

# ISAS Brief

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## Pakistani Militants Strike Back

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Who launched the terrorist attack at Wagah on Pakistan's border with India? The attack, the deadliest in Pakistan in about a year, occurred on 2 November 2014, killing more than sixty people and injuring another one hundred. Was the choice of the target a warning to the Pakistani leadership not to make peace with India? Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's third-time Prime Minister, seemed committed to improving his country's economic relations with India. Did the well-planned operation signal the arrival in Pakistan of the ideology behind the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)? The rise of the ISIS – also known simply as the 'Islamic State' – had happened with a suddenness that surprised most in the world. All these are important questions not only for Pakistan but also for South Asia, but the answers will take a long-time. This incident at Wagah needs to be looked at and studied, since it will impact not only Pakistan and Afghanistan but also India.<sup>2</sup> Already the Al Qaeda under the

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<sup>2</sup> The effect on Afghanistan of terrorist activity in Pakistan is one of the subjects covered by the author in a forthcoming book – *Afghanistan: The Next Phase* – a collaborative work, in association with Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Professor Riaz Hassan.

leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, had announced the opening of a new franchise in South Asia including India.

The fear that the militants in Pakistan, headquartered in the country's tribal belt on the border with Afghanistan, would resort to retaliatory strikes at the country's vulnerable urban areas was one reason why Islamabad did not for long move against them militarily. It was also the reason why, having taken the decision to launch military strikes against the terrorist groups, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif delayed the action by almost six months. The move was originally planned for February 2014 when snow would have blocked the passes in the mountainous area thus preventing the terrorists from escaping to Afghanistan. In a speech in the National Assembly on 29 January 2014 the prime minister was to have announced the start of the military campaign. Instead, he surprised the nation – even his close associates in government<sup>3</sup> – by declaring that he had decided to give “peace another chance”. This was to be done by beginning a process of formal negotiations with the terrorist organisations. But nothing was achieved.

On 15 June, the military moved into North Waziristan and launched the long-awaited *Zarb-e-Azb* Operation. In the period up to 1 November, the military announced that it had killed or captured 1,000 militants while losing less than a hundred of its soldiers. The military was surprised at the amount of weapons the terrorists had accumulated in the tribal areas. It was taken aback by the presence of an extensive infrastructure that the terrorists had built over the years to support their activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The army found numerous bomb-making factories devoted to the production of improvised explosive devices. Along with suicide-bomb belts, also manufactured and assembled in the area, the IEDs were the weapons of choice for the insurgents. They had used the IEDs to inflict heavy damage on the American and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan. Suicide-belts were the preferred weapons for attacking clusters of people and security assets in Pakistan. This weapon was used in the Wagah attack as well.

The *Zarb-e-Azb* operation continued into the fall and might be extended into the winter of 2014-15. The threat of retaliation by the terrorists did not materialise for several months. On

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<sup>3</sup> As reported in an earlier ISAS work, Sartaj Aziz, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Advisor on National Security and Foreign Affairs, told the author in a conversation in his Islamabad office of the government's plans. In fact, he was to inform the American leadership during a visit to Washington that Islamabad had decided to take the step long demanded by the United States. The terrorists had hounded the American troops fighting in Afghanistan for years, operating from the security of their bases in Pakistan. See Shahid Javed Burki, 'Pakistan's Anti-Terror Offensive: The *Zarb-e-Azb* Operation', ISAS Insights No. 255, 20 June 2014.

the day of the Wagah attack, Pakistan's News International published the findings of a study that showed a steep decline in terrorist-inspired domestic violence. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, which monitors violence in the region, "overall in the first 10 months of this year, 1,369 civilians were killed in terrorist attacks in Pakistan, compared with 2,845 in the same period last year". The number of people killed in 2014 was less than one-half the number who lost their lives to terrorist acts in the first ten months of 2013. Another report by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies showed a "particularly sharp drop in Punjab province, which experienced an average of 1.75 attacks per month compared with 4.5 before the North Waziristan operation began".<sup>4</sup>

Not one but three terrorist groups claimed responsibility for the Wagah attack by a suicide bomber who targeted a large crowd on the Pakistani side of the border that had come to watch the flag-lowering ceremony. The daily ceremony is best described in these words: "In the ceremony, towering Pakistani and Indian soldiers stamp their feet and goose step around one another, sometimes just inches apart, in a confrontational and yet fully choreographed spectacle. Indian and Pakistani civilians crowded on either side of the border, cheer and shout nationalist slogans".<sup>5</sup> Pavilions had been built on both sides to accommodate the thousands who come to watch, about 5,000 to 7,000 every evening from the Pakistani side. Over time, an attempt has been made to reduce the aggressive tone of the choreographed event in the belief that it contributed to the persistence of tension between the two nuclear-armed nations. Some choreographic adjustments have been made to make it more of an entertainment than an expression of mutual hostilities.

The Punjab security officials in Pakistan said that they had intelligence suggesting that the viewing stand at Wagah could come under a terrorist attack, and the security drill for entrance to the gallery had been tightened before the terrorist attack occurred. That was the reason why the bomber exploded the weapon he was carrying on his body not in the viewing stand but in front of the shops some distance from it.

Officials from Jundullah group, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, which split a few weeks earlier from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), as well as the Hakimullah Mehsud faction of TTP came forward to take credit for this attack. This was the bloodiest incident

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<sup>4</sup> These findings were reported by Shaiq Hussain and Time Craig in *The Washington Post*. See "Bombing on Pakistan border kills at least 55", 3 November 2014, p. A9.

<sup>5</sup> Waqar Gillani and Salman Masood, "Bomber kills at least 50 along border in Pakistan", *The New York Times*, 3 November 2014, p. A4.

since September 2013 when more than 100 people were killed in a suicide bombing at a church in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. “This is a continuation of our jihad for the implementation of an Islamic system in Pakistan”, said Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesman for Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. He said the group would continue to attack “the pillar of the infidel system” now governing Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The language used by the spokesman was reminiscent of the words put out by the ISIS after it took control of some of the areas in Iraq and Syria. It seemed to indicate the growing influence of the Arab-Sunni extremists on their fellow-religionists operating in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The newspaper *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most-widely read English-language newspaper, summed up well the dilemma the country is faced with. “The country clearly continues to be stalked by a complex, overlapping and dizzyingly varied militant threat. If internal security – peace, stability and the conditions for economic social progress – is elusive it is because the state – the sum total of the civilian government and army-led security establishment – has an inadequate approach. Pakistan will not overnight become internally stable and secure. Operation Zarb-i-Azb has been treated as some kind of panacea in certain quarters, when, without supporting anti-militancy narrative, it can only amount to surgery on a limb of a body with many afflictions”.<sup>7</sup>

The fight against extremism in Pakistan must cover a number of fronts – the use of force is only one of them. The Pakistani state has to focus on educating the large and young population. It has to improve the quality of governance and bring government closer to the people. It must provide the youth with appropriate employment opportunities. And it should also give up some of the basics on which it has been constructing foreign relations. One of those has been often described as the “India-centric” approach – the apprehension that New Delhi even after nearly seven decades of separation, is still not reconciled to the “idea of Pakistan”. This approach has to be replaced by the one that has the two governments deal with the problems they face and seize the opportunities that close economic cooperation will yield. The rise of Islamic extremism and associated terrorism is one problem that needs close collaboration.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *Dawn*, “Wagah attack”, 3 November 2014, p. 7.