

The role of the Panjabi Taliban in Pakistan's jihadist movement

The situation has come to such a pass that the Panjabi Taliban have become too powerful to be subdued by any government in Pakistan. It is to be seen whether President Asif Ali Zardari would be able to subdue the Frankenstein nurtured by late Zia-ul-Haq and ISI.

By G L Jalali

A decade ago Lashker-e-Taiba ideologue Muhammad Ibrahim said in Lahore, "Whosoever takes part in Jihad against India, Allah will set him free from the pyres of hell. He will have his place in heaven after his death". His call was direct invitation to Pakistanis to participate in the Jihad against India for years Pakistanis establishment, headed by the infamous ISI, used all resources to ensure that the Jihadist like Muhammad Ibrahim achieve their Islamist agenda whose main purpose was to disintegrate India and annex Kashmir which, to quote a former president of Pakistan was "an unfinished agenda of Pakistan". The Jihadist leaders were patronized by the military dominated administration.

In this movement Panjabi Sunni Muslims were in the vanguard and played an important role. They had one advantage both the Army and bureaucracy were dominated by the Panjabis who were witness to the tragedy of country partition in 1947. Pakistani establishment was helpless to curtail the activities of the Jihadists. Even the Pakistani state even now "seems remarkably unwilling to fight back—a phenomenon that has caused no small amount of bewilderment among analysts and commentators across the world". The military was in cahoots with the Jihadists who mostly hailed from Pakistan's east Punjab Province. In fact Pakistan's Jihadist movement originated in east Punjab. Bhawalpore became the epicenter of this movement. There is one important point to note about this movement. There is one important point to note about this movement; it did not try to seek political power. Its purpose was to extend its activities beyond the country's border and as such it "posed no threat to the alliance of military and the mullah which shaped Pakistan's destiny", comments political analysts Praveen Swami (The Hindu March 25'2009). Punjab, Pakistan's heartland of Jihadist movement, provided a good number of Youths to the Jihadist outfits that were controlled by the Panjab Jihadist leaders. These newly recruited youths are often described as the Panjabi Taliban "to denote their ethnicity, ideology and principal area of operation." By nature the Panjabis are aggressive and prone to religious indoctrination by semi-literate mullahs and clerics. By and large they bear hatred for India which is the main plank of the Jihadist ideology. These Punjabi Jihadists have been mainly responsible for a string of spectacular assaults both inside and outside Pakistan since 2007. For instance the attack on Islamabad's prestigious Marriott Hotel and Sri Lanka's cricket players in Lahore as well as a string of assaults on military installations in and around Islamabad have shown that the Panjabi Taliban are involved. Lal Masjid in Islamabad served as a heaven for the Panjabi Taliban who left no stone unturned in offering a stiff resistance to the security forces who successfully demolished the bastion of Panjabi Jihadist.

Since the inception of Muslim insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir states, maximum of infiltrators who crossed the LoC hailed from the East Pakistan. These Panjabi Taliban indulged in unprecedented violence. Hundreds of the Panjabi Taliban were killed by the Indian security forces. According to Tariq Parvez, head of Pakistan's National counter terrorism Authority, the Panjabi Taliban received huge funds from the Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia "Veteran Panjabi extremists plot the attacks while the Pakistan Taliban provides the martyrs", remarks Tariq Parvez. The Panjabi Taliban first made their appearance when Quari Saifullah Akhtar's Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami recruited Jihadis from Panjab province to fight Jihad led by one-eyed Mullah Mohammad Omar in Afghanistan. As already stated Pakistan's ISI patronized these newly recruited Mujahideen from Panjab. They were systematically trained in the Army camps set up by the ISI. These camps were mostly located in Pak-occupied- Kashmir (PoK),

Islamabad, Bhawalpore, Peshawar, Silkote etc. The recruits were trained in asymmetrical warfare, guerrilla tactics, and sabotage”, ISI’s design was to send them later across the LoC to “participate in the Jihadi in J&K state”. A number of terrorist outfits came into being, having their headquarters in the major cities and towns of the east Punjab. In the of military crisis triggered by the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament, President Parvez Musharraf was forced to proscribe some of the terrorist groups that operated on Pakistan soil. LeT was directly involved in the attack on Indian Parliament. Maulana Masood Azhar, Bahawalpore based Jaish-e-Mohammad head and LeT supreme Hafiz Mohammad Sayed went underground. But they continued their operations against India. It is rumored the Maulana Masood Azhar is hiding with the Taliban commander Baitullah Masud in South Waziristan. It may be recalled that two Panjab based sunni terrorist outfits Sipah-i-Sahaba and Lashkar-e- Jhangvi are directly involved in terrorist acts against minority Shia community. In a report published in March, 2009 the international crisis group labeled the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi as “the lynchpin of alignment between the Al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban and sectarian group”. Two prominent Panjabi Taliban groups, the dreaded LeT and Jesh-e-Mohammad, have direct contact with Al-Qaeda. This nexus helps the Panjabi Taliban to sustain Jihad in Kashmir which has taken a heavy toll of life in strife-torn J&K state. There is now public awareness in Pakistan that “Panjabi Taliban’s growing reach and influence pose a threat to Pakistani state”.

If Islamists come to power in Pakistan by subverting state’s law and order machinery there is every apprehension that Pakistan as a sovereign political entity would disintegrate, shattering the dream of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah who carved a separate state for Muslims to keep their identity. That will be the greatest tragedy for Pakistan.

There is main ideological difference between the Panjabi Taliban and Al-Qaeda Jihadists. Says Praveen Swami, “Pakistan’s Jihadist movement though does not seek to acquire a state as distinct from mere territory, Pakistan’s Jihadists are fundamentally different from the struggle for national liberation of the 19th and 20th centuries. They stand for the acquisition of state power” (The Hindu, April 25th 2009) the reason why the Jihadists other than Panjabi Jihadist are “not seeking to capture state is tactical”. With the mass support to the militants, the state itself becomes irrelevant. The state is bound to become active participant in Jihad which is the ultimate active participant in Jihad which is the ultimate aim of the Islamists.

Abdullah Azam, Palestine-born Jihadist who is said to be the co-founder of Lashker-e-Taliba remarks in his book “The Jihad in Afghanistan”, “It is incumbent on the Islamic state to send out a group of Mujahideen to their neighboring infidel state. They should present Islam to the leader and his nation. If they refuse to accept Islam, “JIZYA” will be imposed on them and they will become subjects of the Islamic state. If they refuse second option, the third course of action is Jihad to bring the infidel state under Islamic administration” (Quoted by Praveen Swami in the Hindu, April 25th 2009). Azam finds fault with the Afghan Mujahideen who ventured to acquire “state power”. They, says Azam, instead of taking guns against infidels in India, the Afghan Mujahideen tried to acquire control over Kabul. “They chose carrion over the Paradise of Kashmir, Tajikistan and Palestine,” sums up Abdullah Azam.

All the principal ideologues of the new version of Islam laid stress on Jihad as an instrument of seeking the supremacy of religion and subjugating the infidels. Sayyid Qutb, the noted Egyptian Brotherhood leader, fully justified waging Jihad against infidels. In his view, “Muslim party has no choice but to go for and control the power centers for the simple reason that an oppressive immoral civilization derives its sustenance from an immoral governmental set up”. All the Punjab-based terrorist groups, particularly Lashker-e-Taiba and Jesh-e-Mohammad, take cue from these radical Islamist leaders who stressed the need of fighting Jihad. Lashker-e-Taliba Supreme Hafiz Mohammad Sayed in his fiery speech delivered on June 18th 2008 called on Pakistan to “disassociated itself from war on terror and join the Mujahideen to fight in Kashmir” Another LeT leader Abdul Rehman Maki went a step further, calling upon the government of Pakistan to snap all ties with the United States and join Jihad against it. He appealed to the Pakistani establishment to liberate Kashmir from the Indian occupation Maulana Masud Azhar, the head of Jesh-e-Mohammad also breaths fire against India. His outfit has firm foot hold in the Valley.

The role of the Panjabi Taliban in Pakistan’s Jihadist movement has proved very disastrous for Pakistan. The on going Jihad in J&K state has crippled the very economy of Pakistan. Between 2002 and 2008, the US spent approximately \$1.2 billion to prop up Pakistan’s fragile economy. But common people in Pakistan continue to be mired in appalling poverty. Unprincipled politicians and leaders of religious parties are apparently helping the Panjabi Taliban. That is why there is no let up in bloodshed in J&K state

It was during the time of president Zia-ul-Haq that the Taliban came into being. He utilized them in war against Russia in Afghanistan. After his death all his successors patronized them to gain their political ends. Now the situation has come to such a pass that they have become too powerful to be subdued by any government in Pakistan. It is to be seen whether President Asif Ali Zardari would be able to subdue the Frankenstein created by late Zia-ul-Haq and ISI.