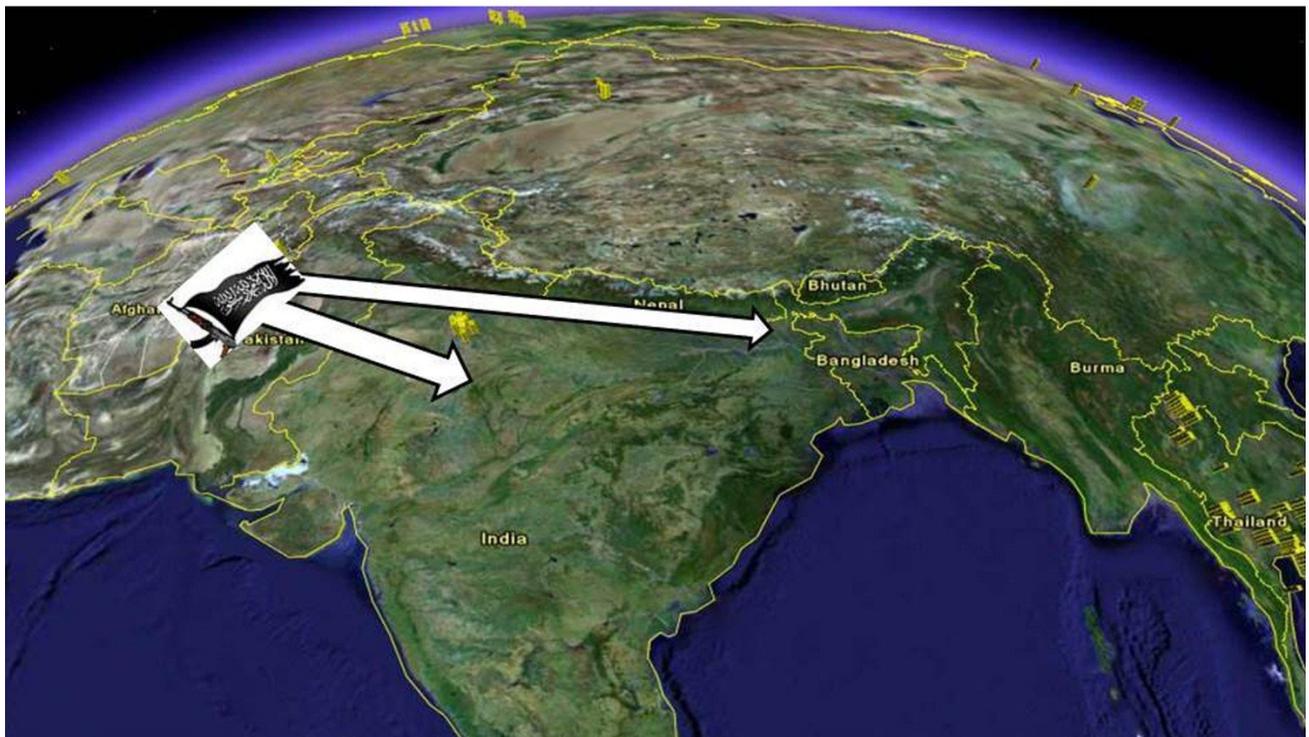




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Al-Qaeda's Resurgence: Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent



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Al-Qaeda's Resurgence: Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent

On September 6, 2014, when national Defense Day was being celebrated across Pakistan, four officers of Pakistan Navy entered the Pakistan Naval Ships (PNS) Dockyard, located near Karachi harbor and attempted to take over warship PNS Zulfiqar. The terrorists planned to hijack the heavily armed destroyer of Pakistan Navy and then to move towards international waters in order to attack US or Indian Naval vessels. The carefully planned attack failed miserably. All terrorists (in-service and retired naval officers of Pakistan Navy) were subdued and arrested by the security forces from the ship and some who managed to escape were later arrested near Quetta while they were trying to flee to Afghanistan. A week later on September 11, Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Amir, Asim Umar claimed responsibility of attack. (The Express Tribune, September 11. 2014)

Days earlier, Al-Qaeda Amir Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the establishment of Al-Qaeda's newest branch AQIS. Zawahiri in his 55-minute video message, while celebrating the formation of new chapter of Al-Qaeda describes AQIS as,

"This entity was not established today, but it is the fruit of a blessed effort for more than two years to gather the mujahideen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity to be with the main group, Qaedat al-Jihad, from the soldiers of the Islamic Emirate and its triumphant emir, Allah permitting, Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid." (Message translated by SITE Intelligence Group, September 2014)

Parallel to this development Al-Qaeda has also inaugurated its new English language magazine "Resurgence". The first issue of Resurgence (released October 2014) primarily focuses on Indian Subcontinent, with Al-Qaeda Central's official spokesperson Adam Gadahn penning the cover article defining the Al-Qaeda objectives. Gadahn wrote,

"America considers Islam to be its main enemy and a threat to the foundations of its existence. It has waged an incessant war against Islam and Muslims that has become increasingly overt over the last two decades. It considers itself to be its foremost duty to crush every Islamic movement struggling for the ascendancy of Islam. It is the patron-in-chief of Israel and the real cause of the existence of the oppressive Zionist entity. And last but not the least the United States of America is equally responsible for every single act of oppression carried out against our brethren in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Burma, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan as well as the rest of the Islamic world". (The News, Islamabad, October 25, 2014)

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's spokesperson Usama Mehmood in a separate statement signifies the importance of PNS Mehran attack and marveled the ferocity of 'mujahideen' who carried out the attack.

"The goal of the PNS Dockyard attack was to take control of two important warships of the PNS Zulfiqar and the PNS Aslat. There were several Mujahid brothers aboard both ships and they were provided with necessary weapons and explosives required for this operation. The first al-Qaeda team was on board PNS Zulfiqar, which departed Karachi on September 3 and was allegedly scheduled to be refueled by USS

Supply, which is one of the most important American naval ships after aircraft carriers. While PNS Zulfiqar was to be refueled, some of the Mujahid brothers present on board were to target and destroy the American oil tanker [USS Supply] with the 72 mm anti-aircraft guns on their frigate. Al-Qaeda operatives on board PNS Zulfiqar were to target the American frigate protecting USS Supply using anti-ship guided missiles. If they were successful, the al-Qaeda team was to then use whatever weapons were left to attack or destroy any US or coalition warship present in the vicinity and fight on until attaining martyrdom. A second AQIS team was present on board PNS Aslat with weapons and explosives. According to the plan, the second cadre of AQIS jihadis was going to take over PNS Aslat, which was near the shores of Karachi, and steer it towards Indian waters in order to attack the Indian warships with anti-ship missiles. If any of the ships got in their way, including the American warships, the AQIS crew on board was to use the PNS Aslat to attack them instead”,” (The News, Islamabad, October 25, 2014)

The establishment of AQIS is the second important strategic decision Zawahiri has taken after the death of former Amir Osama Bin Laden in May 2011. The first one was the appointment of Nasir al-Wuhashi as the Amir of Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQIP) and upgrading his position to ‘General Manager’ in Al-Qaeda (Newsweek Pakistan, August 15, 2013). It appears that Zawahiri is all set to compete with the newly surfaced Jihadi challenger the Islamic State, a splinter group of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi whom Zawahiri has cast out of Al-Qaeda in favor of his favorite Mohammad al-Joulani of Nusra Front. The emergence of IS as a competitor to Zawahiri’s Jihadi throne, seems quite perturbing for him and has compelled him to reorganize his 26-year old transnational jihadi outfit.

Objectives

Zawahiri, in his video message alongside newly appointed Amir of AQIS Asim Umar and spokesperson Usama Mahmoud also stated the objectives of AQIS, which are slightly different from the AQ Central’s objectives.

- Establishment of Global Caliphate in the Khurasan (i.e. Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Burma, Central Asian Republics, and Bangladesh)
- Imposition of Islamic Sharia Laws in the Indian subcontinent
- Taking over ‘apostate’ Muslim regime (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asian Republics, Bangladesh)
- Reconquering Muslim lands now being ruled over infidel (India, Burma)
- Driving out ‘infidel’ forces from Islamic lands
- Protecting the Muslims ‘under siege’ in the Indian States of Kashmir, Assam, Gujrat, Ahmedabad, and defending the ones in Burma and Bangladesh

Asim Umar: Amir of AQIS

Zawahiri appointed Asim Umar as the Amir of AQIS, who also featured in the same video and stated salient objectives of AQIS. Umar is a known jihadi ideologue from Pakistan, and a former high ranking leader of Harkat ul Jihad-e-Islami and later Harkat ul Mujahideen (Awaz Today, September 11, 2014). Acknowledged as a skilled propagandist in jihadi circles of Pakistan, Umar has been releasing video

statements and press releases for Al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for the last two years. Umar is also fond of writing books on Dajjal (Anti-Christ). His books such as *World War-III and Dajjal*, *Bermuda Triangle and Dajjal*, *Lashkar of Dajjal: The Black Water in Pakistan*, and *Friends and Foes of the Messiah* are widely available at jihadi book stores in Pakistan. Umar's long association with Al-Qaeda Core is evident from the fact that before being elevated to position of Amir of AQIS he served as head of AQ's Sharia committee in Pakistan. After taking charge of AQIS, Umar has reaffirmed his stance by declaring the US as prime enemy and emphasized over to defeat US and its allies everywhere. In his message to the Indian youth he said,

"From the land of Afghanistan, a caravan is heading toward India...not on someone's directive. Not on the basis of some governmental policy. But simply on the basis of abiding by God's command." (ARY News, Karachi, September 10)

Umar, because of his long jihadi career in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Pakistan, is fluent in Arabic, Urdu, Uzbek and Pashto. He is not only considered a good orator but also well versed in Islamic clerical issues. However, little is known about his jihadi credentials as far as jihadi activities are concerned. According to one source he is more of an ideologue than actual fighter. (Interview with a local journalist in Islamabad).

Umar appears to focus on already ongoing but jihadi activities in Indian Kashmir, Assam, Myanmar and Pakistan. He seems to galvanize support from Islamist radical youth in order to raise a new cluster of jihadists from the regions experiencing jihadi turbulence.

Interestingly Umar appears to be neither a Pashtun nor Punjabi but rather an Urdu Speaking from southern Pakistani port city of Karachi, known for its relatively secular environment than the rest of Pakistan. Now in his mid-40s Umar received his early education from Jamia Uloom-ul-Islamia, Karachi, a madrasah noted for its jihadi credentials.

Mufti Nizam ud Din Shamzia, the former head of the madrasah and widely recognized jihadi cleric was an ardent supporter of Taliban Movement, patron of Pakistani Jihadi organizations Harkat-ul Jihad-e-Islami (HuJI), Harkat-ul Mujahideen (HM) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). Shamzia issued a Fatwa against the US invasion of Afghanistan and called for Jihad against the US, inspiring thousands to reach Afghanistan amid US invasion in October 2001.

HuJI is considered as the oldest jihadi group in Pakistan emerged in 1983 during the Afghan War (1979-89). HuJI was led by Qari Saifullah Akhter and Fazal ur Rehman Khalil. Few years later in 1987, Khalil parted ways with Akhter and formed his own group HuM with focus on Islamist insurgency in Indian Kashmir. HuM further splintered into Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) after the successful swapping of hijacked Indian Airline passengers in 1999 for jailed propagandist of HuM Masoud Azhar in India along with Ahmed Omar Saeed Shaikh (British born, LSE drop out member of HuM) and Mushtaq Zargar of Al-Badr Mujahedeen.

After the 9/11 attacks and Pakistani government 's decision to become part of US-led alliance HuM's new splinter HuM-al-Alami surfaced in Karachi with two consecutive assassination attempts on President General Pervez Musharraf in 2002.

In February 1998, HuM organized Bin Laden's press conference in Khost, Afghanistan where he proclaimed his Fatwa against the US and allies and also announced formation of Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders.

Umar also studied at Darul Uloom Haqania madrasah, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhawa province of Pakistan and reckoned as Jihad factory because of its decades' old practice of sending students to Afghanistan to fight against the Russian and later American forces. More than 10,000 strong student body the madrasah is headed by Sami ul Haq, leader of Deobandi sect Islamist party Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam. Half of Afghan Taliban cabinet considered Darul Uloom Haqania as their alma mater. Mullah Omar the supreme commander of Afghan Taliban had reportedly studied at the madrasah.

According to renowned Pakistani journalist and analyst Hamid Mir, Asim Umar is an Indian national and he claimed to have met him several times in Afghanistan. Mir also claimed that Asim Umar remained in close contact with Bin Laden till his death in May 2011. Hamid Mir an interview said,

"Asim Umar is an Indian Muslim, that's his only qualification for which he was appointed head of al-Qaeda's south Asia chapter, Yes, I have met Asim Umar... I met him for the first time in 2005, I was visiting Afghanistan. In those days, the Afghan Taliban were in control of Andar district of Ghazni province. I was visiting the tomb of Mahmud Ghaznavi. Somebody there contacted me, it was a taxi driver. He asked me, 'Oh, you come on Geo TV'. I said yes. He said 'Amir sahab wants to meet you'. I asked him who Amir sahab was. He said, 'Don't worry, don't worry. We will not harm you. We will give you a story'.....In 2007, I met him again in North Waziristan. Then I came to know that he was forced to leave Ghazni province because he had developed differences with some local commander. The local commander had alleged that he was an Indian spy. So the Pakistani Taliban protected him and he came to Pakistani tribal area. Now he is absent. But recently I received a lot of literature written by him, both in English and Urdu. So I had one meeting with him in 2005, and one again in 2007." (The Indian Express, October 19, 2014)

Affiliation with former Jihadi organizations

Zawahiri's decision to nominate Umar as the head of AQIS is tactical. In a way Zawahiri is trying to regroup the plethora of Pakistani Islamist/jihadist groups under the banner of AQIS. With HuM, HuJI, JeM and LeJ in despair in Pakistan, and Indian Mujahideen (IM) and Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) are indeed looking for a new brand to cover their failures. The need to reinvigorate their jihadi activities and AQIS could provide them a new setting for renewing their jihadi credentials. Disgruntled Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar already tilting towards the Al-Qaeda-linked Itihadul Mujahideen of Arakan (IMA) may slide towards AQIS. Radical Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh could also provide potential recruits for AQIS. Because of his long affiliation with Islamist terrorist groups active in Indian Kashmir the primary focus of Umar is expected to be Indian Kashmir, the only Muslim majority province in India. He reflected his thoughts in videos released earlier,

"To wave Islam's flag over Srinagar's Lal Chowk... caravans are heading from Afghanistan to liberate India and it is not being done on instructions of any intelligence agency, and not as part of some governmental policy, but simply to abide God's command..." (First Post India, September 4)

On another occasion he said,

"Those (Kashmiri's) who swore to martyrs to walk their path till their last breath and vowed to continue jihad, who convinced them to shun jihad and dream about freedom of Kashmir by resorting to protests, shutdowns and democratic ways..." (First Post India, September 4, 2014)

Umar has repeatedly criticized Pakistani authorities for their failures to support jihad in Indian Kashmir. He denounced the Pakistani state, its intelligence agencies, military and law enforcement bodies for acting against 'mujahedeen on behalf of 'infidels' (the US and allies). (In.com, India, September 4, 2014)

In his July 2013 video titled *"Why is there no Storm in your ocean?"* Umar elucidated his approach regarding for the establishment of caliphate in accordance with Al-Qaeda,

"Jihad does not limit itself to any specific region, lives are being sacrificed in this jihad to defeat America and its allies everywhere" (July 2013 video message, translated by SITE Intelligence Group)

Reaffirming the allegiance to Mullah Omar

An interesting development, primarily to encounter the growing influence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which recently announced the establishment of Caliphate, comprising of territories of Iraq and Syria, the AQIS reaffirmed its allegiance to Taliban supreme commander Mullah Mohammad Omar. Omar the self-proclaimed Amir ul Momineen of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan considers himself as the sole Amir (representative) of all Muslims, a claim which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has also endeavored to do. Zawahiri while announcing AQIS also deliberated on Afghan Taliban and eulogized their efforts, calling them the 'soldiers of Islamic Emirate'. Slain Al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden had pledged oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar during his stay in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

"My pledge of allegiance to the Emir of the Believers [Mullah Omar] is the great pledge of allegiance, which is mentioned in the chapters of the Koran and the stories of the Sunnah. Every Muslim should set his mind and heart and pledge allegiance to the Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar for this is the great pledge."(The Long War Journal, July21, 2014)

The oath effectively made Al-Qaeda part of Afghan Taliban and their short-lived state Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. After the rise of ISIS and announcement of Caliphate (Islamic State) by the ISIS leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the new Al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a carefully calculated move reaffirmed its allegiance to Mullah Omar. In a statement issued by Al-Qaeda through its Al-Nafir news bulletin,

"The first edition (Al-Nafir) begins by renewing the pledge of allegiance to [the] Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid, may Allah preserve him, and confirming that al Qaeda and its branches everywhere are soldiers among his soldiers, under his victorious banner to the coming State of the Caliphate." (Translated by SITE Monitoring Services Group, July 20, 2014)

The New Challenge

Founded in the backdrop of Soviet defeat in Afghanistan after a long guerrilla campaign by Afghan Islamists backed by the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and scores of countries, the Al-Qaeda up till now has never challenged for reaffirming its jihadi credentials. The militant Islamist movement indeed managed to become an umbrella organization of Islamist terrorist organization across the world with branches and affiliates in more than 60 countries. Credited for masterminding and perpetrating the biggest ever terrorist attacks in the world and reaching out to Islamist terrorist groups within a span of quarter century, without losing momentum are some the feathers in Al-Qaeda's cap.

The splintering away of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (aka Al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers or Islamic State of Iraq) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has indeed challenged Al-Qaeda for keeping the throne of jihad. Al-Qaeda badly needs to reinvigorate in order to survive in the jihadi world. The jihadi sympathizers are now expecting much more from Al-Qaeda otherwise Al-Qaeda would not be able to tap in from younger generations of jihadis. On the other hand ISIS is in good shape to carve out many of Al-Qaeda's assets. Strategically speaking Al-Qaeda is on retreat, it is a tactical retreat and the competition between the two jihadi giants may result in catastrophic destruction.

The AQIS is one hastily planned Al-Qaeda endeavor to smoothen the feelings of its rank and file and sympathizers. The ill-planned terrorist attack at Pakistan Navy destroyer and attempt to hijack it depicts its very nature. It was untimely, badly-planned and executed, and shows the nascent state of AQIS.

Conclusion

Zawahiri is all set to compete with ISIS and its ambitious Caliph Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi has clearly outmaneuvered Zawahiri in terms of gaining media attention. Even a bird's eye view at local and international news gives a clear picture of media's interest in IS and Al-Qaeda seems to be unprepared to deal with IS. Zawahiri, a seasoned jihadi knows the importance of coverage and like any other traditional terrorist believes in propaganda by deed. He must have studied average life span of terrorist organizations (8-12 years according to Audrey Cronin, for details see Audrey Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton University Press, 2010). AQIS is indeed a rejuvenating effort by Zawahiri to present a new brand of Al-Qaeda for supporters and sympathizers in India, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Despite the fact the first attack resulted in utter failure, the newly established AQIS would provide an impetus to mundane existence of Al-Qaeda especially after the death of former Amir Osama Bin Laden. The subcontinent does contain a huge pool of disgruntled Islamist radicals for whom joining IS would be far more difficult than to join hands with already existing Al-Qaeda, only if it provides them a potent platform to execute terrorist activities.

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