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Al-Qaeda sees opportunity in Kashmir

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - The shooting of two Taiwanese photographers near the Jama Mosque in [New Delhi](#) on Sunday comes at a time al-Qaeda has pledged to expand its war theater in the Caucasus and India.

The Taiwanese are in stable condition after being shot by unidentified men on a motorcycle while boarding a tourist [bus](#).

Also on Sunday, authorities in Tajikistan have blamed Islamist militants for the ambush in which 23 government troops were killed in the eastern Rasht Valley.

Officials in India are particularly concerned over the Delhi attack as the Commonwealth Games are due to be held in the capital next month, and al-Qaeda has already warned they will be a target. (See The timing of Sunday's attacks coincides with unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir sparked by separatists protesting against Indian rule. More than 100 people have been killed since June.

Al-Qaeda-linked militant sources have told Asia Times Online that they aim to escalate their activities in Indian cities and tap into the mass uprising in Kashmir.

The latest Delhi attack was claimed by the little-known Indian Mujahideen, which earlier had claimed other attacks in India that were later proven to be al-Qaeda's [operations](#).

Kashmir boils again

The [United States](#) invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to topple the Taliban led indirectly to the sting being taken out of the insurgency in Kashmir. Under US pressure, Pakistan cooled its support for militants operating in Indian-administered Kashmir. The US, as a part of the "war on terror", wanted to close down as many war theaters in Muslim territories as possible as it feared they were breeding militancy.

The next [development](#), again under American influence, was to change the leadership dynamics of the Kashmiri struggle. Groups comprising more radical Islamist leaders were pushed into the background and replaced with moderate faces more acceptable to Delhi and [Washington](#). This, along with the reduced militancy from across the border in Pakistan-administered Pakistan, helped calm the indigenous Kashmiri separatist movement, effectively placing it on the backburner.

Now, though, after nine years the war in Afghanistan is a shambles and most regional state and non-state players read that either the US will make an honorable exit next year by recognizing the Taliban as the major political force, or the war will drag on and the US will eventually have to make an exit anyway, albeit a dishonorable one.

This perception of the failure of the American war has gradually reshaped the political dynamics of the region.

The first change emerged in Indian-administered Kashmir, where leaders saw an opportunity to pick up from where they had been in 2001, although now without either India or [Pakistan](#) being in a position to manipulate events.

This week, the All Parties Hurriyat [Conference](#) (APHC) led by Syed Ali Gillani called for sit-ins for its "Quit Jammu and Kashmir" campaign in protest against what it sees as Indian army atrocities in Kashmir. The APHC is a political front of more than 20 political, social and religious organizations formed to achieve the right of self-determination according to United Nations Security Council Resolution 47.

Senior APHC (G) leader Masrat Alam said the group had adopted the slogan "Go India, Go Back" and he appealed to people in all regions of the state to make the "Quit Jammu and Kashmir" campaign successful.

The latest phase of the Kashmiri struggle - which dates to India's independence in 1947 - has its roots in an incident in late April when the Indian army claimed it had foiled an infiltration bid from across the Line of Control that divides the two Kashmirs by killing three armed militants from Pakistan.

However, it was subsequently established that the encounter had been staged and that the three "militants" were in fact civilians who had been lured into an army camp with promises of jobs as ammunition porters. They were then shot in cold blood for a cash

reward.

Once news of this emerged, there was a spontaneous mass reaction and the Indian security apparatus responded with a heavy hand, with each bloody encounter with protesters leading to another cycle of deadly protests.

The campaign is mainly in the hands of youths who were children in the 1990s and saw the mass victimization of Kashmiris by the Indian security forces at the height of the unrest.

These youths are not only resisting Indian rule, they are also disenchanted with Pakistan, which they believe sold out their interests in the name of the "war on terror". This is the first time that processions don't have Pakistani flags, and people don't shout "Long live Pakistan" slogans.

The situation in Kashmir remains grim, with most of the valley under a strict curfew. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh this month said at the start of an APHC meeting, "The only path for lasting peace and prosperity in Jammu and Kashmir is that of dialogue and discussion. Those who have grievances against the government have to talk to the administration," he said. "But it is also true that meaningful dialogue can happen only in an atmosphere free from violence and confrontation."

The problem for New Delhi is that no separatist leader is ready to enter into dialogue with India, including Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who is considered close to New Delhi and who has a reputation of being a moderate face of the Kashmiri struggle in trying to abandon the Islamist leadership led by Gillani.

A part of the reason is that the "Quit Jammu and Kashmir" campaign is in the hands of youths who have taken the extreme position of "Kill us or leave Kashmir". Gillani, a former chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir, has emerged as a natural leader of this extreme position.

Gillani has presented Delhi with five conditions to defuse the protests. These include accepting Kashmir as an international dispute - Delhi as all along maintained it is a domestic issue - the release of all political prisoners, demilitarization of the area and that action be taken against the forces involved in civilian killings since June.

Delhi is unlikely to agree to any or all of these conditions. Pakistan, meanwhile, is in no position to revive the Kashmiri armed struggle, given its preoccupation with militancy in its tribal areas and heavy US pressure to remain focused on that area.

However, al-Qaeda does not aim to miss an opportunity. According to militant sources, al-Qaeda will step up strikes in Indian cities in the coming weeks to spur the anti-India movement in Kashmir, which will eventually be taken into al-Qaeda's broader regional theater.