

26/11 MUMBAI

ATTACKS

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Around 9:30 PM on November 26, 2008, Mumbai witnessed multiple well-coordinated and near-simultaneous terror attacks that continued for the next three to four days. These attacks were carried out by ten Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists, divided into multiple teams to maximize the element of surprise and effectiveness. By the time Indian security forces brought the carnage to an end, around 166 people were dead and more than 300 injured, making it one of the deadliest attacks ever on Indian soil.¹ Given the magnitude, sophistication, and effectiveness of the attack, this was one of India's biggest intelligence failures. This paper is a critical analysis of the 11/26/08 Mumbai terror attacks and an examination of how Indian and international intelligence apparatuses failed to predict the attack.

Departing from an isolated creek in Karachi, Pakistan, the ten terrorists began their journey to Mumbai in a small boat

on November 21. Around 38 hours later, they were picked up by a larger Pakistani vessel, aboard which they were each issued an AK-47, seven magazines with 50 rounds each, eight grenades, automatic revolvers, credit cards, and dried fruits.² After receiving their materials, they hijacked an Indian fishing trawler, killing and disposing of the majority of the crew and then ordered the boat's captain to set course for India. They later killed two Indian coast guard officers and headed towards Mumbai's Colaba jetty.³

After making a landing at Colaba, the ten terrorists split up to head toward their respective targets via cabs in which they planted timed explosives. Four headed to the Taj Mahal Hotel, two to the Oberoi Trident Hotel, two to Nariman House, and two to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station. Around 9:30 PM, a team of two terrorists, Shoaib and Nazir, began the siege by open firing at the people

sitting in Leopold Cafe.⁴ Around the same time as the assault on the Leopold was taking place, another team of terrorists, Ajmal Kasab and Ismail Khan, opened fire at the heavily crowded Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station killing 58 people and injuring 104 others.⁵ The two terrorists briefly escaped but Khan was soon shot dead and Kasab was caught alive.

The assault on the Taj started at 9:38 PM. The first team of terrorists, Abdul Bada and Abu Ali, reached the Tower section of the hotel and made their way into the lobby, wantonly firing on anyone they could see. Around 9:43 PM, the second team of terrorists, Shoaib and Nazir, entered the hotel through its 'La-Pat' door. This particular door was usually kept closed and was only opened for special occasions. The fact that the two terrorists knew about the door being open that day indicates the fact that they might

have had some help from someone within Taj.

The agencies' response to the assault was flawed at multiple levels. Initially, they displayed a complete lack of situational awareness; the Mumbai police mistook the terror attack for an underworld gang war and responded accordingly. 'Armed' with .303 Lee Enfield single-shot rifles and standard issue service revolvers, the police lacked both the equipment and expertise to counter AK-47-wielding terrorists. Special forces were called in once established that it was a sophisticated terror strike. The initial, somewhat operationally adequate response was delivered by the Indian marine commando unit, MARCOS, and yet another special force, the National Security Guard (NSG), was called in. This switch in operational command was logically unnecessary and a product of bureaucratic protocols. MARCOS, being an external security force, is not mandated to conduct operations within India unless given special permission from the President; NSG, a domestic unit reporting to the Home Ministry, is. Flying in the NSG units to Mumbai was a logistical nightmare. There was no transport plane available initially, and when the government intervened to provide a single Ilyushin 76 aircraft, it took three trips to transport the entire team. This resulted in the loss of precious time and failure to contain the terrorists within a set area.

In addition to the hotel, the Nariman House — a Chabad Lubavitch Jewish center in Colaba — was also attacked. Two terrorists, Abu Umar and Babar Imanan, attacked the building and took multiple Israelis and Jews as hostages. The NSG commandos conducted a raid on the building the following day but by the end of the raid, all the hostages were dead. Out of all the attacks that took place on the night of November 26, the one at the Nariman House was the most significant for the perpetrators. This was mainly because killing Israeli Jews on foreign soil would lead to global attention to the attack, and would further propagate the radical Islamist ideology of eradicating the Jewish population. Some reports even suggest that the Nariman House was the primary target of the whole operation, and all the other attacks were conducted just to amplify the impact.⁶ Although this suggestion seems to be an exaggeration, targeting Mumbai's Jewish population aligns perfectly with Lashkar-e-Taiba's core Islamist ideology that views the Jews as an existential threat to Islam. The fact that the terrorist organization is a signatory to Osama bin Laden's 1998 fatwa against the Jews not only codifies anti-semitism in its organizational principles but also points toward the synonymy between anti-semitism and Islamic terrorism.⁷

Needless to say, it was a complete failure on the part of multiple intelligence agencies to not be able to stop the attack. In the fall of 2008, Zarrar Shah, Lashkar-e-Taiba's technology chief, looked up multiple hotels and Jewish hotspots in Mumbai and used Google Earth to map out numerous routes between these locations and various landing sites on the coast of Mumbai. By September,

British intelligence had been keeping track of Shah's internet activity, along with another Indian intelligence agency. Even though the United States' intelligence agencies did not know that the British and the Indians were monitoring Shah, they collected several indications of a plot through other surveillance sources and had tipped off Indian authorities multiple times. Moreover, Indian intelligence agencies had intercepted a satellite phone call to a top Lashkar-e-Taiba commander on November 18, that suggested an imminent seaborne attack in Mumbai targeting one of the hotels near the Gateway of India.⁸

There were lapses on the part of the United States' intelligence services as well. David Coleman Headley, an American Lashkar-e-Taiba operative who scouted all the landing and attack sites in Mumbai in order to plan for the attack, was reported to American security agencies numerous times by one of his wives, as she was suspicious to his multiple trips to Mumbai, but this tip was ignored. The 26/11 attacks were a result of a lack of intelligence sharing and failure to act on substantial tips. As India's then Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon put it: "No one put together the whole picture. Not the Americans, not the Brits, not the Indians... Only once the shooting started did everyone share."⁹ ■



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Citations located on pg. 2*