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## The Foreign Policy Essay: C. Christine Fair on “Lashkar-e-Taiba: Pakistan’s Domesticated Terrorists”

By [Daniel Byman](#)

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Lashkar-e-Tayiba (LeT), which operates under the name Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JUD), is both an important and misunderstood terrorist group. LeT grabbed world attention in 2008, when its operatives attacked hotels and other sites during a multi-day operation in Mumbai, India that killed over 160 people. In addition to the horror of the attack itself, American officials were alarmed because the attackers appeared to single out Western and Jewish targets—and one of the key logisticians of the attack was the Pakistani American David Headley. This led to worries that LeT, a massive and powerful organization, might throw in its lot with Al Qaeda’s war against the United States. My Georgetown colleague Christine Fair offers a different take on LeT, describing how the organization has embraced social welfare activities since 9/11 and, with the cooperation of the Pakistani state, has successfully rebranded itself as a more benign entity, even as it maintains its violent role.

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[Lashkar-e-Tayiba](#) (LeT), which has long operated under the new name Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) is the most lethal terrorist group operating from South Asia. LeT first emerged in 1993 as the military wing of the Punjab-based Markaz Daawat ul Irshad (MDI). In 1986, two Pakistani engineering professors, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and Zafar Iqbal founded the MDI. The ISI was a crucial partner of LeT from the start. Additionally Abdullah Azzam, a close associate of Osama bin Laden, also provided assistance to the fledgling organization. The majority of LeT operatives are [Pakistanis \(often Punjabis\)](#) and the organization has spawned a vast training infrastructure to support its dual mission of training militants and converting Pakistanis to the Ahl-e-Hadith interpretative tradition. For much of the 1990s (with few exceptions), LeT operations were restricted to Indian-administered Kashmir. By 2000 LeT began conducting operations in Delhi and beyond. Currently it can conduct operations throughout India.

JuD is distinctive from other [Pakistani militant groups](#). The vast majority of the Islamist terrorist and insurgent groups operating from and in Pakistan draw from the Deobandi interpretative tradition of Islam. (Deobandism began as a religious revivalist movement—associated with the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence—centered in Deoband in modern India, during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It remains a South Asian movement although it has also taken root where Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshis have migrated.) These Deobandi groups include the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistan Taliban, the anti-Shia Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and so-called “Kashmiri” outfits such as Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkut-ul-Jihad-Islami etc. Members of these groups often overlap because of a shared network of Deobandi madrassas, mosques, and religious scholars; many have cooperated with fellow Deobandi militants in their respective jihad. Some of these groups have a long history of killing Pakistanis, whether security forces, civilian politicians, or members of other religious groups such as Ahmediyas, Shia, Christians, Hindus, and increasingly Barelvis, who comprise the majority of Pakistanis.

In contrast, [JuD](#) is from the Ahl-e-Hadis interpretive tradition of Islam, which is associated with the Hanbali Islamist school of jurisprudence. Frequently, adherents of this school are described as “Salafist.” Unlike numerous Deobandi groups which have turned their guns and bomb against Pakistanis, JuD has *never* operated against targets in Pakistan. JuD has remained a stalwart defender of the state. Most importantly, its own ideology argues against Deobandi terrorists operating against Pakistanis and insists that only jihad outside of Pakistan is legitimate. Thus, JuD is an important domestic barrier to a divisive and dangerous development that has claimed as many as 40,000 lives in the last decade alone. Its leader, Hafez Saeed—a terrorist near the top of the US most-wanted list, for whom the United States has offered a bounty of \$10 million for evidence that could lead to a prosecution—has become a household figure in Pakistan, leading large, boisterous processions across the country denouncing an array of American perfidies from drone strikes to the Afghan war. The organization is a part of the Interservices Intelligence Directorate’s (ISI) strategy to orchestrate maximal antipathy towards the United States so that it can resist pressure to cooperate with the United States, and extract a higher price when it does cooperate whether on drone strikes, arresting or eliminating terrorists of mutual interests to the United States and Pakistan, or facilitating logistical efforts to sustain the US war in Afghanistan.

I argue that Pakistan has enabled the organization to rebrand itself as a domestic philanthropic organization in order to maintain itself in the face of US pressure on Pakistan to crack down on terrorism. These efforts are paying off. JuD’s [website](#) (in Urdu) frequently shows the organization dispensing medicine and other social services, and engaging in relief operations across the country.

### **Rebranding LeT**

LeT began reorganizing itself in December 2001, only a few days before the United States designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organization. American and Pakistani analysts alike believe that the ISI alerted LeT to this impending designation. As a part of this restructuring, LeT’s leader, Hafiz Saeed, proclaimed that there would be a militant component of the organization which would be commanded by Maulana Rehman Lakhvi, and a larger umbrella organization that became known as Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). Because it received advance warning of the

impending designation, LeT transferred most of its financial assets and personnel. LeT buildings, offices, training facilities, and bank accounts were all rebranded as assets of JuD.

This rebranding was not just in name only. From 2004 onward, JuD became increasingly known for its relief work. It gained some notoriety when it delivered several truckloads of aid relief to the victims of the [2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka](#). Later, in the devastating [2005 earthquake](#) that killed tens of thousands in Pakistan's Kashmir, the organization again drew international attention for its relief and rescue operations. In 2009, now operating under yet another name, Falah-e-Insaniat Foundation (FIF), the organization allegedly provided relief to the internally displaced persons in [Swat](#) who had been effected by Pakistani military operations. And in 2010, domestic and international media reported on its extensive relief services to the hundreds of thousands of flood victims.

There was one problem with this reporting: it grossly exaggerated what the organization did. In fact, JuD provided only negligible [flood relief](#) or [earthquake relief](#). Pakistan's intelligence and Inter Services Public Relations office seemed to be pointing domestic and international journalists specifically to the areas where JuD was working. The end result is that JuD gained a reputation that it likely did not deserve at home and abroad.

### **What the Data Say**

While the heroics of JuD (aka FIF or LeT) are certainly dubious, the results of public relations campaign accompanying these alleged activities are not. Based on a recent survey conducted by me and my colleagues, Jacob N. Shapiro and Neil Malhotra, the public attributes to JuD many things that it does to genuine philanthropic organizations (see the quick summary below in Table One).

In 2011, the team fielded a [face-to-face survey among 16,279 respondents](#). We wanted to know what services and activities Pakistanis ascribed to several militant groups, including JuD. We interspersed questions about JuD and other militant groups (Sipah-e-Sahaba and the Afghan Taliban) with an important Muslim relief organization (Islamic Relief), a Pakistani development NGO (Agha Khan), and a proselytization group (Tablighi Jamaat). We first asked how many had heard of each groups. For those who were familiar with the organization, we fielded a battery of questions and asked respondents to indicate which services and activities they believed each group does.

The results are striking. Despite the massive boost from Pakistani media, fewer than 40 percent of respondents had heard of the group. However, this is substantially greater than those who knew of Islamic Relief, and comparable to the share who knew of Agha Khan. (It is likely that this estimate of public knowledge of JuD is low. It is a well-known problem of such surveys that respondents may be wary of admitting to knowledge of such controversial groups. Thus there may be greater public awareness than this metric suggests.)

Among those who conceded knowledge of this and the other organizations, about one half believe that JuD provides social services, provides burial assistance to the poor, and helps internally displaced persons—with somewhat more respondents believing that JuD builds

religious schools. Nearly 60 percent believe that JuD publishes books and magazines (which it does in copious quantities) and propagates Islam (which it also does). This is in addition to about 70 percent who also believe JuD “trains activists to help oppressed Muslims through Jihad.” In several respects, JuD’s public profile seems closer to Agha Khan’s than the other militant groups included in the survey.

### **Implications**

Since 2001, LeT has steadily sought to rebrand itself away from a group that largely provides jihad to a large scale social service provider in addition to jihad. These activities have expanded since 2004. The organization now seems to have a profile that more resembles legitimate philanthropic organizations than its peer and competitor terrorist organizations. There can be little doubt that this is exactly it has sought to do all along with the help of Pakistan’s intelligence and military.

It is certainly bad news for the United States and the international community, who would like Pakistan to clamp down on this group and inhibit its ability to operate in India. As the organization’s good standing grows in Pakistan, its government handlers can point to its growing support base as yet another reason for inaction.

The United States has had little success in shaping the information environment in Pakistan. The ISI, which exerts enormous control over domestic media on such issues, will always be in a place to undermine US efforts to increase the quality of information about this group. This does not mean that the United States should not try. There are some things that the United States could do at least in principle.

First, it must engage the Pakistani public through Urdu. Few Pakistanis are literate in any language and fewer yet know English. The United States needs to expand its public diplomatic efforts to embrace local languages such as Urdu and even Punjabi. The US embassy should support a sustained information campaign about LeT and its killing sprees in India and Afghanistan and this should be in Urdu as well as in English.

Second, the United States needs to do a better job of exploiting this organization’s copious publications such as its robust defenses of violent jihad (e.g. Hum Kyon Jihad Kar Rahen Hai (Why We are Waging Jihad) and Difa-e-Jihad (Defense of Jihad)). Even a cursory familiarization with these texts is adequate to undermine the claims of the organization and by the Pakistani government that it is solely a philanthropic and human development organization.

Third, the United States should abandon any delusions that it can reshape Pakistan through economic and military support and develop more coercive tools to contain the threat that Pakistan poses to itself and beyond.

**Table 1: Public Beliefs about JuD and other Islamist Militant Groups and Charities**

	<b>Jamaat- ud-Dawa</b>	<b>Tablighi Jamaat</b>	<b>Islamic Relief</b>	<b>Agha Khan</b>	<b>Sipah-e- Sahaba</b>	<b>Afghan Taliban</b>
<b>Percent who have heard of group</b>	38.9	82.1	25.1	36.4	48.4	63.1
<b>Percent who think group:</b>						
<b>Provide social services</b>	51.5	36.6	74.4	79.8	37.4	18.1
<b>Help poor with burial</b>	47.4	33.1	58.0	45.4	32.4	19.8
<b>Train activists to help oppressed Muslims through jihad</b>	71.3	36.7	37.2	17.0	68.4	74.3
<b>Provide assistance to internally displaced peoples</b>	48.6	31.8	64.5	54.8	31.4	13.3
<b>Financially support Kahmiris in Maqbooza Kashmir</b>	47.6	28.0	45.2	22.4	37.5	18.8
<b>Publish books and magazines</b>	61.1	51.5	49.6	34.0	50.2	31.1
<b>Propagate Islam among Pakistanis</b>	61.7	90.3	44.8	19.8	55.0	35.0
<b>Build madrassahs for religious studies</b>	56.3	49.9	55.2	27.5	46.0	27.5