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India in the face of global jihad: Time to re-evaluate?

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IS INDIA now on the map of global jihad? The arrests of two Indian Muslims, Sabeel Ahmed and Kafeel Ahmed, from the United Kingdom in connection with the failed London and Glasgow bombings on 29-30 June 2007, seem to suggest this. Both Indians are young, well educated established professionals, who represent India's Muslim middle class. Significantly they belong to the state of Karnataka, where literacy among Muslims is higher than other parts of the country, and particularly from Bangalore, the cosmopolitan Information Technology (IT) hub of India. Kafeel Ahmed keenly followed events in Afghanistan and Palestine. Evidence gathered from his house includes speeches delivered by Osama Bin Laden, graphic videos of tortured Chechen terrorists and online manuals on how to prepare bombs.

This is the first time that Indian professionals working abroad are being directly linked to a terrorist attack overseas. The implications of this development are two-fold. On the one hand, it portrays the increasing identification of Indian Muslims with the cause of global jihad. On the other hand, the involvement of educated professionals in terrorism could be detrimental to India's economic and business interests.

The shift

From 1989, with the rise of insurgency in Kashmir, Indian Muslims, albeit a minority, have sympathized with the cause of terrorist groups whose focus was primarily the liberation of Kashmir. However, today what is being seen is a shift in mindset. The emerging pattern now points to indigenous Islamist radicals, many of them educated, middle-class professionals, who are identifying themselves more and more with the movement for global jihad, being spearheaded by groups like Al Qaeda and its allies.

This trend was first noticed in the profiles of some of the perpetrators arrested in connection with the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and the Mumbai bombing in 2003 and 2006. For the 2003 blasts in Mumbai, of the 23 arrested, there were five engineers, three physicians, a business-school graduate, two college graduates and a doctoral student. These people apparently kept keen interest on the 9/11 attacks. Muzammil Sheikh and Tanvir Ansari, two of the suspects implicated in the 2006 train bombings in India, are a computer professional and an Indian traditional doctor respectively. Additionally, examples of Mohammed Abdul Mateen and Jalees Ansari, both doctors by profession are manifestations of a rising radical consciousness among the Muslim middle class in India. Interestingly, Muslim radicals with Western educational backgrounds tend often to be educated in the sciences and engineering. This phenomenon reflects the tendency of such radicals to have been transformed by an increasing consciousness of religion while in university. They tend to read religious texts literally, just like their engineering or mathematics texts, unlike social science students who

adopt a more critical approach to their academic texts.

Their profiles are similar to the three men arrested for the failed London and Glasgow terrorist attacks. However, while most of the people responsible for the Mumbai bombings and the Parliament attacks were affiliated to a terrorist group, the three Indians arrested seem to have been self-radicalised. Similarly, there is a shift in the choice of target -- from the near enemy to the far enemy. The June 2007 attempts in the UK show that for the first time, a Western target was chosen, thus displaying the shift of consciousness from the domestic to the global level.

Certain events may have caused the radicalization of these Indian Muslims. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 by Hindu fanatics was a direct affront against the political, religious and cultural dominance of Islam during successive Muslim rulers in the past. A decade later, the Gujarat riots witnessed the manifestation of a new level of religious hatred with hundreds of Muslims killed by Hindu fundamentalists, polarizing the Hindu and the Muslim communities even further. The Bombay blasts, in 2003 and again in 2006, were motivated by a desire to avenge the Gujarat riots.

Apart from domestic issues, the Indian Muslim psyche may be getting further radicalized in recent years by the tensions created by events like the invasion of Iraq, and the Danish cartoon controversy. Mainstream Muslims especially those in the countryside who previously kept themselves away from the global Islamist agenda are getting increasingly sensitized about these incidents which are being projected as a clash of civilizations and conspiracy on the part of the West to denigrate Islam as a religion. There is now the rising threat that Muslim sentiments in India may be becoming as much hateful of the West as they are now in some other parts of the world.

The implications

India is a country with over 170 million Muslims, making up the second largest Muslim populace in the world after Indonesia. So far the democratic polity has managed to accommodate diverse interest groups representing India's numerous castes, languages, and religion. However to respond to this phenomenon of radicalization, the Indian security and law enforcement agencies need to increase surveillance and monitoring. There will be higher levels of screening for jobs both in the public and the private sector. This will inevitably be denounced as 'religious' profiling. An earlier attempt to profile Muslims in various sectors was denounced by the community as a ploy by the Indian government to further discriminate the minority. In a country where religious sentiments are being increasingly sensitized, such profiling could deepen the schism leading to social unrest. Ultimately this would undermine the secular credentials of the Indian state.

The arrest of the Indian Muslims similarly has critical consequences for Indian educational and business interests. A combination of low-cost labour and a highly educated, English-speaking workforce has made India's knowledge and IT sector a significant component in the business of many multinational corporations, especially in the software, e-commerce and customer-service industries. As many as half of the Fortune 500 industries are customers of Indian information-technology companies, and nearly as many of these firms have outsourced their customer service and support functions to India. There will now be a concern about information leaks and stolen data. For example, Kafeel Ahmed worked for Infotech Enterprises, an outsourcing company, which designs aircraft parts for clients like Boeing and Airbus. There is a fear that he could have accessed sensitive information from the client's business data. This could have negative consequences for India's business interests, as foreign institutional investors may now have reservations about hiring Muslim employees and conducting a large part of their business in India. Additionally, there are the social repercussions they would have to deal with if indeed a system of 'religious profiling' is implemented.

Similarly, for Indian Muslims desiring to study and work abroad, there will be enhanced surveillance

leading to decrease in the number of visas and permits as was the case in the United States following the 9/11 attacks. After the June 2007 incidents, Australia and the United Kingdom have already indicated that Indian professionals will have to undergo stringent checks. According to 2006 figures, the Indian diaspora contributed US\$25 billion out of the US\$ 800 billion making up India's GDP. Any potential curb in jobs for Indians abroad will affect the Indian economy that is growing at a rate of 8% per annum.

The involvement of the two Indian Muslims in the terrorist attacks in the UK has raised the question whether it is time to re-evaluate the trend of Muslim radicalism in India. On one hand, much effort has to be put in to maintain India's secular identity. At the same time the Indian government has to ascertain that the threat of Muslim radicalization at home does not hinder its economic progress, while at the same time not alienate the majority of Muslims in India.

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