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Jonathan Kay on Syed Zabiuddin Ansari, and India's role in prosecuting the global war on terrorism

JONATHAN KAY | July 3, 2012 9:28 AM ET
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The 10 Islamist terrorists who committed the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks killed 164 innocent people with guns, grenades and bombs. Nine of the killers died during their rampage. The 10th, Ajmal Kasab, was taken alive — and has provided details about how the attacks were planned and executed by Lashkar-e-Taiba (“Army of the Good”), a terrorist group with deep links to the Pakistani military.

The 26/11 attacks (as they're widely known in India) took place over three days in late November, during which time the killers moved from target to target — including the Taj Mahal Palace hotel, a hospital for women and children, and a Jewish community centre. Throughout the slaughter, cell phone intercepts show, the terrorists received a flow of real-time instructions from a pair of mysterious Karachi-based controllers. Those two men are believed to be the real architects of the attacks — the equivalent, in 9/11 terms, of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

Last month, according to Indian authorities, half of the mystery ended with the arrest of Syed Zabiuddin Ansari, aka Abu Jindal, at Delhi airport, after he'd allegedly been discovered recruiting terrorists in Saudi Arabia for a new plot. (No genius, Ansari reportedly opened up a Facebook page under his real name.)

Indian officials claim that the alleged Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist already has been spilling some details about the 2008 operation, such as the identities of those who were in the Karachi control room during the attacks. These figures reportedly include not only Lashkar-e-Taiba commanders, but also agents of Pakistan's military spy agency — the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In this crucial regard, Ansari's confession would match the disclosures of Pakistani-American terrorist-turned-informant David Headley (born as Daood Sayed Gilani), who last year testified that senior ISI agents actively support Lashkar-e-Taiba operations in general, and helped organize the 2008 Mumbai attacks in particular.

The arrest of Ansari is a significant victory in the war on terrorism, despite the relatively modest media coverage it got here in the West. As former CIA officer Bruce

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Riedel [writes](#), “with al Qaeda on the ropes,” Lashkar-e-Taiba “is now probably the most dangerous terror group in the world.”

Ansari might provide information useful in rolling up Lashkar-e-Taiba cells in India and elsewhere. And if reported disclosures about ISI-Lashkar-e-Taiba co-operation in the 2008 Mumbai attacks hold up, it might even shame Pakistan into taking action against the terrorist group: To this day, Lashkar-e-Taiba and its leader Hafeez Saeed operate freely in Pakistan. Saeed even appears on Pakistani [television](#), as if he were a respected commentator, even though he is believed to have been personally present in the Karachi control room while his Lashkar-e-Taiba minions roamed Mumbai on their killing spree.

The circumstances of Ansari’s arrest also provide some basis for optimism. According to the [Associated Press](#), “both India and Pakistan [lobbied] for his release into their custody, but India clinched the arrest by providing DNA samples from Ansari’s Indian family members, who live in the western state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is located.”

“Saudi Arabia’s decision to hand Ansari over to India, rather than Pakistan, appeared to surprise Indian officials,” the Associated Press report continues. “Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have long held close ties. Foreign Ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin described the arrest as something ‘rather new’ in Saudi-Indian relations. ‘Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is expanding in a variety of ways.’ ”

The fact that the Saudis co-operated with India on Ansari indicates that they see Lashkar-e-Taiba as a global terrorist threat — not just an Indian problem. As for India itself, it has become a front-line state in the war on terror, a sort of South Asian Israel (with Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Taliban, in their Pakistani sanctuaries, playing the equivalent roles of Hamas and Hezbollah).

The United States recognizes this. Last month, the *Hindustan Times* [reported](#) that the FBI promised Indian home secretary Raj Kumar Singh and Intelligence Bureau Director Nehchal Sandhu that the United States would extradite criminals — even American nationals — to India if they were involved in terrorism. (David Headley would seem like perfect test of this new policy. But his case is still being dragged out by the U.S. Department of Justice.)

Canada should take this opportunity to revisit its own extradition policies with India. We have [extradited only one person to India in the last two decades](#) (a murderer named Malkiat Singh). Currently, a court in B.C. is weighing the possible extradition to India of Malkit Kaur Sidhu, 63, and Surjit Singh Badesha, 67, to face charges that they ordered the honour killing of Ms. Sidhu’s daughter, Jaswinder Kaur Sidhu, who’d married a poor rickshaw driver she’d met on a trip to India, over her parents’ objections. The evidence in the case is strong (phone calls between the accused couple and the convicted killers in India) — but in the past, Canadian courts have cited concerns about possible torture and corruption by Indian officials to justify their refusal to extradite.

One particularly troubling [example](#) involved the case of Air India Flight 182 bombing suspect Talwinder Singh Parmar. In 1982, he was the subject of a formal extradition request from the Indian government, which identified the man as a terrorist who’d been implicated in six murders. That request was denied by Canada. Three years later, Air India Flight 182 was blown out of the sky.

Thirty years later, India’s role at the front line of the war on terrorism is even more pronounced. The next time an Indian terrorist — or even an ordinary murder suspect — is apprehended on Canadian soil, let us make sure that past errors are not repeated.

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