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2006

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IDSS COMMENTARIES (64/2006)

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THE MUMBAI RAIL BOMBINGS Explaining Kashmiri Groups' Expanding Theatre Of Operation

Muhammad Haniff Hassan *

17 July 2006

THE perpetrators of the recent bombings of the Mumbai train system that killed 200 civilians have not been officially identified by the Indian authorities. Until due process takes place, the identity of the attackers will remain a subject of speculation. However, previous bombings in India have been linked to separatist groups from Kashmir. This is a new development that has surprised many observers because bomb attacks outside Kashmir by the separatist groups began only in 1993, although the armed struggle for Kashmiri independence started much earlier.

Why the shift in attacks

What triggered such a shift? What caused the separatist groups to take the offensive beyond Kashmir and increasingly deep inside India?

Some insights could be gained from a book entitled "The Army of Madinah in Kashmir" (Maktabah Al-Ansaar, Birmingham, 1999). The book was written by Esa Al-Hindi whose real name is Dhiren Barot. He was alleged to be a leader of an Al-Qaeda cell in Britain. Some reports also mentioned him as Al-Qaeda's cell leader in Europe.

Along with other suspects, he was arrested on 3 August 2004 in Willesden, London by British police and charged with conspiracy to murder. He was also charged for possession of a reconnaissance plan of buildings in various cities in the United States. He had two notebooks with information on explosives, poisons, chemicals and related matters, which were likely to be useful to a person preparing for an act of terrorism. He was alleged to be the ringleader of the cell plotting an attack on Heathrow International Airport in London.

The book reflects the author's personal experience fighting jihad in Kashmir through guerrilla activity. It provides the readers with a description of the situation in Kashmir under the occupation of Indian forces and the author's analysis of the situation. It also aims to instill in the readers the virtue of armed jihad and encourages them to join it.

It is not known how much influence the book has on groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JEM), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HUM) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) who are fighting for Kashmiri independence and have a record of conducting bombings in India. However, the views in the book could still provide insights that could partially explain the shift in the theatre of operations of the pro-independence Kashmiri

groups.

Offensive Jihad

Al-Hindi is of the view that armed jihad by Muslims today in areas like Kashmir is largely defensive in nature. Muslims are only reacting to the situation and the manoeuvres of their enemies. Yet, defensive jihad has caused a high number of casualties among the mujahideen, the most special group of people among the *ummah*.

Al-Hindi argues for the need to reform and change -- from defensive to offensive jihad -- so that the tables can be turned and Muslims can gain the initiative in achieving their objectives. He likens offensive jihad to a “flanking operation” in military combat. This can be achieved by bringing armed jihad operations into the enemy’s territory. The objective is to create big problems to destabilise and force the enemy to turn away from Muslim territories.

Stirring Communal Conflicts

Since Kashmiri independence is viewed as an Islamic cause to regain lost Muslim territories, Al-Hindi is of the view that local Muslims living in India should be co-opted. They are seen as the main actors for a successful offensive jihad because they understand the language, culture, area, and common practices of the enemy that they coexist with. This highlights the need for recruiting and winning them over to engage in or support various sabotage and attacks inside India.

Propaganda is viewed as a necessary means of jihad for Al-Hindi. He therefore suggests, as part of the offensive jihad on India, launching a propaganda campaign. One important aspect of propaganda is to cause communal conflicts, such as those between the Hindus and the Sikhs or between Muslims and non-Muslims inside India.

Widening the Theatre of Operation

Identification of the enemy is important in the thinking of Al-Hindi because it helps to justify an attack and to determine targeted countries for launching offensive jihad. Al-Hindi views countries that invade a Muslim land as enemies of Islam and those that support an invasion of a Muslim land as interfering in the affairs of Muslim states.

The book specifically identifies five countries as enemies: India, because of its occupation of Kashmir and the atrocities committed by its forces against the Kashmiris; the Pakistani government for being the puppet of America and using the Kashmir issue and the mujahideen as its pawns; the United States for supporting the Indian government with millions of dollars of ‘emergency aid’ and “being the tip of the spear against al-Islam in modern times”; Russia for being the “mentor” for India; and finally; Israel for providing training for the Indian army.

Conclusion

The centrality of Al-Hindi’s idea lies in the view that offensive jihad is a strategic option. Jihad should be used as a leverage to advance the Kashmiri cause by bringing the operation into the enemy’s soil and gaining the initiative. It means destabilising India from inside in any possible way.

The idea of offensive jihad is a critical development. It not only widens the theatre of operation in India, but potentially also into other countries that are seen as collaborators with the Indian government at the expense of the Kashmiri cause. This also explains the attack plots planned by Al-Hindi against targets in the United States. The widening of the operating theatre into India has already taken place, as seen in various bombing attacks by the separatist groups.

It could be said that Al-Hindi's ideas have an ideological dimension – that offensive jihad could go beyond the zone of conflict; that targeting civilians is permissible; that there is a strategic dimension of recruiting local Muslims for Kashmir's independence cause; and that there is an operational dimension through a propaganda campaign to undermine India's social stability. All these are issues that need to be addressed accordingly to provide long lasting peace and security in India specifically, and the sub-continent in general.

* Muhammad Haniff Hassan is a research analyst at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.