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Al-Qaeda sets up new India wing after losing ground in Mideast

Analysts say Zawahiri's video is attempt by Al-Qaeda to regain global influence after losing ground to Islamic State in Iraq, Syria.

By Parvaiz BUKHARI – SRINAGAR

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As he set up shop in Kashmir's main city Thursday, Saleem Ahmed had little truck with Al-Qaeda's call to turn India's only Muslim-majority state a key battlefield of a new jihad across South Asia.

"Ours is not an Islamic war for Ummah (a global Islamic nation)," said Ahmed as he laid out his wares on the street by his clothing store in Srinagar's central

business district.

"It is a struggle for sovereignty over our land and our political right to self-determination," he said.

In a video message Wednesday by its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda vowed to "raise the flag of jihad" across the sub-continent as it sought to exploit the disillusionment felt by tens of millions of Muslims.

India, Bangladesh and even Sri Lanka have a long history of communal violence, and have spawned several radical Islamist movements such as Indian Mujahedin and the Kashmir-based Hizbul Mujahedin.

But for all the sectarian tensions, experts say most of the region's Muslims are moderate and preoccupied with disparate local issues rather than fighting for a common global cause.

"India's Muslims have their grievances but they are more of a local social, political and economic nature," said Wilson John, senior fellow at the Observer Research Foundation thinktank.

"They are more anxious about their children's education" than waging war against the West, John said.

"They have also generally been part of the political process, they are not isolated, they have their say."

The main flashpoint has been Kashmir where fighting between about a dozen rebel groups and Indian forces has left tens of thousands dead, mostly civilians, since 1989.

But while most Kashmiri Muslims want independence from Hindu-majority India or to become part of Pakistan, Srinagar school teacher Abdul Hameed said he doubted that Al-Qaeda could help with that.

"They (Al-Qaeda) are telling India that the people of Kashmir are not alone," Hameed said. "I doubt anyone but ourselves has a possibility of helping us in Kashmir."

Indian Mujahedin have been blamed for a number of recent attacks, including a deadly series blast in Patna last October when the then opposition leader Narendra Modi was speaking at a rally.

The Hindu nationalist Modi's landslide election victory in May dismayed many Muslims who recall the communal violence that left hundreds dead in Gujarat in

2002 when he was the state's chief minister.

After Zawahiri's video message, Gujarat director general of police P.C Thakur said that local security forces "are alert and keeping a close watch on all developments in the state".

Analysts say the video was an attempt by Al-Qaeda to regain global influence after losing ground to the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group fighting in Iraq and Syria.

- IS recruits -

The deadliest attack by Islamist extremists on Indian soil came in November 2008 when gunmen from the Pakistan-based Islamist group Lashkar-e-Taiba killed 166 people in a three-day onslaught in Mumbai.

Four young Muslim men were recently feared to have left their home on the outskirts of Mumbai to join IS in Iraq, with one reportedly killed last month.

But experts say historically, Indian recruits to Islamist conflicts in other countries have been few.

In remote Assam, which was also named in the video, some said the chances of recruiting Muslims to the outfit was reasonable "given the volatile situation" in the state.

Riots and killings have erupted sporadically in the northeast for decades, pitting indigenous tribal groups against Muslims, many of whom are accused of being illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

"There are thousands of Muslim refugees who have been in relief camps ... who are victims of repeated ethnic clashes in Assam, and they can be a soft target for Al Qaeda," said Abdul Rahim, president of the influential All Minority Students Union.

Those gathered for prayers at India's biggest mosque, Jama Masjid in Delhi, said all communities would suffer including Muslims if Al-Qaeda gathered support.

"I don't think Al-Qaeda will succeed in its designs in India for the simple reason that Hindus and Muslims live together in peace here," Mohammad Farhan Khan said.

"If God forbid they are able to incite such sentiments here, people of both communities will suffer," the 18-year-old said.

In Bangladesh, formed in 1971 after a brief but bloody war between India and

Pakistan, hardline Islamist leaders also cast doubt on Al-Qaeda's plans.

Islamist hardline group Hefazat e-Islam is one of several behind deadly street violence in the last 12 months to push for a change of government and stricter religious controls, including introduction of a blasphemy law.

But they said the violence was confined to issues within Bangladesh's borders.

"Bangladesh is not Pakistan," Maolana Azizul Hoque Islamabadi, a senior leader of Hefazat e-Islam, said. "Al-Qaeda won't be able to make any impact if they open a branch here."