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Published: December 17, 2008 00:00 IST | Updated: February 11, 2011 14:07 IST December 17, 2008

How West Asia views Mumbai attacks

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Several West Asian commentators feel that after the Mumbai attacks, India has been co-opted as an active partner of the U.S., Israel and the U.K. in the war on terror or is being “trapped” to join this unseemly coalition.

The Mumbai terror attacks have generated a vigorous debate in West Asia. In most major countries, these are being interpreted as an incident that is likely to usher in a new phase in the so-called global war on terror led by the United States. The war on terrorism, which has so far focussed on Iraq and Afghanistan within the strategic ambit of West Asia, has moved into South Asia with India as its new pillar.

Many, especially in Iran and Saudi Arabia, see the attacks as part of a plot hatched by Washington and some of its allies to stoke a major geopolitical realignment in the wider West Asia-South Asia region. Several commentators are of the view that in the wake of the Mumbai attacks, India has either been co-opted already as an active partner of the U.S., Israel and the U.K. in this war or is being “trapped” to join the unseemly coalition.

With the exception of Israel, there is plenty of sympathy in the Arab and Iranian media for Pakistan, which is seen not as an instigator of the Mumbai attacks but as a victim of this conspiracy. There is a considerably large body of opinion that after the Mumbai attacks, the stage has been set for Pakistan to be targeted militarily during the Obama Presidency. The ultimate objective of a chain of events that could follow Mumbai is to draw both Pakistan and Afghanistan along with India firmly into the western orbit of influence.

So far, the jury is out in the region on the role the Indian state is likely to play in the aftermath of the Mumbai strikes. Sections of the Iranian and Saudi media have either bluntly stated or implied that India is already in the western camp and would be an active player in redrawing the geopolitical map of the region. Some others are, as yet, not so sure.

The influential hardline Iranian daily, Kayhan, said on December 1 that India, the U.S., Britain and Israel were behind the Mumbai terror attacks. It observed that neither the Al-Qaeda nor the Pakistan government was involved in the strikes. Kayhan is known to be close to the

Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but that does not mean it necessarily reflects his views or that of a majority of Iranians.

‘Vengeance obsession’

The Saudi-owned daily Al Hayat has also voiced suspicion over India’s strategic relationship with the U.S. “The Indian brother may have already given the Americans a mandate to launch wars in the Indian subcontinent, whose management will be India’s responsibility, since it is possessed by the same ‘vengeance obsession’ that struck the Americans [in 2001].”

The Lebanese militant group, Hizbollah, which successfully battled Israel for 33 days in the killing fields of South Lebanon in 2006, does not presume that India is already part of the western camp. But sensing that New Delhi is under enormous pressure to join it, the militant group has counselled India to steer clear of an alliance with the U.S. and Israel. In a statement, Sayyid Nawwaf al-Musawi, Hizbollah’s head for international relations, has recalled India’s image as a country which has not succumbed to pressures of big powers since its independence.

Hizbollah’s stand

“India has been one of the three founder-states of the Non-Aligned Movement, which sought to follow a path that is independent from the hegemony of the arrogant. We have noted that these kinds of attacks that struck India are often a prelude to U.S. security and military interference that confiscates the sovereignty of states at the pretext of fighting terrorism. These attacks will be an opportunity for the U.S. administration to blackmail both Pakistan and India and infringe on their sovereignty.”

The statement also warns India against the pitfalls of depending on Israeli intelligence. It says Israel sets this “additional trap that aims at inundating states with misleading intelligence as well as infiltrating their security and military establishments.”

According to the Hizbollah, those who carried out the Mumbai strikes were of the Takfiri ideological persuasion. It is widely perceived that the Takfiris are extremists who view the entire non-Muslim world as a battleground, with the majority of Muslims also being termed infidels.

The Hizbollah said it rejected “Takfiri ideas which make others targets of killing and aggression ... the deadly Takfiri thought has been tearing apart the body of the Muslim community, [has] inflicted massacres on them and shed much of their blood.”

The Hizbollah pointed out that it did not view conflicts through a religious ideological prism. “Our opinion on divisions and conflicts ... are not based on religious, ethnic, or sectarian considerations but on the basis of arrogance and oppression. We stand by the oppressed, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, colour, or countries in order to confront the arrogant ones whatever their religious and national affiliations might be.”

Commenting on how it envisaged its relations with India, Hizbollah, which has now emerged as a highly influential player in the Lebanese

political establishment, said: “[It is] our desire to consolidate dialogue and friendship with the Indian people of various groups in order to uphold freedom of mankind and confront the forces of arrogance, takfir, and Zionism, because these forces cooperate and stand together to reap the fruits of their common work. Indeed, they have the same approaches and methods.”

The 9/11 analogy

There has been considerable comment on the negative implications of characterising the Mumbai attacks as India’s 9/11. Al Hayat points out that repeated references to 9/11 in the wake of the Mumbai attacks only bring back “the atmosphere of the U.S. 9/11.”

The website of Iran’s state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) also posted an article on December 5, stressing that the Americans were going to great lengths to connect the group which perpetrated the 9/11 attacks with terrorists who struck in Mumbai. It cited the visit by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to New Delhi, where she reportedly said those who attacked India’s commercial capital and those blamed for the 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington “move in the same circles.”

IRNA added: “If there is a connection between the Mumbai attacks and those of September 11 it is to be found in the American response. Seven months after the planes flew into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Rice described those tragic events as ‘an enormous opportunity’ to ‘create a new balance of power.’ Washington now sees a similar opportunity arising from the carnage in India to pursue its interests in South Asia.”

Sympathy for Pakistan

The events that followed the Mumbai attacks have generated sympathy for Pakistan in West Asia. An editorial in Saudi Arabia’s daily Al Madina said: “Terrorism also threatens Pakistan’s very existence, and directly or indirectly harms its sovereignty over its territory, every time the U.S. attacks what Washington claims is a ‘terrorist’ target within Pakistan. [In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks], India is furious while Pakistan, already in an extremely complex economic predicament, definitely needs no more crises to add to its existing ones.”

An editorial in the Saudi daily Al-Jazirah titled “A War Is Imminent” blamed the policies adopted by the U.S. in Afghanistan as the deeper cause of the current tensions in South Asia. “The terrorist attacks in Mumbai were extremely serious — in terms of their ‘quality,’ in hitting a number of targets [simultaneously], and in the [large] number of victims [they claimed]. But worst of all, they gave rise to serious political and military tension between India and Pakistan, which may lead to a war. Such a war would be a war between two nuclear powers whose security has been fundamentally undermined by the U.S. warfare in Afghanistan ...”

The Iranian leadership was the first to imply that the Pakistani state was not involved in the Mumbai attacks. On December 2, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told state television IRIB that the “savage terrorist attacks which killed so many innocent people were staged by [elements] from outside the region as regional people would never do such a thing.”

The Mumbai attacks challenge the Indian state on not only how it manages domestic security but also how it frames external policies. It remains to be seen whether New Delhi will follow an independent approach by forging closer ties with neighbours on a common politico-security platform or get itself entrapped as a junior partner in an alliance with extra-regional players pursuing their geo-strategic agenda in the region.

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Printable version | May 22, 2015 8:43:34 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/how-west-asia-views-mumbai-attacks/article1396193.ece>

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