



AL QAEDA'S NEW INDIA WING FOR JIHAD: ALARM BELLS !

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The Sunni organization Al Qaeda in its effort to expand itself in South Asia announced the formation of its Indian branch dedicated to waging jihad in the Indian subcontinent. In a 55 minute videotape posted online on multiple online forums popular among jihadists and spotted by the SITE intelligence group, on September 3, the head of the group Ayman al-Zawahiri described the formation of “al Qaeda in Indian subcontinent” as glad tidings for Muslims “in Burma, Bangladesh, Assam, Gujrat, Ahmedabad, and Kashmir”. He said that the new force would spread Islamic rule and “raise the flag of jihad” across the subcontinent, and “crush the artificial borders” dividing Muslim populations in the region.ⁱ *The Indian Express* reported that the organization named Jamaat Qaidat al-jihad fi’Shibi al-Qarrat al-Hindiya or Organisation of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, also released an online manifesto written by Usama Mahmood, its spokesperson and Asim Omar, the organisational chief for the new wing.ⁱⁱ

Zawahiri said, “The entity was not established today but is a fruit of a blessed effort of more than two years to gather the mujahedeen in the Indian sub-continent into a single entity....It is an entity that was formed to promulgate the call of the reviving imam, Sheikh Osama bin Laden, may Allah have mercy upon him.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The announcement by Al-Qaeda has come after the reports of aggressive recruitment policy of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was reported in various Pakistani dailies. The Islamic State, which exceeds Al-Qaeda in brutality and lethality, has indeed gained prominence and, is supposedly out recruiting Al-Qaeda. It has managed to successfully recruit young followers from

across the world to join the conflict in the Middle East. Reportedly, booklets calling for support of ISIS were handed out in the northwestern Pakistan and in the refugee camps of Afghanistan. The 12 page booklet titled al-Fatah (victory), has been published in Pashto and Dari language and bears a Kalma, the historical stamp of Prophet Muhammad, and picture of AK-47 assault rifle on the cover.^{iv} Islamic State is a rich organization (making millions of dollars from selling oil and ransoming hostages) and has managed to acquire sophisticated arms, and uses high technology, fashionable and youth friendly social media successfully as a tool for terrorism.

Certainly, Al-Qaeda feels threatened with the rising popularity of the Islamic State among the young jihadis and (some) Taliban leaders who have expressed their support and loyalties for the al-Baghdadi, who took the title of Caliph Ibrahim, posing a threat to Al Qaeda. ISIS shot to fame (or infamy), in the world of terrorism, after a stunning victory in Iraq and Syria and shocking killings of the US journalists. The organization has been challenging the global supremacy of Al-Qaeda in the jihadi movements and some Al-Qaeda splinters have pledged loyalty to ISIS. Al-Qaeda's announcement captured immediate international attention and appears to be an attempt by the organization to gather spotlight in the "competitive" world of terrorism and attract recruitment for the organization.

There have been reports in the Indian media regarding the inundation of Indian jihadis being trained abroad and the former operatives of Indian Mujahidden (IM) fighting on the Afghanistan Pakistan border. Also, ISIS has reportedly recruited 300 plus Indians. Al-Qaeda is looking for fresh recruitments and would be keen to exploit the opportunity of enticing discontented youth from certain Indian pockets. In fact, the organizational head of the new branch, Asim Umar, is a Pakistani, has worked with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and has produced numerous online calls for jihad. Asim Umar has a relatively low profile, but is believed to be an intellectual asset to Al-Qaeda, who would be proficient to recruit youth for jihad from the Indian subcontinent.

The announcement makes a reference to Gujrat (and Ahmendabad), home state of India's new Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has taken a *much desired* tough posture signaling intolerance towards cross-border terrorism being conducted from the Pakistani soil. India cannot afford to take the announcement lightly and both the policy and the intelligence need to be on high alert.

Al-Qaeda in the last few years, has become more Pakistan centric and the Pakistani Taliban draws its ideological support from Al Qaeda. Asim Umar's linkages with Pakistan and the TTP is certainly a cause of concern. The announcement of formation of the India wing and renewal of loyalty to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, comes close to the US drawdown from Afghanistan. The lingering Afghan political crisis carries numerous uncertainties and, added support to Taliban from Al-Qaeda significantly weakens the prospects of political and social stability in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's expanding influence and penetration in Pakistan and Afghanistan would undoubtedly have direct security repercussions on India posing a severe challenge to the new government.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS))

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ⁱ "Al-Qaeda Leader announces India wing", *Al Jazeera*, 4 September, 2014, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/09/al-qaeda-leader-announces-india-wing-201493221044940452.html>

ⁱⁱ Praveen Swami, "Al-Qaeda comes out of cold to call for jihad in India", *The Indian Express*, 5 September, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Avaneesh Pandey, "Al Qaeda Announces Creation of South Asia Wing To Counter Rise of ISIS", *International Business Times*, 4 September, 2014, at <http://www.ibtimes.com/al-qaeda-announces-creation-south-asia-wing-counter-rise-isis-1678104>

^{iv} "ISIS recruiting in Pakistan", *News 24*, 3 September, 2014, at <http://www.news24.com/World/News/ISIS-recruiting-in-Pakistan-20140903>