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Al Qaeda's Latest Bid to Woo India's Muslims

Al Qaeda has struggled in the past to gain the support of India's vast Muslim population. But that's gradually changing, warns Animesh Roul. Today, he outlines how the fragmented organization is trying to attract money and manpower from the third largest Muslim community on the planet.

By Animesh Roul for ISN

Al Qaeda has recently renewed its efforts to gain a foothold within India's 176 million-strong Muslim community. In June 2013, Maulana Asim Umar, a senior Al Qaeda ideologue, released [why there is no storm in your ocean](#), a video that calls on the country's Muslims to join the global jihad. Two months later, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri issued specific guidelines for [Jihad and Dawa](#) that endorsed the right of militants to fight Indians in Kashmir. The messages were released against a backdrop of growing Islamist extremism in India spearheaded by the Indian Mujahideen (IM). Worse still, the captured leader of Indian Mujahideen (IM), recently revealed to interrogators his organization's plans to join ranks with Al Qaeda for operations inside India.

Al Qaeda's India fixation

Three pivotal issues make India a prime target for Al Qaeda: the country's ties with the United States and Israel, the Kashmir question and New Delhi's strategic interests in Afghanistan. In this respect, the organization began to ramp up its rhetoric against the country in 2006. In April of that year, al-Zawahiri released a video message praising Islamist activities in the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir. This was followed in August 2007 by a video featuring Adam Yahya Gadahn, an Al Qaeda operative of American descent, in which he labeled India's overseas interests and diplomatic missions as 'legitimate targets'.

Al Qaeda's first message aimed specifically at India came in February 2009, when Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, the organization's alleged financial chief, warned New Delhi of violent consequences in the event of an attack on neighboring Pakistan. The following year, Ilyas Kashmiri of Al Qaeda's 313 Brigade threatened to strike against international sporting events in India, most notably the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi. And prior to the most recent messages, in September 2012 Ahmad Farooq, a member of Al Qaeda and the Harkat ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI), warned India that its alleged atrocities in Assam may garner a suitably violent response.

Lone wolves under the influence

Yet, despite all the rhetoric, Al Qaeda has struggled to establish a presence within India and has instead relied upon Pakistani and Bangladesh-based affiliates and entities such as Lashkar- e-Taiba,

Jaish-e-Muhammad and Hujl to advance its cause. This, in turn, reflects that the organization's anti-Indian rhetoric and calls for global Jihad have by and large failed to resonate with the country's Muslim population. But that's not to say that all of India's Muslims have failed to connect with Al Qaeda's messages.

Four individuals of Indian origin help to explain why New Delhi should not become complacent over the perceived lack of interest in Al Qaeda's ideology. Dhiren Barot (aka Abu Musa al-Hindi) is a British citizen of Indian origin who plotted bomb attacks against the New York Stock Exchange, International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Haroon Rashid Aswat, another Indian with a British passport, was a self-proclaimed hitman for Osama bin Laden and allegedly a key figure in the July 2005 attacks in London. Bangalore-born Kafeel Ahmed, who was involved in the June 2007 attack on Glasgow International Airport attack plot, was a known follower of Al Qaeda. And finally, Mohammad Niaz Raseed, a member of the outlawed Student Islamic Movement of India ([SIMI](#)), was recently [sentenced to eight years](#) in prison by the Paris Criminal Court for plotting a series of terrorist attacks.

Courting the homegrown

These seemingly isolated cases notwithstanding, many SIMI and IM leaders in India have also been vocal in their support of Al Qaeda. Both organizations are, for example, committed to spreading Islam, the creation of a global Ummah, waging Jihad and establishing "God's government" in accordance with Quranic tenets. However, their efforts have often been limited to the distribution of audio cassettes of Bin Laden's speeches or Jihadist videos. But this began to change after 9/11. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, SIMI organized anti-US demonstrations across India.

Since 2007, the Indian Mujahideen has claimed responsibility for a string of terrorist attacks across India, with a series of attacks on court buildings in the state of Uttar Pradesh among the most spectacular. After a series of bombings across India in 2008, the IM kept a low profile for a year, only to resurface with an attack on a bakery in Pune that was popular with foreign nationals. Since then, the organization has struck intermittently across India, primarily targeting religious sites, court buildings, markets and business centers. The IM's most recent attacks occurred in February and July 2013, when the group claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in Hyderabad and against the Bodh Gaya temple in Bihar.

Terror attacks have increasingly been accompanied by propaganda. Like Al Qaeda, the IM has also made calls for greater international support for its cause. In its September 2010 publication 'As We Bleed, So You Will You Seep', it urges the global Ummah to recognize that 'Hindus are recklessly killing your brothers and sisters'. Published several months later, 'Let's Feel the Pain Together' uses similarly dramatic language to outline the suppression and injustice that Muslims face in India. The IM's rhetoric is yet to be backed up with a video message.

The organization is also thought to have close links with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) community organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba. Indeed, the recent arrest of Yashin Bhaktal on the Indo-Nepalese border adds substance to the Pakistan connection. The alleged leader of the IM claimed that the organization had recently been in contact Al Zawahiri, who is believed to be hiding in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. Discussions are thought to have centered around attacks on foreign nationals based in India, most notably Jews. This may help to explain why New Delhi recently asked Mumbai-based Jewish establishments in September to step up security measures in the face of an impending terrorist threat.

There is also increasing evidence that the Indian Mujahideen are targeting Muslim youths with stories about the plight of fellow Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, and elsewhere. The organization is also thought to make reference to its [Declaration of Open War against India](#). This May 2008,

'manifesto' links the multiple attacks in the Indian city of Jaipur (Rajasthan) to the broader global jihad. It also warns "the US and UK in particular that Muslims are one across the globe", and that western visitors to India "will be welcomed by suicide attackers".

Reason number four

Yet, it still remains to be seen just how much influence Al Qaida and its affiliates will be able to develop in a country that is by no means a hotbed for homegrown terrorism. After all, al Zawahiri reaffirmed in his recent message that Al Qaeda's struggle will be long-lasting and that 'Jihad is in need of consistent support in terms of men, finances, and expertise.' This suggests that the dwindling strength and decreasing influence of this increasingly fragmented organization are the real reasons behind Al Qaeda's renewed interest in India. With one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, the country is undoubtedly an attractive source of manpower, money and material support. Standing in its way is India's much-cherished status as the world's largest secular/liberal democracy and New Delhi's sound working relations with its sizeable Muslim minority.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Al Qaeda at 25](#)

[In Their Own Words: Al Qaeda's View of the Arab Spring](#)

[Al Qaeda, A Decade After the 9/11 Attacks](#)

[The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's [Dossiers](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

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