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# OPINION

## Lashkar-e-Taiba's Fedayeen Missions: Need to Understand the Terror Dynamic

Naveen Khan\*



Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) usually mistranslated as "Army of the Pure/Righteous" is correctly translated as the 'Army of Madinah', because Taiba is the other name for Madinah,<sup>1</sup> the second holiest city in Islam; the city that hosted the Prophet when he migrated to this place in 622 CE. LeT considers itself the force which is there to defend Muslims worldwide. Though historically, the bulk of the operations conducted by this Pakistani jihadist organization focused on Kashmir, LeT adheres to an extremist Salafist *takfiri* (declaring other Muslims to be infidels) ideology that envisages a

global pan-Islamist caliphate. It is known for pioneering *fedayeen* (also spelled as *fidayeen*) or suicide missions in India since 1993.<sup>2</sup>

These attacks are endorsed by the controversial Arab Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah in 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, who is still revered and quoted by al-Qaeda and Daesh. What few people know is that he proposed the use of a battlefield tactic known as *inghimas*: the act of one or a few fighters plunging into a numerically superior enemy to cause maximum damage, despite the high risk of death.<sup>3</sup> LeT's *fedayeen* missions are based on Ibn Taymiyyah's *inghimas*, and the term *fedayeen* refers to members of a group who

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are willing to sacrifice themselves for a larger cause.

The *fedayeen* missions have been described as “death-defying”,<sup>4</sup> “daredevil”,<sup>5</sup> “dramatic”,<sup>6</sup> “no-surrender”,<sup>7</sup> and “high-risk commando-style”<sup>8</sup> operations. They successfully transformed the Kashmiri freedom movement “from insurgency to terrorism”.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of attacking the Indian forces and civilians, according to LeT's ex-spokesperson, Abdullah Muntazir, the *fedayeen* “must complete [their] mission even in the worst circumstances”.<sup>10</sup> These fierce attackers thus prioritised the fulfilment of their assigned missions over achievement of martyrdom. Abdur Rahman Makki, LeT's co-founder, described the *fedayeen* attacker's aim as, “a single *mujahid* attack[ing] many enemies with the hope of coming back alive or of inflicting maximum damage or [...] to terrorise the enemy...”.<sup>11</sup>

These operations following the Kargil War in 1999 caused great physical and logistical damage to the Indian forces. In 2001, when the attacks were at their peak in Kashmir during the infamous “*fedayeen* stage of the insurgency”,<sup>12</sup> the death toll peaked at 4,507, forcefully reinvigorating the insurgency.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the *fedayeen* fighters inflicted considerable psychological damage upon the Indian forces, as teams of only two fighters fought fiercely on the battlefield, causing heavy loss of lives on the Indian side. At times, these attackers even managed to escape unharmed.

Simultaneously, LeT launched the *fedayeen* actions deep inside India by attacking Delhi's historical Lal Qila (also called the Red Fort) in 2000, thereby bringing unprecedented “shock and awe”.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, in 2001, the attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi halted the peace process between India and Pakistan, and brought the two countries to the brink of war.

The Mumbai 2008 attacks that killed 166 people during a four-day siege were projected as a step up as the *fedayeen* targetted what they believed as the “evil trio”,<sup>15</sup> that is, the so-called “Brahmanic-Talmudic-Crusader” alliance,<sup>16</sup> in five locations within the city. This operation brought LeT's transnational ideology to the fore and had international repercussions since citizens of 14 countries besides India were also killed.

Inside Pakistani territory, and also in Kashmir, the *fedayeen* missions

burnished LeT's reputation among the terrorists as "the premier militant group fighting in Kashmir", which brought the group publicity and respect.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, these missions benefitted Pakistan indirectly as well by helping to avenge its honour that was damaged during the Kargil War.<sup>18</sup>

Delhi's Lal Qila attack, in particular, succeeded in a "symbolic reconquest of the Hindu-occupied seat of the Moghul Empire".<sup>19</sup> Theologically, as these missions were related to Ibn Taymiyyah, they were even more able to resonate with the religious sentiments of conservative Pakistanis.

The *fedayeen* fighters also had symbolic similarities with the participants of the historic 'Battle of Badr' that under the Prophet attained a major victory for the early Muslims. It was fought by a small number of warriors who confronted a large enemy force, sustaining less loss of lives while inflicting heavy damage upon the opponents—all of which the *fedayeen* aim at. This symbolism—coupled with vehement arguments by LeT's leaders defending these missions as different from 'suicide attacks' and thus 'shariah-compliant'—apparently lent them greater legitimacy among Muslim Pakistanis. Such 'higher' moral

standing, among a host of terror outfits operating out of Pakistan, also eased fundraising and recruitment of LeT in Pakistan and abroad.<sup>20</sup>

Notwithstanding the spectacular successes of the LeT, the *fedayeen* missions sometimes faced failures as well. For instance, the LeT fighters were killed in 2001 trying to attack the Jammu airport, then in 2005 while attempting to strike Ayodhya's then-makeshift temple in the formerly disputed Ram Janambhoomi complex, and in 2007, whilst storming an Indian Army unit in Kashmir.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, since 2002, several LeT *fedayeen* operatives have surrendered to the Indian security forces, in more than a dozen instances of desertion.<sup>22</sup>

LeT's *fedayeen* missions, overall, have met with a significant success rate in India, accomplishing their assigned targets. This lesson from history is important for predicting LeT's future operations in India and across the West, considering its transnational ideology. It is thus time not to lower the guard but reinforce counter-terrorism efforts by India, based on the evidence that LeT has used the *fedayeen* tactic as a legitimising factor sustaining its appeal as a jihadist outfit that uses terror as an instrument in the asymmetric war being fought not only in Kashmir but against India as a whole. ■

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