



THE 'TALIBANIZATION' OF PAKISTAN'S BIGGEST CITY

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KARACHI, Pakistan – In the back of a jeep driving through Karachi, a sign on the wall of the city's famous "Village Restaurant" caught my eye. It was just a little piece of frayed white paper plastered next to the restaurant's much bigger logo, tempting customers to "Experience the Exotic of Traditional Dining."

But the printed sign expressed an increasingly urgent plea in this teeming port city, once Pakistan's capital: "Save your city from Talibanization," it said in English.

But could the Taliban really be taking over Karachi? Karachi is Pakistan's biggest city, far from the lawless tribal hinterland along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Out there, Taliban and al-Qaida militants have carved out an independent state. In the mountains, militants have their own courts and even issue licenses to local business. Last week in the tribal area, the Taliban publicly executed a group accused of murders. In another village square, they flogged several butchers for allegedly selling the meat of sick animals. That is Taliban justice.

U.S. military and intelligence officials consider that border area to be the world's biggest, most dangerous safe haven for Taliban and al-Qaida fighters. Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar and nearly all of their deputies have been based, and may still be based, in this often impassible mountain terrain.

But I was in Karachi, a giant city on the Indian Ocean. If Karachi is being 'Talibanized,' Pakistan is in real trouble, and so is everyone else.

Growing radicalism

Karachi has a history of Islamic radicalism. Wall Street Journal correspondent [Daniel Pearl](#) was kidnapped in front of the Village Restaurant in 2002. Pearl had been meeting contacts here. They were supposed to help him investigate Richard Reid, the "Shoe Bomber" who tried to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris in December 2001.

But Pearl's meeting was a set up. The "contacts" turned out to be fanatic militants who kidnapped and beheaded him. I was about to discover the radicals' presence in this city appears to have grown since then.

Traveling in Karachi is both overwhelming and exhausting. It is a colorful, chaotic and undeniably dirty city. Flocks of vultures circle the sky all day. Trash lines many of the streets. As we drove from the Village Restaurant, our jeep darted around swarms of motorcycles, pickup trucks, rickshaws and even a sad looking camel pulling a cart stacked with barrels.



An empty street in Karachi, Pakistan.

We were headed to a neighborhood in west Karachi where I had been told al-Qaida and Taliban militants had established a safe haven. Many Pakistanis make little distinction between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Both want to destabilize Pakistan and Afghanistan, establish an even bigger base of operations and spread their aggressive, intolerant vision of Islamic law.

The majority of people in Karachi want no part of it. Karachi is Pakistan's cultural capital, the center of the nation's fashion, high-tech and media industries. But that Karachi is under siege.

After about 30 minutes in traffic, our jeep arrived at the office of a local contact in a slum in west Karachi. Fearing for his safety, he didn't want to be identified. I'll call him Malik. He would take us deep into the alleys on the outskirts of Karachi, a neighborhood filled with brick homes built around cliffs and marble quarries. It would be unwise, Malik said, to venture in alone.

"It is too dangerous," he said. "The Taliban have their checkpoints, bunkers and snipers. At night, they patrol, sometimes on horses. They are always coming out with their weapons and RPGs intimidating people."

Malik said radicals have been flooding into Karachi since this spring, moving in from the border region. The border region is now a warzone, under attack by the Pakistani military and, controversially here, by U.S. drones and Special Operations Forces (SOF) that carry out raids from bases in neighboring Afghanistan.

The Pakistani and U.S. military offensives have killed hundreds of militants, but scattered many more. Increasingly, they are settling in Karachi. Estimates of Karachi's population range from 12 to 18 million. The lack of accountability makes the city a great place to hide, unless you look like I did as I descended from the jeep dressed in khakis and a blue shirt.

Malik and I were standing in front of one of west Karachi's madrassas, a traditional Islamic school for boys.

"Are there any students inside," I asked a guard. He stared back at me blankly. In less than a minute there were about 15 people around us. Several appeared to be madrassa students who had come out to see what a foreigner could possibly want from them.

"Are you all students at the madrassa?" I asked. A few said they were.

'God willing, we will fight them'

Many Pakistanis attend madrassas because they offer free education, supplementing the government's lacking public school system. For centuries madrassas were the only form of education in the Islamic world. From Morocco to Indonesia, most madrassas have a similar layout, with a mosque at the center and classrooms upstairs. The vast majority of madrassas are moderate charities that teach religious values, the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed.

But some madrassas in Pakistan have churned out suicide bombers indoctrinated in jihad and a paranoid but widespread philosophy that they must attack innocent civilians to defend their faith from the United States, Israel and other modern-day "crusaders."

Former President Pervez Musharraf promised to reform and regulate Pakistan's hard-line madrassas. It never happened. According to Karachi's former mayor Farooq Sattar, there are now more than 2,000 illegal madrassas in Karachi alone. This was one of them.

"What do you think of the Taliban and their influence here?" I asked the students.

More blank stares.

"What do you think about the U.S. incursions?"

That got a reaction.

"God willing, we will fight them," said one teenager with a purple scar on his chin. "They are the enemy," he said and launched into a long explanation of America's goal to occupy Muslim lands and undermine Islam. I've heard the same speech from Cairo to Lebanon, Baghdad to Riyadh. God bless the Internet.

A few minutes later my driver/fixer, a very tough guy from a very tough part of Pakistan, tapped me on the shoulder.

"I think you have been here long enough," he said. It was time to go.

But I still hadn't seen any Taliban.

Malik suggested we go deeper into the slum, to the neighborhood right under the cliffs and quarries. He was nervous about taking a foreigner, but had an idea. There was a graveyard in the area.

"We can pretend to be offering prayers for the dead," Malik suggested. "I'll pray over one of the graves and you can see the neighborhood for yourself."

Malik said praying at a gravesite would give us an excuse to be in the area and raise less suspicion.

'You should not be here'

It didn't exactly work. As soon as I stepped out of the jeep by the gravestones, I was again surrounded by a group of people. They didn't have weapons or appear threatening, but didn't attempt to hide their sympathies for the Taliban. One man proudly told me several suicide bombers had prayed in a nearby mosque.

But others were scared of the Taliban. A man who spoke English told me the Taliban were in control of the area.

"Do the Pakistani police or soldiers ever come here?" I asked him. "No, they can't come here."

"How do people feel here?"

"We are all frightened. The Taliban has taken over."

More men, athletically built in their 20s and 30s, started to arrive.

"Who are these people?" I asked the English speaker.

"They are Taliban."

"Do they understand what we are saying? Do they understand English?"

"No, but you shouldn't stay here. It is not comfortable here. You should not be here."

"Who runs this neighborhood?"

"They do."

The new arrivals didn't want to be interviewed.

"Stop asking them questions," the English speaker advised.

We left a few minutes later.

"We couldn't come here at night," Malik said as we were driving out of the neighborhood. "Now we had an excuse to come to the graveyard. But at night, there would be no reason to be here."

'It's sad'

Driving back to the hotel, I kept thinking how a neighborhood in Karachi could be so tense and apparently

out of control. In less than two hours, and without any prior arrangements, we'd managed to get to an area full of Taliban supporters and where many locals were clearly terrified.

As I walked back to my hotel room, I passed an old man in the hallway.

"I didn't know you people were still coming here," he said. By "you people" I assumed he meant foreigners.

"Yes, a few. Not many of us," I admitted.

"I didn't think anyone would be coming anymore," he added, saying he was upset by the [bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad](#), one of the centers of social life for Pakistan's shrinking expatriate community.

"It's sad," he said. "It's sad it's come to this."

"Yes, it's sad," I agreed.