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Terrorism in India and the Global Jihad

By: Bruce Riedel

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The attacks on multiple targets in downtown Mumbai in late November 2008 is only the latest in a long series of horrific terrorist operations in India. Terrorism in India is a complex phenomenon with numerous perpetrators. The most dangerous terrorist menace comes from groups with intimate connections to the global jihadist network centered around Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda and its allies in the Pakistani jihadist culture. While it is too soon to draw firm conclusions about responsibility for the attacks in Mumbai in November 2008, the odds are good that the terrorists and the masterminds behind their plot are connected into the global jihad.

India has been a target for al Qaeda and the global jihadist movement for over a decade. India has often been listed by bin Laden and his accomplice Ayman Zawahiri as a part of the 'Crusader-Zionist-Hindu' conspiracy against the Islamic world. The targets of the killers in Mumbai—Americans, Brits, Israelis and Indians—fit exactly into the profile al Qaeda and its partners vilify and plot against. Both bin Laden and Zawahiri have spoken about the "U.S.-Jewish-Indian alliance against Muslims."

The National Counter Terrorism Center noted earlier this year that India had the second largest number of casualties from terrorism in 2007, just behind Iraq. Now it almost certainly will have the highest casualty number in 2008. Many different groups use terror as a tool in India, including separatist movements in the north east, rural Maoists called Naxalites in the center and east of the country, extremists in the Muslim minority and extremists in the Hindu majority. Mahatma Gandhi was a victim of Hindu extremist violence himself. These indigenous groups are responsible for much of the low intensity violence in the country.

But the most dangerous terror menace comes from Kashmiri groups based in Pakistan with long and intimate connections to al Qaeda and bin Laden. The group which has been linked by initial Indian assessments of the Mumbai attack, Lashkar-e Tayiba (literally the army of the pure or righteous), was founded in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a group of Kashmiri activists with the assistance of the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter Services Intelligence Directorate or ISI. Usama bin Laden was an early supporter of the group and provided some of the initial funding for its start. The ISI was an enthusiastic supporter of the Kashmiri insurgency and wanted to use asymmetric warfare, i.e. terrorism to undermine Indian control of Kashmir.

LeT was banned in Pakistan in 2002 but continues to operate there under a number of cover names including Jamaat ud Dawah. Its self professed goal is to create an Islamic state in all of south and central Asia, not just Kashmir. Its operatives have worked closely with al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and there are reports of LeT volunteers fighting in Iraq. Like al Qaeda it has raised funds in the Gulf states. The extent of its continuing relationship with the ISI is much debated. The Pakistani authorities claim none exists but the fact is that the organization has been tolerated in Pakistan despite the 2002 ban. It still has its leadership there and trains its fighters in both Pakistani Kashmir and the badlands along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Since 9/11 several key al Qaeda operatives arrested in Pakistan have been found in safe houses run by LeT. The first major al Qaeda lieutenant caught after 9/11, Abu Zubayda, was apprehended in an LeT safe house in Faisalabad. Gary Schroen, who served as a CIA chief of station in Pakistan and led the first CIA team into Afghanistan after 9/11, has noted that “since 2002 whenever a raid has been conducted in Pakistan against al Qaeda, al Qaeda members are found being hosted by militant Pakistanis, primarily from the LeT group, supporters of the Kashmir insurgency.”

Also like al Qaeda, the LeT recruits actively among the Pakistani diaspora in the United Kingdom. Some 800,000 strong, many with Kashmiri roots, the British Pakistani community is an attractive target for many reasons not the least the fact that second and third generation members have British passports and can thus travel more easily in the West. LeT has been linked to numerous terrorist attacks in India including the massacre of dozens of Sikhs in Kashmir in March 2000 during President Clinton’s visit to India, bombings in New Delhi in 2005 and bombings in Varanasi and Mumbai in 2006. The Mumbai metro bombings on July 11, 2006 killed over two hundred.

Bin Laden was also a key figure in the creation of another Kashmiri group that works closely with global jihadists, the Jaish-e Muhammad (Army of Muhammad). In December 1999 Kashmiri militants hijacked an Indian commercial airliner, IA 814, from Kathmandu, Nepal, and flew it to Kandahar, Afghanistan, then the de facto capital of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The hijackers demanded the release of several terrorists held

in Indian jails, including Maulana Masoud Azhar, wanted for several previous terrorist atrocities. The hijackers were allegedly assisted by the ISI station in Nepal, they were received as heroes by the Taliban in Kandahar and the plot was reportedly planned by bin Laden. Usama hosted the victory dinner when India reluctantly gave in to the hijackers' demands to save the 155 hostages.

Former Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, who flew to Kandahar to arrange the hostage release and negotiated with the Taliban, has labeled the IA 814 operation the "dress rehearsal" for 9/11 because it involved so many of the same characters behind 9/11. After the release of Azhar the ISI took him to Pakistan for a hero's welcome and a fund raising tour through the country to help found a new group, JeM.

In December 2001 JeM, possibly with help from LeT, was behind an attack on the Indian parliament. This attack was designed to create a crisis between India and Pakistan by killing the senior echelon of the Indian government and legislators. It succeeded in provoking a tense standoff that would last over a year and during which more than a million Indian and Pakistani soldiers were deployed in forward positions along their border. By focusing Pakistan's army on its eastern border with India the attack also left the western border with Afghanistan open to the retreating al Qaeda and Taliban leadership including bin Laden, Zawahiri and Mullah Omar who were fleeing the American Operation Enduring Freedom forces in Afghanistan. This was undoubtedly not a coincidence. Like LeT, Jaish has been outlawed in Pakistan but continues to operate under various cover names. The extent of its existing ties to the ISI is also much debated.

The Mumbai attacks displayed a level of sophisticated planning that marks another milestone in the global jihad. Multiple targets within an urban environment, trained and armed killers intent on operating in small teams or alone targeting Americans, Brits, Israelis as well as Indians, careful casing of the targets ahead of the attack and the use of small boats to get close in to the targets are signs of the continuing evolution of terrorist planners. Hotels have long been a favorite target of al Qaeda and its allies from the multiple hotel bombings in Amman by Al Qaeda's Iraq franchise in November 2005 to the attack on the Serena Hotel in Kabul this January and the bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad in September.

Many accounts of the incident say the terrorists arrived by sea from the Pakistani megacity port of Karachi. Karachi has long been a favorite hide out of the global jihad syndicate. Khalid Shaykh Mohammad, the tactical mastermind of 9/11, trained most of the Saudi hijackers in Karachi in a safe house. KSM also watched the collapse of the World Trade Center towers from an internet café in Karachi on the day of the attack. The December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament was planned and orchestrated from Karachi, perhaps with KSM's involvement.

Much still needs to be learned about the Mumbai attacks. According to some Indian accounts, a captured terrorist has already confessed to being a

member of LeT. Several Indian (B. Raman for example) and Pakistani (Ahmad Rashid) experts have suggested an al Qaeda hand in the attacks behind LeT. But we should be careful not to draw conclusions too early from an incomplete investigation. There is considerable confusion and contradiction in the press accounts of what transpired. The good news is that Pakistan has offered to assist in the investigation which could help prevent the very crisis between India and Pakistan that the plots masterminds may have wanted.

For the last several months India and Pakistan had been improving their bilateral relationship. Pakistan's new President Asif ali Zardari had made several positive statements about his desire to ease tensions with India, including a pledge that Pakistan would adhere to a no first use of nuclear weapons doctrine, a major change in Islamabad's position. Trade has been opened across the line of control in Kashmir, albeit in small amounts, for the first time in sixty years. Zardari has also promised to get control over the ISI and to stop its policy of both chasing and supporting terrorism in Pakistan. His ability to do so is still very much in doubt.

Al Qaeda and its allies like LeT and JeM would see this easing of tensions as a threat to their interests. They want conflict between India and Pakistan today just as they did in 2001. They thrive on the hatred the Indo-Pakistan conflict produces. If they are involved in the Mumbai attacks it would be in part to disrupt any chance at easing tensions in the subcontinent and perhaps also to divert Pakistan's army away from the badlands along the border with Afghanistan to the border with India, again as in 2001.

For over a decade, India has been in the bull's eye of both al Qaeda and the global jihadist syndicate that has its' hide outs in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In spite of horrifying terrorist spectacles the Indian people and India's democracy have not been terrified into defeat. The people of Mumbai in particular have risen time and again from terrorist attacks that would shake any other city to its core. The terrorists who attacked Mumbai have tried to break the morale of the city that is at the center of India's economic renaissance and its cultural life. They have failed before and will fail again.

AUTHOR

Bruce Riedel

Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Saban Center for Middle East Policy