

MUMBAI UNDER SIEGE

The Never-Ending Conflict

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Numerous theories are doing the rounds about the dastardly terrorist assault on Mumbai. The dominant view, based on what is being suggested by the media is that this is the handiwork of the dreaded Pakistan-based self-styled Islamist and terrorist outfit Lashkar-e Tayyeba, which, ever since it was ostensibly proscribed by the Government of Pakistan some years ago, has adopted the name of Jamaat ud-Dawah. This might well be the case, for the Lashkar has been responsible for numerous such terrorist attacks in recent years, particularly in Kashmir.

The Lashkar is the military wing of the Markaz Dawa wal Irshad, an outfit floated by a section of the Pakistani Ahl-e Hadith, a group with close affiliations to the Saudi Wahhabis. It has its headquarters at the town of Muridke in the Gujran-wala district in Pakistani Punjab. The Markaz was established in 1986 by two Pakistani university professors, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and Zafar Iqbal. They were assisted by Abdullah Azam, a close aide of Osama bin Laden, who was then associated with the International Islamic University in Islamabad. Funds for setting up the organization are said to have come from Pakistan's dreaded official secret services agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). From its inception, it is thus clear, the Lashkar had the support of the Pakistani establishment.

The Lashkar started out as a paramilitary organization to train warriors to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. Soon it spawned dozens of camps across Pakistan and Afghanistan for this purpose. Militants produced at these centres have played a major role in armed struggles, first in Afghanistan, and then in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, the southern Philippines and Kashmir.

Like other radical Islamist groups, the Lashkar sees Islam as an all-embracing system. It regards Islam as governing all aspects of personal as well as collective life, in the form of the *shariah*. For the establishing of an Islamic system, it insists, an "Islamic state" is necessary, which will impose the *shariah* as the law of the land. If, the official website of the Lashkar announces, 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'. And for this, as well as to respond to the oppression that it claims that Muslims in large parts of the world are suffering, it insists that all Muslims must take to armed *jihad*. Armed *jihad* must continue, its website announces, "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 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, thus effectively ending up equating Islam with terror. Being born as a result of war in Afghanistan, war has become the very *raison d'être* of the Lashkar, and its subsequent development has been almost entirely determined by this concern. The contours of its ideological framework are constructed in such a way that the theme of armed *jihad* appears as the central element of its project, in the writings and speeches of Lashkar spokesmen *jihad* appears as violent conflict (*qital*) waged against 'unbelievers' who are said to be responsible for the oppression of the Muslims. Indeed, the Lashkar projects it as the one of the most central tenets of Islam, although it has traditionally not been included as one of the 'five pillars' of the faith. Thus, its website claims that 'There is so much emphasis on this subject that some commentators and scholars of the Quran have remarked that the topic of the Quran is *jihad*'. Further, a Lashkar statement declares, 'There is consensus of opinion among researchers of the Qur'an that no other action has been explained in such great detail as *jihad*'.

In Lashkar discourse, *jihad* against non-Muslims is projected as a religious duty binding on all Muslims today. Thus the Lashkar's website claims that a Muslim who has 'never intended to fight against the disbelievers [...] is not without traces of hypocrisy'. Muslims who have the capacity to participate or assist in the *jihad* but do not do so are said to 'be living a sinful life'. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Lashkar denounces all Muslims who do not agree with its pernicious and grossly distorted version of Islam and its hideous misinterpretation of *jihad*— Sufis, Shias, Barelvis and so on—as being "deviants" or outside the pale of Islam or even in league with 'anti-Islamic forces'. The Lashkar promises its activists that they would receive great rewards, both in this world and in the Hereafter, if they were to actively struggle in the path of *jihad*. Not only would they be guaranteed a place in Heaven, but they would also 'be honoured in this

world', for *jihad*, it claims, is also 'the way that solves financial and political problems'.

Astoundingly bizarre though it is, the Markaz sees itself as engaged in a global *jihad* against the forces of 'disbelief, stopping at nothing short of aiming at the conquest of the entire world. As Nazir Ahmed, in-charge of the public relations department of the Lashkar, once declared, through the so-called *jihad* that the Lashkar has launched, 'Islam will be dominant all over the world'. This global war is seen as a solution to all the ills and oppression afflicting all Muslims, and it is claimed that 'if we want to live with honour and dignity, then we have to return back to *jihad*'. Through *jihad* the Lashkar website says, 'Islam will be supreme throughout the world'.

In Lashkar discourse, its self-styled *jihad* against India is regarded as nothing less than a war between two different and mutually opposed ideologies: Islam, on the one hand, and Hinduism, on the other. It tars all Hindus with the same brush, as supposed 'enemies of Islam'. Thus, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, Lashkar chief, declares: 'In fact, the Hindu is a mean enemy and the proper way to deal with him is the one adopted by our forefathers, who crushed them by force. We need to do the same'.

India is a major target for the Lashkar's terrorists. According to Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, 'The *jihad* is not about Kashmir only. It encompasses all of India'. Thus, the Lashkar sees its self-styled *jihad* as going far beyond the borders of Kashmir and spreading through all of India. Its final goal, it says, is to extend Muslim control over what is seen as having once been Muslim land, and, hence, to be brought back under Muslim domination, creating what the Lashkar terms as 'the Greater Pakistan by dint of *jihad*'.

The Lashkar, so say media reports, has been trying to drum up support among India's Muslims, and it may well be that it has managed to find a few recruits to its cause among them. If this is the case, it has probably been prompted by the fact of mounting murderous Hindutva-inspired anti-Muslim pogroms across the country, often abetted by agencies of the state, which has taken a toll of several thousand innocent lives. The fact that no semblance of justice has been delivered in these cases and that the state has not taken any measure to reign in Hindutva terrorism adds further to the deep-seated despondency and despair among many Indian Muslims. This might well be used by self-styled Islamist terror groups, such as the Lashkar, to promote their own agenda. Obviously, therefore, in order to counter the grave threat posed by terror groups such as the Lashkar, the Indian state needs to tackle the menace of Hindutva terror as well, which has now assumed the form of full-blown fascism. Both forms of terrorism feed on each other, and one cannot be tackled without taking on the other as well.

Mercifully, and despite the denial of justice to them, the vast majority of the Indian Muslims have refused to fall into the Lashkar's trap. The flurry of anti-terrorism conferences that have recently been organized by important Indian Islamic groups is evidence of the fact that they regard the Lashkar's perverse understanding of Islam as being wholly anti-Islamic and as a perversion of their faith. These voices urgently need to be promoted, for they might well be the most effective antidote to Lashkar propaganda. Numerous Indian Islamic scholars have spoken to insist that the Lashkar's denunciation of all non-Muslims as 'enemies of Islam', its fomenting of hatred towards Hindus and India and its understanding of *jihad* are a complete misrepresentation of Islamic teachings. They bitterly critique its call for a universal Caliphate as foolish wishful thinking. And they are unanimous that, far from serving the cause of the faith they claim to espouse, groups like the Lashkar have done the most heinous damage to the name of Islam, and are to blame, to a very large extent, for mounting Islamophobia globally.

Irrespective of who is behind the deadly attacks on Mumbai, it appears to suit the political interests and agendas of multiple and equally pernicious political forces—Islamist and Hindu radicals, fired by a hate-driven Manichaeon vision of the world, but also global imperialist powers that seem to be using the attacks as a means to push India even deeper into their suicidal axis. □