

Resurgence of Sectarian Violence in Kurram Agency, Pakistan in 2017

Graeme Swincer OAM¹, 25 May 2017

1. Introduction

The recent bombing of a Shia place of worship in the capital city Parachinar² has underlined the worrying recent trend of increasing sectarian violence in Kurram Agency, one of the seven divisions of the FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) in north-west Pakistan. This particular incident, on 31 March 2017, left 22 dead and over 100 others injured as car bomb exploded near the women's entrance of an *imambargah* (Shia place of worship) in Shendak Bazaar. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a faction of the umbrella Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the attack, stating "*The blast was part of Operation Ghazi and Shias were the targets*". It was the second of three multiple-fatality incidents in Kurram Agency in the first four months of the year. The others are documented below. Another deadly incident occurred in another FATA division, Mohmand Agency, on 16 February³.

2. Background and trends

The seven semi-autonomous tribal districts of the FATA are governed according to local laws and customs. Kurram Agency has a long history of sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shias, the latter making up roughly 20 percent of Pakistan's population of 200 million but representing a much higher proportion of the population of Kurram. The major Shia ethnic groups in Kurram are Hazaras (the minority), originating from Afghanistan, and Turis, a Pashtun tribal group with a long presence in the area. The well-known "war" of 2007 to 2010 left over 3,000 people dead and caused thousands of families to flee their homes. It was followed by a period of relative peace, but in fact the violence and unrest never completely abated and now there are signs of serious resurgence, including major targeted attacks against Shias.

This trend has been noted by expert observers for at least the past two years. For example in May 2016 the FATA Research Centre reported⁴ that Taliban-led violence in Federally Administered Tribal Areas was "on the rise since the start of 2016". The report noted that 42 percent of Taliban attacks employed IEDs, while 26 percent involved ambushes on security forces and anti-Taliban elders. According to Irfan Uddin, a security analyst at FRC, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan Jamaatul Ahrar (TTP-JA) has emerged as the most virulent terrorist group in the northern Agencies of FATA as well as in the adjoining Peshawar valley districts.

"*Kurram Agency has seen a spike in terrorist activities.*" The report noted that the head of TTP-Kurram exhibits sympathies for Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) and foreshadowed "*an unprecedented level of violence compared to the previous year 2015*". Those forebodings have proven to be tragically accurate.

Further analysis was provided recently by Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, a Research Associate at the Institute for Conflict Management, reporting in India Blooms⁵ about the 31 March bombing in Parachinar. Reference was made to a similar deadly blast on 13 December 2015, in a makeshift market in Parachinar – 25 people killed and 62 injured. Two militant groups, LeJ Al-Alami and

¹ Retired agricultural scientist, international development programs coordinator, and cross cultural consultant, trainer and researcher.

² See for example "Parachinar bleeds again", Pakistan Daily Times, 01 April 2017, <http://dailytimes.com.pk/pakistan/01-Apr-17/parachinar-bleeds-again>

³ See for example "Suicide attack kills five in Mohmand Agency's Ghalanai", <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/suicide-attack-kills-mohmand-agency-ghalanai-170215063112154.html>

⁴ "Taliban-led violence in Fata on the rise: FRC", 14 May 2016, <http://epaper.brecorder.com/2016/05/14/18-page/753700-news.html>; also <http://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-terror-attacks-increase/3826598.html>

⁵ "Kurram Agency: Sectarian Bloodshed", 03 April 2017, <https://www.magzter.com/news/528/1611/042017/ko00p>

Ansarul Mujahideen claimed responsibility for the attack, with one of them saying the target was the Shia community. While this was in the middle of a relatively tranquil period, the sense that Parachinar remains a principle target for Sunni sectarian violence has never gone away, and is reinforced by recent events.

Unlike other tribal agencies of FATA, the dynamics in Kurram are different because of the sectarian divide and the geo-strategic location of the Agency. Kurram is surrounded by Afghanistan from three sides and has remained in turmoil since 1980, after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Thrust into Afghanistan on three sides, the Kurram Agency has always been of critical importance for Pakistan. It shares the major portion of its borders with the troubled Logar, Paktia, Khost and Nangarhar Provinces of Afghanistan. The al Qaeda and Taliban infested Tora Bora Mountain range in the Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan shares its boundaries with the Kurram Agency. . . . The Kurram Agency connects the tribal areas of Pakistan to Afghanistan through lower, central and upper Kurram. Crucially, the Thal-Parachinar route is the shortest route to Kabul.

3. Threats from Afghanistan

The analysis of Tushar Ranjan Mohanty⁶ gives special attention to the reality and significance of an increase in terrorist and militant activities from across the Afghan border:

. . . the presence of TTP and IS on the abutting Afghan territory have created new threats for the Kurram Agency. . . . For instance, on April 2, 2017, four missiles were fired from across the Pak-Afghan border into Kurram Agency. A spokesperson of the local administration stated that the missiles were fired from Afghanistans Paktia province, and panicked the locals, though there was no loss of life. Terrorist attacks from across the border are a regular phenomenon, and some of the major incidents include:

- *February 19, 2017: Eleven terrorists allegedly attempting to enter Pakistan from Afghanistan were killed in a clash with SFs in the Sapperkot and Para Chamkani area of Kurram Agency. Two Kurram militia members were also injured in the gun battle between SFs and the terrorists.*
- *October 14, 2016: Two persons including a soldier sustained injuries in a suicide attack on a border crossing at Kharlachi in Kurram Agency. The suicide bomber was trying to enter Pakistan from the Paktia province of Afghanistan through the border crossing.*
- *April 7, 2016: 18 terrorists were killed in a cross border attack on a SF checkpoint in the Mangora Sar area on the Pak-Afghan border in Kurram Agency.*

The report notes that the Pakistan Government launched a “deweaponisation” campaign in Kurram Agency on 17 December 2016, asking the local tribal people to hand over weapons to the administration. However tribal elders in Parachinar “remained apprehensive, as the recent history of violence against the tribes and the fragile security situation in Afghanistan continued to threaten security in the Agency”. Furthermore:

On February 7, 2017, hundreds of pamphlets containing threats were allegedly distributed by Daesh in the Kurram Agency on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line, threatening attacks in specific tribal areas. The Daesh pamphlet declared, in the local language, Pashto, “We have achieved our goals in Afghanistan and are now ready to confront Shia renouncers in Pakistans tribal areas”.

4. The 21 January 2017 Parachinar attack: additional comments

Twenty-five people died and 87 others suffered injuries when a bomb went off during peak business hours at the crowded vegetable market of Parachinar on 21 January 2017⁷.

The town was immediately closed and security at checkpoints was beefed up.

The report cited here suggested that this attack appeared to be a sign of growing cooperation among extremists as two banned groups came forward to claim responsibility, with one describing the incident as a suicide attack.

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Carnage at Parachinar market; 25 killed, 87 injured, Hussain Afzal, 22 January, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1309926/carnage-at-parachinar-market-25-killed-87-injured>

Another report⁸ noted that Kurram has witnessed scores of such attacks and “kidnappings for ransom” incidents in the past several years, traditionally being one of the key routes for militant movement across the border with Afghanistan.

The anti-Shia Tehrike Taliban Pakistan (TTP) accepted the responsibility for the blast and indicated it was a revenge attack for the arrest of two of their leaders.

5. The 31 March 2017 Parachinar attack: additional comments

The report cited above⁹ pointed out that local security arrangements and responses were clearly inadequate:

“Angry Shia leaders and local residents quickly accused security forces of failure, with small protests breaking out in Parachinar. . . eyewitness described seeing security forces fire on the protesters, injuring some.”

The chief of a Shia political organisation is quoted:

“Terrorists crossing dozens of checkpoints and carrying out attacks puts a question mark over the progress of security institutions.”

Another report¹⁰ noted that the area was previously a stronghold of Pakistani Taliban and Sunni militant groups, and although the Pakistan army claims to have cleared Kurram of militants, this claim now has to be questioned. This opinion echoes the analysis of Tushar Ranjan Mohanty¹¹:

*As a result of the recent surge in terrorist incidents across the country, there has been a step up in the security arrangements in sensitive areas of the Kurram Agency as well. Security personnel in large numbers have been deputed at the Government Offices, Mosques, Imambargahs, big shopping markets, hospitals, and bus stands, to avoid the possibility of any mishap. Troops have been deployed at all the exit and entry points, including Parachinar, the headquarters of the Agency, Sadda and Alizai, and barricades have been erected at sensitive places in the Agency for checking. A majority of roads leading to Government offices in the Agency have been sealed. **Despite the high security alert, the terrorists have succeeded in executing attacks, putting a question mark against the Government’s claims of having tamed terrorism in the tribal areas.** [emphasis added]*

6. The 24 April 2017 Godar area attack.

At least 15 people were killed and 9 injured when a passenger van hit a landmine in the remote Godar area of Kurram Agency on 24 April¹². The route from Godar to Parachinar takes hours to travel, the section to the key market town of Sadda being an unpaved road.

IS Khorasan and TTP-JUA both claimed responsibility for the attack. This is indicative of a sectarian motive.

7. Summary

There is little doubt now that the signs of escalating sectarian violence in Kurram Agency, FATA, Pakistan, noted in 2016, are now being realised. Threats originating across the border in Afghanistan are a very significant factor. The Pakistan Government seems to be unable to deal effectively with this situation at this time.

⁸ “Parachinar Bomb Blast: Who is behind the attack?”, Times of Islamabad News Desk, 21 January 2017, <https://timesofislamabad.com/parachinar-bomb-blast-behind-attack/2017/01/21/>

⁹ Footnote 2

¹⁰ Suicide bomber kills 24 near Shia mosque in Pakistan, The Associated Press, 31 March 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/mosque-explosion-parachinar-pakistan-1.4049100>

¹¹ Op. cit.

¹² E.g. “14 killed as passenger van hits landmine in Kurram Agency”, Iftikhar Firdous, April 25, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1392767/blast-rocks-parachinar/>