

## Jaish-e-Mohammed's Western Appeal

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### South Asian group emerges as apparent pipeline for jihadists

The news that five Americans were picked up in Sargodha, Pakistan at a safe house operated by Jaish-e-Mohammed (the Army of Mohammed, JeM) highlights once again the apparent importance of the group as a pipeline for Western jihad enthusiasts seeking to fight in South Asia or seeking to connect with elements close to Al Qaeda in the region. The group was established in February 2000 in the wake of the hijacking of Indian Airlines 814 from Nepal to New Delhi, which resulted in the release from prison of the leader of the group, Maulana Masoud Azhar, in exchange for a planeload of passengers.

The hijacking was blamed upon Harakat-ul-Mujahedeen (Movement of Holy Warriors, HuM), who had launched a series of kidnappings in the mid-1990s in the wake of the arrest of a number of their senior leadership in 1993-1994. At the time a leader in the HuM, Azhar chose to break away and establish a separate group in the wake of his release in 1999 – the reasons for which are not entirely clear, though it caused a certain stir amongst the South Asian jihadi community which resulted in the Pakistani government announcing that it was inhibiting Azhar's movements.

More significant for the question at hand, however, is the fact alongside Azhar, a young British-Pakistani named Omar Saeed Sheikh was also released (a third man, Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar, an Indian Kashmiri Muslim, was also freed in the exchange) and followed Azhar into his new group.

Saeed Sheikh was a British-Pakistani born in East London who attended the London School of Economics and in the mid-1990s first got involved in Muslim causes as a participant in an aid convoy to Bosnia. Falling sick during the trip, he ended up in a Croatian hospital where he met a South Asian mujahedeen warrior from HuM who advised him that if he really wanted to pursue holy war, he should head to Pakistan.

Heeding this advice, Sheikh left Europe for Pakistan where he trained with the Kashmiri group and ended up taking part in an attempt to kidnap some Western tourists in the province (for which he was languishing in jail until the 1999 hijacking). It was the later kidnap and murder of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter, however, for which he would achieve greater infamy – Sheikh currently sits on Pakistani death row guilty of this crime.

While his exact role in JeM is unclear, it has been suggested that he likely played a relatively prominent role, acting as a fundraiser and organizer for the group. His ability to blend into Western society is something that JeM capitalized upon in both of the known kidnappings in which he got involved (his accent and manner enabled him to ingratiate himself to the victims), and he has links to other British militants who have been linked to Al Qaeda or other Pakistani groups.

He apparently sent money to Rangzieb Ahmed, an alleged "director of Al Qaeda"; currently sitting in a British prison, when Ahmed was in an Indian jail after being picked up in the early 1990s as an HuM member crossing the line in Kashmir between India and Pakistan. He has also been linked by the BBC to safe houses connected to the network that was built up in Pakistan by the British extremist group Al Muhajiroun.

Sheikh is not, however, the only Briton to allegedly hold a senior role in JeM. The mysterious and ever-elusive Rashid Rauf, who was the apparent ringleader of the Pakistani end of the August 2006 plot to bring down about 8 aircraft in transit from London to North America, was also a member of the group. While hard information about Rauf is hard to come by, it is known that he married into Azhar's family soon after he fled to Pakistan in 2002 following the murder of an uncle in Birmingham.

Fleeing alongside another British-Pakistani, Mohammed Gulzar, who was later to return to the UK under an assumed name and was in the dock as the alleged ringleader at the British end of the 2006 plot (Gulzar was cleared of charges related to the case, and remains at large in the UK under a control order), Rauf has since also been linked to a number of other Al Qaeda inspired plots in the West. It would appear as though he played something of a coordinator role between local militants in Pakistan and the Westerners who came over seeking jihadi glory.

The difficult part to ascertain from this, however, is what is the role of JeM in all of this, and whether it is the group that is behind such targeting, or whether it is simply allowing its network to be used by Al Qaeda. Certainly since its high profile involvement in the 2001 attacks on the Indian Parliament, which almost brought India and Pakistan to war, the group as an active force has faded somewhat from the limelight.

The group has a history of inspiring foreigners into carrying out destructive acts of self-immolation &ndash; on Christmas day 2000, young Asif Sadiq, using the nom de guerre Mohammed Bilal, carried out the first known suicide attack by a British national in Kashmir, ramming a car full of explosives into an Indian army base in Srinagar killing 10. Highlighting a connection hinted at earlier, Sadiq may also have been a member of the British extremist group Al Muhajiroun. It is also known that Azhar made fundraising trips to the West during the 1980s and 1990s, and it has been claimed that he passed through the United Kingdom at least once.

It is possible that it was during these trips that Azhar laid the roots of the apparently strong connections or profile that his group has amongst the community of young jihad enthusiasts in the West. Certainly, in a number of recent plots the group's name has appeared as the connection that those coming from the West were seeking in the first place rather than Al Qaeda &ndash; something maybe acknowledging the fact that as a Kashmiri freedom group first, the group may be easier to locate.

That these five Americans were captured in a safe house allegedly linked to the group would seem to lend some support to this theory, though it must also be pointed out that the individual with whom they were first in contact, the enigmatic Saifullah, was apparently claiming to be linked to Al Qaeda. Whatever the case, the group's peripheral involvement in these young men's attempt to join the holy war highlights once again the very immediate danger to the West from seemingly locally minded militant groups.