

Picking up the pieces in Mumbai

Many questions remain about who the terrorists were and what they wanted

By Tom Quiggin and Arabinda Acharya December 9, 2008



An Indian national flag is held up during an anti-terror protest rally outside the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai.

Photograph by : Punit Paranjpe, Reuters

A small group of terrorists was able to upset all of India while fascinating the world's media with their bold attack on Mumbai. But nearly two weeks later, much is still unanswered.

Who are they and why did they do this? Are they insane? Who armed and trained them? Is this a religious or political act?

Many observers are blaming the attack on the Pakistani-based Lashkar-e-Toiba terrorist group. It still remains unclear, however, as to how much local support was provided, such as the initial targeting and surveillance activities necessary for such an attack to succeed. Many observers have also placed the blame on the government of Pakistan or its intelligence service.

This problem was not unforeseen. By 2006, it was clear that India was facing both an internal and

external jihadist problem. This new form of militancy would have two defining characteristics. One would be a new form of decentralized yet coherent organizational structure. The other was that there would be new forms of attacks. Included in these new forms of attack are fidayeen, or no-surrender attacks.

Numerous terrorist attacks have occurred in India. In 2008, there have been four attacks alone which have been claimed by the "Indian Mujahideen" which is an offshoot of the Student Islamic Movement of India. Up to 2002, it had been thought that India's Muslim population was immune to the message of "global Islamic jihad."

The militancy problem in India is different from the homegrown jihadists whom we see in Canada and other western countries. This is not a "failed integration" problem. Rather, this is a tiny minority of youths who have developed a transnational consciousness. They have taken on board the al-Qaeda-inspired global message of violent jihad against the "Jews and Crusaders," which is clearly seen in the case of Mumbai.

Are these individuals insane? Are they drugged? Are they religious fanatics? The answer to all of these questions is "no" and that is truly frightening. Only in the rarest of cases (less than one per cent) has it been shown that jihadist-inspired terrorist have any sort of mental problems. They come from stable families with no major drug problems.

The individuals who are recruited to this form of terrorism are vulnerable precisely because of their lack of religious knowledge. Almost all of the jihadist terrorists to date have come from a low-practising or non-practising religious background. The motivations for these individuals are almost exclusively political. Perceived or real, the grievances they discuss use words such as oppression, deprivation, a colonialist past and their own puppet governments.

When you listen to the recordings of the terrorists during the attacks, several things become clear. One is that the longstanding problems in Kashmir were not even mentioned. The second is that the terrorists were intent on hitting both foreign and domestic targets. One of the terrorists who spoke from besieged Nariman House was using rhetorical phrases, but he was concerned both about the killing of Muslims in Gujarat in India, as well as the situation in Palestine.

The last thing that was clear from their recordings is that they have no long-term plan. Their objective was to kill as many people as possible, including foreigners, while creating inter-communal tensions. Like most al-Qaeda inspired terrorists, their future plan includes only some dreamy ideas about installing "caliphates."

Were they working under foreign influence? It should be noted that the governments of India and Pakistan both blame each other for any new problem. It is unlikely that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency would directly undertake such an operation. Clearly, the ISI has been involved in all sorts of nefarious operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but this is outside of even its fanatical view of what constitutes a legitimate operation. The ISI has also lost control over most of the groups that it helped create to fight in Kashmir.

The infamous Pakistan-based terrorism group Lashkar-e-Toiba played a role. This type of attack is typical of the LeT, and they have trained other groups as well.

It should also be noted that the criminal elements that surround Dawood Ibrahim may be involved as well. Ibrahim is India's most wanted man due to his criminal activities involving drugs, guns and money. It is believed that he organized a bombing attack in India in 1993. Ibrahim's main man in India for this operation is identified only as Muhammad Ali and he is known to operate in the coastal waters near Mumbai.

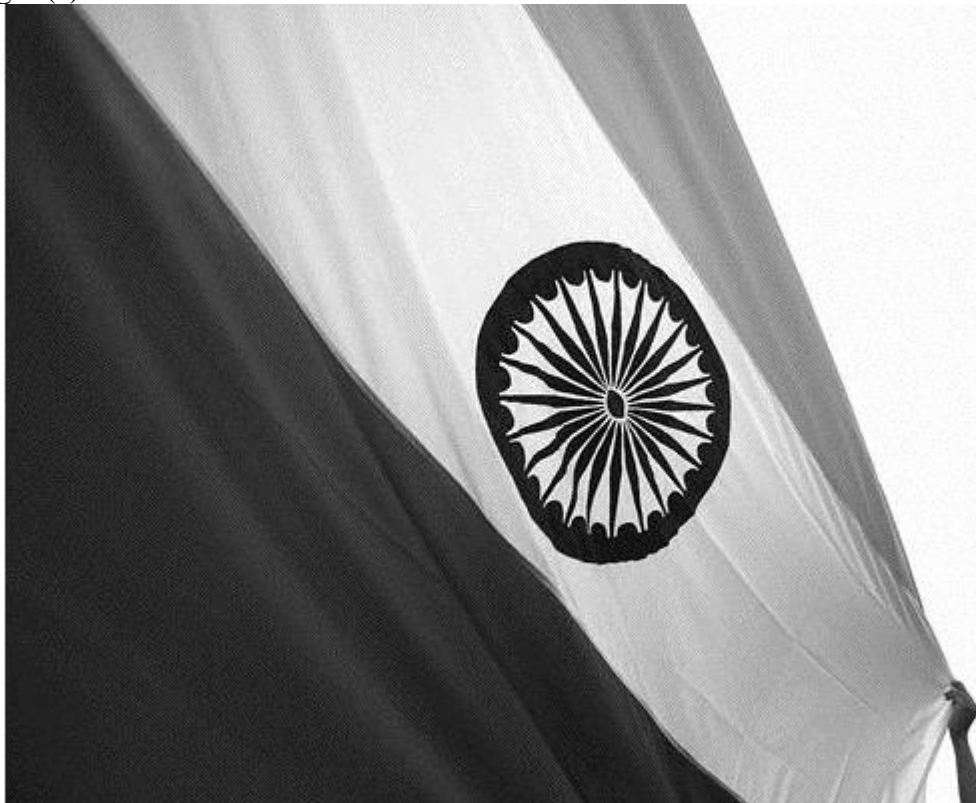
As for al-Qaeda, it is unlikely that they have provided anything in this case beyond inspiration, propaganda and rhetoric. The "core" group of al-Qaeda is now some 100 to 200 people in the tribal areas of Pakistan, down from its height of 3,000 or more. It is mainly in survival mode and has not been able to singularly carry out a major attack since 2001.

Many multicultural states are reluctant to deal with the problems of extremism that are increasingly infecting the political and social systems. With many people losing faith in the political and judicial systems, there is a space opening for more, rather than less, radicalization. As has been noted in many countries, radicalization often leads to violent extremism.

It should be remembered by Canadians that the individuals arrested in the "Toronto 18" conspiracy allegedly had two major strikes being planned. One was to use a truck bomb to attack a major building. The other was to simply take the guns they had obtained and go into a crowded public and open fire.

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