

Lahore Suicide Bombing Signals Emergence of a New Militant Organisation

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Summary

Ten people were killed and dozens wounded in a suicide attack outside a Sufi shrine in Lahore on 8 May 2019. If the Hizbul Ahrar's claim to have carried out the attack is true, we have to look beyond mere religious motivations at the wider political and symbolic significance of the attack.

On the morning of 8 May 2019, 10 people were killed and dozens wounded when a 15-year-old suicide bomber detonated his device outside the Data Darbar Sufi shrine in Lahore, Pakistan. According to the Punjab Police Chief, Arif Nawaz Khan, the bomber targeted a vehicle belonging to Punjab's Elite Police. The Elite Police is a branch of Punjab's security forces which specialises in counter-terrorism and other high security operations. In this case, the Elite Police were stationed to secure the Data Darbar shrine.

Dedicated to the 11th century Sufi saint, Abul Hassan Ali Hujwiri, Data Darbar is one of the most important Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Thousands of devotees throng the shrine each day. Over the past decade, Sufi shrines in Pakistan have been targeted by militant groups which view the devotional practices associated with the shrines – such as prostration, veneration of the saint and singing – as heretical. In 2010, suicide blasts within the Data Darbar itself killed more than 50 people and injured over 200.

Data Darbar is also symbolically linked to the cultural life and significance of Lahore. Lahore is the capital, cultural hub and wealthiest city of the province of Punjab. Punjab, in turn, is the largest, wealthiest and most politically important province in Pakistan. Thus, an attack on or around the Data Darbar carries wider symbolic and political significance.

In June 2014, the Pakistani military launched Operation Zarb-i-Azb, an extensive military operation involving nearly 30,000 soldiers, to crush Taliban-inspired militancy in the northwestern regions that border Afghanistan. In these regions, militant groups inspired by the Taliban in Afghanistan had coalesced under the title of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). While nominally supporting the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan, members of the TTP were primarily concerned with destabilising the authority of the Pakistani state and establishing what they defined as the socio-legal structure of Islam.

The number and intensity of militant attacks have substantially declined since the launch of Operation Zarb-i-Azb. Over the past five years, the TTP has lost a number of its leaders and bases. Security observers have noted that the TTP's formal structure and supply networks in the northwestern regions have largely been uprooted. These, in turn, have led to leadership disputes within the TTP and the emergence of smaller splinter groups.

The suicide bombing outside of the Data Darbar has been claimed by one such splinter group – the Hizbul Ahrar. The Hizbul Ahrar released an online statement entitled “Lahore Mein Mubarak Istishshadi Humla” (The Blessed Martyr Attack in Lahore), in which it claimed responsibility for the attack. It further stated that the Elite Police stationed outside the Data Darbar were the target and that steps had been taken to minimise civilian casualties.

The Hizbul Ahrar emerged in 2017 when it broke away from the Jamaat ul-Ahrar, which was itself a militant organisation that had split from the TTP. The leader of the Hizbul Ahrar, Mukarram Khan, announced that he had split from the Jamaat ul-Ahrar because the latter was committing un-Islamic practices in the name of jihad. Interestingly, he referred to the Jamaat ul-Ahrar’s targeting of civilians and its 2016 bombing of a park, where Christians had gathered to celebrate Easter that killed more than 70 people, as un-Islamic. Unlike the Jamaat ul-Ahrar and the TTP, Mukarram Khan stated that the Hizbul Ahrar would specifically target Pakistani security forces and fight the United States and its allies.

Since its formation, the Hizbul Ahrar has claimed responsibility for a number of suicide and improvised explosive device attacks. These include a suicide bombing at a paramilitary checkpoint in Hub, Balochistan, and a bomb attack on security personnel in Spinwam, North Waziristan.

The claim by the Hizbul Ahrar that it carried out the bombing outside of the Data Darbar is revealing both about its aims to expand its terrain, and to challenge the TTP and its various splinter groups. Till date, most of the Hizbul Ahrar attacks had been restricted to the northwestern and tribal regions of Pakistan. Confronted by the military crackdown, TTP attacks have also been limited mainly to Balochistan and the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

If the Hizbul Ahrar’s claim to have carried out the attack outside of the Data Darbar is true, we have to look beyond mere religious motivations at the wider political and symbolic significance of the attack. By attacking security personnel at such a sensitive and important site in Lahore, the Hizbul Ahrar is asserting itself as a major militant organisation in Pakistan. It is seeking to publicly dispute claims that the Pakistani security establishment is winning the battle against militancy. In a statement released on 13 February 2019, the organisation’s spokesperson called on other jihadi groups to increase their activities and to collaborate with the Hizbul Ahrar. The spokesperson also declared the launching of Operation Shamzai, a concerted militant campaign against the security and government. Evidently, the Hizbul Ahrar sees the bombing outside of the Data Darbar as a public display of its capacity and as a rallying cry to other militant organisations.

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