



**Storming the World Stage: The Story of  
Lashkar-e-Taiba**

By Stephen Tankel

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Reviewed by

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Pakistan simultaneously acts as one of America's most important allies and one of its most implacable foes. It is an ally when it provides critical support to U.S. efforts against al Qaeda and becomes an adversary when it provides safe haven to violent extremists such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). In *Storming the World Stage*, Stephen Tankel—a highly regarded academic expert on Pakistan with substantial experience in-country—details LeT's evolution into a “powerful and protected” Pakistan-based organization with international reach. The book uses a variety of academic sources and original field research in Pakistan and elsewhere to produce the best account of LeT's evolution along with important insights into Pakistan's relationship with Islamic militants in general. Tankel argues LeT's growth and international reach result from its ability to reconcile two dualities: “identity as militant outfit *and* as a missionary organization” along with being both a tool of Pakistan *and* a pan-Islamist militant organization. *Storming the World Stage* is a must read for anyone attempting to understand the complex and opaque Pakistani logic that permits Islamic militants to survive and thrive in that country.

The book first explains how Pakistan's “jihadi milieu” influenced the development of Pakistan-based militants. The domestic and foreign problems of the nascent state drove national leaders to rely on Islam and militant proxies as important tools of state. West Pakistan's mixed ethnicities and differences from

East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) made Islam a rare commonality throughout the country. Even before the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan, Pakistan used pan-Islamism to undermine Pashtun separatist sentiment along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Additionally, Pakistan developed militant proxies to offset India's military superiority. Among militant proxies, LeT was one of the most loyal groups and followed a unique Islamic school of thought—Ahl-e-Hadith—that initially limited LeT's popular support and, in turn, its threat to the state.

The second section examines how and why Pakistan used militants in Kashmir, how LeT grew into a global organization, and finally how 9/11 initially impacted LeT and other Pakistani militants. LeT's loyalty and perceived limited growth prospects encouraged Pakistan to provide it with substantial training and other support. This state support enabled LeT to become the best trained outfit operating in Kashmir and gave it the freedom to build a robust domestic and international network dedicated to spreading its ideology and supporting military operations. LeT built schools and hospitals and ran other social programs in Pakistan to proselytize and support jihad. Its social works improved its financing and influence with Pakistan's patriotic military leaders and politicians, who often benefited from LeT's political support. Internationally, LeT capitalized on perceptions of Muslim abuse in India, the Pakistani diaspora, and the spread of Salafism to increase recruitment, fundraise, and spread LeT's ideology.

The last section explores how Pakistan views militants, perceptions that caused Pakistan's government to protect LeT after 9/11, and LeT's spectacular 2008 attack in Mumbai. Pakistani actions against LeT have almost universally been a facade to appease the international community with minimal lasting impact because Pakistan perceives LeT as “good” Islamic militants. One of Tankel's most important concepts is that Pakistan protects or counters militants depending on their status as “good” or “bad” jihadis. This distinction is neither static nor exact as militant actions cause Pakistan's perception of loyalty and utility to shift. Though other Pakistan experts such as Christine Fair and Ashley Tellis implicitly use similar concepts, Tankel's construct is more concise and equally valid. Tankel clearly articulates how perceptions of good and bad jihadis affect Pakistani decisions and uses events after 9/11 as a poignant example. His sources describe militants as a “gas stove” that Pakistan

believes it can use with precision against India to increase or decrease the “temperature” as policy requirements dictate. However, Pakistan cannot turn off the flame because it cannot restart the “pilot light.”

As Pakistan increased restraint on militant activity to further its policy priorities, specifically in Kashmir, many militants turned their attention to foreigners in Afghanistan and in some cases Pakistan's government. Organizations perceived to be too restrained by Pakistan lost prestige. In LeT's case, this decline in prestige likely encouraged it to launch the attack in Mumbai, vaulting it into the international spotlight and increasing its status among extremists.

While Tankel makes no attempt to develop policy recommendations to reduce the potential threat from LeT, he arms readers with the context necessary to avoid major policy blunders. He explains how Pakistan relies on LeT and other militant groups to serve a series of domestic and foreign policy objectives. Tankel also describes the conundrum for policy options dealing with LeT and other militant groups that Pakistan supports. Efforts to substantially degrade a group's capabilities would likely negate Pakistani restraints and encourage vigorous self-defense. Neither American nor Pakistani leaders want LeT to shift its operational activities from Kashmir, India, and Afghanistan to Pakistan, Europe, or the United States.

*Storming the World Stage* is the best analytical history of LeT's development and cogently explains how it balances competing secular and religious aspects to form one of the most capable terrorist networks in the world. Ultimately, it is LeT's practical nature that allows balance, which subsequently prevents it from becoming the next al Qaeda, at least for now. As a result, the greatest threat from LeT is its long-term potential to erode moderate values in a Pakistan already plagued by weak governance and violent Islamists. While the book's focus is LeT, readers will gain a better understanding of Pakistan and its relationship with militants in general. While Pakistan is too complex to understand from one book, *Storming the World Stage* provides a strong foundation to readers unfamiliar with Pakistan, and its extensive field research offers new insights for Pakistan experts. **JFQ**

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