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Congressional Testimony

BAD COMPANY—LASHKAR E-TAYYIBA AND THE GROWING AMBITION OF ISLAMIST MILITANCY IN PAKISTAN

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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for your invitation to testify on Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT) and the growing ambitions of Islamist militancy in Pakistan. In my judgment, LeT today remains—after al-Qaeda—the most important terrorist group of global reach operating from South Asia. Like al-Qaeda, LeT too has a universalist ideology focused on establishing a universal Islamic Caliphate through the instrument of jihad, but unlike al-Qaeda, which is truly a stateless terrorist organization, LeT remains primarily Pakistani in its composition, uses Pakistani territory as its primary base of operation, and continues to be supported extensively by the Pakistani state, especially the Pakistani Army and its Directorate, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Since I have testified previously on LeT’s organization, ideology, and activities before the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on January 28, 2009,¹ I will focus my remarks today, as requested, principally on assessing the impact of LeT’s actions on Indo-Pakistani relations and their implications for U.S. policy. Specifically, I will describe how LeT fits into the Pakistani military’s strategy towards India and what its consequences have been for Indo-Pakistani ties and the United States. I respectfully request that my statement be entered into the record.

LeT as an Instrument of Pakistan’s National Strategy

LeT was founded in 1987 by Hafiz Saeed, Abdullah Azzam, and Zafar Iqbal as the armed wing of the Markaz Dawat-ul Irshad (MDI), the Center for Proselytization and Preaching, which sought to realize a universal Islamic state through *tableegh* (preaching) and *jihad* (armed struggle). The group’s founding occurred at a time when Pakistan was in the throes of Islamic ferment. General Zia ul-Haq’s decade-long program (1977-88) of Islamizing Pakistan had by then grown strong domestic roots, providing a plethora of armed groups such as LeT with a steady supply of volunteers, funding and, most important of all, concerted state support.

Given the current propaganda about LeT being a Kashmiri organization, it is worth remembering that the group’s earliest operations were focused on the Kunar and Paktia provinces in Afghanistan, where LeT had set up several training camps in support of the jihad against the Soviet occupation. This contribution to the anti-Soviet campaign was consistent with LeT’s mission of armed struggle against the infidels and in its earliest official supporters, General Akhtar Abdur Rahman and Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, the ISI’s directors-general during the late 1980s, the group found kindred spirits who were also tantalized by the lure of an international jihad. The mujahideen’s defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan empowered both the ISI and various jihadi groups within Pakistan which came to see state-sponsored insurgency as the key to advancing Islamabad’s myriad strategic interests. Jihad undertaken by sub-national groups with state support would thus become the instrument that allowed

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Pakistan to punch above its geopolitical weight: its campaign in Afghanistan had already contributed to the fall of a superpower and Pakistani military and intelligence officials were nothing if not ambitious during the 1980s and the 1990s when they sought to replicate the same outcome against India.

The indigenous uprising which broke out in 1989 in Jammu and Kashmir provided this opportunity. Just as Pakistan had supported the Sikh insurgency against New Delhi earlier in the decade, Islamabad now threw its weight behind the Kashmiri resistance—a development that was in many ways inevitable, given Pakistan’s longstanding claims on this disputed state. Unfortunately for Pakistan, its strategy of defeating India through armed insurgencies failed in Kashmir, just as it failed in the Punjab. By 1993, the native Kashmiri uprising spearheaded by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a secular organization composed largely of Kashmiris, was defeated by the Indian military, just as the Khalistan movement in the Punjab, also supported by Pakistan, was slowly being ground down at about the same time.

These twin defeats, first in the Punjab and then in Jammu and Kashmir, demonstrated that Pakistan’s national strategy of supporting domestic insurgencies in order to checkmate Indian power had failed conclusively. But the larger objective of keeping India “off-balance” and weakening it through persistent attacks would not disappear because it is rooted in a dangerous medley of deep geopolitical dissatisfactions, the ambitions of a self-serving military that rules even when it does not govern, and the possession of nuclear weapons.

The advent of nuclear weapons in the Pakistani arsenal only reinforced Islamabad’s commitment to pursuing the bold and provocative national strategy centered on aiding insurgencies abroad. Unable to secure its political objectives through conventional war against its stronger neighbor, the Pakistani military began to exploit its evolving strategic capabilities as cover to support various insurgencies within India as a means of either realizing its territorial claims or merely wearing India down. Both these actions operated on the premise that New Delhi would be unable to retaliate conventionally against Islamabad’s sub-conventional offensive for fear of provoking a major war that could end up in a nuclear holocaust. This realization—that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons could be used offensively to resolve outstanding disputes with India or enervate New Delhi because its larger successes could not be constrained in any other way—provided fresh impetus to Islamabad’s longstanding competition with its larger neighbor.

By 1993, when it became clear that the strategy of sustaining domestic insurgencies against India was simply not paying off in the manner expected—a sorry record that goes back to Pakistan’s earliest experiments in 1947 in Kashmir—Islamabad responded with a new strategy of fomenting *terrorism* instead. Using the instruments engendered by the jihad in Afghanistan, Pakistan quickly shifted to an alternative approach: instead of continuing to rely on dissatisfied indigenous populations to advance Islamabad’s interests through their own struggles with New Delhi, the ISI focused on injecting

combat-hardened aliens into India in order to sustain a large-scale campaign of murder and mayhem intended to bring New Delhi to its knees. Consistent with this strategy, the earliest LeT presence in India was detected in 1993 when a cohort of the group's Punjabi cadres crossed the Line of Control into Jammu and Kashmir. Its presence was publicly recognized by early-1996—a full six years after the local Kashmiri resistance burst forth—when a group of LeT terrorists massacred sixteen Hindus at Barshalla in Kashmir's Doda district. Since then, literally hundreds of terrorist attacks involving LeT militants have occurred throughout India, although it took the devastating attacks of November 2008 in Bombay—a bloodbath that claimed the lives of close to 200 people, including 26 foreigners of 15 nationalities—for the international community to recognize that LeT's ambitions, transcending India, were actually part of a larger war with the West and with its liberal democracies more generally. Today, LeT's close ties with al-Qaeda in Pakistan, its support for the Afghan Taliban's military operations (despite the ideological divide between the Deobandi and the Ahl-e-Hadith interpretations of Islam), and its close collaboration with Jamiat al-Dawa in operations directed at American troops in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, remain only the latest in a long line of hostile activities—most of which have remained *sub rosa*—affecting U.S. citizens, soldiers or interests.

That LeT pursues goals that go beyond India, even if it has focused on the latter disproportionately, is now acknowledged even by those who were initially skeptical of the group's larger ambitions. The concerted focus on India since 1996—and one that still continues—is largely due however to the interests of its state patrons in Pakistan, namely the Army and the ISI. Since the mid-1990s, ISI favored LeT as its preferred instrument for war against India: the group's dominant Punjabi composition, which matched the ethnicity of most of the Pakistani Army and ISI, its willingness to engage in risky military operations throughout India, its demonstrated savagery in encounters with the Indian military, its readiness to inflict high and indiscriminate levels of violence on its targets, and above all, its absolute loyalty to its state sponsors, made it the favored among other state-supported groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Harkat ul-Mujahedin (HUM), Harkat ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), and even the dominantly Kashmiri Hizb ul-Mujahedin (HM).

In an environment where terrorist groups often turn against their patrons, there is no record of any LeT attacks either inside Pakistan or against Pakistani Army and ISI interests. This loyalty is owed partly to the common ethnic bonds among these entities and partly to the disproportionate support offered by the ISI. At the beginning, this support was comprehensive: being a special ward of ISI's Directorate S, the organization with responsibilities for all external operations, LeT received assistance from its sponsors in the form of operational funding, specialized weapons, sophisticated communications equipment, combat training, safe haven for the leadership, hides and launching pads for the cadres, intelligence on targets and threats, campaign guidance, infiltration assistance, and, in coordination with the Pakistani Army, fire support when crossing the border into India. A highly specialized section within Directorate S, which has primary responsibility for covert operations against India and is manned by Pakistani Army officers on secondment, traditionally had responsibility for liaising with all terrorist groups engaged in these operations.

As LeT grew over the years, in part by siphoning resources from its charities run under the rubric of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, the group's autonomy from the ISI has gradually increased. Thus, for example, LeT's ability to raise funds independently from mosques in Pakistan and business and charities in the Middle East and Europe, has allowed it greater freedom of action than existed during the 1990s. Today, for example, LeT relies on the ISI primarily for safe haven and political protection for its leadership, intelligence on selected targets and threats, campaign guidance when necessary, and infiltration assistance, particularly in regard to long distance operations involving transits through third countries. Most LeT operations against India today do not require the other forms of assistance witnessed during the early years. They also do not require either formal sanction from the ISI or even exchanges of information: operating within the bounds of the extant strategy of striking India by any means, LeT operations can be undertaken with minimal reference to its state guardians so long as sufficient care is taken to ensure that these attacks cannot be readily attributable to the ISI, the Pakistani Army, or formally to the Pakistani state. Because the requirement of plausible deniability lies at the heart of ISI's relationship with LeT operations against India, directive, as opposed to detailed, control has always been preferred by the Pakistani intelligence services.

Given the objective of bleeding India through a thousand cuts, but not wounding it to a point that automatically embarrasses Pakistan or precipitates a major subcontinental war, the ISI has only sought—especially after the post-2001 era—to “modulate” the object and intensity of LeT's violence, but emphatically not to end it. The record of ISI behavior in the aftermath of the carnage in Bombay clearly confirms this fact. Although the interrogation of David Headley has now established that there were clearly some shadowy ISI connections with the Bombay attacks, the management of the LeT detainees by the Pakistani state and the tortured progress of their trial demonstrates that, whatever the outcome of this charade, the ISI has simply no intention of eviscerating LeT (or any other anti-Indian jihadi groups) because of their perceived utility to Pakistan's national strategy vis-à-vis India. Whether the strategy succeeds or fails ultimately in destroying the Indian polity has become quite irrelevant; rather, attacking India appears to be an end that justifies itself.

LeT, Indo-Pakistani Relations, and the United States

The threat posed by LeT to India today is not a danger posed by “a stateless sponsor of terrorism,” as it was unfortunately described by President George W. Bush on December 21, 2001. Rather, LeT represents a specific state-supported and state-protected instrument of terrorism that operates from the territory of a particular country—Pakistan—and exemplifies the subterranean war that Islamabad, or more specifically Rawalpindi, has been waging against India since at least the early 1980s. It is not a war that relies any more on “fomenting insurgencies,” that is, exploiting the grievances of a dissatisfied section of the Indian populace against its state. Instead, it is a war that is centered on “fomenting terrorism,” that is, unleashing groups, which have little or no connection to any existing internal grievances within India, on murderous surprise attacks aimed at indiscriminately killing large numbers

of civilians whose only fault lies in being at the wrong place at the wrong time. In other words, LeT represents one heinous face of the Pakistani Army's ongoing war with India. Yet, because of what LeT is—a terrorist organization that counts in addition Israel and the United States as its enemies solely for ideological reasons—it also represents the war that extremist forces in Pakistan, including some in its own government, are waging against many liberal states in the international community.

While it is, therefore, tempting to treat LeT as the cause of the current crisis in Indo-Pakistani relations—particularly in the aftermath of the Bombay attacks—it should instead be understood as a manifestation. The real cause of the problems in Indo-Pakistani relations remains those political forces within Pakistan that profit from continued hostility with India, namely the Pakistani Army, its key intelligence services, mainly the ISI, and their narrow bases of support among the general population. The civilian government in Pakistan, and in particular, the current regime of President Asif Ali Zardari, has a very different view of the bilateral relationship. They recognize that India represents a tremendous commercial opportunity that could contribute to Pakistan's economic growth and social uplift. Cognizant of the fact that Pakistan will never be able to favorably resolve its disputes with India through force, Zardari has sought a non-confrontational affiliation with New Delhi that would set aside existing disputes, if not resolve them, while increasing economic opportunities to permit Pakistan to deal with its many—and deteriorating—internal conditions.

Unfortunately for Pakistan, for India, and for the United States, Zardari and his civilian cohort do not make national security policy in Islamabad. All such matters, especially those relating to the nuclear program, resource allocations between military and civilian activities, and foreign relations with key states, particularly India, remain very much the provenance of the Pakistani Army. As a result of the poisoned history of the subcontinent, manifested by the pathological insecurity, fear and hatred of India in every Pakistani cantonment, the necessity of sapping India's strength through multiple kinds of warfare—economic closure, terrorist attacks, and nuclear competition—remains deeply entrenched in the Pakistani military psyche.

Ever since President George W. Bush initiated the global campaign against Islamist terrorism, his administration and that of his successor have struggled mightily to convince Pakistan that its deepest threats emerge from within its own country and not from the outside. Although this reality appears self-evident to most in the United States and in the international community, ten years and many billions of dollars in military and economic assistance later, we have to admit—with deep regret—that our efforts to wean Pakistan away from its obsession with India and away from fomenting terrorism to satisfy this obsession have failed. Consequently, the expectation that the Pakistani Army would give up its investment in jihadi groups, such as the LeT, in order to repair the damage done by such forces to its country's political fabric, has been fundamentally belied. The evidence since 2001, in fact, demonstrates conclusively that Islamabad has been content to continually play the American expectation that a fundamental shift in its national strategy might be in the offing—so as to avoid sacrificing the large quantity of U.S. assistance that seems always on offer—while it continues to

implement a self-serving counterterrorism strategy that involves targeting only those terrorist groups that threaten its own security (such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) even as it brazenly continues to provide succor and support to those elements that threaten India and Afghanistan (such as LeT and the Afghan Taliban) to this day.

The survival of groups such as LeT—despite President Barack Obama’s valiant, but thus far unsuccessful, efforts to enjoin Islamabad to target them as part of the promise of a new, long-term, U.S.–Pakistan partnership—has grave consequences for regional stability and for American security. The outrage at Bombay demonstrates one fact with clarity: strategic stability in South Asia may now depend precariously on the success or failure of a handful of lightly armed terrorists who have the ability to bring two nuclear powers to war. The Pakistani Army and the ISI may attempt to stave off this worst outcome by attempting to better control their terrorist clients, but because their focus still remains centered on modulating the activities of these groups rather than eviscerating them altogether, the very existence of these forces ensures that the threat of “catalytic” war in the Indian subcontinent remains an ever-present possibility—and this condition will persist so long as the Pakistani military concludes that its interests are better served by protecting its terrorist clients instead of putting them out of business.

That a conflict has been avoided thus far has been solely due to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s courageous decision to stay India’s hand, despite enormous pressure to the contrary. Against much opposition, including from within his own party, he has even resumed the dialogue with Pakistan. This effort, which most recently took the form of a meeting between the Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries, brings respite, but not necessarily hope. This is because there is no “peace party” in Pakistan today that is both politically effective and committed to reconciliation with India: those who seek to turn the page in relations with New Delhi are for most part feckless; those who truly hold power in Islamabad do not consider making peace with India a particularly pressing priority. Consequently, all of Prime Minister Singh’s initiatives, no matter how well intentioned, appear to face bleak prospects for want of a suitable partner in Pakistan capable of effective reciprocity. Singh’s efforts to reach out to Islamabad will, as a result, buy some time, but they will not and have not remedied what remains the fundamental problem of strategic stability in South Asia: that regional peace and security is now hostage to bands of terrorists whose actions, even when unbeknownst to their state patrons, have the potential of provoking major war.

This danger has resulted in many senior U.S. officials characterizing terrorist groups such as LeT as if they were comprehensively rogue actors, intent on destroying the fragile peace process between India and Pakistan. Although some jihadi actions may indeed have just this effect, it is important to end the farce of treating these entities as if they are truly free agents, acting of their own accord, untethered to the state organs from which they derive protection, succor, and support. If groups like LeT continue to thrive and operate effectively—despite the risks of war attendant upon their actions—it is fundamentally because they are aided and supported by the Pakistani military, which,

however regrettable it may be, has concluded that its interests are more enhanced than subverted by the continued sustenance of such “strategic assets.” Accordingly, U.S. policy towards South Asia will fail if it does not accept the reality that all the Islamist terrorist groups operating within the region are, far from being anarchic free agents, actually instruments of state authority.

Whatever its public rhetoric, the Obama administration understands this fact clearly, just as its predecessor did. Consequently—and to its credit—it has invested much effort in attempting to persuade Pakistan, and in particular the Pakistani Army, to change course with respect to supporting various terrorist groups, especially LeT. President Obama in his personal letter to President Zardari delivered in November 2009, in fact, made targeting LeT, among others, one of the conditions for a renewed U.S. strategic partnership with Pakistan. Thus far, however, Islamabad has been non-responsive, preferring instead to emphasize the threat India poses to Pakistan (thereby implicitly justifying its continued reliance on terrorist groups), while demanding further U.S. assistance that is explicitly intended to inveigle the United States into Rawalpindi’s relentless security competition with India.

Whether the administration’s entreaties to Pakistan will be more successful in the future is any one’s guess. But, if the record of this decade is any indication, President Obama will be just as unsuccessful as President Bush was in getting the Pakistani military to reverse course in regards to its support for terrorism. In part, this is because senior Pakistani military officers read all American admonitions regarding LeT in particular as special pleading on behalf of India. Decision makers within the Pakistani security establishment have not yet internalized the fact that American concerns about LeT date back to the 1990s and particularly after the events in Bombay have increased in salience because of the growing conviction—with much supporting evidence from the U.S. intelligence community—that LeT’s activities in Afghanistan, South Asia (outside of India), the Middle East, China, Europe, and North America, make it increasingly a direct threat to the United States.

Even as U.S. efforts to persuade Pakistan of its concerns are floundering, the intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation with India on the other hand has been flourishing, at least since the LeT attacks in Bombay. This cooperation was driven in part by the U.S. calculation that if Pakistan could not be persuaded to interdict LeT, aiding India to cope with the threats posed by this group at least offered a near-term palliative while American diplomacy worked its course. Although the Indian government would very much prefer that Washington recognize the limits of its leverage with Pakistan and shift towards a tougher policy towards Islamabad as a means of mitigating the continuing threat of Pakistani terrorism, it has embarked on a historically unprecedented program of counterterrorism cooperation with the United States. The fruits of this effort thus far have been remarkable: although most of the details are classified, the information shared between the United States and India about LeT activities has led to the foiling of numerous planned attacks, although it is certain that planning for future attacks continues in Pakistan just as vigorously as counterterrorism officials in Washington and New Delhi cooperate to defeat them. The difficulty in this arena is that counterterrorism activities

have to be successful every time if a tragedy is to be avoided, whereas LeT plotters and their handlers have to be successful only occasionally in order to wreck the mayhem that precipitates a crisis.

The only lasting solution to this danger is to press Pakistan to target groups such as LeT conclusively. Many in the United States imagine that the fix actually lies in pressing India to make peace with Pakistan; such an outcome would eliminate the Pakistani military's incentives to support a sub-conventional conflict against New Delhi—or so the theory goes. There is no doubt that a lasting reconciliation between India and Pakistan would be fundamentally in the interests of both countries—and of the United States. To that degree, Washington should certainly use its influence with both India and Pakistan to encourage the dialogue that leads to a resolution of all outstanding disputes, including the vexed problem of Kashmir. But, unfortunately for those who advocate pressing India, the impediments to a lasting peace in South Asia do not emanate from New Delhi. Rather, they are incubated in Islamabad, or to be more precise, in Rawalpindi.

So long as the Pakistani Army and the security establishment more generally conclude that their private interests (and *their* conception of the national interest) are undermined by a permanent reconciliation between India and Pakistan, they will not rid themselves of the terrorist groups they have begotten and which serve their purposes—irrespective of what New Delhi or Kabul or Washington may desire. This fact ought to be understood clearly by the Obama administration. Once it is, it may push the United States to either compel Pakistan to initiate action against LeT or hold Pakistan responsible for the actions of its proxies. If these efforts do not bear fruit, the United States will have to contemplate unilateral actions (or cooperative actions with other allies) to neutralize the most dangerous of the terrorist groups now resident in Pakistan. Doing so may be increasingly necessary not simply to prevent a future Indo-Pakistani crisis, but more importantly to protect the United States, its citizens, its interests, and its allies.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee for your attention and your kind consideration.