

The screenshot shows the Al Jazeera website interface. The main article is titled "The (in)visible in Indian terrorism" by Irfan Ahmad. The article's sub-headline reads: "Indian Muslims are often accused of terrorist links, but in many cases it is Muslims themselves who are terrorised." The article is dated September 16, 2011. The page features a navigation menu at the top, a search bar, and several sidebar sections including "Related", "Top News", "Opinion", and "What's Hot". A "WATCH ALJAZEERA LIVE STREAM" banner is positioned at the top right. The main image shows three men in white turbans embracing each other.

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The (in)visible in Indian terrorism

Indian Muslims are often accused of terrorist links, but in many cases it is Muslims themselves who are terrorised.

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India's media often rushes to blame Muslims for acts of terrorism, sometimes without serious evidence [EPA]

According to the Indian government and media, many Muslim groups have recently been involved in terrorism. Of these, three stand out: Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), formed in 1976 and banned soon after 9/11 for fomenting “communal disharmony” and “sedition”; Deccan Mujahideen (DM), an outfit which shot to prominence by claiming responsibility for the 2008 Mumbai terror attack; and Indian Mujahideen (IM), a group believed to have been formed after 2001. These groups have been charged with killing hundreds of people. The latest attack came on July 13, when 20 people were killed in a series of bombings in Mumbai.

Shortly after the attack, the police said that IM and SIMI were behind the blasts. A nationwide hunt followed. According to Rakesh Maria, Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) Chief, expert teams

fanned out to seven states. Officers from the National Intelligence Agency, formed after the 2008 Mumbai attacks to fight terrorism, raided the houses of two IM suspects in Ranchi, capital of Jharkhand state.

In Indian political discourse, outfits like SIMI, DM and IM appear as a threat to India's stability and its global rise. While some depict them as domestic groups, others portray them as working in alliance with outfits from Pakistan. It is thus believed that IM was floated by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a militant group formed in 1990 in Afghanistan and active in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Most accounts of these outfits are, however, inconsistent and even contradictory.

By analysing the Mumbai attack and the alleged involvement of IM and SIMI, I make three arguments. First, since the media and the security agencies have a close and uncritical relationship, we should have a healthy doubt about the accuracy of their information, and refrain from immediately pointing fingers at one Muslim group or another. Despite the fact that barely anyone adequately knows what IM is and how it came about, after the July attack several Muslims were arrested as terrorists.

Second, because Muslims are blamed, arrested, tortured, and killed (by the police) after each terror attack, with little or no evidence, such measures might end up creating the danger the Indian state claims to fight.

Third, I contend that the Indian media's role in "reporting" terrorism is prejudiced.

What is Indian Mujahideen?

After the blast, the police arrested many people from Mumbai's "sensitive" (read Muslim) neighbourhoods, a practice the residents of such neighbourhoods have grown accustomed to in the last decade. One suspect, Faiz Usmani, died in police custody. The police claimed that his death was caused by "hypertension"; his family believes that he was tortured. Usmani was the brother of Afzal Usmani, in jail for his alleged involvement in the 2008 Ahmadabad blast. Both brothers are reported to be IM members.

Riaz Bhatkal, described as India's "most wanted terrorist", is regarded as IM's founder. He became close with SIMI in the early 1990s when it began to radicalise. Born in 1976, Bhatkal went to an English-medium school and later studied engineering at a Mumbai college. But beyond that, much of IM's history remains unclear. It's not even known whether Bhatkal is alive or dead. After the July 13 blast, the ATS attempted to nab him. This is surprising, because early this year the media reported that Bhatkal was killed in Karachi by Chhota Rajan, Mumbai's underworld don.

The media provides differing accounts of IM's formation and, in fact, is sometimes inconsistent even within a single version. For example, Animesh Roul, the director of the Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict in Delhi, claimed that IM was "conceived at a terrorist conclave attended by top leaders of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Harkat-ul-Jehadi Islami (HuJI) in Pakistani-administered Kashmir in May 2008". He did not find it contradictory when in the next paragraph he wrote, "IM came into the open for the first time in November 2007". In *Asian Policy*, Christine Fair indicated two dates of its formation: 2001 and an ambiguous date of "much later". According to *The Times of India*, IM was formed in 2005. To Namrata Goswami of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis in Delhi, "key SIMI members ...started supporting the idea of the formation of the IM as early as December 2007".

IM first hit the headlines after a series of explosions in November 2007. In an email to the media and police, IM claimed responsibility for the blasts. As the email explained, the aim of those attacks was to protest against "the pathetic conditions of Muslims in India that idol worshippers can kill our brothers, sisters, children and outrage dignity of our sisters at any place and at any time and we can't resist them". Then, in 2008, minutes before the blasts in Ahmadabad, IM sent an email (entitled "The Rise of Jihad, Revenge of Gujarat") to the media saying: "We hereby declare an ultimatum to all the state governments of India ... to stop harassing the Muslims and keep a check on their killing, expulsion, and encounters."

The messages are a sign that IM's aim is to protest against and avenge the killings and humiliation of Muslims at the hands of Hindu nationalists and the state administration. The destruction of the Babri mosque by Hindu nationalists in 1992 is important to IM's ideological repertoire - hence its description by the media and the terrorism experts as a "home-grown", "domestic" terror outfit. Since the media regard the Babri mosque as a domestic issue (unlike Kashmir, which is international) and the IM invokes the Babri mosque to rationalise its attacks, the IM is thus considered a domestic outfit.

However, many Indian security experts hold that IM is a tool of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) used to destabilise India. In these accounts, IM is a means to advance ISI's agenda of destabilising India and at the same time to exonerate Pakistan of any allegations made by India and the West of promoting terrorism. The logic of the security experts is that the word "Indian" in IM points to India's domestic groups, rather than Pakistani groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, through which the ISI has been operating in Kashmir. On the other hand, experts like B Raman allege that IM and SIMI's reach extends beyond South Asia, characterising the groups as a part of a global network of Islamic radicals without furnishing adequate evidence.

India's Guantanamo Bays

The media invariably base their stories on the sources of the state. An apt example is Praveen Swami, a terrorism expert cited by everyone writing about the IM. Swami is to print media what Arnab Goswami (of *Times Now*) is to Indian TV: Their views are rabidly nationalist, some might even say Islamophobic. Swami reproduces the police version (e.g. see his writings in *CTC Sentinel*, May 2010; *The Hindu*, Edit-Page, March 22, 2010; and *Frontline*, June 2-15, 2007) without giving the other side of the story, namely: the viewpoints of the alleged terrorists, their family members, or the Muslim community. It is well-known that the Indian police are biased against Muslims and have been complicit in killing them, as was evident in the state-mediated 2002 Gujarat violence, in which 1,000 Muslims were killed.

Given that the Indian media is uninterested in reporting "facts" and multiple views, can an anthropologist like me make sense of the mediated world of terrorism? Thomas Eriksen holds that a concept like globalisation has "no meaning to an anthropologist unless it can be studied through actual persons, their relationship to each other and to a larger surrounding world". I thus agree with Peter Van der Veer that "behind the growing visibility [of media] is a growing invisibility".

What is rarely visible in the Indian media, however, are the brutal, illegal methods used against suspected terrorists: torture cells, illegal detention, unlawful killings in "police encounters"; elimination of evidence against the illegal actions of the law-enforcing agencies; and rampant harassment of Muslims. In July 2009, *The Week* reported on the existence of at least 15 secret torture chambers meant to extract information from the detainees. The methods to extract information include attaching electrodes to a detainee's genitals as well as the use of pethidine injections. To quote *The Week*, these chambers are "our own little Guantanamo Bays or Gitmos", which a top policeman called "precious assets".

In May 2008, a Muslim boy aged 14 was abducted by the Gujarat police. He was dragged to the police car at gunpoint and taken to a detention centre where he was tortured. He returned home ten days later when the court ordered his release following his mother's petition. The police subsequently threatened the boy's family with dire consequences if they pursued the case in court. The police harassment becomes even more acute in light of the fact that most lawyers often hesitate to take up the cases of "terrorists". As a disempowered community - as the government-appointed Sachar Committee report (of 2006) minutely demonstrates - Muslims themselves don't have adequate and qualified lawyers to pursue such cases. Muslims' marginalisation thus renders their voice invisible in the media too.

It is believed that after SIMI was banned, soon after 9/11, its radical members formed IM. During my fieldwork (2001-2004) on Jamaat-e-Islami and SIMI I did not hear anything about IM. SIMI activists and other Muslims I met felt terrorised themselves. It is worth noting that since 2001 far more people have been arrested as "SIMI terrorists" than the actual number of SIMI members, which in 1996 was 413 (when founded in 1976, SIMI's members numbered 132). Until today, the Indian government has still not legally proved its rationale for banning SIMI.

The story untold

In the fight against terrorism, evidence and the rule of law are subservient to prejudice. As of this writing, the Indian government has not yet tracked the perpetrators of the July 13 attack. However, only two days after the attack, Subramanian Swamy, a prominent politician and former minister (with a doctorate from Harvard University) wrote an article called “How to Wipe Out Islamic Terror”. Without any evidence, he blamed Muslims for the attack, in the same way that *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Sun* suspected Muslim involvement in the Norway shooting nine days later.

What Swamy did is standard practice in Indian media. In September 2006, a blast killed 35 people at a Muslim graveyard in Malegaon (in the state of Karnataka). The media blamed Muslims. Likewise, in 2007, after a blast killed 10 Muslims praying in Hyderabad’s Mecca mosque, Praveen Swami freely wrote about the Muslim terrorists he believed caused it and about what he perceived to be the “Islamist threat to India’s cities”. However, investigations later showed that Hindu nationalists carried out the Malegaon and Mecca mosque terror attacks.

Returning to Subramanian Swamy, Swamy wrote: “We need a collective mindset as Hindus to stand against the Islamic terrorist. The Muslims of India can join us if they genuinely feel for the Hindus. That they do I will not believe unless they acknowledge with pride that though they may be Muslims, their ancestors were Hindus”. Those refusing to acknowledge this, Swamy advocated, “should not have voting rights”. He proposed declaring India “a Hindu Rashtra [state]”.

Stories of Muslim terrorists abound in both the Indian and Western media. Since the July 13, 2011 Mumbai bombings, vitriolic pieces like Subramanian Swamy’s have appeared frequently in the media. These pieces subtly influence the analyses of many liberal intellectuals.

By contrast, stories portraying Muslims as the terrorised remain fairly sparse. One wonders if, and how, such stories will be told.

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