

Killings in Karachi: down, but not out

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With the Rangers-led targeted operation aimed at restoring peace to Karachi entering its fourth year, there was marked improvement in the overall law and order situation in the city in the year 2016. However, even as fatalities from political violence and gang wars sharply declined in Karachi amid the ongoing operation, the city continued to face sectarian violence during the year under review.

With the backing of the federal government and the military, the security operation had started in Karachi in September 2013, mainly targeting four categories of violent groups involved in fueling violence in the city: Taliban, sectarian outfits, armed wings of ethno-political parties and criminal gangs operating in Lyari and other parts of the city.

In the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP), which the federal government had adopted—in the wake of the December 2014 attack on a Peshawar school—to counter militancy and violence in the country, one point specifically stated that the '[o]ngoing operation in Karachi will be taken to its logical end'.

Taliban groups weakened

Since the launch of the operation, various Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) factions operating in Karachi have been the prime targets of law enforcement agencies. The factions were extensions of the Swat, Mohmand and South Waziristan chapters of the TTP in Karachi and had started when militants began taking refuge in Karachi after the military launched

operations in FATA in 2009. The militants would shave off their beards, trim their long hair and worked as petty labourers, as part of a strategy to wait for the right time to organise their respective outfit's network in Karachi.

The TTP affirmed its presence in Karachi for the first time when it openly threatened activists of the Awami National Party (ANP) to quit the party. The TTP militants then started attacking police personnel, polio vaccinators and civil society workers, besides unleashing a brutal extortion campaign on Pashtun traders. However, since the launch of the Karachi operation, all three TTP factions have been weakened after their key leaders and militants were arrested or killed in shootouts with law enforcement agencies. In 2016, the crackdown against the TTP continued and the killing and arrest of many of its members made headlines.

Although law-enforcement agencies were largely successful in shattering the network of Taliban militants in Karachi, they had to deal with the emerging menace of transitional militant outfits and self-radicalised, educated militants in the city's affluent neighbourhoods.

The transitional groups mainly included Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Laskhar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami (LJA) and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen Al-Alami (HuMA), which according to law enforcement agencies and media reports, had been working in collaboration with the TTP and the LeJ.

According to Raja Omar Khattab, a senior counter-terrorism police official in Karachi, law enforcement agencies had weakened the AQIS network by arresting several leaders in 2016 but the outfit still existed in Karachi and operated in small cells, which had launched attacks on law enforcement personnel and schools.

In February 2016, the chief military spokesperson announced the arrest of Farooq Bhatti alias Musaana, a key AQIS leader in Pakistan, along with Naeem Bukhari and Sabir Khan, heads of LeJ's Sindh and Karachi chapters, respectively.

Similarly, the LJA, an anti-Shia militant group splintered from LeJ, has also been on the radar of the law enforcement agencies. On August 25, 2016, Sindh Rangers announced a Rs 5 million reward for assistance in finding a key LJA leader Syed Safdar, having several aliases, including Yousuf, Huzafa, Khorasani, Muaviya, Ali, Shah Ji aka Zeeshan, along with his accomplices and facilitators.

The HuMA, a proscribed militant group and an offshoot of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, has also been active in Karachi and its members have been joining the LeJ and AQIS.

Law enforcement agencies have also been keeping an eye on Karachi's prestigious academic institutions for individuals and smaller cells affiliated with international jihadist networks, including Al Qaeda and

ISIS, which have been recruiting middle- and upper-middle class students for years.

The government was first alerted to their presence when police arrested suspects in connection with an attack in Safoora Goth neighbourhood in May 2015 wherein 47 members of the Ismaili community travelling in a bus had been shot dead. The intelligence-based crackdown on academic institutions continued throughout 2016.

Sectarian violence linked to Balochistan

The surfacing of sectarian violence in Karachi in October 2016 has left a question mark on three years of efforts by law enforcement agencies to bring peace to the city and forced the government to launch an across-the-board crackdown on sectarian outfits. The action led to the arrest of several leaders of Deobandi and Shia groups and killing of militants associated with such groups in shootouts with law enforcement agencies.

Karachi is one of most active theatres of violence between Sunni Deobandi and Shia groups, where tit-for-tat killings occur on a regular basis, according to law enforcement officials and security analysts. Since 2011, as many as 349 persons have lost their lives in such violence — 215 Shias and 134 Sunnis, according to police statistics.

These groups have carried out surveillance of active members, professionals and

clerics of rival sects and targeted them whenever they got an opportunity.

Proscribed militant groups Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, the LeJ and Jundullah in Karachi traditionally share operational and ideological ties with Al Qaeda and the TTP. Police officials believe that after the crackdown in the tribal areas and Karachi, Taliban groups and sectarian outfits have found new sanctuaries in the Sindh-Balochistan border area, where they jointly plan attacks on the Shia community and government interests in Karachi and elsewhere in Sindh. Counter-terrorism Department in Karachi has also written to the federal government, seeking action against militant groups based in Khuzdar district of Balochistan, which have been providing sanctuaries to the LeJ and the TTP.

In retaliation for attacks on the Shia community, Shia militant groups, such as the proscribed Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan, have also been active in Karachi. Although Shia leaders deny the existence of militants in their community, police officials believe that Shia militant outfits exist and are involved in the killings of Sunni clerics in the city.

District Central of Karachi has traditionally been the area most vulnerable to sectarian violence. In the last six years, at least 138 people belonging to Shia and Sunni sects have been killed in sectarian violence in this district. Also, clashes between groups

representing Deobandi and Bareilvi sects—the ASWJ and Sunni Tehreek—have also regularly occurred in Godhra neighbourhood of the district.

Armed wings of political parties

The actions of militant wings of mainstream ethno-political and religious parties have also been blamed for aggravating the security situation and law enforcement agencies have also targeted such wings during the operation. Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the main political party in the city, suffered much from the operation as a large number of its members were arrested or went into hiding to escape detention. The party also claimed that a number of its workers had been killed extra-judicially or abducted by law enforcement agencies.

MQM found itself in a graver crisis in August 2016, following a diatribe by its London-based chief Altaf Hussain and incitement to the party workers to attack media houses. Within hours, the Rangers picked up the party's top brass in Karachi, including Farooq Sattar, MQM's parliamentary leader in the National Assembly, and sealed the party headquarter—known as Nine Zero—for the first time. The clampdown forced MQM's Pakistan-based leaders to disown Altaf Hussain.

The crackdown and the consequent weakening of MQM's armed front also

undermined MQM's well-known ability to shut down the city within minutes. However, its electoral strength remained intact, although its vote bank seemed to be shrinking.

Awami National Party, Sunni Tehreek and Sindhi ethnic parties also suffered much from the operation and dozens of their workers were also arrested in 2016.

Lyari, one of the ancient towns in Karachi, had become the epicenter of intense warfare between rival criminal gangs over the last several years. The gang wars had resulted in the killing of a large number of innocent people. Law enforcement agencies also shattered the gangs' networks, partly by killing a number of gang leaders in the operation throughout 2016.