

American Foreign Policy Council



LASHKAR-E TAIBA

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: South Asia

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

Leadership: Hafiz Muhammad Saeed

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam (Wahhabi)

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

Of all the terrorist groups present in South Asia—and there are many—it is Lashkar-e Taiba that represents a threat to regional and global security second only to al-Qaeda. Founded in Pakistan in 1987, LeT over time has expanded its ambitions and reach far beyond Southeast Asia, and now boasts a presence in some twenty-one countries, and its activities continue to be tacitly supported by the Pakistani state. However, it was not until the November 2008 massacre in Mumbai, India—a terrorist attack which claimed the lives of close to 200 people, including 26 foreigners of 15 nationalities—that the international community recognized that LeT's ambitions transcend India and are part of a larger war with the West and with liberal democracies more generally.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Although Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) is linked in popular perceptions mainly to terrorism in the disputed regions of Jammu and Kashmir, the operations and ideology of this group transcend the violence directed at the Indian state. An adherent of Sunni Wahhabism,

LeT seeks to establish a universal Islamic Caliphate with a special emphasis on gradually recovering all lands once under Muslim rule. That strategic objective has made LeT a strong ideological ally of al-Qaeda, while the emphasis on recovering “lost Muslim lands” in Asia and Europe has taken LeT to diverse places such as the Palestinian Territories, Spain, Chechnya, Kosovo and Eritrea.

That LeT is a constituent member of Osama bin Laden’s International Islamic Front should not be surprising given that one of its three founders, Abdullah Azzam of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, was reputedly associated with Hamas and has been widely described as one of bin Laden’s religious mentors.¹ Together with Hafiz Saeed, LeT’s current *amir*, and Zafar Iqbal of the Engineering University, Lahore, Azzam formed LeT in 1987 as the armed wing of the Markaz Dawat-ul Irshad (MDI), the Center for Proselytization and Preaching, which sought to actualize the universal Islamic state through *tableegh* (preaching) and *jihad* (armed struggle).² The group’s founding occurred at a time when Pakistan was in the throes of Islamic ferment. General Zia ul-Haq’s decade-long program (1977-88) of Islamizing Pakistan had by then grown strong domestic roots, providing a plethora of armed groups such as LeT with a steady supply of volunteers, funding and, most important of all, concerted state support.

In the fervid atmosphere of the 1980s, when numerous extremist groups were emerging in Pakistan under the patronage of the country’s principal intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), LeT’s militant attitude to political change, and its commitment to exploiting modern science and technology in support of its ideological ends, quickly made it an ISI favorite because its uncompromising commitment to *jihad* could be manipulated to advance Pakistan’s own strategic goals. As Saeed noted in a January 1998 interview with *Herald*, a Pakistani news magazine, “many Muslim organizations are preaching and working on the missionary level inside and outside Pakistan... but they have given up the path of *jihad* altogether. The need for *jihad* has always existed and the present conditions demand it more than ever.”³

LeT's earliest operations were focused on the Kunar and Paktia provinces in Afghanistan, where LeT had set up several training camps in support of the *jihad* against the Soviet occupation. LeT's initial focus on Afghanistan is significant because it refutes the common misapprehension—assiduously fostered since the early 1990s—that the group has always been a part of the indigenous Kashmiri insurgency. Nothing could be further from the truth. LeT is composed primarily of Pakistani Punjabis and has been so from its inception. In fact, its Punjabi composition, along with its inflexible ideology, is precisely what made it so attractive to the ISI to begin with, because it could be controlled and directed far more effectively by its Punjabi-dominated sponsor, the Pakistani Army, than could any local Kashmiri resistance group. Because of LeT's founding ties to al-Qaeda, however, its Punjabi core has over the years been episodically supplemented by Libyans, Central Asians, and Sudanese—although these non-Pakistani elements have generally been marginal to the group's numerical strength.

LeT's early contribution to the anti-Soviet campaign was consistent with its mission of armed struggle against the infidels. In its earliest official supporters, General Akhtar Abdur Rahman and Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, the ISI's Director Generals during the late 1980s, the group found kindred spirits who were also tantalized by the lure of an international *jihad*. The *mujahideen's* defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan empowered both the ISI and various *jihadi* groups within Pakistan, which came to see state-sponsored insurgency as the key to advancing Islamabad's myriad strategic interests. *Jihad* undertaken by sub-national groups with state support would thus become the instrument that allowed Pakistan to punch above its geopolitical weight: its campaign in Afghanistan had already contributed to the fall of a superpower and Pakistani military and intelligence officials were nothing if not ambitious during the 1980s and the 1990s, when they sought to replicate the same outcome against India.

The indigenous uprising which broke out in 1989 in Jammu and Kashmir provided this opportunity. Just as Pakistan had supported the Sikh insurgency against New Delhi earlier in the decade, Islam-

abad now threw its weight behind the Kashmiri resistance—a development that was in many ways inevitable, given Pakistan’s long-standing claims to the disputed state. Unfortunately for Pakistan, its strategy of defeating India through armed insurgencies failed in Kashmir, just as it did in the Punjab. By 1993, the native Kashmiri uprising spearheaded by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a secular organization composed largely of Kashmiris, was defeated by the Indian military, just as the Khalistan movement in the Punjab, also supported by Pakistan, was slowly being beaten back at about the same time.

These twin defeats, first in the Punjab and then in Jammu and Kashmir, demonstrated that Pakistan’s national strategy of supporting domestic insurgencies in order to checkmate Indian power had failed conclusively. But the larger objective of keeping India “off-balance” and weakening it through persistent attacks had not disappeared, rooted as it was in a dangerous medley of deep geopolitical dissatisfactions, the ambitions of a self-serving military that rules even when it does not govern, and the possession of nuclear weapons.

By 1993, when it became clear that the strategy of sustaining domestic insurgencies against India was simply not paying off in the manner expected, Islamabad responded with an alternative strategy. Using the instruments engendered by the *jihad* in Afghanistan, the ISI focused on injecting combat-hardened aliens into India in order to sustain a large-scale campaign of murder and mayhem intended to bring New Delhi to its knees.

Consistent with this strategy, the earliest LeT presence in India was detected in 1993, when a cohort of the group’s Punjabi cadres crossed the Line of Control into Jammu and Kashmir.⁴ The group’s presence, however, was not publicly recognized until early 1996—a full six years after the local Kashmiri resistance burst forth—when a group of LeT terrorists massacred sixteen Hindus at Barshalla in Kashmir’s Doda district. Since then, hundreds of terrorist attacks involving LeT militants have occurred throughout India. LeT has been implicated in terrorist attacks in New Delhi in October 2005;

in Bangalore in December 2005; in Varanasi in March 2006; in Nagpur in June 2006; and in the July 2007 train bombings in Bombay. It took, however, the devastating attacks of November 2008 in Bombay—a bloodbath that claimed the lives of close to 200 people, including 26 foreigners of 15 nationalities—for the international community to recognize that LeT’s ambitions, transcending India, were actually part of a larger war with the West and with liberal democracies more generally.

Today, LeT’s close ties with al-Qaeda in Pakistan, its support for the Afghan Taliban’s military operations (despite the ideological divide between the two groups’ interpretations of Islam), and its close collaboration with Jamiat al-Dawa al-Quran wal-Sunna, a Salafist group based in the Kunar province of Afghanistan, in operations against American troops in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley, remain only the latest in a long line of hostile activities—most of which have remained *sub rosa*—affecting U.S. citizens, soldiers or interests.⁵

As LeT grew over the years, in part by siphoning resources from its charities run under the rubric of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the group’s autonomy from the ISI has gradually increased. LeT’s ability to raise funds independently from mosques in Pakistan and business and charities in the Middle East and Europe has allowed it greater freedom of action than existed during the 1990s. Today, LeT relies on the ISI primarily for safe haven and political protection for its leadership, intelligence on selected targets and threats, campaign guidance when necessary, and infiltration assistance, particularly with long distance operations involving transits through third countries. Most LeT operations against India today do not require the other forms of assistance witnessed during the organization’s early years. They also do not require formal sanction or exchanges of information from the ISI; operating within the bounds of the extant strategy of striking India by any means, LeT operations are undertaken with minimal reference to its state guardians, with sufficient care taken to ensure that these attacks cannot be readily attributable to the ISI, the Pakistani Army, or formally to the Pakistani state.⁶ Because the requirement of plausible deniability lies at the heart of

ISI's relationship with LeT operations against India, the Pakistani intelligence services has always preferred directional, rather than detailed, control.

Pakistan's desire to control Afghanistan—an objective that dominated Islamabad's strategic policies during the 1980s and 1990s—and its commitment to religious renewal through participation in armed struggle has made the LeT one of the key beneficiaries of ISI support. For over two decades, and currently, the ISI has maintained strong institutional, albeit subterranean, links with LeT and has supported its operations through generous financing and combat training. At many points in the past, this support has included the provision of sophisticated weapons and explosives, specialized communications gear, and various kinds of operational assistance—aid which helped expand the lethality of the group as it conducted its missions in Afghanistan and against India.⁷ Since the inauguration of the global war on terror, ISI assistance to LeT has become even more hidden, but it has by no means ended—even though the organization was formally banned by then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on January 12, 2002.

GLOBAL REACH

That LeT pursues goals that go beyond India, even if it has focused on the latter disproportionately, is now acknowledged even by those who were initially skeptical of the group's larger ambitions. While India has occupied the lion's share of LeT attention in recent years, the organization has not by any means restricted itself to keeping only India in its sights. Like many other radical Islamist groups, the LeT leadership has on numerous occasions singled out the Jewish community and the United States as being among the natural enemies of Islam. Saeed warned, for example, that although his outfit was consumed at the moment by the conflict with India, "let's see when the time comes. Our struggle with the Jews is always there."⁸ This enmity with the Jewish people is supposedly eternal and ordained by God himself. When Saeed was asked in the aftermath of the tragic 2005 earthquake in Pakistan whether then-President Musharraf's solicitation of aid from Israel was appropriate, he had

no hesitation in declaring forthrightly that Pakistan “should not solicit help from Israel. It is the question of Muslim honor and self-respect. The Jews can never be our friends. This is stated by Allah.”⁹ This twisted worldview found grotesque expression during the November 2008 LeT atrocities in Bombay when the group deliberately targeted the Jewish Chabad center at Nariman House. Justifying this attack as reprisal for Israeli security cooperation with India, the Jewish hostages at Nariman House were not simply murdered but humiliated and brutally tortured before finally being killed during the three-day siege.¹⁰

Since Israel and India are viewed as part of the detestable “Zionist-Hindu-Crusader” axis that includes the United States, it is not surprising that LeT has long engaged in a variety of subversive activities aimed at attacking American interests. Although the ideological denunciation of the United States as an immoral, decadent, and implacable enemy of Islam was part of the group’s worldview from its founding, its war against the United States took a decidedly deadly turn after the Clinton administration launched missile attacks against several al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan in August 1998. Although these attacks did not kill Osama bin Laden, their intended target, they did kill many LeT operatives and trainers who had been bivouacked in these facilities. Shortly thereafter, the LeT formally declared a *jihad* against the United States, and began a variety of operations globally aimed at targeting U.S. interests. Asserting unequivocally that LeT intends to “plant the flag of Islam in Washington, Tel Aviv, and New Delhi,”¹¹ the group intensified its collaboration with al-Qaeda, supporting bin Laden’s efforts as a junior partner wherever necessary, while operating independently wherever possible. In South Asia today, and especially in Pakistan’s tribal belt, along its northwestern frontier, and in Afghanistan, LeT cooperates with al-Qaeda and other militant groups, such as the Taliban, in the areas of recruiting, training, tactical planning, financing, and operations.¹² Senior al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaydah, for example, was captured in a LeT safe house in Faisalabad, Pakistan, indicating the close ties existing between both terrorist organizations.¹³

LeT's universal ambitions do not permit the group to confine itself only to South Asia. After declaring that it would provide free training to any Muslim desirous of joining the global *jihad*—a promise upon which the LeT has since delivered—the group's operatives have been identified as engaging in:

- liason and networking with numerous terrorist groups abroad, particularly in Central and Southeast Easia and the Middle East;
- the facilitation of terrorist acts, including in, but not restricted to, Chechnya and Iraq;
- fundraising in the Middle East, Europe, Austrlia, and the United States;
- the procurement of weapons, explosives, and communications equipment for terrorist operations from both the international arms markets and Pakistani state organizations such as the ISI;
- the recruitment of volunteers for suicidal missions in South Asia as well as the Middle East;
- the creation of sleeper cells for executing or supporting future terrorist acts in Europe, Australia, and likely the United States; and
- actual armed combat at least in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.¹⁴

Indian intelligence currently estimates that LeT maintains some kind of terrorist presence in twenty-one countries worldwide with the intention of either supporting or participating in what Saeed has called the perpetual "*jihad* against the infidels."¹⁵ Viewed in this perspective, LeT's murder of the six American citizens during the November 2008 attacks in Bombay is actually part of a larger war with the West and with liberal democracies more generally.

LeT is a terrorist organization of genuinely global reach. Although the nature of its presence and activities vary considerably by location, LeT has demonstrated the ability to grow roots and sustain operations in countries far removed from South Asia, which remains its primary theater of activity. As significantly, it exhibits all the ideological animus, financial and material capabilities, motivation

and ruthlessness required to attack those it believes are its enemies because of their adherence to different faiths or their residence in secular, liberal democratic states. Furthermore, like al-Qaeda, LeT has demonstrated a remarkable ability to forge coalitions with like-minded terrorist groups. These alliances are most clearly on display within Southern Asia. In India, for example, LeT has developed ties with Islamic extremists across the country including in states distant from Pakistan such as Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu; in Pakistan, LeT cooperates actively with the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and coordinates operations with al-Qaeda and the Haqqani network against Afghanistan; in Central Asia, LeT has cooperated with both the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and local Islamist rebels in the Caucasus; and, in Europe, LeT was actively involved in supporting the Muslim resistance in Bosnia while raising funds and building sleeper cells in countries such as Spain and Germany.¹⁶

When viewed from the perspective of the United States, it is safe to say that LeT has long undermined U.S. interests in the global war on terror. It threatens U.S. soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan and has now killed U.S. citizens in Bombay. Thus far, however, it has not mounted any direct attacks on the American homeland, but that is not for want of motivation. Rather, U.S. targets and allies in Southern Asia present more immediate and vulnerable—and therefore more inviting—targets. The effectiveness of U.S. law enforcement after September 11, 2001, and the deterrent power of U.S. military capabilities have had much to do with reinforcing this calculus. Consequently, LeT operations in the United States thus far have focused mainly on recruitment, fundraising and procurement rather than on lethal operations. Yet, with the deliberate killing of American citizens in Bombay, a new line may have been crossed in terms of LeT activities.

RECENT ACTIVITY

Unlike many of the other indigenous terrorist groups in South Asia whose command and control structures are casual and often disorganized, LeT's organizational structure is hierarchic and precise, reflecting its purposefulness. Modeled on a military system, LeT

is led by a core leadership centered on its amir, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, and his deputies, who oversee different aspects of the group's functional and charitable operations. These activities are implemented through various branch offices throughout Pakistan, which are responsible for recruitment and fundraising as well as for the delivery of social services such as education, healthcare, emergency services, and religious instruction. LeT's military arm is led by a "supreme commander" and a "deputy supreme commander" who report to Saeed directly. Under them are several "divisional commanders" and their deputies. Within the South Asian region, the divisional commanders oversee specific geographic "theaters" of operation, which are then subdivided in certain defined districts. These are controlled by "district commanders," each of whom is ultimately responsible for various battalions and their subordinate formations.¹⁷

The entire command edifice thus reflects a crude model of "detailed control," with orders being executed at the lowest level after they are approved by a chain of command that reaches to the top echelons of the group. This hierarchic command and control structure, although susceptible to decapitation in principle, nonetheless became institutionalized because LeT owed its origins primarily to the charismatic leadership of three individuals—of which Hafiz Saeed quickly became the *primus inter pares*. A hierarchic structure was also particularly appropriate, given the covert activities carried out by its military wing both autonomously and for the ISI—with the latter in particular insisting on a combination of high effectiveness, unremitting brutality, durable control, and plausible deniability as the price for its continued support. Because LeT was from the very beginning a preferred ward of the ISI, enjoying all the protection offered by the Pakistani state, the vulnerability that traditionally afflicts all hierarchic terrorist groups was believed to be minimal in this case.

This judgment, turned out to be accurate; even when Pakistan, under considerable U.S. pressure, formally banned LeT as a terrorist organization in 2002, the LeT leadership remained impregnable and impervious to all international political pressure. Not only did

it continue to receive succor from the ISI, but its continued close links with the Pakistani state raised the understandable question of whether the 2008 terrorist strikes in Bombay were in fact authorized either tacitly or explicitly by the Pakistani secret services, as other attacks on India have been in the past. The interrogation of David Headley, the American citizen connected with the November 2008 terrorist attacks conducted by Lashkar-e-Taiba in Bombay, has now established that there were concrete ISI connections with the Bombay attacks.¹⁸ In addition, Pakistan's management of the LeT detainees connected with those attacks and the halting progress of their trial demonstrates that the ISI has no intention of eviscerating LeT (or any other anti-Indian *jihadi* groups) because of their perceived utility to Pakistan's national strategy vis-à-vis India. Whether the strategy ultimately succeeds or fails in destroying the Indian polity has become quite irrelevant; rather, attacking India appears to be an end in and of itself.

The threat posed by LeT to India today is not a danger posed by “a stateless sponsor of terrorism,” as it was unfortunately described by President George W. Bush on December 21, 2001.¹⁹ Rather, LeT represents a specific state-supported and state-protected instrument of terrorism that operates from the territory of a particular country—Pakistan—and exemplifies the subterranean war that Islamabad, or more specifically Rawalpindi—where the headquarters of the Pakistan Army is located—has been waging against India since at least the early 1980s. This war no longer relies on “fomenting insurgencies”²⁰—that is, exploiting the grievances of a dissatisfied section of the Indian populace against its state. Instead, it is a war that is centered on “fomenting terrorism” by unleashing large scale, indiscriminate attacks by groups with little or no connection to any existing internal grievances within India. In other words, LeT is one of the faces of the Pakistani Army's ongoing war with India. Yet, because of what LeT is—a terrorist organization that also counts Israel and the United States as its enemies solely for ideological reasons—it also represents the war that extremist forces in Pakistan, including some in its own government, are waging against many liberal states in the international community.

The 2008 attacks in Bombay reflect the LeT's classic *modus operandi*: since 1999, the group has utilized small but heavily armed and highly motivated two- to four-man squads operating independently or in combination with each other on suicidal—but not suicide—missions intended to inflict the largest numbers of casualties during attacks on politically significant or strategically symbolic sites. These missions invariably are complex and entail detailed tactical planning; historically, they have taken the form of surprise raids aimed at heavily guarded facilities such as Indian military installations, command headquarters, political institutions, or iconic buildings—all intended to inflict the highest level of pain, underscore the vulnerability of the Indian state, and embarrass the Indian government. (In Afghanistan, by contrast, LeT operations have focused principally on targeting Coalition forces, disrupting reconstruction efforts, and supporting other terrorist groups in their efforts to undermine the Karzai regime.) In any event, the LeT personnel involved in the majority of these attacks seek to escape the scene whenever possible—in fact, they come carefully prepared to endure yet exfiltrate—but appear quite willing to sacrifice themselves if necessary, if in the process they can take down a larger number of bystanders, hostages, and security forces.

The targets attacked in Bombay are consistent with this pattern. They included the symbols of Indian success (luxury hotels), reflections of Indian history and state presence (a historic railway station) and emblems of India's international relationships (a restaurant frequented by tourists and a Jewish community center). The targeted killing of the Jewish residents at Nariman House, and possibly the murder of the Western tourists at the Leopold Café (if indeed they were deliberately targeted), would also be consistent with LeT's past record, which has included the focused slaughter of non-Muslims such as Hindus and Sikhs. Although the use of small arms—to include pistols, automatic rifles, grenades, plastic explosives, and occasionally mortars—has been the norm in most past LeT attacks, the group has also undertaken true suicide missions, including car bombings. Operations in Afghanistan, where recruitment for suicide bombings appears to be a specialty, have seen the use of larger crew-served weapons, mines, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades,

and even primitive air defense systems.

ENDNOTES

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