

Mecca Masjid Bombing Report

On 18 May 2007, a bomb exploded inside the compound of the 400 year old Mecca Masjid (mosque) in the old city in Hyderabad in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh. The explosion left nine people dead and more than 50 injured. Two other devices were defused at the scene by bomb disposal experts.

The Mecca Masjid was completed in 1694 and has great symbolic meaning for the predominantly Sunni Muslim population of Hyderabad. Its main arch is created of bricks from the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. It is for this reason that the Mosque is called the Mecca Masjid. This mosque is the oldest and biggest mosque in Hyderabad.

All the bombs were remotely detonated at 1315 HRS on a Friday when the mosque is exceptionally crowded. It was reported that over 10,000 people were attending prayers within the mosque at the time of the explosion.¹ The bomb that exploded was placed next to the Wuzukhana (facility for Muslims to conduct ablutions) under a marble bench. The marble bench took the brunt of the lethal energy from the blast thus keeping the death toll small. Another possible reason for the small number of casualties is the timing of the explosion. When the bomb detonated, most of the devotees were all in the prayer area and no longer at the Wuzukhana. The other two devices placed at the entrance to the mosque were not activated contributing to the low casualty numbers. This would suggest a level of incompetence on the part of the perpetrators as they failed to anticipate the impact of the blast at that particular time.²

Investigations revealed that mobile phones were used to trigger the bomb remotely. Though the use of mobile phones to trigger improvised explosive devices is not new, this would suggest that the perpetrators were well trained. Investigators are in the process of obtaining information such as the last received call and location of purchase from the

¹'10 killed, 50 injured in Hyderabad mosque blast', The Hindu 19 May 2007
<http://www.hindu.com/2007/05/19/stories/2007051907990100.htm>

²'India: The Mecca Mosque Bombers' Poor Tradecraft', *Stratfor Terrorism Brief*, 05.18.2007
www.stratfor.com.

Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards. A Nokia mobile phone was also recovered from the scene with its display screen damaged.³ Another mobile phone was recovered from the water tank at the old Masjid. However, it is not yet known if it was the one used by the bomber or simply misplaced by a devotee although the model appears to be identical to the one that was detached from an explosive device.

The explosives used in the devices in this case were a combination of Research Department Explosive (RDX) and Trinitro Toluene (TNT). Some reports indicate that the explosives were placed in metal pipes, and then placed into tiffin boxes. The assembly of these devices drew speculation about the similarity with, particularly two bombing incidents that have occurred under similar circumstances in the past. On 14 April 2006 two explosions rocked the Jama Masjid Mosque in the capital city of Delhi. In that incident the explosions also were triggered on a Friday and they were also placed near the Wazukhana. However, the explosions in Jama Masjid in New Delhi occurred at about 1755 HRS and not at the afternoon prayer time. The bomb that exploded then was a crude device consisting of Potassium Chlorate and Sulphuric Acid unlike the far more lethal concoction of RDX and TNT as in the Mecca Masjid case. No complex circuitry or remote device was used to trigger the bomb in the earlier incident either. The two chemicals were contained in a pipe and separated by a rubber stopper. The explosion occurred when the acid corroded the rubber and reacted with the Potassium Chlorate.

The bombing in Malegaon, a small textile town in the Nashik District of Maharashtra, on 8 September 2006, shares greater similarities with the Mecca Masjid Bombing. On that occasion the bombers struck during Friday afternoon prayers within the vicinity of the Noorani mosque.⁴ The explosive used was RDX, similar to the Mecca Masjid bombing.⁵ A series of four blasts were set off, three in the nearby cemetery and one in the street. This also was similar to the modus operandi in the Mecca Masjid bombing as three

³ Cell phone holds key to mosque blast The Hindu 20 May 2007
<http://www.hindu.com/2007/05/20/stories/2007052005200800.htm>

⁴ Malegaon Blast Toll Rises to 37, Injuring Nearly 200! City Calm, but Tensed!
India Daily 09 September 2007

<http://www.indiadaily.org/entry/malegaon-blast-toll-rise-to-37-injuring-nearly-200-city-calm-but-tensed/>

⁵ 'Malegaon blasts case solved: Police', *Rediff*, 27 November 2006
<http://www.rediff.com/news/2006/nov/27malegaon.htm>

explosive devices were placed in the mosque although only one detonated. But unlike the Mecca Masjid case all the bombs were rigged to bicycles⁶ and the explosive used was a concoction of RDX, ammonium nitrate and fuel oil.⁷ Additionally, the bombing occurred on Shab-e-Bara'at, a holy day for Muslims celebrating the 15th day of the month of Sha'ban in the Islamic calendar. (Sunni Muslims believe that during this night, Allah prepares the destiny for all people on Earth for the coming year.) In the Mecca Masjid incident the day was not one considered particularly holy, beyond the routine Friday prayers.

However, there is one striking similarity in all three bombings. All the bombings took place in parts of India where there existed a large Muslim population with a history of communal violence. On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh was destroyed by Hindu rioters. In Delhi, in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid destruction, forty-two people were killed in violent riots throughout the city, particularly in the old city. Malegaon in Maharashtra state too has had its history of communal violence. Following closely after the Babri Masjid riots a series of bombings were carried out by Muslim terror groups in the city of Mumbai in Maharashtra State on 12 March 1993. Again communally fueled riots ensued and many more were killed throughout Maharashtra. During the Hindu-Muslim riots of 2001, fifteen people were killed. It also has a large community of Muslims who subscribe to an extremist Islamic view. When the US led the invasion of Afghanistan, Malegaon Muslims carried out violent street protests against the invasion which claimed the lives of some 12 people.

Hyderabad, a city of some 7 million people has a Muslim population of about 40 percent. It too has been susceptible to communal violence in the past as a result of Hindu-Muslim animosity. A pertinent example of this is the riots that occurred after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The final death toll, after the violence had subsided stood at 23 dead in the state including Hyderabad city. Again on 8 December 2003, during the anniversary of

⁶ 'Police release sketches of Malegaon blast suspects', 11 September 2006
<http://news.indiainfo.com/2006/09/11/1109police-sketches-malegaon.html>

⁷ 'Malegaon, 7/11: Same Lethal cocktail used', *Time of India*, 12 September
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1980270.cms>

the demolition of the Babri mosque, Hindus and Muslims clashed resulting in the death of 5 people in Hyderabad.

The motive of this bombing in Hyderabad appears to fan communal tensions eventually leading to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims. The Samjhauta Express bombings on 18 February 2007 in Panipat in Haryana State targeted Muslims travelling between India and Pakistan. The majority of the dead were believed to be Muslims. Three days after the Mecca Masjid bombing, three explosive devices were found aboard a train in Kolkatta in the state of West Bengal. The train was set to travel from Howrah Station to Tarakeswar, a town considered sacred to Hindus and visited by scores of pilgrims daily. In fact, there seems to be an escalation of a systematic effort to propagate such tensions.

Fortunately, the situation after this incident has been relatively calm. Small scale violence occurred in the immediate aftermath between devotees and the police resulting in the death of 5 persons. Hundreds of police were deployed in riot gear and Muslims called for a day long strike in protest of the bombing and lack of security provided by the police. The number of casualties in the riot is small considering Hyderabad's past history of communal violence. Two days after the bombing and ensuing violence, calm returned to the streets of Hyderabad and normalcy was restored in the city. This would demonstrate that ordinary citizens are not provoked despite the evil designs of the perpetrators. The same was the outcome after the Islamist groups bombed local trains in Mumbai in July 2006.

Investigators have identified two terror groups as possible suspects. These are the Bangladesh based Harkat ul-Jihad Islami (HuJI) and the Paksitan based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).⁸ Both groups are believed to have a significant presence in Hyderabad and the means to carry out such attacks. Police have pointed the finger at

⁸ 'Mystery woman at blast', *Deccan Chronicle*, 21 May 2007
<http://www.deccan.com/home/homedetails.asp#Mystery%20woman%20at%20blast>

Mohammed Abdul Shahed, alias Bilal as the main perpetrator in the bombings.⁹ He is reportedly a member of HuJI and has been trained by JeM. He is also said to be the leader of terrorist activities in south India.¹⁰ Details of his involvement remain sketchy at this time. Abdul Shahed is also one of those believed to be responsible for the Samjhauta Express Train bombings.¹¹

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⁹ 'Blast Friday throws up Bengal link', *The Telegraph*, 20 May 2007
<http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>

¹⁰ 'Blast suspect was trained at Jaish camp', *The Hindu*, 21 May 2007
<http://www.hindu.com/2007/05/21/stories/2007052105491200.htm>

¹¹ 'Blast Friday throws up Bengal link', *The Telegraph*, 20 May 2007
http://www.telegraphindia.com/1070520/asp/frontpage/story_7803451.asp