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The Evolution of a Pakistani Militant Network

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9/15/2011

For many years now, STRATFOR has been carefully following the evolution of “Lashkar-e-Taiba” (LeT), the name of a Pakistan-based jihadist group that was formed in 1990 and existed until about 2001, when it was officially abolished. In subsequent years, however, several major attacks were attributed to LeT, including the November 2008 coordinated assault in Mumbai, India. Two years before that attack we wrote that the group, or at least its remnant networks, were nebulous but still dangerous. This nebulous nature was highlighted in November 2008 when the “Deccan Mujahideen,” a previously unknown group, claimed responsibility for the .Mumbai attacks

While the most famous leaders of the LeT networks, Hafiz Mohammad Saeed and Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, are under house arrest and in jail awaiting trial, respectively, LeT still poses a significant threat. It’s a threat that comes not so much from LeT as a single jihadist force but LeT as a concept, a banner under which various groups and individuals can gather, coordinate and .successfully conduct attacks

Such is the ongoing evolution of the jihadist movement. And as this movement becomes more diffuse, it is important to look at brand-name jihadist groups like LeT, al Qaeda, the Haqqani network and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan as loosely affiliated networks more than monolithic entities. With a debate under way between and within these groups over who to target and with major disruptions of their operations by various military and security forces, the need for these groups to work together in order to carry out sensational attacks has become clear. The result is a

new, ad hoc template for jihadist operations that is not easily defined and even harder for government leaders to explain to their constituents and reporters to explain to their readers

Thus, brand names like Lashkar-e-Taiba (which means Army of the Pure) will continue to be used in public discourse while the planning and execution of high-profile attacks grows ever more complex. While the threat posed by these networks to the West and to India may not be strategic, the possibility of disparate though well-trained militants working together and even with organized-crime elements does suggest a continuing tactical threat that is worth examining in more detail

The Network Formerly Known as Lashkar-e-Taiba

The history of the group of militants and preachers who created LeT and their connections with other groups helps us understand how militant groups develop and work together. Markaz al-Dawa wal-Irshad (MDI) and its militant wing, LeT, was founded with the help of transnational militants based in Afghanistan and aided by the Pakistani government. This allowed it to become a financially-independent social-service organization that was able to divert a significant portion of its funding to its militant wing

The first stirrings of militancy within this network began in 1982, when Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi traveled from Punjab, Pakistan, to Paktia, Afghanistan, to fight with Deobandi militant groups. Lakhvi, who is considered to have been the military commander of what was known as LeT and is awaiting trial for his alleged role in the 2008 Mumbai attacks, adheres to an extreme version of the Ahl-e-Hadith (AeH) interpretation of Islam, which is the South Asian version of the Salafist-Wahhabist trend in the Arab world. In the simplest of terms, AeH is more conservative and traditional than the doctrines of most militant groups operating along the Durand Line. Militants there tend to follow an extreme brand of the Deobandi branch of South Asian Sunni Islam, similar to the extreme ideology of al Qaeda's Salafist jihadists

Lakhvi created his own AeH-inspired militant group in 1984, and a year later two academics, Hafiz Mohammad Saeed and Zafar Iqbal, created Jamaat ul-Dawa, an Islamist AeH social organization. Before these groups were formed there was already a major AeH political organization called Jamaat AeH, led by the most well-known Pakistani AeH scholar, the late Allama Ehsan Elahi Zaheer, who was assassinated in Lahore in 1987. His death allowed Saeed and Lakhvi's movement to take off. It is important to note that AeH adherents comprise a very small percentage of Pakistanis and that those following the movement launched by Saeed and Lakhvi represent only a portion of those who ascribe to AeH's ideology

In 1986, Saeed and Lakhvi joined forces, creating Markaz al-Dawa wal-Irshad (MDI) in Muridke, near Lahore, Pakistan. MDI had 17 founders, including Saeed and Lakhvi as well as transnational militants originally from places like Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian territories. While building facilities in Muridke for social services, MDI also established its first militant training camp in Paktia, then another in Kunar, Afghanistan, in 1987. Throughout the next three

decades, these camps often were operated in cooperation with other militant groups, including al-Qaeda.

MDI was established to accomplish two related missions. The first involved peaceful, above-board activities like medical care, education, charitable work and proselytizing. Its second and equally important mission was military jihad, which the group considered obligatory for all Muslims. The group first fought in Afghanistan along with Jamaat al-Dawa al-Quran wal-Suna, a hardline Salafist group that shared MDI's ideology. Jamil al-Rahman, the group's leader at the time, provided support to MDI's first militant group and continued to work with MDI until his death in 1987.

The deaths of al-Rahman and Jamaat AeH leader Allama Ehsan Elahi Zaheer in 1987 gave the leaders of the nascent MDI the opportunity to supplant Jamaat al-Dawa al-Quran wal-Suna and Jamaat AeH and grow quickly.

In 1990, the growing MDI officially launched LeT as its militant wing under the command of Lakhvi, while Saeed remained emir of the overall organization. This was when LeT first began to work with other groups operating in Kashmir, since the Soviets had left Afghanistan and many of the foreign mujahideen there were winding down their operations. In 1992, when the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was finally defeated, many foreign militants who had fought in Afghanistan left to fight in other places like Kashmir. LeT is also known to have sent fighters to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Tajikistan, but Kashmir became the group's primary focus.

MDI/LeT explained its concentration on Kashmir by arguing that it was the closest Muslim territory that was occupied by non-believers. Since MDI/LeT was a Punjabi entity, Kashmir was also the most accessible theater of jihad for the group. Due to the group's origin and the history of the region, Saeed and other members also bore personal grudges against India. In the 1990s, MDI/LeT also received substantial support from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) and military, which had its own interest in supporting operations in Kashmir. At this point, MDI/LeT developed relations with other groups operating in Kashmir, such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Jihad e-Islami and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Unlike these groups, however, MDI/LeT was considered easier to control because its AeH sect of Islam was not very large and did not have the support of the main AeH groups. With Pakistan's support came certain restraints, and many LeT trainees said that as part of their indoctrination into the group they were made to promise never to attack Pakistan.

LeT expanded its targeting beyond Kashmir to the rest of India in 1992, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque during communal rioting in Uttar Pradesh state, and similar unrest in Mumbai and Gujarat. LeT sent Azam Cheema, who Saeed and Iqbal knew from their university days, to recruit fighters in India. Indian militants from a group called Tanzim Islahul Muslimeen were recruited into LeT, which staged its first major attack with five coordinated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on trains in Mumbai and Hyderabad on Dec. 5-6, 1993, the first anniversary of the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque. These are the first attacks in non-Kashmir India that can be linked to LeT. The group used Tanzim Islahul Muslimeen networks in the 1990s and later developed contacts with the Student Islamic Movement of India and its offshoot militant group the Indian Mujahideen.

The Student Islamic Movement of India/Indian Mujahideen network was useful in recruiting and co-opting operatives, but it is a misconception to think these indigenous Indian groups worked directly for LeT. In some cases, Pakistanis from LeT provided IED training and other expertise to Indian militants who carried out attacks, but these groups, while linked to the LeT network, maintained their autonomy. The most recent attacks in India — Sept. 7 in Delhi and July 13 in .Mumbai — probably have direct ties to these networks

Between 1993 and 1995, LeT received its most substantial state support from Pakistan, which helped build up LeT's military capability by organizing and training its militants and providing weapons, equipment, campaign guidance and border-crossing support in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. LeT operated camps on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border as well as in .Kashmir, in places like Muzaffarabad

At the same time, MDI built up a major social-services network, building schools and hospitals and setting up charitable foundations throughout Pakistan, though centered in Punjab. Its large complex in Muridke included schools, a major hospital and a mosque. Some of its funding came through official Saudi channels while other funding came through non-official channels via Saudi members of MDI such as Abdul Rahman al-Surayhi and Mahmoud Mohammad Ahmed Bahaziq, who reportedly facilitated much of the funding to establish the original Muridke .complex

As MDI focused on dawah, or the preaching of Islam, it simultaneously developed an infrastructure that was financially self-sustaining. For example, it established Al-Dawah schools throughout Pakistan that charged fees to those who could afford it and it began taxing its adherents. It also became well-known for its charitable activities, placing donation boxes throughout Pakistan. The group developed a reputation as an efficient organization that provides quality social services, and this positive public perception has made it difficult for the Pakistani .government to crack down on it

On July 12, 1999, LeT carried out its first fidayeen, or suicide commando, attack in Kashmir. Such attacks focus on inflicting as much damage as possible before the attackers are killed. Their goal also was to engender as much fear as possible and introduce a new intensity to the conflict there. This attack occurred during the Kargil war, when Pakistani soldiers along with its sponsored militants fought a pitched battle against Indian troops in the Kargil district of Kashmir. This was the height of Pakistani state support for the various militant groups operating in Kashmir, and it was a critical, defining period for the LeT, which shifted its campaign from .one focused exclusively on Kashmir to one focused on India as a whole

State support for LeT and other militant groups declined after the Kargil war but fidayeen attacks continued and began to occur outside of Kashmir. In the late 1990s and into the 2000s, there was much debate within LeT about its targeting. When LeT was constrained operationally in Kashmir by its ISI handlers, some members of the group wanted to conduct attacks in other places. It's unclear at this point which attacks had Pakistani state support and which did not, but the timing of many in relation to the ebb and flow of the Pakistani-Indian political situation indicates

Pakistani support and control, even if it came only from factions within the ISI or military. The first LeT attack outside of Kashmir took place on Dec. 22, 2000, against the Red Fort in Delhi

The Post-9/11 Name Game

In the months following 9/11, many Pakistan-based jihadist groups were “banned” by the Pakistani government. They were warned beforehand and moved their funds into physical assets or under different names. LeT claimed that it split with MDI, with new LeT leader Maula Abdul Wahid al-Kashmiri saying the group now was strictly a Kashmiri militant organization. Despite these claims, however, Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi was still considered supreme commander. MDI was dissolved and replaced by Jamaat-ul-Dawa, the original name used by Saeed and Iqbal’s group. Notably, both al-Kashmiri and Lakhvi were also part of the Jamaat-ul-Dawa executive board, indicating that close ties remained between the two groups

In January 2002, LeT was declared illegal, and the Pakistani government began to use the word “defunct” to describe it. In reality it wasn’t defunct; it had begun merely operating under different names. The group’s capability to carry out attacks was temporarily limited, probably on orders from the Pakistani government through Jamaat-ul-Dawa’s leadership

At this point, LeT’s various factions began to split and re-network in various ways. For example, Abdur Rehman Syed, a senior operational planner involved in David Headley’s surveillance of Mumbai targets, left LeT around 2004. As a major in the Pakistani army he had been ordered to fight fleeing Taliban on the Durand Line in 2001. He refused and joined LeT. In 2004 he began working with Ilyas Kashmiri and Harkat-ul-Jihad e-Islami. Two other senior LeT leaders, former Pakistani Maj. Haroon Ashiq and his brother Capt. Kurram Ashiq, had left Pakistan’s Special Services Group to join LeT around 2001. By 2003 they had exited the group and were criticizing Lakhvi, the former LeT military commander

Despite leaving the larger organization, former members of the MDI/LeT still often use the name “Lashkar-e-Taiba” in their public rhetoric when describing their various affiliations, even though they do not consider their new organizations to be offshoots of LeT. The same difficulties observers face in trying to keep track of these spun-off factions has come to haunt the factions themselves, which have a branding problem as they try to raise money or recruit fighters. New names don’t have the same power as the well-established LeT brand, and many of the newer organizations continue to use the LeT moniker in some form

Operating Outside of South Asia

Organizations and networks that were once part of LeT have demonstrated the capability to carry out insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, small-unit attacks in Kashmir, fidayeen assaults in Kashmir and India and small IED attacks throughout the region. Mumbai in 2008 was the most spectacular attack by an LeT offshoot on an international scale, but to date the network has not demonstrated the capability to conduct complex attacks outside the region. That said, David Headley’s surveillance efforts in Denmark and other plots linked to LeT training camps and factions do seem to have been inspired by al Qaeda’s transnational jihadist influence

To date, these operations have failed, but they are worth noting. These transnational LeT-linked :plotters include the following
.The Virginia Jihad Network

Dhiren Barot (aka Abu Eisa al-Hind), a Muslim convert of Indian origin who grew up in the United Kingdom, was arrested there in 2004 and was accused of a 2004 plot to detonate vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices in underground parking lots and surveilling targets in the United States in 2000-2001 for al Qaeda. He originally learned his craft in LeT training camps in .Pakistan

David Hicks, an Australian who was in LeT camps in 1999 and studied at one of their madrassas. LeT provided a letter of introduction to al Qaeda, which he joined in January 2001. He was .captured in Afghanistan following the U.S.-led invasion
Omar Khyam of the United Kingdom, who attended LeT training camps in 2000 before his .family brought him home

The so-called “Crevice Network,” members of which were arrested in 2004 and charged with .attempting to build fertilizer-based IEDs in the United Kingdom under the auspices of al Qaeda
Willie Brigitte, who had been connected to LeT networks in France and was trying to contact a bombmaker in Australia in order to carry out attacks there when he was arrested in October .2003

While these cases suggest that the LeT threat persists, they also indicate that the transnational threat posed by those portions of the network focused on attacks outside of South Asia does not appear to be as potent as the attack in Mumbai in 2008. One reason is the Pakistani support offered to those who focus on operations in South Asia and particularly those who target India. Investigations of the Mumbai attack revealed that current or former ISI officers provided a considerable amount of training, operational support and even real-time guidance to the Mumbai .attack team

It is unclear how far up the Pakistani command structure this support goes. The most important point, though, is that Pakistani support in the Mumbai attack provided the group responsible with capabilities that have not been demonstrated by other parts of the network in other plots. In fact, without this element of state support, many transnational plots linked to the LeT network have been forced to rely on the same kind of “Kramer jihadists” in the West that the al Qaeda core has .employed in recent years

However, while these networks have not shown the capability to conduct a spectacular attack since Mumbai, they continue to plan. With both the capability and intention in place, it is probably only a matter of time before they conduct additional attacks in India. The historical signature of LeT attacks has been the use of armed assault tactics — taught originally by the ISI and institutionalized by LeT doctrine — so attacks of this sort can be expected. An attack of this sort outside of South Asia would be a stretch for the groups that make up the post-LeT networks, but the cross-pollination that is occurring among the various jihadist actors in Pakistan could help facilitate planning and even operations if they pool resources. Faced with the full attention of global counterterrorism efforts, such cooperation may be one of the only ways that the transnational jihad can hope to gain any traction, especially as its efforts to foster independent grassroots jihadists have been largely ineffective.