

The Challenge of Islamist Militancy in India

By Paul Staniland

ISLAMIST MILITANT ORGANIZATIONS have targeted India for more than a decade. Bombings have bloodied the sprawling metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai and Hyderabad, as well as smaller cities and towns throughout India. Dramatic attacks have also hit the historic Red Fort in Delhi, the Indian Parliament and Kashmir's state assembly. Police and paramilitaries stand permanent guard outside government buildings, popular tourist sites and crowded markets, while terrorism alerts have become familiar headlines. For an India experiencing unprecedented economic growth, Islamist terrorism is a grim reminder of South Asia's bitter divisions.

As with much of the political violence that has roiled the subcontinent, a corrosive mixture of external and domestic causes lie behind this terrorist threat. Pakistan's sponsorship of militant groups fighting in Kashmir has allowed these organizations to build their capabilities for pushing violence into the Indian heartland. At home, a small but sufficient proportion of Indian Muslims appear to have been radicalized by vicious anti-Muslim riots instigated and enabled by nationalist Hindu politicians. While the vast majority of the 140 million Indian Muslims have no interest in militancy, a driven few believe that there can be no justice or security for Muslims in a "Hindu Raj." This combination presents a multilayered challenge to an Indian state lacking the resources of its richer peers and beset by serious challenges of development and governance.

Background to Today's Violence

When British India was partitioned in 1947, millions left their homes amidst chaos and carnage—Hindus and Sikhs fled from the newly-formed Pakistan into India, and many Muslims abandoned the historic core of the Mughal Empire in north India.¹ The riots and massacres

of partition were quickly followed by a full-scale war over the disputed princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—situated between the two new countries—which had a Muslim-majority but was ruled by a Hindu maharaja. This violence bred a foundational enmity between India and Pakistan that has continued for six decades. Further wars in 1965 and 1971 and the development of nuclear weapons by both states hardened this "conflict unending."²

For the purposes of understanding the recent wave of Islamist terrorism within India, the year 1989 marked an important moment. It was then that a serious insurgency erupted in Kashmir led by Kashmiris seeking independence, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). This rebellion was backed by Pakistan, which began supplying arms and training in large quantities to individuals and organizations fighting in Kashmir.³ Drawing on the lessons of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) believed that it could bleed India while safely shielded behind Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

The JKLF was quickly marginalized by its own organizational failures, Indian counter-insurgency strategy and Pakistani dissatisfaction with the JKLF's pro-independence ideology. A more disciplined, pro-Pakistan group rose to the fore built around the infrastructure of the Jamaat-i-Islami political party—the Hizb al-Mujahidin. Hizb al-Mujahidin carried the banners of Islam and Kashmir in the early and mid-1990s, but largely restricted its violence to the confines of the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Indian counter-insurgency efforts expanded apace, containing, though not eliminating, the Hizb al-Mujahidin. In the mid- and late-1990s, militant organizations with a dominantly Pakistani recruiting base began to take up an increasingly prominent

role in the Kashmir conflict.⁴ Harkat-ul-Mujahidin and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, soon followed by Jaysh-i-Muhammad, were based heavily in Pakistan and had ties to groups in Afghanistan; Harkat-ul-Mujahidin and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba had been formed to fight in Afghanistan and consequently shifted attention to Kashmir. They had more expansive aims than either the JKLF or Hizb al-Mujahidin, both of which drew the bulk of their cadres from Kashmir itself. The new wave of powerful jihadist groups, though different in important ways from one another, had visions of shattering the Indian state and "liberating" its Muslim components.⁵ The glories of past Mughal dominance combined with broader Islamist ideologies, creating a South Asian jihadist milieu.⁶

Pakistan provided these groups with extensive sanctuary, resources and assistance in infiltrating across the Line of Control. In this way, Kashmir laid an important organizational basis for the terrorism that would come to haunt India's streets—the Harkat, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and Jaysh-i-Muhammad would take the guns, money and training of the ISI and strike beyond Kashmir.

For this to become a sustained campaign, however, these organizations needed local assistance from Indian Muslims. Although partition divided the subcontinent along religious lines, many millions of Muslims remained in India. They tended to be less educated and poorer than the middle and upper classes who would join the elite of the new Pakistan. This relative poverty has continued—Muslims lie toward the bottom of most key statistical categories.⁷

4 This is the theme of Manoj Joshi, *The Lost Rebellion: Kashmir in the Nineties* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999); see also Navnita Chadha Behera, *Demystifying Kashmir* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

5 Another group with a smaller presence in Kashmir but a significant role in terrorist attacks within India is the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islam, which has an important Bangladesh branch. "HuJI's Role in Focus Again," *Times of India*, August 27, 2007.

6 Overviews of Islamist terrorism in South Asia can be found in Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and C. Christine Fair and Peter Chalk, *Fortifying Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2007).

7 Details of Muslim economic and social marginalization

1 Two recent overviews of partition are: Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Stanley Wolpert, *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

2 Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

3 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 53-4; Owen Bennett-Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 86-91.

Some of India's Muslims have also been influenced by tolerant strands of Islam, born of the subcontinent's exposure to numerous faiths and sects over centuries. This diversity has provided an important check on radicalism, as has the ability of Muslims to become involved in India's democratic politics as candidates, workers and government employees. The Muslim population has not historically proved a source of violent radicalism or support for Pakistan-backed militants.⁸

Hindu-Muslim Clashes

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, India witnessed a remarkable mass mobilization by Hindu nationalist leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Rallying their followers around Hindu symbols and narratives, they argued that Muslims had been appeased by the ruling Congress party. Accompanying this charge was the insinuation that Indian Muslims were secretly supporters of Pakistan, and thus a fifth column within India. The rise of Hindu nationalism triggered a wave of communal riots that targeted Muslims at the direct instigation of politicians or with the acquiescence of a politicized police force.⁹ Small groups of Muslims began developing self-defense organizations in response.¹⁰ The Hindu nationalist "saffron wave" reached a brutal crescendo in 1992 and 1993 after a Hindu mob destroyed a mosque in the north Indian city of Ayodhya. They claimed the mosque had been built on the birthsite of a Hindu god, Lord Rama.¹¹ Violence swept much of the country, killing thousands.

can be found in the Indian government's Sachar Report, discussed in Somini Sengupta, "Report Shows Muslims Near Bottom of Social Ladder," *New York Times*, November 29, 2006.

8 One of the reasons for the failure of Pakistan's attempt to seize Kashmir in 1965 was the lack of support it received from Kashmiri Muslims.

9 Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ashutosh Varshney, *Civic Life and Ethnic Conflict: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

10 Praveen Swami, "A Widening Network," *Frontline* 19:26 (2002).

11 Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Bombay (now Mumbai), India's financial capital, was the scene of vicious riots. Several months later the city was rocked by a series of coordinated bombings that left 257 dead and more than 1,000 wounded. These bombings have been widely seen as retaliation for the anti-Muslim riots and were committed by Muslims of a variety of backgrounds.¹² The murderous backlash against the Hindu nationalists' fusing of politics and violence had begun. The overwhelming majority of Muslims abhorred terrorism, but some were willing to turn to death and fear themselves.

The late 1990s saw a slow and partial merging of these two dynamics—a conflict in Kashmir with a growing presence of radical Pakistani groups, and a tiny but existent portion of India's Muslims willing to listen to

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their message and eventually accept it. Other factors were also at play, particularly the ability of Islamists to base out of Bangladesh, and the spread of sophisticated technology and explosives. This period saw an upsurge in highly visible bombings believed to have been committed by Islamist militants. Militant groups used support within India to hide, plan and receive logistics, particularly through the indigenous Students Islamic Movement of India.¹³ In 1999, for example, an Indian Airlines jet was hijacked; in 2000, Delhi's Red Fort was attacked by Lashkar-e-Tayyiba; and in December 2001 the Indian Parliament itself was assaulted by a team of militants linked to Jaysh-i-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-

12 "The 1993 Bombay bombings, say police, were in response to the 1992 destruction of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu mobs, and to avenge Muslim deaths in the rioting that followed," in Sajan Kuriokos, "Bombay Bombing: More Religious Strife?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 26, 2003.

13 Praveen Swami writes that "with local networks in place, top jihadi commanders were able to operate outside Jammu and Kashmir with ease," in "A Widening Network," *Frontline* 19:26 (2002).

Tayyiba.¹⁴ The latter attack nearly took India and Pakistan to war, resulting in a standoff between mobilized armies.¹⁵

Although war was avoided, a different kind of tragedy nevertheless lay in store. In February 2002, Hindus returning from a pilgrimage to Ayodhya were burned to death in a railway car in the state of Gujarat. While the source of the fire remains unclear (it may have been accidental), rumors immediately spread that Muslims were to blame. The BJP government is then alleged to have largely allowed radical Hindu nationalists to attack Muslims with relative impunity for several days, killing well over a thousand.¹⁶ The sweeping victory of the BJP in the consequent elections signaled that their actions were supported by large segments of the population.

Gujarat has contributed further to Muslim alienation within India.¹⁷ One of India's premier security correspondents wrote, "As a direct consequence, terrorist groups appear to have acquired greater social legitimacy than at any time in the past, even if their influence is still peripheral in the Muslim community"¹⁸ In 2003, bombings hit Mumbai; in 2005 New Delhi; in 2006 Mumbai¹⁹ and Varanasi; and in 2007 Hyderabad and Lucknow.²⁰

Conclusion

This trend has led to growing concerns that al-Qa`ida has become a force in India. There is room for concern as al-

14 John F. Burns, "Pakistan Moves Against Groups Named by India," *New York Times*, December 29, 2001.

15 V.K. Sood and Pravin Sawhney, *Operation Parakram: The War Unfinished* (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

16 Sumit Ganguly, "The Crisis of Indian Secularism," *Journal of Democracy* 14:4 (2003): pp. 11-25.

17 Many Muslims remain afraid to return to their pre-riot homes. One example is "In Concentrated Camps," *Outlook*, January 29, 2007.

18 Somini Sengupta, "India Fears Terrorism May Attract Its Muslims," *New York Times*, August 9, 2006. Examples of Muslims feeling alienated by Gujarat and Hindu nationalism can be found in Jill McGivering, "India's Muslims Feel Backlash," BBC, June 6, 2002.

19 On the coordinated train bombings in 2006 in Mumbai, and discussion of other attacks, see "Terror in Mumbai: Call This Peace?" *Economist*, July 12, 2006.

20 A slightly out-of-date chronology of major attacks in India since 9/11 (including in Jammu and Kashmir) can be found through the South Asia Terrorism Portal, available at www.satp.org.

Qa`ida leaders have specifically deemed India an enemy of Islam. Moreover, the Islamist groups targeting India have ties through Afghan and Pakistani jihadist networks to al-Qa`ida members. This does not mean, however, that al-Qa`ida has a significant presence in India. The groups that have carried out the major attacks in India have their own resources, organizational structure and social base. They have pursued their agenda since well before 9/11, and will continue doing so regardless of what happens to Usama bin Ladin's organization. Islamist militancy in and against India has its own autonomous logic and infrastructure.

India's democracy and diversity have helped it weather many storms. The overwhelming majority of its Muslims show no inclination to militancy. India's challenge is to stop further radicalization, while successfully containing militant organizations and their sympathizers. Police forces need to be professionalized so that they are not used solely as political cudgels. India's internal security agencies should be better coordinated to avoid bureaucratic conflicts and oversights. Good intelligence and police work can blunt the ability of organizations with existing networks to do significant damage. Finally, government efforts to integrate Muslims need to stop offering laundry lists of programs and instead focus on a few meaningful and achievable goals. Overcoming Islamist militancy is no easy task, but can be accomplished with a combination of straightforward policies.

For the United States, India's experience is important for several reasons. First, the groups operating in India have links to the rising tide of Islamist militancy within Pakistan. Their ability to grow within India can only increase their power in a dangerously unstable Pakistan. Organizations that can leverage support throughout the subcontinent will be enormously difficult to combat. The ability of Pakistan to control its jihadist fighters and factions is already unclear, and will certainly diminish if an independent Indian base of support develops. Second, India's attempts to maintain a liberal, multiethnic democracy in the face of terrorism can provide valuable lessons and warnings for European countries trying to deal

with problems in integrating Muslims. The Indian and European situations differ in many crucial respects, but if India proceeds wisely it can show how to avoid alienating Muslim populations without compromising the crucial attributes of secular democracy. The Indian example may thus prove relevant beyond the borders of South Asia.

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