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We asked why Pakistanis support Lashkar-e-Taiba. Results will surprise you

The Pakistani deep state prefers the Lashkar-e-Taiba over others. At home, the brutal terrorist group is quite the opposite.

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ashkar-e-Taiba, along with Jaish-e-Mohammed, remains Pakistan's most virulent export. It remains the most effective and brutal terrorist group operating in India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and possibly elsewhere. Understanding who supports this nefarious organisation remains an important scholarly and policy analytic question. To cast light on which Pakistanis support this group, [my colleague, Karl Kaltenthaler and I](#), fielded a novel, nationally-representative survey of 7,656 Pakistanis in the country's four provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Our results may surprise you.

Ideology matters

The Lashkar-e-Taiba (and other various *noms de guerre* it has used and uses) differs from many of the Islamist terrorist groups operating in the region that hail from the Deobandi religious interpretive tradition, in that the LeT draws from the Ahl-e-Hadees tradition. In fact, the organisation has considerable conflict with these Deobandi groups in large measure because most of the Deobandis engage in a practice of *takfir*, or declaring Pakistanis to be non-Muslim, which then render them subject to lethal violence.

Moreover, the Islamic State in Pakistan draws from Deobandi militant organisations because the madrassas and the terrorist organisations the Deobandis support are deeply sectarian with a rich history of targeting non-Muslims, Shia, Ahmadi and increasingly Barelvis over the last decade.

More than anything, Pakistan's deep state values the Lashkar-e-Taiba precisely because it preaches non-violence within the country. As I discuss elsewhere, the organisation does not even publicly advocate death for Ahmadis, which puts it in stark contrast with Pakistan's Deobandis and even Barelvis, who view Ahmadis as the worst perpetrators of *shirk*(apostasy). Moreover, Lashkar believes that it provides the only ideological competitor to the Islamic State in Pakistan.

Despite the organisation's claims to be Ahl-e-Hadees, most of Pakistan's Ahl-e-Hadees ulema and institutions reject Lashkar's primary claims that waging military jihad is an inescapable obligation of all Muslims and that it can be waged only by non-state actors. Instead, most Ahl-e-Hadees ulema believe that only an *Islami Riyasit* (Islamic State) can wage jihad. While the LeT preaches nonviolence towards anyone who recognises the supremacy of Allah, it has real ideological differences with virtually all other Muslim sects in Pakistan. It accuses Barelvis (likely the largest market share in Pakistan) of committing idolatry for their cult-like adoration for the Prophet, who in Islam is merely a human being. Barelvis not only ascribe attributes to the Prophet that are reserved for Allah alone, but they also engage in practices – wearing amulets, worship of pirs, erection of elaborate graves, etc. – that the Lashkar believes to be apostasy.

Lashkar, like Deobandi militant groups, also take issue with Shias because they reject the succession of the Prophet. Unlike Deobandis, who believe that Shia are *wajib-ul-qatil*, worthy of being killed, Lashkar believes that they should be educated and converted.

Despite significant ideological differences with mainstream Ahl-e-Hadees institutions in Pakistan, according to our study, Lashkar-e-Taiba still draws support from Ahle-e-Hadees adherents. Notably, we find that Bareilvi, Shia, and Deobandi oppose the organisation, which is consistent with the LeT's proselytisation efforts (*dawa* and *tabligh*) to convert such persons to the Lashkar's understanding of the Ahl-e-Hadees interpretative tradition.

But ethnicity matters more

Lashkar has long claimed to be a Kashmiri Tanzeem, comprising Kashmiris fighting for Kashmiris and dying in Kashmir. But it has long been suspected and recent data somewhat demonstrates that only the latter claim is true (See Figure 1). Whereas some 90 per cent die in India, and over 90 per cent of its cadres come from a mere ten districts in Pakistan's Punjab. A meagre 1 per cent come from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Irrespective of the LeT's claim to be a "Kashmiri" organisation, it is by all measure a Punjabi organisation.

This raises an interesting question: Do Pakistanis support the organisation because of its religious or ethnic *bona fides*? It turns out that while ideology matters, ethnicity is the strongest predictor of support. It is far more important than ideology. At the same time, the Baloch are significantly more likely than others to oppose the Lashkar-e-Taiba whereas Sindhis are weak in their response. This also tracks with reality: Pakistan's deep state has used the Lashkar in Balochistan for various reasons.

First, it is expected that Lashkar can persuade Baloch to abandon their ethnonationalist aspirations and embrace the State-sponsored notions of Islam propounded by Lashkar. To advance this agenda, when natural disasters hit Balochistan, as they often do, Pakistan only lets "humanitarian" organisations in to do relief, which are tied to [Lashkar](#). Equally important, the Lashkar is explicitly pro-[China](#) and endorses the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Given that Pakistan will fight to the last Baloch to make the resource-rich province safe for Chinese exploitation, the

Baloch rightly view the Lashkar to be another guise of Punjabi domination working in concert with the Punjabi-dominated army, which many Baloch believe has immiserated Baloch in their own province.

Support of the Army-led status quo in Pakistan

While the Lashkar is an important and violent disruptor abroad, at home in Pakistan, it is an explicitly status quo power. While LeT advocates killing *kuffars* (nonbelievers) in India, within Pakistan, it insists upon [converting](#) them through social services, humanitarian relief, and lived examples of pious Muslims. LeT's staunch opposition to sectarian violence pits it against the Islamic State and many of the Deobandi militant groups, such as the anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ, which also operates under the names Sipah-e-Sahaba-e-Pakistan and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat) or the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP or the Pakistani Taliban), which draws many of its commanders and cadres from the LeJ.

Moreover, the Lashkar argues against any kind of protest of the State—irrespective of its leadership—and is a staunch supporter of the current domestic, political and economic system in Pakistan, including Pakistan's unaffordable [friendship](#) with China. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the third-strongest predictor of support for the Lashkar was satisfaction with the status quo. Our results should put to rest any thinking that Lashkar is a revolutionary organisation.

Mothers of brutes

While very little work has been done to explicate whether and why women support Islamist terrorism, women in Pakistan are much more likely to support the Lashkar than are men. [As I describe elsewhere](#), the organisation dedicates significant resources to recruit women to the organisation's goals to

ensure that they support the LeT by encouraging their sons and other male family members to join it either as militants or in supporting roles.

The LeT empower women to promote the organisation's creed, which empowers them and frees them to move about without hindrance. To ensure that mothers are not disenchanted with the organisation, the Lashkar-e-Taiba requires the mother's explicit blessings for every mission in which her son may meet so-called martyrdom. The organisation dispatches senior personnel to notify the parents of their sons' death and it oversees the important *ghaib-e-janaza*, or funerary prayers in absence of a body.

None of this is good news

So, what does one do with this information? These results continue to show that it is very likely that there is a viable non-kinetic strategy to deal with the Lashkar-e-Taiba. Given the extensive State support for the organisation and the stronghold that Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies have in the country, there is little scope to conduct information offensives that would undermine any of the sources of support we find.

The only options to deter the LeT—absent capabilities to impose India's will over Pakistan decisively through overt military operations—are covert and kinetic. As I have shown elsewhere, the pyramidal and open leadership structure in Pakistan make it vulnerable to leadership decapitation. While this option is challenging and difficult to execute, other options seem elusive.

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