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Threat of Indian Mujahideen: The Long View

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Abstract

The explosions in Patna in India on 27 October 2013, targeting a political rally, once again brought the Indian Mujahideen into media focus. Far from being a localised group trying to exploit local grievances, the Indian Mujahideen is fast emerging as both a formidable group within India and also an example for terrorist formations elsewhere.

Introduction

The origin and growth of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) have been linked to a host of issues including communal riots, perceived alienation among the Muslims, and even India's diplomatic relations with Israel. Some organisations and personalities have, on the other hand, termed it a mere conception of the intelligence agencies and an imagination of the media. Such speculations and presumptions notwithstanding, the evolution of the IM and its growth dynamics continue to be baffling. In the context of 18 episodes of explosions in 14 Indian cities since 2005, which

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accounted for hundreds of deaths, and despite the arrests and capture of several cadres, the group's violent campaign appears interminable and its capacities seem unassailable. The success of the IM could inspire terrorist outfits elsewhere to emulate, revitalise and challenge the state in a unique way.

Home-Grown and Expanding

The IM's aims and objectives, loosely defined as 'a war on a Hindu India on behalf of the persecuted Muslims' have constantly shifted. The first-ever 'manifesto' of the group released in 2007, after the bombings of court complexes in Lucknow, Varanasi and Faizabad, claimed that the blasts were intended to "punish local lawyers" who had attacked suspects held for an abortive kidnap plot by the terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). Two other 'manifestos', released after the 2008 blasts in Delhi and the 2010 explosions in Varanasi, faulted "the Supreme Court, the high courts, the lower courts and all the commissions" for failing the Muslims in India. The focus on the judiciary has since shifted and in fact has become more mysterious, with the outfit discontinuing the practice of mailing its 'manifesto' following each attack, compelling the state agencies to depend upon the interrogation of arrested cadres to unravel the intentions behind the explosions.

As per such interrogation reports, the explosions in Pune in the state of Maharashtra in August 2012 were intended to avenge the killing of its imprisoned cadre Qateel Siddique by his cell mates. Blasts targeting the Buddhist shrine in Bodhgaya in the state of Bihar in July 2013 were said to have been in response to the attacks on the Rohingyas in Myanmar. The 27 October 2013 explosions in Patna, Bihar were reportedly carried out to protest against the communal riots in Muzaffarnagar in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh. The recovery of a large amount of explosives at Ranchi in the state of Jharkhand on 4 November² demonstrated the outfit's plan of maintaining the momentum in its violent campaign. Similarly, the recovery of other documents has further pointed to the possibility of the IM carrying out more violent attacks on Buddhist shrines, on foreign tourists, and public installations in the state of Chhattisgarh.³ The choice of such a wide array of unconnected objectives underscores the fact that, instead of remaining a purely ideology-based organisation with both local as well as global aspirations, the IM could be willing to carry out attacks by invoking almost any cause that might suit its convenience. Believed to be controlled by external forces and to nurture the aspiration of making common

² "Nine live bombs recovered in Ranchi", *Times Now*, 4 November 2013, <http://www.timesnow.tv/Nine-live-bombs-recovered-in-Ranchi/articleshow/4440756.cms>. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

³ Gyan Prakash, "Patna bombers had planned to target Rajgir, Nalanda", *Times of India*, 13 November 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Patna-bombers-had-planned-to-target-Rajgir-Nalanda/articleshow/25664998.cms>. Accessed on 14 November 2013.

cause with the Al Qaeda⁴, the IM's image could be transcending way beyond the metaphors of a traditional outfit that was triggering explosions only on behalf of the 'wronged Indian Muslims'. Largely defined as an indigenous or home-grown terror organisation within India, the IM leadership does not appear to be averse to the idea of transforming the outfit into a pan-Islamist terrorist formation in the long run.

Shadowy Network

The IM inherited a band of highly radicalised individuals from the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), the proscribed Islamist outfit, which served as a contact group and service provider for Pakistan-based outfits like the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami (HuJI) and JeM. Along with these outfits, SIMI was involved in a spate of attacks in India's urban centres. Towards the late-1990s and early-2000, however, SIMI underwent a vertical split, with a hyper-radical group separating from the parent organisation and forming the IM. Since then, meticulous planning combined with external support from its sponsors in Pakistan has shaped the IM into a formidable group.

Its success as a terror group rests primarily on the secrecy surrounding its operations. Information on the process of recruitment of cadres, assembly of weapons, funding pattern and internal sharing of vital information largely remain in the realm of unknown. In fact, its organisational fluidity and operational secrecy have turned out to be its greatest strength. Since its first attack in 2005, the outfit has managed to carefully create a highly fluid structure, capable of withstanding losses resulting from arrests of its cadres and pressures from the state agencies, and to continue with its bombing campaigns. While its top leadership is believed to be based outside the country, the middle-level and low-rank functionaries are primarily based in India, dispersed throughout the country and operating as 'shadowy networks' of small modules. A belief in the ideology of the group binds the modules together, whereas knowledge and operational plans to orchestrate attacks remain module-specific and localised. As a result, full knowledge of the group's operational dynamics and overall strategy is not available with a single module. The possibility that the IM could have undergone multiple splits itself, with each faction reporting to various leaders based in India and outside, has further complicated an understanding of the organisation's changing character and mode of operation.

The adoption of an amorphous decentralised structure and *modus operandi* contributes to the outfit's success and prevents an outflow of complete information in case a cadre falls into the hands of the state agencies. This explains the reason why so little is known about the operational aspects of the outfit, even after the arrest of hundreds of its cadres involved in the previous episodes of explosions. One important addition to this long list of arrests was Yasin Bhatkal, a

⁴ Neeraj Chauhan, "Indian Mujahideen would be under al-Qaida: Riyaz told Yasin", *Times of India*, 3 November 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-11-03/india/43627820_1_riyaz-yasin-bhatkal-afghan-taliban. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

senior leader of the outfit who was picked up from a village on the Indo-Nepal border in August 2013.⁵ Each such arrest has led to revelations of interesting bits of information about the cadres' personal history within the organisation but almost nothing about the organisation's future targets and activities. Not surprisingly, the arrest of Yasin Bhatkal did not yield much indication about the explosions in Patna, which were to occur less than two months after his arrest.

The IM tasks its modules to function as focal points of contact for recruitment drives. Educated, computer- and tech-savvy youths are the usual targets. However, young men who do not fall into the broad description of tech-savvy have also been recruited to be used to plant explosives, function as couriers and to assist in logistics. As the Patna blasts revealed, the haste in using the newly-recruited cadres in planting explosives has contributed to failures in the organisation's plans. In recent times, a young woman, students preparing for competitive examinations, shop- and hotel-owners, and even a former retired police officer have come under the scanner of the intelligence outfits for being active cadres of the outfit. Yet, the neutralisation of the IM's fully expendable cadres is not expected to impact the outfit in a significant manner.

The IM has used locally-procured materials to manufacture improvised explosive devices (IEDs), a tactic which not only makes the manufacturing process cost-effective but averts the danger of interception. At the same time, the IM also has worked to create depots of centrally-manufactured IEDs, to be supplied to individual modules when required.⁶ The outfit retains the services of few explosives experts, which include a couple of Pakistani citizens. Over the years, some Indian cadres have also been trained in assembling the IEDs, although their level of perfection may not have reached the highest levels. Some of the IEDs used in Patna and Pune failed to explode because of manufacturing faults.

In spite of some recent operational failures, the IM remains an extremely tricky outfit to neutralise. Indian official assessments of the IM's strength have varied significantly. In 2011, based on the interrogation of an IM cadre, Danish Riyaz, the agencies concluded that the arrests of a large number of cadres have severely dented the group's operational capabilities and badly affected its recruitment- and fund-raising drives. Recent official assessments, however, portray the picture of the IM as not just regaining its strength within India, but having spread into Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.⁷

⁵ Rahi Gaikwad, "IM founder Yasin Bhatkal arrested", *The Hindu*, 30 August 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/im-founder-yasin-bhatkal-arrested/article5070960.ece>. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

⁶ Neeraj Chauhan, "90 'ready-to-use' IEDs found at Indian Mujahideen hideouts in Mangalore, Hyderabad", *Times of India*, 16 September 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-09-16/india/42113155_1_yasin-bhatkal-ieds-ammonium-nitrate. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

⁷ Rahul Tripathi, "Indian Mujahideen has grown stronger, spread to Pakistan and Afghanistan", *Indian Express*, 17 October 2013, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/indian-mujahideen-has-grown-stronger-spread-to-pakistan-and-afghanistan/1183524/>. Accessed on 5 November 2013.

Lessons Learnt for Southeast Asia

The success of the IM could indeed provide important pointers to the possible recovery of some of the groups in Southeast Asia from their current state of weakness and to how they might be able to recalibrate their strategies. The IM's unique personalised recruitment campaign, operational dynamics, localised mode of operations, harnessing of local grievances and global issues for eliciting support, and seamless switching between prominent cities and lesser-known locations for its bombing campaigns, could impart lessons to radical Islamists in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. Within the operating environments and constraints imposed upon their activities by the state agencies in Southeast Asia, these groups can attempt to seek a turn-around in their anti-state campaigns by using the IM model. While the IM's linkages with the Al Qaeda still belong to realm of speculation, the Southeast Asian groups, especially those belonging to Indonesia and the Philippines, already have a head-start in this regard, which could make them even more lethal.

On the other hand, the three key problems affecting the Indian response to the IM's violent campaign have several lessons for the counter-terror practitioners in the region. First, the presence of external support and India's sense of non-cooperation from Pakistan, where the top leadership of the IM is based, are critical elements for the survival of the top echelons of the outfit's leadership. Second, the lack of coordination between the centre and the states (provinces) in India inhibits the framing of a unified and effective counter-terrorism response. And third, knowledge gap regarding the changing character of the group prevents a fair assessment of its strength and effective responses to thwart future attacks.

Accordingly, the preparedness among the Southeast Asian countries to deal with any such evolving threat from the local groups would be critically linked not just to inter-state cooperation and intelligence-sharing, but also to the capacity to collect ground-level and operational intelligence regarding terrorist recruitment, dynamics and plans to take advantage of local grievances. Apart from expecting the directly-affected countries to share intelligence with their unaffected neighbours, the latter have an obligation to work closely with and, to an extent, show solidarity by offering resources and expertise to the less-resourceful countries so that they could effectively deal with the threat .

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