

The Milli Muslim League Politics of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba

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Almost ten years after the fateful 26/11 Mumbai terror attack, Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's Prime Minister at the time of the attack, in an interview on May 18, 2018, clearly acknowledged, for the first time, the presence of militant outfits in Pakistan and their use by Pakistan's so called 'deep state'.¹

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1 "Political scientists and foreign policy experts have used the term deep state for years to describe individuals and institutions who exercise power independent of—and sometimes over—civilian political leaders. They applied it mainly to developing countries like Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey, where generals and spies called the real shots in nominally democratic societies and replaced elected leaders when they saw fit.", as stated by Michael Crowley, "The Deep State Is Real", Politico Magazine, September/October, 2017, June 1 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/deep-state-real-cia-fbi-intelligence-215537>. "In recent years, analysts have begun using the expression 'deep state' for Pakistan to reflect the fact that a coterie of current and retired military and intelligence essentially run the state irrespective of the policy preferences of Pakistan's civilian leaders. An implication of this is that the civilians exert virtually no control of these elements.", as stated by C. Christian Fair and Sarah J. Watson, "Introduction: Pakistan's Enduring Challenges", in C. Christian Fair and Sarah J. Watson (eds.), Pakistan's Enduring Challenges, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2015, p. 22.

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The recently ousted Prime Minister stated,

Militant organisations are active. Call them non-state actors, should we allow them to cross the border and kill 150 people in Mumbai? Explain it to me. Why can't we complete the trial?²

“The trial” was a reference to the Mumbai attacks-related cases which have stalled in a Rawalpindi anti-terrorism court. The former Prime Minister indeed went further to state, “You can't run a country if you have two or three parallel governments. This has to stop. There can only be one government: the constitutional one.”³ Nawaz Sharif was unambiguously referring to the Pakistan Army and its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and their most subservient proxies: the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and its affiliates which have been functioning in Pakistan despite a ban. These entities constitute what can best be described as Pakistan's ‘deep state’.

The LeT is one of Pakistan's largest militant Islamist organisations. Founded in 1987 by Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, it has played a central role in indoctrinating, recruiting, and training thousands of jihadists to fight for Pakistan. The group has since expanded its targets to include the U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Hindus and Sikhs have been its major targets in J&K through the 1990s, and their operations include the March 20, 2000, massacre of 35 Sikhs at Chattisinghpora, Anantnag, on the eve of the then US President Bill Clinton's visit to India.

In 2002, LeT was banned by the Musharraf Regime due to severe international pressure. But the organisation continued to

2 Mohammad Imran, “What did I say that was wrong ?”: Nawaz responds to controversy around remarks on Mumbai attacks”, *Dawn*, May 14, 2017, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1407622>.

3 Ibid.

grow in its scope and activities under the umbrella of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). After the 2008 Mumbai terror incident, in which 166 people were killed in a coordinated attack at multiple locations by 10 members of the LeT international pressure further mounted on Pakistan to ban JuD. However, defying all bans, the LeT, the JuD and other affiliated front outfits like the Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF) have continued to operate freely in Pakistan under the guise of so called charity organisations.

More recently, in August 2017, LeT floated a new political outfit, the Milli Muslim League (MML) with the aim of participating in electoral politics of Pakistan. At the time of its launch, party President Saifullah Khalid, stated: "We have decided to make a new political party, so that Pakistan is made a real Islamic and welfare state." Saifullah Khalid has been a long-time office bearer of JuD and a close associate of Hafiz Saeed. Clearly, this could not have happened without the knowledge and support of the Pakistani establishment. The spokesperson of the newly formed MML, Tabish Qayoum, announced that the party had filed for registration with Pakistan's Election Commission, but this was denied after protracted litigation. However, JuD fielded a candidate as an 'independent' for the 2017 by-election to Constituency National Assembly (NA) 120, vacated by disqualified Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The MML again announced its intention to contest the July 2018 general elections for Pakistan's National Assembly from Punjab (Pakistan), on the platform of a dormant but registered political party – *Allahu Akbar Tehreek* (AAT). This party was registered in 2013 with Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) under the leadership of Mian Ahsan Bari. What is noticeable is that Hafiz Saeed's son, Hafiz Talha, and son-in-law, Hafiz Khalid Walid, will be contesting the July 25, 2018 general elections from the Punjab Province of Pakistan, with MML support.

The crucial question that begs attention is why Saeed developed an interest in forming a political party and contest elections at this juncture? Does the likely transition from an Islamist terror organisation to a political party mean that Pakistan has changed its policy of using Saeed's organisation to settle scores with India?⁴ The trend does not auger to this direction. As we know, Islamist militant groups within Pakistan have proliferated and are also divided on various ideological-doctrinal and theological approaches. Some of them have closely worked with the state. There are the Deobandi groups like the Jamait Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), which believe jihad is a holy obligation, but at the same time participate in electoral politics. Most of the Afghan Taliban in the pre-9/11 period came from the Deobandi madrasas of Pakistan and were close allies of Pakistan's military and the ISI. However, there is a new breed of highly conservative- hard-line Deobandis, which is not willing to work within the confines of Pakistan's realpolitik and are ready to challenge the state. Amidst this situation, there is this Wahabi group, the LeT headed by Hafiz Saeed, backed by Saudi money and supported by the ISI.

The fact that the LeT has never attacked a target within Pakistan, indicates that it remains most loyal to the establishment. As noted Pakistani scholar Hussain Haqqani puts it:

Saeed now heads his organisation with the name Jamaat-ud-Dawa from a large campus facility at Muridke, outside the Pakistani city of Lahore. Pakistan authorities have repeatedly refused to move against either Lashkar, which continues to operate in Kashmir, or Jamaat-ud-Dawa, which operates freely in Pakistan. In return Saeed has urged Islamists to defend the

4 Mohammad Imran, "What did I say that was wrong?": Nawaz responds to controversy around remarks on Mumbai attacks", *Dawn*, May 14, 2017, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1407622>.

Pakistani state and to spare it from terrorist attacks even if the state policies appear to contradict the global Islamist agenda. LeT and Jamaat-ud-Dawa's policy seem to be to secure the support of the Pakistani state for organisational survival while limiting criticism of Pakistan.⁵

It is for this reason that Pakistan watchers believe that the emergence of MML is driven by a domestic agenda, wherein the Pakistan Army wants to mainstream the LeT and JuD cadres to counter its civilian adversaries. By doing so, JuD could get relative autonomy to operate. And the state may be hedging that participation in mainstream politics by keeping JuD cadres away from militant activities. Whether that translates into action and influences policy is anyone's guess. But the larger trend, as manifested elsewhere, has been that radical Islamist groups cannot be incorporated into mainstream politics because of their ideology and also for the reason that the political systems in some Muslim countries lack the structure and legitimacy to absorb them into formal politics.⁶ These groups are also aware of the fact that they cannot compete in mainstream politics, as they lack the organisation and experience. On their part, the move toward organised politics and negotiations is, therefore, often driven by the desire to pursue their radical goals through different means.⁷ If that is the objective behind the formation of MML, then it should be a serious cause for concern. MML, JuD and LeT have a symbiotic relationship and are part of the broader Salafi-Markaz clan. They will continue to work

5 Husain Haqqani, "Islamism and the Pakistani State", *Hudson Institute*, August 9, 2013, <http://www.hudson.org/research/9952-islamism-and-the-pakistani-state>.

6 Kamran Bokhari, "Radical Islam by Different Means", *Geopolitical Futures*, August 8, 2017, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/radical-islam-different-means/>.

7 Ibid.

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in tandem to accelerate their ideological and militant agenda. Indeed, a more realistic assessment of the situation is offered by noted American expert, C. Christine Fair:

I contend that the Pakistan's move is much more profound than a quest to find an alternative to demilitarizing the LeT/ JuD or even manipulating electoral outcomes. I contend that the formation of the MML is part of a more serious effort to use the pro-state organisation against a myriad militant groups tearing the state apart, while also investing in another political alternative to the current political parties that will pay dividends over the longer time horizon. Based upon the available information about the MML, its ties to the JuD and its mentorship by Pakistan's security organisation, I reject the claim that the MML's formation signals a new effort on the part of the Pakistani state to redirect JuD's external militarism towards more domesticated political role, and thus serves as a state-directed "de-radicalisation" or "de-mobilisation" effort to mainstream Islamist militants. I argue, instead, that the MML will be a compliment to JuDs effort to stabilize Pakistan internally and enhance LeT's external activities in the service of the deep state.⁸

THE STATE AND MILITANCY IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan's support to Islamist militancy is not new, and is a deliberate long-term grand strategy. Amongst the major grand strategic tools is the use of militant proxies. Ironically, it is only after the 9/11 attacks that the Pakistan-militant nexus received some attention. Pakistan has, since its inception, used Islamist

8 C. Christian Fair, "The Milli Muslim League: The Domestic Politics of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba", *Hudson Institute*, May 7, 2018, <http://www.hudson.org/research/14305-the-milli-muslim-league-the-domestic-politics-of-pakistan-s-laskar-e-taiba>.

militants to wage *jihad* to compensate for severe political and material weakness. This use of militancy has become so important that it is now a central component of Pakistani grand strategy. It is within this broader context, that the history of LeT and now its political front – MML – needs to be located.

Like many other jihadist outfits, LeT's origin is to be found in the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan. As we now know, the 1980's Afghan War changed the political landscape of Pakistan forever. Islamabad decided to become a party to the war at the behest of the West to achieve its own strategic goals, i.e. to expand its area of operation in Afghanistan to counter Indian influence. General Zia-ul-Haq promoted a hard-line Islamic ideology in his country and cracked down on liberal political groups and activists. General Zia also introduced Islamic laws, Islamised the educational curriculums, opened thousands of religious seminaries across the country, inducted Islamists into judiciary, bureaucracy and the army, and created institutions headed by Islamic clerics to oversee the affairs of the government.⁹

This decade-long program (1977–1988) of Islamising Pakistan had, by the 1990s, 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. LeT's three founders—Hafiz Saeed, its current Amir; Zafar Iqbal of the Engineering University of Lahore; and Abdullah Azzam of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, capitalised on this environment.¹⁰

9 Shamil Shams, "Pakistan's Islamization - before and after dictator Zia-ul-Haq", *Deutsche Welle*, August 17, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-islamization-before-and-after-dictator-zia-ul-haq/a-19480315>.

10 Ashley J Tellis, "The Menace that is Lashkar-e-Taiba", *Carnegie*, March 13, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/13/menace-that-is-lashkar-e-taiba-pub-47512>.

The LeT was formed in 1987 as the armed wing of the Markaz Dawat-ul-Irshad (MDI), the Center for Proselytisation and Preaching. Lashkar-e-Taiba means the ‘Army of the Pure’ or ‘Army of God’. The objective of LeT is to establish “Nizam-e-Mustafa” or Rule of the Prophet or the Islamic Caliphate or Islamic Rule, and to bring back the lost glory of earlier Islamic empires. This led LeT to come together with Al-Qaeda, resulting in a wider reach.

Lashkar’s desire to engage simultaneously in *Tableegh* or preaching, and *jihad* or armed struggle, has found manifestation in different ways since its founding. Both, LeT and MDI are adherents of *Ahl-e-Hadith* Islam, which is of Salafist¹¹ orientation. MDI’s leaders aimed to unite the Pakistani Ahl-e-Hadith movement and purify society through *dawa* and *jihad*. From the outset it was a missionary and a militant organisation that, for most of its history, has placed an equal emphasis on reshaping society at home (through preaching and social welfare) and to waging violent *jihad* abroad.¹² Moreover, Lashkar’s *jihad* was not nation-centric, but rather pan-Islamist, and its members fought on several fronts during the early 1990s.

11 “Salafis are united by a common religious creed, which provides principles and a method for applying religious beliefs to contemporary issues and problems. This creed revolves around strict adherence to the concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and ardent rejection of a role for human reason, logic, and desire. Salafis believe that by strictly following the rules and guidance in the Qur’an and Sunna, they eliminate the biases of human subjectivity and self-interest, thereby allowing them to identify the singular truth of God’s commands. From this perspective, there is only one legitimate religious interpretation; Islamic pluralism does not exist.”, Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 29, 2006, p. 207.

12 Stephan Tankel, “Lashkar-e-Taiba’s rise, before Mumbai”, *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/03/lashkar-e-taibas-rise-before-mumbai>.

The Indian State of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) was the most important for LeT. Lashkar leaders considered Kashmir to be part of Pakistan, meaning it was not simply a foreign land under occupation.¹³ Nor was this simply a territory in need of liberation. The Kashmir *jihād* was part of a larger battle against Hindus, which the group's leaders assert (with little regard for history) has continued since the inception of Islam. Numerous other outfits were also active on this front, most, if not all, of them receiving some level of support from the Pakistan Army and its ISI. Lashkar was not initially the state's most favoured proxy, but over time it has assumed this role.¹⁴ The ISI chose to channel increased support to the group for several reasons. Most important was its small size and lack of natural allies in Pakistan, where Lashkar's interpretation of *jihād* as an individual obligation for all Muslims estranged it from the country's small *Ahl-e-Hadith* movement. The assumption was that the group could become powerful externally without building up a significant support base or threatening the state domestically, and hence that it would be easier to control than other outfits.

The offer of state sponsorship to promote the scale and lethality of Lashkar's participation in the Kashmir *jihād* was a significant opportunity, and the group seized it. Since that time, Lashkar's military activities have been informed both by its pan-Islamist rationale for *jihād* and its role as a proxy for the Pakistani state.¹⁵ *Jihād* against India to liberate Muslim land under perceived Hindu occupation aligned with LeT's

13 Ibid.

14 Ashley J Tellis, "The Menace that is Lashkar-e-Taiba", *Carnegie*, March 3, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/13/menace-that-is-lashkar-e-taiba-pub-47512>.

15 Ibid.

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ideological priorities and with state interests.¹⁶ Today, LeT remains Pakistan's most disciplined and obedient proxy; the group has become so powerful that there is a strong chance it could destabilise the state if it chose to do so. This also brought with it substantial benefits, including the support needed to construct a robust social welfare apparatus used for missionary and reformist purposes.

In addition to this infrastructure in Pakistan and a powerful military apparatus, Lashkar wove together transnational networks which have been used primarily to support non-violent activism in Pakistan, military operations in Kashmir and terrorism against India. Thus, its ability to reconcile the two dualities that define it – missionary and militant organisation, pan-Islamist outfit and Pakistan proxy – helped Lashkar to grow into the powerful and protected organisation it is today.¹⁷ And, with its political arm, MML, it now wants to “compliment JuD's efforts to stabilise Pakistan and enhance LeT's external activities in the service of deep state”.¹⁸ Militants who show skill at parliamentary politics would be candidates for an Army-supported government. In all likelihood, an Army-Islamist coalition might emerge. For India, therefore, the emergence of MML raises concerns.

THE MILLI MUSLIM LEAGUE

With the aim of keeping its focus on Kashmir, and advocating “self-determination for Kashmiris as per UN

16 Ibid.

17 Stephan Tankel, “Lashkar-e-Taiba's rise, before Mumbai”, *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/03/lashkar-e-taibas-rise-before-mumbai>.

18 C. Christian Fair, “The Milli Muslim League: The Domestic Politics of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba”, *Hudson Institute*, May 7, 2018, <http://www.hudson.org/research/14305-the-milli-muslim-league-the-domestic-politics-of-pakistan-s-laskar-e-taiba>.

Resolutions”, the LeT/ JuD leadership decided, in August 2017, to enter politics and form a party with the name of Milli Muslim League (MML). The decision to form a political party was not incidental. C. Christine Fair notes, “rumors about a possible LeT / JuD-tied political party have been floating around for at least the past two years.”¹⁹ Thus, MML is to function as a political wing of the banned LeT and JuD, conceived of by terror-master Hafiz Saeed to legitimise his malignant actions, especially in Kashmir, as well as to evade international pressure and sanctions. By forming MML, Hafiz Saeed also intends to mislead the international community into speculating that he is a firm “believer” in the democratic process, apparently a ploy to avoid being labelled as merely a terrorist. On December 24, 2017, Saeed inaugurated the MML office in Lahore’s National Assembly-120 Constituency. During his visit to the Mohni Road area adjacent to the Data Sahib shrine, he listened to the civic problems of people in the area, who welcomed Saeed by showering rose petals on his vehicle. The JuD headquarters in Chauburji also falls under the NA-120 Constituency. Saeed’s visit and opening of the political office in Lahore pointed towards his grand plans to enter politics.²⁰

Since MML was yet to be registered by the Election Commission of Pakistan, the party decided to field Qari Yaqoub Sheikh as an independent candidate against ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s wife Kulsoom Sharif for the Lahore seat, which fell vacant after Nawaz Sharif’s disqualification. Qari Yaqoub Sheikh, a prominent JuD leader, has been a member of LeT’s ‘central advisory committee’, and has also

19 Ibid.

20 “Hafiz Saeed opens MML office in Lahore, plans to contest 2018 Pakistani General Election”, *Firstpost*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/hafiz-saeed-opens-mml-office-in-lahore-plans-to-contest-2018-pakistani-general-election-4274525.html>.

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served as a leader in LeT's foreign affairs department. He has also been associated with JuD and is a leader of the banned FIF, the 'charity organisation' and a subsidiary of JuD, which has also been banned.

On June 13, 2018, Pakistan's Election Commission, for a second time, rejected an application by MML to register it as a political party. The ECP had been asked by the Islamabad High Court (IHC) to review its 2017 decision through which it rejected MML's registration bid. A four-member bench of the commission, chaired by its Sindh member Abdul Ghaffar Soomro, decided against allowing MML to be registered as a political party. Pakistan's Interior Ministry had also opposed MML's enlisting as a political party, arguing that it was an offshoot of the banned JuD. MML, however, denied that it had any links with the JuD or that its chief, Saifuddin Khalid, had relations with Saeed.²¹

MML's STRUCTURE

The launching of MML was announced by Saifullah Khalid, who was appointed as its President by Hafiz Saeed. The other central office bearers of the party include Vice President Muzzamal Iqbal Hashmi; General Secretary Fayyaz Ahmed; Joint Secretary Mohammad Haris; Finance Secretary Mohammad Ehsan; Information Secretary Tabish Qayyum; and Publications Secretary Faisal Nadeed Sheikh.²² Each

21 "Hafiz Saeed's MML can't contest general polls: Pakistan Election Commission", *Deccan Chronicle*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/asia/140618/hafiz-saeeds-mml-cannot-contest-general-polls-pak-ec.html>.

22 Kohli, S.C., "Milli Muslim League-the political party launched by Hafiz Saeed is looking to revive the Khalistan Movements in India", *Merinews*, August 19, 2017, <http://www.merinews.com/mobile/login.jsp?requestedURL=article/World/2017/7/19/milli-muslim-league---the-political-party-launched-by-hafiz-saeed-is-looking-to-revive-the-khalistan-movement-in-india/15926747>.

of the founding members of the MML have been closely associated to LeT-JuD and with the deep state, indicating the party's close affinity to the Markaz family and its ties to the Pakistan Army and the ISI. The founding President, Saifullah Khalid, has also praised Hafiz Saeed for rendering "selfless" services to the cause of Kashmir as well as to the needy people of Pakistan, particularly in the Tharparkar District of Sindh, Punjab (Pakistan) and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Saifullah also criticised Hafiz Saeed's house arrest. More importantly, MML has severely criticised India and USA for allegedly conspiring against Pakistan.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The declared aims and the objective of the newly founded MML are clearly stated in the October 2017 issue of *Invite*, JuD's English language online magazine. As follows:²³

- To seek and strive, both within and outside the parliament, towards the practical implementation of the 1973 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan that compels the society and the state to conform all laws to the Injunctions of the *Quran* and *Sunnah*, and to ensure no legislation repugnant to it shall be passed.
- To uphold and promote social values such as tolerance, harmony, brotherhood, compassion and social justice.
- To guard and protect our ideological, moral, ethical and cultural ethos.
- To try to make Pakistan a true modern Islamic welfare state.
- To inculcate the ideology of Pakistan in the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

23 "The rise of MML and the mainstreaming debate", *ISSUU*, October 8, 2017, <https://issuu.com/invtthemag/docs/issue7>.

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- To promote a political environment in which all members of the society, especially the lower and the middle class, get complete rights and to prepare them for leadership roles.
- To restore and advance Pakistan's global stature in the world, and to promote ties with brotherly Islamic countries.
- To honour and safeguard the rights of the citizens, providing them dignity, equality, unity, brotherhood, healthcare and liberty, while empowering the weak and the helpless segments of the society, in accordance with the 1973 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
- To enforce a unified and single educational system throughout the country and achieve a 100% literacy rate, and to promote science and research based education.
- To attain a highly productive industrial and agricultural output in order to reduce dependency on foreign debt and aid.
- To enact policies that will help bring together marginalised people of the community and promote the integration of the tribal people into a productive part of mainstream society.
- To safeguard and honour the rights of women.
- To protect the rights of the minorities.
- To morally and diplomatically support the people of Jammu-Kashmir in acquiring their right of self-determination, and to lead an effective struggle against the oppression being inflicted upon the people of the occupied valley.

- To counter the *takfeeri* extremist ideology of the *Kharijites*, educate the people in battling it, and to work towards curbing sectarianism.
- To devise an independent, clear and categorical foreign policy that is subject to national interest and promotes the security, protection and stability of the Muslim *Ummah*.

The objectives of the MML also are no different than LeT's and JuD. Noticeably, most of the stated objectives also overlap with those of the Pakistani state. But what may be of concern from an Indian point of view is the focus on minorities, particularly the Sikh minorities of Pakistan. The Sikh community is being invited to MML's public meetings in an effort to involve them within the support networks of the party. On August 13, 2017, Sardar Gopal Singh Chawla of the Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC) and Chairman of the Punjabi Sikh Sangat, Pakistan, addressed a public rally in Lahore which was organised by MML. Chawla announced the support of the Pakistani Sikh community as well as of Sikhs settled in the United Kingdom, USA and Canada, to Hafiz Saeed and MML. In his address, Chawla aired anti-India views in favour of Khalistanis and Indian Kashmiris.

CONTESTING THE BY-ELECTION

Soon after the formation of the MML, the party filed for registration with the ECP. Pending registration, the JuD fielded Qari Yaqoub Sheikh, who pledged himself to the ideals of JuD, to contest the 2017 by-election in the NA 120 Constituency, which had fallen vacant after the Supreme Court's disqualification of then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Yaqoub was pitted against Nawaz's wife, Begum Kulsoom Nawaz of Pakistan Muslim

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League-Nawaz (PML-N).²⁴ Although, Yaqoub had contested as an independent candidate, the party campaign urged voters to vote for MML-backed candidate. The Constituency has a large number of Kashmir-origin voters as well.²⁵ Yaqoob Sheikh secured 5,822 votes and stood fourth in the by-election in Lahore's National Assembly Constituency.²⁶

More recently, and ahead of the July 25, 2018, polls in Pakistan, while there is a debate amongst various political parties on the influence and role of the military in these elections, the nomination papers of Hafiz Saeed's son and son-in-law have been accepted by the ECP. Hafiz Talha Saeed (son) and Hafiz Khalid Waleed (son-in-law) are contesting for the NA-91 (Sargodha-IV) and NA-133 (Lahore-XI) constituencies, respectively. As reported in Pakistan's media, the two are among 265 candidates who will be contesting the upcoming polls on AAT tickets. As already stated, the ECP had earlier refused to register MML as a political party. MML is now participating in elections to 80 NA and 185 provincial seats across Pakistan, on the AAT ticket. More importantly, the focus remains on Punjab, where 50 NA and 152 provincial assembly candidates are contesting; crucially, Punjab is the LeT/JuD stronghold. AAT has clearly stated that members of MML will also be the members of AAT.

24 Ashok Behuria, "JuD/LeT Mutating into 'Milli Muslim League'", *Weekly Bulletin*, August 07-13, 2017, <https://idsa.in/system/files/page/2015/PEW-Aug-2-2017.pd>.

25 Ibid.

26 "Pakistan government opposes Saeed's MML registration as political party", *Business Standard*, December 23, 2015, https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/pakistan-government-opposes-saeed-s-mml-registration-as-political-party-117122300290_1.html.

WHAT EXPLAINS THE EMERGENCE OF MML?

It is clear that there has been a change in Pakistan's strategic approach in dealing with this group. It remains difficult to determine if this change has been propelled by domestic considerations or external compulsions. Saeed's participation in Pakistani politics may indicate the state's efforts to contain JuD's jihadist agenda and its domestic implications by offering it another outlet for its energies, possibly as the only way forward to deal with the group.²⁷ This may not, however, necessarily mean that Pakistan intends to terminate the use of the JuD-LeT complex as a tool of its foreign policy. Domestically, Pakistan's limitations have been evident when it comes to dealing with jihadist groups like JuD and LeT.²⁸ Moreover, these limitations also extend to the state's inability to counter their violent narratives.²⁹ For the past three decades, the country's policies have enabled, encouraged, and mainstreamed such practices. Particularly in Punjab, which is a melting pot of different jihadist groups, the limitations related to the state's counter-terrorism efforts are palpable. Accommodation rather than containment has been devised as the core policy approach. There are other examples from Punjab, where the state's attempt to co-opt sectarian jihadists into the country's political fold appear obvious. The recent election of Masroor Nawaz Jhangvi, son of Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, to the Punjab Assembly not only highlights the state's emerging approach to these groups, but also the limitations of this approach. If

27 Mohammad Imran, "What did I say that was wrong?": Nawaz responds to controversy around remarks on Mumbai attacks", *Dawn*, May 14, 2017, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1407622>.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

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Saeed is able to gain an electoral foothold in Punjab, it would only further enhance his ideological support base. The state, by allowing Saeed to grow politically, may not only further entrench militant Islamism in Pakistan, but would deepen the country's counter-terrorism challenges internally.

Secondly, the change in Pakistan's policy regarding Saeed's role in Pakistan's domestic politics also has implications regarding the state's intention to legitimise the group's branding, by portraying it as more moderate. The current political landscape, which is in turmoil, offers Pakistan's security establishment an ideal setting to introduce JuD into the country's political arena. And MML can capitalise on the so called charity work done by its affiliate outfits. Reports suggests that the FIF, an LeT affiliate outfit, runs 35 operations across Pakistan, including hospitals, earthquake-relief, ambulance services, vaccination and so on.³⁰ The result is that, despite US and international bans on all these outfits, they enjoy popular public support within Pakistan. Indeed, the United States has already placed MML on its list of foreign terrorist organisations. The State Department disclosed, in a statement on April 2, 2018, that it had designated MML as a foreign terrorist group because it was operating as fronts for LeT, which is also on the U.S. terrorist list.³¹

Third, the Pakistan Army is now looking for new political partners. In Pakistan, the Army seems to be least interested in engaging with mainstream parties, i.e., Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N).

30 Ashok Behuria, "JuD/LeT Mutating into 'Milli Muslim League'", *Weekly Bulletin*, August 07-13, 2017, <https://idsa.in/system/files/page/2015/PEW-Aug-2-2017.pdf>.

31 "U.S. Adds Pakistan's Milli Muslim League To Terror List", *RFE/RL*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-milli-muslim-league-u-s-terror-list/29141811.html>.

Other smaller parties like Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) are not in a position to form a government on their own. As a result, the Army appears to be looking for new political partners and MML could, today, be in a grooming stage. Notably, a Pew Institute survey suggests that LeT is more acceptable to Pakistanis as compared to other Islamist groupings, especially Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).³²

Fourth, a section of Pakistan's security establishment still views Saeed and his associates as useful tools in some measures, particularly vis-à-vis India. Moreover, Saeed and a number of other anti-India jihadist groups offer legitimacy and street power to Pakistan's confrontational policy toward New Delhi. In this context, the impending transition of the JuD from a proscribed organisation to a political party is hardly a result of international pressure.

Fifth, the JuD of late has been under pressure to raise funds. Being under a political umbrella gives them more freedom to operate and generate funds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

MML may *prima facie* not appear to be a direct threat to India as a political outfit, but its emergence should be a cause for concern. As mentioned earlier, MML, JuD and LeT belong to the same family. Their aims and objectives are global, even if these may currently be limited by capacity or focus. The LeT-JuD-MML complex has a distinct ideology that underwrites a program of Islamic revanchism—and justifies collaboration with other terrorist groups. When it comes to Pakistan, LeT not only does not bite the hand that feeds it, it

32 Madiha Afzal, "Do Pakistanis hold a favourable view of the Lashkar-e-Taiba?", *Dawn*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1396877>.

in fact protects its patrons against other domestic adversaries.³³ LeT is a Janus-faced entity that is involved in terrorism and social development concurrently— which limits the Pakistani establishment’s ability to target it, even if it were so inclined.

The MML and LeT possess a cohesive and hierarchical organisational structure that is effective at both the conduct of violence and the delivery of social programs. The group uses technology and social media to advance its political and jihadi goals. After a demonstrated terror program against India, MML/LeT will now have a definite political agenda against New Delhi, as a pressure group in the short run. However, if MML is able to form a government or even be part of a coalition which rules Pakistan, this would be a real worry, as it could constitute a direct and long-term nuclear security threat. MML president Saifullah Khalid stated, at a Press Conference on August 7, 2017, that the party would work in coordination with all parties and religious groups that believe Pakistan should lead a Muslim Ummah, declaring that “the fight will continue until the completion of Pakistan (by inclusion of) Kashmir.”³⁴

These stated aims, coupled with nuclear weapons, should alarm Indians and the world at-large. No wonder the world understands the Indian-dilemma. As pointed out on March 12, 2013, in testimony to the US Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence, the Director of US National Intelligence James Clapper observed: “Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba

33 Ashley J Tellis, “The Menace that is Lashkar-e-Taiba”, *Carnegie*, March 13, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/13/menace-that-is-lashkar-e-taiba-pub-47512>.

34 Tufail Ahmad, “The New Long-Term Nuclear Threat To India – The Security Implications Of A Political Party Formed By Pakistani Jihadi Hafiz Muhammad Saeed”, *MEMRI*, August 31, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/new-long-term-nuclear-threat-india-%E2%80%93-security-implications-political-party-formed-pakistani>.

will continue to be the most multifaceted and problematic of the Pakistani militant groups... The group has the long-term potential to evolve into a permanent and even Hamas/Hezbollah-like presence in Pakistan.”³⁵

Now that LeT has given birth to the Milli Muslim League, it poses a far more significant long-term security threat—especially to India—because such a political party is bound to work in ideological coordination with the ISI.

35 Tufail Ahmad, “Will the ISI use Lashkar-e-Taiba’s new political party to start a nuclear war?”, *The Print*, August 10, 2017, <https://theprint.in/opinion/will-the-isi-use-lashkar-e-taibas-new-political-party-to-start-a-nuclear-war/6177/>.