

Paper

Tahir Saeen Group: higher-degree militants

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On May 13, a group of militants in police uniforms intercepted a bus near Safoora Goth, a suburb of Karachi near Karachi University. The bus was carrying minority Ismaili Shias.¹ Six of them entered the bus, one of them over the driver's seat and another guarded the vehicle door. The other four started indiscriminate firing for 10 to 12 minutes.² Forty three people were killed in the massacre.³

No one could deny the involvement of sectarian groups in the killing. What wasn't clear was the exact group behind the attack.

Initial reports pointed towards the involvement of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, popularly known by its acronym ISIS or Arabic translation Daish. The group's sworn ally in Pakistan, Jundullah, based in Karachi, was quick to claim responsibility of the attack.⁴ The perpetrators of the attacks had also dropped leaflets of the ISIS at the spot, displaying their affection to it. Perhaps because ISIS indulges in

sectarian bloodbath, its involvement seemed plausible.

As police progressed in its investigation, the ISIS connection got weakened. Instead, some members of the attackers were in contact with Ayman Al-Zawahiri, leader of Al-Qaeda, which didn't endorse ISIS's claim of militant caliphate. What's more, it emerged that the cell that carried out the attack was linked to AQ's branch in the Indian subcontinent, Al-Qaeda in Subcontinent (AQIS), formed recently to ward off ISIS's luring of South Asia's militant groups.⁵

A police officer said the accused militants established their own group in 2014 without naming it. Hence, it was referred by the cell leader's name, Tahir Saeen, who ordered most of the terrorist activities. His second-in-command Saad Aziz, aka Tun Tun or John, masterminded many attacks. The cell's activities largely revolved around them. Investigators found that the two, like many other of the cell's members, hailed from diverse socio-economic

¹ Ismailism is a branch of Shia Islam and commonly known as Seveners which means unlike traditional Shias who believe in 12 Imams (faith leaders) the Ismailis believe in seven.

² Salis bin Perwaiz, "Safoora Goth attackers were inspired by IS," *The News International*, July 2, 2015, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-4-326642-Safoora-Goth-attackers-were-inspired-b>.

³ Imtiaz Ali, "43 killed in attack on bus carrying Ismailis in Karachi," *Dawn*, May 14, 2015.

⁴ Faraz Khan, "Macabre violence: Ugly face of terror," *Express Tribune*, May 14, 2015.

⁵ Hafeez Tunio, "Arrested Safoora Goth attack mastermind behind Sabeen's murder," *Express Tribune*, May 20, 2015.

backgrounds with sound educational credentials.

Anatomy of the cell

The Tahir Saeen group has all the traits of a classic terrorist group: few members but high expertise.

The group, which was involved in orchestrating more than 15 terrorist attacks in Karachi, has never more than 15-20 members. That was one reason why the cell remained out of the radar of police and other security agencies for a very long period of time.

Members of the group were trained in bomb manufacture, assassinations, reconnaissance, counter intelligence and counter interrogation. Part of their 'expertise' owes to their high technical education, including in engineering. Strikingly, their leader Tahir was a high school dropout.

	Cell member	Educational background	Expertise
1	Abdul Rehman Shujaat	B. Sc. Engineering from N.E.D Engineering University, Karachi	
2	Saad Aziz	BBA from Institute of Business Administration, Karachi	Dealt with propaganda; translated material, managed pro-
3	Azhar Ishrat	B.Sc. Electronic Engineering from Sir Syed University, Karachi	Expert in bomb making
4	Tahir Minhas	Matriculate	Group's leader, involved in planning and executing terror plots
5	Hafiz Nasir	Masters in Islamic Studies from University of Karachi	Involved in planning and executing terror plots
6	Asadur Rehman	Graduate	

The cell was assisted by one female collaborator Saadia, who is still at large. According to police sources Saadia is wife of a local Al-Qaeda commander and was tasked for recruitment of potential jihadis.¹ Some of the other assailants are at still not apprehended.

What bound these myriad individuals together was strong ideology, reflective in their hatred of the West and minorities.

Some say the cell's members were either linked to AQ or inspired by it. Others say the cell wanted to affiliate with the ISIS.² According to some experts, the cell members might be affiliated with Al-Qaeda but because of the growing popularity of ISIS in jihadi circles they had ambitions to network their cell with ISIS.³ Apparently, the cell members were part of Al-Qaeda's sleeper network, as at least one member (Tahir Minhas) had personally met AQ's top leaders in Afghanistan.

Still, what is established is the group's belief in the notion of *tafkir*, declaring other Muslims apostate. That notion, evident in both AQ's

and ISIS's philosophy, was carried by the Tahir group, too.

The cell members, following the cardinal principle of plausible deniability among terror outfits, deliberately did not know each other's real name. Instead, they called each other through aliases. The group was quite careful in recruiting new members. That was one reason the group swelled to a handful of members during its life span.

Subsequent investigations found that each one of cell members had participated in the Safoora Goth attack, having worked for months on the possibilities of targeting the community service bus. According to police, the cell members planned and rehearsed for two months and visited the location seven times. They kept monitoring the bus passing through the same route, over and over, and finally prepared a map with circling points of deployment of cell members.

The equipment recovered from cell members included TT pistols, Kalashnikovs, laptops, explosive material, jihad literature, and hit lists of media personnel, fashion

¹"Probe reveals involvement of female terror suspect in group behind Safoora incident," Such TV, June 3, 2015, <http://www.suchtv.pk/pakistan/sindh/item/23998-probe-reveals-involvement-of-female-terror-suspect-in-group-behind-safoora-incident.html>.

² Imtiaz Ali, "IS-inspired militants behind Safoora carnage, Sabeen Mahmud murder," *Dawn*, July 1, 2015.

³ Author's interview with Amir Rana, expert on terrorism and security issues, Islamabad.

designers, NGO workers, and law enforcement agencies personnel.⁴

Although the group came under the radar after the Safoora Goth incident, it had masterminded several other attacks in Karachi in recent months including targeted assassination of NGO worker Sabeen Mehmud in April 2015; firing and critically wounding American Professor Dr Debra Lobo in April 2015; suicide attack on Brigadier Basit of Sindh Rangers in February 2015 (Brigadier Basit narrowly escaped while four others were injured in the attack); grenade attacks on private co-education institutes in February and March 2015; targeted killing of some workers of secular political party Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) and members of Bohra community;⁵ and bomb attacks on police patrolling parties and targeted killing of police personnel in at least five different locations in the city.⁶

An odd leader

Safoora Goth attack was the brainchild of cell's leader Tahir Minhas, who apparently seemed an odd element in the cell: he hailed from Punjab, unlike many others who came from Karachi; and being a simple matriculate, he was the least educated of other members. Yet, he was the cell's main planner, founder, and lynchpin. The cell he founded was in fact known by his name, Tahir Saeen group.⁷

Tahir had earlier worked for AQIS under Jalal, a cousin of Ramzi Yousaf, the main perpetrator of 1993 World Trade Center bombing, disclosed a senior Karachi police officer.⁸ Even now, investigators found, Jalal cell of AQ exists, most probably in Baloch-populated Lyari area of Karachi. Tahir Saeen formed his own cell, after breaking from Jalal cell.⁹

Tahir's connections with Al-Qaeda dated back to 1990s. Much before the 9/11 attacks, he visited Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, where, besides getting trained at AQ-run camps, he

⁴ Hafeez Tunio, "Arrested Safoora attack mastermind behind Sabeer's murder: Sindh CM," *Express Tribune*, May 20, 2015.

⁵ "Umar Kaathio Al-Qaeda Sindh's head, reveal Safoora terrorists," *Dunya News*, June 22, 2015, <http://dunyaNews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/285507-Umar-Kaathio-AlQaeda-Sindh-head-reveal-Safoora>.

⁶ Hafeez Tunio, "Arrested Safoora Goth mastermind behind Sabeen's murder."

⁷ Salis bin Perwaiz, "Safoora Goth attackers were inspired by IS," *The News International*, June 2, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Imtiaz Ali, "Safoora bus attack suspects wanted to establish their links with IS," *Dawn*, July 2, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1191674>.

personally met AQ's leader Osama Bin Laden and ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri several times.¹⁰

A veteran jihadi, Tahir was in contact with AQ's Pakistani leaders, including the emir of Sindh province, Umar Kaathio, a resident of Kotri district. Minhas says that he joined Al-Qaeda on Kaathio's advice.¹¹ The two had even worked in Hyderabad district.

It was in Hyderabad that Tahir started colluding with Saad Aziz, and launched terror attacks at police parties and killed seven police officers, three members of Bohri community, and three workers MQM.¹² In 2006, in Hyderabad, Minhas was arrested for killing a Hindu boy but later released in 2009 and shifted to Karachi.¹³

When he had first come to Karachi, he faced difficulty in recruiting people. Eventually, with the support of Hafiz Nasir, a Jamaat-e-Islami member, Tahir managed to form his cell, which conducted score of terrorist activities, without even

coming close to police. According to Karachi police, Tahir has been involved in terrorist activities since 1998 and acquired special expertise in using Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG).

After the Safoora Goth attacks, he was finally arrested from Bahawalpur, southern Punjab.¹⁴

Second-in-command

Saad Aziz, a Karachite, was highly educated, with upper-class-urban family background. Unlike Minhas, Aziz was born and raised in Karachi to an educated Punjabi family long settled in Karachi. His father, himself a business graduate, had worked for a multinational corporation Unilever as Executive Director, in Karachi.

Aziz did his O-levels from Beacon House School and A-levels from Lyceum School, both elite schools in Karachi. Saad qualified the highly-competitive entry exam of the country's leading business school, the Institute of Business

¹⁰ Hafeez Tunio, "Arrested Safoora attack mastermind behind Sabeer's murder: Sindh CM," *Express Tribune*, May 20, 2015; "Pakistan's educated jihadis," Deutsche Welle, May 22, 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-educated-jihadists/a-18467631>.

¹¹ "Umar Kaathio Al-Qaeda Sindh's head, reveal Safoora terrorists," *Dunya News*, June 22, 2015, <http://dunyaews.tv/index.php/en/Pa>

[kistan/285507-Umar-Kaathio-Al-Qaeda-Sindhs-head-reveal-Safoora](http://dunyaews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/285507-Umar-Kaathio-Al-Qaeda-Sindhs-head-reveal-Safoora).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Naimat Khan, "Killers of Ismailis, Sabeen arrested Al-Qaeda network of graduates behind Safoora, Mahmud's killings," *Frontier Post*, <http://www.thefrontierpost.com/article/print/300418/killers-of-ismailis-sabeen-arrested-al-qaeda-network-of-graduates-behind-safoora-mahmud-s-killings>.

Administration (IBA),¹⁵ in Bachelor of Business Administration, which he completed in 2011.¹⁶¹⁷

At the IBA, initially, he was a usual undergraduate student. He was fond of football, had girl friends, and hung out with friends on regular basis. His grades in the first two years were reasonably good, too. But then, midways, Saad drifted towards radicalization. Slowly and gradually, he disconnected himself from all of his previous friends.

It emerged that Saad was coming under the influence of Iqra Society at the IBA, a religious reading and discussion group. Disconnected with old friends, Saad maintained contacts with his new friends.

Iqra Society's role in radicalizing him has been ignored by the law-enforcement bodies.

From its website, the Society seems a look-alike of Hizbut Tahrir, which promotes Islamist values amongst the educated, liberal, and affluent students. As Deputy Inspector General of Police, Karachi South, said, "Al Qaeda subcontinent is a

splinter group, a mixture of al Qaeda and Hizbut Tahrir. Hizbut Tahrir is not violent, but this group is using their ideology and literature."¹⁸

The Society organizes guest lecture at the IBA where Islamist speakers are invited to speak about the Muslim way of life.¹⁹ The Society appears to be thoroughly Islamist, as reflected in its vision, which "attempt[s] to establish the realization among the students of IBA that Islam is not merely a religion, but the complete code of life and provides us with the best solution for our every sphere of life including our academics and the corporate world."²⁰

Among their past events, according to its website, the Society raised the plight of jailed Islamist terrorist Dr Afia Siddiqui and highlighted her case at their forum, where former British journalist Mariam Ridley also spoke. Mariam, formerly Yvonne Ridley, had converted to Islam after her captivity by Taliban in 2001 and became an outspoken supporter of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. According to the Society's website, Ridley later visited Fouzia Siddiqui, sister of Dr Afia, at her house in Karachi.²¹ For its

¹⁵ Current President of Pakistan Mamnoon Hussain and former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz studied at IBA Karachi.

¹⁶ "Saad Aziz confesses to Sabeen's murder for holding Valentine's Day rally," *Express Tribune*, May 22, 2015.

¹⁷ Author's discussions with IBA students.

¹⁸ "Good degrees and Kalashnikovs," *Express Tribune*, May 21, 2015.

¹⁹ Sidrah Roghay, "The many shades of Saad Aziz," *The Friday Times*, June 5, 2015.

²⁰ Official website of IBA Iqra Society, <http://iqra.iba.edu.pk/aboutus.html>.

²¹ Official website of IBA Iqra Society, <http://iqra.iba.edu.pk/events.html>.

apparent links with former members of Jamaat-e-Islami such as Fouzia Siddiqui, the Society appears to be a conduit of Jamaat's student wing at the IBA Karachi, where, otherwise, student politics is strictly prohibited.

During his stay with the Society, he translated anti-Shia sect hate speeches of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the founder of anti-Shia organization Sipah-e-Sahaba in late 1980s. He gave Jhangvi's speech the title "The men who rocked Kufr."²²

Aziz's sectarian overture also runs through the Society's magazine, *Al-Rashideen* too, which he, along with eight others, edited and published at the IBA. Introducing the first issue of the magazine, he termed it a "platform where relevant issues facing the Ummah are studied and analysed upon by students of colleges and universities, and Muslim youngsters whose first or second language is English."²³

Iqra Society exposed Saad to the writings of ultra-radical Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb. Saad once asked his friend, "Have you read *Milestones* by Sayyid Qutb? It has changed my life."²⁴ His friends even believe that Saad might have gone to

jihad training too, "he went somewhere for a few months. Someone said he had gone for jihad training."²⁵

Commenting on Saad's transformation, one of his former schoolmates from Lyceum days wrote:

"Saad never had a group. He could be seen floating from one group of friends to another, never really seeming like he belonged to any one in particular. He tried his luck on the 'dabo' board, spent a few weeks on the foosball table and even attempted to join the drama gang, but he remained on the periphery...The extremists may be able to offer him something that our schooling system was unable to: a group of people where we felt valued, where we have purpose."²⁶

Aziz alongside cell's Emir Tahir Minhas planned and executed terrorist attacks. Saad's grasp over English language, sound educational background and being a local Karachite gave him an advantage over other cell members. He was more interested in targeting westerners and westernized Pakistanis (which he himself was once).

²² Ibid

²³ "Good degrees and Kalashnikovs," *Express Tribune*, May 21, 2015.

²⁴ Naeem Sahoutara, "Eyewitness identifies Saad Aziz as American professor's primary shooter," *Express Tribune*, June 27, 2015.

²⁵ "Saad Aziz confesses to Sabeen's murder for holding Valentine's Day rally," *Express Tribune*, May 22, 2015.

²⁶ Shehzad Ghais, "My friend from IBA, an extremist?," *Express Tribune*, May 27, 2015.

In April 2015, for instance, he planned and executed the attack on Debra Lobo, an American professor at Karachi's Jinnah Dental College.²⁷ She was critically injured in the attack.

His other target didn't survive: Sabeen Mehmud, Director of The Second Floor (T2F), who publicly condemned religious extremism, was shot five times.²⁸ Aziz confessed of the murder, saying,

"We shot her for holding a Valentine's Day rally. ... My friend was riding the motorcycle but I was sitting at the back and I shot her. ... When she sat in the car after her Balochistan seminar [which she had hosted], I followed her and when her car stopped at Sunset Boulevard signal I shot her. ... We followed her for days and gathered information on her before killing her."²⁹

Despite adhering to militant Islamist ideology, working with his Al-Qaeda-linked cell fellows and personally involved in high profile Islamist terrorist attacks, he maintained a regular routine life. He got married after completing his education and had a daughter;

moreover, he owned a restaurant The Cactus at a posh locality, Sindhi Muslim Housing Society in Karachi.³⁰

Conclusion

"He was a very hardworking child and passed with good grades. It is troubling to know that terrorist thoughts and ideologies have also managed to affect youngsters with good education and decent parentage."³¹

These were the words of a teacher of Saad, a key member of the cell. Like Saad, others belonged to urban upper class with sound professional education. Once again, it forces policy makers to revisit the assumptions made on terrorism and education.

To recall, in the past too, it was AQ that had links with terrorists having higher degrees. Examples include "Doctors Cell" of Dr Akmal Waheed and Dr Arshad Waheed in Karachi, "Ata-ur-Rehman-led Jundullah" in Karachi, and "Hammad Adil Cell" of Islamabad. Tahir Saeen cell seems like another such cell.

²⁷ "Saad Aziz confesses of murdering policeman," *Express Tribune*, June 17, 2015.

²⁸ "Director T2F Sabeen Mehmud shot dead in Karachi," *Dawn*, April 25, 2015.

²⁹ "Saad Aziz confesses to Sabeen's murder for holding Valentine's Day rally," *Express Tribune*, May 22, 2015.

³⁰ Sidrah Roghay, "The many shades of Saad Aziz," *The Friday Times*, June 5, 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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This should force researchers and policymakers to study and analyse the changing nature of Islamist militants in urban centres like Karachi, Islamabad and Hyderabad. What appears is that A-Qaeda, which started off from a highly centralized structure, is turning more and more decentralized, resulting into its sleeper cells.

In the near future, such cell-like structure may become headache for law enforcement investigators in near future.

That the Tahir Saeen Cell, which has been working in Karachi and Hyderabad for at least two years, was finally busted by the local police makes a strong case for better intelligence-led proactive policing. Other terrorism-ravaged countries like Germany, France, Italy and United Kingdom, largely rely on their police forces.

Urban terrorism can be tackled by providing high-quality surveillance equipment to police force rather than by relying on other non-investigative security bodies.