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A STUDY OF AL-QAEDA'S TARGET-SPECIFIC NARRATIVES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This article examines Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's (AQIS) extremist propaganda in Bangladesh and how this South Asian affiliate of the Transnational Jihadist group- Al Qaeda- has dominated the extremist narrative against Bangladesh. The analyses draw on primary data from AQIS supporter channels on encrypted social media platforms such as Telegram and various "cloud-platform" websites that serve as repositories for the group's propaganda. Narratives explored in this article highlight AQIS' strategy of infiltrating and recruiting from the Bangladesh army to carry out attacks against India by highlighting the latter's influence on the Bangladesh military and defence sector. This is coherent with AQIS' strategy of exploiting anti-India sentiments prevalent in Bangladesh. Through its nuanced strategic communications, AQIS in Bangladesh seeks to appeal to the local sentiments, garnering support and recruiting sympathisers, especially the youth. The article also explores the implications of such strategies in the wider context of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and the killing of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022.

Keywords: Al-Qaeda, Bangladesh, Al-Hikma, India, Propaganda, Jihad.

Since its inception in September 2014, Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate- Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)- has exhibited resilience in the face of continued counterterrorism operations and competition from the rival regional jihadist factions of Islamic State (IS).[1] The group has persisted in the region through a three-pronged localisation strategy, presenting itself as an alternate to IS and demonstrating strategic patience.[2] In Bangladesh, AQIS' propaganda-centric approach has afforded the group a foothold in the domestic conservative sentiment and youth anger, particularly following the Shahbagh protests of 2013.[3]

AQIS propaganda on India and Bangladesh are often intertwined. In its Bangladesh focussed narratives, AQIS has consistently exploited the anti-India sentiments stemming from India's alleged interference in Bangladesh's domestic politics.[4] It also manipulated, primarily to its advantage, the perceived mistreatment of Indian Muslims under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government since 2014.[5] Moreover, through its nuanced strategic communication skills, AQIS has previously sought to exploit localised issues such as India's water sharing agreements with Bangladesh, seeking to appeal to the Bangladeshi consciousness, particularly those on the Indo-Bangladesh border with greater opportunities to attack India.[6]

Keeping in line with the localised approach, the AQIS-affiliated Al-Hikmah media released a document titled "India's influence in the Bangladesh army" by extremist ideologue Ustad Misbah-al-Bangali (Nom-de-guerre) in December 2021.[7] This was widely shared among AQIS supporters early this year on its various Telegram channels and "cloud-platform" websites. As claimed by AQIS, the document addressed the key conspiracies exercised by the "extremist Hindutva India" to take complete control of the Bangladesh army.

This article examines the conspiracies explored in the document, which AQIS claims is India's next phase (following the phase of implementing a pro-India government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina) in secularising Bangladesh and wiping its Muslim identity.

Ultimately, the article asserts that the group will continue to implement its core strategy of disseminating localised, targeted propaganda to recruit more and instigate new insurgencies in the region. This is further facilitated by the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, providing AQIS with a platform for regional expansion and allowing it to focus on other parts of South Asia, such as India and Bangladesh. Such a strategy will likely continue unabated despite AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's killing.

“India will inevitably extend its dominance. India will be the centre of all political and economic activities in the Indian Ocean region. The small nations will be defeated. It will remain a culturally autonomous region, but not politically independent.”

It was Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's popular India Doctrine, (Nehru Doctrine), one of the pillars of India's independence. Originally, it originated from the idea of 'Unified India'. One by one, Kashmir, Hyderabad, Sikkim, Nepal, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka and the war of 1971 and the unwanted intervention in Bangladesh since then are unveiling the India Doctrine.”

[Excerpt from the introductory paragraph of Al-Hikmah document]

India's influence on Bangladesh Army: Two main themes

The document released by the Al-Hikmah media features two main themes to showcase the alleged conspiracies of the Indian government in taking control of the Bangladesh army. These include references to India's historical discrimination of the Bangladesh security forces, citing the ineffectual Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace—often referred to as the 'defence pact' of 1972. This is followed by criticisms of the current India-Bangladesh MoUs and defence agreements, used to portray the alleged unfair advantage the Indian army holds over their Bangladesh counterparts. The following sections discuss the themes in further detail.

The 25-year slavery treaty:

The AQIS/Al Hikmah document cites the 'defence pact' of 1972 as a necessary precursor to understanding the 'military chemistry' between India and Bangladesh.[8] With a validity of 25 years (ending the treaty in 1997), the defence pact covered essential provisions in the economic, security, and military issues. The document highlights one such condition wherein Bangladesh could not have professional armed forces but would only maintain a paramilitary force.[9] Although this agreement did not hold, the defence pact has since been a source of distrust and resentment among the Bangladeshi people and the defence community, fueling suspicions about India's intentions towards their country.[10]

“Any independent country needs its own army to maintain its sovereignty. But before Bangladesh became independent, India forced Bangladesh to sign a 25-year slavery treaty. One of the conditions was that Bangladesh could not have its own army. There will be paramilitary forces, some of which will be officers, some will be the leaders of India's choice from among the freedom fighters and some will be officers of the Indian forces themselves! So these few lines of history are enough for us to understand the military chemistry of India and Bangladesh!”

[Excerpt from the document on the 1972 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace]

Moreover, historically, the Bangladesh army's attitude towards India was primarily rooted in the former's historical connection with the Pakistan Army. Having trained with Pakistan until its independence, many of the Bangladesh army's top leadership were comprised of retired officers from Pakistan who were trained to view India with apprehension and hostility. However, the past few decades have seen a new generation of indigenously trained military leadership whose stance towards India is more cordial than their predecessors.[11]

Consequently, AQIS seeks to reignite the erstwhile sentiment by portraying that India has historically sought to undermine Bangladesh's sovereignty, independence and, as a result, its Muslim identity. Such historical references constitute a crucial part of AQIS and other Islamist propaganda to portray a lack of progress for the conservative Bangladeshi population.

Contemporary Defence Relations:

While India's popularity in Bangladesh has waxed and waned depending on the government in place, the defence cooperation between the two countries has progressed significantly in the last few years. This is illustrated in the exchange of visits between leaders of the two nations and the collaboration through military training programmes and joint exercises.[12] AQIS alleges that this diplomacy is part of India's strategy to brainwash the Bangladesh military cadets towards a pro-Indian stance and dilute their Islamic identity.

The document further highlights India's consistent push for a military partnership with Bangladesh following the latter's submarine purchase from China in 2016. China is Bangladesh's strategic partner and its biggest arms supplier.[13] The country is also a destination for Bangladesh army officers to receive training.[14] Oddly, the defence agreement between the two nations is hardly debated in public discourse in the same manner as even the possibility of an agreement with India.[15] Such polarity underscores the scepticism towards India prevalent among the Bangladeshi populace. As rightly explicated by scholars, AQIS' ability to exploit such local sentiments constitute a significant part of its strategy to recruit, stay relevant, and demonstrate its resilience.[16]

Subsequently, the document also speaks on India's US\$500 million line of credit to Bangladesh for purchasing Indian defence equipment, which it has not used so far. The allocated budget is viewed by many as a presentiment of disaster, claiming that Bangladesh would not be able to defend itself against an invading Indian army using the former's weapons systems. [17]

"In 2016, Bangladesh bought two submarines from China. India did not like it. They also tried to influence the purchasing process. In this context, India signed a defense agreement with Bangladesh. Naturally no one knows much about this deal. The USD 500 million that India is lending to the defense sector is not entirely to be spent on imports from India. Bangladesh can spend a portion of the agreement (about 35 percent) on military equipment from third countries. But in that case Bangladesh will have to take permission from India. In other words, they want to know where Bangladesh will buy weapons from, how many weapons it will buy!"

[Excerpt from the document on the contemporary defence relations]

Lastly, the AQIS/Al Hikmah document highlights contemporary military exercises between India's Border Security Forces (BSF) and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB), which it claims is India's strategy to slowly make gains along the Indo-Bangladesh border by diminishing the resistance capabilities of the BGB.[18]

Implication

AQIS Strategic Communications

While the document includes some of the narratives previously highlighted in AQIS propaganda, its focus on the Bangladesh army is a testament to the group's target-specific propaganda approach in Bangladesh. The reasons to appeal to the emotions of the military are two-pronged: Firstly, AQ and its affiliates (especially the Taliban) have long exercised a core strategy of infiltrating and recruiting from the regional army to carry out high-profile attacks against its near and far enemies (including foreign militaries conducting joint exercises in the region).[19] In 2019, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed a high-profile infiltration attack on the Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida.[20] The attack was carried out by Saudi Air Force Second Lieutenant Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, killing three U.S. Navy soldiers and injuring eight others. Investigations revealed that the attacker was cooperating with AQAP members, sharing plans and tactics for the attack.[21]

Moreover, AQIS has demonstrated the ability to infiltrate regional armies through its 2018 attack on the Pakistani Naval frigate, PNS Zulfikar.[22] Further investigations revealed that the group had recruited Pakistani Naval officers to carry out the operation.[23] Similarly,

AQIS seeks to exploit the grievances of the Bangladesh army to carry out insider attacks against its perceived enemies in India and Bangladesh.

Secondly, studies on AQIS' local sentiment capitalisation have revealed the group's opposite stance on military/government entities in different countries in the Indian subcontinent. For example, the group does not identify the army as a primary target for conducting attacks in Bangladesh. However, in India, where AQIS perceives the army as leading human rights violations against Muslims (especially in Kashmir), it is more vocal about attacking affiliated individuals.[24] This also explains the document's lack of criticisms towards the Bangladesh army, focussing merely on India's influence on the same.

“Here are just a few notable facts. Apart from this, numerous other incidents of India remain behind the scenes of Indian aggression and creating chaos within the army. In fact, the Indian aggression in Bangladesh has now entered a terrible new phase with the help of India's own slave Hasina. Hindustani control has already been firmly established in the economy, media and administration of the country.”

[Excerpt from the Al Hikma document's conclusion]

Furthermore, political parties in Bangladesh lean towards the armed forces for stability. The ruling Awami League (AL) government constantly devises policies in order to maintain a good rapport with the armed forces. The document's focus on highlighting India's influence on the Bangladesh army against AQIS's broader narratives criticizing the ruling party's pro-India stance is aimed at creating disassociation among military personnel towards their government. This could create security/political instability-a key factor for the group's survival in the region.

Afghanistan Sanctuary

According to Tore Hamming, while AQIS has not stood out operationally since its inception, the group has focussed on uniting disparate militant groups in a cohesive structure, establishing an effective media apparatus, and diffusing targeted messages to recruit and mobilize sympathizers.[25] The Taliban's control of Afghanistan further facilitates AQIS in achieving these objectives owing to an increase in the latter's operational freedom. The relationship between the Taliban and AQ and the presence of its affiliates in Afghanistan-especially AQIS- is well documented. In a video announcing the formal establishment of AQIS, spokesperson and present leader Usama Mahmoud highlighted that supporting the Taliban was a key goal for the group. Additionally, many AQIS members have also been killed in US-led airstrikes in Afghanistan.[26]

Moreover, in the absence of sustained kinetic operations, AQIS' local affiliates in India and Bangladesh, the Kashmir-based Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) and Ansar al Islam (AI), have long been observed to focus on rebuilding through online recruitment and propagating AQ literature translated to Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi.[27] In December 2021, Bangladeshi intelligence units warned about a possible operational resurgence of AI owing to the success of its online recruitment campaign. More recently, there have been indications that AI intends to expand its focus to Kashmir and Myanmar by providing funding or supporting fighters.[28]

With Afghanistan quickly becoming a jihadist sanctuary under the Taliban, AQIS appears to be gaining a foothold in sustaining its media/targeted propaganda operations and is poised to increase its coordination with affiliates across India and Bangladesh regarding fighters' movements and funding. Despite the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, this advantage is likely to hold, considering that the Taliban will continue to support AQIS by providing the time, space, and safety for the group to rest, regroup and train its fighters.[29]

Thus, the Taliban's Afghanistan redux extends AQIS's opportunity to mount a protracted, multi-faceted war against its various regional enemies. In this context, it is paramount to observe and understand the targeted propaganda of AQIS and its affiliates further to understand the group's strategies in South Asia.

CONCLUSION

Since its inception, AQIS has significantly influenced Bangladesh's militant Islamist milieu. Through localisation and opportunistic populism, the group has employed a propaganda-centric approach focussed on recruiting sympathisers, particularly youth of the upper/middle-class background from higher education institutions and universities.[30] The AQIS document's focus on military partnerships and defence agreements, as opposed to the more predominant narratives on the persecution of Muslims, demonstrates the approach mentioned above and the group's strategic communication skills.

In India, the AQIS movement has been limited despite Islamophobia and prevalent inter-religious violence.[31] The group has focussed on increasing its communication output concerning India, especially since early 2020.[32] Consequently, the group's propaganda aims to increase the perception of crises in the Bangladesh army/populace from India to gain sympathisers to carry out high-profile attacks against the Indian security forces. In doing so, the group could also elicit an unfair response from the Indian government, further destabilising the region's already volatile political and social harmony.

AQIS' strategic communication has been key to its survival and longevity in South Asia. As this article attests, the group demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the socio-political and cultural grievances in its operating regions. The volumes of online propaganda disseminated

by the group demand the adoption of long-term counterterrorism measures, which are currently lacking.

In sum, AQIS will persist in South Asia for the foreseeable future. Despite the killing of the AQ leader- Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQIS' potency is likely to increase with the foothold provided by the Taliban in Afghanistan. This will enable AQIS to establish itself as the authoritative voice in the South Asian militant Islamist milieu through its regional affiliates.

As consistently observed throughout history, safe havens are the lifeblood for terrorist/insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Powerful counter-narratives and ideologies must be included in South Asian counterterrorism and counter-extremism efforts to neutralise the multi-faceted war waged by AQIS, its regional affiliates, and their larger parent group- Al-Qaeda.

NOTES

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