

LASHKAR-E-TAIBA: LOCAL ORGANISATION, GLOBAL AMBITIONS

The Pakistani jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba has been labelled as potentially the next al-Qaida. It has shown both the desire and the capacity to attack Western nationals. The group has gained a certain degree of state protection in Pakistan by compartmentalising its activities into violent and non-violent components, and selectively cooperating with security agencies. Due to its global ambitions, growing operational presence, and internal dynamics, it now poses a serious threat to international security.



Reuters / Jayanta Shaw

The burning Taj Hotel in Mumbai: This attack placed LeT in the focus of public attention. 27 November 2008.

With the threat of major attacks by al-Qaida increasingly remote, attention has turned to jihadist groups of similar ideological persuasion. Among the most prominent of these is a Pakistani organisation named Lashkar-e-Taiba (“Army of the Pure”). US security officials believe that this group poses the single-biggest threat to Western interests in South Asia. Its ties with the Pakistani state make it difficult to combat, and the growing sophistication and reach of its overseas operations has become a matter of serious policy concern.

LeT was well-known to the international counterterrorism community throughout the 2000s, but only attained public noto-

riety in 2008. That year, its cadres carried out a sea-borne suicide raid on the Indian city of Mumbai, killing 25 foreign tourists and 141 locals. After the attacks, it became evident that the targeting of Western nationals had been prioritised. This came as a surprise to counterterrorism experts, who had hitherto assumed that the group’s regional focus was limited to South Asia.

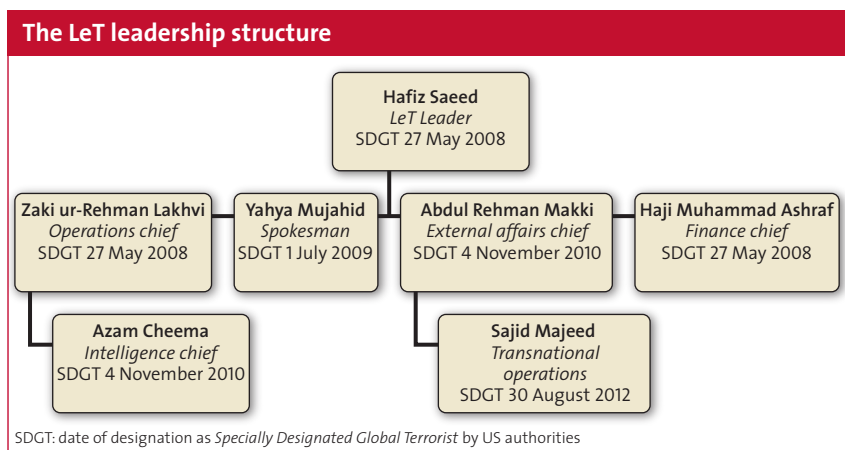
LeT has always had global ambitions, but managed to conceal these behind a regionalist narrative. Over 20 years, it has evolved into a triple-faceted militia that is a charitable organisation domestically, a guerrilla force regionally, and a terrorist network internationally. This analysis will

trace LeT’s organisational evolution from its genesis and the development of institutional contacts with Pakistani state agencies, before examining how growing proximity to al-Qaida and internal pressures have led the group to develop an extra-regional concept for jihadist operations. The brief will conclude by offering an assessment of the threat posed to the West and suggestions for combating it.

Origins of LeT

LeT was created on 22 February 1990 as the armed wing of a proselytising organisation based in Pakistan’s Punjab province. Known as the Markaz Da’wa wal-Irshad (MDI – Centre for Preaching and Guidance), this organisation subscribed to the Ahl-i Hadith school of Muslim jurisprudence. The Ahl-i Hadith had commonalities with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia and with other strains of puritanical or “Salafist” Islamist thought.

One of MDI’s most prominent founders was Abdullah Azzam, a radical Palestinian cleric based in Pakistan. He formulated the idea of a borderless jihad that would unify present and past Muslim territories into a global Caliphate. His protégé, Osama bin Laden, hijacked this concept to legitimise the formation of a pan-Arab jihadist group named al-Qaida. Bin Laden aspired to lead a mercenary army that would fight for Muslim interests worldwide. Azzam responded by backing the creation of LeT as a rival group with an identical ideology and mission, consisting mostly of Pakistani cadres.



Despite the factional rivalry out of which it had been born, LeT proved amenable to outreach by al-Qaida. The instrumental link was a marriage alliance between the family of LeT operations chief Zaki ur-Rehman Lakhvi and a senior bin Laden aide. Lakhvi was a guerrilla leader and not a religious scholar, so he symbolically placed LeT under the overall leadership of Hafeez Saeed, a Pakistani Ahl-i Hadith cleric associated with both Azzam and bin Laden.

From its inception, LeT had a close ideological kinship with al-Qaida. The Arab group donated US\$2 million for the construction of LeT’s headquarters and main training complex, situated near the Pakistani city of Lahore. Both groups set out to build a name for themselves in the international jihadist community by providing quality instruction in military tactics to a new generation of jihadists, who were expected to fight in “wars of liberation” across the world. They developed similar syllabi and even had common trainers.

However, their respective ethnic compositions caused their operational priorities to differ. Al-Qaida was focused on promoting regime change in the Middle East, since it saw control of the Arab world as key to establishing a Caliphate. LeT, in keeping with its Pakistani roots, was primarily focused on leading a Muslim reconquest of India – a country that, its leaders asserted, had historically been part of the Muslim realm before Western colonisation. Each group trained its cadres for subversive activities in its primary target area.

This difference in priorities was rhetorically papered over by a common antipathy to Israel. Both al-Qaida and LeT agreed that the State of Israel represented an abomination on Muslim peoples imposed by the West, and that it had to be annihilated.

Since neither had extensive operational contacts with Palestinian groups, though, their common worldview did not lead to a common strategy. Al-Qaida remained a de-territorialised network of Arab exiles, while LeT developed into a bureaucratised militia with official patronage.

Connections with Pakistani military

The main reason for LeT’s growth after 1990 was the protection and assistance it received from the Pakistani army and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), respectively. LeT understood that the Pakistani military establishment was keen to wage a proxy war in Indian Kashmir. Its leaders decided to strategically purchase Pakistani indulgence for their ‘reconquest’ of India by tactically cooperating with the ISI in Kashmir. They calculated that the “liberation” of Kashmir would in any case provide a springboard for further jihadist offensives into India by encouraging rebellion among the country’s large Muslim minority.

Operating in the ethnically and linguistically distinct Kashmir region was not easy, however. LeT was an overwhelmingly foreign organisation whose cadres needed local guidance in order to carry out guerrilla attacks. Although ISI intermediaries arranged some degree of local assistance, Indian security forces countered this by highlighting LeT’s doctrinaire nature, limiting the degree to which the group could gain an ideological foothold. By 1998, heavy losses due to Indian intelligence penetration had thinned the LeT ranks.

The jihadist group adapted by importing a tactic from the Middle East: the suicidal or ‘fedayeen’ raid. Instead of launching hit-and-run assaults, LeT gunmen would storm security outposts and kill as many soldiers or policemen as they could, before

themselves being gunned down. This tactic negated the need for an escape route. It was less demanding logistically and less vulnerable to intelligence-led disruption. From 2002 onward, LeT also attacked unprotected civilian targets with the aim of generating a higher death toll.

Throughout this period, the ISI retained control over LeT operations at the strategic level, but its personnel in the field were susceptible to “reverse indoctrination”. Many intelligence officers assigned to supervise LeT ended up assisting provocative terrorist attacks that severely vitiated Indo-Pakistani relations. Former members of the Pakistan army’s Special Services Group (SSG) provided training and advice for carrying out mass-casualty assaults in urban areas. Their professional input is believed to have crucially enabled LeT in carrying out its largest operation to date: the Mumbai terrorist attack of 2008.

The Mumbai attack was a paradigm-changing event. According to disclosures from arrested LeT cadres, it was assisted by mid-ranking ISI officers, who provided funds, contacts, and weaponry for the raid. Following the assault, the then-ISI chief even admitted to US officials that “rogue operatives” from the agency might have been involved. His admission, together with other indications suggesting partial complicity from state actors, raised questions as to whether close ties with the Pakistani establishment had restrained LeT or emboldened it.

Hitherto, conventional wisdom among counterterrorist analysts held that ISI control over LeT kept the group’s focus limited to low-impact actions. The scale of the Mumbai attack, coupled with the systematic targeting of Western tourists, threw these assumptions into doubt. Instead of submitting to Pakistani calibration, the jihadist group had leveraged its contacts with the country’s military and intelligence community to launch more sophisticated international operations, using techniques pioneered by al-Qaida in the early 1990s.

Learning from al-Qaida

Like al-Qaida, LeT had a dual identity: it was both a training platform for freelance jihadists from across the world – a kind of “terrorist university” – and a direct sponsor of terrorist attacks. It synergised this duality to boost its striking power. Talent-spotters in the Pakistani diaspora

encouraged Western-born jihadists to join the group. These recruits were trained in Pakistan as sleeper agents and assigned handlers from LeT's External Affairs Department. Upon return to their home countries, they assisted in the procurement of commercially-available military equipment and reconnoitred potential targets. The scale of their activities only became evident in 2009, when investigators discovered a list of 320 targets worldwide that LeT planners had identified for possible attack.

A major reason for the push towards international targets was the growing proximity between LeT and al-Qaida's fugitive leadership after 2001. Documents recovered by US Navy SEALs from Abbottabad in 2011 suggest that LeT chief Hafeez Saeed maintained a running correspondence with Osama bin Laden. A number of al-Qaida leaders were hosted in LeT safe houses across Pakistan, following the US invasion of Afghanistan. The Pakistani group came to be seen in the international jihadist community as a "safe" gateway to joining al-Qaida, since it enjoyed state protection, but also had close ties with its Arab counterpart.

Unlike al-Qaida, LeT avoided claiming responsibility for acts of terrorism carried out by freelance graduates of its training camps, as well as its own operational cadres. The latter operated under the banner of phantom organisations with no apparent Pakistani connections. Such subterfuge was necessary because LeT was far more vulnerable to counterterrorist action than al-Qaida: it had over 6000 offices in Pakistan, and the whereabouts of its leaders were well known to Western intelligence agencies. To forestall any punitive action, LeT portrayed itself as an India-centric guerrilla group primarily active in Kashmir. Meanwhile, it unobtrusively acted on its long-standing global ambitions through shadowy transnational networks run in the compartmentalised style of an intelligence agency.

Following a fedayeen assault on the Indian Parliament, intense international criticism forced the Pakistani government to announce a ban on LeT in 2002. According to both US and Indian analysts, restrictions imposed on the group were cosmetic and easily circumvented by a contrived administrative split. LeT ostensibly separated from its parent body, the Markaz Da'wa wal-Irshad, which was renamed Jama'at

ud-Da'wa. In practice, both the military and political wings of LeT continued to function in unison, operating from the same facilities.

As the US-led war against al-Qaida gained momentum, LeT noted that jihadist military capabilities could not be sustained for long without public support. Its leaders accordingly resolved to prioritise ideological subversion alongside military training. The group's political wing had already built a large network of schools across Pakistan, creating a middle-class support base. After 2001, Jama'at ud-Da'wa showcased these schools as examples of LeT's positive societal contribution, together with the provision of welfare services. The jihadist group's violent actions were not publicly acknowledged.

Externalising internal tensions

During the 2000s, three factors led LeT to shift from merely fantasising about global jihad to actually launch attacks in support of that vision. First, with the Kashmir theatre proving less hospitable than expected, LeT developed a manpower surplus. Its training camps produced far more combat graduates than could be productively employed. This led the group to search for alternative targets. Its leadership was concerned about demoralisation and indiscipline borne out of inactivity, and so encouraged planning for major international attacks. Until 2007, however, such attacks were only meant to be executed by trained freelancers, and not directly by LeT's own operational cadre. That changed after a political crisis in Pakistan enhanced LeT's importance to the ISI.

In July 2007, the Pakistani army assaulted a jihadist bastion. Six months later, a group of 27 organisations formed the Pakistani Taliban, intent on punishing the army for its "betrayal". The ISI, desperate for intelligence on these groups, coopted LeT as a "loyal" jihadist force. In exchange for hefty bribes and freedom to expand its overground infrastructure, LeT assisted the security establishment's efforts to defuse jihadist militancy in Pakistan by funnelling it overseas instead. Its leaders used the same logic that bin Laden had previously employed to hold al-Qaida together, arguing that attacks on fellow Muslims were inexcusable, and that jihad should only be directed against "unbelievers". Their rhetoric was the second factor creating internal pressure for carrying out attacks overseas.

Chronology

2012	US government announces a US\$10 million bounty for evidence that would compel Pakistan to convict LeT chief Hafeez Saeed
2011	Bin Laden killed, LeT organises rallies in support of al-Qaida across Pakistan
2010	Several leaders of LeT designated as global terrorists by US
2009	LeT plan to attack media offices in Denmark disrupted by US intelligence
2008	LeT carries out Mumbai attacks under a pseudonym, its culpability is quickly established, UN designates Jama'at ud-Da'wa as a terrorist front organisation for LeT
2006	LeT carries out train bombings in Mumbai, partly funds "liquid bomb" airline plot in UK
2005	London bombings by jihadists associated with LeT, UN designates LeT a terrorist organisation
2002	LeT banned by Pakistani government, but escapes police action through administrative change.
2001	11 September attacks, al-Qaida fugitives hosted in Pakistan by LeT, LeT designated terrorist organisation by US and UK
1999	LeT begins suicidal attacks on security outposts in India
1998	al-Qaida and LeT ally in "International Islamist Front" against the West and Israel
1996	Bin Laden sets up permanent base in Afghanistan, begins training for major attacks
1993	LeT inducts guerrilla fighters into Indian Kashmir
1992	LeT begins recruiting for Islamic reconquest of India, al-Qaida designates US as primary enemy
1990	LeT formed as military wing of Azzam's MDI
1989	Soviet Union completes withdrawal from Afghanistan
1988	al-Qaida formed by Bin Laden
1987	Azzam-bin Laden split, Markaz Da'wa wal-Irshad (MDI) co-founded by Azzam
1984	Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden begin collaboration in fighting Soviets
1979	Soviet Union invades Afghanistan

A third factor was the effect of generational change upon LeT operational planning. By 2007, many of the group's middle managers came from a generation born in the 1970s, a period when Pakistani political culture became markedly "Arabised". Under the combined influence of petro-dollars, sermons from the Saudi Wahhabi clergy, and mass migration to the Persian Gulf, many middle-class Pakistanis developed an awareness of Middle Eastern geopolitics. This led them to regard the West as an enemy for having supposedly taken a partisan stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict. LeT's transnational network was run

by ambitious cadres from this age cohort and economic class. They wanted to join al-Qaida's global jihad.

A typical example was Sajid Majeed (better known as "Sajid Mir"), a former army officer and ISI operative who was the main organiser of the 2008 Mumbai attack. For some years previously, he had been tracked by Western intelligence agencies as a handler of LeT sleeper agents. As an "Arabised" jihadist, he viewed mass-casualty attacks on "unbelievers" as integral to the global Caliphate vision that underlay both LeT's and al-Qaida's founding rationales. Majeed conceived of a suicidal amphibious assault that would simultaneously strike Western and Israeli tourists and Indian citizens in Mumbai. His motive was partly personal: to prove himself as an innovative operational leader and upstage a rival in LeT who was in charge of non-suicidal operations. Following the Mumbai attack, he planned a similar assault in Copenhagen, which was prevented when US authorities arrested one of his agents in 2009.

Threat and response

Internal pressure has been critical in shaping LeT's attack strategy. Persistent tensions between top leaders such as Zaki ur-Rehman Lakhvi and Hafeez Saeed have caused foreign operations to become a mechanism for conflict management. Lakhvi is said to be furious that Saeed controls LeT finances with the ISI's backing, and has even sent a death threat to his ostensible superior. The ISI, fearful of a fratricidal war within LeT, has strived to contain these tensions by encouraging the group to expand its overseas operations. Part of the reason is also strategic: The Pakistani security establishment wants to ensure that future terrorist attacks by the group against Western nationals cannot be traced directly back to Pakistani territory. LeT is thus setting up new operating bases in the Persian Gulf region and attempting to establish a foothold in the Maldives and Myanmar, due to political turmoil in these countries and a consequent drop in official vigilance against jihadist infiltration.

The US considers LeT a grave security threat, since it is perhaps the only jihadist group with the capacity to mount a major transnational terrorist attack. According to senior Indian security sources, LeT has an operational presence in at least 21 countries. It is also thought to have fraternal ties with radical Islamists in over 100 others. Its sleeper networks have been

disrupted in the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Australia and the US. In certain cases, these networks were detected shortly before they were about to carry out major terrorist strikes. One example was the 2006 "liquid bomb" plot to blow up trans-Atlantic airliners flying from the UK. British investigators suspect that the plot was partly funded by LeT with money donated for humanitarian purposes following the 2005 Pakistan earthquake.

Given the jihadist group's ties with Pakistani state agencies, US analysts believe that there are few policy options for proactively combating it other than to quarantine Pakistan itself. Travellers from the country are already subject to intense screening by Western authorities. An additional counter-measure might be to exert sustained pressure upon Pakistani security officials to cooperate in the incarceration of those LeT leaders who control transnational operations. Such a step would leave LeT's political wing relatively

safe, thus providing a face-saving device for Pakistan, while severely degrading the group's military capability. So far, Pakistan has shown little interest in cooperating in counterterrorism efforts against LeT due to the group's usefulness as an instrument for containing domestic militancy. Islamabad's inability to restrain LeT's global ambitions, however, means that Western governments need to pool intelligence and coordinate operations against the jihadist group, or else risk attacks on their own citizens if violence continues to be externalized away from Pakistani territory.

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www.css.ethz.ch/cssanalysen

ISSN: 2296-0244

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