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**Punjabi Taliban' and the Sectarian
Groups in Pakistan**

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‘Punjabi Taliban’ and the Sectarian Groups in Pakistan

Katja Riikonen¹

Introduction

Until recently, the Taliban consisted of two main linked entities: the Afghanistan and the Pakistan Taliban. They share the same ideology but differ in goals². The extent of their interconnectedness and collaboration has been under debate but the existence of ties between the two – facilitated by the Pashtun belt and its culture as well as the history of the region – have never been denied or disputed.

In late spring 2009 the Taliban family gained a new addition when the ‘Punjabi Taliban’ entered the media lexicon.³ Suddenly the media exploded with stories of the new Taliban grouping, at the same time grappling with its meaning.

Some media reports and analysts have been vague about what the term exactly refers to. For some it is an extension of Taliban in the Punjab province, especially its southern parts, and for some it is “a blanket term for members of banned sectarian and jihadi groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan and Jaish-e-Mohammad”⁴ which originate and operate from Punjab. The precise meaning of the term remains elusive, resulting in conflicting and confusing reporting, not least on the recent bombings and armed attacks in Pakistan.⁵

Less questionable than the term ‘Punjabi Taliban’ is the evidence of growing operational links between these sectarian groups and the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan). The arrest of sectarian operatives in attacks owned by the Taliban,⁶ the

¹ Katja Riikonen is a PhD candidate in the Department of Peace Studies researching sectarian violence in Pakistan. The views expressed in this paper are hers alone.

² See for example: Pervez Hoodbhoy (2009) “Whither Pakistan? A five-year forecast” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 3 June 2009 <http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/whither-pakistan-five-year-forecast>.

³ Some analysts cite much longer history to the term. Amir Mir for example dates the first use of the term to 1996, as well as the beginning of the most recent entity to the 2007 Lal Masjid aftermath. Misc (2009) “Special report – the News on Sunday”, <http://www.jang.com.pk/thenews/oct2009-weekly/nos-25-10-2009/spr.htm>

Also see:

Frederick Kagan & Ahmad Majidiyar (2009) “Punjabi Taliban”, May 28, 2009 <http://www.criticalthreats.org/pakistan/punjabi-taliban>

⁴ Amir Mir (2009) “Punjabi Taliban found involved in Pak terror spree” Friday 16 October 2009. http://www.metransparent.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=8438&lang=en <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/03-there-are-no-good-militants-ss-04> and Matt Wade (2009) “An unholy trinity” October 21, 2009 <http://www.theage.com.au/world/an-unholy-trinity-20091020-h6wt.html>

⁵ Some examples of the various ways to define Punjabi Taliban: Zaffar Abbas (2009) “There are no ‘good’ militants” The Dawn, , 11 Oct, 2009 <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/03-there-are-no-good-militants-ss-04> ;

Matt Wade (2009) “An unholy trinity” October 21, 2009 <http://www.theage.com.au/world/an-unholy-trinity-20091020-h6wt.html> ; BBC (2009) “Conflict Map”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8046577.stm

⁶ Omar Waraich (2009) Why Pakistan Must Widen Hunt for Militant Bases, Time, Oct. 13, 2009 <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929931,00.html?iid=tsmodule> And: Amir Mir

joint appearances of senior leaders,⁷ and even the transfer of leaders from sectarian organizations to the TTP⁸ are amongst the recent examples.

In fact the connections between the various organizations have existed since the Afghan war, and the leadership of sectarian organizations, especially LJ, is well known to have taken refuge in Afghanistan when under pressure from Pakistani governments.⁹ This resulted in personal relationships between the leaders of sectarian groups and the Afghan and later Pakistani Taliban, and subsequently led to more collaboration in the training of militants, assistance in operations, and their facilitation with provision of food, safe houses, etc.¹⁰ Those links themselves are not new. What, then, has caused the coining of the new term?

Whereas most analysts would agree that the sectarian outfits are closely linked to the Pakistani Taliban conglomerate¹¹ the extent of the merging of sectarian groups and the Pakistan Taliban is unclear. Some writers argue: “JeM and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are now subsumed in TTP” while others take a more cautious line by calling this a “coming together of the major Sunni radical groups in ways that are far more dangerous and far more threatening than they were two or three years ago”¹².

Most analysts agree that the Taliban insurgency has penetrated into Punjab¹³, and hold the recent developments as a proof of “how intricately the violence in Punjab is linked to terror in the Frontier”¹⁴. There is still very little hard evidence as to whether this is simply the formation of “a powerful Jihadist alliance”¹⁵ or a deeper merging of the groups.

Rather than knowing the exact extent and depth of the ties of these groups, especially since the membership of these groups are not clear-cut or mutually exclusive, the more important question is to know how much the agendas of the sectarian organizations and the Taliban have merged. This would have wide implications for the status and importance of the sectarian groups in the conflict topology of Pakistan,

(2009) “Punjabi Taliban found involved in Pak terror spree” Friday 16 October

2009. http://www.mettransparent.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=8438&lang=en

⁷ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\10\12\story_12-10-2009_pg7_10

⁸Saeed Shah (2009) “Taliban suicide bombing kills 25 in Pakistan” The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/6204885/Taliban-suicide-bombing-kills-25-in-Pakistan.html>

⁹ This happened especially during crackdowns on sectarian militants initiated by Pakistan governments. Also see Mariam Abou Zahab (2000) “The Regional Dimension of Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan” <http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/archive/octo00/artmaz.pdf>

¹⁰ The LJ leader Riaz Basra is one of the most famous examples of these personal connections to Taliban and their operationalisation. Also see for example: http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\10\18\story_18-10-2009_pg3_2

¹¹ The Dawn (2009) “Enter, Hakeemullah”, 7th October 2009 <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/editorial/enter%2C-hakeemullah-709>

¹² Matt Wade (2009) “An unholy trinity” October 21, 2009 <http://www.theage.com.au/world/an-unholy-trinity-20091020-h6wt.html> (Samina Ahmed, International Crisis Group, ICG)

¹³ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\10\14\story_14-10-2009_pg3_2

¹⁴ The Dawn (2009) “Bloody Thursday”, 16 Oct, 2009 <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/editorial/bloody-thursday-609>

¹⁵ Zahid Hussain (2009) Punjabi militants form unholy alliance with Taleban fighters in the west, October 16, 2009 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6877108.ece>

but it would also mean a changing situation for the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Pakistan.¹⁶ The merging of the agendas to joint goals and mission would also signal a real coming together of the different militant groups.

Again, experts disagree. Samina Ahmed from ICG thinks that “[t]hese groups have their separate identities and goals which could be local, regional and trans-regional, but there is a close alliance relationship and there is a flow of everything from funding to training to recruitment and methodology.”¹⁷ Amir Mir, on the other hand, says: “the TTP and Punjabi militants --- are part of the same front and have one mission.”¹⁸ Through the interconnected leadership and closer operational ties there most likely have been some merging of the agendas but it hasn’t been an equal process. Since the sectarian groups were built on exclusivist sectarian agenda and it – at least so far – has formed the core of their identity - sectarianism remains their priority.¹⁹ But by taking part in the joint operations with Taliban²⁰ they have signalled that attacking Shias is clearly not their only goal. In fact, the militant operatives of sectarian groups have a long history of engaging in various activities outside the sectarian agenda. For example, many high-profile members of the sectarian groups are, or have been, well-known dacoits and criminals, and engaged in various criminal activities. This is the latest development in the expansion of their agenda.

It is less likely that Pakistani Taliban will adopt a stronger sectarian agenda²¹ - which now serves as a side goal, and is mostly confined to NWFP - or will seek to expand such an agenda to the rest of Pakistan. It is more likely that the sectarian organizations will continue to adopt Taliban’s anti-government, anti-West agenda, engaging more frequently in the attacks linked to them.

Even though we now see signs of stronger cooperation and collaboration, the relationship between the Punjabi sectarian groups and the TTP is likely to fluctuate in the future. It will depend on possible leadership power struggles or whether the various groups have a momentum of joint, coherent action and agreement on goals. The TTP itself is a fractious coalition, making its stability and resilience difficult to predict. What will remain as an important factor, though, are the ready-made networks that benefit both the Punjabi groups and the TTP enabling further operationalisation of the established connections.

¹⁶ For more on sectarian conflicts in Pakistan see for example: Ashok K. Behuria (2004), “Sunni-Shia Relations in Pakistan: The Widening Divide”. *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 157-176. And: Owen Bennett Jones (2002), *Pakistan –Eye of the Storm*. Lahore: Vanguard.

¹⁷ Matt Wade (2009) “An unholy trinity” October 21, 2009 <http://www.theage.com.au/world/an-unholy-trinity-20091020-h6wt.html>

¹⁸ Amir Mir (2009) “Punjabi Taliban found involved in Pak terror spree” Friday 16 October 2009. http://www.metransparent.com/spip.php?page=article&id_article=8438&lang=en

¹⁹ See for example: Omar Waraich (2009) Why Pakistan Must Widen Hunt for Militant Bases, *Time*, Oct. 13, 2009 <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929931,00.html?iid=tsmodulehttp://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929931,00.html?iid=tsmodule>

²⁰ See footnote 3. See also: BBC News (2009) “Taliban claim Pakistan army raid”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8302114.stm and: Alex Rodriguez (2009) “Taliban taps the Punjab heartland”, *Los Angeles Times*. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-pakistan-punjab16-2009nov16,0,3306802.story>

²¹ Pervez Hoodbhoy (2009) “Whither Pakistan? A five-year forecast” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 3 June 2009 <http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/features/whither-pakistan-five-year-forecast>

The Naming Game - the implications of labelling the ‘Punjabi Taliban’

There are reasons to be sceptical of the term ‘Punjabi Taliban’. Where it perhaps highlights the importance of the province in understanding the military landscape, the ongoing conflicts and the actors involved in them, it simplifies a complex network of groups, and their historical ties and interdependence.

As noted above, the lines between the various organizations have always been blurred, and their memberships are not mutually exclusive. Punjab, with its militant networks, not to mention its madrassas, had a noteworthy role in the creation and success of Taliban.

Perhaps it is because the complex connections amongst militant groups defy neat and clear-cut definitions that the media took on the term so eagerly. For Western media, the term offers a short cut in explaining the recent developments in Pakistan without having to introduce a new cluster of previously less known groups to the Western audience. It helps to equate these attacks to something previously jointly condemned and defined as ‘enemy’. By simplifying matters, and suggesting the spread of Taliban to other areas of Pakistan, the media is also reinforcing the profit-guaranteeing discourse of fear. This line of thinking was expressed by a Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah Khan who claimed that “the western media was behind Talibanisation rumours in south Punjab”, and he denied the existence of either Punjabi Taliban, or their training camps in the province.²²

The reason why the term ‘Punjabi Taliban’ entered the media lexicon can be understood in the above light, but it inevitably blurs the complex issue of agency in violent attacks, and creates the illusion of a unified actor. It also carries the implication that Taliban has entered the heartland of Pakistan, the Punjab province, previously associated with the fight for Kashmir and sectarianism. From that position it is easy to jump to speculation about the existence of Taliban training camps²³ – and to envision future military operations in Punjab²⁴.

A further rhetorical trap is that while the “the battle against the Taliban is clearly laid out; the battle against sectarian terror and sectarian groups “is less coherent.”²⁵ Reducing all actors to ‘Taliban’ simplifies arguments about how to eradicate militancy and extremism from the region. The approaches that are currently being implemented against the Pakistani Taliban in FATA and NWFP are in danger of being assumed to be easily transferable to other parts of Pakistan, and “the problem with battling militancy in Punjab “is reduced to the problem that “the government cannot undertake a crackdown on the scale of the offensives against the Taliban in

²² The Dawn (2009) “‘No Taliban in south Punjab’, The Dawn, 13 Oct, 2009 <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/national/no-taliban-in-south-punjab-309>

²³ See for example: Alex Rodriguez (2009) “Taliban taps the Punjab heartland”, Los Angeles Times. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-pakistan-punjab16-2009nov16,0,3306802.story>

²⁴ Bureau Report (2009) “NWFP for army action in southern Punjab”, The Dawn, 11 Oct, 2009 <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/nwfp-for-army-action-in-southern-punjab-109>

⁴ Bureau Report (2009) Ibid, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/nwfp-for-army-action-in-southern-punjab-109>

²⁵ http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\09\20\story_20-9-2009_pg3_1

northwestern Pakistan's Swat Valley or in Waziristan” because the “Punjab is too densely populated.”²⁶ By acknowledging the complex terrain of militant actors in Pakistan those strategies would need to be seriously revisited, but this would have the virtue of opening space for action and could avoid the adoption of inappropriate strategies. .

As noted above, the coining of the term does have one positive outcome: it draws much needed attention to the Punjab province, and will hopefully result in incorporating it as an integral part of the plans for eliminating violent extremism from the region. Perhaps, when the simplicity of the term ‘Punjabi Taliban’ is questioned more widely, the complex relationships of the province’s military networks and Taliban will also come to light. When the Western media more fully reports the extent of the dangers posed by the militants in Punjab²⁷ they will have caught up with intellectuals in Lahore who have long stated that to resolve, or to transform, the extremist conundrum you have to start by solve the sectarian and militant challenge in Punjab.

Conclusions

The media and many analysts are struggling to come to define ‘Punjabi Taliban’ and show the exact connection of the Punjab-based militant groups to the Pakistani Taliban. For some, the groups have merged; whereas others talk about loose coalition of like-minded groups. There is very little evidence of a full merger, but the ties that go a long way back have now moved into a new operational level.

This move signals a shift for the Punjabi groups away from a sectarian agenda and the adopting of goals from the wider agenda of the TTP. This does not however, mean that the various groups would have the same priorities, or even that goals would be fully aligned. The use of the term ‘Punjabi Taliban’ is unhelpful in blurring the complex issue of agency in violent attacks, and in general simplifies the conflict topology of Pakistan. From the term it is also easy to deduce prescriptions for action in the Punjab from the existing plans laid out to tackle the threat from Taliban which may be disastrous. The term ‘Punjabi Taliban’ at least has the virtue of highlighting the importance of the Punjab, and Punjab-based groups when trying to resolve, or transform the extremist challenge in Pakistan.

²⁶ Alex Rodriguez (2009) “Taliban taps the Punjab heartland”, Los Angeles Times. <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-pakistan-punjab16-2009nov16.0,3306802.story>

²⁷ See for example: Raza Khan and Ayesha Nasir (2009) “Punjabi Taliban threat growing”, The Washington Times, October 21, 2009, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/21/punjabi-taliban-threat-growing//print/>