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## The American Taliban are coming

By Pepe Escobar  
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Intricate shadowplay surrounds the (failed) smoking sports utility vehicle Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad. Earlier in 2010, the Central Intelligence Agency warned al-Qaeda might try an attack inside the US "within the next six months". It did happen - like clockwork - with the added bonus that the alleged perpetrators are even more convenient than al-Qaeda.

United States Attorney General Eric Holder is now sure "the Pakistani Taliban was behind the attack. We know that they helped facilitate it. We know that they probably helped finance it and that he [Shahzad] was working at their direction". President Barack Obama's homeland security and counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan basically said the same thing.

On May 3, United States federal prosecutors charged Faisal Shahzad, 30, on five criminal counts, including committing an act of terrorism and attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction. The complaint filed in a Manhattan court said Shahzad had admitted he received bomb-making training in Waziristan, Pakistan, before attempting on May 1 to explode a car packed with explosives in Times Square. The car had cans of gasoline, propane tanks, fireworks and detonators.

Despite this, no hard evidence has been presented. The notion that the ultra-localized, Pashtun-oriented Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban - TTP) may pull an al-Qaeda-style New York car bombing is as fishy as Goldman Sachs juggling with wacky financial instruments. The Pakistani army, for starters, does not buy it. According to its top spokesman, Major General Athar Abbas, "I don't think they have the capacity to reach the next level."

Pakistani Minister of Interior Rehman Malik said it was "premature" to link New York with Waziristan - adding that only Pakistani intelligence would investigate the matter (no Americans allowed). However, British media have reported that investigation teams from the US are at work in Pakistan, including Rawalpindi, where the army and intelligence agencies are based.

The TTP itself, via a spokesman, Azam Tariq, dismissed the whole thing, although it had initially claimed responsibility. Tariq was quoted as saying, "This is a noble job and we pray that all the Muslim youths should follow Faisal Shahzad. But he is not part of our network." Instead, what the TTP says it sees is "a plot hatched by the US and its allies to trap Muslim and Pukhtun [Pashtun] youth in terrorist activities".

This could be bluff, but it makes some sense. Shahzad's "bomb" tanked miserably. The TTP really does train jihadis on bomb-making in only a few days; the instructors themselves were trained by al-Qaeda jihadis. If Shahzad really did train at a Waziristan camp - leaked information is trying to make public opinion believe he did - his bomb could have been expected to have at least gone off.

All the same, a steady, relentless drip of leaks has built an official narrative of Shahzad linked to the TTP, meeting its leaders, training in Waziristan - and even being coached by US-born imam Anwar al-Awlaki, now hiding in Yemen, who conveniently had just become an assassination target for the Obama administration. Evidence? Nothing concrete.

McClatchy newspapers, in one of its stories, mentioned "six US officials" stressing "no credible evidence has been found" that Shahzad "received any serious terrorist training from the Pakistani Taliban or another radical Islamic group". As for Shahzad's father, Air Vice-Marshal Baharul Haq (this is an elite Pashtun family), he was linked in the US with a top Taliban leader - but nobody made that link in Pakistan itself; he was just questioned by Pakistani police.

### **Profile of an American Taliban**

Nobody really knows whether Shahzad really saw Pashtun civilians in Waziristan droned to death - apparently the definitive motive for his jihadi act. But whether he witnessed it in person or he read and heard about it, it's immaterial. What he must certainly have felt was that both Pashtun nationalism and Islam were under attack. With his house in the US foreclosed, his bank suing him and his marriage reportedly on the rocks, he hardly needed another push to "smash the mirror" and cross to the other side.

Earlier this year, I argued ([Yemen, the new Waziristan](#)) that we had entered the age of the virtual jihadi nomad - characters that in earlier times would have been in a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky or Albert Camus.

Shahzad fits the profile: young, globalized and addicted to a fantasy - the virtual *ummah* (Muslim community). He apparently did make the conceptual leap from idealizing the *ummah* on the Internet to actually feeling the irresistible urge to act on the ground. Like virtually every neo-jihadi - from Dhiren Barot (who planned to bomb the New York Stock Exchange) to shy

underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab - he broke communication with his family. As a Pakistani-American he was already a living exercise in deterritorialization.

And this would all be very individualistic - no orchestration would be needed by a terrorist network. Add to it - if some of those leaks are to be taken seriously - that Shahzad seems to bear the traits of a highly narcissistic personality (he's apparently "singing like a bird"). As scholar Oliver Roy has put it, talking about al-Qaeda-influenced neo-jihadis, Shahzad in his own way has also become a lonely avenger, some sort of self-styled hero "who can redeem a life he is not happy with by achieving fame while escaping a world where he finds no room".

In the wake of the (failed) Times Square bombing, none of this was taken into account. It didn't even matter that US Central Command chief General David Petraeus - always positioning himself to 2012 - allowed that Shahzad had acted as a "lone wolf". Hysteria ruled - from Senator Joe Lieberman wanting to strip all "terrorism" suspects of US citizenship (anyone now can become a suspect) to pundits demanding the shipment of said suspects directly to Pentagon-orchestrated commissions.

United States public opinion largely refuses to acknowledge facts on the ground at their own peril. Inside the US, now even peaceful dissent could be criminalized as a "terrorist" threat. US citizens such as imam al-Awlaki may be "secretly" assassinated abroad - while if this happened inside the US it would be a capital crime; the new policy may well be a first step towards assassinating US citizens at home as well.

The Obama administration, the US intelligence machine and US public opinion also refuse to acknowledge facts on faraway grounds at their own peril. The drone war over Pakistan - covert, mercenary and a mix of both - is considered not only by Pashtuns but by most of Pakistani public opinion for what it is: a US-conducted war - an extra-judicial, systematic mass killing of "unknown", "invisible" people. The Obama administration is not even acknowledging whether it is reevaluating this strategy.

That's because they are not. The timing of the failed Times Square bombing could not have been more convenient - just when the Obama administration was stepping up the drone war in Pakistan, "secretly" allowing the Central Intelligence Agency last week to attack even larger batches of "unknown", invisible, low-level Pashtun fighters (with the accompanying collateral damage; over 400 civilians killed in 2009 alone). Even though Pakistani army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani, a Pentagon darling, will not emit a peep, this will be largely seen by Pakistani public opinion for what it is: a renewed declaration of war.

The age of the virtual jihadi nomad is a go. Forget the Osamas; now it's the time for the Shahzads. Illegal, covert drone wars are bound to spawn - spin or no spin - a terrible, absurd and deadly string of blowback. Lookout, the American Taliban are coming.