

Al Qaeda's Secret Plan, Pakistani 9/11

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

In the light of the documents found in an underground Al-Qaeda base in Afghanistan in 2003, the Commander in Chief of CENTCOM at the time General John Abizaid shared an intelligence report with the Pakistani intelligence officials about top secret material that had been captured from Al-Qaeda members in an operation conducted in Afghanistan. Despite being unaware of the identity of terrorists and the target at that time, it took just a couple of days for Pakistani Military Intelligence (MI) to make arrests and thwart the planned attack, which would have been as big and stunning for Pakistan as 9/11 was for Americans. This secret story of how Pakistan's Military Intelligence (MI) service thwarted one of the deadliest attacks planned on Pakistani soil by Al-Qaeda is now being made public for the first time.

It was August 2003 and almost everything was running smoothly in Pakistan. In Karachi, the headquarters of Pakistan's Military Intelligence (MI) was bustling with activity. That morning all the intelligence officers in the Karachi HQ of MI were urgently summoned to an important meeting. No one really knew what this was about.

The worst victims of the global Jihad, which was announced by Al-Qaeda against Western forces after 9/11 attacks, have been Muslim majority nations, and Pakistan tops that list of Muslim nations because of the challenge it presented to terrorists due to its alliance with the US against Al-Qaeda and its allies. In a way, Al-Qaeda was born and found a foothold in Pakistan around the same time when world powers were busy defeating the Soviet Union with the help of Pakistan. And so, it was understood that Pakistan was going to be one of the main targets for terrorists. International politics had completely changed after the events of 9/11. Pakistan was paying a heavy price in its new journey after allying with US in the war on terror. Pakistani intelligence agencies faced many new challenges after the events of 9/11. And even though around two years had passed since the 9/11 attacks, intelligence agencies around the world, and in particular Pakistanis, were busy making arrests of more terrorists and launching raids targeting terrorist bases. During this time, officers in the Pakistani intelligence community were so busy that they didn't have time for anything else other than the war on terror.

It won't be incorrect to say that Pakistani intelligence community has been honest and loyal to its mission when it came to cracking down on terrorism. But since many arrests had already been made in the past few months, there hadn't been an emergency meeting at the MI HQ for some time. Typically, when there was any new intelligence tip was received about any person of interest, senior intelligence officers just passed on the mission to the juniors, who took care of it.

But that particular day, the officers gathered in the meeting hall were very surprised to see the local head of MI – also called G-1 in military lingo – sitting at the table before everyone's arrival. Normally, the G-1 arrives when everyone has entered the meeting hall and settled down at the table. But this was unusual for most officers, who were summoned at the HQ on an emergency basis. Most officers present instantly knew something serious must have happened. Finally, the meeting began with G-1, after some formal greetings, talking about the main reason why everyone was summoned. "I congratulate you all for all the victories we have achieved so far in the war against terrorism. But in reality, we will only deserve praise when we actually succeed in rooting out terrorism. The testing times are not over yet.

The challenge that I am going to present now in front of you is a serious and sensitive one. CIA sources based in Afghanistan have informed us that on the 11th of September, when the world will be observing the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda terrorists have planned to carry out an identical attack in Karachi involving crashing a plane into a building. Al-Qaeda's leadership has approved this plot and they are planning to carry it out in the next few weeks. We don't know who are those terrorists, how many they are, where are they hiding, how will they hijack a passenger plane from Karachi airport, which building will they target in Karachi, or what kind of preparations they have made for this attack. We are lucky that we have found out about this attack few weeks before it's supposed to be carried out.

We are unlucky that we don't know any other details about this plot. You are those heroes of our nation who risk your lives for the dignity and security of our nation without any expectation of glory. The terrorists are trying to shake us with their full might. So, we must also answer them with our full might and must find these terrorists. We must stop this attack from happening regardless of the cost we must pay for that. Now I want to get the opinion of you people about this very complicated case so that we can create a strong counter-strategy.”

After explaining his point, the G-1 of MI went quiet, waiting for every officer to give his opinion on the case. The G-1 was listening to everyone's opinion but was not satisfied with any of it. He was focused on those quiet yet observing officers of his department who had a reputation for never failing on a mission. These officers were seen with great pride by the seniors in the agency. These officers had only one thing to say: they wanted some time to study the case file, discuss the case with other officers and consider all possible angles before submitting their final report since they knew that access of armed terrorists to any plane at Karachi airport was nearly impossible. G-1 dismissed the meeting and gave the time of maximum three days to all intelligence officers.

The case file contained all the necessary documents including the report based on information from the CIA and extra information provided by other authorities. The first report in the case file was from the Commander of CENTCOM General John Abizaid. Gen. Abizaid, in a report addressed to the highest officials of Pakistani intelligence, said that NATO forces, with the help of the CIA, raided a secret underground base belonging to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan's Khost city. No militant could be captured alive in the raid. But CIA found some laptops and other electronic devices and some files from the underground base. The material recovered from the site showed that Al-Qaeda leadership has planned to hit a building in Karachi with a plane on the second anniversary of 9/11, i.e., 11th September 2003.

The material also showed that Al-Qaeda had completed preparations for the attack and were about to carry it out in the next few weeks. Gen. Abizaid also reported that among the documents recovered from the underground site, they also found an art paper which had the drawing of a building and a plane was drawn to make it look like it was crashing into the building. Gen. Abizaid attached this piece of drawing with the letter he sent to the highest officials of Pakistani intelligence. A few officers of the Military Intelligence, who were known for cracking difficult cases, went in the right direction in solving this case.

They investigated everything about Karachi airport, gathered intelligence on suspected terrorists and their activities. After that they contacted all their sources on the ground and then finally contacted the most experienced experts and engineers of planes. In the end, they were able to trace the terrorists. After the short time of three days, the local chief of Military Intelligence G-1 was going through the reports submitted by some of his best officers. The reports, with minor differences, submitted by the officers said, “After investigation into all the staff working at Karachi Airport it has been revealed that some staff members facilitate smuggling operations while some others are also involved in corruption.

But not even one staff member is capable of helping a terrorist organization like Al-Qaeda to carry out an attack. No credible information has been found about suspected terrorists in Karachi who may be planning a hijacking at Karachi airport. As far as Al-Qaeda is concerned, it is clear that Al-Qaeda is working on foreign targets these days. In light of this, there could be two potential targets for Al-Qaeda in Karachi: One, the hotel at Karachi Airport, which was temporarily rented out to NATO. Second, the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi, where the two top VVIP floors had been rented out to the FBI. The drawing of the building attached to Gen. Abizaid’s letter indicates that the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi is most likely the building which is to be targeted. A close study of the plane in the drawing indicates that it is most likely the Mirage aircraft belonging to Pakistan Air Force (PAF). Therefore, based on this information, we can say with almost certainty that this attack could only be initiated by members of PAF who have been secretly recruited by Al-Qaeda. As for the question that how can we identify these terrorists present within the PAF, there’s an easy solution for that. We must investigate every single person supposed to be on duty for routine flight check, technical department, etc. of Mirage aircraft on 11th September at PAF airbase in Karachi.”

As G-1 was going through the reports submitted by his best officers, he instantly knew his best intelligence officers have found the right trail. He was very impressed with what he was reading. After reading all the reports, G-1 was fully satisfied and was convinced that they will be able to stop this evil act of terrorism. They were now very close to the enemy and all that was left to do was to act. G-1 then compiled a case file and sent it to his superiors in the agency and then spent hours discussing the case with his superiors on the hotline. During this time, Chief of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Chief of PAF intelligence was taken into confidence. The PAF schedule for 11th September was not changed in any way. At the designated time, when the final schedule was released, after conducting screenings of all the staff, a small secret operation was carried out at PAF’s Masroor Airbase in Karachi, in which MI arrested six staff members posted at Masroor Airbase: chief technician Khalid Mehmood, senior technician Kurram Uddin, junior technician Niaz Muhammad, junior technician Nasrullah, technician Mushtaq Ahmed and corporal Nawazish Ali.

A gruelling interrogation process started once the arrested suspects were shifted to the Military Intelligence HQ. Very soon the interrogators realized that these six men had been radicalized and had unstable mental conditions. When interrogators used enhanced interrogation techniques to get out information, these men started shouting Arabic verses “Alhamdulillah”, “Subhanallah” and “Ya Rehman Ya Rahim”. On the first night, the interrogators tied one leg of each man and made them stand on the only leg throughout the night.

It turned out that all of them had memorized Quran and finished the entire Quran while standing on one leg the entire night. Eventually, the six men agreed to give information to their interrogators. They admitted their association with Al-Qaeda and gave all the secret details about the plot to fly a plane into the Sheraton Hotel building in Karachi. After this information was revealed, some important decisions were taken by the top most authorities in the ISI and MI: the Al-Qaeda plot to attack Sheraton Hotel in Karachi and all the information gathered from the six Al-Qaeda members was to be kept secret and Pakistani public would not be made aware about this operation, which was one of the most successful operations of Pakistan's Military Intelligence and showed just how much they excelled at their job. In short, it was decided that all the information related to this plot will be buried among the millions of files in the offices of MI.

These six Al-Qaeda recruits, who were also members of Pakistan Air Force at the time of the arrest, remained in the custody of MI for next two years. Their arrest was made public for the first time on 3rd October 2005 as part of the suicide terrorist team involved in the attacks on the then Chief of Pakistani military General Pervez Musharraf. These six men were then court-martialed by The Field General at Chaklala Airbase of PAF. Following that, junior technician Niaz Muhammad was hanged in Peshawar on 31st December 2014. Chief technician Khalid Mehmood and technician Mushtaq Ahmed were hanged in Faisalabad on 9th January 2015 while corporal Nawazish Ali was hanged in Faisalabad on 13th January 2015. Junior technician Nasrullah was sentenced to life imprisonment. There is no credible information available to show what happened to the sixth member – senior technician Kurram Uddin - of the failed Al-Qaeda 11th Sept 2003 terrorist plot.

The attack Al-Qaeda carried out on 11th September 2001 in the United States was actually the first opening attack of the terrorist group in the long series of attacks it planned as part of its Global Jihad. And surely, since then Al-Qaeda has carried out several attacks against different countries. But the Al-Qaeda plot to carry out a 9/11 style attack in Pakistan's biggest metropolitan city Karachi was thwarted by the excellence of Pakistan's Military Intelligence (MI), delivering a crushing defeat to Al-Qaeda's doomsday fantasies. This successful counter-terrorism operation is one of the greatest achievements of not only Pakistan's Military Intelligence (MI) service but perhaps by any intelligence agency in the War on Terror. Buried in the vault until now, this story of extraordinary heroism has been presented publicly in this form for the first time on the platform of ITCT.

The purpose of making this story of unimaginable heroism public now, after 15 years, is to remind the often-forgetful world about the long list of many victories of Pakistan's intelligence community in the war on terror that the public never came to know of. Now there's one less in the long list.