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## London Bridge attack 2019: Three out of four terror plots in the UK have roots in Pakistan

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A month after the 29 November terrorist attack that killed two innocent people on London Bridge, the media frenzy and the public buzz generated by the event has faded away, as it more often than not does. The attack, the attacker, and the victims have all receded into the recess of public memory. The attack has, in a matter-of-fact manner, been accepted as another inescapable reality of the turbulent times that we live in. A sense of inevitability prevails over the widespread expectation, almost anticipation, that the next round of mindless and pointless killings by terrorists is just around the corner; it could happen at any time really, and to any random set of victims. That it ought not be this way, that the modern nation State owes more, much more, to its citizens and their well-being and security, and that the countries that have incontrovertibly and chronically been linked to such indefensible acts of violence and terror must be held accountable and made to pay the price for their actions and inaction, is unmistakably obvious. Whether these lessons have registered and are being acted upon by those entrusted with the responsibility of countering terrorism and ensuring safety is, alas, not that clear.

Just a handful of days after the London Bridge attack, reports appeared in the British media in the first week of December that suggested that Rangzieb Ahmed, a convicted terrorist whose close links with Al-Qaeda's top godfathers in Pakistan caused the United Kingdom's (UK) anti-terror apparatus to reportedly view him as one of the most dangerous Islamic terrorists ever captured on British soil, was on the verge of being released from prison. Ahmed had been handed a life sentence in 2008 for his links to the 7/7 London terrorist bombings in which 52 people were killed, and for plotting other attacks in the UK. A key link between British recruits and Al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan, Ahmed had the dubious distinction of being the first ever member of Al-Qaeda to be convicted of directing terrorism in the UK. He was also linked to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks in the United States (US). Born in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, the 44-year-old Ahmed moved to Pakistan before he was ten. He was arrested by Indian forces in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) while fighting as an 18-year-old for the Pakistan-backed terrorist outfit the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen. While in prison, Ahmed received money from Ahmed Omar Saeed, the UK terrorist who had ordered the beheading of US journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002. After his release in 2001, Ahmed joined Al-Qaeda. He returned to the UK in 2005. In 2007, on his way back after another trip to Pakistan, Ahmed was nabbed at London's Heathrow Airport and charged with directing terrorism and possessing three terrorist contact books and an explosive-tainted rucksack. British authorities revealed that his contact books contained personal details of high ranking Al-Qaeda leaders such as Abu Hamza Rabia, the third in command, who was killed in Pakistan in a US drone strike. Ahmed was tried and jailed for life in December 2008 with a

recommendation that he serve a minimum of ten years before he could be considered for parole. That period having elapsed a year ago, British authorities had begun moving quickly to prepare Ahmed for release. The media claimed that he was within weeks of freedom, at which point in time Usman Khan, a fellow Pakistan-linked terrorist who had been freed from prison after serving just half of his terror-related sentence and was still wearing an electronic tag, struck during an event meant for prisoner rehabilitation at London Bridge. This attack has prompted the Ministry of Justice to launch a review by the Parole Board to determine if someone would represent a significant risk to the public after release.

Had it not been for Usman Khan going berserk on 29 November, a terrorist as dangerous as Ahmed would have been returned to the British mainstream sporting an electronic tag or two but able, nevertheless, as Usman demonstrated, to be destructive and lethal. The justice and security systems of countries cannot afford loopholes as gaping as these. When they are exposed, they demonstrate exactly why citizens deserve more.

In addition to tightening its internal justice and security apparatus, the real challenge for the UK is, and has actually been for over a decade now, to pressurize and, if necessary, browbeat the Pakistani military establishment into stepping back and letting go of the terrorist assets that it has nurtured over the decades.

### Earlier warnings

It is not as though recognition of Pakistan's emergence as the hub of Europe-directed terrorism is a new phenomenon. The Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael in its 2006 study titled *'Jihadi terrorists in Europe: their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study'* noted that *"Given the high number of persons in our sample that are of Pakistani descent and the many reports of persons in our sample that have visited the country, Pakistan also seems to be an important place of recruitment"*. In the mid-2000s, the renowned French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière, based on his investigation of Willie Brigitte, a Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist of French origin, had observed that *"Lashkar is not just a tool of the (Pakistani intelligence agency) ISI, but an ally of al Qaeda that participates in its global jihad. Today Pakistan is the heart of the terrorist threat. And it may be too late to do anything about it"*.

In April 2009, *The Telegraph* UK daily in an article titled *'Pakistan: origin of -quarters of all terror plots'* revealed that as per the British security services, at least three in every four terror plots then under investigation in the UK had their roots in Pakistan. Elaborating, the article said that *"Of the four men who carried out the London suicide bombings in July 2005, three were young British men of Pakistani origin who had travelled to the country to receive religious and military training. Mohammed Siddique Khan, the leader of the plot, was raised in Beeston, West Yorkshire, but was understood to have made regular trips to terrorist training camps in southern Punjab, and was captured on video at Karachi airport in November 2004 with his accomplice Shehzad Tanweer, 22, another British national of Pakistan origin. They returned to Britain the following February. The third bomber of Pakistani origin, Hasib Hussain, aged 18, had travelled to Pakistan 12 months before the attack. Meanwhile, the alleged plot to bomb*

*shopping centres in Manchester has been linked by MI5 to two al-Qaeda suspects in Pakistan - British Pakistani Rashid Rauf, who has been implicated in at least one other alleged terror plot, and Baitullah Mahsud, the leader of Pakistan's Taliban movement who has promised attacks on the West in hate-filled pronouncements in recent weeks. So many UK terror suspects have links to Pakistan that thousands of innocent travelers between the two countries every year are now closely monitored for signs of suspicious activity. Latest estimates suggest 4,000 young British Muslims have been trained in terrorist camps in Pakistan, and with 400,000 British citizens visiting Pakistan each year, there are fears that many more will become radicalized".*

The Washington D.C. based think tank *The Heritage Foundation* in a November 2009 report titled *'The Pakistan-Britain Terror Connection: Lessons and Warnings for the United States'* warned that *"The Pakistan-Britain terror connection poses a serious threat to Great Britain and its allies, including the United States"*, and recommended a multi-front fight to break *"the personnel, financial, and ideological links"*. The report added that *"Many of the planned or successful Islamist attacks in Britain have been linked directly or indirectly to Pakistan. British authorities have acknowledged that the al-Qaeda network based in Pakistan poses the greatest terrorist threat to Britain. This threat includes both terrorist attacks and the financial and ideological networks that support and inspire attacks. For many years, the Pakistani State has minimized the danger that this threat posed to its neighbors, Western democracies, and its own existence"*. The report stressed that *"Breaking this terror connection between Pakistan and Britain is central to winning the war on terrorism. It would improve the security of Britain and its allies, including the United States. It would also enhance Pakistan's stability and the security of important American partners, including India. However, breaking the terror connection will require US-British cooperation in Afghanistan, a coordinated US-British policy toward Pakistan, and a wide-ranging set of reforms in Britain"*. The report quoted the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown as saying after the Mumbai attacks in November 2008 that *"three quarters of the most serious terrorism cases investigated by British police have links to al-Qaeda in Pakistan"*. The report highlighted that the threat from Pakistan was not restricted to the UK but also to the rest of the world *"because of the ease with which British citizens can travel from Britain to Europe, the US, or other nations"*.

The report further says, *"Because the links between Britain and al-Qaeda's stronghold in Pakistan are particularly close, disrupting them is of special importance in the war against terrorism... The problem is closely related to the continued existence of terrorist training camps in Pakistan, Pakistan's failure to break up terrorist networks on its own soil, and its ambivalence toward cracking down on Islamist extremists, who have served as assets to Pakistan in pursuing its regional security goals. Because Kashmir-focused terrorist groups, which intermingle and cooperate with al-Qaeda, have ties to Pakistan's security establishment, Pakistan has often acted half-heartedly against terrorist threats against Western targets. This ambivalence has damaged international efforts to combat terrorism. Pakistani security officials have been particularly reluctant to crack down on terrorist groups located on its territory that fight India, such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), because they believe these groups help to destabilize India and thus strengthen Pakistan's hand in bilateral discussions with India, especially in the dispute over Kashmir... An expert testifying before the*

*House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee noted that the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's intelligence service, was unhelpful in investigations into the London transport attacks on July 7, 2005, and had misdirected US and UK intelligence services on a number of recent occasions". The report recommended specific actions that the UK could take to guard against the terror threat emanating from Pakistan. Just as we have suggested earlier in this article, it also recommended steps that the UK could take jointly in conjunction with the US to pressurize Pakistan to mend its errant ways. The key prescription was that the UK and the US "adopt consistent policies toward Pakistan that hold the country's officials accountable for stopping all support to terrorists".*

More recently, as highlighted in EFSAS Commentary of 02-11-2018, [‘EU Election Observation Mission and Oxford University release critical reports on Pakistan’](#), Oxford University and the international think tank Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) in a report titled ‘*Humanity at Risk - Global Terror Threat Indicant (GTTI)*’ observed, “*If we look at the most dangerous terrorist groups, based on hard facts and statistics, we find that Pakistan hosts or aids majority of them. Also, there are a significant number of groups based in Afghanistan, which operate with the support of Pakistan. Thus, Pakistan is responsible for 3 times the terror risk to humanity that Syria poses, or more than 5 times the risk that Libya poses, and 7 times the risk that Iraq poses*”. The report contends that “*in Pakistan, an interdependent relationship between state institutions and terrorist groups has grown over the years, in a manner much more transparent than the safe house in Abbottabad (where Osama Bin Laden was sheltered). The risk of the capture of nuclear weapons by terrorist groups cannot be ruled out in the long run, unless all infrastructure of terror is demolished, and the psychology of terror is addressed constructively. Pakistan has specific grievances with India and Afghanistan. But to infest its entire neighbourhood with terrorism allowing it to spread across the world through ideology, manpower and dark net, not ruling out the risk of the capture of its state and strategic assets, is placing humanity at risk for narrow gains*”. Further, “*If a state uses terrorist groups for its geo-political objectives, the consequences are not limited to its intended target areas. As the terrorist groups gain strength from state support, they are able to use their man power and resources to spread their power to different parts of the world and to seek an edge over other terrorist groups*”. The report aptly concludes that “*it is time for the international community to act in concert to demolish the infrastructure of terror*”.

That terror linkage of its citizens to Pakistan continues to hold serious dangers for the UK as demonstrated afresh by the London Bridge attack implies that not much has been achieved over the last decade and a half by the UK and the rest of the international community in getting Pakistan to act against terror. The repeated cautions, from various quarters, about the gravity and scope of the threat to the UK and the rest of the world that Pakistan’s dynamic terrorist infrastructure poses appear not to have been heeded adequately.

## Who was Usman Khan?

A UK-born terrorist whose family hailed from Pakistan-Administered Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), 28-year-old Usman Khan had dropped out of school in the UK without earning any credentials. He spent his late teens in Pakistan, where he lived with his mother who had taken ill. He returned to the UK indoctrinated, and began preaching radical Islam on the internet. He attracted a significant following. At 19, Usman joined an Al-Qaeda inspired group of nine men from Stoke-on-Trent who took an active part in the local branch of al-Mujahiroun, a militant Salafi outfit that counted radical preacher of Pakistani origin Anjem Choudary among its ranks. The group was planning to set up a terrorist training camp, under the guise of a madrassa, in Pakistan-Administered J&K on land owned by Usman's family. They planned to train terrorists at this facility for undertaking terrorist attacks in Indian-Administered J&K. After gaining experience there, the group intended to redirect the trained terrorists to launch attacks in the UK.

Before Usman's planned departure for Pakistan in 2012 to set up the training camp there, British security services overheard him discussing how to use an Al-Qaeda manual to build a pipe bomb. The British services linked this to other intelligence they had about a plot to bomb the London Stock Exchange and the US Embassy in London. Usman was arrested, and he revealed details of other plots that he and the groups he was involved with were hatching, including a Mumbai-style attack on the UK parliament; attacking then-London mayor Boris Johnson, the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and two Rabbis; sending letter bombs; attacking pubs used by far-right British groups; and attacking a high-profile target with an explosive device.

At his trial, the then 20-year-old Usman pleaded guilty to engaging in conduct for the preparation of terrorism, which included travelling to and attending operational meetings, fundraising for terror training, preparing to travel abroad and assisting others in travelling abroad. British judge Alan Wilkie said when he sentenced Khan in 2012 that the Stoke group *"was, and was considered to be, pre-eminent"*, and that *"They regarded themselves as more serious jihadis than the others. It was envisaged by them all that ultimately they, and the other recruits, may return to the UK (from Pakistan) as trained and experienced terrorists available to perform terrorist attacks in this country"*. On Usman, the judge observed that *"The long, monitored, discussions of Usman Khan about the madrassa (and training camp in Pakistan) and his attitudes towards it and terrorism are highly eloquent of the seriousness of their purpose"*. Judge Wilkie added that Usman was on a *"more long-term and sustained path"* and would try to recruit and train *"more serious and effective terrorists"* to wreak mayhem in the UK.

While sentencing Usman, Judge Wilkie said that Khan was so dangerous that he was imposing a so-called imprisonment for public protection (IPP) indeterminate sentence of eight years. That meant he would remain incarcerated as long as he was considered to be a danger to the public and that the Parole Board needed to assess whether he should be released. However, the then Prime Minister David Cameron announced a review of the IPP sentencing, and it was abolished in 2012. Usman appealed his sentence, and in view of the scrapping of the IPP, appeal court judges in 2013 quashed the indeterminate period of incarceration and Usman

was handed a determinate sentence of 16 years, which meant that he could be released after serving just half of his term. He spent more than a year on remand, followed by seven years in prison after sentencing, and was released in December 2018. The Parole Board said that it did not have any role in the decision on Khan's release as he *“appears to have been released automatically on licence (parole), without ever being referred to the Board”*.

After leaving prison, Usman joined a programme run by Cambridge University's Institute of Criminology called *Learning Together* that aims to rehabilitate prisoners with workshops on storytelling. Still under monitoring via an electronic tag, Usman obtained special permission from probation officials to attend a *Learning Together* event on 29 November at Fishmongers' Hall in London Bridge. He attended the morning session of the event and spoke at various workshops on his experiences in prison. At about 2 p.m., he embarked on a knife attack that lasted just about 5 minutes but left two innocents dead and three seriously wounded. Usman wore a fake suicide bomb vest, which he threatened to blow up when the police arrived on the scene. He was, however, overpowered by some brave members of the public and eventually shot dead by the police. The Metropolitan Police said, *“We believe that the attack began inside before he left the building and proceeded onto London Bridge, where he was detained and subsequently confronted and shot by armed officers”*.

After the initial shock of the attack and the grief for the hapless victims had subsided, an air of incredulity gripped the UK. How a convicted terrorist, ostensibly under monitoring by the State while on parole, could be afforded the freedom and opportunity to carry out a grisly and mindless attack in the very heart of London baffled observers. As Kyle Orton, a British terrorism researcher, said, it was *“impossible to argue that (Usman) shouldn't have been in prison. He was so obviously a dangerous person... Keeping jihadists off the streets is preferable to trusting in half-baked reformation”*.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson called a meeting of the government's emergency response committee, known as Cobra, on the evening of the attack. Even he, prior to that meeting, asserted that it has consistently been his stand that it was a *“mistake to allow serious and violent criminals to come out of prison early and it is very important that we get out of that habit and that we enforce the appropriate sentences for dangerous criminals, especially for terrorists, that ... the public will want to see”*.

### Reaction in Pakistan

Beleaguered by the country's image being severely tarnished in recent years over its permissive policy towards terrorism, and mindful of the hawk-like gaze of the Financial Action Task Force upon it, the Pakistani military establishment is also conscious that it has been losing credibility within the country due to its ineffectiveness on the J&K issue and its emerging thus far in second place in its ongoing tussle with the country's higher judiciary. The establishment, nursing a few tender wounds already, did not take kindly to the country's prominent *Dawn* daily stating what was an undeniable fact when it described Usman Khan as a British citizen of Pakistani origin. The Pakistani roots of an Usman Khan arriving with crisp Pound notes to set up a terrorist training camp for fresh, green-eared British terrorist recruits

would have been welcomed and celebrated by the establishment, but being linked to terrorism yet again through a dead Usman, even if by his very same origins, proved to be unpalatable for it. The establishment deemed the *Dawn's* reference to Usman's Pakistani roots as unpatriotic and defamatory.

Shouting "*Long Live Pakistan Army, Death to Dawn*", the scores of angry and violent protesters who pounced on the office of the *Dawn* in Islamabad on the evening of 2 December did not leave much doubt as to who was behind the protest. The protesters surrounded the *Dawn* office, physically assaulted employees of the newspaper, and threatened them with death. Protesters also gathered at the Press Club in Karachi holding placards calling for *Dawn* editor Zaffar Abbas and publisher Hameed Haroon to be hanged. Iqbal Khattak, the head of Freedom Network, a Pakistani press freedom watchdog, believes that the protests seemed pre-planned. He said, "*This incident was really dangerous. Journalists in Pakistan need to ask the government to investigate the matter and ask, 'who these people were' and 'what their issue is'. It seems like the mob was staged*".

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) was less guarded. Urging Pakistan's Ministries of Human Rights and Information to address the situation, the Commission tweeted that "*HRCP has received alarming reports that access to @dawn\_com's office in Islamabad is being blocked by protestors shouting pro-army slogans. We are seriously concerned about the security of Dawn's personnel and urge @mohrpakistan and @MoIB\_Official to take immediate action*". Senator Usman Kakar of the opposition Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami party, who is also a member of the Pakistani Senate's Standing Committee on Human Rights, also pointed a straight finger at the establishment. He said, "*This issue needs to be brought up and discussed in the Senate. Media (in Pakistan) is scrutinized and under a lot of pressure...they are afraid of the establishment*".

Amidst all the frenzy over Usman's roots and the concerted campaign to completely disown him, the international media reported at the end of the first week of December that Usman's body had been brought to Islamabad from London. Abdul Hafeez, General Manager (Public Relations) of Pakistan International Airlines, was quoted as saying that upon arrival in Islamabad, the body was handed over to members of Usman's family on 6 December. They took the body to Usman's ancestral village of Kotli in Pakistan-Administered J&K, where his funeral was held and he was buried.

## Conclusion

The close ties to Pakistan that Rangzieb Ahmed and Usman Khan had, as indeed a host of other British terrorists like Ahmed Omar Saeed and ideologues like Anjem Choudary did, have been brought out above.

The reality confronting the UK is that it is doomed, by virtue its own vast number of unmoored, disenchanting youth of Pakistani origin who have relatively easy access and entry into the fecund industry of terror that thrives in Pakistan under the cocooning and comforting

embrace of the military establishment, to be the target and casualty of sporadic terrorist attacks of varying intensity that are all linked to Pakistan in one way or another.

The hard fact for the UK is that unless Pakistan is forced to relent, unless its soil no longer remains a fertile breeding ground for terror that Pakistani-British youth get drawn to and have access to, terror clouds will continue to hover precariously low over the UK. If unilateral efforts fall short, the UK must use its considerable influence in the international domain to collectively clamp down on Pakistan and make it unfeasible and unsustainable for the country to continue sponsoring terrorism.

Garnering international support should not be very difficult in a milieu where most western governments, led by the US, have in recent years been highly critical of Pakistan's support to terrorism. Public opinion in these countries is also not lagging behind, as was demonstrated at a rally held outside the Pakistan Embassy in Washington on 8 December in which American veterans of the Afghan war and congressional candidates joined a mass of protesters against Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and held up placards containing statements and slogans such as *'Pakistan has been involved in more than 90 per cent of all terror attack that has happened in the past 20 years within the United States'*.

The groundswell, therefore, exists for the UK to capitalize upon.