

Education As A Threat
The End of Borders

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Peshawar, Pakistan. December 16, 2014. 132 students killed at the Army Public School and Degree College. 145 people total murdered.

Two years prior – almost to the day – on December 14, 2012, our entire country was devastated by the unconscionable killing of 20 students and 6 staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

Unfortunately, for Pakistan, the barrage of such devastation has become nearly constant. Students and schools are victims of tragedies like Sandy Hook over and over again.

Consider the following timeline of terror attacks targeting students and schools in Pakistan:

November 2014: Two people killed and another injured in a bomb attack on a school bus in the Nisti Kot area of the Upper Kurram tribal district.

October 2014: A girls' school in Pakistan has been blown up by terrorists. The unidentified terrorists attacked the government girls' primary school with explosives in Hakim Khan Keley village in the Bara area of Khyber district.

September 2014: Suspected terrorists blew up a government girls' primary school in the border area in Nawagai tehsil.

January 2014: A suicide bomber has blown himself up outside a government school in northwest Pakistan, killing a teenage boy and another person.

September 2013: Bomb attack At Pakistani Girls School. A bomb has exploded outside a girls' school in the northwestern town of Bannu, wounding 14 people.

June 2013: At least 14 people were killed and 28 injured in an attack on a Shiite religious school in northwestern Pakistan.

October 2012: Malala Yousafzai was shot at by Taliban militants while she was boarding her school bus in northwest Pakistani district of Swat.

September 2011: Pakistan school bus attack kills teacher and three children. Islamist gunmen target bus near city of Peshawar.

December 2010: Suspected militants targeted a school bus with a roadside bomb in northwestern Pakistani city, killing its driver and injuring two students.

April 2009: 12 children were killed when a bomb hidden in a football, left near the compound wall of a girls' school in Dir, west of Swat Valley, exploded.

March 2009: The Government Girls' Higher Secondary School in Hathian village, Mardan, was bombed. On 23 March, a rocket hit the courtyard of FG Girls' High School in Peshawar; it was launched from nearby hills.

March 2009: A suicide bomber attacked a girls' school in Baluchistan, eastern Pakistan.

February 2009: A girls' schools in Mardan District, north-east of Peshawar, was attacked.

January 2009: A government-run girls' middle school was blown up in Qambar, a suburb of Mingora, Swat.

August 2002: Six killed at Pakistan missionary school. Six Pakistanis were killed and at least three people wounded when masked gunmen burst into the compound of a school for children of foreign missionaries near the town of Murree. (source: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/major-terror-attacks-on-schools-in-pakistan/518380-56.html>)

Incomprehensible.

Worse, the list of the fifteen attacks is incomplete and does not begin to tell the whole story. Yes, incomprehensible, but there were more.

International aid groups report that at least 1,000 schools have been attacked in Pakistan since 2009 (source: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/more-than-1000-schools-in-pakistan-have-been-attacked-by-the#.reJB9ppkxk>).

The trend of terrorists targeting students and schools is not isolated to Pakistan.

Look at Nigeria. In April 2014, Boko Haram (whose name is loosely translated to “Western education is forbidden”) kidnapped 276 school girls in Chibok. Most of the students remain missing.

The kidnapped school girls’ story received a lot of media attention. Countless other stories involving students and schools in Nigeria have not. For example, in November 2014, a suicide bombing killed at least 58 people at a boys’ school in Potiskum. Forty students were killed at a boarding school in Buni Yadi in February 2014. In January 2014, two secondary school teachers were killed in Maiduguri by suspected Islamic extremists. As students were sleeping in a college dormitory in September 2013 in a rural Nigerian town, gunmen opened fire and killed at least 40 students (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/29/world/africa/nigeria-college-attack/index.html>). In July 2013, 42 students in Yobe state were attacked in their dormitories. The *Washington Post*

published an article just a couple of days ago that referenced that Boko Haram has begun to use schools and dormitories as staging areas for filming their propaganda

(http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/boko-haram-releases-video-of-extremists-killing-civilians/2014/12/21/8549fcd4-8954-11e4-a085-34e9b9f09a58_story.html).

Then there is Syria. Over 80 people were killed in January 2013 at Aleppo University in Syria on the students' first exam day. Although I could not find any definitive conclusion in terms of claimed responsibility for the attack, I think it's fair to say that – whoever was responsible – it was not by chance or accident. The attack was on students at school.

Enter Israel. In April 2011, an Israeli school bus was attacked by Hamas. A 16-year-old student was killed.

In terms of scale, the Peshawar attack has been compared to the Beslan, Russia attack in September 2004. Three hundred eight-five people, hundreds of them students, died during the three day massacre at School Number One (source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beslan_school_hostage_crisis).

The list is growing and the world should take notice. These incidents are not random. Students and schools are definite targets of terrorists.

According to a recent article in *The Atlantic* (source:

<http://m.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/12/terrorist-attacks-on-schools-have-soared-in-the-past-10-years/383825/>), the Global Terrorism Database reports that there have been 213 terrorist attacks on educational institutions in Thailand since 2004. Afghanistan and Iraq have had 205 and 184 such attacks respectively.

About six years ago, I began saving articles about terrorist attacks on students and schools that I came across during the daily browsing of newspapers and news sites and stuffed them into a folder. I did so because my hunch told me that a disturbing trend was emerging. With every headline, I found myself growing increasingly concerned that the media, politicians, and others did not appear to be connecting the dots. At last, the referenced article in *The Atlantic* makes an attempt.

The following quote from a CNN article on ISIS is telling, “For us, there is no such thing as borders. There are only front lines.” (source:

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/22/world/meast/inside-isis-juergen-todenhoefer/index.html>) In my opinion, the quote captures the new mindset of terrorist groups. To them, there are no borders.

To them, students and schools are not off-limits.

I imagine there was a time when there was an imaginary border surrounding places where young, innocent children learned and played that even the most barbaric of terrorists didn't dare to cross. Clearly, that time is over.

What is the reason behind this trend?

Well, the answer could be an entire dissertation but I think one reason is the Information Age. The world has grown in leaps and bounds during the Information Age. During the Information Age, more and more world citizens are becoming wired, connected, and, yes, educated. As a result, the terrorists are becoming – themselves – increasingly threatened.

Education is a direct threat to the terrorists and they know it.

This of course is not the most joyous of messages to share at this time of year. However, this time of year is always a good time to take inventory of what is important and to make resolutions for the New Year. It is a good time to get “the house” and health in order. And it is a good time to reflect on blessings and not take things for granted.

In order to get our house in order and to reflect on our most precious of blessings, we need to think about the unthinkable. Never might seem like a good time to think about the trend but we really need to. Students and schools are not off-limits.

To terrorists, there are no borders. Is our country ready if the trend expands to America? Now is a good time to take inventory. What kinds of new security measures have been implemented to protect students and schools that were not in-place prior to the emerging trend of terrorists attacking students and schools? If we cannot answer these questions with confidence and certainty, there is work to be done. Do we need to adjust our resources, preparation, and action just as terrorists have seemed to adjust their “borders”? If so, it seems those adjustments would make good resolutions. Have we taken things for granted? If so, what could and should we do differently? When we think about the trend and assess the places where young, innocent children learn and play across this country, we should ask ourselves: Is our house in order?

If not, then what?

We live in an age without borders. We have to do everything possible and reasonable to protect students and schools. We have to protect education.

Education is a direct threat to terrorists and is, quite possibly, our best defense.

More so than ever before, education does not have borders. Let the power of teaching and learning expand everywhere.

Let there be peace on Earth.