

Analysis: Homegrown terror or international jihad?

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The financial and commercial heart of India is reeling from the worst series of terrorist attacks in its history.

The well-coordinated attacks simultaneously targeted two of the city's best-known hotels, a railway station and a number of tourists' landmarks.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the Deccan Mujahideen, a previously unknown group, claimed responsibility. This group is apparently linked with another relatively new and previously unknown terrorist organization, the Indian Mujahideen (IM), a splinter group of the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).

The IM, a local radical Islamist organization, had already claimed responsibility for the 2007 Uttar Pradesh bombings and the May 2008 attacks in Jaipur. The group's activities had increased dramatically in the past six months, with over four attacks in as many major Indian cities that claimed the lives of over 140 people.

IM's previous attacks, just as in the Mumbai bombings, had consisted of a series of coordinated, simultaneous blasts aimed at causing the maximum amount chaos and the highest number of casualties. A senior officer of the Indian Police Service, briefing the parliament on the group's September 2008 attack in Delhi, clearly stated: "This group... doesn't attack parliament or police stations. They go directly for maximum chaos and maximum financial damage."

Furthermore, the possibility of a link between the IM and the Deccan Mujahideen is strengthened by the fact that the IM had itself, following the Delhi blasts, threatened to hit Mumbai in its next operation. Also, in October 2008, Indian Intelligence had warned that the IM was regrouping despite the massive campaign that local authorities had launched against the group in the aftermath of the bombings.

In fact, only two weeks after the warning, another series of deadly blasts occurred in Assam on October 31. On that occasion, the Islamic Student Federation-Indian Mujahideen (ISF-IM) claimed responsibility, but it is highly likely that this previously unknown group was either an IM front or a splinter cell of the organization - and a similar claim can be made about the Deccan Mujahideen.

In this sense, the Mumbai attacks seem to confirm this "local connection," as well as the rising trend of homegrown radical Salafists in India.

However, the highly coordinated and planned nature of the attacks, as well as the terrorists' modus operandi, also suggest the existence of a strong international connection between the IM and international as well as regional terrorist groups.

First, according to Indian authorities, the IM have links with both the Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI), and the Pakistan-based Laskar e Taiyyaba (which is in turn suspected being connected with the Pakistani Intelligence Services, ISI).

Accordingly, HuJI has been providing IM with operational support and training. For instance, in July 2008, the Indian police discovered a number of bombs with integrated circuits in the West Indian city of Surat, foiling an IM plot and supporting the notion that the group had foreign connections. In fact the use of integrated circuit chip bombs is a trademark of Indonesia's al-Qaida proxy, Jemaah Islamiyah - and it is likely that the Indian militants obtained this technology through HuJI. Moreover, IM also has operational and logistic connections with Laskar e Taiyyaba, a Jihadist group active in Kashmir which in turn has very close to al-Qaida.

Additionally, the modus operandi and target choice of the local terrorist group in Mumbai also seem to confirm the existence of international support and training in the preparation of the attacks, if not direct assistance.

Although the previous terrorist attacks of IM had also been highly coordinated and planned, and aimed at obtaining the maximum number of casualties, the Mumbai operation was qualitatively more sophisticated and deadly and shared several characteristics of al-Qaida's operational strategy. The choice of targets, the deliberate decision to hit and kill the maximum number of western citizens, the simultaneous use of suicide missions as well as hostage-taking, all reveal the existence of a complex and internationally-oriented agenda behind the attacks. Also, the attacks employed the same logic as that behind the 2002 bombings in Bali - hit soft targets like tourist spots and hotels to maximize the number of western casualties.

Finally, the attacks have both an international as well as a regional agenda. On the international front, the timing of the attack strengthens the al-Qaida-connection hypothesis, as western intelligence had been expecting an al-Qaida attack in the transition period between the end of President Bush's presidency and the beginning of the mandate of President-elect Barack Obama. In this sense the bombings could be seen as part of a power projection strategy directed towards the newly elected administration in the US.

Moreover, regionally, the attacks could be seen as an attempt to stall any significant negotiations between India and Pakistan, especially given the latter's failure to take action against Lashkar-i Toiba and other groups which have been backing terrorism in India, as well as groups like the IM.

Therefore security agencies should be worried about the existence of a well-organized, locally based Indian group with an al-Qaida-inspired agenda.

Furthermore, although it is uncertain whether the group is a new al-Qaida ally, proxy, or "franchise" group in the Indian sub-continent, it is clear that the terrorist organization has received assistance and backing from al-Qaida-affiliated organizations and has adopted an international Jihadist agenda.

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