



ORF ISSUE BRIEF

NOVEMBER 2014

ISSUE BRIEF # 83

Six Years after Mumbai: The LeT Threat

Vikram Sood and Wilson John

Introduction

Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) is a trans-national terrorist group based in Lahore, Pakistan, with a cadre strength of over 500,000, a number which makes it the largest terrorist group in the world. With the active support of Pakistan military, LeT carried out the terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2008. The coordinated attack, carried out by a team of 10 terrorists from Pakistan, began on the night of November 26 and continued till November 29, killing 164 persons and injuring over 300. The international outcry and pressure over the attacks, which brought two nuclear powers close to conflict, should have compelled Pakistan to dismantle the terrorist group and its extensive infrastructure. It did not. Six years after the attack, the terrorist group and its leadership have grown in strength and influence, posing an even more serious threat to India and the region as a whole than in 2008.

Despite being one of the first terrorist groups to adapt to the changing information and communication environment, with a rudimentary set of websites, few people understood the objectives of the group, its links with al Qaeda and the patronage it draws from the Pakistan state—especially the army. Since the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, LeT has come under greater scrutiny from security agencies, academics and policymakers. Today, it is possible to construct a profile of the terrorist group from material available in the public domain. The group has been active in the social media with different Facebook accounts and Twitter handles; it is also possible to track down some of its public activities and what its leaders are saying. This 'public face,' however, is a deliberate policy on the part of the terrorist group to distract attention and is thus of little use in understanding the group's strength, recruitment, funding and 'operational' capabilities today.

This Issue Brief will therefore focus on examining what is least known—or not known—about the group since the Mumbai attacks to underline the threat it poses to India and the world and the urgent need for dealing with it.

Observer Research Foundation is a public policy think tank that aims to influence formulation of policies for building a strong and prosperous India. ORF pursues these goals by providing informed and productive inputs, in-depth research and stimulating discussions. The Foundation is supported in its mission by a cross-section of India's leading public figures, academics and business leaders.

Subterfuge and Patronage

LeT's two core strengths have been secrecy and state patronage. These two factors are in many ways mutually dependent and have remained unscathed till date. The group created and sustained its clandestine character by establishing several front organisations for charity and *dawa* (invitation to Islam) while maintaining its core agenda of creating an army of 'jihadis,' the Fifth Column, all trained and wedded to the group's ideology and objectives. Barring a core group of around 50,000 armed cadres, the rest live 'ordinary' lives as bureaucrats, politicians, student leaders, farmers, traders, businessmen and soldiers. While the group's nerve centre has remained embedded in urban areas, its influence and terrorist training facilities straddle both urban and rural parts of Pakistan. Before the Mumbai attacks, the group had over 2,500 centres for recruitment, training and other activities across the country; since November 2008, little information has been available about the fate of these centres. What has emerged, however, through scattered clues in the public domain about the group's growth in numbers and influence is that it has established more mosques and *madrastas*, charity centres and training camps since 2008. Its recruitment and fund-raising activities have become more sophisticated and clandestine and have not reduced in any manner.

The group has cleverly reverted to the pre-social media era of door-to-door campaigning and personal interactions to recruit and raise funds. This is done through its charity and social welfare fronts, especially schools and colleges. Parents are persuaded to commit at least one child to the 'cause' and those who do, also inevitably follow up with financial donations. Likewise, those who benefit from the group's hospitals, dispensaries and rescue and relief centres are drawn to the group and its ideology. This grass-roots campaigning has helped the group escape international countermeasures.

Much of the terrorist group's funding comes from private donations, NGOs, *madrastas* and businesses in South Asia, Middle East and Europe. These funds are raised in the name of charity, education and rescue and relief measures and a substantial amount is diverted to terrorist activities. What is not known is the extent of Pakistan Army's financial contribution. With LeT acting as a proxy instrument, it is fair to assume that the 'budgetary support' from the GHQ would be substantial. A 2009 US estimate put the 'operational' budget of the terrorist group at \$5.2 million per year.¹ But this may not include the support from Pakistan Army. With its expanded network, both its charity fronts as well as terrorist infrastructure, the operational cost today could be at least double the 2009 estimate.

'Ghost Protocol'

It is the opaqueness of its command and control structure and operational methodology which magnifies the group's potential threat and its immunity from any overt or covert action. Going by what is known, Hafiz Saeed is the *amir* or leader of the group. He is a former religious teacher and has no experience in combat. Zaki-ur Rahman Lakhvi, said to be the 'mastermind' of the Mumbai attacks and the 'operational commander' of the terrorist group, has had combat experience in the Afghan Jihad and thereafter, but is hardly known to be a planner or an able organiser. Lakhvi is at best an efficient and experienced field commander but with limited capacity to plan a sophisticated attack like that on Mumbai, which called for an expertise in maritime intrusion, urban warfare, hostage-taking and, above

all, dexterity with sophisticated communication tools. Likewise, various wings of Jamat-ud Dawa (JuD), one of the several fronts the terrorist group has created, are known and deliberately publicised in social media and group publications. They are the 'public face' of the group and an important part of LeT's command and control structure.

But they are not the ones who take decisions about the targets and the modus operandi or plan damage control exercises, which include aggressive media and diplomatic campaigns to protect the group from international sanctions. The group, in fact, has no *majlis-e-shura*, the decision-making council, as in many other terrorist outfits. Key decisions are taken, or conveyed, by Saeed or his close confidants—most of them related to him by blood or marriage. It is therefore difficult to see how Saeed and Lakhvi could have recruited David Coleman Headley, set him up in Mumbai and tasked him with electronic surveillance of potential targets. Or how they could have set up a mother ship and a set of dinghies or planned the sea route and landing for the Mumbai attacks.

This raises the possibility of a parallel, clandestine structure of command and control which remains under deep cover and is part of a 'Ghost Protocol' set up and authorised by the state, more specifically the Pakistan Army. This makes the group almost-invincible to external targeting and sanctions. Four points of reference (there are more) accessible from open sources could assist in clearing much of this chain of mystery:

- The testimony of David Headley in which he talks about his interactions with middle-ranking Pakistani Army officials during the planning of the Mumbai siege;
- The statement of Ajmal Amir Kasab³, the terrorist caught during the attack, tried and sentenced to death subsequently, in court about the presence of military officials during his training;
- French judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere, who tried a French LeT member, Willie Brigitte, writing in his judgement and later in his book (*What I Could Not Say*) about Pakistan Army's management of the terrorist training camps set up by LeT⁴; and
- Former Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's missive to two US Congressmen before she was assassinated in December 2007.⁵

The essence of these testimonies and statements is that Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), an intelligence arm of Pakistan Army, ran a cell or a division which managed terrorist groups by providing funds, training and protection. This division, which some reports call the S Wing⁶, oversees groups like LeT; thus the difficulty in figuring out who really runs LeT.

Given the nature of the command and control of the group, it is even more difficult to estimate its combat capabilities. An attempt, however, can be made to piece together what is known about LeT's combat experience after November 2008.

- The Mumbai attacks showed that the group's training facilities, manned by retired soldiers and officers, could train cadres in surveillance, close-quarter combat, hostage taking, armed assault, maritime operations and urban guerrilla warfare.

- Never before had LeT cadres shown such capabilities that hinted at the involvement of Special Forces. The terrorist group since the Mumbai attacks has been known to be involved in counter-offensive operations launched by Pakistan Army against Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the tribal areas⁷ and counter the persistent rebellion in Balochistan.
- LeT has also been active since 2006 in supporting the Afghan Taliban against the US forces in Afghanistan.
- The LeT cadres located in many parts of eastern Afghanistan and in the tribal areas work under the overall supervision of the Haqqani Network, a close ally of Pakistan Army.

These combat experiences have benefited the group in three ways—in sharpening their skills in active battle zones, strengthening inter-operability procedures with the army units and carrying out coordinated actions with local groups. Two additional capabilities, which the group has been making efforts to acquire in the past few years, would make them even more lethal—cyber capability and the use of drones.

Cyber Outreach

LeT's social media outreach since the Mumbai attacks has been phenomenal. Although its websites were shut down after the November 2008 attacks, the group quickly took to the social media with Hafiz Saeed first opening Facebook and Twitter accounts. Several accounts were opened to project the group's political and charitable activities as well. The social media platform quickly became a key instrument for attracting new cadres, disseminating information and, in the process, creating a cyber community of likeminded and sympathetic followers. It also helped the group create an alternative narrative to its terrorist identity, targeted largely at the domestic audience, especially the young, and the diaspora.

The terrorist group was quick to set up a full-fledged cyber cell and promoted it by holding social media workshops at various centres camouflaged as computer institutes. These have become one of the important platforms for the group to attract talent and money. The social media workshops are conducted by computer professionals who are either alumni of schools and colleges run by the group or are neo-converts to the cause. Considering the modules taught at these workshops, the trainers are fairly proficient in exploiting the power of social media for various ends. The group has expanded its internet presence by creating two dedicated units to look after its web presence—a social media team and a cyber team. One of the objectives of these units is to develop and disseminate learning tools to its members and participants of various workshops held regularly in Lahore and Karachi for 4th Generation Warfare, which, according to one of the cyber team leaders, Salaar Abdur Rahman, “is the main tool....[to] spread disinformation and propaganda.”

It is not easy to fully discern the group's cyber capability. But a few things are clear. Given the number of science students graduating from the group's educational institutions, it is fair to assume that there will be no shortage of recruits for its cyber campaign. It has a fairly vast network of computer centres which can be exploited for benign as well as malignant campaigns against adversaries without much

difficulty. There are a substantial number of hackers in Pakistan who mostly indulge in hacking Indian websites, and many of them could be either directly associated with LeT as cadre members or available on hire. The LeT cyber team has become fairly sophisticated in its operations, going by the increasing number of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media accounts the group runs today. The team has also developed several mobile applications and may even have adopted encryption codes made available by al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in the recent past.

Although there is no known case of any of these groups being involved in cyber attacks like Directed Denial of Services (DDoS), spear phishing, malware infiltration or crippling of networks, the possibility remains high simply because these groups have the capability and the intent to carry out such attacks. They have so far chosen not to do so. One of the reasons could be that such attacks would not give them the kind of media coverage that an attack like the one on Mumbai did. The LeT in all likelihood will deploy sophisticated cyber capability to enhance the impact of a terrorist attack which could be seen live across the world. During the Mumbai attack, the group utilised a sophisticated Skype-like Voice over Internet Protocol technology developed by Pakistan Army to monitor and direct the terrorists in Mumbai.

The group is likely to focus more on spreading disinformation and propaganda to incite communities and trigger communal violence in India to lay the ground for setting up modules, recruiting cadres, enabling access to trainers and materials and liaising with other local groups to launch attacks. After having failed through the traditional route of attracting recruits through indoctrination at *madrasas* or mosques and audio-visual media, LeT will exploit social media and smart phone penetration in India to create support networks. Effective countering of such a cyber campaign could prove to be a formidable challenge for Indian agencies.

The terrorist group's plans to use microlite aircraft or drones for terrorist activities presents another challenge. Indian Mujahideen leaders in custody have spoken about LeT procuring Chinese microlites and engaging in training to fly them in Karachi and Muzaffarabad. Independent researchers like Arif Jamal have reported seeing small drones in LeT premises in Pakistan. Two Chechens who were arrested in Spain in August 2012 told the Spanish authorities about being trained to use microlites in LeT camps in Pakistan; they were planning to use the planes for a ricin attack against foreign tourists in Gibraltar. Drones are now commercially available and the terrorist group can procure them easily in Pakistan without attracting much attention, like it bought dinghies and Yamaha motorboat engines for the Mumbai attack. In Pakistan, besides defence public sector units, there are at least four private firms which make unmanned aerial vehicles—East West Infinity (Lahore and Karachi), Satuma, Global Industries Defense Solution (Rawalpindi) and Integrated Dynamics (Karachi). LeT therefore can source UAVs and drones without raising red flags in the intelligence circles.

Present Threat

Six years after the Mumbai attack, LeT with state patronage has expanded its capability and networks across the world and more specifically in Pakistan. The group's combat experience in Afghanistan and

in the tribal areas, where it took on regular armies, its increasing cyber capabilities and ability to network with ideologically different local groups makes it a formidable threat in the near future. The patronage it enjoys from the Pakistan Army and its urban anchoring gives it immeasurable invincibility from counteroffensive measures. It is today capable of launching sophisticated cyber tools to spread disinformation, indulge in cyber rioting and cripple networks. Its capabilities for armed assault, bombings and hostage-taking are sharper than in 2008. The group's attempt to take over the Indian consulate in Herat and hold diplomats hostage in June this year underline this capability, reach and ambition.

For India, LeT with its expanded capability and strong state patronage poses a far greater threat than al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent or the Islamic State. In fact, the emergence of these new groups gives LeT and its patron an alibi to avoid direct responsibility and retaliation for any future attacks on India, the possibility of which remains high.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vikram Sood was the Chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and is currently Adviser, Observer Research Foundation.

Wilson John is a Senior Fellow with the Foundation.

Endnotes:

1. "US embassy cables: Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists raise funds in Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/220186>.
2. Testimony available at <http://www.propublica.org/documents/item/268228-ranatrial-headlymeetsiqbal#document/p1/a39259>.
3. http://supremecourtofindia.nic.in/scr/2012_v8_pii.pdf.
4. Sebastian Rotella, "Framed French judge Bruguiere tells of a troubled Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/nov/04/world/fg-terror-judge4>; "Willie Brigitte was trained by Pakistan military," *The Daily Telegraph*, December 2, 2009, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/willie-brigitte-was-trained-by-pakistan-military/story-e6freuy9-1225805920213?nk=578f59d5e1c89e7416dfddfcfb33c8b>.
5. Amir Mir, "You can Name Musharraf As My Assassin If I Am Killed': Benazir," *Outlook*, January 14, 2008, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article/You-Can-Name-Musharraf-As-My-Assassin-If-I-Am-Killed-Benazir/236475>.
6. Philip Shenon, "Pakistan's bin Laden Suspects," *The Daily Beast*, May 15, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/05/16/pakistan-spy-agencys-shadowy-s-wing-ties-to-bin-laden.html>.
7. "Mohmand Agency: TTP accuses rival groups of plotting attacks on its bases," *Express Tribune*, June 9, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/560880/mohmand-agency-ttp-accuses-rival-groups-of-plotting-attacks-on-its-bases/>.



Observer Research Foundation,
 20, Rouse Avenue, New Delhi-110 002
 Phone: +91-11-43520020 Fax: +91-11-43520003
www.orfonline.org email: orf@orfonline.org