Peekaboo! I See You

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Bangladesh made its debut in violent Islamism in 1996 when Osama bin Laden issued a fatwa that says that it is an individual duty of every Muslim to kill 'Americans and its allies' in any country in which it is possible to do it. Besides Laden, the edict is signed by four others, one of which is Fazlur Rahman, amir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh. No-one knows Rahman's whereabouts, and the name of the group suggests that it works as an umbrella organisation for terrorists in Bangladesh.

Be that as it may, Bangladesh's recent history gives ample reason to deny the very existence of Rahman's group. The terrorist outfits that we have come across were home-grown, and, to make matters even more interesting, up till now, they have failed to gain any public support. The type of terror attacks that we experienced during the 1996-2008 period were well organised, but they fizzled out as soon as both Awami League (AL) and BNP-led governments clamped down on Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh--the three organisations responsible for mass terror in the country.

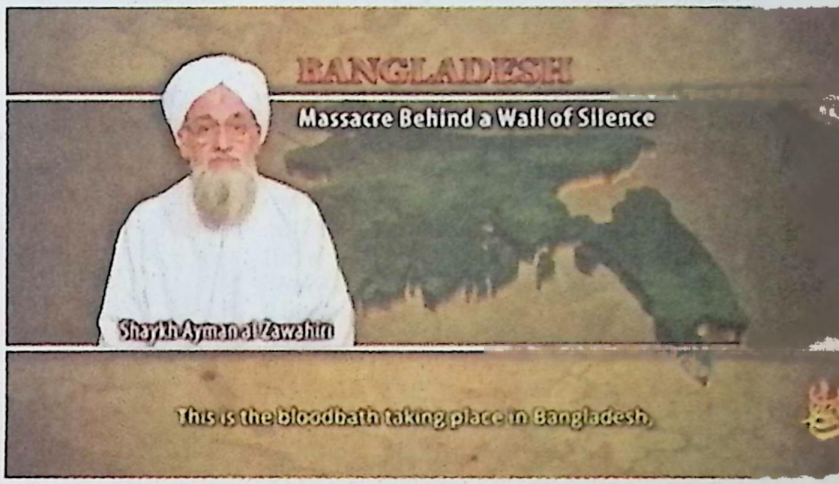


PHOTO: STAR FILE

So it is surprising that Al-Qaeda's supreme leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in an audio-tape message has chosen to speak about 'atrocities committed on Muslims in Bangladesh and Arakan' in recent times. The terrorist organisation, which has its tentacles spread across the globe, has never had any significant foothold in Bangladesh. Whatever amount of presence it could claim to have was wiped clean during the AL government's last term in office.

Having said that, Al-Zawahiri is no deluded fool. Bangladesh has everything to make Al-Qaeda to send its recruitment officers to the country. Al-Zawahiri's speech was carefully crafted to cater to the 'aggrieved' masses. Unlike other terrorist organisations, Al-Qaeda has no vertical hierarchy. It works as an ideological lighthouse for terrorists, showing them guidance, setting precedence through attacks, and, recruiting in countries where democracy is vulnerable or is considered threatened.

Al-Qaeda's actions also tell us that even though it believes in an extreme form of Salafism, the group is trying to encompass all the four schools of Sunni Islam. It is even trying to go the extra mile to woo Muslims who even visit shrines (The case of Mohammad Yunus Khalis of Afghan Hezb-i-Islami is a case in point). It is then no wonder that in his speech Al-Zawahiri is trying to project itself as the savoir of local Muslims. This is exactly what the Irish Republican Army did in Northern Ireland after the Battle of the Bogside.

We have to keep in mind that Al-Qaeda is not an organisation, it's a network. Its operating principles are loosely franchised, and unlike a multinational company, its branches are not controlled by its headquarters.

Bangladesh has a large number of young people who are denied their right to choose their leaders in a free and transparent manner. Coupled with that is a youth age bulge which feels relatively deprived as the country's economic progress has failed to incorporate them. Stagnant real income and relative deprivation are two other factors to work as facilitators of terrorism in this part of the world. On top of it all, Bangladesh is a weak globaliser and modernity is confrontational with some of its cultural and social values.

Presently Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. In the last few years, its social fabric and economic progress have kept it isolated from the turmoil that most of the Muslim majority states are going through. Now that the world's most dangerous terrorist organisation has taken an interest in us, it does not bode well for the nation. ■

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