Not just India's problem any more

Carnage … Indian policemen walk through the shooting site at Chattrapati Shivaji Railway terminus in Mumbai yesterday.
Photo: *AFP*

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Much is at stake in a growing nation whose struggle with terrorism had gone unheeded, writes Sandy Gordon.

THE US State Department has consistently listed India as the country with the second-highest number of terrorism casualties after Iraq. However Western media has given scant regard to the problem and this is sometimes resented in India.

All that is likely to change with yesterday's attacks in Mumbai. Mumbai has been at the epicentre of India's terrorist problem but there have been many attacks in other key cities.

Terrorism in India is perpetrated by a number of groups, including Maoists in eastern India and separatists in the north-east and Kashmir. But one of the most persistent and costly problems has been so-called "violent jihadi" terrorism in India's major commercial and administrative

centres.

Indian authorities and commentators point to Pakistan, and especially the secretive Inter-Services Intelligence, as having a hand in the Indian attacks. After an attack on the parliament in December 2001, India mobilised against Pakistan and the two very nearly slipped into war - a frightening prospect for nuclear-armed powers.

It is clear that arms and training have been provided by Pakistani groups, such as Lashkar-e-Toiba; that the ISI has been heavily engaged in helping insurgents and terrorists in Indian Kashmir; and that Pakistan has refused to extradite accused terrorists to India.

But there is no "smoking gun" indicating direct involvement of Pakistani authorities in terrorist attacks outside Kashmir. On the contrary, most of those involved appear to be "home-grown" terrorists intent on revenge against the activities of Hindu zealots, incensed by the poor socio-economic status of India's Muslims or inspired by the so-called "global jihad".

Frequently members of the banned Students' Islamic Movement of India, or SIMI, have been involved. Recently SIMI seems to have morphed into the Indian Mujahideen, or at least acted with its members. The group claiming responsibility for yesterday's attacks, Deccan Mujahideen, may be another example of such morphing.

The stakes in this "game" of terrorism in India are extremely high. Exponents of violent jihad and political Islam would like to see an end to the India-Pakistan rapprochement over Kashmir, which has resulted in a diminution of Pakistani support for the Kashmiri separatists.

If they could mount an attack of sufficient seriousness, the rapprochement could quickly unravel, especially in the highly charged climate of impending state and national elections.

Moreover, increased India-Pakistan tension would be highly damaging to the broader "war on terrorism". It would draw Pakistan's security efforts away from the western frontier and give virtual free rein to the militants in the tribal belt to operate in Afghanistan.

The attacks also target commercial and IT hubs, such as Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad, apparently with the purpose of undermining India's economic renaissance. They also target communal hotbeds, such as Malegaon, and important religious centres, such as Varanasi. The apparent purpose is to fan communal unrest (Hindu-Muslim rioting) and thus drive Muslims to support militancy.

It is this strategic targeting, among other things, that has prompted accusations by Indian commentators of official Pakistani involvement. But, given that many of those terrorist leaders are well educated, especially in technology and science, it is possible that they, themselves, are capable of picking strategic targets.

Moreover, there is also an evident motive of revenge apparent in some of the targeting. Several attacks in Mumbai, including the rail bombings of 2006, have apparently targeted lines, business places and suburbs frequented by the Gujarati Hindu business community, evidently in revenge for the terrible rioting against Muslims that occurred in Gujarat in 2002. In those riots, the authorities - under a Hindu-leaning government - turned a blind eye to the horrors and failed subsequently to prosecute their alleged perpetrators.

A successful counter-terrorism campaign requires that two things be done well: investigation and intelligence to catch those involved and pre-empt attacks, and alleviation of the conditions that give rise to terrorism. India's record in the first of these has been patchy. Investigatory and forensic skills have not, on the whole, been well honed. Where the authorities have done very well is to keep the lid on the difficult communal situation after terrorist attacks. With the exception of Gujarat, there has not been widespread communal unrest after what are frightful terrorist attacks.

Long-term alleviation of the situation of Muslims is more problematic. Here the Congress-led coalition is caught between the rock of needing to act affirmatively to assist the community and the hard place of reaction to such action fanned up by the so-called "Hindu right", led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. Should a BJP-led coalition win next May's national election, the outlook for Muslim regeneration would probably be bleak. The BJP is making considerable political play of the Congress Government being "soft" on terrorism. Consequently the Government is contemplating toughening the counter-terrorism laws.

Moreover, there has recently emerged a violent Hindu reaction to the growing problem of jihadi-inspired terrorism.

What India is experiencing is well short of the kind of violence and counter-violence in Lebanon and Iraq. Given that 140million of India's 1.1 billion are Muslim, that would be a development not to be contemplated. After each such attack, India seems able to pick itself up and resume where things left off.

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