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**THE NOVEMBER 2008 FIDAYEEN ATTACK IN MUMBAI:  
ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS**

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### THE NOVEMBER 2008 FIDAYEEN ATTACK IN MUMBAI: ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS

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This paper shall answer two questions: why did terrorists choose to carry out a *fidayeen* (suicidal) attack on Mumbai, and what are the implications of this attack? Its query is prompted by the fact that mass casualty terrorism in India does not require resort to suicidal tactics, owing to the inadequacy of existing policing systems. Indian security forces already have a poor record in thwarting random bombings of unprotected or 'soft' targets. Why then, did those who planned the carnage in Mumbai opt for a risky *fidayeen* assault? What were their objectives and were these achieved?

The paper argues that by carrying out an attack with suicidal gunmen, the terrorists sought both precision and publicity. Their primary aim was to deliver a blow to the Indian economy, using as few resources as possible. A secondary objective was to win adherents to their ideology among Indian Muslims, by claiming to act exclusively on their behalf. In adopting the *nom de plume* Deccan Mujahiddin, they hoped to provoke violent reprisals by Hindu vigilantes on Muslims, which would radicalise the latter and drive them to make common cause with the terrorists. While the attackers achieved a measure of success in meeting the first objective, it remains to be seen whether the second one will be met, too. The paper does not find any merit in the suggestion (advanced by some commentators) that the terrorists were seeking to provoke a military crisis between India and Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mumbai attacks: India's relationship with Pakistan in the balance', *The Daily Telegraph*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3537954/Mumbai-attacks-Indias-relationship-with-Pakistan-in-the-balance.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

First, the paper shall briefly outline the nature of *fidayeen* assaults, and explain why it views them as an extraordinary form of terrorist attack. Thereafter, it shall provide a backgrounder as to the significance of Mumbai as a terrorist target, and the history of terrorist violence in the city. Next, it shall describe the events that took place between 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> November 2008 in Mumbai, and identify how far they marked a departure from past trends. Lastly, the paper shall make a projection as to the damage done and assess whether the terrorists can claim to have achieved moderate or spectacular success.

### ***Fidayeen* Tactics – Surgical and Yet, Symbolic**

The first use of *fidayeen* tactics occurred in 10<sup>th</sup> century Persia, by a group that subsequently became known as the Assassins. Usually, the target of these operations would be a single individual who had been deemed a threat by the higher leadership of the Assassins. After committing a murder, the *fidayees* (killers) would resignedly accept their punishment, which was extremely brutal.<sup>2</sup>

During the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, suicidal attacks became the Arabs' favoured method of hitting out at Israel. Small squads of Palestinian gunmen would infiltrate Israel's border defences and embark on a shooting spree, killing anyone they saw before themselves being gunned down.<sup>3</sup> At times, they took hostages to garner publicity for their actions, which usually ended in considerable bloodshed. Hostage-taking during *fidayeen* attacks was not intended to provide leverage in prisoner swap negotiations (unlike with hijacked aircraft), but purely as a means of shielding the terrorists. While hiding behind non-combatants, *fidayees* could fire at the security forces without being killed in retaliatory firing.

India first experienced a *fidayeen*-style attack on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was shot dead by two members of her bodyguard detail. Since the killers were Sikhs and did not ascribe to Islamist discourse, their action was naturally not classified as a *fidayeen* attack at the time. Yet, in terms of method used, it was very similar to one: the two bodyguards stealthily gained proximity to their victim, committed the murder, and thereafter made no attempt to escape punishment.<sup>4</sup> One was killed almost immediately by agitated policemen while the other survived to face trial and ended his life on the gallows.

Despite facing intense terrorist violence in Punjab and Kashmir through the 1980s and 1990s, the Indian security forces very rarely had to contend with suicidal terrorists. One reason why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE – a Sri Lankan terrorist group) succeeded in assassinating Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 was because it used a suicide bomber.<sup>5</sup> Both, *fidayeen* tactics and suicide bombings demanded a level of fanaticism which was not easily found amongst Indian terrorist

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), pp. 47-48

<sup>3</sup> 'The Guerrilla Threat in the Middle East', *Time*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1969, accessed online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,839649,00.html>, on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Lethal Lapses', *India Today*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1984, pp. 20-25

<sup>5</sup> 'Planned, Precise, Pulverising', *Frontline*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1991, pp. 15-22

groups. Any organization that sought to adopt such methods found itself facing a shortage of volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, it was not an Indian terrorist group that began to carry out *fidayeen* attacks on a regular basis, but a Pakistani one. On 13<sup>th</sup> July 1999, three gunmen from the Pakistani jihadist organization Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT – ‘Army of the Pure’) shot their way into an Indian police camp in Kashmir. They killed four people and held off several counter-attacks by security forces before eventually being neutralized.<sup>7</sup> The attack came as a shock to the Indian security establishment, which had never before confronted such audacious terrorists. Four more attacks followed in quick succession, forcing the security forces to introduce permanent measures to restrict access to sensitive installations.<sup>8</sup>

The LeT went on to establish a near-monopoly over *fidayeen* tactics in South Asia, with its only imitator being the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), another Pakistan-based terrorist group.<sup>9</sup> Cadres from both these organizations are suspected to have participated in the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2001 *fidayeen* assault on the Indian parliament. The attack came close to wiping out the entire political leadership of India and led to a near-war situation between India and Pakistan, whose intelligence agency was suspected of sponsoring LeT and JeM. Although the crisis passed, it led to international fears that violent non-state actors might henceforth execute *fidayeen* attacks with the aim of triggering off a war in the Indian subcontinent.

Interestingly, such fears were never seriously voiced when non-suicidal terrorist attacks took place in India. Two of these even occurred in Mumbai – the country’s financial capital – on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2003 and 11<sup>th</sup> July 2006. Although the human suffering was considerable in both cases, suicidal assaults contained an additional element of purposefulness that captivated audiences. They usually featured prolonged gunbattles between security forces and terrorists, with the media providing a running commentary. Having occupied an advantageous tactical position, the terrorists would continue to fire until they were killed.

Those selected by the LeT to become *fidayees* mostly came from impoverished rural families in the Punjab province of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> They tended to be physically very tough – a result of harsh upbringing, and thus adapted easily to the rigours of paramilitary training. LeT recruits went through a two-phase training process. All underwent a basic 21-day physical toughening course known as *Daura Aam* (ordinary tour) while

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<sup>6</sup> Since 1991, Pakistani intelligence operatives have been urging Sikh separatist groups to launch suicidal attacks on Indian security forces, involving either *fidayeen*-style squads or human bombers. Barring one case in 1995, no Sikh terrorist organization has carried out such attacks due to lack of volunteers. Secret document entitled *Review of Terrorist Activities for the Month of October 1991*, compiled by The Office of the Additional Director General of Police Intelligence, Punjab, p. 52

<sup>7</sup> ‘War by Proxy’, *India Today*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1999, accessed online at <http://www.india-today.com/itoday/19990726/cover5.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>8</sup> E.N Rammohan, ‘Terrorist Attacks and Suicide Bombers’, *United Services of India (USI) Journal*, accessed online at [http://www.usiofindia.org/article\\_Apr\\_Jun04\\_7.htm](http://www.usiofindia.org/article_Apr_Jun04_7.htm), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Kashmir: Suicide terror’, *Asia Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2002, accessed online at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/DL14Df02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/DL14Df02.html), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Mumbai: Behind the attacks lies a story of youth twisted by hate’, *The Observer*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/30/mumbai-terror-attacks-india>, on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2008.

the more motivated were then put through a three-month assault course called *Daura Khas* (special tour).<sup>11</sup> Some were trained in intelligence tradecraft at a one-month course, while others underwent specialized training in assault techniques. The squad that attacked Mumbai had trained for 18 months in marine operations at two training camps in Pakistan. One of these was in the port of Karachi.<sup>12</sup>

Initially, the LeT focused its *fidayeen* attacks on security forces installations in Kashmir. The fanatical courage of its cadres, who were told that their next-of-kin would be well looked after upon their ‘martyrdom’, led to Indian security forces suffering heavy casualties.<sup>13</sup> Gradually however, counter-tactics were developed and police informers succeeded in penetrating some of the group’s networks.<sup>14</sup> Sentries at points of ingress were also sensitized about the tell-tale signs to watch out for prior to a suicidal assault, such as improperly attired personnel who could be *fidayeen* in disguise. All of these factors led to a marked decline in the efficacy of *fidayeen* attacks after 2003, and use of the tactic petered out in Kashmir.

### **Terror Shifts to Mumbai**

From 2002, LeT also began to shift its attention towards targeting population centres in the Indian mainland ie., areas other than Kashmir. On 24<sup>th</sup> September that year, its cadres carried out a *fidayeen* assault on a Hindu temple in western India that left 34 people dead. A series of bombings began in the city of Mumbai the following December, which killed very few people but frightened many more. Police investigators were unable to make any headway in dismantling the network behind these blasts. Eventually, after a particularly devastating attack that killed 50 people on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2003, they stumbled upon clues which led to the arrest of the bombers.<sup>15</sup>

This was the second time that Mumbai had been targeted: the city had previously been the focus of a terrorist campaign in 1992-93. During mid-1992, Indian Intelligence learned that its arch-rival, the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), had developed a plan to sabotage the Indian economy.<sup>16</sup> Using local proxies from Mumbai’s Muslim community, the ISI hoped to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in the city that would damage investor confidence. Since Mumbai was the hub of commercial activity in India, an attack there would automatically have a disproportionate impact on the macroeconomic situation.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Abortive Lashkar plot holds clues to Mumbai massacre’, *The Hindu*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.thehindu.com/2008/12/08/stories/2008120859431000.htm>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>12</sup> According to one Pakistani journalist, the 2008 Mumbai attack was a rogue operation mounted by an ISI major based in Karachi, and Lashkar-e-Toiba. There was also allegedly a strong Al Qaeda influence owing to India’s growing strategic alliance with the United States. Whether this is true or not, there is a general consensus that Karachi was a major hub for preparations for the attack. ‘Al-Qaeda ‘hijack’ led to Mumbai attack’, *Asia Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2008, accessed online at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JL02Df05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JL02Df05.html), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Lecture by Lieutenant General (Retired) Vinayak Patankar on Lashkar-e-Toiba, delivered at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Lashkar honed *fidayeen* skills in Srinagar attacks’, *The Hindu*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.thehindu.com/2008/12/01/stories/2008120155651000.htm>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>15</sup> ‘When terror struck Mumbai’, *Frontline*, 30<sup>th</sup> August – 12<sup>th</sup> September 2003, accessed online at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2018/stories/20030912006613100.htm>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>16</sup> B. Raman, *Intelligence: Past, Present and Future* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2002), p. 232



An outbreak of religious violence between Hindus and Muslims in the city during December 1992-January 1993 converted the ISI's plan into reality. Angered by the failure of local government officials to protect them, a handful of Indian Muslims plotted revenge. They were provided with arms and explosives by the ISI. On 12<sup>th</sup> March 1993, eleven synchronized bombings took place across Mumbai, killing 257 people. Interrogation of the bombers, who were swiftly identified and arrested by Indian police, revealed that target selection for the attacks had been done by the ISI. Instead of killing political leaders (as they had originally intended), the terrorists were instructed to first bomb airline offices, hotels and the city stock exchange. Only after this had been done were they to attack use firearms to eliminate political figures.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, not every terrorist attack in Mumbai since 1993 has had economic overtones, or even a strong link to the ISI. The August 2003 and July 2006 bombings for instance, were focused on maximising casualties, and the perpetrators were never convincingly traced back to Pakistan. Both attacks targeted crowded areas (marketplaces and public transport systems) and involved the use of timed explosive devices. Moreover, in the case of the 2006 bombings, many of the bombers succeeded in getting clean away. The fact that Indian security forces could not interdict them despite being on full alert speaks very poorly of the quality of intelligence coverage.

For some years now, Indian scholars have noted with growing alarm that the country is woefully under-policed. Mumbai, a city with an estimated population of 14 million and many more illegal migrants, has a police force of just 42,000 personnel.<sup>18</sup> Poorly trained and poorly paid, these policemen are a match only for local gangsters who lack the firepower and discipline to pose a serious threat to law and order. Against battle-hardened terrorists armed with assault rifles, the Indian police represent a caricature of buffoonery. Preventive intelligence is almost never generated at the local level, with security forces depending heavily on tip-offs from national intelligence agencies. Due to lack of funding, infrastructure for first responders is abysmally poor.

As a result, Indian security forces have made little progress in unravelling the networks that have carried out a spate of bombings across the country from 2005. Over a three year period (2005-2008) there have been 12 major bomb attacks in India, with the perpetrators managing to evade arrest in each case.<sup>19</sup> On one occasion, investigators blamed LeT for fire-bombing a passenger train that was travelling to Pakistan, only to discover that the attack had been carried out by Hindu fanatics. The fact that they could make such a monumental blunder and not realize it for several months suggests abject incompetence on the part of the Indian security establishment.

The question thus needs to be asked: why did the perpetrators of the November 2008 attack on Mumbai opt for a *fidayeen* attack? If their objective was to cause heavy casualties, they could have achieved the same by merely following the tried-and-

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<sup>17</sup> S. Hussein Zaidi, *Black Friday: The True Story of the Bombay Bomb Blasts* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002) pp. 70-75

<sup>18</sup> 'Mumbai: India's financial, cultural hub', *CNN.com*, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/11/26/mumbai.snapshot/index.html#cnnSTCText>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Also see, 'Information about Mumbai Police', [www.mumbaipolice.org](http://www.mumbaipolice.org), accessed online at [http://www.mumbaipolice.org/right\\_of\\_information/Right\\_of\\_info\\_Sept\\_2008.pdf](http://www.mumbaipolice.org/right_of_information/Right_of_info_Sept_2008.pdf), on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>19</sup> 'Domestic Violence', *Time*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008, accessed online at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1828144,00.html>, on 11 December 2008.

tested formula of placing timed explosive devices in public places. If the Lashkar-e-Toiba did indeed carry out the Mumbai Massacre (and its record of using *fidayeen* tactics makes it the prime suspect), what did it seek to achieve?

The most likely answer is that the LeT was aiming for a qualitative escalation of its targeting policy, by attacking those who were not otherwise vulnerable. Frequent bombings of Indian cities have gradually de-sensitized many observers to terrorist violence within the country. Although an attack on Mumbai, whether suicidal or not, always had the potential to create alarm, this would not be the same if those killed were just lower-middle class commuters and shoppers.<sup>20</sup> To achieve a long-term or 'strategic' impact, the attack needed to be precision-guided towards a target group whose activities were disproportionately important to the city.

Such a target group would include both foreign tourists and businessmen who visit India, bringing much-needed foreign exchange into the country, as well as local politicians. The latter, as has already been mentioned, sit high on the list of some Islamist terror groups due to their alleged anti-Muslim policies. Both foreign nationals and political leaders are unlikely to be caught up in a random act of bombing; they need to be specifically targeted. That is why a *fidayeen* assault became necessary – the ten gunmen who infiltrated into Mumbai on 26<sup>th</sup> November were precision-guided missiles. If, as claimed, they were seeking to avenge the wrongs inflicted upon Indian Muslims, then what was the need to single out American and British passport-holders for assassination? The fact that they chose to concentrate on attacking foreign nationals indicates that the primary motive for the attack was to do economic damage.

Eyewitness accounts have clearly established that the terrorists were intent on killing foreign nationals at the two hotels that they attacked; the Taj Palace Hotel and the Oberoi-Trident Hotel. Although the vast majority of their victims were Indian citizens, this was incidental to the purpose of the assault. Rather than the identity of those Indians who died, it was where and how they were killed that mattered. They died under a hail of bullets in what were hitherto viewed as 'safe areas', where a time bomb could not be smuggled in.

### **The Events of 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> November**

An outline of the sequence of events that took place between 26<sup>th</sup> November, when the *fidayeen* attack began, and 29<sup>th</sup> November, when the last gunman was killed, is now in order. According to eyewitnesses, the ten gunmen reached the Mumbai coast in a motor-powered dingy at around 2100 hours on the 26<sup>th</sup>. They alighted near a fishermen's village and avoided speaking to curious bystanders who enquired as to their identity. Splitting up into four groups, they set off towards their targets, which they had been trained to locate on high-resolution maps created from online satellite imagery. The coordinated assault began half an hour later, as gunshots rang out across the city. Of the ten attackers, four opened fire upon foreign tourists eating dinner at the well-known Leopold Café. They then moved half a mile down the road towards the rear entrance of the Taj Palace Hotel. Upon entering the hotel compound, they

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<sup>20</sup> 'Mumbai Attacks Politicize Long-Isolated Elite', *The New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/asia/07india.html?\\_r=1&scp=15&sq=mumbai%20attacks&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/asia/07india.html?_r=1&scp=15&sq=mumbai%20attacks&st=cse), on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

first shot a sniffer dog and his handler, who were part of the hotel's anti-bomb security system.<sup>21</sup> Entering the cafeteria, they indiscriminately sprayed bullets before disappearing into the corridors of the building as diners cowered beneath their tables.

Two other gunmen launched a simultaneous attack on the Oberoi-Trident Hotel, while another two forced their way into a Jewish cultural centre called Nariman House. The last pair of gunmen opened fire on passengers at Mumbai's main train station, before going on to kill three senior police officers who tried to intercept them. Hijacking the officers' vehicle, they drove around shooting at pedestrians until the police caught up with them. In the ensuing gunbattle, one terrorist was killed and another captured. The captured gunman was one of the very few *fidayees* ever taken alive by Indian security forces. His interrogation provided vital details of the planning and preparation that went into the attack, and confirmed suspicions that it had been masterminded from Pakistan. Whether this automatically makes the Pakistani ISI complicit in the attack remains unclear.

At the other locations that were attacked, Indian security forces were pitifully slow to react. Until 2300 hours, no one in the Mumbai police or political establishment grasped the seriousness of the situation.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds of miles away in New Delhi, Indian National Security Advisor M.K Narayanan continued partying at a friend's house even after being told of the developments in Mumbai.<sup>23</sup> It was only at 0030 hours on the morning of 27<sup>th</sup> November that commandos from the National Security Guard (NSG), India's elite counterterrorist assault force, were ordered to deploy.<sup>24</sup> The NSG is based at a camp outside Delhi, and their travel to Mumbai was delayed owing to unavailability of any military transport aircraft in the national capital.

Eventually, a slow-flying IL-76 aircraft left Delhi at around 0215 hours, for a three-hour flight to Mumbai. By the time the first commandos touched down in the city, almost nine hours had elapsed since the attack began.<sup>25</sup> During the intervening period, the Mumbai police had sought help from the Indian Army and Navy in isolating the areas attacked by the terrorists. Soldiers fanned out around the Taj Palace Hotel, the Oberoi-Trident Hotel and Nariman House, while a 45-man team of marine commandos entered the first two locations. The marine commando officer who led this operation later described the terrorists as extremely ruthless in their willingness to kill. While he and his men strove to avoid civilian casualties in the crowded buildings,

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<sup>21</sup> 'Taj hotel was warned of terrorist attack: Ratan Tata', *The Times of India*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Taj\\_hotel\\_was\\_warned\\_of\\_attack\\_Ratan\\_Tata/articleshow/3775558.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Taj_hotel_was_warned_of_attack_Ratan_Tata/articleshow/3775558.cms), on 11 December 2008.

<sup>22</sup> 'India's intelligence services 'failed to act on warnings of attacks'', *The Daily Telegraph*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3537279/Indias-intelligence-services-failed-to-act-on-warnings-of-attacks.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>23</sup> 'Why M Sounds Better than Mk', *Outlook*, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20081215&fname=GInvestigation&sid=2>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>24</sup> 'Bullets for Broadway', *Outlook*, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20081215&fname=BNSG+%28F%29&sid=1>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>25</sup> 'Why did NSG take 9 hrs to get there?', *The Times of India*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Why\\_did\\_NSG\\_take\\_9\\_hrs\\_to\\_get\\_there/articleshow/3775003.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Why_did_NSG_take_9_hrs_to_get_there/articleshow/3775003.cms), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

the terrorists fired and hurled grenades at will, making the task of neutralizing them that much tougher.<sup>26</sup>

The first batch of 200 NSG commandos relieved the marines at 0805 hours, and it was only from this point that pressure seriously began to build up on the terrorists.<sup>27</sup> Lack of familiarity with the hotels' layout slowed the pace of clearing operations, as the commandos went from room to room evacuating guests. The terrorists meanwhile, demonstrated a remarkable degree of knowledge of the buildings, and agilely moved between floors, occasionally sniping at the commandos. Gradually, through relentless attrition they were picked off, with the last gunman being shot dead at 0930 on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The three-day battle has also seen a dramatic helicopter-borne rooftop assault on Nariman House, where commandos discovered that the terrorists had already killed their Jewish hostages. In total, nine terrorists were killed and one captured, while the security forces lost 20 personnel, including two NSG commandos.

Even as the clearing operations were still on, it emerged that Indian Intelligence had detected preparations for the attack. On 18<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> September 2008, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW – India's foreign intelligence agency) intercepted messages between LeT cadres that indicated an attack on Mumbai.<sup>28</sup> Interrogation of the sole surviving terrorist later revealed that the attack had in fact, originally been planned for 27<sup>th</sup> September but had been abruptly postponed.<sup>29</sup> The alarming nature of the intercepts should logically have commanded attention, given that in 2007, Indian security forces had thwarted a *fidayeen* attack on Mumbai. Unbeknownst to the general public at the time, the country's domestic intelligence service, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), had intercepted an eight-man *fidayeen* team that landed on the Mumbai coast.<sup>30</sup>

Between September and November 2008, communications intercepts as well as counterterrorism liaison with the Central Intelligence Agency suggested that another attempt would be made. The CIA had specifically warned that the threat would originate from the sea and would be aimed against luxury hotels, which indicated that it would once again, take the form of a *fidayeen* assault.<sup>31</sup> Since the hotels had anti-bomb systems in place and relatively strict access control, penetrating their security perimeter would require an armed frontal assault. As it turned out, such an assault would be even more devastating than a bomb attack, since it allowed the terrorists to gain access to areas which were otherwise thought to be 'secured'. Moreover, the total

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<sup>26</sup> The officer's interview is available online at <http://ishare.rediff.com/filevideo-Indian%20Commando%20speaks%20of%20battle%20with%20Mu-id-522130.php>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>27</sup> 'Mumbai: The Uneducable Indian', *South Asia Intelligence Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2008, accessed online at [http://satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/7\\_21.htm#assessment1](http://satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/7_21.htm#assessment1), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>28</sup> 'Mumbai terrorist strike: The Anti-Israeli angle – International Terrorism Monitor Paper No. 476', *South Asia Analysis Group*, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://southasiaanalysis.org/papers30/paper2964.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>29</sup> 'The real plan was to attack on September 27', *Rediff.com*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://in.rediff.com/news/2008/dec/10mumterror-the-terror-attack-plan-was-to-attack-on-september-27.htm>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>30</sup> 'Lethal Lapse', *Frontline*, 6<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.flonnet.com/stories/20081219252501800.htm>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>31</sup> 'US warned India of attack by Islamist militants, say officials', *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/03/mumbai-attacks-us-intelligence-warning>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

death toll for the three-day gunbattle was close to 200, which was as bad as any bomb attack could get.

### Costs and Consequences

Almost immediately upon news of the Mumbai Massacre being broadcast, there was speculation that it aimed to derail the peace process between India and Pakistan. Every time there has been a terrorist attack in India since the 2006 Mumbai bombings, this concern is routinely voiced by commentators in the media and academia.<sup>32</sup> Its proponents probably genuinely believe that the peace process carries credibility in the subcontinent, and that its 'derailment' in some way marks a victory for terrorism.<sup>33</sup> The stark reality is somewhat different: the much-hyped peace process consists mainly of dialogue on confidence-building measures (CBMs), rather than substantive negotiations on the status of Kashmir. It is more a precursor to negotiations rather than an attempt at conflict resolution, and even by November 2008, was a long way from addressing the basic issues fuelling Indo-Pakistani hostility.<sup>34</sup>

To argue that the 'negotiations about negotiations' which were ongoing between India and Pakistan somehow threatened the viability of terrorist groups would be incredibly naïve. Lashkar-e-Toiba carried out its first *fidayeen* attack on the Indian mainland in December 2000, when relations between the two countries were extremely hostile. Its cadres continued to plan and execute bombings across India with remarkable consistency during both, periods of Indo-Pakistani cordiality and hostility.<sup>35</sup> There simply does not seem to be any correlation between the state of foreign relations in the subcontinent, and terrorist attacks by Pakistan-based groups. Whilst the former fluctuates, the latter remains relatively constant.

Detecting the motive for the terrorist attack requires looking more at the nature of the targets chosen, the method of attack, and the justifications offered for it. All of these factors suggest two motives: to damage India's international image as a safe investment destination, and to stir up Hindu-Muslim tensions. It was for the latter reason that the terrorists insisted in telephonic interviews to Indian journalists that they were indigenous Indian Muslims. Their organization was alleged to be the Deccan Mujahiddin, which until 26<sup>th</sup> November, was not even known to exist.<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> 'Trust deficit', *Frontline*, 15th-28<sup>th</sup> July 2006, accessed online at

<http://www.flonnet.com/fl2314/stories/20060728004202200.htm>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>33</sup> The so-called 'peace process' has been stalled for several years now, and is only subject to periodic re-starts when Indian and Pakistani emissaries meet to debate the modalities of talks. 'India to resume Pakistan peace talks', *International Herald Tribune*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2008, accessed online at <http://www.iht.com/articles/reuters/2008/05/18/asia/OUKWD-UK-PAKISTAN-INDIA.php>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>34</sup> 'Peace process not stalled, Zardari to meet Singh: Pak', *The Indian Express*, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2008, accessed online at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/peace-process-not-stalled-zardari-to-meet-singh-pak/363009/>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>35</sup> List of 'Incidents involving Lashkar-e-Toiba', *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, accessed online at [http://www.satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist\\_outfits/lashkar\\_e\\_toiba\\_lt.htm](http://www.satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/lashkar_e_toiba_lt.htm), on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>36</sup> A terrorist codenamed 'Fahadullah' contacted Indian journalists from inside the Oberoi-Trident Hotel and claimed that he and his fellow gunmen were from Hyderabad in southern India. He claimed affiliation to the 'Deccan Mujahiddin' and when asked for a list of demands, became confused and consulted with his confederate as to how he should respond. Indian police later identified him as Abu Fahad, a resident of Okara in Pakistani Punjab. The telephonic interview is available online at

terrorists themselves spoke with Punjabi accents, and communications intercepted by security forces revealed that they conversed with each other in Punjabi. All of this strongly suggested that the *fidayees* were Pakistani nationals, probably members of LeT.<sup>37</sup>

The claim of Pakistani involvement was hotly disputed by Islamabad, even though the Indian government had not explicitly accused the ISI of complicity in the attack. Efforts were made by Pakistani spokesmen to deny that the arrested *fidayee* was a Pakistani national, but these wilted away in the face of investigative reports that traced his antecedents.<sup>38</sup> Hailing from a village called Faridkot in the southern Punjab region, the surviving terrorist has been named by police as Mohammad Ajmal Amir. Aged 21 years, he had been born into a poor rural family and had previously worked as a labourer before drifting into petty crime. He told Indian interrogators that his willingness to join LeT stemmed from a desire to learn weapon-handling, a skill which he thought would help his criminal career.<sup>39</sup> Gradually, he was radicalized after being shown propaganda films of atrocities being committed by Hindus against Muslims in India.

Amir's interrogation yield appears credible because it is consistent with the stories of other captured *fidayees*. Although such individuals are by definition, extremely rare, they all testify to having been indoctrinated with tales of anti-Muslim persecution in India.<sup>40</sup> Their trainers urge them to be extremely brutal, and fearless about the consequences of their actions. The battle skills imbibed by *fidayees* are many degrees more sophisticated than those of even regular soldiers in the Indian Army. From the duration of the shoot-outs that took place in Mumbai, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the terrorists who participated were trained to Special Forces standards. Only that would explain the heavy casualties suffered by Indian security forces.

No indigenous terrorist group in India, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, is known to have the capacity to produce such highly-trained fighters. The sheer physical infrastructure required, in terms of firing ranges, assault courses and recruitment camps, cannot function without intelligence operatives learning of it. Even allowing for the incompetence of Indian police forces which was referred to earlier, the creation of Al Qaeda-style training facilities is not viable in the Indian context. This lends credibility to New Delhi's claims that the Mumbai attack was not planned within India, although it does not rule out the possibility that the attackers had local support. By seeking to portray themselves as acting on behalf of Indian Muslims, the

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<http://ishare.rediff.com/filevideo-Terrorists%20speaks-id-519878.php>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>37</sup> 'Marks on the Water', *Outlook*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online via [www.outlookindia.com](http://www.outlookindia.com), on 14<sup>th</sup> December.

<sup>38</sup> 'Revealed: home of Mumbai's gunman in Pakistan village', *The Observer*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/07/mumbai-terrorism-india-pakistan>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>39</sup> 'The making of a cold-blooded killer', *The Independent*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-making-of-a-coldblooded-killer-1054435.html>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>40</sup> 'The new face of terror', *Frontline*, 17<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> December 2005, accessed online at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2226/stories/20051230003103300.htm>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

terrorists could have only one agenda: provoking attacks against Muslims by Hindu vigilantes.<sup>41</sup>

Such a propaganda policy makes eminent sense from what is known of the LeT's modus operandi. Reprisals against Indian Muslims would provide fodder for its recruitment drives within Pakistan, as well as ensuring a stream of local supporters from India itself. It would also sharpen fears that India's much-vaunted domestic stability was an illusion, and that there exist deep tensions within Indian society which remained unaddressed by democratic processes. (While this is undoubtedly the case, there are at present few grounds for believing that these tensions are likely to erupt suddenly or all at once.) Conveying an impression of an India torn between a persecuted and militant Muslim minority, and an oppressive but vulnerable Hindu majority, suggests that the country is a simmering volcano of religious conflict.

While no evidence has been made public about an ISI link to the *fidayeen* attack, Indian officials insist that the training for it could not have been carried out with Pakistani officialdom remaining ignorant.<sup>42</sup> Amir's interrogation led investigators to identify some of his trainers, one of whom has been named as ISI Colonel Mehmud Hassan.<sup>43</sup> The others are known LeT leaders such as Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi and Yusuf Muzamil, who have been previously involved with planning *fidayeen* attacks in Kashmir.<sup>44</sup> LeT itself is known to maintain strong links with former ISI officers, many of whom are suspected by Indian Intelligence to be sheep-dipped covert operatives. In other words, they are prematurely retired and then re-hired by LeT to function as its military advisors, thus giving the Pakistani government plausible deniability.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

At any rate, it is widely believed within Indian Intelligence circles that the ISI is intent on damaging the Indian economy. As proof of this claim, Indian officials cite the large quantities of Forged Indian Currency Notes (FICN) which are recovered from Pakistani spies, smugglers and terrorists every year.<sup>46</sup> One might make the logical extension of this argument, and hypothesize that the ISI might have suggested to the LeT that it engage in acts of economic terrorism. Unlike the 1993 bombers, who were

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<sup>41</sup> A second terrorist who telephoned Indian television journalists delivered a lengthy rant about the alleged persecution of Muslims in India. His decision to contact them was in all probability, motivated by a desire to communicate with potential Islamist militants within India and through his speech, rouse them to action against the government. Interview available online at <http://ishare.rediff.com/filevideo-2nd%20Terrorist%20speaks%20from%20Nariman%20house-id-519881.php>, accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>42</sup> 'US, India: We've proof of ISI role in Mumbai attacks', *The Indian Express*, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/us-india-weve-proof-of-isi-role-in-mumbai-attacks/394263/>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>43</sup> 'Mumbai suspect arrested in night raid on camp', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/3684306/Mumbai-suspect-arrested-in-night-raid-on-camp.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Armies of the Night', *Outlook*, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online via [www.outlookindia.com](http://www.outlookindia.com), on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Interview of former Indian Intelligence Bureau Joint Director Maloy Dhar, New Delhi, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

<sup>46</sup> 'Islamabad rides a terror tiger', *Asia Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2008, accessed online at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JI20Df02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JI20Df02.html), on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

amateur terrorists and needed instructions in handling explosives, LeT cadres are quite capable of mustering a *fidayeen* team without official help.<sup>47</sup> They would not need active participation of Pakistani officials, merely an understanding that their preparations for the attack would not be interfered with.

From initial reports, it appears as though the terrorists have achieved their first objective of damaging the Indian economy. More than even the losses incurred during the *fidayeen* attack on Mumbai, it is the damage done to India's international image that might prove most devastating.<sup>48</sup> In front of television cameras, the full armed might of the Indian government was held at bay for three days by ten gunmen operating far from their home territory. Failure to bring about a speedy resolution to the stand-off at the Taj Hotel, Oberoi-Trident Hotel and Nariman House has spoken volumes of the performance of the country's security forces. It suggests that even as Indian politicians bask in the claim of leading a rising superpower, they remain oblivious to the gradual collapse of governance within.<sup>49</sup> Foreign investors would be sure to take notice of such complacency, and consider how severely it might jeopardise the safety of their assets (both human and material) in India.<sup>50</sup>

That said, the terrorists failed dismally in achieving their second objective, which was to inflame tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India. So outrageous were their actions, that virtually every prominent member of the Indian Muslim community has condemned them. In an extraordinary gesture, the Muslim Council of Mumbai urged cemeteries across the country not to allow the slain *fidayeen* to be buried as per Islamic rites. Its logic was that since they were not Indian citizens and had killed innocent people in contravention of the Quran's teachings, they were not entitled to a dignified burial anywhere on Indian soil.<sup>51</sup>

An even more dramatic gesture was made by the Dar-ul Uloom seminary at Deoband, in northern India. The seminary is considered to be the most powerful Islamic religious centre in the whole of South Asia, and commands enormous influence over the Indian Muslim community. On 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008, its leadership issued a statement calling upon Indian Muslims not to eat beef during the upcoming festival of Id ul Azha, in deference to the sensitivities of Hindus.<sup>52</sup> They argued that Muslims

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<sup>47</sup> 'Pakistan's Spies Aided Group Tied to Mumbai Siege', *The New York Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/08/world/asia/08terror.html?scp=40&sq=mumbai%20attacks&st=cs>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>48</sup> 'Govt. should prepare itself for a further surge in jihadi terrorism: International Terrorism Monitor – Paper No. 482', *South Asia Analysis Group*, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://southasiaanalysis.org/papers30/paper2981.html>, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>49</sup> 'Mumbai attacks: The world can't ignore India's Islamist terrorists any longer', *The Daily Telegraph*, 27<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3563804/Mumbai-attacks-The-world-cant-ignore-Indias-Islamist-terrorists-any-longer.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008

<sup>50</sup> 'Mumbai terror: the economic fallout', *Rediff.com*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2008, accessed online at <http://www.rediff.com/money/2008/dec/03mumterror-mumbai-terror-the-economic-fallout.htm>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>51</sup> 'Muslim body refuses to bury 9 killers', *The Times of India*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2008, accessed online at [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Muslim\\_body\\_refuses\\_to\\_bury\\_9\\_killers/articleshow/3777954.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Muslim_body_refuses_to_bury_9_killers/articleshow/3777954.cms), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>52</sup> 'Avoid cow slaughter on Eid-ul-Azha: Deoband to Muslims', *The Times of India*, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2008, accessed online at



needed to actively oppose the perversion of Islam by terrorist groups, and show solidarity with their fellow Indians. Given that the Deobandi leadership had already issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) in May 2008 against terrorism, their gesture marked a new offensive in the ideological war against terrorist groups.<sup>53</sup>

The November 2008 Mumbai Massacre might thus turn out to be a pyrrhic victory for terrorism: with half its objectives being achieved at the cost of the other half. All that can be stated with certainty is that those who planned the *fidayeen* attack will not be deterred from trying for an encore.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 'Deoband first: A fatwa against terror', *The Times of India*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2008, accessed online at [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Deobands\\_first\\_A\\_fatwa\\_against\\_terror/articleshow/3089161.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Deobands_first_A_fatwa_against_terror/articleshow/3089161.cms), on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

<sup>54</sup> 'Mumbai attacks: Jihadists see 'invasion' as a triumph', *The Daily Telegraph*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008, accessed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3535740/Mumbai-attacks-Jihadists-see-invasion-as-a-triumph.html>, on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2008.