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BOOK REVIEW: IN THEIR OWN WORDS: UNDERSTANDING LASHKAR-E-TAYYABA

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Over the last few decades India and Pakistan have often come to the brink of war normally after a terror attack that takes place inside Indian territory that is undertaken by a Pakistan-based jihadi group. For decades the Pakistani deep state has used sub conventional warfare against India – jihad – under the cover of a nuclear umbrella.

While there is a plethora of Pakistan-based jihadi groups that target India and Afghanistan, the Lashkar e Taiba (LeT) is the most lethal. Even though the group has been proscribed as a global terrorist organization and its leaders are on watchlists, the Pakistani state has been reluctant to act against the group or its leaders. To understand why Pakistan refuses to act against LeT and its parent organization Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD) and the role LeT/JuD play in Pakistan's foreign and domestic politics one must read Georgetown University Professor Christine Fair's excellent work *In their own words: Understanding Lashkar e Tayyaba* (<https://www.amazon.com/Their-Words-Understanding-Lashkar-Tayyaba/dp/1849045720>) (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Fair's magnum opus undertakes an in-depth examination of LeT's own expansive literature to provide details of its recruitment and training policies, of its ideological framework, and of how LeT helps Pakistan with both its regional and domestic policies. Fair's book thus explains why the globally proscribed terrorist outfit Lashkar e Taiba (LeT) is the favored proxy of the deep state of Pakistan.

The book starts with examining the legacy of the 1947 Partition of the British Indian empire (British Raj) and what is often referred to within the Pakistani establishment as the "unfinished business" of partition – the need to "take back" Kashmir from India and create some form of parity between India and Pakistan. This worldview, Fair argues, continues to frame the thinking of the Pakistani military and explains its use of jihad as a lever of its regional foreign and security policy.

There is an old and deep relationship between the Pakistani military -intelligence establishment and jihadi groups dating back to the 1970s. The Lashkar e Taiba (LeT), however, Fair argues, is the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI's) most "reliable and obedient proxy." The reasons lie in LeT's ideological convergence with the Pakistani establishment, LeT's avoidance of any attacks within Pakistani territory, and its support for the state's domestic and regional agendas.

Fair's book is rare in that it provides an in-depth analysis of the Lashkar e Taiba, tracing the group's Salafi origins, its evolution over the decades and its relationship with the Pakistani state. LeT is one of the few Pakistan-based Islamist organizations that focuses solely upon two key "external enemies:" India and Afghanistan. Over the decades LeT has conducted complex and lethal terror attacks inside both India and Afghanistan, including the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which 167 people were killed including Americans and Israeli citizens.

As Fair shows, despite a plethora of terrorist groups, the LeT is never short of recruits inside Pakistan because LeT focuses solely on India. This finds resonance amongst a public that has been brought up on an educational curricula and media that views India as a perennial 'existential' threat, refers constantly to the "unfairness" of Partition and "injustice" in Kashmir.

The LeT (and its parent organization Jamaat ud Dawa, JuD) is extremely dependent on state support to recruit young men, train them both for dawa (proselytization) and jihad, operate madrassahs and campuses, publish and distribute its ideological and jihadi literature and finance its

activities. The JuD has over the decades built an elaborate ostensibly philanthropic and educational apparatus that has benefitted from state support.

In return for JuD/LeT being the Pakistani deep “state’s most dutious and governable agent” the LeT has not witnessed any significant splits or splinter groups. The Pakistani intelligence services have “engineered or fomented dissent among other militant groups to ensure enhanced control over them” but avoided any such ruptures within LeT.

Fair’s book also examines the “domestic utility” of JuD. Within Pakistan the JuD/LeT chooses to use only proselytization and education. According to Fair “this policy is at the heart of the organization’s domestic utility in Pakistan and explains why the Pakistani state invests so heavily in it and its activities at home and abroad.”

Unlike other jihadi groups – Al Qaeda, ISIS, and various Deobandi outfits – LeT opposes violence within Pakistan. Paradoxically LeT literature opposes violence against other Muslims as well as non-Muslims within Pakistan while decrying non-Muslims and other Muslims outside of Pakistan, especially in India and Afghanistan. LeT is also the only group amongst the various Pakistan-based jihadi groups that has never undertaken any attack within Pakistan. LeT thus is unique in that it supports the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment’s national security and domestic agendas.

JuD’s domestic activities include framing public opinion around issues that matter to the deep state through protests, rallies, demonstrations. In a country where secular political parties are not allowed to organize marches, non-violent movements like Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) and Aurat March are denied permissions to hold rallies, the LeT and its affiliates like Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD) or Markaz ud Dawah wal Irshad (MDI) have always been able to hold rallies that have often turned violent.

Fair’s book analyzes in detail LeT’s organizational structure, its extensive fund-raising capabilities, its recruitment policies and the increasing role it is playing in Pakistan’s domestic politics. The JuD has 2000 recruitment centers, a network of schools in addition to madaris, and a large well-trained cadre that is deployed primarily for the domestic agenda. It is this large network that the Pakistani military establishment seeks to benefit from in its recent attempts to “mainstream” jihadi groups foremost among them being JuD. In 2017 JuD launched a political party that contested Pakistan’s 2018 general elections though it did not win many seats.

Fair ends her book by examining policy options that are available to American and Indian policymakers on how to deal with a country that refuses to change its strategic outlook, insists on using jihad under the nuclear umbrella and believes its strategic location will ensure its importance to the world.

Fair notes that realistically speaking there are no good options only “less bad” ones. Her three options include maintaining the status quo, leadership decapitation, and a policy of escalation.

The status quo policy refers to the current policies followed by the U.S. and India. The American policy has centered around offering incentives and disincentives to Pakistan in the hope that Pakistan would change its strategic calculus. As former Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States and author Husain Haqqani wrote this has been a policy of “Magnificent Delusions.” The Indian policy has been one of strategic restraint: India has hoped that greater economic and military disparity combined with threat of isolation will force Pakistan to change its calculus.

Fair’s second option of leadership decapitation is based on the notion that unlike other jihadi groups LeT is extremely hierarchical with a core set of leaders with familial ties. However, Fair agrees that this is extremely difficult as it would “require detailed intelligence knowledge” of LeT leadership, “penetration of their multilayered security apparatus” and since they are in urban centers any attack would result in high civilian fatalities (which is something both America and India would be reluctant to undertake)

Fair’s third and final option essentially asks the US to “call Pakistan’s nuclear bluff” and apply pressure on Pakistan by even threatening it with the state sponsor of terrorism status. This, however, is something the US has been reluctant to do even under the Trump administration.

Dr Fair’s book is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the Pakistani state, its foreign and domestic policies and also the limited policy options both India and the United States face when it comes to dealing with Pakistan.