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The Long Arm of Lashkar-e-Taiba

By Stephen Tankel
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In his February 2 testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair highlighted the growing danger posed by Pakistani militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Calling the group a "special case," he asserted that it is "becoming more of a direct threat and is placing Western targets in Europe in its sights." He also expressed concern that it could "actively embrace" a more anti-Western agenda. Given its global capabilities with regard to fundraising, logistics, support, and operations, LeT could pose a serious threat to U.S. interests. Consequently, weakening it should be a high priority for Washington.

Background

Many observers tend to believe that LeT began with a parochial agenda. In reality, the group emerged from the Afghan struggle against the Soviets with a pan-Islamic jihadist agenda. Some of its militants entered the Kashmir theater, while others fought in the Tajik civil war and the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict. Indeed, Sheikh Abu Abdul Aziz -- who headed Lashkar's external affairs activities during most of the 1990s and was a key interface with al-Qaeda -- played a central role in convincing Salafi scholars to rank the Bosnian war as an obligatory jihad.

Although LeT narrowed its military operations to Indian-controlled Kashmir in the mid-to-late 1990s, it continued to develop an international support network that encompassed several Persian Gulf and Western countries. For the most part, it has used this network to threaten India, which remains its primary enemy. But LeT's transnational operatives have threatened the West as well, and this threat has grown in recent years.

Since its creation, LeT has also maintained strong ties to al-Qaeda. One of the founders of Lashkar's parent organization, Markaz al-Dawa wal-Irshad (later renamed Jamaat-ul-Dawa), was Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Usama bin Laden and cofounder of Maktab al-Khidmat (the Afghan Services Bureau). Although LeT ran its own camps in Afghanistan during the 1990s, some of its cadres cross-trained in al-Qaeda camps as well. Following the September 11 attacks, a number of al-Qaeda operatives found shelter in LeT safe houses. Collaboration between the two groups increased after LeT entered the Afghan theater around 2006. Today, they cooperate on training and recruitment for the Afghan jihad against coalition forces, equipping fighters and infiltrating them across the Durand Line separating Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Persian Gulf Activities

LeT has used the Gulf for fundraising purposes since the Afghan jihad against the Soviets, and it continues to attract cash from the region today. In addition to Salafi contributors, who constitute LeT's largest donor base in the area, the Gulf's Kashmiri diaspora has historically given significant sums of money. Much of this money comes through various "charitable" sources cultivated by LeT over its more than two decades of existence. Its donor base was already quite robust by the end of the 1990s and has only grown since then. In 2003, LeT's chief of finance began to work with the leaders of the group's Saudi branch on "expanding its organization and increasing its fundraising activities," according to the U.S. Treasury Department.

LeT also uses the Gulf as a logistical and recruiting hub, primarily for its jihad against India. Gulf countries are opportune places for LeT leaders and operatives to meet, as well as useful transit points for trafficking all manner of resources into India. Recruitment efforts focus on Indian Muslims working in the region, who are targeted for the very same reasons as Muslims living in India: to help execute terrorist attacks against their homeland. The recruitment process involves personal connections, often formed at mosques or other spiritual centers where operatives spot, radicalize, and indoctrinate new members. Initial contact with recruits is sometimes made in India and then followed up in the Gulf. Some new members are sent to Pakistan for training and then back to India to join underground cells. Others became part of Lashkar's support networks in the Gulf, Bangladesh, or Nepal, facilitating the movement of people, money, and materials.

For example, prior to his arrest and conviction last year, Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti was one of LeT's top organizers in the Gulf and its main interface with the Indian Mujahedin, an indigenous terrorist network in India. He transferred money and weapons into India and helped send dozens of recruits to Pakistan from his base of operations in Muscat, Oman. Among those he dispatched to Pakistan for training was Fahim Ansari, one of the Indians arrested on charges of providing surveillance footage to Lashkar for use in the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. According to Omani authorities, al-Hooti also considered launching operations against his Gulf host nation. He and other LeT sympathizers in Oman reportedly discussed targeting prominent Muscat landmarks in June 2007, included the Golden Tulip Hotel and a BBC office. No final plans were ever put in place, but Omani authorities were able to gather enough evidence to successfully prosecute al-Hooti.

LeT in the West

Lashkar also boasts operatives in a number of Western countries, including Britain and the United States. Since the 1990s, the group has trained foreigners as a means of establishing networks in the West. This activity thrived after September 11 because LeT experienced less of a crackdown than its jihadist brethren in Pakistan. As a result, its camps became an especially appealing destination for many would-be jihadists. The group has also been deploying agents directly to the West since the 1990s, both to recruit youths and to raise money. Although these agents are believed to be most active in Britain, they operate elsewhere, too. For example, during an inquiry into "shoe bomber" Richard Reid's support networks in Paris, authorities uncovered channels used to send volunteers from France to Lashkar camps in Pakistan.

LeT uses its Western operatives to provide support for jihad against India and, more recently, its operations in Afghanistan. In one prominent case, a member of the "Virginia Jihad Network" helped British LeT operative Muhammad Ajmal Khan acquire equipment for Lashkar during visits to the United States in 2002 and 2003. Khan held a senior post in the organization with responsibility for recruiting foreigners. The U.S. government eventually prosecuted the Virginia operative for training with LeT, while a British court sentenced Khan to nine years imprisonment in March 2006 for his role in supporting the group.

Western operatives have also been involved more directly in supporting LeT's terrorist plots, including attacks outside India. For example, European members are suspected of providing financial support for both Richard Reid and the liquid bomb plotters who attempted to destroy transnational flights in July 2006. The group also deployed a French convert named Willie Brigitte to Australia in 2003 to support attacks there. In 2009, the U.S. government indicted Pakistani American David Headley (aka Daoud Gilani) on charges of conducting preoperational surveillance for the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Headley is also believed to have performed surveillance in Pune, India, where a German bakery and cafe was bombed this past weekend. As with the Mumbai attacks, this was a blended attack aimed at Indian and Western interests.

Headley was also accused of conspiring with Lashkar and the commander of another Pakistani jihadist group, Harkat al-Jihad al-Islami, to attack the Danish newspaper that printed cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in 2005. Finally, Bangladeshi authorities thwarted Lashkar-led attacks against the U.S. embassy and Indian High Commission in Dhaka based partly on information from Headley and a co-conspirator. That plot -- which was tied to planned strikes in India, also thwarted -- was intended to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the Mumbai attacks.

Conclusion

LeT's main enemy remains India, but it is clearly becoming more of a threat to the West. The Pakistani security services have always sought to control rather than dismantle the group, viewing it as a reliable strategic asset against India. For its part, LeT continues to abjure attacks at home, making it one of Pakistan's few proxies not to have turned its guns on the state. Although Islamabad has traditionally wielded more leverage over LeT than over other jihadist groups, the degree of control it is able to exert today remains in question, and the group is clearly growing bolder.

Convincing Pakistan to ramp up its efforts against LeT should remain a priority for the United States and its allies. In the short term, Islamabad must use its leverage to keep the group from executing any attack against India that could trigger a war and destabilize South Asia. The United States should also push Pakistan to provide information necessary to degrade LeT's transnational networks. Although Islamabad's assistance is critical in this regard, so too is the cooperation of U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, where more could be done to disrupt Lashkar's activities.

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