

The Indian Mujahidin and Lashkar-i-Tayyiba's Transnational Networks

By Praveen Swami

IN 2006, THE LIVES of a rich Omani businessman and an Indian computer professional crossed at a mosque in Muscat, the capital of Oman.¹ Kerala-born Sarfaraz Nawaz and Muscat-based entrepreneur Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti—apparently improbable recruits to the jihadist movement—became key players in building a complex Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (LeT) network that gave the jihadist group a new reach, resilience and lethality. Both men allegedly operated an LeT logistical hub that supported the terrorist group's operations in India, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh and even the Maldives. Ever since the two men were detained by authorities in December 2008, investigators in India have developed significant new insights into the almost invisible threads linking together three apparently distinct jihadist enterprises: the urban bombing campaign that has claimed hundreds of lives across India since 2005; the November 2008 assault on Mumbai; and a wider jihadist apparatus stretching across the Indian Ocean from the Persian Gulf to Bangladesh. Tadiyantavide Nasir,² Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti and other key operatives helped recruit and train dozens of LeT militants from outside Pakistan, provided the platform for the organization to stage offensive operations across the Indian Ocean, and raised the resources needed to grow a new affiliate, the Indian Mujahidin.³

From its origins in Pakistan's Punjab Province, the LeT has grown into a transnational organization.⁴ This development is of concern to authorities

across the region for three reasons. First, the evolutionary trajectory of the LeT will make it increasingly resistant to counterterrorism action in any one country or decapitation attempts targeting its leadership. Second, the LeT's ability to recruit from a pool of well-educated, affluent sympathizers in multiple countries gives it dramatically-enhanced reach and lethality. Third, the LeT could spawn and sustain the growth of quasi-independent jihadist movements outside of Pakistan.

This article provides an overview of the LeT's transnational infrastructure, explaining how the terrorist group has helped support other violent networks in India, such as the Indian Mujahidin. It first examines the lives of LeT operatives Sarfaraz Nawaz and Ali Abdul Aziz al-Hooti, and then profiles the formation and progression of the Lashkar-linked Indian Mujahidin.

The LeT's Role in Inciting Jihadist Violence

Sarfaraz Nawaz's jihadist journey began in 1995 when he was 18-years-old. He joined the now-proscribed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), an Islamist political formation from which the Indian jihadist movement has drawn much of its cadre.⁵ Five years later, Nawaz was elected to SIMI's New Delhi-based central committee. His contemporaries included many who later played critical roles in building India's jihadist movement—among them, key SIMI ideologue Safdar Nagori, and Peedical Abdul Shibly and Yahya Kamakutty, both successful computer professionals who are now being tried for plotting jihadist operations in southern India.⁶ Yet like the overwhelming majority of SIMI members, Nawaz chose a life of middle-class respectability. He received a computer networking degree from an

institute in Kochi, married and found a job in Oman.⁷

Nawaz, however, was drawn back into the world from where he appeared to have escaped. During a visit home in early 2006, he heard Tadiyantavide Nasir—an Islamist political activist who, improbably enough, also served as a preacher with the Noorisha order of Sufi mystics—deliver a speech casting jihad as an imperative part in the practice of Islam.⁸ Inspired, Nawaz made contacts with jihadists in Muscat. Friends from his days in SIMI put him in touch with al-Hooti, a successful automobile components dealer who also owned a number of internet cafés. Nawaz then played a key facilitation role by connecting an Indian Mujahidin cell leader with al-Hooti, the LeT financier.

Born to an Indian mother, al-Hooti's radicalization had been driven by stories of atrocities against Muslims he heard on visits home to Miraj, near Mumbai. Before he turned 30, Indian investigators allege, al-Hooti had twice trained at LeT camps in Pakistan. By 2006, al-Hooti had emerged as one of LeT's key organizers in the Gulf.⁹ Working with LeT intelligence operative Mohammad Jassem, also known by the code-name "Tehsin," al-Hooti helped send dozens of jihadists to Lashkar's camps in Pakistan for training.¹⁰

Many of these men proved themselves to be valuable LeT assets. Early in 2007, al-Hooti and Jassem dispatched Dubai-based, Indian-origin printing-press mechanic Fahim Arshad Ansari to an LeT camp in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir.¹¹ Having finished

7 Material on the background of Nawaz and al-Hooti was gathered during personal interviews with Indian police personnel in Hyderabad, Mumbai and Bangalore, conducted during research for Praveen Swami, "Mumbai Terror Trail Leads to Muscat."

8 The Noorisha Sufis purport to oppose terrorism. See "Terrorists Giving a Bad Name for Jihad: Tariqa Chief," Expressbuzz.com, February 3, 2009. For details on Nasir, see Praveen Swami, "The Sufi with the Kalashnikov," *Hindu*, February 16, 2009.

9 Personal interview, senior Mumbai police official, Mumbai, May 27, 2009. For an overview of Indian Mujahidin membership, see Raman. For details of Shibly and Kamakutty, see Swami, "White-Collar Jihadists a Cause for Growing Concern."

10 Ibid.

11 For details on Fahim Ansari's background and op-

1 Praveen Swami, "Mumbai Terror Trail Leads to Muscat," *Hindu* [Chennai], May 28, 2009. See also Praveen Swami, "How Lashkar Funded Transnational Terror Campaign," *Hindu*, May 28, 2009.

2 Tadiyantavide Nasir is an Islamist political activist.

3 The Indian Mujahidin is an ethnic Indian offshoot of the LeT and SIMI.

4 For a brief overview of the origins of Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, see Saeed Shafiqat, "From Official Islam to Islamism: The Rise of the Dawat-ul-irshad and Lashkar-e-Taiba," in Christophe Jaffrelot ed., *Pakistan: Nationalism Without a Nation?* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

5 For more information, see the South Asia Terrorism Portal file on the Students Islamic Movement of India, located at www.satp.org. For a full account of the origins and growth of SIMI, see Yoginder Sikand, *Islamist Assertion in Contemporary India: The Students Islamic Movement of India* (New Delhi: Islam Interfaith, 2005). For a sympathetic Urdu-language account, see Sayyed Abdul Bari, *Azad Hindustan Mai Muslim Tanzimiy* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2001).

6 For an overview of Indian Mujahidin membership, see B. Raman, "Terror's New Faces," Rediff.com, August 19, 2008. For details of Shibly and Kamakutty, see Praveen Swami, "White-Collar Jihadists a Cause for Growing Concern," *Hindu*, October 7, 2008.

a *Daura Ribat*¹² covert tradecraft course, Ansari was tasked with carrying out surveillance at several important locations in Mumbai. Footage he generated, Indian prosecutors have said, helped facilitate the training of the LeT assault team that targeted Mumbai in November 2008.¹³

Funds generated by al-Hooti are thought to have helped LeT commander Faisal Haroun, also known by the code-name “Naim,” set up Indian Ocean networks that eventually enabled the group to target India’s western seaboard. Haroun is suspected of crafting the 2006 delivery of assault rifles intended for use in a terrorist attack in Gujarat, as well as an aborted 2007 effort to land eight Lashkar *fidayin* (high-risk commandos) off Mumbai.¹⁴ Indeed, al-Hooti and Jassem recruited widely across the India Ocean region. Maldives investigators, for example, have learned that the men facilitated the training of Ali Assham, a Malé resident who was forced to suspend his jihadist career after losing an eye in a bomb-making accident.¹⁵

According to Omani authorities, by 2007 the pro-Western emirate itself had begun to figure on al-Hooti’s list of targets. In June that year, al-Hooti held discussions with LeT sympathizers in Oman on the prospect of targeting prominent landmarks in Muscat—among them the Golden Tulip Hotel, a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) office, and a spa in the upmarket Nizwa

erations, see Praveen Swami, “How the Lashkar Planned Mumbai Massacre,” *Hindu*, February 28, 2009. Also see Praveen Swami, “Abortive Lashkar Plot Holds Clues to Mumbai Massacre,” *Hindu*, December 8, 2008.

12 *Daura Ribat* is an intelligence course.

13 Ashok Duraphe, “Final Form / Report (Under Section 173 Cr.P.C.) in the Court of Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, 37th Court, Esplanade, Mumbai,” Mumbai Police Headquarters, February 25, 2009, pp. 6-7.

14 For details of the Aurangabad case, see Stavan Desai, Anuradha Nagaraj and Sagnik Chowdhury, “Cops Follow Aurangabad Arms Trail,” *Indian Express* [New Delhi], July 16, 2006. For an account of Lashkar’s use of sea routes into Mumbai, see Praveen Swami, “Signs of Another Kind of Line of Control,” *Hindu*, May 14, 2007.

15 For background details on Faisal Haroun’s Indian Ocean network, see Praveen Swami, “Mumbai: The Road to Maximum Terror,” *South Asia Intelligence Review*, December 15, 2008. For a review of jihadist operations in the Maldives, see Praveen Swami, “The Jihad in Paradise,” *South Asia Intelligence Review*, November 19, 2007.

area.¹⁶ Although no final operational plans were made, Omani authorities found enough evidence to secure a conviction earlier this year.¹⁷

Most important to the Indian investigators, al-Hooti also provided an interface between the LeT to deal with the Indian Mujahidin: a loose cluster of semi-autonomous SIMI-linked cells responsible for bombings in a dozen Indian cities since 2005. Last year, Tadiyantavide Nasir turned to Sarfaraz Nawaz to secure funding for the training of a new group of Indian Mujahidin volunteers he had raised from the Indian state of Kerala.¹⁸ Nasir also said he needed cash to pay for a planned bomb attack in the city of Bangalore.¹⁹ Nawaz then facilitated contact between Nasir and al-Hooti. Between March and May 2008, police allege that al-Hooti transferred an estimated \$2,500 for Nasir’s use to a Kerala-based *hawala* dealer.²⁰ LeT commander “Rehan,” one of al-Hooti’s associates, also arranged for Nasir’s recruits—all Indian Mujahidin members—to train with a jihadist unit operating near the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.²¹

Beginning in July 2008, however, the plan unraveled.²² First, the bombs planted in Bangalore failed to work properly; just one person was killed by the 10 improvised explosive devices planted. Then, in October, five of Nasir’s volunteers were identified by a Jammu and Kashmir police informer in northern Kashmir. Four were killed in subsequent fighting with the Indian Army; the fifth man, Kerala resident Abdul Jabbar, was arrested.²³ Even as the police closed in on Nasir and other members of his Indian Mujahidin cell, al-Hooti and “Rehan” helped arrange

16 Personal interview, senior Mumbai police official, Mumbai, May 27, 2009. Also see Raman. For details of Shibly and Kamakutty, see Swami, “White-Collar Jihadists a Cause for Growing Concern.”

17 *Ibid.*; Personal interview, senior Indian government official, New Delhi, May 19, 2009.

18 B. Srijan, “LeT Trained its Terror Brigade in Kerala,” *Indian Express*, March 19, 2009.

19 Personal interview, Bangalore police investigator, Bangalore, May 25, 2009.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 Johnson TA, “Nine Held in Bangalore Blasts Case,” *Indian Express*, February 8, 2008.

23 Srijan.

his escape with the help of Lashkar’s top resident agent in Bangladesh, Mubashir Shahid.²⁴

Like Nasir, most key Indian Mujahidin commanders are now fugitives. India’s intelligence services believe they are most likely hiding in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Yet, by questioning dozens of mid-level Indian Mujahidin operatives held last year, investigators believe they now have a reasonable understanding of the organization’s story and its affiliations with the larger Lashkar project in India.

The Indian Mujahidin is Born

One of the main founders of the Indian Mujahidin is Sadiq Israr Sheikh, who was arrested in September 2008. Sheikh had no conception of that jihadist project when he began attending SIMI’s Sunday study meetings at a friend’s apartment in 1996. Yet it was at these meetings that the Indian Mujahidin idea was born.²⁵

At around the same time, the LeT was preparing to initiate a new phase of operations directed at India. At a February 2000 rally in Islamabad, LeT chief Hafiz Mohammad Saeed explained the organization’s plans.²⁶ He said that Kargil, where India and Pakistan had gone to war in 1999, had been the first component of this new campaign; the wave of *fidayin* suicide-squad attacks the organization had unleashed in Jammu and Kashmir thereafter was the second. “Very soon,” Saeed promised, “we will be launching a third round.”²⁷ More likely than not, Sadiq Israr Sheikh knew nothing of that speech—but the organization he would help build would be a core part of this “third round.”

From Sheikh’s testimony to Mumbai police investigators, it appears he was drawn to SIMI’s political Islamism by resentments common to millions of

24 Personal interview, Bangalore police investigator, Bangalore, May 25, 2009.

25 Praveen Swami, “Indian Mujahideen Chief Sadiq Sheikh’s Slumdog Story,” *Hindu*, March 6, 2009.

26 For a full account of the genesis and course of Lashkar’s operations in India, see Praveen Swami, “The Well-Tempered Jihad: The Politics and Practice of Post-2002 Islamist Terrorism in India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 16:3 (2008): pp. 303-322.

27 Amit Baruah, “Militant Chiefs Warn Musharraf,” *Hindu*, February 6, 2000.

lower middle class Mumbai residents.²⁸ Born in 1978 to working-class parents from the north Indian town of Azamgarh, Sheikh grew up in the Cheeta Camp housing project. Home to thousands of slum residents who had been evicted to make way for the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Cheeta Camp provided the foundations for tens of thousands of families to make the journey to the fringes of India's middle class.²⁹ Sheikh's parents were able to give their children a decent home and an education.

Yet Sheikh's story did not quite run according to his parent's script. Having dropped out of high school, he obtained certification as an air conditioning mechanic. Sheikh could only find ill-paid freelance work, not a regular job. Like many of his contemporaries, he felt cheated by the growing economic opportunities emerging around him and came to believe he was a victim of religious discrimination. Hundreds of Muslims were killed in communal riots that tore the city apart in 1993, and SIMI gave voice to Sheikh's rage.³⁰ As the scholar Yoginder Sikand has perceptively noted, SIMI's aggressive polemic gave "its supporters a sense of power and agency which they were denied in their actual lives."³¹

SIMI's language turned increasingly violent over the years. At rallies held in 1999 and 2001, it eulogized Usama bin Ladin and called for Indian Muslims to launch a jihad aimed at the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.³²

28 Personal interview, family members of Sadiq Israr Sheikh, Mumbai, March 2 and March 3, 2009. The family members requested anonymity, as their testimony might otherwise be admissible as evidence in ongoing criminal proceedings against Sheikh. Also see Swami, "Indian Mujahideen Chief Sadiq Sheikh's Slumdog Story."

29 For an account of Cheeta Camp's background and demographic profile, see Fred W. Clothey, *Ritualizing on the Boundaries* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), p. 141.

30 For an account of the violence, see Kalpana Sharma, "Chronicle of a Riot Foretold," in Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner eds., *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 268-286.

31 Yoginder Sikand, "Islamist Assertion in Contemporary India: The Case of the Students Islamic Movement of India," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 23:2 (2003): pp. 335-345.

32 Javed Anand, "Suspect SIMI? Of Course," *Indian Express*, August 16, 2008. In one pre-9/11 interview, SIMI

Even this, however, was not enough for Sheikh. Early in 2001, he stormed out of a SIMI meeting, complaining that the organization did nothing other than "talk."³³

In April 2001, Sheikh ran into a distant relative who helped turn his dreams into reality. Salim Islahi—later killed in a shootout with police—put Sheikh in touch with Aftab Ansari, a ganglord reputed to have discovered Islamist radicalism while serving prison time in New Delhi along with Jaysh-i-Muhammad terrorist Syed Omar Sheikh. Sheikh's lieutenant, Asif Reza Khan, arranged for Sheikh to travel to Pakistan in September 2001 to train with the LeT.³⁴ Later, Sheikh would learn that two of the men who used to attend SIMI's study meetings had already traveled the same route. Altaf Subhan Qureshi and Riyaz Ismail Shahbandri would, along with Sheikh, help found the terrorist cells that later called themselves the Indian Mujahidin.³⁵

Qureshi, like Sheikh, was the son of working-class migrants from north India. Qureshi, however, received an elite education—ironically, at the Catholic-run Antonio D'Souza High School.³⁶ In 1996, he had begun working as a software engineer, specializing in network solutions. Qureshi joined SIMI around the same time. Later, he edited the SIMI-affiliated journal *Islamic Movement*. In 2001, Qureshi submitted a letter of resignation to his employers, saying he intended to "devote one complete year to pursue religious and spiritual matters." Like Sheikh, he

chief Safdar Nagori said Usama bin Ladin "has shown great character in standing up to the Americans, the greatest terrorists in the world." See Sayantan Chakravarty, "Interview: Safdar Nagori 'I am very bitter about being Indian,'" *India Today* [New Delhi], April 2, 2001.

For other significant accounts of SIMI's activities, see Javed Anand, "Suspect SIMI?" and Javed Anand, "Why Be Shy About SIMI?" *Communalism Combat* [Mumbai], October 2001 and Sutapa Mukherjee, "A Fatwa in Reverse," *Outlook* [New Delhi], October 8, 2001.

33 Personal interview, family members of Sadiq Israr Sheikh, Mumbai, March 2 and March 3, 2009.

34 Praveen Swami, "The Arrest of Aftab Ansari," *Frontline* [Chennai], March 1, 2009.

35 Personal interview, Mumbai police official, Mumbai, March 1, 2009.

36 For this and all further material on Qureshi, see Praveen Swami, "The Hunt for the Indian Mujahideen's 'al-Arbi,'" *Hindu*, September 13, 2008.

left India to train at an LeT camp in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir.

Shahbandri, too, was the son of migrants. His father, Ismail Shahbandri, had moved from coastal Karnataka to establish a leather-tanning works in Mumbai's Kurla area.³⁷ Like Sheikh, though, Shahbandri dropped out of high school and became a full-time SIMI activist. By the autumn of 2002, spurred on by anti-Muslim violence that claimed hundreds of lives in the state of Gujarat, dozens of volunteers were joining the Indian Mujahidin network—although the group did not yet have a name. Many were from Hyderabad and wanted training in the wake of the Gujarat pogrom, among them Abdul Khwaja, who using the alias Amjad now heads a Lashkar-linked, Lahore-based cell operating against India.³⁸ Others came from Maharashtra. By 2003, Sheikh was himself regularly dispatching volunteers from the Azamgarh area to training at LeT camps.

Within months of their departure, the new recruits executed their first successful strikes. Ghulam Asad Yazdani, a resident of Hyderabad's Toli Chowki area, helped execute the assassination of the former Gujarat home minister, Haren Pandya.³⁹ Pandya, India's Central Bureau of Investigations later determined, was killed in a reprisal for his role in pogrom.⁴⁰ In 2005, the network was ready to carry out their first bombings: an attack on a Hindu temple in the north Indian city of Varanasi. During the coming years, the Indian Mujahidin succeeded in staging attacks of ever-increasing intensity, among them the July 2006 strikes on Mumbai's suburban train system that claimed at least 183 lives.⁴¹ Finally, in

37 For this and all further material on Shahbandri, see Praveen Swami, "Politics of Hate Gave Birth to Top Terror Commander," *Hindu*, February 23, 2009.

38 Praveen Swami, "Nasir Can Help Unravel HuJI Network: Sleuths," *Hindu*, January 29, 2008.

39 Praveen Swami, "Harvest of Hate," *Frontline*, March 14, 2009.

40 "Life for Nine in Haren Pandya Murder Case," *Times of India*, June 26, 2007.

41 Sadiq Sheikh's own role in these bombings remains a source of debate. For an overview of the contention, see "IM's Sadiq Sheikh Let Off in 7/11 Case," *Indian Express*, May 12, 2009; Praveen Swami, "Maharashtra ATS Moves to Resolve 7/11 Mystery," *Hindu*, February 22,

November 2007, the networks began using the Indian Mujahidin name in e-mail manifestos released to the media.

One Principal Lesson and One Key Challenge Lie Ahead

The LeT has ceased to be only an armed organization—although, as November's attacks in Mumbai show, its capabilities are still considerable. Instead, the LeT serves as a provider of logistical and ideological infrastructure to the regional jihadist movement. Groups such as the Indian Mujahidin are, of course, a particularly spectacular example of the kinds of autonomous jihadist enterprises that have emerged from the LeT. Similar outgrowths, however, have been observed in locations as unlikely as the Maldives and Singapore.

Countering these fluid transnational networks will need international cooperation of an order higher than anything seen so far. In the Hooti-Nawaz case, Omani authorities demonstrated an exemplary willingness to cooperate with India.⁴² Nawaz was deported to India post-haste, and is now awaiting trial. Al-Hooti has been sentenced to life imprisonment in Oman. Some signs of progress are evident. Bangladesh, for example, is believed to be cracking down hard on Lashkar-linked elements within its territory. Key organizers, such as Sharif-ul-Haq and Mubashir Shahid, have disappeared; some suspect they are being held by the authorities. In Pakistan and much of the Gulf region, however, action against the Lashkar's networks is still poor or non-existent. As a result, the LeT and its affiliates such as the Indian Mujahidin will likely continue to expand their reach and lethality.

Praveen Swami is Associate Editor of the Hindu, one of India's largest English-language newspapers, and reports on terrorism and low intensity conflicts in India. His most recent book, India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad: The Covert War in Jammu and Kashmir, 1947-2002, was published by Routledge in 2007. The book was written while he was a Jennings Randolph senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace in

Washington, D.C., in 2004-2005. His scholarly work includes a 1999 book, The Kargil War, chapters in several edited volumes, and papers in journals including The India Review and Faultlines. Mr. Swami has won several major awards for his work, including the Indian Express-Ramnath Goenka Print Journalist of the Year prize, 2006.

2009.

⁴² Johnson TA, "Bangalore Blasts Financier Flown in from Oman," *Indian Express*, March 8, 2009.