

Testimony before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia (MESA) on

**"Bad Company: Lashkar e-Tayyiba and the Growing Ambition of
Islamist Militancy in Pakistan."**

By

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Congressman Burton, Members of the Committee, I am honored to be invited to speak before you today.

I speak as a Pakistani who follows closely developments inside Pakistan and the US-Pakistan Relationship. At the Atlantic Council, we are committed to “waging peace” in the region and to finding practicable solutions to the security, economic, political, and social challenges facing greater South and Central Asia. Last year we issued a detailed report on Pakistan, warning of troubles ahead if we did not support that country’s fledgling democracy as it took on a rising insurgency. We are shortly going to issue another report that focuses on the progress made to date but warns of dangers ahead if we ignore systemic issues domestically and in the US-Pakistan relationship.

Today’s topic is at the heart of the dangers that confront Pakistan today. The Lashkar e Tayyiba represents a Frankenstein’s Monster created for the purpose of assisting the Kashmir freedom movement but that ended up becoming a powerful Sunni Punjabi movement with an independent agenda that appears to have taken on a broader regional role. It was born out of the US-backed Afghan Jihad against the Soviets, and built on the training provided by that war to Punjabi

fighters who could then inculcate Kashmiri fighters in their ways. Successive civil and military leaders of Pakistan supported the movement as a strategic asset to counter a powerful India to the East and to force it to negotiate for a settlement of the disputed territory by waging a war of “a thousand cuts”.

Over time, however, the sponsored organization took on a life of its own, finding the economically disadvantaged area of Central and Southern Punjab to be a fertile territory for recruitment of Jihadi warriors. In a country where the median age is estimated to be 18 years (and hence half the population of 175 million is below that age), the recruitment pool of unemployed and impressionable youth is huge.

The attraction of the militants’ message cannot be countered by military might alone. It has to be addressed at the core by changing the underlying socio-economic conditions that foster militancy as a passport to a better life here and in the hereafter.

LeT spread its wings nationwide, using its contacts to raise funds from the public and gradually attained autarkic status. Collection boxes for the Kashmiri jihad in shops, at mosques, and around the festivals of Eid al Fitr and Aid al Adha gave it a steady source of income. It spun off a social welfare organization, the Jamaat ud Dawa that served to proselytize on behalf of the LeT while providing much needed social services. In doing this, the LeT was playing to the weakness of the corrupt political system of Pakistan that failed to recognize and meet the basic needs of its population at large while catering to the elites. The performance of the Jamaat ud Dawa during

the earthquake of 2005 won it more followers in a critical region of the country that straddled the Karakoram Highway linking China to Pakistan.

The Inter Services Intelligence began losing its control as the LeT became more self sufficient. But the realization that the LeT had become autonomous was slow in being understood or accepted in the ISI and by the military leadership of Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf. His ambivalence about the LeT even in 2002 was evident in his confusion during an interview with Australian Broadcasting Corporation, when he challenged the interviewer who stated that the LeT had been banned. Musharraf thought only the Jaish e Mohammed had been banned, referring to another surrogate of the ISI in Kashmir. Today, LeT is banned. But its social services wing, the Jamaat ud Dawa, is not and remains an active surrogate.

General Musharraf made an effort to lower the political temperature in Kashmir and began distancing the state from the LeT. However, the process was not handled as well as it could have been. Similar to the disbanding of the Iraqi army after the US invasion when thousands of trained soldiers and officers were let go, the LeT was cut loose without a comprehensive plan to disarm, re-train, and gainfully employ the fighters. A dangerous corollary was the induction into the militancy of some former members of the military who had trained and guided them in their war in Kashmir.

What should we do? I believe that it may not be too late to assist Pakistan in crafting a plan to reach out to the fighters of the LeT and other Punjabi militant organizations and by involving their extended families in the process, provide training and stipends to wean them away from

their militant path. The extended family unit could play a role in ensuring against recidivism on the part of the fighters. Simultaneously it is critical to focus on drastically changing the Islamist curriculum of public schools, a vestige of the period of general Zia ul Haq's rule, and invest in South and Central Punjab to create job opportunities that would lift up the relatively backward population of this area.

Enough evidence exists now to link the Sunni militant groups Sipah e Sahaba and Jaish e Mohammed with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The LeT's emerging role as a trans regional force that has broadened its aim to include India and perhaps even Afghanistan, by linking with the Students Islamic Movement of India or SIMI and the Harkat ul Jihad al Islami or HUJI of Bangladesh poses a serious threat to regional stability. Another Mumbai-type attack involving the LeT might bring India and Pakistan into conflict, a prospect that should keep us awake at night. In Pakistan, both the civil and the military now appear to recognize the existential threat from home grown militancy. The army appears to have dislocated the Tehreek e Taliban of Pakistan. Yet, it faces a huge and, to my mind, greater threat in the hinterland, in the form of the LeT.

My own research into the recruitment of the Pakistan army over 1970 to 2005 indicates that the army is now recruiting heavily in the same area. Unless we change the underlying social and economic conditions, the Islamist militancy that appears to be taking root there will start seeping into the military.

Mr. Chairman, I am grateful that this committee is focusing on this issue and thank you for allowing me to share some of my ideas. I shall be glad to provide more details in my replies to queries.