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## Terror in Balochistan: New Lessons to Learn

*Balochistan in Pakistan has once again been the hit by a terrorist attack. On 24 October 2016, 3 gunmen struck at the Quetta Police Training College causing at least 61 deaths and leaving 117 others injured. Following the bomb blast at the Quetta Civil Hospital on 8 August 2016, it appeared that terrorists were beginning to shift focus from hard to soft targets and also moving towards specific targeted killings<sup>1</sup>. The latest attack seems to indicate a continuation of such a trend, although the rationale behind the choice of targets still remains unknown. This paper seeks to analyse the recent attack and its implications for Pakistan.*

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Quetta, the capital city of Balochistan, is also its largest city with a population of over one million and has a geographical area of 2,656 square kilometres, 3.5 times the size of Singapore, reflective of the sparse demographics of Balochistan. The City is home to the *Mazar* (mausoleum) of Shaal Pir Baba also known as Khwaja Naqruddin who established the Chisti order of Sufism in the Baloch region. The Chisti order founded by Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti based its religious practice on the expression of love for the almighty and the spiritual master, tolerance and inclusiveness towards other faiths. It also advocated non-interference in the affairs of the state. Today the city is known for playing host to the *Quetta Shura* (Quetta

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<sup>1</sup> Anish Mishra, *Terrorism in Balochistan: Shift towards Soft Targets?*, ISAS Brief No.445 - 31 August 2016, available at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20Brief%20No.%20445%20-%20Terrorism%20in%20Balochistan.%20Shift%20towards%20Soft%20Targets.pdf>

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Council) of the Afghan Taliban. Its proximity with the Durand Line facilitates shuttling between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was also the province where the former Emir of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Akhtar Mansour was killed by a United States drone operation<sup>3</sup>. On 8 August 2016, the Quetta Civil Hospital was attacked by a suicide bomber; at least 70 were killed and dozens of others were injured<sup>4</sup>. The responsibility for the hospital bomb blast was claimed by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-linked faction of the Pakistan Threek-e-Taliban (PTT) known as Jamaat-UI-Arhar.<sup>5</sup>

The Balochistan separatist movement spearheaded by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) uses armed resistance to achieve its objective of an independent Balochistan; the organisation is secular in character. Besides the Baloch nationalist insurgent groups, there are also radical Islamist sectarian groups in Balochistan. These include the PTT, Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Al-Qaeda, and the Ahle Sunnat wal jammat as well as ISIS-backed factions of these groups such as the Jamaat-UI-Arhar of the PTT.

An example of a sectarian attack was the Hazara Town bomb blast in Quetta in 2013. On 17 February, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for that bomb blast that killed at least 79 and injured over 180, most of whom were members of the Hazara community.<sup>6</sup> The Hazaras are a Shia Muslim ethnic group spread across Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The various militant groups operating in Balochistan may differ in ideologies and goals; however, they share two common features. One, they employ the means of violence to attain their ambitions. Two, they share a common enemy which is the Pakistan State. Therefore, this creates an environment for terrorist activities to flourish in Balochistan. The recent terrorist patterns in Balochistan show a commonality between the terrorist groups. This can be inferred as a nexus between the separatist and sectarian groups operating in Balochistan. In the analysis of terrorism in Balochistan, one can draw a triangle connecting the antagonist, target and the objective of every terrorist attack, as these three variables are intertwined.

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<sup>3</sup> "Taliban Chief Targeted by Drone Strike in Pakistan" *The New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/23/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-leader-mullah-mansour.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/23/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-leader-mullah-mansour.html?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> Same source as in Note 1

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> "Pakistan: Dozens Dead in Bomb Attack on Quetta Market." *BBC News* <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21485731>

In just three months after the Quetta Civil Hospital bomb blast, targeted at Balochistan's legal fraternity, the city has once again fall prey to militancy<sup>7</sup>. This time round, directed at the Balochistan police force. On the night of the 24 October 2016, 3 heavily armed gunmen wearing vests, intruded into the compound of the Police Training College (PTC), Quetta, after an intense gun battle with the sentry guards<sup>8</sup>. The police trainee cadets were sleeping in their barracks.<sup>9</sup> The first information report on this incident was received by the Balochistan Frontier Corps (FC) at 23.10hrs<sup>10</sup>. According to the Inspector General (IG) of the FC Major General Sher Afghan in an interview with the media "the troops of the FC took 20 minutes to arrive at the scene and it was believed that the recruits have been held hostage."<sup>11</sup>The quick response showed a sense of preparedness in reacting to such incidents. Out of the 3 militants, one was shot dead by the troops from the FC before he could detonate his vest<sup>12</sup>. Another suicide bomber was cornered by two soldiers of the Pakistan Army, which allowed many police recruits to escape, before he too detonated his vest<sup>13</sup>. During this anti-terror operation, Captain Rooh Ullah and Naib Subedar Muhammad Ali lost their lives. Both soldiers were accorded gallantry awards by General Raheel Sharif.<sup>14</sup> The Pakistan Army also directed security at the Quetta Civil Hospital to be enhanced, even as the injured were transported there for treatment.<sup>15</sup> This precautionary measure was taken in view of the lessons from the previous attack that took place at the hospital.

The identity of the assailants responsible for this latest attack is yet to be determined. The media wing of ISIS, the Amaq News Agency, announced in a press release that its Khorasan province branch was responsible for the attack.<sup>16</sup> It also published a photograph of the 3 gunmen on its

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> "61 Killed in Twin Suicide Attacks as Terrorists Storm Police Training College in Quetta." *Dawn News*, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1291999/60-killed-in-twin-suicide-attacks-as-terrorists-storm-police-training-college-in-quetta>

<sup>9</sup> "Quetta: 'We Were Sleeping When Terrorists Attacked' - CNN - <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/24/world/pakistan-police-academy-attack/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> "IG FC Media Talks." *Youtube, Dawn News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzl9i-zwbJM>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> "Update Police Training Center (PTC) Quetta, Press Release No: PR377/2016-ISPR." *Inter Services Public Relations*, [https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press\\_release&date=2016/10/25](https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-press_release&date=2016/10/25)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> "61 Killed in Twin Suicide Attacks as Terrorists Storm Police Training College in Quetta." *Dawn News* <http://www.dawn.com/news/1291999/60-killed-in-twin-suicide-attacks-as-terrorists-storm-police-training-college-in-quetta>

<sup>16</sup> "IS' Khorasan Province Claims Killing 60 in Three-Man Suicide Raid at Police Training Center in Quetta." *Site Intelligence Group*. <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/is-khorasan-province-claims-killing-60-in-three-man-suicide-raid-at-police-training-center-in-quetta.html>

website.<sup>17</sup> This claim is believed to have been by far the most credible one among those made by various terrorist groups. However, Major General Sher Afghan also told news channels within a couple of hours after the attack that the Afghan-based Al-Alimi faction of the Lashkar-e Jhangvi was responsible for the attack<sup>18</sup>. He said that calls were intercepted which showed the terrorists were communicating with their handlers in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader Imran Khan said during his visit to Quetta that “All political parties had agreed upon and signed the National Action Plan (NAP), so why it’s so that it has still not been properly acted upon?”<sup>20</sup> The Pakistan People’s Party Chairman Bilawal Bhutto said that the “Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Khan had not taken adequate measures to root out terrorism.”<sup>21</sup> The month of November 2016 is set to be a politically sensitive month for Pakistan. At first, the PTI together with its allies began preparing to cause a lockdown of Pakistan’s capital Islamabad to campaign for the resignation or accountability of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on allegations of corruption figuring in the Panama Papers.<sup>22</sup> In a similar fashion in 2014 *Azadi March* (freedom march) had disrupted life in the capital for four months. On 1 November, PTI Chairman Imran Khan decided to call off the planned lockdown and hold a “thanksgiving” rally<sup>23</sup> in celebration of the Supreme Court’s decision ordering the formation of a committee to probe the Panama Papers findings concerning the elected members of the Sharif family. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is also tasked with appointing a new Chief of Army Staff (COAS); General Raheel Sharif is set to retire on 29 November 2016. The association of terrorism and corruption is a threat to any civilian government in Pakistan as the Army believes these two elements to be inextricably linked.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> IG FC Media Talks." *Youtube, Dawn News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzl9i-zwbJM>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> "PM, Army Chief Attend High-level Security Meeting in Quetta after Police College Carnage." *Dawn News*. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1292187/pm-army-chief-attend-high-level-security-meeting-in-quetta-after-police-college-carnage>

<sup>21</sup> "Bilawal Bhutto Visits Victims of Quetta Attack" *SamaaTv*, <http://www.samaa.tv/pakistan/2016/10/bilawal-bhutto-visits-victims-of-quetta-attack/>

<sup>22</sup> "Won't Leave Islamabad until PM Resigns: Imran Khan." *Pakistan Today*, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/10/25/national/wont-leave-islamabad-until-pm-resigns-imran-khan/>

<sup>23</sup> "PTI's Nov 2 'lockdown' Changed to 'thanksgiving' Rally in Islamabad." *Dawn News*, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1293593/ptis-nov-2-lockdown-changed-to-thanksgiving-rally-in-islamabad>

<sup>24</sup> "Army Chief Reiterates Resolve to Break Terrorism-corruption Nexus" *The Express Tribune*, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1151418/army-chief-reiterates-resolve-break-terrorism-corruption-nexus/>

The Quetta attack is a reflection of the continuation of the shift from random untargeted killings in public places as seen in the Lahore, Gulshan-e-Iqbal park bomb blast to selective targeted strikes like the Quetta Civil Hospital & Police Training College attacks. The 24 October incident raises the question of how can just 3 gunmen overwhelm armed sentry guards and cause so many deaths in such a sensitive site. Although the response from the various security agencies is noticeable, the casualties could have been prevented if the sentry guards had superior weapons to put up a stronger resistance against the militants.

Due to Quetta's overwhelming dependence on the Quetta Civil Hospital for its medical needs, the hospital gets exposed as the likely location for a second strike after the initial attempt of whatever magnitude. The Balochistan Ministry of Health should therefore recognise this threat and collaborate with the various security agencies to take possible preventive measures. The Army should also consider opening up the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) which is located 3.5 kilometres away, for civilian use in cases of terrorist incidents.

Pakistan's troubled province of Balochistan is of strategic importance to the China-Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC) project. In September 2016, Pakistan's Minister for Planning, Development and Reforms Ahsan Iqbal announced that the CPEC was now worth US\$ 51.5 billion after the Asian Development Bank agreed to lend to Pakistan US\$ 2.5 billion and China pledged to provide concessionary credit of US\$ 5.5 billion.<sup>25</sup> This increase in investment towards the CPEC shows confidence and faith in the project despite the security threats that it faces. This creates a strong incentive for Pakistan to try to eliminate all forms of terrorism in Balochistan. The CPEC is a gateway for foreign direct investment into Pakistan and will create jobs for the people. This exposes this province to greater danger. Hence, the security of Balochistan is essential to Pakistan.

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<sup>25</sup> "With a New Chinese Loan, CPEC Is Now worth \$51.5bn." *Dawn News*, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1287040>