

## **THE INDIAN MUJAHIDEEN: A RESURGENCE OF TERROR\***

By

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The blood that flowed through Varanasi on the evening of December 7, 2010, marked yet another appalling episode in the history of India's prolonged combat with the various subversive elements spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. Soon after the devastating attack that rocked the portals of the temple town, an e-mail was sent to various prominent media houses by the Indian Mujahideen claiming responsibility for the attack. The e-mail claimed that the blast was in retaliation to the verdict in the Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi title suit case. Security agencies traced the Internet Protocol address of the five-page e-mail signed by 'Al-Arbi' to the suburbs of Mumbai.<sup>i</sup> Police teams were immediately despatched to the area for further investigation, the results of which are awaited.<sup>ii</sup>

At this juncture, it would be prudent to look into the inception as well the activities of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) in order to understand their composition, terror tactics, modus operandi, as well as the issues that inflame their operations. Thus, this paper focuses on

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\* This is the first part of a series of papers based on a study of the Indian Mujahideen.

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the inception of the IM, their links with the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), the ideology that they profess, and the various attacks that have been attributed to the same. Since the subject requires an in-depth research into the intricacies of the terror group as well as its links with other groups, this paper deals with certain aspects of the same. It is the initial part of a series of papers based on a study of the Indian Mujahideen.

### The Inception of the Indian Mujahideen (IM)

A study of the modus operandi of the IM has shown that the role of educated and technologically advanced youth in masterminding and executing terror attacks is of utmost importance. Such subversive elements have been indoctrinated with assorted ideologies like the Wahhabi and Deobandi schools of thought, to give legitimacy to their version of terror in the name of Islam. Drawing their own interpretations of the Quran, there has been a rapid spread of ‘radical’ teaching in the mushrooming *madrasas*. During the recent times there has been a sudden surge in the formation of such destructive organisations throughout India. One such organisation is the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), which gave birth to the IM.<sup>iii</sup>

SIMI<sup>iv</sup> was founded with 250 members on April 15, 1977, by Mohammed Ahmedullah Siddiqui, as the students’ wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH).<sup>v</sup> JIH was the first organised Islamic reformist movement in India formed in Lahore on August 26, 1941, under the leadership of Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi.<sup>vi</sup> However, the alliance between the JIH and SIMI lasted only till 1981, when radical student members of SIMI protested against Yasser Arafat’s visit to India, while the senior JIH leaders saw him as a champion. The rift in ideologies led JIH to abandon SIMI and float a new students’ wing, the Students Islamic Organisation, while SIMI continued as a separate hard-line Islamic organisation.<sup>vii</sup>

After breaking away from JIH, SIMI underwent radicalisation, and its fanatical position was dictated entirely by geo-political events taking place in the world, which were

interpreted as direct attacks on Islam and Muslims. Events, both domestic and international, which led to a shift in SIMI's philosophy, were:

- The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and toppling of the Shah of Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini.
- The imposition of harsh Shariah laws in Pakistan by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1980.
- The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992.
- The militancy in the Kashmir Valley since 1989.<sup>viii</sup>

Provoked by the Godhra carnage of 2002, the divide, assisted by the ISI, LeT and HuJI, eventually led to the creation of a new militant organisation of SIMI called the Indian Mujahideen. It was co-founded by Riyaz Shahbandri and Abdul Subhan Qureshi. The IM, at this point in time, consisted of students, most of them Kashmiris, studying in Deobandi madrasas in South Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The Indian Mujahideen was, thus, born, taught by its masters to spread jihadist doctrines in India, through homegrown militants, aided, abetted and calibrated from across the borders.<sup>ix</sup>

### The Ideology

The name Indian Mujahideen is apparently drawn from a book on a *jihad* waged by two Islamic warriors in north-west India around 1831 in Balakot, now in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK), and which suited the terror mission devised by the Students Islamic Movement of India.<sup>x</sup> The IM ideology primarily draws inspiration from the Wahhabi philosophy of the Deobandi School, which practises a rigid, puritanical version of Islam. All the arrested members of the IM and SIMI, so far, have been students of Deobandi *madrasas* from Bharuch, Ujjain, Azamgarh and Saharanpur.

The Deobandi Wahhabis advocate that a Muslim's first loyalty is to his religion and only then to his country. Secondly, Muslims should recognise only the religious frontiers of their *ummah* (community) and not national frontiers. Thirdly, they have a sacred right and obligation to go to any country to wage *jihad* to protect the Muslims of that country.<sup>xi</sup> The Deobandi and Ahle-e-Hadith schools were revived in India through funding by Saudi charities, when oil prices skyrocketed in the 1970s. Significantly, a majority of terror groups like the JeM, HuJI, LeT, HuA and now the IM owe 'allegiance' to the Deobandi *madrasas* and the Mawdudi school of thought. Thus, the Deobandi school of thought and Wahhabism combined to form an extremist version of radical Islam, which advocates the prominence of *jihad* for Islamisation.<sup>xii</sup>

### The Leadership

The leadership of the IM can primarily be traced to a man from Mumbai named Abdul Subhan Usman Qureshi, code name "Kasim" or "al-arbi" who has signed the e-mail manifestos sent by the IM before and after the multiple blasts of 2008. It has been reported that he may have escaped into Bangladesh recently. Interestingly, Qureshi's background refutes the theory that most IM cadres come from deprived backgrounds or are schooled in radical *madrasas*. Qureshi studied at the Antonio DeSouza High School ran by a Christian missionary in Byculla, Mumbai, and came from an economically privileged background. In 1995, he obtained a diploma in industrial electronics and in 1996, a specialised software maintenance qualification from the CMS Institute in Marol. After obtaining these degrees, he joined various software and computer firms. However, somewhere during this period, Qureshi was also harbouring radical ideologies and in 2001, he left his job at the firm stating in his resignation letter that "I have decided to devote one complete year to pursue religious and spiritual matters."<sup>xiii</sup>

According to Mumbai police intelligence, by 1998, Qureshi was one of the most committed SIMI activists to edit one of SIMI's house-magazines, *Islamic Voice*, from New Delhi. By then, SIMI's growing links with global Islamic movements like the

Egyptian Brotherhood and Hamas were clear. Links with Bangladesh based HuJI and Pakistan based LeT were also coming to the fore. Since 2007, Qureshi succeeded in training hundreds of SIMI-IM cadres and was the mastermind of the Delhi blasts undertaken by Mohammad Bashir, Mohammad Fakruddin and Saif Ahmad in September 2008.<sup>xiv</sup>

According to a UP based IM cadre, Sadiq Shaikh, hailing from Azamgarh district and who was arrested on September 23, 2008, IM modules exist in Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Pune and Mumbai. Most arrested IM cadres are computer professionals and bomb makers. Among those arrested are Pune based Mohammed Mansoor Asgar Peerbhoy and Mubin Kadar Shaikh, who jointly designed the IM logo and hacked into unsecured Wi-fi connections. Another significant intelligence input from the UP police indicates that UP based IM cadre Fahim Arshad Ansari who was arrested in UP in February 2008 was in direct contact with the LeT in masterminding the Mumbai attacks of November 2008. Ansari studied at the Malad Municipal Secondary School in Mumbai, from where he graduated in 1989 but later on went onto Dubai. In 2005, another Hyderabad, Sami Ahmad who was arrested by the police in 2006 revealed that he had had agreed to put Ansari in touch with the LeT.<sup>xv</sup>

### Conclusion

At present the Gujarat Police suspect that the same absconding Indian Mujahideen (IM) terrorists wanted for the 2008 serial bombings in Ahmedabad could be behind the December 7, 2010, blast in Varanasi. The IM, which claimed responsibility for the Ahmedabad blasts by sending emails to media houses, reportedly owned up the Varanasi blasts in a similar fashion. The two mails bore striking similarities in both language and content, a senior ATS officer said.<sup>xvi</sup> Fifty-nine people were killed and over 200 injured in the Ahmedabad blasts. “The two mails have great similarities. Both mention the Godhra riots, both mention the name of (Chief Minister) Narendra Modi and state in a

similar way how he had presided over the massacre of Muslims in his state but is still free. Both mails also say the motive was to avenge the Godhra riots,” the officer said.<sup>xvii</sup>

ATS sources said there were strong indications that two top IM men, Riyaz and Iqbal Bhatkal — believed to be holed up in Pakistan and wanted for the Ahmedabad blasts — were involved in the Varanasi bombing. According to them, there were inputs suggesting that Riyaz had supported Dr Shahnawaz, a top IM operative suspected to have overseen the planning and execution of the blast in Varanasi.

A senior ATS officer added: “Riyaz and Iqbal are remote-running the banned SIMI outfit in the name of IM. They adopted the method of low-intensity blasts in Varanasi, just like the Ahmedabad bombings. Even the mail in which their outfit claims responsibility for the blast is strikingly similar to the one they sent out after the Ahmedabad blasts.”<sup>xviii</sup>

It is thus beyond doubt that terror groups have established a pan-Islamic network, with a large number of sleeper cells in the hinterland, with extreme linkages with J&K, the global terrorists, and the ISI. In the recent past, a number of terrorist modules have been broken up in all metropolitan cities, and hitherto unaffected areas in the country. It remains to be seen as to whether such horrific carnage as meted out in Varanasi will follow in the near future or effective counter terrorism measures would be successful in annihilating the menace of domestic terrorism from within the heartland of India.

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<sup>i</sup> “IM claims responsibility for Varanasi blast,” *CNN-IBN*, December 7, 2010, accessed electronically at <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/indian-mujahideen-behind-varanasi-blast/136720-3.html>, on December 8, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Tracing the e-mail, which was received after the Varanasi bomb blast, Mumbai police has found that it was sent by Indian Mujahideen terrorists after hacking a Wi-Fi connection registered in Navi Mumbai. Police officials said that hacked Wi-Fi connection was registered in the name of Akhil Talreja, a DJ by profession. Earlier, police officials grilled Talreja in suspicion of the attack, but found that his Wi-Fi connection was used after hacking. Police officials traced the email, which claimed that Varanasi bomb blast was planned by Indian Mujahideen in response to the Babri Masjid demolition, using its internet

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protocol (IP) number. The email was sent from the id, alfateh0005@gmail.com, using Talreja's Wi-Fi connection.

<sup>iii</sup> For a detailed report on SIMI please refer to: *Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI)*, South Asia Terrorism Portal, at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/simi.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> SIMI publishes several magazines in various languages, including *Vivekam* in Malayalam, *Sedhi Madal* in Tamil, *Rupantar* in Bengali, *Iqraa* in Gujarati, *Tahreek* in Hindi, *Al Harkah* in Urdu and the *Shaheen Times*.

<sup>v</sup> Jaamat-e-Islami Hind (JIH) was the first organised Islamic reformist movement in the Indian subcontinent. The group was formed on August 24, 1941, in Lahore under the leadership of Syed Abul Ala Maududi. After partition, which JIH opposed because it would separate the *ummah* (Muslim community) along nationalist lines, Maududi moved to Pakistan where Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) founded the Pakistan branch. After 1971, when Bangladesh separated from Pakistan, Jamaate-Islami Bangladesh emerged. For more information about JIH, see Jaamat-e-Islami-Hind's website at <http://www.jamaateislamihind.org/index>. For information about Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jam'at-i Islami of Pakistan*, IB Taurus, London, 1994.

<sup>vi</sup> Singh, Rohit, *Understanding the Indian Mujahideen*, Maneckshaw Paper No. 19, Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, 2010, p. 2.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>x</sup> Deshpande, Rajeev, *Indian Mujahideen, SIMI have 'purist link'*, The Times of India, New Delhi, September 22, 2008, accessed electronically at [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Indian\\_Mujahideen\\_SIMI\\_have\\_purist\\_link/articleshow/3510433.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Indian_Mujahideen_SIMI_have_purist_link/articleshow/3510433.cms), on December 8, 2010.

<sup>xi</sup> Glasse, Cyril, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2001, pp.469-472.

<sup>xii</sup> Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>xiii</sup> Swami, Pravin, "The Hunt for the Indian Mujahideen's al-arbi", *The Hindu*, Chennai, September 13, 2008, accessed electronically at <http://www.hindu.com/2008/09/13/stories/2008091355761100.htm>, on December 9, 2010. Also, Page, Jeremy, "Abdul Subhan Qureshi, known as India's Bin Laden named as bombing suspect" *The Sunday Times*, London, September 15, 2008, accessed electronically at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4759825.ece>, on December 9, 2010.

<sup>xiv</sup> Namrata Goswami, "Who is the Indian Mujahideen?", *IDSa*, New Delhi, February 3, 2009, accessed electronically at <http://www.idsa.in/background/IndianMujahideen>, on December 8, 2010.

<sup>xv</sup> Swami, Praveen, "Abortive Lashkar plot hold clues to Mumbai massacres", *The Hindu*, Chennai, December 8, 2008, accessed electronically at <http://www.hindu.com/2008/12/08/stories/2008120859431000.htm>, on December 9, 2010.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Nayudu, Ujjwala, “Gujarat Police see link to 2008 Ahmedabad blast,” *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, December 9, 2010, accessed electronically at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/gujarat-police-see-link-to-2008-ahmedabad-blasts/722345/0>, on December 10, 2010.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*