



War by Other Means

Attacks on Embassies & Foreign Nationals

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The latest in a string of strikes against embassies and consulates across the world was the explosion of a car bomb outside the Danish Embassy in Islamabad on 1 June 2008. In the period since the 9/11 attacks, especially since America's invasion of Afghanistan, there has been a spurt in the number of such assaults, including against UN offices.

Why are they being attacked? Is there an underlying trend? Will they decline, or are they likely to continue? Is there a way out?

I ATTACKS ON FOREIGNERS & EMBASSIES A PROFILE

On 22 January 2002, armed men on motorcycles fired at the US Consulate in Calcutta, India, killing five Indian security personnel and wounding 13 others. The Harakat ul-Jihad-I-Islami and the Asif Raza claimed responsibility for the attack. In June the same year, a car bomb exploded near the US Consulate and the Marriott Hotel in Karachi, Pakistan. The explosion killed 11 people and destroyed the compound wall of the American consulate. A previously unknown group, Al Qanoon claimed responsibility for the attack. On 12 October 2002 three powerful bombs ripped through Bali, killing 202 people (164 of whom were foreign nationals and 38 Indonesian citizens) and injuring 209. The attack was carried out by the detonation of a backpack-mounted device carried by a suicide bomber and a large car bomb, which exploded in or near nightclubs in Kuta; and a third detonated outside the US consulate in Denpasar.

July 2003 witnessed an attack on the American Embassy in Monrovia, Liberia, fortunately, without

any casualties or injuries. The UN Headquarters in Baghdad was attacked by a truck bomb on 19 August the same year, in which nearly 22 people died. A branch of the al-Qaeda – the 'Brigades of the Martyr Abu Hafz al-Masri' claimed responsibility for the attack. In August that year, at least 19 people were killed when a truck exploded outside the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad. In October, a US diplomatic convoy in the Gaza Strip was bombed, killing three US citizens. While the major Palestinian militant groups denied responsibility for the assault, a day later, Palestinian security forces arrested several suspects belonging to the Popular Resistance Committees. In November 2003, truck bombs detonated at a London-based bank and the British Consulate in Istanbul, killing 26 and injuring over 450. Al Qaeda and a Turkish Islamic militant group – the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders' Front (IBDA-C), claimed joint responsibility for the same.

In July 2004 the US Embassy in Uzbekistan was attacked by a suicide bomber (belonging to the Islamic Jihad Group of Uzbekistan). In September, the bombing of the Australian embassy with a car bomb in Jakarta, Indonesia left nine people dead. The Jemaah Islamiah (JI) or 'al-Jama'a al-Islamiya in East Asia' - the Al Qaeda-linked JI purportedly took responsibility for the attack. In December 2004, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, armed men stormed into the US consulate, killing five consulate employees. Four attackers were killed by Saudi security personnel. The 'al-Qaeda organization in the Arabian Peninsula' claimed responsibility.

A rocket struck the US embassy in January 2005, in Baghdad's fortified 'Green Zone', killing two Americans and wounding six others. In March 2006, a suicide car bomb attack near the US Consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, left an American Diplomat and

four others dead. The suspects are believed to have had links with al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. An attempt by four gunmen to attack the American embassy in Damascus, Syria, on 13 September was foiled by Syrian guards at the embassy. While there was no immediate assertion of responsibility for the attack, a little-known group (believed to be an offshoot of al-Qaeda) called Jund al-Sham (Arabic for 'Soldiers of Syria') was suspected to be behind the assault. September 2006 saw a suicide car bomb explode near the US embassy in Kabul, killing 16 people were killed. The responsibility for the attack was claimed by Taliban rebels.

In January 2007, an explosion was caused by a rocket fired into the US embassy building in Athens, Greece. The attack is suspected to have been carried out by Greek leftists. While the embassy building was minimally damaged, no injuries were reported. In December, over 60 people, including 11 UN staff members, were reported to have been killed, when two car bombs exploded near Algeria's Constitutional Council and the UN offices. The Maghreb Al Qaeda group claimed responsibility.

In January 2008, a bomb explosion targeted at a US Embassy vehicle in Northern Beirut, killed at least three Lebanese and injured an American bystander and a local embassy employee. Al-Qaeda was seen as responsible for the same. In addition to the latest strike outside the Danish Embassy in Islamabad on 1 June 2008; the heavily fortified district in the Iraqi capital – the International Zone (more popularly – the 'Green Zone'), which houses the American Embassy and is also the center of the international presence in the city, has come under increasing attack in the last few months. In one of the fiercest attacks in March this year, a barrage of rockets and mortars were fired into the zone. According to news reports, of the nearly 700 rockets and mortar rounds fired since March, about 120 actually struck the Zone.

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II TARGETS, PERPETRATORS AND LOCATION IDENTIFYING TRENDS

Most of the attacks on embassies have occurred predominantly in greater West Asia/Middle East (with a few exceptions like Indonesia, Greece, and Pakistan), including Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon, among other countries.

Since attacks on embassies are not without precedent, they are not a post-9/11 phenomenon. The events of 9/11 only served to accelerate their incidence. Foreign missions have been under attack since the 1970s, notably, the US embassy and American nationals in Tehran; Pakistan's centers in Afghanistan; and Afghan and Iranian centers in Pakistan. Targeting foreign nationals, cultural centers and embassies (especially of those countries with whom these states have had troubled relations at particular historical points), have unfortunately become a part of the violent political reaction witnessed in the region. As mentioned above, in terms of attacks on foreign missions, one can see a trend across Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan,.

Attacks on foreign nationals within the region (particularly these three countries), have largely been carried out by jihadi (irrespective of whether they are part of the al Qaeda or not) groups, influenced by factors such as, bilateral political reactions, sectarian animosity, and their own fundamentalist ideology. Such violent political reactions therefore, must be understood in the historical context that has developed since the late 1970s, instead of locating the issue solely within the current 'al-Qaeda' discourse.

The obvious question to ask then is why these three countries and why the late 1970s? Three major developments took place within these countries in the late 1970s that radically altered the perceptions of the local populations vis-à-vis their neighbouring states and the two super powers. The military coup in Pakistan headed by Zia in 1977, the Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979, and the entry of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, engendered a vitiated political environment within the region.

Zia's search for legitimacy, in order to consolidate his rule in Pakistan, made him lean towards the religious organization belonging to the Sunni

majority, resulting in the victimization of the Shias. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Kohmeni regime's perceived support the Shias in Pakistan, unleashed sectarian vendetta that continues even today. The attack on Iranian nationals and their cultural centers in Pakistan therefore, must be seen in this light.

In Afghanistan, since the late 1980s, there have been attacks on foreign nationals belonging to the US, Pakistan, and Iran, depending on their political alignments. During the 1980s, the US and Pakistan supported the mujahideens against the Soviet troops; while in the 1990s, Pakistan supported the Taliban against the mujahideens. Iran's support to the Shias, especially in the Hazara region resulted in the Taliban attacking Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif, killing eight of them in 1998. In Iran, the takeover of the American embassy by a group of extremists in 1979 and the ensuing violence is well-known.

In short, the assault on foreign missions within this region has become a part of the violent political reaction seen since the 1970s. In recent years, this violence has spilled over to other countries as well. This new wave of attacks is being led by the al-Qaeda and groups allied to it, and has spread from Africa to Indonesia. This new phenomenon which started a few years before 9/11 is more organized in terms of targets, perpetrators, and places of attack.

Where do these attacks take place? Most of them have taken place in countries that have non-democratic or not-truly-democratic regimes including Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Sudan. Besides the democratic deficit in these countries, there is also a huge deficit of governance. Failure to allow democratic expression of discontent and protest over the last few decades has resulted in providing spaces to religious and fundamentalist organizations within these countries.

Besides being non-democratic, these regimes also shared and continue to share an understanding with the West (read the US). Problems of governance and the failure to introduce reforms by the regimes in these countries can be linked to the external support they receive from the US. Today, many non-democratic countries in the Middle East, survive primarily due to such external support. Debates on the restoration of democracy within these countries get dissipated in the larger

strategic calculus of Western powers. With local democratic expression stunted, the impotence of the UN, and the continuance of non-democratic regimes within these states due to external pressures, local populations feel helpless.

Why do these attacks take place? The above mentioned groups – politico-religious and militant, in their attempt to find spaces beyond those offered by moderate and secular political parties, have chosen religion

as their main vehicle of ideology and expression. Their politics and objectives have become inward-looking, retrograde, and fundamentalist. In this process, they have become not only anti-West, but also sectarian, leading to a clash of civilizations within and without.

Unresolved problems have acquired new meaning and new symbols of resistance. While problems in Palestine have existed for a long time, new conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Iraq have become mobilizing points for radical groups. A new phenomenon has emerged since the 1990s - Muslims from other countries (some of them even secular and moderate), from the UK to Indonesia, have become actively involved in resisting what they perceive as discrimination against them.

While Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan since the 1990s, provided for a base, the al Qaeda became the main driver of this resistance. While pre-9/11, Afghanistan absorbed the new wave of Muslim youths from all over the world; post-9/11, it pushed them back into their respective countries. These youths, thoroughly radicalized with a sincere belief that Islam is under attack from the Western countries, have today organized themselves within their respective countries. With Afghanistan and Iraq becoming a litmus test, any minor issue, even if inconspicuous and innocent, is exploited by these groups. The interpretation of the Danish cartoons and the subsequent mass mobilization

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and violent reactions within Muslim countries is a case in point.

It is this section of individuals, who are responsible for attacks inside their respective countries - from London to Bali. Foreigners, consulates and embassies have become easy targets in these countries, for the lack of sufficient protection and the failure of intelligence. Even if these embassies are better protected and travel advisories issued by their respective countries, the foreigners' presence at any given time - for business and tourism, cannot be completely secured. The attacks on hotels and restaurants, for example in Bali, Jakarta, Karachi and Islamabad, are meticulously planned, for the perpetrators clearly understood the lack of security in these areas. Even if security was provided, it was minimal and could be breached by these groups.

III

ARE THERE LESSONS TO BE LEARNT?

Based on the above discussion, though narrowly focused and inadequate, the following trends can be identified. First, the violent backlash in these countries, especially in the Middle East, should be viewed in a larger historical perspective and not in terms of narrow post-9/11 reactions. Reasons, real or perceived, that have radicalized the Muslim youths of the present generations in these different countries need to be identified and addressed. If the reasons are real, then there is a need to take hard decisions within their respective countries and also at the international level. After all, for how long can the international community suppress their genuine grievances under the pretext of 'strategic interests'?

Second, the development of international crises within these countries, especially post-9/11, need to be better analyzed, in terms of the main actors, the reasons for their actions, and their links with other organizations at the international level. For example, the perpetrators of attacks on foreign nationals and consulates belong to three different groups - the al-Qaeda; its 'franchisees' in different countries; and local militant groups. Many believe that the al-Qaeda today has become a loosely-organized movement, with its spirit strongly present in many parts of the Muslim World. The second group - al-Qaeda franchisees are those groups, which are a part of the al-Qaeda network, even

though their command and control structures may not be headed by Osama bin Laden. These groups have local leaders who mobilize support from within for what is perceived as a global Muslim cause. The third kind of groups may neither be strictly affiliated to the al-Qaeda nor act as its franchisees in local countries, but have local grievances vis-à-vis their respective governments and also serious problems with fellow religious and sectarian groups.

Clubbing the above three groups under one category will lead to erroneous conclusions - any counter-strategy is unlikely to yield the desired result. Different sets of strategies need to be pursued at the national, regional, and international levels. This includes changes not only in those countries where attacks have taken place, but also those who were at the receiving end.

Third, there is need for better intelligence-collection, coordination, and sharing between various agencies within the country and also among countries. Embassies and foreign nationals are always easy targets, irrespective of the improvements made in physical security. Human intelligence acquires salience here and it is imperative that the host country shares it with foreign embassies, especially on matters relating to the safety and security of foreigners.

Finally, certain international security practices in the post-9/11 period have become a serious issue of political mobilization in many Muslim countries. For example, the treatment of individuals of Middle Eastern origin at the airports in US, UK and Europe, has become a sensitive issue. Whether real or perceived, when such treatment finds space either orally or in writing in the print and electronic media, it serves to further demonize the West. Unless these concerns are addressed in all seriousness, such attacks are likely to continue.



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