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Expert Talk



Lashkar-E-Tayyiba Still Targeting West a Year After Mumbai Attacks

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Lashkar-e-Tayyiba's siege on Mumbai in November 2008 signaled a broadening of its target set of Indian nationals to also include Westerners and Jewish centres. Recent developments indicate that the targeting shift was not an anomaly. In October, Pakistan-American David Coleman Headley (formerly known as Daood Gilani) and Pakistani-Canadian Tahawwur Rana, both suspected planners of the 2008 Mumbai attack, were arrested in Chicago for involvement in a subsequent LT terrorist plot in Denmark and India, where attacks were planned on elite boarding schools, Western landmarks and Jewish centres. In Denmark, the Jyllands-Posten newspaper that published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006 was the target. At the same time, LT had also been planning to attack the American and Israeli embassies in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In fact, Abdur Rahman Saeed, a Pakistan-based LT leader, had already transferred the approximately US \$86,000 to a Bangladesh-based LT operative, "Faizullah," to carry out the attacks.

More than a year since its outrageous attack on Mumbai and the subsequent banning of its non-profit front, Jamaat ud-Dawa (JD), an obvious question seems to be: How has the group not only survived but flourished to the extent that it is actively plotting attacks on at least three continents?

Geostrategic Calculus: Pakistan's Proxy

In Pakistan, India drives perceptions of national security and the conflict over Kashmir is one of the key manifestations of the rivalry. Since its founding in the late 1980s, LT has been a valuable and effective proxy force for Pakistan's military in Pakistan's conflict with India for contested Kashmir. Having forged strong bonds with LT over the years, influential elements of the Pakistani military, arguably the most powerful institution in the country, are able to protect the group from international pressure. Unfortunately the Pakistani military is the only institution capable of eliminating LT – and heretofore it does not indicate a willingness to do so. Seen through the prism of Indian-Pakistan relations, it is understandable that the Pakistani military would hesitate to diminish the strength of its strategic asset; especially when the cost of inaction is so low.

In addition, LT's strategic objectives regarding Kashmir and arch-enemy India are consonant with the perceptions of the Pakistani populace in general. Any attempt to defang the group could be interpreted by the public as succumbing to foreign pressure and acting against Pakistan's national interest. Unlike al-Qa'ida and the Pakistani Taliban, which carry out attacks almost daily, LT limits its attacks to India and the West. LT enjoys popular support due to its strategic objectives, but also due to its substantial community organizing and humanitarian work.

Charity the Key to LT's Resilience

The group has enmeshed itself into the fabric of many Pakistani communities through its humanitarian face, Jamaat ud-Dawa, a UNSC-designated terrorist entity for its involvement in the Mumbai attack. Despite the designation in December 2008, there has been no meaningful act by the Pakistani government to show that it is serious about dismantling LT's humanitarian front organization.

With around 2,200 offices, schools and centers across Pakistan, JuD is a large enterprise. The Punjab province itself has around 26 educational institutions administered by JuD, most of which were reportedly involved in promoting extremism. JuD also runs an Urdu monthly journal, Al Dawa, which has a circulation of 80,000 copies. In addition, the group produces an Urdu weekly, Gazwa, a children's monthly, Nanhe Mujahid, and an English monthly, Voice of Islam. These publications generally feature articles about the purported global conspiracy against Muslims, Jihad against India and the West, in addition to coverage of the Taliban's war reporting from the Afghan theatre. LT/JuD strategy seems to be to bring the masses to a distinctively Jihadist worldview through good deeds, sophisticated PR, and terrorist attacks.

LT certainly won positive public opinion for its relief work following the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and for providing food and aid to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) after the Pakistan Army offensive against the Taliban this year. In May 2009, the provincial head of LT's newly named charity wing, Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), Mr Atiqur Rahman Chohan, reportedly said that the organization provided food to about 275,000 IDPs. This engagement in charity work has gone a long way in building trust among the average Pakistani and makes it easier for LT to promote its extremist ideology.



The city of Muzafarabad, Pakistan lays in ruins after the 2005 Kashmir earthquake that hit the region

This helped the LT in two obvious ways. The 2005 earthquake for instance left the JuD in charge of thousands of orphans who eventually were sent to its madrassas across the country. The earthquake also put JuD in charge of huge amounts of money from donations including by the United Nations relating to reconstruction and rehabilitation. Thus, any humanitarian crisis was taken as a great opportunity by the LT as it acted faster and more visibly than the government in alleviating people's distress. What was more subtle was the successful recruitment and fund-raising strategies followed by this group during these turbulent times.

In light of the group's community activities, any attack on LT's humanitarian fronts would likely be interpreted in Pakistan as an attack on humanitarian support for Pakistanis and IDPs. This poses a stumbling block for the Pakistani and other governments as these fronts appear entrenched in the minds of the Pakistanis and any attempt to act against them may be politically calamitous for the Pakistani government. LT has used crises as stepping stones in a largely successful attempt to

portray itself as a constellation of humanitarian organizations led by pious Muslims that has taken up arms against the infidel enemy India, rather than as a terrorist entity responsible for the cowardly murder of men, women and children.

Playing the Name Game

Another important reason why Lashkar continues to flourish is the inability of the sanctions imposed by the international community to have any real impact on the ground. The sanctions regime fails to keep timely track of what can only be described as the subtle name game that the group has played over the years. The September 11th attacks in 2001 presented LT with its first challenge. With increasing pressure brought on Pakistan by the US to tackle terrorism, the then-president of Pakistan banned Lashkar in January 2002. Banning it in word, however, was a far cry from dismantling it in deed. Lashkar continued to operate albeit with the name Jama'at ud Dawa, which claimed to be involved in charity work only. The Mumbai attacks made the world take notice and the JUD was banned in Dec 2008 by the United Nations and subsequently by the Pakistan government. This did not discourage the militants and the name was further changed to the Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation which further claimed to be involved purely with charity. The organization's massive infrastructure including compounds, schools, mosques, and approximately 55,000 activists in Pakistan continue to operate freely.

Conclusion

At least two things are clear. First, LT continues to target Western interests and has significant transnational linkages. Second, there is a lack of will in Pakistan to shut down the organization. Any non-kinetic approach to the first problem requires a change of heart in the Pakistani establishment. Effecting change in LT's current threat posture requires making it clear to Pakistan that the cost of doing nothing about the group – its historic response -- is much higher than taking effective action against the group. Just as the key to LT's resilience has been its slow, methodical campaign to win hearts and minds over two decades of substantial community-cum-Jihadist ideological work, it will be critical for the Pakistani government to intervene and weaken the organization by prosecuting LT leaders for their role in the Mumbai attacks while at the same time providing viable substitutes for LT's community service. All things remaining equal, the likely alternative is that LT will continue to grow and expand its operations and targeting in the West. LT is fast becoming a cross between al-Qa'ida in its threat posture and ideological outlook, and the Red Cross/Crescent in its ability to mobilize and administer humanitarian support to win hearts and minds. A potent and unwelcome combination indeed.