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## Al-Qaeda strikes back in Lahore

By Syed Saleem Shahzad  
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KARACHI - The Civil Lines area of the northeastern Pakistani city of Lahore, capital of Punjab province, is famed for its magnificent automobile display rooms and the city police headquarters.

On Wednesday morning, though, al-Qaeda-linked militants set their sights on a little-known structure that houses the operations office of Pakistan's premier secret service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which is actively working to purge jihadi networks from Punjab.

However, guards at the ISI building became suspicious of the red van carrying the militants and opened fire. While returning the fire, the militants diverted to a police helpline office and set off a powerful bomb which killed at least 23 people and left hundreds injured.

A similar attack was planned on the ISI headquarters in the capital Islamabad, but the men were arrested on Wednesday before they could act.

President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani were quick to condemn the attack, the third this year in Lahore. The others were the March 3 incident in which gunmen killed six police guards in an ambush on the Sri Lanka cricket team and the March 30 attack on a police academy which killed eight people.

Punjab is the country's largest province and with about 82 million people it accounts for approximately half of the total population. Due to its overwhelming representation in the armed forces, it is also known as the "sword arm" of the country.

Wednesday's attack is widely seen as retaliation for the military's operations in the Swat area of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), where for the past two weeks fierce fighting has raged against Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. This is not the case.

Asia Times Online investigations reveal that in response to the Swat operation, Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud sent several men to various destinations, but they all failed

to launch an attack.

The biggest group was sent to the southern port city of Karachi. It comprised Amjad Zameer Khattak alias Musarat alias Talha, the son of Sadiq Zameer and a resident of Swat; Mohammad Asim alias Tipu Sultan alias Babu, the son of Mohammad Hakeem Khan of Nowshera in NWFP; Mohammad Safir alias Saifullah, Adnan and Abdul Hameed. They had belonged to the banned outfits the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Harkatul Mujahideen, but now they are allied with a nexus headed by Baitullah Mehsud.

They apparently arrived in Karachi last week and planned a suicide attack on the headquarters of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, which is anti-Taliban and a coalition partner in the federal and provincial government. They dropped this plan when they found the building to be too heavily guarded.

They were in the process of identifying another target when their presence was leaked to the police and Khattak and Asim were arrested. The others escaped.

Wednesday's Lahore attack is rooted in an agreement between Pakistan and the United States in the last days of the George W Bush administration. Washington relayed to the Pakistani envoy in the US that it was seriously displeased over Pakistan's inactivity in trying to arrest big al-Qaeda names.

In the three of four years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Pakistan signing onto the "war on terror", Pakistan had hunted down several big names. These included Abu Zobedah, Ramzi Binul Shib and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, wanted in connection with the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US. Arrests such as these justified the large amounts of aid and money the US gave to Pakistan.

Pakistan's efforts then tapered off, especially in the tribal areas, where it had lost much of its writ as the militants had ejected the para-military forces from the area. Islamabad also feared an escalation of suicide attacks.

After assuming office in January, President Barack Obama picked up on the Bush administration's warning to the Pakistani envoy, and soon after a top al-Qaeda ideologue, Egyptian scholar Sheikh Essa al-Misri, was arrested.

Abu Amro Abdul Hakeem alias Sheikh Essa, in his 70s, had never been particularly popular with the al-Qaeda leadership, but given of his background he was respected in jihadi circles. He was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s and close to slain Abdul Qadir Audah, a Muslim Brotherhood general who was executed by Gamal Abdul Nasser's regime in Egypt in 1960.

Sheikh Essa, who had recovered from a form of paralysis, had settled in the North Waziristan tribal area in a very secure environment. However, while traveling to a meeting in Faisalabad in Punjab he was captured by security agents. This arrest caused considerable anger in militant circles, especially in the Arab camps.

However, the real trigger for the Lahore attack, planned by more than two Pakistani groups, was the recent clampdown on a major al-Qaeda sanctuary in Mohmand Agency.

Ten days ago, security agencies arrested four Saudi nationals. They were named only as Ahmed, Ali, Mohammad and Obaidullah and had arrived from Saudi Arabia recently. There was also an Abdullah from Libya, and all were experts in explosives and had spent some time in the Afghan province of Helmand.

Al-Qaeda also has sanctuaries in Bajaur Agency, which, like Mohmand, borders the Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nooristan. Top al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden and his deputy Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been seen in these regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The capture of the Saudis shows a real hostile gesture by Pakistan against al-Qaeda's most high-profile sanctuary.

As a result, the Lahore operation was planned and financed by al-Qaeda. The Jundul Fida group led by veteran Kashmiri guerrilla commander Ilyas Kashmiri provided logistic support and militants linked with Baitullah Mehsud were used in the suicide mission.

### **A new perspective**

There is a strong possibility of more terror incidents such as the latest one in Lahore. The Pakistani establishment is convinced that it can prevent this from happening by defeating the militants in Swat and the Malakand Agency, provided there is unanimous political support behind the military operations.

In the latest offensive in Swat, the army has stuck to its task, despite some acts of brutality by the militants - the headless bodies of two majors were recently found. Such barbarity is the work of the group of Qari Hussain of South Waziristan and his Uzbek accomplices.

The armed forces are convinced that if they lose this operation, Pakistan will fall into a spiral of instability, even leading to "Talibanization".

The recent Supreme Court judgement lifting a ban against opposition leader and former premier Nawaz Sharif from contesting in elections provides a good opportunity to strengthen the political system.

Sharif is likely to contest a by-election in the near future and be elected to parliament. He could then replace Gilani as prime minister, which will solidify support for the military operations against militancy.