



**Christine C. Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2018), 307.**

*Reviewed by Prof. Dr Eamon Murphy, Adjunct Professor, School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry, Curtin University, Australia.*

I was staying in Islamabad in 2005 when a devastating earthquake in Pakistan-administered *Azad* (Free) Kashmir killed around 90,000 people and caused widespread damage. At the time, I wondered why the terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT, Army of the Pure) played such a major role in the relief effort.

Fair's book provides the answer to this and other perplexing questions about the appeal of LeT among so many young Pakistani males and their families. Fair's book, consequently, makes a highly original contribution to our understanding of the appeal and successes of terrorist groups both in Pakistan and more widely.

Fair, an eminent if, at times, outspoken controversial South Asian linguist and political scientist, explains the appeal of LeT, also known as *Jamaat-ud-Dawa* (JuD, Society for Proselytization), through a textual analysis of its numerous publications: books, pamphlets and periodicals. Central to her analysis is a sample of the

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numerous biographies of LeT *Shaheeds* (martyrs) which she and her research team have been collecting for a number of years. By utilising these previously neglected sources, Fair presents important original information and insights about the organisation, the recruits and their families, and its impact on external and, in particular, its domestic politics which other terrorism scholars have largely ignored.

Fair concludes that most LeT members are recruited at an average age of 17 years and are generally relatively more educated, lower-middle class males. Most are recruited from the part of the Punjab Province closest to the Indian border where anger towards the atrocities committed against Muslims during partition in 1947 is strongest. Very few recruits come from Kashmir but most fight in Indian- controlled Kashmir.

The young men's motivations for joining the LeT vary widely. For many, joining gives them a purpose in life. Some recruits are self-motivated, while others are attracted through LeT publications and social media recordings, or after discussions with relatives and people they meet in mosques and *madaris* (religious schools). Some are religiously motivated; others are simply bored and want some fun and excitement in their otherwise humdrum lives. The latter are not very different from other young men who join regular armies. Yet, there are those who are angry at the treatment of Muslims in Kashmir, particularly women, by the Indian security forces.

One of the most disturbing conclusions Fair draws from her research is that many parents, siblings and wives, especially mothers, urge their loved ones to join the LeT and become *Shaheeds*. As Fair explains, having a *Shaheed* as a family member brings financial benefits, great respect, especially to the mother, and guarantees that 70 members of the family will go to Heaven. Interestingly, LeT itself urges its operatives to fight to the end if they have to but to escape if possible.

In truth, however, the vast majority of LeT's recruits never take part in combat. Rather, most are sent on *Dawah* (proselytising) missions to convert people in South Asia to the fundamentalist puritanical exclusivist *Ahl-e-Hadith* sect whose beliefs underpin LeT's *raison d'être*. The recruits, many of whom have never previously attended a religious school, are given a religious education and are

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expected to be model citizens. The recruits and their families are expected to live a very simple puritanical life. Watching television, listening to music, and taking photographs are frowned upon as a highly undesirable Western influence. Women are urged to be veiled and males to be full bearded.

The LeT also runs schools which teach regular subjects as well as religious studies. One of the major reasons for LeT's appeal is that it provides a wide range of welfare benefits such as ambulance services, hospitals, blood banks, food for the poor, and responds quickly in times of natural disaster such as the Kashmir earthquake. The LeT formed a political party in August 2017, the Milli Muslim League, to contest elections.

Fair demolishes the myth, held particularly in the West, that terrorist organisations are only concerned with violence and are run by irrational religious fanatics who use the illiterate poor, who have been brainwashed in fundamentalist *madaris*, as cannon fodder. LeT is well-organised, hierarchical and disciplined. Its technical experts are highly skilled in the most effective use of the latest modern communications and military technologies. It conducts a rigorous training programme for the new recruits selected to fight.

While it is just one of a number of Pakistani-based *jihadi* organisations, it is the most competent and arguably the most dangerous threat to peace and security in the subcontinent. Its attacks on targets in India, especially Indian-occupied Kashmir, have led to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. LeT orchestrated the attack on Mumbai in 2008 which killed over 160 people over three days, and brought India and Pakistan perilously close to war and the horror of nuclear weapons.

Proscribed as a terrorist organisation by many countries, the United States, in 2012, announced a bounty of USD 10 million on LeT's co-founder and current *Emir* (leader) Hafiz Saeed for his alleged role in the 2008 Mumbai massacre. He was arrested in Pakistan on terror financing and money laundering charges under the country's Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997 in the summer of 2019.

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Unlike other terrorist groups, the Le-T has not turned against the Pakistan state and rejects the use of violence against members of rival Muslim sects arguing that the only legitimate *jihad* is that waged outside the country. Rather surprisingly, it also has no quarrel with Pakistan's religious minorities arguing that they should be persuaded to convert rather than to be coerced. It has identified India and Indian interests in Afghanistan as its sole enemy.

While we may abhor as morally indefensible LeT's terrorist tactics and the killing of innocent civilians outside of Pakistan, we need to fully understand why it is such a successful organisation before effective means can be made to counter it. This beautifully written, highly incisive book is essential reading in Pakistan, India and elsewhere by anyone who wishes to see terrorist organisations, like the LeT, defeated and peace and stability to prevail between India and Pakistan. It is a highly recommended read. ■