What makes the Time Square bomber different from other Pakistani terrorists

By Ahmed Rashid

LAHORE - By all accounts and even by Pakistan's grim roster of terrorist bombers Faisal Shahzad is an extraordinary militant. He is also Pakistan's first global jihadist.

We are still learning details about the man, but we already know his basic profile.

He had spent 10 years in the United States gaining a bachelor's and then a masters degree in business studies. He worked as a financial analyst at a U.S. financial marketing services company. He was married with two children. He is a U.S. citizen.

But what is truly extraordinary, from a Pakistani perspective, is that he belongs to this country's true blue-blooded "establishment" — his father is a retired Air Vice Marshal of the Pakistan Air Force, who lived quietly in a suburb of Peshawar until Tuesday when he packed up his family and left the house for a secret destination to escape the press pack outside.

The military has ruled Pakistan for half its existence and the sons and daughters of many senior officers have especially benefited from U.S. largesse to win scholarships in the U.S. and then settle down there. They never seem to have problems gaining green cards or citizenship. But then they are mostly professionals who never dabble in Islamic militancy.

Even for Shahzad, from what we now know, there is no record of extreme religiosity in his family, nor did he hang out with militant groups, nor attend noted militant mosques in Karachi where he spent five months last year. In his youth he never attended a madrassa (religious school) nor did anything that would appear to arouse suspicion that he was planning to plant a car bomb in the middle of New York.

The fact that his father belonged to the country's ruling elite helped provide a cover that made it virtually impossible to detect his terrorist activities. Claims by American interrogators in the past 48 hours that Shahzad had received weapons and bomb making training in the Pakistan's violent north west was obviously so quietly done that nobody, not even his family seems to have cottoned on.

The fact that he was determined to set off a bomb in the U.S. rather than in Pakistan or in Afghanistan where Westerners have been recruited as suicide bombers makes him Pakistan's first global jihadist. In other words someone who is willing to carry out jihad world wide and the basis of Al Qaeda's beliefs.

The implications for Pakistan are immense. If Shahzad is found to have been trained in bomb-making in two distinct areas, U.S.-Pakistan relations are likely to sour dramatically for the Pakistanis have so far refused to combat terrorism emanating from these two sources.

The first is a geographical region — North Waziristan — a tribal region of high mountains and thick forests bordering Afghanistan and one of seven tribal agencies where the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, Al Qaeda and dozens of other groups have taken refuge since 2001.

In the past two years the army has carried out sweep and destroy operations in six of these agencies, but has left alone North Waziristan, partly because several key Afghan Taliban leaders who have received clandestine support from the Pakistan military in the past are hunkered down there.

The problem now is that North Waziristan has become the major terrorist hub for dozens of other groups including the Pakistani Taliban, who while escaping the military's offensives in other tribal agencies, have all conglomerated in North Waziristan.

Central Asians, Chechens, Arabs and Kashmiris are also holed up there. The U.S. has pursued them with repeated drone missile strikes killing hundreds of militants and some leaders and it has repeatedly urged Pakistan to carry out an offensive there, but so far the military has resisted.

If a car bomb placed in Times Square is traced back to Shahzad receiving training in North Waziristan from any one of these groups, the U.S. will be obliged to put enormous pressure on the Pakistan military to do something about this terrorist haven.

The second source is a group — Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT), which is centered in Lahore the second largest city in the country and the capital of Punjab province, the largest, wealthiest and perhaps safest area in the country.

LT carried out the bloody Mumbai massacre in November 2008 which killed 166 Indians and wounded hundreds more. Established in the 1980s by Pakistan's intelligence services LT has always targeted India and Indians — part of the proxy war that the two countries have waged for the past half century.

But in recent years LT has hooked up with Al Qaeda and other militant groups facilitating their global jihad and it has expanded its wings to recruit in the US and Europe. The U.S. and India insist that the government rein in LT, but so far the army has declined to clamp down on it because it is still seen as a useful foil against India.

If Shahzad had anything to do with LT, this will translate into enormous pressure on Pakistan to move against LT. The car bomb in NYC luckily failed to explode, but if the quiet "establishment" terrorist is found to be linked to either North Waziristan or LT, Pakistan will face explosive pressure from the U.S. to do something about these untouched sources of terrorism.

Rashid is author of the books "Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia" and "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," which was jus reissued on the 10th anniversary of its publication with an update covering recent events.