

Militant Groups Forge Ties As Pakistan Havens Remain

FINANCIAL TIMES - THE EXCHANGE. February 24, 2017

Ahmed Rashid

A dozen suicide attacks in just over a week this month have sparked anger in Pakistan at the failure of the government and the military to pursue a sustained counter-terrorism campaign with a strategic plan and narrative. Instead, they blame neighbouring countries and allow some militant groups to go untouched in the country.

The height of anguish for many was the February 16 explosion at a Sufi shrine in Sindh province that killed 88 people, including 20 children, and wounded another 250. The shrine is one of the most revered in south Asia.

The attack with the strongest political message was outside the Punjab parliament in the heart of Lahore, where security is tight. Fifteen people were killed – including seven police officers – and more than 100 wounded. It was a humiliation for the government.

More than 150 civilians, soldiers and police were killed across all four provinces of the country in the week-long campaign that was led by Islamic State and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, according to claims they made. Isis has bases in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and its fighters include former Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. JUA is a breakaway faction of the Pakistani Taliban with bases in both countries.

The military response has been fierce. Armed forces spokesman Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor said that in the wake of the attacks, the army had killed more than “100 terrorists” and arrested many. The Pakistan army artillery shelled JUA camps in Afghanistan for the first time and the border between the two countries was closed.

But the government blamed Afghanistan for harbouring the terrorists, even as other militant groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad, live under the protection of the Pakistani state. India is also frequently held responsible when terrorists strike in Pakistan. The government also frequently insists that Isis has no presence in the country – despite the militants’ claims of responsibility for the killings.

According to news agencies, Pakistan’s army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa told US Gen John Nicholson, who commands US-Nato forces in Afghanistan, that “most of the incidents in Pakistan are claimed by terrorist organisations with leadership hiding in Afghanistan”.

Neither Afghan forces nor US-Nato troops have any control over the Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan, and they are havens for the Taliban and a dozen other groups including al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Afghanistan.

After the Sindh bombing, the Pakistan military gave Afghan diplomats a list of 76 Pakistani terrorists they want returned. But it is the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda rather than the Afghan government who are protecting the terrorists. The Afghan Taliban’s leadership remains ensconced in Pakistan’s border cities of Quetta and Peshawa. Kabul appears helpless in the face of the Taliban offensive and for years has demanded that Islamabad stop sheltering the Afghan Taliban and push them into peace talks.

Islamabad should put pressure on the Taliban leaders to enter into dialogue with Kabul and then work with the Afghan and Nato forces to regain control of the border provinces.

Other large extremist groups have sanctuary in Pakistan’s eastern province of Punjab because they are considered helpful in the struggle against India in Kashmir. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammad are listed as terror groups by the UN and the US and some of their activists support the very terrorists the army is trying to eradicate, but they remain protected by both military and politicians.

The government has no coherent counter-terrorism strategy, despite Islamabad issuing a 20-point National Action Plan against terrorism two years ago. More than half of those points – such as a deradicalisation programme, educational reforms, disarming militants and a clamp down on religious schools – have not been implemented. Pakistan’s leading newspaper Dawn said in an editorial on February 18 that the National Action Plan was “a running joke”.

The lack of a strategy has only energised the militants, whom Pakistani officials accept now operate in a broad alliance where they help each other carry out attacks. A bombing claimed by one group could have several groups facilitating it.

As long as Pakistan blames its neighbours for terrorism instead of co-operating with them in fighting it, and uses militants as an appendage to foreign policy, instead of forging an inclusive deradicalisation strategy, the kind of bloodbaths we have seen this month will happen again.

But the army and the civilian government, are not on the same page. They have different agendas towards the militant groups which makes establishing a united front difficult. The failure of the state to adopt a common strategy and a believable narrative is emboldening the terrorists, weakening the state and making solutions harder to find.