

POLICY SHORT

Students Islamic Movement of India and the Indian Mujahideen: An Assessment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay assesses the organization, ideology, and membership of the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and the Indian Mujahideen (IM), as well as India's ability to contend with this domestic security threat.

MAIN FINDINGS

- SIMI emerged as a student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami-i-Hind (JIH) in 1977. It remains unclear when IM broke from SIMI or if IM has simply appropriated the militant elements of SIMI.
- Though IM recruits tend to be lower- and middle-class Muslims that are disaffected by Hindu nationalism, as well as those offended by Western values and polytheism, IM also claims leaders and cadres from professional backgrounds, especially from the IT sector.
- SIMI/IM has endorsed the goals of Osama bin Laden and seeks redress for violence against Indian Muslims, as well as recourse for the deprivation of socio-economic opportunities for India's Muslim community.
- SIMI/IM has long-standing ties to global Islamist organizations, including Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami (HUJI), and mafia as well as Pakistani intelligence agencies and other criminal and militant organizations beyond India.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- An exact rendering of terrorist acts attributable to SIMI/IM is difficult because the Indian press tends to blame LeT for most attacks in India. This is likely due to India's reticence to acknowledge an indigenous threat, as well as its political interest in attributing India's domestic security challenges to Pakistan.
- India's internal security will continue to be fraught, owing to the ongoing support from Pakistan for a variety of militant groups operating in India from Pakistan. India's internal security situation is deeply problematic, riven by interagency discord, pervasive corruption, and a lack of political will to make changes required to protect the citizenry.
- Given the pervasive social inequity of India's Muslim population, the internationalization of jihadist groups operating in the guise of social justice, and India's domestic barriers to developing a robust internal security apparatus, India's citizenry will remain vulnerable, as will other domestic and international terrorism targets within India.

This essay examines several aspects of the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and the Indian Mujahideen (IM) and aims to provide information about the groups' origins, known leadership, ideological roots, and cadres, as well as their international linkages among other elements. This essay also examines the various impediments to India's ability to contend with the array of domestic security threats to the state.

It should be stated at the outset that several questions remain about the precise linkages between these two groups. Some analysts contend that IM split off from SIMI, attracting those inclined toward militancy, and, thus, that IM is the militant wing of SIMI. Other reporting suggests that SIMI and IM are separate yet inherently linked organizations. During a trip to India in July 2009, most analysts the author approached expressed the belief that IM and SIMI are, for all intents and purposes, the same organization.

This essay is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 103–4 offer a brief discussion of the sources referenced for this assessment and the limitations of available open-source information on this subject
- ≈ pp. 104–7 examine the origins of SIMI and IM
- ≈ pp. 107–11 analyze these groups' organizational leadership and membership
- ≈ pp. 111–12 study SIMI and IM's ideologies and motivations
- ≈ pp. 112–14 examine these groups' their ties to other terrorist and international organizations
- ≈ pp. 114–16 address potential cleavages within and among SIMI and IM
- ≈ p. 116 provides a brief listing of recent attacks
- ≈ pp. 116–18 discuss India's ability to manage the country's internal threats.
- ≈ pp. 118–19 conclude with a discussion of key empirical questions that require further research and observation.

SOURCES FOR THIS ASSESSMENT

In addition to information the author obtained during a July 2009 trip to India, this essay draws mostly from Indian press reports, assessments by Indian terrorism analysts, and a very limited secondary literature. Only

Yoginder Sikand has conducted in-depth scholarly analysis of SIMI.¹ Given the nature of the press reports and the paucity of secondary literature, it is nearly impossible to validate the authenticity of the journalistic accounts of the organizations and their actions. The most prominent Indian journalist on this subject is Praveen Swami, who is exceedingly well-connected to the Indian intelligence community and is well-regarded as one of the most knowledgeable analysts of domestic Islamist militancy in India.

Given the potential biases in such reporting, some of the most extreme allegations about Pakistan merit further inquiry through other means. One of the most problematic issues inherent in such a study is that many—if not most—of the terrorism attacks that have taken place across India have been attributed by Indian media and official organizations as the work of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). This may be driven in part by a reluctance of Indian officials to recognize that India has a problem with domestic terrorism as well as by a political agenda to assert that India's internal security problem is due to Pakistan. Though it is possible that some of these attacks involved SIMI/IM operating in conjunction with LeT or supported by LeT (or other Pakistan-based organizations), it is difficult to discern the role of the IM or SIMI in these attacks due to the nature of the open-source reporting of these assaults.

Despite the importance of Islamist militant groups in India and the potentially volatile environment in which they operate, very little has been written about SIMI or IM, apart from journalistic accounts that often fail to provide adequate context or background for the various reports. As such, there is a significant paucity of reliable and comprehensive information that can be obtained through open-source accounts of these organizations. This dearth of information renders it difficult to make assessments on such issues of interest as the potential impact of the recent terrorist events in India on the support base that SIMI/IM enjoys or the evidentiary bases of the various claims made about these groups and their ties to other militant or international organizations.

SIMI AND IM: ORIGINS

Currently, most prominent Indian analysts believe that SIMI and IM are no longer (if they were ever) distinct organizations; rather, these analysts

¹ See Yoginder Sikand, *Muslims in India Since 1947: Islamic Perspectives on Interfaith Relations* (London: Routledge, 2004); Yoginder Sikand, "The SIMI Story," *Countercurrents.org*, July 15, 2006 ~ <http://www.countercurrents.org/comm-sikand150706.htm>; and Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002).

believe that IM emerged largely from militant elements of SIMI, enjoying the support of, and possibly personnel from, Pakistan-based LeT and Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami (HUJI-B).² This stands in contrast to earlier assessments that treated the SIMI and IM as distinct organizations that share a common origin, leadership, and cadres.³ Others have suggested that IM does not exist at all but is instead an effort by Pakistan's external intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to project an Indian face to the activities of Pakistan-based militant groups.⁴ This essay treats IM as an evolution of SIMI, in a narrative that begins with the origins of the SIMI and continues with an exposition about IM's formation. This narrative is subject to the caveat that the assumption that IM is an evolution of SIMI has merit.

SIMI formed in 1977 at Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh), initially as a student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH).⁵ It is believed that SIMI was established to revitalize the JIH's older student wing, the Students Islamic Organization (SIO), which was set up in 1956. SIMI's founding president was Mohammad Ahmadullah, who had been a professor of Journalism and Public Relations at Western Illinois University. JIH reportedly began distancing itself from SIMI in 1981, when several SIMI activists protested against Yasser Arafat's visit to India. SIMI's youth perceived Arafat as a puppet of the West, whereas JIH viewed him as a champion of the Palestinian cause. SIMI and JIH had other differences. JIH was discomfited with SIMI's support of the Iranian Revolution and its communal orientation. After distancing itself from SIMI, JIH reverted to relying on the older student organization, SIO.⁶

² Author interview with Praveen Swami, New Delhi, July 2009; and Animesh Roul, "India's Home-Grown Jihadi Threat: A Profile of the Indian Mujahideen," Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor VII, no. 4, March 3, 2009 ~ http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_007_4_03.pdf.

³ See Lisa Curtis, "After Mumbai: Time to Strengthen US-India Counterterrorism Cooperation," Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder no. 2,217, December 9, 2008 ~ <http://www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/bg2217.cfm>.

⁴ For a full discussion of these possibilities, see Khurschchev Singh, "Who Are the 'Indian Mujahideen?'" Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), Strategic Comments, May 30, 2008 ~ <http://www.idsa.in/backgrounder-IndianMujahideen.htm>.

⁵ Jaamat-e-Islam-i-Hind (JIH) was the first organized Islamic reformist movement in the Indian subcontinent. The group was formed on August 24, 1941, in Lahore under the leadership of Syed Abul Ala Maududi. After partition, which JIH opposed because it would separate the *umma* (Muslim community) along nationalist lines, Maududi moved to Pakistan where Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) founded the Pakistan branch. After 1971, when Bangladesh separated from Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh emerged. JI was widely seen as a collaborator in the deaths of Bangladeshis in the 1971 war, and the organization was outlawed. Though JI has recuperated itself, many continue to call for accountability for the group's war crimes. For more information about JIH, see Jaamat-e-Islam-i-Hind's website ~ <http://www.jamaateislamihind.org/index.php?do=category&id=46&blockid=46>. For information about Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jamaat-i Islami of Pakistan* (London: IB Taurus, 1994).

⁶ See "Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI)," South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) ~ <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/simi.htm>; and the Students Islamic Organization's website ~ <http://www.sio-india.org/zone/head-quarters>.