APS Peshawar Incident – An Appraisal

(Ms. Qurat ul Ain)*

Abstract
As one mourns and grieves over the massacre of innocent children, teachers and civilians in Peshawar, it is important to look at the hindsight to think hard about how and why Pakistan lost its way. Many failings of the state including lack of political will manifested by all concerned, poor governance and appeasing religious bigots for political mileage have created a culture of religious bullying and intolerance for tolerance. Sadly, the drift away from a modernist, democratic and secular (neutrality of state in religious matters) tendencies in Pakistan has been constant. Jinnah’s vision of a secular and democratic state was actually buried with him. The pursuit of power interests by the military and political leaders set aside every good idea and principle of state and nation-building.

Key Words: manifested, governance, religious, intolerance, democratic

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Introduction

First let us establish the context of this ghastly incident. Pakistan witnessed an unprecedented act of terror on 16 December 2014. Where one continues to feel aggrieved due to this barbarism, yet it is imperative that one carries out an objective appraisal to discern our national response against the menace of terrorism. Contextually, it is felt that the incident was primarily triggered because of Zarb-e-Azb affecting terrorist safe havens and in reaction, then reaching out to the settled areas thereby evoking Urban Terrorism that aims at exerting a pull on our forces from the operations. This incident can be categorized as the Terrorists Riposte. The increased intensity in Operation Khyber 1 resulted in diluted protective arrangements in Peshawar and that provided space for the terrorist strike. It can also be termed as an effort by the terrorists to counter the State’s success in recent operations by projecting their own notion of success to exemplify their viability and resolve in achieving their goals and objectives.

Causes /Reasons behind the incident

One can concede that a great many number of socio-economic, political and other factors led to these groups taking this course of action, not the least of them being that elements within the state sponsored them at least initially for perceived geo-strategic interests.

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Yet, a state is duty-bound to bring to an end a violent revolt in which civilians are being targeted. It cannot afford to be delicate in a theatre of war, which is what parts of the tribal areas effectively are. However the visible causes or reason behind the incident are:

**Pakistan's recent military operations against the TTP**

This, so far, is the TTP's stated justification for the attack. It is also, probably, the most direct cause of the attack.

"We selected the army's school for the attack because the government is targeting our families and females," a Taliban spokesperson, Muhammad Umar Khorasani, said. "We want them to feel the pain".⁴

Hence Taliban wanted revenge for the deaths it had suffered at the hands of the army. It wanted to demoralize the security forces. By attacking the soldiers’ own children, it was aiming to cause deep and lasting loss.

Pakistan's military has been going hard after the Taliban since June 2014, when it launched "Operation Zarb-e-Azb," a major assault in North Waziristan, the mountainous region on the border of Afghanistan that has become a TTP stronghold and a safe haven for several other militant groups, such as the TTP-allied Haqqani Network.⁵ The United States had been pressuring Pakistan to launch this type of operation ever since Al Qaeda militants slipped across the border and set up camps in the region at the beginning of

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the US war in Afghanistan in 2001. As the US has drawn down its military operations in Afghanistan, some Pakistani authorities have looked to the border region with growing anxiety about the future, and a wave of TTP attacks in early June 2014, including an assault on the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, confirmed that something needed to happen. The operation had displaced hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed entire towns.

An army-administered school allowed the TTP to launch a symbolic attack on the military without a direct engagement. The TTP is struggling, according to the Guardian, and ‘it could be trying to use a large-scale, shocking attack to shore up support and prove that it’s still a major threat to the Pakistani government’. It is not just the Pakistani military offensive, which has killed around 1,600 militants, that’s hurt the group – it is internal division. Hence the school's over 100 dead children might have also been the victims of something else: power struggles within the Taliban.

**Taliban's Struggle for Power**

The TTP has split into multiple factions in recent months. A number of moderate factions have made peace with the government, so that what is left behind is an increasingly radical core that is splintering into different groups. That process was accelerated when Maulana Fazlullah, an outsider who formerly headed a group of militants in Pakistan's Swat district, took command last year. He has been a divisive leader, causing the powerful Messud family to leave and form its own organization.

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Competition for power within an armed group or between different splintering factions often leads to increased violence, as leaders jockey to prove their authority and improve their reputations by carrying out ever more audacious or brutal attacks.  

**Impacts of the Incident: Short Term and Long Term**

The first question that we need to address is that what were the main short term and long term effects of the incidents that the terrorists achieved:

- **Short Term Effects**
  - Gripping the entire Country in state of shock and awe through their spectacular attack.
  - Creating a sense of insecurity in the general populace, inspite of Government’s claim of success in combating terrorism.
  - Re-crafting their space in all spheres of media to remain relevant.

- **Long-term impacts of the incident**
  - **Psychological Impacts:** When terrorists act like this people generally face acute stress and trauma. Such disasters evoke a fundamental fear of helplessness. The violent actions are random, unprovoked, and intentional, and often are targeted at defenseless citizens. Trying to cope with the irrational information that is beyond normal comprehension can set off a chain of psychological events culminating in feelings of fear, helplessness, vulnerability and grief. The psychological

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7 ibid

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effects that are caused by these attacks include recurring thoughts of the incident.\textsuperscript{8}

- **Economic Impacts:** Peshawar school massacre has turned a new chapter in this American started war on terror. It is now closer to home and has turned into a war for the survival of Pakistan. It is an established fact that no country can thrive economically without peace. Therefore the deteriorating law and order situation in Pakistan has a huge economic cost and is burdening an already shaky economy guided by a policy based on failed measures from the past.\textsuperscript{9}

The fact of the matter is that there isn’t a sector left in Pakistan which has not been affected by terrorism, either directly or indirectly. But even worse than all this, culminating from the Peshawar school attack, is the wide-spread panic with resulting shockwaves across all segments of the society as well as the economy. If not checked the ramifications of this can be much more than what we have already faced.\textsuperscript{10} While the economic impact briefly outlined is important, the immeasurable cost of the lost lives and the related potential can never be monetized.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, now that the American started war on terror has turned into the foreign-sponsored TTP


\textsuperscript{9} Abbas, Hassan. Pakistan’s drift into extremism: Allah, the army and America’s war on terror. M.E.Sharpe, 2005.

\textsuperscript{10} ibid

\textsuperscript{11} Puri, Samir. Pakistan’s war on terrorism: Strategies for combating jihadist armed groups since 9/11. Palgrave, 2012.
menace engulfing Pakistan, we are faced with a problem we have to resolve ourselves. The benefits of resolving this amicably will not just be economic but the social positives from such a strategy can be manifold. Though for such a drastic step to succeed we would need to rid ourselves of the American interferences and subjugation too.

- **Religious impacts:** The menace of terrorism engulfing Pakistan culminated in the worst tragedy in recent history with the barbarian killing of children in the Army Public School Peshawar. While Pakistan was dragged in this quagmire by a dictator searching for the legitimacy of his rule, the complicated regional “grand game” has now reached the stage where the country is tearing itself from within, something the enemies always desired.\(^\text{12}\)

Leaving aside all other complicacies and debates, killing children can never be condoned no matter what the reason. Islam’s fundamental war principle baring one unique incident has been the strict instruction to not harm the children, women, elderly and even the non-combatant men of the non-believing enemy let alone the Muslims. The massacre in Peshawar was therefore anything but Islam. It was in fact an effort to tarnish the image of Islam and a direct assault not just on Pakistan or Islam but entire humanity. Like Jinnah stated in his speech to constitution assembly 1947:

\(^{12}\) Murphy, Eamon. The making of terrorism in Pakistan: Historical and social roots of extremism. Routledge, 2013.
“Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state”.

Hence, there is political and religious space in Pakistan for groups like the Taliban to operate unharmed, the result of decades of government financing and exporting of terrorism abroad and aggressive Islamization at home. The country’s moment of reckoning has arrived, and both the political and religious establishment will now need to confront the conditions that allowed the Taliban to enter a school and murder children.

**National Action Plan: A way forward**

The National Action plan had been drafted in the wake of the APS Peshawar attack on 16th December, 2014 to chalk out a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism. A parliamentary committee had been formed in this regard which evaluated the post-Peshawar tragedy scenario and discussed necessary laws and amendments in relation to terrorism. The 21st Amendment to the Constitution gave us the twenty-point National Action Plan to root out terrorism from Pakistan. Extraordinary situation and circumstances exist that demand special measures for speedy trial

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13 Speeches and writings of Mr. Jinnah (1947)-vol 1
15 ibid
of certain offences relating to terrorism, waging of war or insurrection against Pakistan and for prevention of acts threatening the security of Pakistan by the terrorist groups formed in the name of religion or a sect and also by the members of any private armies, armed groups, wings and militia. The people of Pakistan have expressed their firm resolve through their chosen representatives in the All Parties Conference held in aftermath of awful terrorist attack on the Army Public School at Peshawar to permanently wipe out and eradicate terrorists from Pakistan.\textsuperscript{16}

**National Action Plan: A Policy overview**

As far as practical implementation of NAP is concerned, it is necessary to redefine the nature of state first to reach towards a policy outcome. For this it is very important to look at the hindsight to think hard about how and why Pakistan lost its way. Till the time, government does not identify the mistakes and follies Pakistan will not be able to move forward for a better future with peaceful environments. Eventually, many failing of the state including lack of political will manifested by leaders, poor governance and appeasing religious bigots for political mileage has created a culture of religious bullying intolerance for tolerance. Sadly the drift away from modernist, democratic and secular tendencies in Pakistan has been constant. Jinnah’s vision of a secular, democratic state was actually buried with him. As he stated in his address to National Assembly in 1947:

“In any case Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic State to be ruled by priests with a divine mission. We have many non-

\textsuperscript{16} Markey, Daniel S. "The National Security Implications of Pakistan’s Latest Political Crisis(May 18, 2015)." Council on Foreign Relations
Muslims-Hindus, Christians, and Parsis - but they are all Pakistanis. They will enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan”.

The pursuit of power interests by the military and political leaders set aside every good idea and principle of state and nation-building. It is also an established fact that no country can thrive economically without peace. Therefore the deteriorating law and order situation in Pakistan has a huge economic cost and is burdening an already shaky economy. The fact of the matter is that there is not a sector left in Pakistan which has not been affected by terrorism, either directly or indirectly.

On external front, Pakistan inherently enjoys premier geo-strategic positions as it borders three major strategic regions; South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, and its geographical proximity to Afghanistan made it an important partner of the coalition forces after 9/11 incident. Pakistan played a significant role, both during the Cold War and as a non-NATO member in the US-led “War on Terror” against al Qaeda and the Taliban. Despite Coalition’s support, Pakistan has suffered in terms of loss of lives and economic downturn. Despite being the victim of terrorism, Pakistan has remained determined to eliminate the menace of terrorism.

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17 Speeches and writings of Jinnah (1947)-vol1
terrorism. In June last year, Pakistan army started comprehensive military operation in NWA with the strength of over 30000 troops to eliminate terrorists from all affected areas of the country.\textsuperscript{20}

The military operation was long-overdue against militants in North Waziristan. Public support for the Operation Zarb-e-Azb, remains considerably high. If the perception is to be believed, the military offensive in North Waziristan has been a strong blow against militants operating in the region, particularly the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its foreign allies such as al Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The ground phase of the operation in North Waziristan with air support is progressing towards culmination phase. We have learnt from the lessons of previous military operations and are prepared to do what was necessary in North Waziristan for the greater interest of Pakistan and global security.\textsuperscript{21} A peculiar aspect relating to this operation is that there is no discrimination in good/bad or Haqqani/Non Haqqani groups of the militants and the operation is continuing across the board against the militancy and terrorism. Almost, 90 percent of North Waziristan has been cleared and the return of TDPs to their native home towns has been initiated as the suitable conditions in their areas for their returns are being created. This time, the government is determined, to tackle this challenge amicably.

**Salient Features of National Action Plan**

Now coming to National Action Plan, The Prime Minister envisaged 20 points of terrorism action plan which are:-

\textsuperscript{20} ibid
\textsuperscript{21} ibid
• Implementation of death sentence of those convicted in cases of terrorism.
• Special trial courts under the supervision of Army. The duration of these courts would be two years.
• Militant outfits and armed gangs will not be allowed to operate in the country.
• NACTA, the anti-terrorism institution will be strengthened.
• Strict action against the literature, newspapers and magazines promoting hatred, decapitation, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance.
• All funding sources of terrorists and terrorist outfits will be frozen.
• The invalid outfits will not be allowed to operate under any other name.
• Establishing and deploying a dedicated counter-terrorism force.
• End to religious extremism and protection of minorities will be ensured.
• Registration and regulation of religious seminaries.
• Ban on glorification of terrorists and terrorist organisations through print and electronic media.
• Communication network of terrorists will be dismantled completely.
• Concrete measures against promotion of terrorism through internet and social media.
• No room will be left for the extremism in any part of the country.
• Ongoing operation in Karachi will be taken to its logical end.
• Balochistan government to be fully empowered for political reconciliation with complete ownership by all stakeholders.
• Action against elements spreading sectarianism.
• Formulation of a comprehensive policy to deal with the issue of Afghan refugees, beginning with registration of all refugees.
• Reforms in criminal courts system to strengthen the anti-terrorism institutions including provincial CIDs.

Implementation of NAP

National Action Plan indeed covers all the important segments where we need to work but as a whole. It must emerge as a holistic Government response, in which a common platform needs to be designed for taking this effort against terrorism to its logical conclusion. And this platform needs to be supported by all the pillars of the state, concurrently and in synergy. Employment of Governmental pillars in isolation is not likely to yield dividends. Such an approach is desired which actualizes the kinetic and non-kinetic realms synchronously and cooperatively, starting immediately with the existing wherewithal and subsequently building further capacity to mount this holistic response against terrorism and extremism to its destined end.

Conclusion

To eliminate terrorism and extremism from our country whatever policy or strategy we devise, we need to create enabling environment within the country, as it may not be useful to merely look at the symptoms, like intolerance, extremism and violence as a means to political and religious ends but we must get to the roots of our current depression. There are many foundational ideas that have shaped good modern societies but two are essential to all of them, secularism and democracy. Unfortunately, both of these ideas are misunderstood, misinterpreted and misused in our social climate of religious rupture and political divisions. Secularism is not the absence or rejection of religion but it means that citizens have equal right to a religion but state does not. Likewise, democracy is not what the dynastic, personalized politics or repeated military rulers in the name of ‘guided’, ‘Islamic’ or ‘genuine’ democracy have established but it is in fact what majority of people actually wants. Democracy in essence and neutrality of state in religious matters are time tested ideas all civilizations have eventually accepted like Jinnah’s vision of secular democracy:

“In any case Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic State to be ruled by priests with a divine mission. We have many non-Muslims—Hindus, Christians, and Parsis- but they are all Pakistanis. They will enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan”.

Hence, Media being a very strong tool of national power can play a very dominant role in such perception building of nation.

23 Jinnah’s speeches and writings (1947)-vol1