

How Western Policy Toward Palestine Has Spread 'Jihad' Throughout Eurasia

by Ramtanu Maitra

In end-August, addressing a group of foreign journalists in Dhaka, Bangladesh's former Prime Minister and leader of the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, said she is fearful that a Taliban-like "Islamic Rule" may take control over Bangladesh soon and provoke a massive refugee crisis.

Since Sheikh Hasina is preparing for the general elections in October, some analysts may dismiss such talk as a political overstatement. Nonetheless, the truth within it cannot be hidden. In fact, Bangladesh's political environment is rife with violence and the jihadis are growing in power in that milieu.

The growth of Taliban militancy came to light more than two years ago, when Indian police officers arrested Syed Abu Nasir, a Bangladesh national, who is allegedly a member of the Lashkar-e-Toiba (Army of the Pure) and the Pakistan-based Markaz Dawa Al-Irshad (Center for Preaching), and recovered from him two kilograms of RDX explosives and detonators. Abu Nasir had told the police he had entered India from Pakistan via Bangladesh in October 1998. His mission was to blow up the U.S. Consulate in Calcutta, and he brought along six others—four Egyptians and one each from Myanmar and Sudan.

Bangladesh Connection

Press reports of the police version said the Pakistan Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) had been handling these terrorists. ISI is the military-controlled Pakistani external intelligence agency. The U.S. State Department acknowledged the Indian intelligence report and carried out an independent investigation, which led them also to a similar conclusion.

Subsequently, in the Spring of 2000, President Clinton had to curb his visit to Bangladesh when intelligence reports indicated that armed militants had taken up positions to ambush his helicopter on his way to visit a remote Bangladesh village.

Almost at the same time Sheikh Hasina was expressing her fears to the foreign media, intelligence agencies in India published a report which showed that Pakistani militants are infiltrating into India through Bangladesh. This evidence surfaced during investigations of the movements of three Jaish-e-Mohammed ultras, who were killed in Lucknow, and one Lashkar-e-Toiba militant, who was shot down in Faizabad. Similar details also came to light during the grilling of two Pakistan-trained ISI agents arrested by the Indian Special

Task Force (STF) last month. Both Jaish and Lashkar are prominent terrorist groups operating in the Indian part of Kashmir and have accounted for many deaths there.

While the Bangladesh connection poses a new problem in the region, the Taliban militancy, in fact, had made inroads into Pakistan years ago. In Pakistan, where the Taliban-linked militants "own" a piece of the Pakistani Army, jihadis forced Islamabad to stop a crackdown on Pakistan-based militant organizations fighting in the Indian part of Kashmir.

The military regime in Pakistan, under severe international pressure, had launched a massive operation in mid-August against the militant groups, starting in the port-city of Karachi before moving northwards. Hundreds of activists belonging to Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashmar-e-Toiba factions were rounded up in Karachi, Multan, Sargodha, and Rawalpindi. But within 24 hours, the policy was dropped and the militants were released.

The government's about-turn was unexpected, but is said to have been triggered by pressures exerted by senior bureaucrats and Army officers. These power-brokers were concerned that the crackdown on militant groups would force the larger religious political parties, including the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jamiatul-Ulema-e-Islam, to take to the streets.

While the situation is not as bad in Central Asia, it is not much better either. In the fertile Fergana Valley, where Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan meet, Islamic radicalization is taking place in full swing. Helped by the Wahabi-version of religious books, brought by aircraft from Pakistan, the area is becoming a center of radical zealots. Clerics such as Numangani are preaching a violent jihad and getting their people trained in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, heroin production is spreading in Central Asia. Some heroin refineries have already been relocated to Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

Where To Look

The process that can be described as "Talibanization" began in the mid-1970s following the oil embargo hoax and the oil-price hike by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The high oil price benefitted Saudi Arabia the most. Saudi Sheikhs, bloated with oil money, began funding Muslim clerics in South and Southeast Asia by giving them substantial amounts of money to build new and large mosques. Their objective was to spread Wahabism—the Is-

lamic sectarian theology followed by the Saudis—and gain control of the Islamic world. This created fresh tensions in some societies, particularly in non-Islamic nations such as India, but it did not distort the situation beyond control.

Real distortions occurred in the 1980s. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late-1979, the West, led by Washington, mobilized Islamic mujahideen to fight the Red Army. Jails were thrown open in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Jordan, among other Islamic nations, bringing in volunteers to fight the Communists. These believers were trained with automatic rifles, carbines, machine guns, grenade and rocket launchers, and other sophisticated weapons by the Western and Pakistani military officers. It was also the time when Osama bin Laden was brought into Afghanistan to finance and inspire the battling mujahideens. At the time, of course, Osama was an asset and a friend of the West, his brother a financial player in Bush circles in Texas.

In 1988, the Soviets left Afghanistan in disgrace and the newly developed fighting machine, molded from a group of criminals, now called the mujahideen (freedom fighters), began to fight each other over control of Afghanistan. Between 1979 and 1988, the mujahideen became “self-sufficient” with the help of Western intelligence groups and Pakistani ISI. The latter allowed the mujahideen to cultivate poppy and then funneled their products—heroin, hashish and opium—to the international market through the narcotics cartel. The mujahideen invested their drug proceeds heavily in buying weapons from the underground. The process almost got exposed when the Iran-Contra affair blew up in Washington around 1987.

As the Afghan situation deteriorated on the ground in the 1990s, Pakistani ISI, with the help of British and U.S. intelligence, began to develop a religious identity group, which later came to be known as the Taliban. As a result, “mujahideens” became “jihadis” and the Talibs from various religious schools were recruited. When the Taliban took control of virtually all of Afghanistan, receiving direct help from the Pakistani Army, jihadis picked up the Islamic flag to help fellow Muslims in the region to annex political power.

By mid-1990s, Pakistan’s Kashmir movement became wholly dependent on the “Afghansi” jihadis, and a number of groups were set up inside Pakistan as coordinating bodies. The Pakistani Army, which had been Islamized by the late President Zia ul-Haq, and the Pakistani ISI, which has strong links to the Western intelligence agencies, provided the logistical and intelligence help to the jihadis and opened up new grounds for them.

The arrangement was a perfect fit. While the Saudi and Kuwaiti sheikhs could fund the clerics legally only to build new mosques, the jihadis, with a huge stash of illegal drug money, could fund any number of poor Muslims and give them the hope of securing political power. Money helped them to recruit fast and guns helped them to become a potent force.

Palestine Warfare Changes The Ground

While this situation was developing, the West remained virtually disinterested. But when the jihadis, following the 1991 Gulf War, opposed the stationing of the U.S. Army in Saudi Arabia and picked up the Israel-Palestine issue as a core cause, things began to sour between the jihadis and the West. Strong denunciations of the jihadis were routinely issued from Washington and Moscow, but little attention was paid to the Talibanization process in the region and beyond.

Since then, the situation has grown more complex. While jihadis controlled at the ground level the growing of poppy and peddling of heroin and opium, at the top of the narcotic-traffickers’ heap sat the mafias from Russia, the Balkans, and elsewhere. These mafia networks have also developed linkages with international intelligence agencies. The objective is to pay the intelligence agents and corrupt them, and keep the narcotic-trafficking machine well-oiled. What is not fully understood by all but a handful, is that this potpourri of criminals have a huge worldwide network and financial strength.

The issue at stake here is how to dismantle this apparatus that was put in place during the Cold War days and nurtured in the post-Cold War days for making money. To begin with, a resolution of the Israel-Palestine issue, in a manner just and acceptable to all parties, will be the first signal of a commitment. Needless to say, Washington remains the key to the resolution of the problem and this is where it must start.

Were the Palestine-Israel conflict situation resolved peacefully, the jihadis would lose much of their appeal among the Muslims around the world. However, narco-money and the firepower will still appeal to a significant section of poor Muslims who believe that an Islamic rule is decidedly superior to the rule dished out by the Western-trained leaders of most Islamic nations. A true solution will emerge when the Islamic nations, no longer burdened with the Palestine-Israel issue, would find strength to label these jihadis as “criminals” and “usurpers of Islam.”

Present conditions, however, do not allow the Islamic nations to take this important step. While Pakistan is a glowing example of where the jihadis call the shots, fear of similar developments exists in many Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt are increasingly vulnerable to the jihadis’ wrath. In Saudi Arabia, the situation has become quite unstable. The Saudi intelligence chief suddenly resigned a couple of weeks ago, and Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan had cancelled the annual Saudi-U.S. joint military exercise, only hours before it was to begin.

Similar instability exists in Jordan, as well. Any condemnation of jihadis, while the Israelis carry out mayhem on the Palestinians, will bring citizens to the streets in many Arab countries. Under such tenuous circumstances, and a double-faced policy of the West, Islamic nations will continue to act impotent, when it comes to dealing with the well-armed and violent jihadis.