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*Rule of Law - Security - Governance*

# Al-Qaeda's Islamabad Cell

A Case Study for Understanding the Structure,  
Tactics and Modus Operandi of Urban-Based Al-  
Qaeda Cells

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Account of a busted al-Qaeda's cell in Pakistan's capital

## **About CRSS**

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## **Abstract**

The article provides a case study of an urban terrorist cell in Pakistan's capital of Islamabad that successfully carried out a wave of assassination and bombings of "high-value" targets and individuals from 2007 to 2013. This cell effectively formed a means for Core al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to pressure the Pakistani government from their headquarters in the tribal territories of northwest Pakistan. The "success" of the cell relied on a number of factors and practices, including the careful selection of members based on the usefulness of their family connections, the middle-class background of its operatives, intimate knowledge of its urban surroundings and its reliance on specially trained suicide bombers brought in from the tribal regions rather than local individuals. Of particular interest is the role of family members (including those in senior roles in the security services) in aiding and abetting "second-generation" jihadists.

## Introduction

Pakistan's capital of Islamabad endured a six-year wave of terrorist activity between 2007 and 2013 whose momentum was only recently reversed by the apprehension of members of the al-Qaeda/Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Islamabad cell by local law enforcement agencies.

A post-mortem review of the Islamabad cell's structure, activities, tactics, ideology, objectives and membership criteria will allow researchers to examine this particular case study to gain greater understanding of urban area terrorist cells, their recruitment patterns, the role of family members in aiding and abetting terrorist activity and the operational *modi operandi* of such cells. The Islamabad cell case study provides law enforcement officers, academics, terrorism analysts and policy makers an opportunity to analyze and elucidate the group dynamics of such cells.

## Origins

On July 18, 2014, the Islamabad Anti-Terrorist Court (ATC) granted bail to Abdullah Umar, linchpin of the al-Qaeda-TTP Islamabad cell. His father, an ex-military officer of the Pakistan Army, had pleaded for his release on medical grounds, saying that his paralyzed son has become a "living corpse" after receiving bullet injuries in spinal cord during an attack he carried out. The grant of bail to Abdullah by the ATC was a huge victory for militant Islamist forces in Pakistan. [1]

Abdullah Umar (a.k.a. Ghulamullah) founded the al-Qaeda-associated TTP's Islamabad cell in 2008. [2] The cell members were mostly from Islamabad's more affluent families (sons of retired military officers or relatives of civil servants). This made them focus on high value targets and enabled them stay away from the radar of the law enforcement agencies for a considerable period of time. The group, calling themselves the TTP-Punjabi chapter, took guidance and specific instructions from al-Qaeda Core based to conduct terrorist operations in the Islamabad Capital Territory. Abdullah's bail was a low point for law enforcement authorities after having spent years of hard work to apprehend Abdullah and his associates. [3] Nonetheless, Islamabad experienced relative calm after the arrest of the cell members in August 2013, with the city experiencing only two major terrorist attacks since the arrests. [4]

## Membership

Membership in the Islamabad cell was always small and restricted to candidates from affluent families. According to police investigation reports, cell strength was never more than 13 active members, though not all took part in every terrorist attack planned and executed by the cell. Core members included Abdullah Umar, Hammad Adil, Tanweer Dogar, and Haris Khan, while other members' services were acquired only according to the needs of the operational plan. Suicide bombers were brought in through TTP's Qari Hussain Waziristan-based faction. Tanweer was

the point man in executing operations, whereas planning and logistics were looked after by Hammad and Abdullah Umar. Hammad played a central role since he had access to key information courtesy of his brother Kamran, a police officer. Though trained at the TTP's training camp in Waziristan, Hammad restricted himself mostly to planning while Tanweer was responsible for orchestrating the attacks and bringing in new blood.

## **Ideology and Links**

The ideology and methods of cell members Hammad Adil and Abdullah Umar confirmed their *takfiri* beliefs, though they also had ties to Deobandi organizations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaysh-e-Mohammad, both involved in sectarian violence and Islamist insurgency in Kashmir. Abdullah Umar's arrest led to a series of arrests that included Hammad Adil, his brother Adnan Adil and a pair of brothers known as Saad and Fahd.

The cell was led jointly by Hammad and Abdullah rather than following a single amir as law enforcement personnel have encountered in other Islamist terrorist groups. Hammad and Abdullah had financial and logistical connections with Punjabi Taliban groups Harkat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI) and Harkat ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), with these groups providing operational resources in the Islamabad Capital Territory. Hammad joined the TTP in 2007. Though his father and police officer brother Kamran Adil managed to bring him home from the tribal areas, he continued to use his TTP connections to obtain suicide bombers from Waziristan and operational directives from the TTP. Among these suicide bombers was the one used in the bombing of the Danish Embassy in July 2008. [5]

## **Terrorist Activities**

The cell started its activities in early 2008 with the bombing of the Italian Luna Caprese Restaurant, a retreat frequented by Westerners in Islamabad. Hammad Adil and Tanweer Gondal (a.k.a. Qari Nasir) threw a grenade inside the restaurant while Abdullah was on standby. [6] Twelve individuals, including four American FBI agents, received injuries in the bomb blast. [7]

However, the cell's masterstroke came later when a 500 kilogram car bomb suicide attack razed the Danish Embassy in June 2008. [8] The blast claimed ten lives, including embassy guards, passersby and two Danish citizens of Pakistani origin. To carry out this well-coordinated attack, al-Qaeda and TTP sent a 20-year-old suicide bomber of Saudi origin from their base in North Waziristan. [9] The Danes were punished in response to allegedly blasphemous cartoons published in Copenhagen's *Jyllands Posten* newspaper in 2006. Another well planned suicide attack on the Frontier Constabulary (FC) barracks in Islamabad in 2009 cost the lives of six FC personnel and two civilians. [10] Five people were killed a few months later when a suicide bomber in a FC uniform detonated his explosives in the lobby of the United Nations' World Food Program office in Islamabad. [11]

All these attacks paled in the glare of the assassination of Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti, whose car was sprayed with bullets near his house on March 2, 2011. The Minister was targeted by the cell as he was a Christian and dared to oppose the anti-blasphemy law in parliament. [12] Bhatti's assailants dropped pamphlets on his body stating his murder was a punishment carried out by the TTP-Punjab and warned that death awaited anyone willing to speak against Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Forsaking a police escort, Bhatti was killed, his car was obstructed by Hammad Adil's vehicle, allowing Abudllah Umar to emerge and shoot the minister. [13]

The cell also targeted two NATO supply terminals in the suburbs of Islamabad in June 2010, killing 12 people and achieving a temporary halt of NATO supplies to Afghanistan. More than 150 NATO oil tankers and supply trucks were set ablaze during the two attacks. [14]

Emboldened by these successes, the group attempted another murder, this time targeting Hamid Saeed Kazmi, Minister of Religious Affairs and an adherent of Sufi Islam known for his anti-al-Qaeda and TTP rhetoric. Abdullah led the attack and targeted the Minister outside his office. Kazmi was wounded while his bodyguard was killed. [15] Despite the fact that the Minister's office was next to the police station in downtown Islamabad, the assailants managed to escape comfortably. They appeared to have prior knowledge of the timing of police patrols and the response time of first responders as Kamran Adil, the brother of cell members Hammad and Adnan Adil, was a senior police officer once posted in the same locality. [16]

The Cell also planned to assassinate former Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Lieutenant General Zaheer ul-Islam in May 2011. Abdullah travelled to Wana, South Waziristan to bring the suicide bomber from an al-Qaeda-TTP training camp. Abdullah worked in close coordination with Tanweer and Hammad Adil to take down the spymaster. The suicide jacket of the bomber developed a technical fault, forcing Abdullah to abort the operation and send back the bomber to Wana. [17] A similar attempt on the life of former president General Pervez Musharraf faced the same fate in 2013. Abdullah chalked out a plan to hit the former President's convoy while it was *en route* to court for a scheduled proceeding of cases registered against the General. Abdullah requested al-Qaeda and the TTP to provide a suicide bomber for the mission as well as an explosives-laden car. [18] The TTP provided both as targeting the General had always been a TTP priority. This time the suicide bomber failed to locate the target and the whole mission was aborted. Abdullah then planned to hit a sit-in of secular and anti-Taliban parliamentarians of the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM - United National Movement) outside the Parliament House. The attack could not be operationalized as Abdullah had serious doubts about the mental capacities of the bomber. He called off the operation and sent back the bomber back to Wana. [19]

## **Terrorist Transformations**

Abdullah Umar was born into a highly religious family, where the tradition was to join the Pakistani military after completing high school. His father, Colonel Khalid Mehmood Abbasi, joined the army's Signal Corps during General Zia ul-Haq's military regime (1977-88). [20]

Colonel Abbasi was known for his hardcore religious beliefs, which he never tried to hide as military officer, regularly preaching to his fellow officers. [21]

Abbasi's last posting was at the Signals Training School in Kohat, *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa* (KPK) Province. The turning point in Abdullah's life came after the arrest of his father in 2003 when Abbasi was identified as a suspect in an attempted assassination on the life of then-president and military dictator General Pervez Musharraf. [22] Musharraf narrowly escaped two consecutive suicide attacks on his motorcade in December 2002. [23]

Colonel Abbasi was also charged for facilitating the stay of Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, the 9/11 chief planner. Abbasi colluded with Major Adil Qadoos and his father Abdul Qadoos, an activist of Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, to shelter the al-Qaeda stalwart at his house in Rawalpindi. [24] Abbasi was arrested when a telephone call from a high-level al-Qaeda leader in Afghanistan was intercepted by U.S. intelligence, which in turn shared the intercept with their Pakistani counterparts. [25] Because of the high profile nature of Colonel Abbasi's activities he was detained at Jacobabad Airbase, used at the time by the U.S. military as its operational, interrogation and investigation centre. [26] A critical investigation quickly followed involving all military and civil law enforcement and investigation agencies of Pakistan, resulting in the arrest of those involved in the acts of terror. Abdullah's father was court martialed, found guilty, dismissed from the military and sentenced to six months in prison. [27]

The humiliation and severe financial hardships that faced the Abbasi family following the arrest and dismissal led Yasmeen Abbasi, the mother of Abdullah, file a *habeas corpus* writ petition in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, but to no avail. Abdullah later disclosed that his parents' humiliation made him join Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

At twenty-four years of age, Abdullah was considered a bright student of Islamic Shari'a at the International Islamic University, where Abdullah managed to assemble a cell of like-minded students. Hammad Adil, younger brother of Superintendent of Police Kamran Adil, Haris Khan, a government officer's son, brothers Saad and Fahd (also sons of a retired government officer) and Tanveer, a loner, became his aides in striking targets all over Islamabad with the TTP providing a firm support base for Abdullah's personal revenge. [28]

Apart from the activities of the Islamabad cell, Abdullah also participated in other operations with TTP members. On December 3, 2009, four TTP terrorists stormed the mosque located inside the military cantonment area in Rawalpindi. [29] The mosque, packed with at least 300 people attending Friday prayers, was located only a few minutes' drive from the Pakistan Army's General Headquarters. The terrorists were particular in selecting their targets, confirming their pre-attack planning and information about the people regularly attending the Friday service. After eliminating high value targets, including two serving Pakistan Army generals and four other officers, the terrorists sprayed the other worshippers with AK-47 fire and threw hand grenades that resulted in the deaths of 40 (including 17 children) and the wounding of more than 80 worshippers. [30] When the security forces launched an operation to flush them out, the assailants blew themselves up. Most of the dead and injured were either retired or serving military officers and family members. [31] Abdullah confessed to being part of the "Parade

Lines Mosque attack” as far as planning and facilitation was concerned after his arrest in July 2013.

Hammad Adil, another key member of the cell, was a younger brother of a senior police officer posted in the Islamabad Capital Territory Police. Born in a middle class but highly religious business family, Hamad received his early education in Lahore and graduated from International Islamic University, Islamabad. Later the family moved to Islamabad, where his father started a real estate business and elder brother Kamran joined the Police Service of Pakistan (PSP) after passing the Central Superior Services examination. After completing his education, Hammad secured a job at Barclay’s Bank in Islamabad where he worked briefly. His family members, including his father and police officer brother, later claimed that six years ago Hammad ran away from the family home in Islamabad to join the TTP operating in North Waziristan. His brother somehow managed to bring him back but only disclosed this after Hammad’s arrest. [32]

Hammad Adil studied Islamic Shari’a at the International Islamic University where he was an active member of Islami Jamiat-e-Talba (the student wing of Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami). In fact the whole family had strong religious leanings and all five of Hammad Adil’s brothers were part of Jamaat-e-Islami. Hammad Adil’s family had an influence in Islamabad’s bureaucratic circles mainly through his police officer brother. Taking advantage of his university’s Islamist environment and city social circles, Hammad managed to recruit members of his choice to establish the cell.

## **The End of the Islamabad Cell**

The cell’s killing spree finally ended when they targeted Choudhry Zulfiqar Ali, a Federal Investigations Agency (FIA) employee and prosecutor in the Benazir Bhutto murder case. [33] Eliminating Zulfiqar Ali was considered important as the group believed that the prosecutor was about to reveal crucial information regarding the role of the TTP, al-Qaeda and other Islamist networks in the assassination of Bhutto in December 2007. The cell members killed Zulfiqar Ali by attacking his vehicle while he was on his way to court. Return fire from the prosecutor’s bodyguard resulted in multiple bullet wounds to Haris and Abdullah. [34]

Their accomplices managed to bring them to safety. Haris later died of wounds while Abdullah Umar’s lower body suffered irreversible paralysis. Abdullah was taken to a hospital in Rawalpindi known for treating injured jihadis. Abdullah’s father, Colonel Abbasi, lodged a fake report at a police station about his son’s bullet wounds, claiming they were received during a car-jacking. [35] The Islamabad Capital Territory police meanwhile raided the hospital and arrested Abdullah. Though in a critical situation, Abdullah was able to reveal the names and addresses of his accomplices. [36] Other than Tanweer, the rest of the cell was later arrested in police raids.

## **Evaluating the Cell’s Goals and Objectives**

The Islamabad cell played a support role in perpetrating acts of terrorism as part of a broader al-Qaeda-TTP network based in Pakistan’s urban areas. The cell was pivotal in bringing the

Pakistani government into talks with the TTP because of its high profile attacks in urban centers and was also able to dissuade policy makers from launching further military operations against the TTP and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It was only after the cell was dismantled that a major operation (Operation Zarb-e-Azb) was launched by Pakistani military against al-Qaeda and TTP-associated terrorists in North Waziristan in April 2014.

## **Conclusion**

The rationale for the cell's highly selective recruitment was to exploit the family and social backgrounds of the members to collect information about possible high profile terrorist targets and the security procedures meant to protect them. The Islamabad cell operated as part of a larger network of urban-based Islamist terrorist groups designed to coerce the Pakistani government into abandoning plans for an offensive in the tribal regions where al-Qaeda and the TTP maintain their main bases. These urban terrorist groups often originated as Islamist armed groups involved in the insurgency in the Indian Kashmir, including groups such as Harkat ul-Mujahedeen (HuM), Harkat ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and sectarian anti-Shi'a Islamist groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). The Islamabad cell maintained especially close connections with LeJ and HuM.

The Islamabad al-Qaeda-TTP cell operated freely for a number of years. They confined their terrorist activities to high profile assassinations and bombing high value targets. Cell members came from affluent families and had a unique advantage in having intimate knowledge of the operational area. Al-Qaeda Core and the TTP capitalized on these strengths and used them to their full advantage. The case study of Abdullah Umar provides an insight into the mindset of a second generation Islamist terrorist whose role model was none else but his own father. The role of family members in motivating and radicalizing terrorists is a topic worthy of further examination. Most vital, however, is the example of the Islamabad cell as evidence of the unprecedented growth of Islamist radicalization amongst Pakistan's urban, middle-class youth, formerly a largely untapped resource for the region's Islamist extremists

## Notes

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