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Islamist Militancy The Lashkar-i-Tayyeba

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South Asia
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One of the leading Islamist groups active in Pakistan and Kashmir today is the Lashkar-i-Tayyeba, or 'The Army of the Pure'. Founded in 1993 and banned in early 2002, the Lashkar comprises largely Pakistani militants who had immersed themselves in the jihad in Afghanistan. After the expulsion of the Soviets, these *mujahids* turned their attention to fresh pastures, Kashmir being one of them. The Lashkar's ideology bears close resemblance to that of the Al-Qaeda and preaches a large-scale jihad against the 'enemies of Islam' in order to establish a unified Islamic state.

The Lashkar is affiliated to the Ahl-i-Hadith school of thought, a reformist Islamic movement, which had its origins in early 19th-century India. The founders of the Ahl-i-Hadith believed that they were charged with the divine responsibility of purging popular Muslim practice of what they saw as un-Islamic accretions and borrowings from their Hindu neighbours. They insisted that Muslims return to the original sources of their faith and abandon all beliefs and practices not sanctioned therein. They called for Muslims to abide strictly by the *shari'a* and to abandon 'imitation' (*taqlid*) of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Besides, the Ahl-i-Hadith also bitterly critiqued Sufism, which they saw as a *bid'a*, for, they argued, it had no sanction in the practice of the Prophet. Given the im-

sion in the number of Islamic seminaries in the country, many of which are sponsored by the Saudis and preach a conservative yet militant form of Islam, and the active sponsorship of such madrasas by the Pakistani state, under and after General Zia-ul-Haq (d. 1988). Most importantly, however, the Afghan jihad against the Soviets saw a great expansion of resources for groups such as the Ahl-i-Hadith, with massive amounts of aid, in the form of money and arms, pouring in from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Many Ahl-i-Hadith and other Sunni madrasas emerged at this time as training grounds for militants. From being a relatively minor group in Pakistan's Islamic landscape, the Ahl-i-Hadith grew, by the end of the 1980s, into a major force, with scores of madrasas all over the country, and several newspapers and journals articulating its vision of an Islamic revolution. With new 'enemies' to target – the Russians in Afghanistan and the Indians in Kashmir – the Ahl-i-Hadith, hitherto marginalized and shunned by most Hanafi Muslims, now began carefully expanding its own support base in the country.

In 1986 the Ahl-i-Hadith set up the Markaz Da'wat wa'l Irshad, based in a sprawling 160-acre campus at Muridke, a town some 30 kilometres from Lahore, to train *mujahidin* to fight the Soviets. Money for the establishment of the centre is alleged to have been received from among other sources, from the Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden. As the Markaz's activities rapidly grew, it was decided to divide its work into two separate but related sections: the educational and the jihadist. Thus, in 1993, the Markaz established its separate military wing, the Lashkar. The Lashkar later set up four training centres in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Markaz authorities claim that the militants produced at these centres have played a leading role in armed struggles, first in Afghanistan, and then in countries as far afield as Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, the southern Philippines, Kashmir and 'in other areas where Muslims are fighting for freedom'.*

According to one report, in recent years the spread of the Markaz/Lashkar in Pakistan has been phenomenal, and today it has some five hundred offices all over the country, most of them in Punjab, which operate as recruitment centres for would-be *mujahidin*. At its Muridke headquarters, the Markaz runs an Islamic school and university, most of whose students are local Pakistanis, with some Kashmiris from the Indian-ruled part of the state, and several Afghans and Arabs. Established in 1994, several hundred students have already graduated from the school. Scores of smaller schools run on the same lines have been set up in various other parts of Pakistan, and by mid-2001 their number was said to be almost 130, with some 15,000 students and 800 teachers on their rolls.

Lashkar ideology

The Lashkar sees Islam as a perfect, all-embracing system. For establishing an Islamic system, an Islamic state, which will impose the *shari'a* as the law of the land, is necessary. If such a state were to be set up and all Muslims were to live strictly according to 'the laws that Allah has laid down', then, it is believed, 'they would be able to control the whole world and exercise their supremacy'. Since Islam is seen as the very antithesis of

nationalism, it demands the establishment of one universal Islamic state, ruled by a single *khalifah*. Thus, the present division of the Muslims into many nation-states must be overcome.

The struggle for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate can take various forms, peaceful as well as violent. Islam, the Lashkar admits, is 'a religion of peace and harmony', and seeks to 'eliminate mischief and disorder, and to provide peace, not only to Muslims but all of humanity'. However, Muslims are commanded to take to armed struggle, or jihad, to defend their co-religionists suffering from the oppression of others. Such a situation is said to prevail over much of the world today. While jihad in defence of Islam and of Muslims labouring under oppression is presented as a liberation struggle, it is also seen as a means for Islam to 'prevail on this earth', for Islam is seen as the only true religion. Armed jihad must continue 'until Islam, as a way of life, dominates the whole world and until Allah's law is enforced everywhere in the world'. The subject of armed jihad runs right through the writings and pronouncements of the Markaz/Lashkar and is, in fact, the most prominent theme in its discourse. Indeed, its understanding of Islam may be seen as determined almost wholly by this preoccupation, so much so that its reading of Islam seems to be a product of its own political project. 'Sufism', it insists, 'has been designed with no other purpose than to dampen the spirit of jihad'.

India is a special target for the Markaz's *mujahidin*. The Markaz sees the jihad as going far beyond the borders of Kashmir and spreading through all of India. The final goal is to extend Muslim control over what is seen as having once been Muslim land, and, hence, to be brought back under Muslim domination. Thus, at a mammoth congregation of Markaz supporters in November 1999, the *amir* Hafiz Muhammad Sa'eed declared: 'Today I announce the break-up of India, *Inshallah*. We will not rest until the whole of India is dissolved into Pakistan.'

The Lashkar's direct participation in the Kashmir conflict dates back to the end of the Afghan war in 1992 when the Lashkar shifted its attention to Kashmir. In this, it was assisted by the Jama'at-i-Islami of Pakistan and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Despite the limited support of Ahl-i-Hadith-style Islamic purism in Kashmir, the Lashkar has today emerged as the single most powerful militant group in the region, owing principally to the arms and resources that it commands. In contrast to the earlier Ahl-i-Hadith activists in Kashmir, the Lashkar has consciously refrained from engaging in intra-Muslim disputes or from openly attacking what it sees as 'un-Islamic' beliefs and practices among the Kashmiri Muslims. In this way it has sought to broaden its appeal beyond the narrow and restricted circle of Ahl-i-Hadith followers in the region. The support for the Lashkar in Kashmir must, then, be seen as essentially a result of its stern opposition to Indian 'colonialism', rather than as representing any considerable acceptance of its theological vision.

The current crisis

The American reprisals against the Taliban, following the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon,

have been fiercely opposed by Islamist groups, including the Lashkar. In the wake of the attacks, the Lashkar is said to have despatched several of its armed volunteers to Afghanistan, to supplement the 600 Lashkar special guards who had earlier been specially appointed as personal security for Osama bin Laden. The Lashkar condemned the American assault on Afghanistan as the launching of a new 'crusade' (*salibi jang*) by the 'Christian' West against the Muslim world. The head of the Markaz sternly warned Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf not to cooperate with America, and issued a thinly veiled threat, calling for defiance of the government if it continued to toe the American line. The head Mufti of the Markaz issued a fatwa claiming it a binding duty on all Muslims to help their Afghan co-religionists. If Pakistan's rulers continued to support America this would be treated as a gross violation of Islam, and they would be considered as 'rebels and traitors of Allah and His prophet'. Osama bin Laden, it asserted, had now become 'the symbol of jihad all over the world'. In the on-going 'war between Islam and *kufr* [disbelief]', led by Osama, it laid down, 'it has become obligatory for all the Muslim states in the interest of the dignity of Islam and the Muslims to [...] forge unity in their own ranks and send their armies to support *jihad* and the *mujahidin*'.

The implications of the American intervention in Afghanistan and the downfall of the Taliban for the Lashkar are not clear as yet. Pakistan's President General Musharraf, under pressure from the US, has been trying to reign in certain Islamist groups, but it appears that this is proving to be largely unsuccessful. Widespread opposition in Pakistan and Kashmir against the American attacks on Afghanistan are an indication that many resent Musharraf's pro-American stance, but whether this would translate into greater support for Lashkar-style Islamist radicalism is a moot question.

Note

* The quotations are taken from the following sites: www.lashkertaiba.net; jammu-kashmir.com; www.dawacenter.com, and markazdawa.org

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mense popularity of the Sufi traditions and the influence of the Hanafi *ulama* among the Muslims of South Asia, it was hardly surprising that the Ahl-i-Hadith faced stiff opposition, being banned from worship at mosques and condemned as apostates and 'enemies of Islam'. For their part, the Ahl-i-Hadith appeared to have revelled in controversy, not losing any opportunity of attacking their Muslim opponents for what they branded as their 'un-Islamic' ways.

Expanding its base

Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Ahl-i-Hadith began making gradual progress in the country, establishing mosques and madrasas of its own. It tended to have a more visible presence in urban areas, its strict scripturalist literalism appealing to groups such as urban traders who were not tied down to local Sufi shrines. From the 1980s onwards the Ahl-i-Hadith was able to make considerable inroads in Pakistani society following the rapid expan-