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Al Qaeda in India: Why We Should Pay Attention

Al Qaeda has announced the formation of a new branch in the Indian Subcontinent, a part of the world where it already has well-established operations. Sunil Dasgupta worries that the move may be part of a new strategy to enlist India's large and disaffected Muslim underclass in the service of global jihad.

By Sunil Dasgupta for ISN

In September 2014, al-Qaeda announced that it was launching a branch in the Indian subcontinent. The move was widely seen as an effort by al-Qaeda as an organization to remain relevant in a world where the Islamic State (IS) was taking over the mantle it had held for more than a decade. CNN's terrorism expert, Peter Bergen, described the issue this way, "It's al-Zawahiri's obvious way of getting some of the limelight back."

Despite the nonchalance and occasional derision that greeted Ayman al-Zawahiri's 'boring' 55-minute video announcing the formation of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (or AQIS, as it has become known in the terrorism literature), this is more than simply inside-the-jihad competition. Why should a terrorist group, which has long maintained a substantial presence in the region, feel the need to announce a formal structure dedicated to its activities there? The answer may be an alarming one. The move may be part of a broader strategy to enlist elements of India's disenfranchised Muslim underclass in the service of the group's global agenda.

Pakistan: From home-grown to global terrorism

Pakistan has been described as part of the epicenter of terrorism in the world. It is where U.S. Navy Seals found and killed Osama bin Laden, and it is where al-Zawahiri is believed to be hiding. In recent years, the country has seen a significant increase in religious extremist violence from a mélange of terrorist groups. The Taliban movement it had supported in Afghanistan in the 1990s has now come home in the form of the Pakistani Taliban that is ravaging parts of the country.

What makes the emergence of AQIS significant, however, is that it is the first time a *global* jihadi organization has explicitly targeted the governments and the people in the region. The entire Indian subcontinent has seen an extraordinary amount of terrorism in the last 35 years, but most of it was home-grown.

Pakistan, for example, has had a history of hosting foreign fighters, but globally focused terrorist

groups have not acted directly against the Pakistani state even after al-Qaeda and others condemned it for joining the American coalition in 2001. Pakistani militants and Pakistani groups have led and conducted the insurgency against Islamabad. The Pakistani government has itself distinguished between terrorist groups focused outward, such as the Haqqani Network fighting U.S. armed forces in Afghanistan, and the groups fighting the Pakistani state such as the Pakistani Taliban. Now, as the line between the two evaporates, the willingness and ability of the Pakistani state itself to abandon this distinction, which has been the source of much acrimony with Washington and New Delhi, may determine the future of the country.

India: From a cross-border to a domestic threat

The rise of AQIS takes on still greater significance in India, which has also suffered a great deal of terrorism in the last three decades. In India, Islamist violence has been mostly Pakistani in origin and generally focused on India itself rather than the world order. The Lashkar-e-Taiba, which conducted the Mumbai attack in 2008, emerged as an anti-India movement, and Pakistan has long supported an insurgency in Indian Kashmir. AQIS, however, represents an alliance between local and global terrorism. Wherever it has occurred, this combination has proven to be deadly: locally disaffected young men working together with global terrorist networks have carried out most of the terrorist attacks in Western nations since the September 11 attacks.

For India, this is a potent and perhaps its preeminent security threat. India has over 170 million Muslims and while Indian democracy brings many Muslim leaders, interests, and groups into the fold, a large number of Muslims continue to live as a veritable underclass—inside ghettos, without modern education, and unable to access the emerging 'Indian Dream'. Worse, those Muslims who are able to overcome these circumstances are often faced with discrimination and experience feelings of guilt and helplessness. Now armed with modern technologies, they could become ripe for global jihad. This is why it is not surprising that one of the most popular pro-ISIS Twitter handles belonged to a young Muslim engineer, Mehdi Masroor Biswas, in the Indian city of Bengaluru, formerly Bangalore.

Indian security officials are wary of the terrorist threat emanating from Pakistan, perhaps too much so. After the Mumbai attacks in 2008, when the terrorists came into the city by sea, the Indian government redoubled and reorganized its intelligence apparatus, which has made the Indian security agencies more confident of anticipating threats coming from outside the country, especially if they are large enough to involve satellite or cellular communications. In the last few months, India has responded with significant force to any signs from Pakistan that it considers provocative.

This has resulted in increased shelling on the India-Pakistan border by the armed forces of both countries. On the last day of 2014, the explosion of a Pakistani fishing vessel in the Arabian Sea, off the Indian coast, was a further demonstration of India's new resolve. Newspaper reports indicate that India's National Technical Research Organization picked up satellite telephone communication between the 25-foot fishing boat and handlers in Karachi, leading the Indian Coast Guard to conduct aerial surveillance that resulted in a coast guard ship trying to intercept and board the vessel. According to the Indian version, the four-member crew perished after setting the boat on fire rather than allowing it to be boarded. Pakistani officials have said that the boat may have been involved in drug smuggling but reject any connection to terrorism.

However, the possibility of domestic terrorism has been growing in India at the same time that the Indian government seems to be hardening its resolve to deal forcefully with external threats. The roots of the domestic threat are deeply social, economic, and psychological. They are embedded in a Muslim underclass that presents complex problems for unity and progress in the country. But the driver of the growing domestic threat has been political. The rise of Narendra Modi, a Hindu chauvinist politician, to the office of Prime Minister in a landslide election victory has aggrieved and unsettled

many Muslims. Despite acquittal by the courts and official investigators, many Indians still believe that Modi had a hand in the Gujarat riots that killed over 700 Muslims in 2002 when he was Chief Minister of the state. Meanwhile, Modi's rise has been accompanied by a degree of Hindu triumphalism and a push toward majoritarian nationalism.

AQIS: Aligning domestic grievances with global aims?

In these conditions, AQIS offers a link between local disaffection and global terrorism that seeks to remake the world order itself. It gives educated young Muslims like Biswas a way to connect to a broader and a global community. In police interviews after his arrest, he called Indian Muslims "sarkari"—a term close to "Uncle Tom" for blacks in the United States—and incapable of fighting against the government. It also gives young uneducated Muslim men, who might otherwise have joined a criminal gang, a religious-political platform.

Since the release of al-Zawahiri's video in September, AQIS has claimed responsibility for two major terrorist attacks, both of them inside Pakistan. The first incident was the assassination of a Pakistani army brigadier and the second was an attack on a Pakistani navy frigate docked in the Port of Karachi. AQIS has not yet claimed credit for an attack on India, but the political and social conditions are in place. The formation of AQIS may very well be intramural competition with IS, but it also seeks to gather local Muslim disaffection, especially in India, toward its larger project of changing the world order.

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Sunil Dasgupta is the director of University of Maryland Baltimore County's Political Science Program at the Universities at Shady Grove. His research and teaching focuses on security and foreign policy. He is currently working on research examining changing military organization and Indian and Chinese pursuit of great power status."

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