



In their own words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba

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BOOK REVIEW

In their own words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, by C. Christine Fair, London, Hurst and Co, 2018, v + 307 pp., £40 (hardcover), ISBN 9781849045728

In their own words analyses the motivations of one of the most infamous terrorist organisations in South Asia - Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) - responsible for the attack on the Taj Hotel in India in 2008 as well as the Pulwama attack in Kashmir in February 2019. Through an analysis of the volumes of literature produced by LeT Fair advances two claims. Firstly, that the Pakistani state has provided funding, support and patronage to the LeT, rendering it, in her words as 'the states' most duteous and governable agent' (p. 3) in carrying out terrorist attacks on India in particular. Secondly, that the LeT - in its other guise as Jamat ud Dawah (JuD) - helps the Pakistani state manage its *internal* security agenda; 'while it is most certainly *jihadi*, its *jihad* focuses upon external enemies' (p. 68). This contrasts markedly with many other militant organisations within Pakistan, that have undermined internal security, for example, the Tahreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) of Khadim Rizvi.

Fair's analysis is based on a study of the biographies of almost 1000 LeT operatives killed during active operations, and a sample of books and pamphlets published by LeT focusing on material that 'delineate what LeT/JuD says it does as an organisation, what external and internal political imperatives shape the organisation's behaviour in and beyond Pakistan, how the organisation recruits and retains fighters, and how it cultivates a larger community of support' (p. 17).

The book is comprised of seven chapters. Chapters two and three revisit the claims made in Fair's 2015 book *Fighting to the end* concerning the 'Military, mullah, militant nexus' (chapter two) and 'Pakistan's creeping jihad and expanding nuclear umbrella' (chapter three). While vital to appreciate the context for the analysis, the meat of the book is contained in chapters four, five and six. Chapter four addresses 'What is the LeT?' Unlike other groups such as the Pakistan Taliban or the Tehreek-e-Labbaik, the LeT is clear that it does not revolt 'against the Pakistan government (whether civilian or military)' (p. 69). However, it is particularly active against India. As LeT's 'recruits share linguistic and ethnic ties with the residents of Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu in Indian-Administered Kashmir' they were able to operate with 'more ease' in these areas than other militant groups (p. 94). This led Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) to become 'its most important patron' (p. 94) by the mid-1990s (although she details other important sources of funding).

Fair's analysis lays out the connections between the external facing LeT and the internal facing JuD, writing that '[a]stonishingly, the Pakistani government provides overt support to the JuD even though it has been declared a terrorist organization by the UN ...' (p. 97), detailing both federal and provincial government (the Punjab) transfers to the organisation. One of the ways the Pakistani state has managed to legitimise the JuD within Pakistan is that it has been promoted

as a 'a social welfare organization [that] has helped to persuade ordinary Pakistanis that it is distinct from LeT and its terrorist activities' (p. 88). She provides compelling evidence that even during periods when the organisation is banned within Pakistan (as it is at the time of writing), its activities are not curtailed in practice.

In Chapter five, the innovative methodology of the study is deployed. Together with a team at West Point she has examined almost 1000 biographies put out by the LeT about its members killed in operations. This provides a rich ethnographic account of the individuals involved in attacks within India. The analysis reveals that most of the slain LeT operatives come from the Punjab (p. 115), significantly, even more so than the Pakistani army recruits, and 'are more likely to be as educated, if not more so, than Pakistanis or Punjabi males' (p. 121). They are more likely to have attended a Madrassah than the average Pakistani, although Fair stresses that this is a complement to, rather than a substitute for, nonreligious education. Although some may quibble with the use of these biographies, the discussion of the methodology demonstrates that she is aware of the difficulties of doing so, and has taken steps to minimise the errors that may creep in.

The discussion of the importance of the family to LeT is a stand-out feature of this book. As she details, LeT puts heavy emphasis on its 'martyrs' receiving their mother's blessings before undertaking lethal (to them as well as others) operations. The depiction of the anguish of the mothers (and fathers) knowing that their child will 'take/eat' a bullet in the chest (p. 132) is powerfully rendered. The discussion of how LeT 'mobilizes – if not outright exploits – women's grief for several ends' (p. 134) is teased out over the rest of the chapter. Fair details the financial and social status benefits for the family of producing martyrs for LeT (p. 145). She concludes that more research is needed on the gendered 'determinants of support for Islamist violence in Pakistan' (p. 148), given the importance of the mother's blessing in LeT's mobilisation strategy.

Chapter six returns to the domestic focus of the organisation, where she analyses pamphlets justifying jihad (outside Pakistan) but contesting its use within Pakistan. In these pamphlets 'JuD invests considerable space denouncing violence against the Pakistani state and its citizens' (p. 172). In contrast to many of the other Deobandi organisations that have perpetrated violence against minority sects of Islam within Pakistan, 'LeT/JuD argues that they should be educated and rehabilitated' (p. 184). A similar approach is taken to religious minorities. JuD relief efforts for Sindhi Hindus after the floods of 2011, boasted 'about imparting Islamic education at a relief camp' (p. 185). However, despite its role in the aftermath of natural disasters, Fair argues that the organisation's activities are deliberately overinflated by a compliant Pakistani media 'with the explicit intention of generating support for them domestically and abroad' (p. 191).

The book finishes with an assessment of whether India (the prime target of these attacks) or the United States (one of the prime financial supporters of Pakistan and its army) can address 'the problem of Pakistan's reliance upon terrorism as a key foreign policy tool' (p. 198). She rejects the idea that the decapitation of LeT's leadership would bring the organisation to an end - given the support of the Pakistan 'deep state'. She argues that 'Pakistan's nuclear arsenal ... endows Pakistan with near absolute impunity to use terrorists as tools of foreign policy' (p. 207)

and implores the United States to stop providing Pakistan with weapons and funds and denounce Pakistan as 'a state sponsor of terror'. However, she is not optimistic that this will happen. Therefore, despite the recent arrest of its leader, Hafiz Saeed, the reader is left with the strong impression that it is likely to be business as usual before too long. This book is a very welcome academic treatment of an important 'security' institution in Pakistan.

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