



LASHKAR-E TAIBA

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: South Asia

Numerical Strength (Members): Exact numbers unknown; estimated several thousand members in Pakistan and India

Leadership: Hafiz Muhammad Saeed

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam (Ahl-e-Hadith)

Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism (Last updated 2016)

INTRODUCTION

Of the many terrorist groups operating in South Asia, Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) is one of the most potent. Founded in Pakistan in the mid-1980s, LeT was generously supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as a proxy in its conflict with India. Since then, LeT has built a substantial infrastructure running schools and social services throughout Pakistan, while simultaneously carrying out deadly, sophisticated attacks throughout India and Afghanistan. From its founding, LeT's ambitions were global in nature, and the group now boasts a presence in some twenty-one countries. After the November 2008 massacre in Mumbai, India—a terrorist attack which claimed the lives of over 180 people and specifically targeted foreigners—the international community recognized that LeT represents a global threat.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT), variously translated from Urdu as Army of the Pure, Army of the Righteous, or Army of the Good, is technically the name of the armed wing of the radical Pakistani Islamist charitable group Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), i.e., the Society for Preaching. Prior to the 2008 Mumbai attack, LeT was viewed primarily as an actor in the ongoing conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. However, from its founding, LeT voiced global ambitions and viewed undermining Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir as a stepping-stone to the dissolution of India and ultimately the reinstatement of Muslim rule over the Indian sub-continent and beyond.¹ (Throughout this chapter, for clarity, use of the term LeT will refer to the group's entire network of linked charitable and terrorist organizations.)

LeT itself was formally founded in 1990, but its origins go back to 1985, when a pair of professors at the University of Engineering and Technology in Lahore, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed and Zafar Iqbal, founded JuD, a small missionary group dedicated to spreading the Ahl-e-Hadith (AeH) interpretation of Islam. (The Ahl-e-Hadith interpretation of Islam is closely related to the Wahhabis of the Arabian Peninsula and is a minority sect within Pakistan.²) LeT's embrace of Ahl-e-Hadith is relatively unusual for

Pakistan-based militant groups, most of which adhere to the Deobandi interpretation of Islam.

In 1986, JuD merged with an organization founded to facilitate the participation of Pakistani followers of the Ahl-e-Hadith sect in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. This new organization was called Markaz al-Dawa-wal-Irshad (MDI), the Center for Preaching and Guidance.³ Among MDI's cofounders was Osama bin Laden's religious mentor, Abdullah Azzam.⁴ Hafiz Saeed became the emir of both MDI and subsequently of LeT when the latter was established in 1990 as MDI's armed wing.⁵

LeT is unique among the Ahl-e-Hadith groups in Pakistan because it holds da'wa (preaching) and jihad (fighting) as equal and essential components of Islam. LeT's charitable wings carry out extensive outreach in an effort to convert Pakistanis to their interpretation of Islam. Many LeT recruits undergo military training, and some are sent to fight for LeT in Jammu and Kashmir, or more recently, Afghanistan. At the same time, LeT's armed operations help its recruitment and outreach efforts by inspiring disaffected Pakistanis.⁶

LeT's first front was Afghanistan, but by the time LeT was founded, the war against the Soviets was waning. According to one report, only five LeT operatives were killed fighting in Afghanistan before LeT withdrew from the conflict as different factions of the Afghan mujahideen turned on each other.⁷

When the people of the disputed Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir rebelled against India in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence agency (ISI) sought to take advantage of this turmoil and destabilize its neighbor. One of the lessons Pakistan's generals had drawn from the Afghan war was how to use proxy forces against a more powerful enemy and how to hurt the enemy without provoking a full-scale war.⁸

Initially, Pakistani strategists supported the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, but found that organization supported an independent Kashmir, rather than Kashmiri absorption into Pakistan. In turn, Pakistan shifted its support to Islamist groups that the ISI believed would be more effective and easier to control.⁹ In this regard, LeT was an ideal proxy because it was ideologically committed to jihad, had an ethnic composition similar to that of the Pakistani military, swore its loyalty to the state, and represented a minority sect within Pakistan.¹⁰

For its part, LeT readily shifted its focus to Jammu and Kashmir, which it saw as the closest of many open fronts in the global jihad. Despite this local focus, however, LeT's ultimate goal was the "liberation" (meaning establishment of Muslim rule) of the Indian subcontinent. To facilitate plausible deniability for Pakistan's role in fomenting violence in Jammu and Kashmir, the ISI urged MDI to split its operations, formally establishing LeT as the militant wing of the organization.¹¹

The earliest known LeT operation in India took place in 1990, when LeT operatives ambushed a jeep carrying Indian Air Force personnel.¹² In 1993, LeT attacked the army base in Poonch, a major coup in terms of its ability to carry out attacks against hard targets.¹³ However, the group's presence was not publicly recognized until early 1996, when a group of LeT terrorists carried out the first of many massacres targeting minority groups within Kashmir, killing 16 Hindus in Kashmir's Doda district.¹⁴ These massacres, which generally targeted ethnic and religious minority communities such as Sikhs and Hindus within Jammu and Kashmir, were intended to provoke ethnic strife and to polarize communal relations within Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁵ Perhaps the most notable of these massacres occurred on March 20, 2000, on the eve of President Bill Clinton's official visit to India, when LeT terrorists (along with members of Hizbul Mujahideen, another Pakistan-backed terrorist organization) massacred 35 Sikhs at Chattisinghpora in Anantnag.¹⁶

Besides its deadly massacres, LeT has carried out innumerable attacks in Jammu and Kashmir, targeting Indian government and military installations and disrupting elections by intimidating voters and targeting political leaders. LeT developed bomb-making skills, building and planting IEDs to target Indian army vehicles and adeptly mixed high and low technology to communicate and carry out operations.¹⁷

This shift does not indicate that LeT lost all interest in Afghanistan in the 1990s. However, its main

operational focus was Kashmir. According to LeT expert Stephen Tankel, several possible factors—from LeT’s *Ahl-e-Hadith* background to a desire on the part of Pakistani intelligence to keep the group separate from other terrorist actors—could explain why LeT’s activities and freedom of movement were constrained in Afghanistan during the 1990s.¹⁸

One of LeT’s signature tactics has been *fidayeen* attacks, in which small, heavily armed and highly motivated two- to four-man squads strike significant or symbolic targets in an effort to cause mass casualties and humiliate the enemy. One early *fidayeen* operation occurred in November 1999, when a team of LeT terrorists infiltrated the supposedly secure headquarters of India’s 15 Corps at the Badami Bagh cantonment in Srinagar (the capital of Jammu and Kashmir) killing the Public Relations Officer and seven of his staffers. The attackers then fought off Indian soldiers for almost 10 hours before being killed.¹⁹ A month later, LeT terrorists attacked the Police Special Operations Group Headquarters and killed a dozen Indian security personnel. These attacks were not limited to security forces. In January 2001, six LeT operatives attempted to enter Srinagar Airport, and in August 2001, three LeT *fidayeen* killed 11 inside the Jammu Railway station.²⁰ LeT has carried out dozens of such *fidayeen* attacks over the years.

Fidayeen attacks are distinct from suicide bombings, a tactic that LeT has refrained from using. Unlike suicide bomb attacks, the *fidayeen* (translated as “those who sacrifice themselves in order to redeem themselves”) can, at least theoretically, survive the attack. *Fidayeen* attacks are an important LeT recruiting tool. LeT publishes their exploits, and substantial numbers of *fidayeen* do survive and return to Pakistan, where they help recruit new members.

Although violence in Kashmir reached its zenith in the mid-2000s and has declined substantially since, LeT has remained active in the region. In January 2010, for example, LeT operatives held off security forces for 22 hours after storming a hotel in Srinagar and killing a civilian and a policeman.²¹

Although the bulk of LeT operations have taken place in Jammu and Kashmir, the group was never confined to that arena. From its beginnings, LeT sought to target India. As early as 1992, Hafez Saeed sent Azam Cheema, a top LeT commander, to India to recruit Indian Muslims. Taking advantage of Hindu-Muslim communal tensions, Cheema had some success, and his network carried out a number of low-level bombings across India.²² Karim Abdul Tunda, who was arrested on the Indian-Nepal border in August 2013, was one these early LeT recruits. He is suspected of involvement in over 40 terror cases in India, both directly and coordinating operations from Pakistan.²³ Indian police arrested LeT operatives in the 1990s, but LeT was not well known at the time and Indian authorities did not realize the extent of the LeT operation in their country.²⁴

Just as the ISI supports LeT as a proxy in order to maintain plausible deniability, LeT fosters proxies in India among radical Islamist militias in India. LeT’s most important ally within India is the Indian Mujahideen (IM). Established by Indian Muslims radicalized by community violence, IM’s members are primarily drawn from the ranks of the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).²⁵ LeT, along with several other Pakistani terror groups, provided support to IM, including training, cash, weapons, explosives, and false travel documents. One of IM’s founders, Mohammed Sadiq Israr Sheikh, is believed to have traveled to Pakistan in part on a legitimate Pakistani passport supplied by ISI through LeT; he met with LeT leaders in Pakistan, attended an LeT training camp, and recruited other Indian Muslims to attend LeT training camps.²⁶

Some analysts argue that IM is little more than an outgrowth of LeT and the ISI, which was established when Pakistan, under U.S. pressure, reduced its support for armed operations in Jammu and Kashmir.²⁷ According to these analysts, IM was an outgrowth of “The Karachi Project” which brought together a number of Pakistani militant groups including LeT to attack India.²⁸ Other analysts view IM as an independent organization, but allied with LeT:

“...most Indian militants did not perceive themselves as proxies for either Lashkar or Pakistan....”

In other words, the group [LeT] was a force multiplier for Indian militancy, rather than a key driver of it. Further, while Lashkar was the chief external outfit providing support for Indian jihadism, it was not the only one.”²⁹

IM has been held responsible for numerous deadly attacks throughout India, most of them before 2012. While LeT’s preferred tactic is the fidayeen assault, IM’s specialty has been IEDs made with pressure cookers packed with ammonium nitrate and fuel oil. It is often difficult to determine if an attack was a LeT operation in which IM provided support, an IM-LeT joint operation, or an IM operation that received LeT support. There may also have been attacks by IM in which they did not receive direct LeT support, but LeT training and support helped IM build the necessary organizational capabilities to carry out the attack. Indian officials have cracked down hard on IM in recent years, and in March 2014 they claimed to have arrested the group’s entire top leadership.³⁰ Since then, IM has not been particularly active.

Jihad is central to LeT’s worldview, but so is da’wa (preaching). LeT runs a vast network of offices, schools, medical centers, and media outlets within Pakistan to proselytize LeT’s Ahl-e-Hadith theology. LeT’s headquarters are at a 200-acre compound in Muridke, outside of Lahore, designed to be a “pure” Islamic city with a madrassa, a hospital, a market, residences, and farmland. To demonstrate the purity of the city, televisions and pictures are banned, with entertainment limited to cassettes of warrior songs.³¹

LeT runs a network of primary and upper-level schools that serve over 18,000 students. They are not, technically, madrassas; while LeT pushes its view of Islam, the schools also teach other subjects. However, LeT’s worldview is infused into every component of education. The former head of LeT’s education department explained that in the basic reader the alphabet is used to emphasize jihad, “‘Alif’ for Allah, ‘Be’ for Bandoq (gun), ‘Te’ for toop (cannon) and so on.” Because of the poor state of Pakistan’s public education, LeT schools are an attractive alternative. LeT also subsidizes the fees for those who cannot pay.³²

LeT is also a major healthcare provider, running hospitals, mobile medical centers, and an ambulance service. Over 2,000 doctors volunteer their services part-time and are trained to use their contact with patients as an opportunity to proselytize. LeT believes these activities are necessary to counter-act the influence of NGOs and Christian missionaries. As in LeT’s education system, the organization is providing a service desperately needed by many impoverished Pakistanis.³³ LeT has also been on the forefront of disaster relief, which helps to raise the organization’s profile and reputation in Pakistan. LeT was one of the first organizations to respond to the 2005 Kashmir earthquake³⁴ and has delivered aid to refugees who were displaced by the fighting in the Swat Valley in 2008 and the 2010 floods.³⁵

The effectiveness with which LeT and JuD have managed to serve the role of a shadow state cannot be overstated. Consider that as early as 2005, LeT’s assets included a 190-acre campus in Muridke, outside Lahore, which featured 500 offices, 2200 training camps, 150 schools, 2 science colleges, 3 hospitals, 11 ambulances, a publishing empire, a garment factory, an iron foundry, and woodworks factories. Salaries were in some cases 12 to 15 times greater than those offered for similar jobs in the civilian state sector.³⁶

LeT has an extensive media arm, publishing several magazines in Urdu, English and Arabic with publications targeted to specific communities such as women and students. The flagship publication, *Majalah al-Dawa*, is an Urdu-language monthly with a circulation of about 60,000.³⁷ *Jihad* is a regular theme in these publications, and they regularly feature testaments from “martyrs,” LeT operatives killed in the service of *jihad*.³⁸ LeT has used the internet to propagate its message, broadcasting an internet radio show and maintaining websites and Facebook pages. However, international scrutiny has led the Pakistani government to shut down these sites. LeT also holds conferences and rallies throughout the country.³⁹ These have continued despite the supposed ban on LeT and often feature speeches by Hafez Mohammed Saeed, notwithstanding the \$10 million bounty on him under the U.S. Rewards for Justice program.⁴⁰

LeT’s large social service and paramilitary operations are expensive to operate. However, the organi-

zation has been both creative and systematic in its fundraising efforts. According to one report donation boxes for the *jihadi* groups are present in every third or fourth shop in Pakistani markets throughout the country. LeT publications include calls for donations. LeT also raises money from wealthy supporters in the Arabian Peninsula and from the large Pakistani expatriate community around the world. Often these donations are channeled through a variety of international Islamist charities, such as the International Islamic Relief Organization and the al-Rashid Foundation.⁴¹

One notable LeT fundraising operation is collecting the skins of sacrificial animals after holidays and selling them to tanneries. In 2010, JuD reportedly collected 100,000 skins, netting a profit of \$1.2 million.⁴² LeT uses a range of low and high-tech means to involve people in this campaign. For example, within Pakistan, LeT announces this campaign via loudspeaker, but internationally, it allows individuals to contribute to the purchase of a sacrificial animal online and then donate the skin to LeT.⁴³

Besides the ISI stipend, the Pakistani civilian government has also contributed to LeT. In June 2010, the Punjab provincial government allocated 80 million rupees (about \$1 million) to LeT-affiliated schools and hospitals.⁴⁴

Another possible source of support to LeT's operations in India is D-company, the organized crime group led by Dawood Ibrahim. While his present location is unknown (most Indians believe he may be based in Pakistan), Ibrahim's criminal network extends well beyond India and the Subcontinent and into the Middle East. Ibrahim, who is heavily involved in the heroin trade and various forms of smuggling, is believed to be a major donor to LeT, with his smuggling networks purportedly used to help LeT move operatives in and out of India.⁴⁵

GLOBAL REACH

Although the vast majority of LeT's operations have been in India, it is a terrorist group of global reach and ambition. LeT's global network has multiple components. LeT has allied with other Islamist groups around the world, including al-Qaeda, and has developed its own network of supporters internationally for fundraising and logistical support. LeT has also become a magnet for Islamists worldwide seeking training. Finally, and most worrisome, LeT is increasingly operating against NATO forces and India in Afghanistan and has on several occasions directed plots outside of the Indian sub-continent.

While LeT's rhetoric focuses on India, it has never discussed India exclusively. LeT statements have long vilified a coalition of Hindus, Jews, and Christians, colorfully termed the "Brahmanic-Talmudic-Crusader" alliance that seeks to destroy the ummah, the international Muslim community.⁴⁶ In a 1998 speech, Hafez Saeed stated:

Lashkar-e-Taiba will ultimately plant the flag of Islam on Delhi, Tel Aviv, and Washington. All evil in the world emanated from the White House which would be blown up and if the U.S. Army took action against the Muslims it would be opposed by Lashkar-e-Taiba.⁴⁷

LeT communications call for jihad to overthrow the oppressors of Muslims everywhere. LeT rhetoric frequently targets Israel and at one point called for Pakistan to deploy a hydrogen bomb to "make the USA yield before Pakistan."⁴⁸

LeT's affiliation with the international Islamist terror movement is deep and extensive. As discussed above, LeT's links to al-Qaeda, the leading organization of the jihadist movement, go back to the very founding of the organizations and the joint legacy of Abdullah Azzam, who was instrumental in the creation of both al-Qaeda and LeT's predecessor, MDI.

The connection between LeT and al-Qaeda was more than rhetorical. LeT has sheltered and trained many notable al-Qaeda figures. Ramzi Yusuf, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and nephew of 9/11 organizer Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, is known to have been sheltered in LeT safe-

houses.⁴⁹ After 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, LeT assisted with the exfiltration of al-Qaeda personnel from Afghanistan into Pakistan and beyond, providing safe houses, safe passage, travel documents, and logistical support.⁵⁰

Even after 9/11, several al-Qaeda operatives trained with LeT. Richard Reid, the terrorist who tried to hide bombs in his shoes as part of an al-Qaeda plot on a U.S.-bound flight, had trained with LeT prior to joining al-Qaeda. Two of the 2005 London subway bombers, Mohammad Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, may also have received training from LeT.⁵¹

While LeT was focused on its anti-India objectives, many group members were embedded in an international network of Islamist organizations. It has long offered support to other extremist groups battling those it perceives as enemies of Islam. LeT has offered rhetorical and occasionally financial support to Islamists in Chechnya, Gaza, the Philippines, and the Balkans.⁵² The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group with the goal of overthrowing the Uzbek regime and replacing it with a sharia-based government, has long-standing ties with LeT and receives support from the organization.⁵³ The IMU's militant network in fact extends well beyond LeT; it also cooperates with the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. In 2015, the IMU pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State, though a faction retaining the name IMU and loyalty to al-Qaeda still exists today.⁵⁴ Over the last two years, it has flirted with the Islamic State faction based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. LeT is also plugged into the international networks of Islamist fundraisers such as the Al Akhtar Trust or the Al Rashid Trust, which were founded to fund militant groups, including LeT.⁵⁵

When al-Qaeda's training infrastructure in Afghanistan was destroyed, LeT's camps were largely untouched due to Pakistan's protection; thus, the camps took up the mantle of training militants from across the international Islamist movement.⁵⁶ This training support is provided to militants from numerous organizations in South Asia, such as Hizbul Mujahideen (HuM), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami (HuJI), and the Taliban, among others.⁵⁷ Furthermore, radical Muslims worldwide have travelled to Pakistan to train with the LeT.

Besides being a magnet for Islamists worldwide, LeT has established its own global footprint to support its terror activities. Within the Indian sub-continent, LeT has safehouses and supporters in Bangladesh, Nepal,⁵⁸ and the Maldives⁵⁹ that facilitate the infiltration of operatives into India. LeT also has supporters in the Gulf region who raise funds, but also recruit Indians working in the Gulf and coordinate travel to Pakistan for training. But LeT's network extends far beyond Asia, into Europe and even the United States. There is evidence that LeT opened an office in Lodi, California, and counterterrorism officials "cite evidence in recent years of fundraising or recruiting efforts in Canada, Britain, Australia and the United States."⁶⁰ There has also been evidence of LeT activity in Germany, as stated by the German Interior Minister,⁶¹ a cell that raised money and was armed with explosives was arrested in Spain,⁶² and (as will be discussed below) LeT had an active presence in France.⁶³

Despite its international network, vast resources, and unmitigated rage against the West for most of its existence, LeT has almost exclusively targeted India. However, this has begun to change over the past decade. The attacks in Mumbai in which foreigners, and particularly Israelis and Americans, were targeted was one example. But LeT is becoming more involved in the fight against the United States and NATO in Afghanistan. More ominously, LeT operatives have, on several occasions, hatched plots beyond the Indian sub-continent that directly target Western interests.

The vast majority of attacks LeT has executed other than in India have occurred in Afghanistan. In part, these attacks have been consistent with LeT's willingness to serve as a proxy for Pakistani intelligence. Pakistan's military leadership is deeply concerned that increased Indian influence in Afghanistan will leave Pakistan surrounded. Several LeT attacks have reflected this Pakistani concern. At first, LeT's support for the Afghan Taliban in their fight against NATO forces was informal, granting LeT fighters leave to travel to Afghanistan and join the Taliban on their own initiative. This was a useful safety valve

for LeT. Many LeT members were frustrated that the Pakistani government had allied with the Americans and was cracking down on LeT activities against India in Jammu and Kashmir. In 2004 and 2005, LeT began to formally support its members traveling to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Taliban.⁶⁴ LeT fighters played a significant role in an attack on a U.S. base in Wanat, Nuristan in which insurgents nearly overran the base.⁶⁵ LeT also carried out a number of high-profile strikes against Indian targets in Afghanistan, including a July 2008 car-bombing of the Indian Embassy⁶⁶ and a February 2010 fidayeen attack on Kabul guesthouses hosting Indians.

LeT has also begun to act operationally within the West. A notable case of an attempted LeT attack in the West is that of Willie Brigitte, a French convert to Islam. Initially, Brigitte sought to enter Afghanistan to join the Taliban. When he could not do so, Brigitte spent several months training at a LeT camp in Pakistan in late 2001. He then was dispatched to Australia, where he linked up with other LeT operatives to carry out a series of attacks, with potential targets including a nuclear reactor and Australian military bases. Ultimately, after France alerted Australia's domestic intelligence agency, ASIO, of the threat posed by Brigitte, he was deported to France where he was convicted of providing support to terrorists and sentenced to nine years in prison.⁶⁷

In spring 2004, LeT dispatched several operatives to Iraq to fight the Americans and British. Led by a high-level LeT operative named Danish Ahmed, the team was arrested by British forces in April 2004. LeT was exploring the possibility of sending fighters to Iraq but ultimately did not have the right links to the clandestine networks. Nonetheless, this incident highlights that LeT was taking a more expansive view of its conflict with the West.⁶⁸

David Headley, a Pakistani-American, is perhaps the most notorious Western LeT operative. He is both an example of a Western recruit to LeT and of attempts by the organization to directly attack the West. Headley's involvement with LeT lasted for seven years, during which time he trained at least five times at LeT camps in Pakistan, shuttled back and forth between the United States, Pakistan, and India on the organization's behalf, and, perhaps most integrally, selected and scoped out attack locations for the Mumbai attack.⁶⁹ He was ultimately arrested in Chicago a year after the November 2009 Mumbai attacks and was convicted in January 2013 to 35 years in federal prison for his role in the attacks.⁷⁰

RECENT ACTIVITY

Lashkar-e-Taiba currently finds itself in a difficult position. Unlike many of the other Islamist groups in Pakistan, it has remained loyal to the Pakistani state, and even serves Pakistan's government as an intermediary to other radical groups.⁷¹ At the same time, LeT's primary arena for jihad, Jammu and Kashmir, has been increasingly closed off to it. Violence in the region has decreased from hundreds of civilians killed annually by terrorists only a decade ago to less than a score killed annually.⁷² Jammu and Kashmir remain restive, and LeT and other Pakistani extremists continue to attempt to wage their battle there. But they are receiving far less support from the government of Pakistan, which is under international pressure to keep a tight leash on the group.⁷³ The November 2008 assault on Mumbai may have been one outgrowth of this internal tension (as well as an effort to derail warming Indian-Pakistani relations at a time when the two countries were involved in backchannel efforts to launch a peace process.)

Additionally, LeT has been unable to capitalize on new developments in the global jihadist sphere. The emergence of ISIS over the last few years has not threatened LeT, but neither has it helped strengthen LeT. When ISIS announced the establishment of a chapter in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region in early 2015, some observers noted that LeT could be a logical partner for ISIS in the South Asia region, given that both groups adhere to the Salafist sect of Sunni Islam. By contrast, most South Asian terror groups—from the Taliban to the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)—belong to the Deobandi sect, which ISIS rejects. Observers contended at the time that some renegade LeT members, frustrated with their group's less active role in Kashmir and across India, could jump ship to ISIS.⁷⁴

Instead, ISIS has chosen to partner with other local militant groups, and particularly LeJ. For ISIS, its preference appears to be to link up with groups in South Asia that share its targeting preferences—LeJ, like ISIS, is deeply sectarian and frequently targets Shia Muslims—even if they don’t share ISIS’s Salafist sect. Another reason that helps explain why ISIS has not taken an interest in partnering with LeT is the latter’s ties to the Pakistani state, which ISIS wants to destroy.

Not surprisingly, LeT does not appear to have much respect for ISIS. In late 2015, the two organizations engaged in a nasty war of words through each other’s respective propaganda magazines.⁷⁵

All this said, despite their differences, LeJ and ISIS, like all Islamist terrorist groups, are cut from the same general ideological cloth. For this reason, one cannot rule out the possibility of a temporary marriage of convenience motivated by a need to target a common enemy—such as U.S. soldiers or Indian civilians in Afghanistan. Still, even these occasional tactical collaborations, were they to be established, would likely have a very limited impact on LeT’s overall capacities.

That being said, several attacks did target Jammu and Kashmir and broader India in 2015 and 2016. Terrorists hit Indian military facilities in Pathankot in the state of Punjab in January 2016, and in Uri in Jammu and Kashmir in September 2016. They also attacked a police station in the town of Gurdaspur in Punjab in July 2015. India blamed another Pakistan-based anti-India terror group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, for the first two attacks. Yet posters were reportedly spotted in the Pakistani town of Gujranwala in October 2016 that announced that LeT would hold last rites in absentia for one of the four attackers in the Uri attack—suggesting a level of LeT involvement.⁷⁶ However, this may have been more a case of LeT trying to assert its continued relevance and potency than a genuine claim of responsibility. Meanwhile, the Gurdaspur attack was initially blamed by Indian officials on terrorists linked to LeT.⁷⁷ However, there was little else said by New Delhi about LeT’s role in the months since the Gurdaspur attack took place.

After the Uri attack, one of the deadliest on the Indian military in decades, India retaliated with what it described as a “surgical strike”—a limited attack on Pakistani militant facilities along the Line of Control. According to Indian media reports drawing on military assessment reports, LeT suffered significant damage, including the loss of 20 fighters.⁷⁸ However, given that some of the Indian media’s reporting on the incident was later contradicted by government officials and subsequent reports, such findings should be regarded with some degree of skepticism.

Over the course of 2015 and 2016, Indian officials often warned of terror threats to India posed by LeT.⁷⁹ They also alleged that the group was behind the protests that convulsed Jammu and Kashmir in the summer of 2016 after Indian security forces killed Burhan Wani, a popular young militant affiliated with the Kashmiri separatist group Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.⁸⁰ However, there is insufficient open source information on which to judge the veracity of these claims.

Over the course of 2017, India did not suffer any major terror attacks. Notably, Jammu and Kashmir suffered relatively few attacks. While the restive Kashmir region did experience protests, some of them prompted by videos depicting the mistreatment of local residents by Indian security forces, Indian officials did not accuse LeT of being behind any of the unrest. However, Indian police claimed that they killed two LeT fighters in a raid in Jammu and Kashmir in October, while Indian authorities also said they killed a top LeT commander, Abu Dujana, in Kashmir in August. A senior Indian Army official described Dujana as the top LeT figure in Kashmir and a “category A plus, plus, terrorist... This is a blow to the LeT leadership.”⁸¹

LeT’s expanded international profile since the 26/11 attacks has also hurt the organization’s ability to carry out terror attacks. The 2012 arrest of Abu Jundal highlighted increased Saudi-Indian counter-terror cooperation.⁸² India’s arrests of Karim Abdul Tunda and Yassin Bhatkal of IM will reduce, although not eliminate, LeT’s ability to carry out attacks within India. Finally, expanded international scrutiny in general will make it more difficult for LeT to move operatives and plan major attacks.

Furthermore, LeT’s compromised future prospects should be viewed through the prism of a deep-

ening U.S.-India security relationship. Washington's messaging, particularly since 2014, has suggested emphatically that the United States—which lost six citizens in the 2008 Mumbai attack—is fully behind New Delhi in its efforts to combat the LeT threat. Tellingly, a White House statement issued in September 2016, following a conversation between U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice and her Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval, stated that: “Ambassador Rice reiterated our expectation that Pakistan take effective action to combat and delegitimize United Nations-designated terrorists individuals and entities, including Lashkar-e-Tayyiba...”⁸³ With Washington and New Delhi poised to increase arms sales and intelligence sharing as their defense relationship grows, India's capacity to attack LeT (and other anti-India militants) on Pakistani soil—particularly through the use of lightning cross-border strikes and other limited covert measures—could well be enhanced in the coming years.

Furthermore, LeT has reportedly suffered setbacks in its operations outside of India. According to the Afghan government, for example, 19 members of LeT were killed in airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan in October 2016.⁸⁴

Despite these setbacks and threats, however, LeT continues to operate openly in Pakistan. In recent years LeT rallies have protested NATO transport vehicles traveling through Pakistan, U.S. drone strikes, Indian water policies, and improved trade relations with India. LeT has spearheaded a coalition of Islamist groups who opposed these efforts, which is known as the Difa-e-Pakistan Council (Defense of Pakistan.)⁸⁵

Despite a \$10 million bounty under the U.S. Rewards for Justice program, LeT chief Hafez Muhammed Saeed continues to travel throughout Pakistan and speak at rallies, including anti-India protests in the heart of Islamabad. Saeed also regularly gives academic lectures at colleges in the Pakistani province of Punjab. Several top LeT leaders are being tried in Pakistan for their role in the 26/11 attacks. But the extremely slow pace of the judicial process suggests that the Pakistani government is not committed to seeing justice served.⁸⁶ Indeed, Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, a top LeT leader implicated by India in the November 2008 attacks, has been in and out of jail for several years and has been out on bail since 2015.

In January 2017, Pakistan announced that it had placed Saeed under house arrest. This wasn't the first time Saeed experienced this fate; he had also been detained in this way in 2008 and 2009, only to be released soon thereafter. Given Pakistan's poor track record on seeking justice for top LeT leaders, independent analysts expected this latest detention would not last long either. Sadly, they were quite right. In November 2017, Pakistani legal authorities announced they had insufficient evidence to justify his continued detention, and he was set free. On the very day he was released, Saeed delivered a fiery sermon in which he labeled Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's prime minister from 2013 until he was forced to resign over corruption allegations in 2017, a traitor for having tried to pursue peace with India. Saeed also vowed to maintain the struggle to “free” Kashmir.⁸⁷

The timing of Saeed's release was notable for two reasons. First, it came just several days after the U.S. Congress delinked LeT from aid certification requirements—in other words, Washington decided that it would not need to certify that Pakistan was taking robust action against LeT before releasing aid monies to Pakistan.⁸⁸ The Haqqani Network—the terror group implicated in a series of attacks on U.S. targets in Afghanistan in recent years—was not delinked. Why the United States delinked LeT is unclear. Perhaps Washington wanted to extend a carrot to Pakistan in the hopes that playing good cop would compel better behavior from Pakistan. Regardless of the motivations, for Washington, the optics of Islamabad releasing Saeed from house arrest so soon after the United States indicated it would reduce pressure on Pakistan regarding LeT were dreadful.

The other reason why the timing of Saeed's release from house arrest in November 2017 was so notable is that it came just a few days before the 9th anniversary of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks—the mass-casualty slaughter that India, the United States, and many other nations believe was orchestrated by LeT. For many relatives of the tragedy's victims, the release of Saeed on a date so close to the anniversary was deeply upsetting.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has shown little interest in improving India's relationship with Pakistan. Modi is a Hindu nationalist, whose party has expressed virulently anti-Pakistan views. Due to this point of conflict, LeT's anti-India extremism may well continue to resonate with large segments of society across Pakistan, and particularly in the province of Punjab where the group is based. In 2016, Modi threatened to revisit, or even revoke, the Indus Waters Treaty—a water-sharing accord that ensures the Indus, a critical water source for Pakistan, flows downstream unencumbered into Pakistan from India.⁹⁰ Modi's threat will provide more ammunition for LeT propaganda, which has long used India's alleged "water theft" as a chief talking point.

Ultimately, LeT holds the values of *jihad* as a central tenet of its ideology. Its current period of relative restraint will be difficult to maintain. The organization may again seek to launch terrorist spectaculars, possibly farther afield from its previous areas of operation. Alternately, frustrated LeT cadres may begin to plot attacks on their own initiative. This may have been the case when David Coleman Headley, the key plotter of the Mumbai attacks, began scouting targets in Denmark.⁹¹ LeT likewise remains ideologically committed to violence and is a formidable organization with the resources and skills needed to launch major, deadly terror attacks. Revelations that it is embracing technological innovations—including a new mobile application that enables its communications in Jammu and Kashmir to be more secure⁹²—highlight the group's willingness to adjust to the times as it prepares to continue its fight into the future.

Another ominous indication of LeT's future direction can be seen in the establishment of a new religious political party called Milli Muslim League (MML). This party was launched by JuD in August 2017. Though Pakistan's election commission refused to recognize MML as a formal political party, an independent candidate fully supported by MML participated in a by-election in the city of Lahore in September 2017. Remarkably, the independent candidate supported by MML, Yaqoob Shaikh—designated as a terrorist by the U.S. government in 2012—received about 6,000 votes, or almost 5 percent of the total vote.⁹³ This was significantly more than the less than 1,500 earned by the candidate of the Pakistan People's Party, one of Pakistan's main opposition parties—and a relatively liberal party that ran the national government between 2008 and 2013. Though the by-election was won by the ruling party candidate, MML's performance illustrated the potential electoral clout of a terrorist-linked party—no small matter in a nation where more moderate Islamist political parties regularly fail to earn many votes at the ballot box.

The emergence of MML may portend a new phase in LeT's evolution. Just like JuD has sought to earn LeT legitimacy and support through humanitarian work, MML provides a new vehicle to earn legitimacy and support through politics. The Pakistani military has supported a new mainstreaming plan that involves a series of new parties comprised of religious hardliners joining the mainstream political process and contesting elections. The idea, according to the military, is to give these parties peaceful channels to express their views that direct them away from violence.⁹⁴ In reality, this new policy risks mainstreaming murderous ideologies and bestowing, even if indirectly, LeT with more political legitimacy.

In effect, one of the world's most fearsome terror groups could be on a new path to reinvent itself—and to cast itself as a viable player in national politics.

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