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Pakistan-Based Jihadi Online Discussion Forum: Al Qaeda's Shadow Army

War on Terror

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Pakistan-Based Jihadi Online Discussion Forum: Al Qaeda's Shadow Army



In recent weeks a Pakistan-based jihadi online discussion forum has come to light that is actively frequented by members of Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade. This discussion forum set up allegedly by members of a madarsa that was the target of Pakistan military action in Lahore back in 2007 is notable for attracting mostly anti-establishment jihadi sympathisers in Pakistan. A curious refrain in this forum is the deep distrust harboured by participants towards Hafiz Saeed-led Jamaat-ud-Dawa'h and the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba both of which are viewed as proxies of the Pakistan state and the ISI. Of particular interest is one participant in this forum who describes himself as a soldier of Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade who was one of the first to affirm news of Ilyas Kashmiri being alive after speculation of Kashmiri's death in a drone attack back in September 2009. -- **Shashi Shekhar**

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Al Qaeda's shadow army

By Shashi Shekhar

Ilyas Kashmiri has been described as the chief of Al Qaeda's shadow army or Lashkar al-Zil. Since then, the spotlight has been focussed on Ilyas Kashmiri's role in a recent wave of attacks. The planning behind the deadly bombing of the CIA's Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost has been attributed to Lashkar al-Zil and Ilyas Kashmiri

The Chicago conspiracy case that saw Pakistan-born American David Coleman Headley and Chicago-based businessman Tahawwur Rana brought to trial on charges of planned terror attacks in India and Denmark has taken a decisive turn. For the first time details of funds transfer and reconnaissance activities conducted by David Headley have been brought to light. Also both Headley and Rana have been explicitly charged for the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai. It is interesting to note that the new details also reveal the role of four still unnamed operatives of the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and one unnamed individual in the funding, coordination and planning for

the Mumbai 26/11 attacks. Additionally, the charges also reveal the disbursement of funds from the Lashkar to Headley over the three year period for expenses towards reconnaissance in India.

While the new revelations are interesting in their details of when and how much money was disbursed to Headley, there is little new on the more significant questions of the identity of the unnamed Lashkar operatives and their alleged role within the Pakistani military establishment. There also is not much new insight on the dual role of retired Major Abdur Rehman straddling the military jihadi faultline in Pakistan by simultaneously collaborating with both the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade.

The most significant development in the Chicago conspiracy case, however, is the FBI's decision to file formal charges against Ilyas Kashmiri for the planned attacks in Denmark.

As noted by this writer, Ilyas Kashmiri was recently described for the first time as the chief of the Al Qaeda's shadow army or Lashkar al-Zil. Since then more spotlight has been focussed on Ilyas Kashmiri's role in a recent wave of attacks. Two prominent observers of jihadi terrorism in Pakistan, Syed Saleem Shahzad and Amir Mir ascribed the planning behind the deadly suicide- bombing of CIA's Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost, to Lashkar al-Zil and Ilyas Kashmiri.

Subsequently, multiple media reports in Pakistan have speculated that the wave of suicide bombing attacks in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir have also been orchestrated by the Lashkar al-Zil lead by Ilyas Kashmiri. It is important to note that PoK had been relatively terror free over the past few years. Amir Mir observes that till June 2009 in fact there had not been any anti-establishment terrorist attacks in PoK. Since then however there have been four incidents mostly targeting security targets with the exception of the anti-Shia attack during a Muharram procession. All four attacks have been attributed to jihadi groups within the Lashkar al-Zil fold.

According to Amir, the Lashkar al-Zil now comprises of Tehrik-e-Taliban, led by Hakimullah Mehsud, the Azad Kashmir chapter of the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami led by Ilyas Kashmiri, and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi led by its jailed leader Akram Lohori, the Afghan Taliban militia led by its Amir Mulla Omar, the Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan led by Gulbadin Hikmatyar and the Haqqani militant network.

With the sustained drone attacks in Waziristan since the suicide bombing in Khost targeting the CIA and the pressure on Pakistan to nab Ilyas Kashmiri, there is considerable speculation on Ilyas Kashmiri's whereabouts. Two recent news reports point in opposite directions. Syed Saleem Shahzad's report in the Asia Times on December 24, 2009 hints at Ilyas Kashmiri being based in Afghanistan. A week earlier on December 19, 2009 the Daily Excelsior quoting an alleged letter from Ilyas Kashmiri to the Muttahida Jihad Council and Command Council — a conglomerate of all major militant outfits based in Islamabad, — lists the 313 HuJI

Brigade office at Main Madina, 14/118, No. 17, Kotli in PoK. The letter quotes Kashmiri asking the councils to replace 'general mujahideen' (normal militants) with fidayeens and push them into different parts of India, including Jammu & Kashmir for carrying out the terror strikes.

With speculation rife on Ilyas Kashmiri's plans for further Mumbai like fidayeen attacks inside India, it would be prudent for the Indian security agencies to also pay specific attention to Ilyas Kashmiri's cyber trail.

In recent weeks a Pakistan-based jihadi online discussion forum has come to light that is actively frequented by members of Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade. This discussion forum set up allegedly by members of a madarsa that was the target of Pakistan military action in Lahore back in 2007 is notable for attracting mostly anti-establishment jihadi sympathisers in Pakistan. A curious refrain in this forum is the deep distrust harboured by participants towards Hafiz Saeed-led Jamaat-ud-Dawa'h and the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba both of which are viewed as proxies of the Pakistan state and the ISI. Of particular interest is one participant in this forum who describes himself as a soldier of Ilyas Kashmiri's 313 Brigade who was one of the first to affirm news of Ilyas Kashmiri being alive after speculation of Kashmiri's death in a drone attack back in September 2009.

It is important to note that while news of Ilyas Kashmiri being alive was widely reported in the media only in mid-October 2009, the FBI transcripts in the Chicago conspiracy case quoted Headley and Abdur Rehman exchanging notes on September 30, 2009 on Kashmiri being alive. Significantly, September 30 was also the date when the above jihadi forum carried news of Ilyas Kashmiri being alive.

As India looks to revamp its security architecture we are being told by the outgoing National Security Adviser of alleged cyber attacks orchestrated from China. From smoking out the cyber trail of anti-India terrorists like Ilyas Kashmiri to defending our strategic assets from cyber attacks originating in China we are once again reminded of the growing significance of the Internet in national security.

- The writer tracks terrorism in South Asia.

Source: The Pioneer, New Delhi

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