

# Not at the forefront of flood relief

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Within days of the onset of Pakistan's devastating floods about six weeks ago, the media began reporting that militant group -- or their purported charity wings -- were at the 'forefront of flood relief.' Lashkar-e-Taiba has been singled out with alarm because it is the most lethal group that operates across several countries in the South Asian region and beyond. With the Pakistani government appearing ever more ineffective and with some Islamist militants ravaging Pakistan itself and others yet savaging Afghanistan and India from bases within Pakistan, this could hardly be welcome news. This reportage echoes that of the October 2005 earthquake in Kashmir, wherein several credible

journalists claimed that these same militant groups were leading the relief effort while domestic and international organizations dithered. However, a recent important study finds that these groups were *only* minimally involved. This research should restrain commentators from giving these groups a public relations campaign that they will not likely deserve when the history of this calamity is written. Lashkar-e-Taiba, now called Jamaat-ul-Dawa and operating under yet another moniker of Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation, has also proclaimed its own prodigious activities through its spokesperson, Yayha Mujahid. The organization also has claimed that it distributed USAID relief supplies to flood victims. Lashkar-e-Taiba particularly discomfits American officials because it perpetrated the four-day killing spree in Mumbai over the Thanksgiving weekend in 2008. More than 170 people died -- including four Americans. The group also has targeted U.S. troops in Afghanistan, along with Afghan and international coalition members, since 2004. If Lashkar-e-Taiba and other Islamist militant groups are truly involved in relief efforts on the scale reported, they could disseminate their message of jihad against kafirs and apostates *and* foster further erosion of trust and confidence in the Pakistani government under the umbrella of their ostensibly popular humanitarian relief efforts. Discerning their real activities should be an important priority for these reasons. However, if the facts of their involvement in the 2005 earthquake offer any insights, the media would do well to reconsider how they cover these groups' purported involvement in flood relief until robust data are available.

In a critical newly released **study**, Jishnu Das and Tahir Andrabi conducted the most extensive assessment of the impact of domestic and international actors upon the populations in Kashmir and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that were devastated by that 7.6 magnitude earthquake which killed as many as 75,000 people.

While reports claimed that these militant groups were leading the **relief effort**, including the deployment and use of tactical x-ray and surgical equipment, the data tell a very different story. Das and Andrabi surveyed 28,297 households from 126 villages in the affected regions. Among other important questions, they asked respondents *which groups* were involved in providing relief. More than one quarter of the households reported that an international organization directly provided assistance to them. Another 7 percent of the households identified legitimate Islamic charities (i.e. *not* affiliated with militant organizations in any way) such as Islamic Relief. In stark contrast, a mere 268 households out of 28,297 recalled groups tied to Islamist militancy such as Lashkar-e-Taiba's "Jamaat-ul-Dawa" being involved in relief efforts. That is about one percent.

While Lashkar-e-Taiba managed to visit 26 villages, the vast majority of the households reporting such contacts were located near Lashkar-e-Taiba's extant infrastructure. In other words, Lashkar-e-Taiba (operating under its then purported charity wing Jamaat-ul-Dawa) was engaged in relief efforts largely where they were located in the first place. After the initial advantage afforded by Lashkar-e-Taiba's proximity to parts of the quake-affected area, they were squeezed out as international and national organizations mobilized. Within six weeks, it was the Pakistani army which carried the load of relief.

As I peruse my copy of Mr. Mujahid's personal business card, it is clear "Jamaat-ul-Dawa" has an extensive presence throughout the country -- especially in the Punjab, which has been acutely affected by the flood. However, this current catastrophe differs significantly from the earthquake both in terms of the expanse of its damage and the types of problems that will emerge, such as food security, water-borne illness, lack of access to hospitals and other social services, among other enduring challenges. While it is impossible to predict, these differences may render these militant groups more durable in their presence and comprehensive in their geographic areas of operations in relief provision.

However, if 2005 offers any insights, it is possible that these militant groups again may be displaced in the landscape of humanitarian relief provision as the current tragedy unfolds and international and national organizations expand their spheres of operations. Unfortunately, no one will notice -- much less report -- if and when at last they recede into irrelevance. All that will remain is a flawed historical account of their "extraordinary contributions" that will bestow upon them undeserved plaudits at home and abroad while doing harm to the efforts of those legitimate aid groups that stayed the course.

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