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WASHINGTON WIRE | THINK TANK

The Quetta Hospital Attack and Terrorism Trends in Pakistan

By C. CHRISTINE FAIR

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An injured man is transported from the scene of a bomb blast at a hospital in Quetta, Pakistan, on Aug. 8. PHOTO: NASEER AHMED/REUTERS

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After a hospital in Quetta, Pakistan, was bombed Monday, Michael Kugelman wrote in Think Tank that the assault "appears to be part of a shift in terrorism tactics in Pakistan in which attackers target society more than the state." Gibran Peshimam, senior executive producer for Pakistan's Geo Television, told NPR, "What has happened is that Pakistani Taliban have targeted soft targets such as schools, lawyers, hospitals, and that is their general target these days."



Actually, Monday's attack in sparsely populated Balochistan province speaks to a different point about terrorism in general and assaults in Pakistan in particular. Yes, attacks on high-value "hard" targets—military facilities or other symbols of the state—that were so common in Pakistan between 2007 and 2009 are increasingly rare. But those assaults, not more recent attacks on civilians, were the aberration.

There is no internationally accepted definition of terrorism, but the State Department considers terrorism "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." For many analysts a terrorist attack is one that intentionally targets civilians; militant operations against government targets are generally classified as "insurgent" or "guerilla" attacks.

The difference is important. Terrorists do not enjoy the protection of international humanitarian law, while the status of insurgents is more ambiguous.

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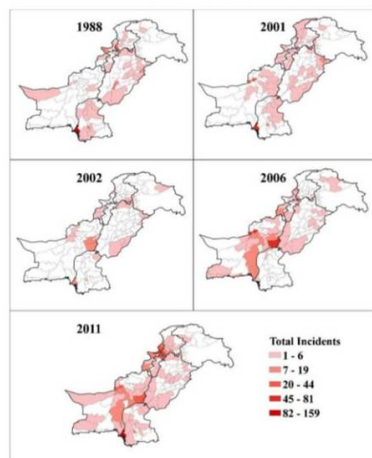
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Terrorists across the world have, for decades, overwhelmingly targeted

ed civilians. Data from the Global Terrorism Database indicate that of the 156,772 attacks worldwide from 1970 to 2015, 132,545 did not include guerilla/insurgent events. In other words, 85% of these attacks were against civilians. The pattern holds for Pakistan: Of 12,768 attacks during that period, 11,218 were not insurgent/guerilla attacks. That means 87% were inflicted on "soft targets."

What stands out in Pakistan's history is that commanders affiliated under the rubric of the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) began assailing the state early in this century. Pakistan had long experienced attacks on civilians but had not previously endured Islamist guerilla attacks on military, paramilitary, and intelligence targets. The

Terrorist Violence Against Civilians in Pakistan



Source: Maps by Jesse Turcotte, based on BFRS Political Violence in Pakistan Dataset

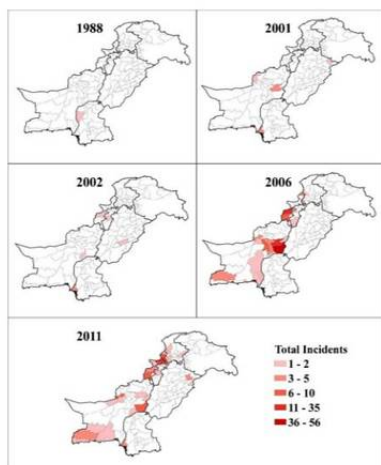
Terrorist violence against civilians in Pakistan in selected years from 1988 to 2011. PHOTO: C. CHRISTINE FAIR

reasons for this shift in targeting are complicated. They derive in part from the Pakistani

government's long reliance upon Islamist terrorism as a tool of its foreign policy, militant anger over the government's erratic support to U.S. operations in Afghanistan, inadequate willingness among officials to kill their erstwhile proxies, and institutions too weak or otherwise inadequate to enforce the rule of law.

The maps in this post, based on data of political violence in Pakistan from 1998 to 2011, illustrate that guerilla attacks are relatively new in Pakistan. The first set of maps (above) shows that terrorist violence against civilians has been a mainstay. The ones below indicate the relative newness of such attacks in Pakistan.

Militant/Guerilla Violence in Pakistan



Source: Maps by Jesse Turcotte, based on BFRS Political Violence in Pakistan Dataset

Author's maps showing militant/guerilla violence in Pakistan in 1988, 2001, 2002, 2006 and 2011, based on data from the BFRS Political Violence in Pakistan Dataset. PHOTO: C. CHRISTINE FAIR

Mr. Kugelman, Mr. Peshimam, and others are not wrong to observe that in recent years militant attacks have returned to the past norm of targeting civilians. This has happened for a variety of reasons: After Hakimullah Mehsud became leader of the Pakistani

Taliban in 2009, the organization took a brutal turn and began focusing on Shiites, Barelvis, Ahmedis, and other non-combatants. The U.S. drone campaign (which killed Mehsud in a 2013 strike) has taken out senior and mid-ranking Pakistani terrorists, vastly diminishing their ability to attack fortified targets. Some argue that drone strikes make more terrorists than they kill, but since President Barack Obama began escalating the drone attacks in 2009, there have been few serious operations on high-value “hard” targets in Pakistan. The Pakistani military’s highly selective campaign against some militants in North Waziristan—operations that have devastated communities and killed many civilians—presumably has also constrained their abilities.

Targeting security forces was the aberration. In returning their focus to killing civilians, Pakistan’s varied terrorists are doing what they have always done.

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