

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Asia Times online

More power to Pakistan's jihadis

By Amir Mir
9/1/2011

ISLAMABAD - While India and Pakistan have resumed their stalled dialogue process to improve ties, the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM - Army of the Prophet Mohammad), one of the deadliest anti-India militant groups operating from Pakistani soil and fighting against the Indian security forces in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), has restarted its propaganda, recruitment and fund-raising activities in Pakistan.

This places at considerable risk the peace process between the two nuclear-armed South Asian neighbors.

On August 20, the Pakistani English daily The Express Tribune quoted senior intelligence officials and JeM activists saying that the group was in the process of regaining its traditional physical and financial strength that had dissipated during the 10-year ban imposed by the Pervez Musharraf regime.

According to them, the Jaish, as it is also known, is working on a plan to reach out to activists who abandoned the organization after it came on the security agencies' radar in the wake of a 2001 *fidayeen* (suicide) attack on the Indian parliament.

JeM is trying to consolidate avenues for fundraising, individual charity from within Pakistan as well as donations from Gulf states that were partially blocked during the ban by the Pakistani authorities.

As the first step, the charity wing of the Jaish, the al-Rehmat Trust, which was run by Allah Baksh until his death last year, has been revived. The trust is trying to capitalize on the goodwill it once enjoyed when it fought in Afghanistan along with the Taliban before the regime was driven out of power by United States-led forces.

According to Maulana Ashfaq Ahmed, the coordinator of the al-Rehmat Trust, fundraising activities are in full swing in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, especially in the holy month of Ramadan that has just ended. He said offices of the trust were being re-established all over the provinces, adding that government agencies had never obstructed the trust's fundraising in the two provinces.

The Al-Rehmat Trust is being made functional despite the fact that the US Treasury Department sanctioned it on November 4, 2010, as the "operational front" for the JeM.

Almost a month later, on December 2, the Treasury tagged the JeM as a "Pakistan-based terrorist organization". However, as things stand, all banned publications of the group such as *al-Qalam*, *Muslim Ummah*, *Zarb-e-Momin and Islam* are still being printed by the state. Even a cursory glance at JeM-run newspapers indicates that the "war" in J&K is still going on and the martyrs of the Jaish are routinely being received back from the Indian-administered part of J&K.

By allowing the JeM to stage a comeback, the establishment seems to have forgotten that British-Pakistani terror suspect Rashid Rauf, who escaped from the custody of the police in Rawalpindi in 2007 while undergoing a court trial, was a close relative of Maulana Masood Azhar - leader and the founder of the Jaish - and had planned to blow up trans-Atlantic planes at Heathrow Airport in London.

Rauf was reportedly killed in a US Predator drone strike in the North Waziristan tribal area on November 22, 2008, along with a senior al-Qaeda leader. Even today, senior security officials concede that JeM activists are working in tandem with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the Haqqani militant network in North Waziristan in their ongoing battle against "forces of the infidel" on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The Jaish was launched by jihadi cleric Azhar in February 2000 shortly after his release from an Indian jail in exchange for hostages on board an Indian plane that was hijacked by Kashmiri militants in December 1999.

Although Azhar was arrested in India in February 1994, his name first hit the headlines following the 1999 hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC 814. After being hijacked, allegedly at the behest of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the plane was taken to Kandahar in Afghanistan, which was under the control of the Taliban at that time. The hijackers were led by Azhar's younger brother.

Once the Indian authorities handed over Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed Omar Saeed and Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar to the hijackers, they fled to Pakistani territory. Shortly after his release, Azhar appeared in the southern port city of Karachi to address an estimated 10,000 people.

He announced the launching of the JeM with the prime objective of fighting Indian security forces in J&K and proclaimed, "I have come here because this is my duty to tell you that Muslims should not rest in peace until they destroy India and the United States."

The Deobandi school of thought formed the key religious and ideological base for the JeM, just like the Taliban. Before being arrested in India, Azhar was the ideologue of another militant organization, the Harkat ul-Ansar (HuA) that was banned in 1997 by the US State Department due to its alleged association with al-Qaeda.

Therefore, the Jaish is ideologically and in terms of organizational links an extension of HuA, which renamed itself as the Harkat ul-Mujahideen in 1998, a year after being banned.

The formation of the Jaish was widely supported by Pakistan's top Islamic Deobandi scholars, especially Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai of the Jamia Binori in Karachi, who was known for his pro-Taliban leanings and Maulana Yusuf Ludhianvi, who was the chief commander of the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan at that time. While Shamzai became the chief ideologue of the Jaish, Ludhianvi was made its supreme leader and Azhar the chief commander.

The Taliban movement in Afghanistan was launched by students of the Jamia Binori network of 9,000 religious *madrassas* (seminaries) across Pakistan. Azhar knit the ties stronger when he toured Kandahar after his release to secure the blessings of Taliban *amir* Mullah Omar for launching the Jaish.

It is said that by launching the JeM, Azhar actually wanted to become the ultimate leader of Deobandi pan-Islamist militants in the Indian-administered part of J&K.

While delivering speeches at various cities and towns in Pakistan after the launch of the group, Azhar said the JeM would eliminate then-Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In its fight against India, he said, his organization would not only liberate Jammu and Kashmir, but also take control of the Babri Masjid, a disputed mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the Indian heartland.

The JeM carried out its first terrorist activity in J&K on April 19, 2000, hardly two months after its formation, when one of its members drove a hijacked car loaded with explosives into the main gate of the Badami Bagh cantonment. The deadly strike marked the first suicide bomb attack in the 13-year-old history of the Kashmir militancy.

Since then, the Jaish has largely confined its operations within Kashmir and the only recorded instance of its operations outside J&K had been the December 13, 2001, attack on the parliament building in New Delhi. Earlier, on October 10, 2001, hardly a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Azhar renamed the Jaish as Tehrik-ul-Furqa.

The move was motivated by reports that the US State Department was contemplating to declare it a foreign terrorist outfit because of its involvement in the October 1, 2001, explosion outside the J&K legislative assembly building in Srinagar. Despite being renamed, the State Department

designated the Tehrik-ul-Furqa as a foreign terrorist organization in December 2001.

However, within no time, Azhar got his outfit registered under the new name of Khudam-ul-Islam, (Servants of Islam) although it is still operationally known as the Jaish-e-Mohammad.

Azhar was arrested by Pakistani authorities on December 29, 2001, after pressure from India and the United States following the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament that literally brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war. But the Lahore High Court ordered his release on December 14, 2002.

Azhar then fell out of favor with his powerful spy masters after the December 2003 twin suicide attacks targeting General Pervez Musharraf's presidential cavalcades in Rawalpindi, in which one of the bombers (Jameel) was later identified as a JeM activist. Azhar tried to clear his position by maintaining that the suicide bomber had already defected to the Jaish's dissident group, the Jamaatul Furqaan, led by Maulana Abdul Jabbar.

But the Jaish was banned by the Musharraf regime and Azhar was made to go underground in the wake of Washington's allegations about his alleged al-Qaeda links and because of the American belief that he, along with some other jihadi leaders, had been providing logistical support to fugitive al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders.

Prior to that, Azhar had been among the establishment's most trusted jihadi leaders, one of those who walked the credibility tightrope gingerly. One season he would be mouthing emotional anti-India rhetoric, sending his militants across the Line of Control to wage "jihad" in J&K; the next would see him lying low and smoldering.

In return, the Jaish chief used to receive the patronage of the Pakistani intelligence apparatus, both financially and morally. But all this changed towards the end of 2003 when Azhar was asked to stop his activities.

In July 2005, British intelligence agencies investigating the suicide bombings in London informed their Pakistan counterparts that two of the four suicide bombers - Shehzad Tanweer and Siddique Khan - had met Osama Nazir, a JeM suicide trainer, in Faisalabad, Pakistan, a few months before the attacks.

Information provided by Nazir after his arrest revealed that Tanweer had stayed at another extremist Sunni religious school, Jamia Manzurul Islami, situated in cantonment area of Lahore, and being run by its principal, Pir Saifullah Khalid, who is considered close to Azhar.

In 2007, the slowing down of the India-Pakistan peace process by Delhi made the Musharraf regime reactivate the Jaish to relaunch cross-border offensives in J&K.

The group was reorganized under the command of Mufti Abdul Rauf, the younger brother of Azhar who had proved his mettle by carrying out successful militant operations inside J&K. Rauf was allowed to establish a transit camp in Rawalpindi for recruits traveling from southern Punjab to the training camp at Kohat, a medium-sized town in central Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It was decided that Rauf would supervise the JeM training camps as the acting chief of the group while Azhar would continue to manage organizational affairs while remaining underground.

In December 2008, almost a week after the Mumbai terror attacks, Pakistani authorities placed restrictions on Azhar's movement by confining him to his multi-storeyed concrete compound in the Model Town area of Bahawalpur, housing 700 armed men.

The action was taken in the wake of the Indian government's demand to hand over three persons to Delhi - Azhar, Dawood Ibrahim and Hafiz Mohammad Saeed. The Indian demand said that Azhar was wanted for his alleged involvement in the 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament.

The Indian demand was followed by Pakistani media reports that Azhar had abandoned his Jaish headquarters in the Model Town and temporarily shifted his base to South Waziristan in the wake of the mounting Indian pressure for his extradition.

In the second week of April 2009, Azhar was declared officially missing from Pakistan after Interior Minister Rehman Malik claimed that he was not in Pakistan and that Islamabad would not provide protection and refuge to any criminal.

However, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee ridiculed Pakistan for denying the "obvious presence" of the Jaish chief, saying: "India had several times got different information from Pakistan on Masood Azhar and it was not unusual to hear such denials from Pakistani officials."

However, well-informed militant circles say Azhar has already returned to Bahawalpur and resumed his activities by reactivating the Jaish headquarters in the Model Town area.

The JeM nerve center openly runs a grand religious seminary - Usman-o-Ali - where extremist interpretation of Islam is taught to hundreds of children every year.

International media recently expressed fears that the headquarters of the jihadi group could contain underground bunkers and tunnels, as had been the case with the Lal Masjid-run Jamia Fareedia and Jamia Hafsa schools in Islamabad, which were eventually destroyed in a massive military operation carried out by the Pakistan army in July 2007.

It was further reported that on the inside walls of the JeM headquarters jihadi inscriptions are painted, including a warning to Hindus and Jews, with a picture of Delhi's historic Red Fort, suggesting they will conquer the city.

The resurgence of the Jaish-e-Mohammad shows that the Pakistani establishment remains deeply embroiled with its jihadi proxies and continues to treat them as the civilian face of the Pakistan army.

Under these circumstances, neither Islamabad nor the wider region can hope for any possibilities of peace unless the Pakistani establishment decides to abandon employing terrorism as an instrument of state policy in India to advance its so-called geostrategic agenda in the region.