive-loaded vehicles from the D I Khan district in North West Frontier Province (NWFP); vehicle-borne suicide attacks on Naval War College in

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid

\textsuperscript{14} “Islamabad Marriott Hotel Attack”, https://www.osac.gov/Reports/report.cfm?contentID=62600

\textsuperscript{15} Ansar Abbasi, “Was it an Attack on US Marines?”, The News, 21 September 2008

\textsuperscript{16} “Americans Not Marriott Blast’s Target, Says US Embassy”, Daily Times, 23 September 2008

\textsuperscript{17} “Was it an Attack on US Marines?”, Op.cit.
Lahore (March 2008) and Federal Investigation Agency’s Regional Office Lahore (March 2008) and the Danish Embassy in Islamabad (June 2008). According to forensic experts in Islamabad, the terrorists are increasing using RDX and TNT in new attacks compared to previous ones, in which they used potassium chloride and fertilizer as explosive material.

In the Marriott Hotel bombing, the terrorists also used splinters of mortar shells and artillery rounds as well Aluminium powder. The powder acted as the accelerator of fire when it mixed with the explosive material. Hence, upon explosion, the shells filled with Aluminium powder blew out and hit the Marriott Hotel, thereby acting as incendiary device. According to Pakistani officials, both Al Qaeda and the TTP had been employing RDX in their previous attacks; hence their involvement could not be ruled out.

Some of the initial findings of the bombing pointed to the fact that the truck driver first blew himself up which led to fire in the cabin. The fire continue to rage for four minutes before traveling to the rear part of the truck where explosives were placed. Upon getting in touch with fire the explosive blasted creating a huge crater in the ground and setting some parts of the Marriott building on fire. There were also reports that the trigger mechanism of the suicide bomber was not properly linked with the explosive material, and the second blast could have been averted if the security officials had acted promptly and doused the fire that started in the cabin of the dumper after the suicide bomber blew himself up.

**Group Assessment**

A hitherto unknown terrorist group, “Fidayeen-e-Islam” has claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has also denied their involvement in the sad attack. According to Rehman Malik, Al Qaeda and the TTP are behind Marriott bombing. A senior government official also remarked that the terrorist attack bore the “hallmarks of Al Qaeda.” According to Rehman Malik, the attack bore resemblance to previous attacks conducted against the ISI’s Hamza Camp in Rawalpindi, vehicle-borne suicide attacks on Federal Investigation Agency’s regional office in Lahore in March 2008; foiled vehicle borne suicide attempts in D.I.Khan in NWFP and the vehicle-borne suicide attack on Danish Embassy in Islamabad. Malik further stated that

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
the use of explosives in all the above-mentioned attacks bore similarity to the recent Marriott Hotel attack.\(^{28}\)

Some reports point to the possible involvement of Qari Saifullah Akhtar-led Harkat-ul-Jehad-ul-Islami (HUJI), which has maintained close ties to both the Taliban and Al Qaeda since the 1990s, and its cadres were also involved in failed assassination attempts on President Musharraf.\(^{29}\) However, Akhtar remains scot-free.

There is a possibility of the involvement of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) in the Marriott Hotel bombing. The LJ is a proscribed sectarian militant group active in the mainland Pakistan, especially the Punjab Province, since the mid-1980s. The group maintained close relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan during the 1990s and also with Al Qaeda. LJ activists were also reportedly involved in failed assassination attempt on former President Musharraf in December 2003. Qari Zafar, one of leading LJ activist and president of Sindh province chapter of LJ has a bounty of US $5 million on his head, and is believed to be involved in innumerable terrorist attacks in the country, including the March 2008 attack on the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) regional office in Lahore, as well as the March 2006 bombing of the US consulate in Karachi. Qari Zafar is very closely linked to Al Qaeda and Baitullah Mahsud, chief of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).\(^{30}\) In September 2008, Baitullah Mahsud, LJ and other terrorist groups operating in Karachi joined hands to pursue their “jihadi” agenda in Karachi.\(^{31}\)

It was also reported on 9 September 2008 that militants hijacked a truck carrying more than 500 kg of explosive material from Taxila, which is 45 km from Islamabad.\(^{32}\) The law enforcement agencies had then suspected that some terrorist outfit could be behind the hijacking incident. There is a possibility that the terrorist could have utilized the same hijacked explosives in carrying out the bombing of Marriott Hotel.

This is pertinent to mention here that the bombing came on the one-year anniversary of Osama bin Laden's call for Pakistani Muslims to unleash jihad or holy war against the government, a vital ally in the US-led ‘war on terror’.\(^{33}\)

The terrorists have attacked several foreign citizens and western targets in Pakistan since the country join the US-led coalition against terrorism in late 2001. The recent vehicle-borne suicide attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad could be in retaliation to Pakistan’s military operation in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. Hundreds of Taliban militants have been killed in various military operations. However, the Marriott Hotel bombing shows that Al Qaeda-linked Pakistani Taliban militants and other mainland terrorist groups have the intention and capability to strike deep into the mainland Pakistan while operating

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\(^{28}\) Ibid.


\(^{30}\) They were targeting Karachi and its leaders, Daily Times, 18 February 2007, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007%5C02%5C18%5Cstory_18-2-2007_pg12_1


\(^{32}\) “Truck With 500kg of Explosives Hijacked”, *The News*, 9 September 2008

\(^{33}\) “All Roads Lead to FATA”, Rehman Malik”, *Dawn*, 21 September 2008
from FATA. Such terrorist groups employ deadly suicide attacks as a potential tactic to force the Pakistani government to halt military operations against them in FATA and NWFP.

The suicide attack could have been a reaction from a Pakistani militant group to avenge the recent US predator drone airstrikes in Pakistan’s FATA to eliminate Al Qaeda’s senior leadership based in the Pak-Afghan border region. The US missile strikes in Pakistan had raised feelings of revenge not only among the Pakistani Taliban groups but also among the local tribes inhabiting FATA.

The recent blast has also highlighted a serious lapse into the security arrangement in the city. The fact that a huge truck laden with explosives was allowed to enter a high security zone in Islamabad and target a leading five-star hotel in the city, points to lax security arrangements by the Pakistani law enforcement agencies.

The recent suicide attack on the Marriott Hotel has also demonstrated the creative and adaptive nature of the terrorist groups operating in Pakistan. First of all, the self-styled so-called Jihadis conducted the inhuman attack at the time of *Ifitar* (the time of sunset when Muslims break fast) to kill innocent civilians who had gathered in the Marriott Hotel. The time to launch the terrorist attack was chosen very carefully because security arrangements witness a considerable relaxation at the time of *Ifitar*. Secondly, the terrorists hid the explosives in the truck under the construction material. Since a lot of infrastructure developmental work is going on in Islamabad, the terrorists were able to divert the attention of the law enforcement agencies away from them.

The terrorist attack on the Marriott Hotel, Islamabad, points towards a changing trend in the terrorists’ strategy to spread a wave of terror in the country. The terrorists are gradually widening the scope of their attacks in Pakistan. While terrorist attacks were conducted against Pakistani military in the first stage, slowly it was broadened to included law enforcement agencies in various provinces of Pakistan. In the third stage, the terrorists targeted political leaders in the country, including the killing of Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister and chairperson of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in December 2007. In the fourth stage, the terrorists began targeting Jirgas of tribal elders and two such incidents – a suicide attack on a tribal jirga in Darra Adamkhel in Khyber Agency and an attack on a tribal jirga in Mirali in North Waziristan Agency in March – have already taken place. In the fifth stage, the militants have started targeting foreigners and western interests in Pakistan. It needs to be reminded that the Afghan Taliban also attacked the Serena Hotel in Kabul in January 2008, which signifies that the Taliban are exploring new tactics. The recent twin suicide bombings in Pakistan – Naval War College and FIA Headquarters in Lahore in March 2008 – is also a recent trend which was first tested in Afghanistan in December 2007 when the Taliban launched a twin suicide attack on the residence of Kabul’s governor.

**Conclusion**
Pakistan has become one of the largest victims of terrorism, with violence on the rise in the country and huge swathes of territory on the western border getting out of the writ of the Pakistani government. In 2008, Pakistan surpassed the war-torn Iraq and insurgency-hit Afghanistan in terms of experiencing the highest numbers of suicide attacks. The present attack on Marriott Hotel signifies the fact that insecurity for foreigners has increased tremendously. This would discourage foreign investors and tourists to visit Pakistan.

Similarly, Islamabad could face the problem of accommodating dignitaries and VVIPS since the city had only two 5-star hotels. With Marriott Hotel rendered useless due to the terrorist bombing, only Serena hotel is left to cater to international and national needs of dignitaries.

There is a growing feeling that the terrorists are increasing relying on the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) to breach enhanced security cordons of buildings. It cannot be ruled out that the terrorists might employ twin-VBIED to attack high-security infrastructures in the future on the pattern of the Kandahar jail break that took place in mid-2008.

Finally, such blatant terrorist acts are increasing awareness among Pakistani public regarding the intentions and activities of the Taliban, and people have increasingly started disliking the Taliban. This could deprive the Taliban of the vital local support base and could help the Pakistani government in its fight in its counter-terrorism efforts.