
David Coleman Headley: Tinker, Tailor, American, Lashkar-e-Taiba, ISI Spy

Introduction

David Coleman Headley, the monstrous Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist who played a vital role on behalf of the LeT and its patron, the Pakistani intelligence agency – the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), in carrying out the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks and is presently serving a 35-year prison term in the United States (US), has been in the news on multiple accounts in the last few weeks. Reports in the media in late July claimed that Headley had been brutally attacked by two prison inmates and had suffered grievous injuries. He had been rushed to the critical care unit of North Evanston hospital in Chicago, where he was battling for his life. However, a day after they appeared, Headley's lawyer John Theis refuted these media reports saying that *"I am in regular communication with Headley. There is no basis for the reports... Although I cannot disclose his location, he is neither in Chicago nor in a hospital"*. It therefore transpires that either the media has been patently ill-informed or Headley's lawyer is very keen to keep the attack under wraps. Why the media would want to waste valuable print space on an incident that never occurred is as baffling as any effort by Headley's lawyer to hush up a beating that his client was subjected to. That said, there is really little about Headley that is not intriguing.

Headley again figured in the news in the third week of August when the Pakistani government took the daft and highly insensitive decision to include Headley's half-brother, Danyal Gilani, in the official four-member delegation that it sent to New Delhi to attend the last rites of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Danyal Gilani works for the Pakistani government and while he is himself not in the bad books of the Indian government, the wisdom and propriety of sending to a State function in India the half-brother of a terrorist responsible for the most gruesome terrorist attack India has ever witnessed, in which as many as 166 people were killed, is at best questionable.

Headley, a US national, had during his trial in the US pleaded guilty to being a member of the LeT as well as to being directly tasked and funded by the ISI for carrying out critical preparations for the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008. He had made several extended reconnaissance trips to Mumbai prior to the attacks from September 2006 to July 2008, and had taken pictures and made maps, sketches and videos of the various targets for the attacks. Following each mission to Mumbai, he travelled to Pakistan to brief his LeT and ISI bosses there and provide them with the material he had collected. Headley was tasked in March 2008 to take boat trips in and around the Mumbai harbour and identify a landing site for the team of LeT attackers who planned to arrive by sea. Headley successfully completed this task during a visit to India in April 2008.

The LeT, a terrorist outfit that was founded in the 1980s to join the Pakistan and US-led fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, was subsequently transformed by Pakistan's military establishment into a strategic asset against India. Headley testified that in the years leading up to the Mumbai attacks the ISI retained a close alliance with the LeT and its officers helped screen and train recruits from overseas

at LeT's training camps. The LeT also has close ties with other terrorist groups operating in the region such as Al Qaeda. The LeT leader Hafiz Saeed shared close personal relations with Osama bin Laden.

A 2011 book titled *'Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11'* by Syed Saleem Shahzad, a Pakistani expert on Al Qaeda, brought out that the ultimate objective of the Mumbai attacks was to provoke a full-scale war between India and Pakistan. Al Qaeda's involvement with the Mumbai attacks was evident from the choice of targets. Americans and Israelis, the sworn enemies of Bin Laden's global jihad, were sought out, identified and ruthlessly killed by the LeT militants that undertook the Mumbai attacks. In the book, based on interviews with Ilyas Kashmiri, an ISI-trained terrorist who had later shifted allegiance to Al Qaeda, Shahzad revealed that Al Qaeda had manipulated the planning of the Mumbai plot to make it bigger than the LeT leadership initially planned. It shocked but did not surprise Pakistan watchers that Shahzad was kidnapped, tortured and killed in Pakistan shortly after the release of his article, which suggested a link between the Pakistani Navy and Al Qaeda. His body was recovered from a canal in May 2011. The Obama administration asserted that it had *"reliable and conclusive"* intelligence that the Pakistani secret services were behind his killing. The then chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, also stated that the ISI was involved in Shahzad's death, the aim being to shut him up. Human Rights Watch separately accused the Pakistani intelligence services of being behind Shahzad's killing.

Prior to the Mumbai attacks, most western countries led by the US refused to acknowledge that the LeT posed a threat to them. They viewed the outfit as being exclusively India-centric. Their vision of the LeT was also densely clouded by their dependence on Pakistan for the supplies and logistics for their ongoing war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. It appeared more convenient for them at that stage to turn a blind eye to Pakistan's support for terrorist outfits that did not pose a direct threat to the West. They fell prey to short-term tactical convenience and self-interest while short-changing strategic goals and threats. Principles enshrined in a rule-based order were also compromised upon by drawing an unnatural, unsavoury and damaging distinction between *'good'* and *'bad'* terrorists. The visionary counsel of renowned French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière, a notable exception who had assessed the dangers posed by the LeT even prior to the Mumbai attacks, was summarily ignored by the then Bush administration to which it had been put forth unambiguously. Bruguière's assessment was based on his years of investigating French LeT terrorist Willie Brigitte, who after being caught had confessed to involvement in a foiled LeT-driven bomb plot in Australia in 2003. The wealth of information on the LeT that Brigitte provided to French investigators left them with no doubt about the outfit's capability, its desire to attack western targets and, most importantly, its close ties to the ISI. This had convinced the seasoned Bruguière enough to warn in 2007, that *"Lashkar is not just a tool of the ISI, but an ally of al Qaeda that participates in its global jihad. Today Pakistan is the heart of the terrorist threat. And it may be too late to do anything about it"*.

The Mumbai attacks proved the correctness of Bruguière's views and turned the earlier-held impression of the US and its western allies on its head. Not only did the LeT specifically and ruthlessly search for, identify, and kill nationals of western countries, especially from the US, and expressly attack a Jewish target in Mumbai, but it also initiated a project in 2009 that had absolutely no relation to India – a terrorist attack against a newspaper in Denmark. Media reports quoted Charles Faddis, a

former senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) counter-terrorism officer, as admitting in November 2011, that *"there should have been a recognition that Lashkar had the desire and the potential to attack the West and that we needed to get up to speed on this group. It was a mistake to dismiss it as just a threat to India"*. That this recognition eventually came is in no small measure due to the revelations made by Headley about the ISI, the LeT, the close linkages between the two, and their plans and commitment to attack the West.

The scope and significance of the terrorist activities Headley undertook on behalf of the LeT and the ISI is apparent from the fact that John Brennan, the then counter-terrorism adviser to US President Obama and his nominee to be the next CIA Director, in a written submission to the members of the Senate Intelligence Committee as part of his confirmation process in February 2013 listed Headley among the five high value targets arrested by the US in the preceding four years. He stated, *"Over the last four years, the American criminal justice system has been used to arrest, detain, interrogate, and prosecute numerous suspected terrorists. Individuals arrested here in the United States include David Headley, Mansoor Arbabsiar, Najibullah Zazi, Faisal Shahzad, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab"*.

It was the discovery and killing by US Special Forces of Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in a fortified mansion in Abbottabad, less than a kilometer away from the premier Pakistan army training school and less than 50 kilometers from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, that played a major role in convincing the US and its allies of the sliminess, duplicity, and incorrigibility of the Pakistani military establishment. Similarly the revelations made by Headley, more than any other factor, impelled the Obama administration to re-evaluate its hitherto simplistic and naive assessment of the LeT. Both these developments eventually had a crucial role in forcing the US to overturn its benevolent and permissive policy towards Pakistan.

The US has steadily increased pressure on the LeT and Hafiz Saeed since late 2008. Working with India in the United Nations (UN) after the Mumbai attacks, the US secured Hafiz Saeed's designation as an Al Qaeda-associated terrorist under the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 on 10 December 2008. Saeed was subsequently designated as a Specially Designated National by the Department of the Treasury on 4 November 2010, which put him on the American sanctions list. A US bounty of \$10 million for Saeed was also announced. At the time of the announcement, only five people had bounties of \$10 million or more on their heads. Three of them were in Pakistan – Saeed, Al Qaeda head Zawahiri and Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

The fact that Saeed remains a free man in Pakistan today, lionized by the military establishment and makes periodic appearances on television to call for the destruction of India and jihad against the US and Israel, despite these UN and US measures, brings into sharp focus the virtual impunity that sponsors of terror such as Pakistan enjoy. It also reflects the abject inability of the international community to implement its chosen rule-based order and ensure compliance of the same. The damning testimony of Headley notwithstanding, there has been no letup in Pakistan's backing of terrorist organizations, such as the LeT, simply because it has been allowed by a toothless international order to get away with doing so.

Who is David Coleman Headley?

David Coleman Headley was born in 1960 in Washington D.C. to Pakistani broadcaster Sayed Salim Gilani and American national Alice Headley. He was named Daood Sayed Gilani, the name he carried until he changed it in 2006, to the one he became better known by. After his birth, the family moved to Lahore in Pakistan. Gilani's mother returned to the US a few years later leaving Daood in the custody of his father in Pakistan, where he remained until the age of 17. He studied in different schools there, including the Cadet College Hasan Abdal school that prepares students for careers in the army.

Daood returned to the US in 1977 and settled with his mother in Philadelphia. He dropped out of school on several occasions before moving to New York where he started a video rental store. He continued visiting Pakistan, where he first became addicted to heroin and later began trafficking it. Gilani was reportedly arrested with two kilos of heroin in Frankfurt in 1988. His case was handed over to the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), with which he made a plea deal by agreeing to surrender his partners in Philadelphia in exchange for a lighter four year sentence. Upon his release, Gilani resumed dealing in drugs and was again arrested by the DEA in 1997 while trying to smuggle in drugs from Pakistan. He was thereafter enlisted as an informant by the DEA and again received a light sentence of 15 months. Soon after the 9/11 attacks in the US, the DEA reportedly directed him to collect intelligence on terrorists in addition to drugs.

Headley was charismatic and had strong chameleon-like qualities. Multilingual and with a sound understanding of both the Pakistani and American cultures, he used these traits to develop into an unscrupulous master manipulator. He reportedly once used an elderly aunt to smuggle drugs on a flight overseas, hiding the package in her pocket without her knowledge. He was as comfortable sporting a full beard and wearing traditional Islamic attire while expressing warlike beliefs, quoting the Quran, praising Al Qaeda and declaring his hatred for India as he was going clean-shaven and taking on the role of an entrepreneur with a taste for champagne and luxury. He had a talent for winning over as well as selling out accomplices, investigators and romantic conquests, all with consummate ease. Even while stabbing Tahawwur Rana, his high school friend and accomplice in the Mumbai attacks, in the back, by testifying against him in court, Headley described Rana in the courtroom as his *"best friend in the whole world"*. Headley's testimony condemned Rana to a 14-year prison term on three counts of giving material support to terrorists, one of whom was Headley himself. Headley's personal life was also messy. He fathered four children, including a son with a Pakistani wife whom he named Osama. He was also married to three other women, and several of these relationships overlapped. Shortly before the Mumbai attacks Headley had brought his Pakistani wife and children to Chicago, while he himself spent most of his time in Pakistan where he had a Moroccan wife.

Headley's entry into terrorism

In December 2001, the US government ended Headley's probation three years earlier and rushed him to Pakistan, where he established contact with the LeT in Lahore. As per court documents, officials and his associates, he enrolled in the terrorist outfit and was imparted several modules of training in LeT terror camps in the mountains near Muzaffarabad, Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir, and

elsewhere in the period from February 2002 to 2003. According to Headley's guilty plea and testimony in the US, he attended the following training camps operated by the LeT: A three-week course starting in February 2002 that provided indoctrination on the merits of waging jihad; a three-week course starting in August 2002 that provided training in the use of weapons and grenades; a three-month course starting in April 2003 that taught close combat tactics, the use of weapons and grenades, and survival skills; a three-week course starting in August 2003 that taught counter-surveillance skills; and a three-month course starting in December 2003 that provided combat and tactical training. In addition, a book titled *'Headley and I'* written by S. Hussain Zaidi with Rahul Bhatt, the son of Bollywood filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt whom Headley had befriended during his visits to India prior to the Mumbai attacks, details the account given by Headley to Indian interrogators about the various LeT training modules that he underwent. Excerpts containing Headley's first-hand account of the training he received, which also brings out the indoctrination and hatred that the LeT ingrains in its trainees alongside with its close nexus with the Pakistani military establishment, are reproduced below:

"After the first two preliminary stages – the Daura-e-Amma and Daura-e-Sufa – I progressed to the next. The training became much more practical, and I learned to translate my acceptance and belief in Salafi Islam and radical ideology into action. In April 2003, I volunteered for the Daura-e-Khaassa in Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. There were thirty or forty of us in the group that underwent the Daura-e-Khaassa training, which lasted for a full three months. During that time, we were taught the importance of being soldiers of Islam... The earlier Dauras were orientation programmes, this (Daura-e-Khaassa) was the real induction into jihad. We were told that it was not just okay to kill others, it was actually an act of worship – it needed to be done to avenge the wrongdoings against Muslims. The LeT established this primarily by showing us very gory and violent movies about atrocities against Muslims. Finally, after graduating from the Daura-e-Khaassa, we were taken to a mountain in Muzaffarabad. At first, I thought the next part of our training would be in a cave, as it looked like that was where we were headed. We soon found out that it was much more. It was a self-sustained branch of the Lashkar-e-Taiba. The sheer grandeur of the place took my breath away – it appeared to be more like a palatial fortress than anything else. It was a safe house, and it was called Bait-ul Mujahideen, meaning the 'house of the crusaders'. Whenever mujahideens would cross over from India's Jammu and Kashmir or from Pakistan, they would be stationed here and taken care of. Here, they lived a life of luxury until they were ready to leave, or were given details of their next mission. They would then cross the border to India.

I also met a frogman while I was in Muzaffarabad; he was introduced to me as Abdur Rehman. He seemed to be from the Pakistan Navy. In that Lashkar camp, Bait-ul Mujahideen, we received intensive all-round training. The emphasis was primarily on urban warfare, and we were trained in two-man, body-attack operations. We learned to cover our partners and work with them seamlessly. We were taught all kinds of urban warfare skills – two-man entry, two-man firing from cover, and covering jams and reloads. We also had situational training – stair work, hall work, combat, first aid, and even unarmed hand-to-hand combat. We were taught to shoot with all kinds of weapons – pistols, rifles, shotguns, everything. I handled the M-16,

Heckler and Koch, FNAR rifles, Steyr AUG, submachine guns and even a Dragunov sniper rifle. I was also taught how to use hand grenades and antipersonnel fragmentation grenades. But the one weapon that all of us had to master was the AK-47 and its derivatives.

I mentioned the name of Abu Kahafa earlier. He was present at the safe house... I went through various modes of combat with him, including hand to hand and using knives. Apart from him, there were several others who gave us weapons training, and they were all from the ISI, Pakistan's Special Security Guard, or the counter-terrorism unit of the Pakistan Army, the Zarar Company. But their identities were never revealed to us at any point of time. We went through another Daura, called Daura-e-Ribat, meaning communication. This is a derivative of the root word rabt, meaning connect. Another important skill we had to learn was counter-interrogation techniques. We had to keep our minds in perfect shape in all kinds of situations so that if we were ever captured alive, we would be able to deflect the attention of our interrogators, and confuse and mislead them.

One day, one of my Lashkar masters took me aside and told me that there was one more Daura that I needed to do, that everyone like me, of my calibre, had to do. Hobnobbing with the Lashkar had awakened me to my spiritual side. But the Daura-e-Tadrib ul Muslimeen in July 2004 gave my spirituality a new momentum. This was at a seminar in Abbottabad. I am sure all of us in this room know about Abbottabad, which houses a large military base. There were many speakers at the seminar. However, to me, the star speaker was Maulana Masood Azhar. Yes, I'm sure the name strikes a chord. It is the same Maulana Masood Azhar that the Indian government had to release in exchange for the passengers of IC-814 in Kandahar. Hearing him speak was a celestial, deeply spiritual experience. Throughout his discourse, I was riveted. As Azhar was wrapping up his speech, he said to us that our lives had no real meaning, no real purpose, and they should be spent in the cause of jihad. From then on, I was ready to die for my Muslim brothers.

By 2005, I had finished my training and had become a full-fledged member of the LeT, a jihadi dedicated to the cause of true Islam. I was itching to start work, and was looking forward to the mission in India that I had been told might be given to me. Within a few days, I was introduced to a retired brigadier of the ISI. They never revealed his full name to me, I only knew him as Retired Brigadier Riyaz. Riyaz lived in a palatial house in Muzaffarabad, reminiscent of all those palaces that people see in movies and photographs. There were times when I was summoned to the house along with Zaki (Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi), one of my LeT masters. It was then that I realized the equation between Pakistan's ISI and the Lashkar – they were like master and subordinate. Zaki, who was a top figure in the LeT, the man in charge of all operations, was just a subservient servant in front of Brigadier Riyaz. I figured out that Riyaz was not the only man in the ISI who was dealing with our LeT handlers. Like him, Major Iqbal too was a very powerful and influential figure. His man in the LeT was Hafiz Saeed. Similarly, Major Samir handled biggies like Abu Kahafa, Sajid Mir and others. It was a strange marriage, and I knew that the LeT despised it. To them, jihad was most important. But the ISI were really

not interested in jihad. They were only interested in developing and executing strategies to destabilize India.

Finally, the ISI masters decided that I was ready for jihad, and my first mission. But they told me that there was one crucial thing I had to do first. I had to go back to the US and change my name. I was still Daood Gilani, and a Daood Gilani flying to and from between Pakistan and other countries would get noticed, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. I was instructed to choose a name that would not raise any suspicion. Sometime in September 2005, I called my attorney, Donald Drumpf, and told him that I wanted to change my name. He was surprised, but I told him that I had grown tired of Daood Gilani and the consequent persecution, and wanted to change my name to one that would sound as if it belonged to a white American. He believed what I said. Finally, though my social security number remained the same, I changed my name to David Coleman Headley, using my mother's middle and last names. At last, I was ready. This was the first time I was leaving the country on a mission, and I was leaving it a new man, as David Coleman Headley. After all those years of nursing my hatred, it was only fitting that my first mission was going to be in and against India".

Headley's role in the Mumbai attacks

In late 2005, Sajid Mir, a long-time member of the LeT who had risen to the position of deputy head of LeT's international operations wing, was assigned to lead the LeT unit dedicated to the attacks in India. Mir had direct access to Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, LeT's military chief. The LeT leadership handed over Headley, who had by now completed all modules of advanced terrorist training including those reserved for high-value recruits, to Mir's charge. In addition to possessing the basic attributes and traits required by the LeT comprising a hatred for India, Pakistani nationalism and dedication to jihad against the West, Headley had two other invaluable assets that no one else could provide. He possessed a US passport and looked and behaved like an American. Mir's instructions to Headley to anglicize his name, which Headley did in February 2006, removed the only loophole that could give Headley away. Charles Faddis said about Headley, *"This guy is perfect. I mean he effectively can walk through every screen that the Indians have thrown up over their years of experience, every fence they've erected to keep out Lashkar operatives. Whether it's his age, his background, his documentation, he's just not going to be one of those guys that the Indians are focused on"*.

After his name change, Headley was informed by Mir and other LeT leaders that he had been chosen as the lead *reconnaissanceur* for a major project. Between 2006 and 2008, Headley visited Mumbai five times and reconnoitered the landmarks identified by Mir and Major Iqbal, his LeT and ISI handlers respectively. He stayed at the main target, the iconic Taj Mahal Palace hotel, and carried out extensive surveillance and filming based on the training he had received in Pakistan. This was followed up by similar scouting of the other targets of the Mumbai attacks – the Oberoi hotel, the Leopold café, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Train Terminus and Chabad House, a Jewish centre. He also identified a suitable spot at a fishermen's settlement in the Colaba area of Mumbai, close to all the targets, where the boat of the LeT terrorists that carried out the attacks could land. He recorded the location of each of these targets with GPS systems and carefully observed and noted the security around each. Based on the

activities he undertook, Headley became one of the masterminds of the plot. After each of his trips to Mumbai, Headley returned to Pakistan to provide the results of his mission to his Pakistani handlers and obtain fresh instructions for the next step.

Acting upon the wealth of information and the insights gleaned by Headley, ten highly trained LeT terrorists arrived on a suicide mission in Mumbai from Karachi by sea on 26 November 2008 and unleashed mayhem in the city. Between 26 and 29 November they attacked the targets scouted by Headley, fired sophisticated automatic weapons indiscriminately at innocents, secured control of hotels and took hostages there, consciously singled out Americans and Jews, and eventually brutally murdered 166 people and injured over 300. Throughout the ordeal, Sajid Mir and other LeT leaders as well as Headley's ISI handlers were holed up in a safe house in Karachi from where they were continuously guiding the attackers over mobile phones and goading them to be even more ruthless, to ensure more damage, to take more lives.

Headley watched the attacks unfold on television, with overzealous news channels providing minute by minute coverage. They not only gave the LeT the world-wide coverage it wished for, but also impeded operations of the security forces to stall the carnage unleashed by the terrorists.

[Headley's involvement in the planned terrorist attack in Denmark](#)

At his trial in the US, Headley admitted and testified that after he had successfully completed the task allotted to him by the LeT and the ISI for the Mumbai attacks, he was instructed by Mir and Major Iqbal to conduct surveillance of the offices of the Danish newspaper *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten* in Copenhagen and Aarhus. They informed him that the plan was to undertake a sensational and violent terrorist attack on the newspaper to avenge the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Headley traveled from Chicago to Copenhagen in January 2009 and, as he had done in Mumbai, conducted surveillance of the *Jyllands-Posten* offices in Copenhagen and Aarhus and scouted and videotaped the surrounding areas.

In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks the LeT and the ISI faced the heat of international pressure with serious questions being asked about their role in the attacks. Demands that Pakistan bring those responsible, including Mir and Major Iqbal, to justice, clamp down on its terrorist proxies and shut down its terrorist infrastructure, were forcefully made by India and the international community, especially countries that had lost their nationals in Mumbai. In this milieu, Major Iqbal and Mir developed cold feet and backed away from the Denmark project in early 2009. At this stage Major Iqbal, who had met Headley at least twice in connection with the Denmark plot and was very enthusiastic about it, cut off all contact with the latter. Headley, however, remained hell-bent on carrying out the Denmark attacks and was left highly disillusioned by the LeT's decision to abandon the project.

Headley, through this period, had also been in close contact with a retired Pakistani Army officer, Major Abdur Rehman Hashim Syed *alias* Pasha. Abdur Rehman had earlier told Headley that if the LeT decided to ditch the planned Denmark attack, Ilyas Kashmiri, the Al Qaeda-linked leader of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), would be keen to take it over. Abdur Rehman was closely associated with Ilyas

Kashmiri. Selected and trained by the ISI in the 1980s, Kashmiri was later even given special training by Pakistan's elite Special Services Group. He began his career as a militant in Afghanistan fighting with the ISI-backed mujahideen against the Soviets. After the Soviet defeat he was sent by the ISI to Kashmir, from where he hailed, to wage terror against the Indian State. He became known for his daring attacks on the Indian Army and for taking foreign hostages. He evolved into a prized asset of Pakistan's security establishment. However, in the early years of this century he became disillusioned with the ISI, moved away from their wings, formed a new terrorist group known as the 313 Brigade and aligned it with Al Qaeda.

In February 2009, Headley and Abdur Rehman met with Kashmiri in the Waziristan region of Pakistan and discussed the video surveillance as well as ways to carry out the attack. Kashmiri told Headley that he could provide manpower for the operation and that the LeT's participation was not required. In May 2009, Headley and Abdur Rehman again met with Kashmiri in Waziristan. Kashmiri referred Headley to his contacts in the United Kingdom (UK), who he said could provide Headley with money, weapons and manpower for the Denmark attack. He asked Headley to convey to the contacts his instructions that it must be a suicide attack and the attackers should prepare martyrdom videos beforehand. Kashmiri also directed that the attackers behead captives at the newspaper offices and throw their heads onto the street of Copenhagen to heighten the response from Danish authorities. Kashmiri stressed that the Al Qaeda leadership desired that the attack take place as soon as possible.

In late July and early August 2009, Headley traveled from Chicago to various places in Europe and met with and attempted to obtain assistance from Kashmiri's contacts. He again visited Copenhagen and made 13 additional surveillance videos. Headley was arrested at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago on 3 October 2009, when he was about to travel to Pakistan to deliver these surveillance videos to Abdur Rehman and Kashmiri.

The ISI's involvement with Headley and the Mumbai terrorist attacks

In his guilty confession Headley painted a picture of official Pakistani military cooperation in an act of mass causality terror that raised worrisome questions. He unambiguously stated that the Mumbai attacks were planned and executed with active ISI involvement at every stage. He said, "*The ISI... had no ambiguity in understanding the necessity to strike India*", adding that a key motivation for it was to bolster militant organizations with strong links to the Pakistani security establishment who were being marginalized by more extreme radical groups.

During every visit to Pakistan prior to the Mumbai attacks, Headley had met with both his ISI and LeT bosses there. The media, citing US officials, have reported that Headley had told investigators that he had a Pakistani relative who was a former deputy director of the ISI and an army general. This facilitated Headley's access to senior officials and militant leaders. In addition to the ISI's Major Iqbal, his trainer and handler, Headley disclosed that he had been in contact with other ISI officers including Major Sameer Ali, Lt. Colonel Hamza and Colonel Shah. Major Iqbal and LeT leader Sajid Mir had jointly supervised Headley's forays into India for surveillance operations and operational planning for the Mumbai attacks. In addition, Major Iqbal had directed Headley to gather military intelligence in India and carry out surveillance of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, India's premier nuclear research

facility located near Mumbai. These additional activities were not of interest to Mir or the LeT. Headley's indictment in court also revealed that Major Iqbal had given Headley about \$28,000 to establish an office of Tahawwur Rana's immigration firm in Mumbai as a cover, and for other expenses.

US Federal prosecutors used Headley's account and corroborating evidence to file charges against Major Iqbal, Headley's ISI handler who trained, directed and funded him. Major Iqbal was the ISI's chosen representative to supervise the Mumbai attacks. This was the first ever instance of the US government charging a serving Pakistani intelligence officer for terrorism. He was charged with the murder of the six US nationals killed in Mumbai. However, as has been its wont, Pakistan has over the years steadfastly refused repeated US requests to arrest him. Reports indicate that Major Iqbal remains a serving officer in the ISI.

The Pakistani military establishment's attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of the international community by denying the ISI's involvement in the Mumbai attacks and any knowledge of Major Iqbal, proved to be rather lame in the face of the plethora of information meticulously gathered by the investigators. Headley's computer, phone, travel and credit card records, invaluable as they were, were just the starting point. Reports brought out that investigators simultaneously compared Headley's revelations with the results of extensive investigations in India, Pakistan, Denmark and the UK. For example, when Headley testified that he had met a mastermind of the Mumbai attacks in Karachi on a particular date, the prosecution produced Headley's Karachi hotel bill from that date in court. When Headley described scouting targets in Denmark, prosecutors showed the jury his surveillance videos of those targets. Major Iqbal's email exchanges with Headley and Rana were presented in the courtroom. The phone evidence presented in court included a number that Major Iqbal had obtained with a New York area code to disguise his calls from Pakistan to India. According to intercepted phone calls and retrieved emails, Headley, over a period of several months, talked about Major Iqbal and other ISI officers with his associates. As per evidence from a wiretap, in September 2009, Headley received a call in Chicago from his brother in Pakistan saying that Major Iqbal had come to Headley's house in Lahore looking for him. The prosecutors presented evidence of Headley's close ties with his other ISI interlocutors as well. Headley's communications with ISI officer Major Sameer Ali were presented in court. Investigators also demonstrated that Major Ali worked closely with Major Iqbal. In the light of all this damning evidence that had been unearthed by the investigators, there was no scope left to even remotely doubt that the ISI and Major Iqbal were directly involved in the Mumbai attacks.

Headley had also elaborated in detail the intelligence training he received at a safe house in Lahore from instructors who were sergeants, corporals and other non-commissioned officers working for Major Iqbal. Given the advanced level of tradecraft he used in his reconnaissance missions, experts are certain that Headley did obtain professional training. Further, analysts have pointed out that the meticulous planning and tactical sophistication of the Mumbai plot far exceeded the majority of operations by Al Qaeda and other groups working without State support.

At the US trials, even Rana's defense attorneys accepted Headley's claim that he worked for the ISI and saw that as a factor that mitigated Rana's guilt. They asserted that Rana had communicated with

Major Iqbal but not with the LeT as he thought he was helping Headley conduct espionage operations for the ISI, not terrorist acts on behalf of the LeT, when he let him use his immigration firm as a cover.

While all the other LeT terrorists of the group of ten that landed in Mumbai to carry out the attacks in 2008 were killed by Indian security forces, one, Mohammed Ajmal Kasab, was taken alive. Headley's revelations on the preparations for the attacks that were done in Karachi were corroborated against Kasab's disclosures on the same subjects during questioning by Indian authorities. Kasab also implicated the ISI directly in the Mumbai attacks, saying it assisted with his training and helped select the targets.

Headley turned approver in 2016 and testified in the trial of LeT leader Sayeed Zabiuddin Ansari *alias* Abu Jindal. An Indian national traveling with a Pakistani passport, Abu Jindal was apprehended by Saudi authorities in June 2012 while he was recruiting and training new LeT volunteers from the large Pakistani diaspora in the Middle East. He was also reportedly in the final stages of planning a new terror attack. Abu Jindal, who was another of the masterminds of the Mumbai attacks, was deported by the Saudis to India. His importance and seniority in the LeT hierarchy and his direct role in the Mumbai attacks can be gauged from the fact that he was among the handful of terrorists allowed access to the control room in Karachi from where the attacks were supervised and directed in real-time. The voice of Abu Jindal talking on the phone to the ten terrorists in Mumbai was intercepted by Indian authorities. Among other things, he was heard advising the terrorists on where to look for more victims in the Taj Hotel and instructing them on when to murder their hostages. In a damning disclosure, Abu Jindal told the Indian authorities that two ISI officers, both of the rank of Major, were present in the control room while the Mumbai attacks were underway. As Abu Jindal was actually present in the control room in Karachi, his disclosure carried even more weight. It also confirmed Headley's assertion that the Mumbai attacks were planned and carried out with the direct involvement of the ISI.

[Many missed opportunities to nab Headley before his eventual arrest](#)

Headley avoided arrest despite at least six warnings to US federal agents about his extremist activities. These tips were given over a period of eight years from 2001 to 2009 by his family and associates at different places. If those invaluable leads from courageous human sources had been investigated more painstakingly, the Mumbai attacks could well have been prevented.

A few weeks after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, a former girlfriend of Headley in New York informed US authorities that Headley held the view that the US had caused great harm to Pakistan, adding that he supported Pakistani extremists and had expressed a desire to fight for them in Pakistan. Agents of the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) in New York interviewed the woman on 4 October 2001 and followed that up by speaking to others known to Headley, including his mother. The inquiry was closed thereafter as investigators were deluged with information in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and could not establish a real threat in Headley's case.

The second warning about Headley came in the summer of 2002 from the owner of a business frequented by Headley's mother. The business owner called the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

in Philadelphia and informed that Headley's mother often described her son as a fanatical extremist and expressed concern over him. Headley had already undergone training at a LeT camp near Muzaffarabad in February 2002, and upon returning to the US had told his mother about it. However, without much follow-up the lead was filed under miscellaneous terror cases and closed. The Philadelphia investigators apparently did not even know of the earlier New York inquiry.

An even more serious tip was received in August 2005, when Headley's then wife called the JTTF in New York and disclosed his ties to the LeT, including his training, fundraising and work as an informant. She offered to show them his e-mails, but they rejected the offer. In this case the investigators were aware of the first inquiry conducted by their own task force in 2001, but not of the 2002 Philadelphia tip regarding Headley's terrorist training in Pakistan. Once again the JTTF concluded that there was *"no nexus to terrorism"* and closed the inquiry. Analysts believe that in this instance the investigators may have been influenced by the common perception amongst US agencies in the years prior to the Mumbai attacks that the LeT only focused on South Asia and did not pose a threat to the US. That this perception was highly misplaced and erroneous is apparent from the fact that by 2005 LeT militants had not only been apprehended and given life sentences in the US state of Virginia but had also been prosecuted for planning bomb attacks in New York, London and Australia.

Another of Headley's four wives, a Moroccan national he had married in Pakistan, visited the US Embassy in Islamabad in December 2007 and told officials of the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security and of Immigration that Headley was involved with *"big people"* and was *"looking to participate in jihad against the US"*. She specifically mentioned suicide bombing and terrorist training. The information was forwarded to the CIA's Islamabad station chief and the FBI legal attaché, who both decided that it lacked actionable details and were too general to pursue. In all likelihood, officials at the embassy were not aware of the earlier tips about Headley in the US.

The Moroccan wife, who had earlier accompanied Headley on some of his reconnaissance missions to Mumbai, visited the embassy in Islamabad again in April 2008 and provided more information. She disclosed that Headley had been given a special mission by the LeT and alleged that Headley had used her in connection with the bomb blast in an express train in India in 2007. Her description of a special mission was accurate as it was around this time that the LeT was fine-tuning its plan to attack Mumbai.

The sixth tip about Headley came immediately after the Mumbai carnage. Moved by the Mumbai tragedy, a friend of Headley's mother contacted the FBI in Philadelphia on 1 December 2008 and told them of a conversation that she had had with Headley's mother that indicated that Headley *"had been fighting alongside individuals in Pakistan to liberate Kashmir for the past 5 to 6 years"*. After carrying out further checks, the Philadelphia agents put the case on hold as they believed that Headley was overseas in Pakistan. However, just weeks later Headley traveled from Chicago to Denmark to carry out reconnaissance for LeT's new project, with which he remained deeply involved until his eventual arrest in October 2009.

Whether it was just the lacunae in the US' anti-terror apparatus of the time that allowed Headley to dodge the bullet despite the long list of credible warnings about him, or there were more sinister reasons such as the possible use of Headley as a double agent by the CIA or the FBI that rendered him

so slippery, is not known till date. What is not that ambiguous though is the propensity of the US and most of its allies, in deference to their perceived interests in Afghanistan, to look away from Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorist outfits that did not ostensibly target them directly. That it took six US lives, along with 160 others, for this thinking to finally change, only serves to show that it was long overdue.

Conclusion

The respected Pakistani author and journalist Ahmed Rashid in his 2012 book titled '*Pakistan on the Brink*' has described Pakistan as the epicenter of the jihadist syndicate. Elaborating upon the complexities of this Pakistani syndicate, Rashid reveals that while Al Qaeda (and later the Islamic State) cornered most of the international attention, these were relatively small organizations within a much larger network in Pakistan. The LeT, Rashid informs, has a much bigger and explicitly overt presence in Pakistan, with its leader Hafiz Mohammad Saeed routinely holding large demonstrations in Pakistani cities that attract tens of thousands of supporters. Rashid also dwells in detail on how the Pakistani Army and the ISI helped build this Frankenstein's monster over the decades. He rightly points out that the obsession of Pakistan's military establishment with India has been the driving force behind its creation. Rashid establishes that the army has not changed its elemental approach of supporting jihad despite the international outcry over the Mumbai attacks. It took Headley's revelations in a court as far afield as the US, in full public glare and without any ambiguity, to bring to life and again establish beyond any doubt the patron-client relationship that exists between Pakistan's military establishment and the LeT.

The LeT has, over the years, had a global presence, with cells throughout South Asia, the Persian Gulf, Europe, Australia and North America. Its militants have been sent to wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya, and it has built global recruitment and financing networks. With Al Qaeda and the Islamic State both in disarray, the LeT is now probably the most dangerous terrorist group in the world. What makes it so and differentiates it from other terrorist organizations, including the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, is the open and direct patronage it receives from the ISI, an integral arm of the Pakistani State. This enables the LeT to operate unhindered in Pakistan, generate funds there, set up terrorist training camps in which Pakistani Army regulars provide training to terrorist recruits from all over the world, and source modern, sophisticated weapons directly from the Pakistani Army.

Western countries have over the last decade or so expressed serious concern over the security of Pakistan's ever-growing nuclear arsenal, especially the possibility of tactical nuclear weapons falling into the hands of a terrorist outfit. Meanwhile, Pakistan has often used the excuse of rogue elements of the military establishment possibly being behind those terrorist incidents in which the ISI's hand has been indefensibly exposed. In this scenario the biggest threat to Pakistan's nuclear security would come from the LeT. As discerning Pakistani analysts have often alluded, the relationship between the military establishment and the LeT is a sort of family affair. That gives the LeT the possibility of accessing the nuclear arsenal through insider connections, something that most other terror groups would find more difficult.

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who till a few years ago was hand in glove with the military establishment but has now run afoul of it and consequently finds himself incarcerated, stated

in May this year, *“Militant organizations are active (in Pakistan). 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?”* Sharif was alluding to the ISI’s direct involvement in the Mumbai attacks, and the fact that being itself knee deep in the plot, the ISI would not at any cost let the trial of the seven accused – Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, Abdul Wajid, Mazhar Iqbal, Hammad Amin Sadiq, Shahid Jameel Riaz, Jamil Ahmed and Younus Anjum – at an Anti-Terrorism Court in Pakistan, move ahead. Other than Lakhvi, the big LeT fish including Hafiz Saeed have not even been charged. Into its tenth year, the trial has not made any progress at all, while corresponding trials in the US and India have concluded several years ago. The US, the UK and other European countries have repeatedly asked Pakistan to bring those responsible for the attacks to justice, but they almost certainly knew the futility of their exertions much before they were even initiated.

It is now almost a decade since the LeT was sanctioned by the UN after the Mumbai attacks. Other countries, including the US, the UK, Australia and India had done so even earlier. In spite of this, the LeT has, in real terms, not paid any price for its horrific attacks in Mumbai. It continues to operate freely in Pakistan and is widely acknowledged to have persistent connections with the Pakistani intelligence services and the army. Its founder and leader Hafeez Saeed has a \$10 million US bounty on his head, but he regularly addresses large anti-India and anti-America rallies organized with the help of the ISI.

If it was the lackadaisical attitude of investigative agencies towards the several warnings about Headley that stood in the way of his apprehension way before the Mumbai attacks, the very same attitude towards the LeT and its sponsors in the ISI and the Pakistani Army could well come back to haunt the international community at a subsequent stage. The LeT has morphed into a dangerous organization with aspirations way beyond South Asia. Headley was not only a highly motivated and thoroughly trained LeT terrorist with a permanent base in the US, but was also affiliated to Al Qaeda. He remained undetected for close to a decade, and could at any point have turned against the US and done serious damage there. The same was the case with the French LeT terrorist Willie Brigitte, who after being trained by the LeT in Pakistan was asked to return to France and await further instructions. He was later asked to move to Australia. He was eventually caught and confessed to involvement in a foiled bomb plot in Australia in 2003. The possibility of the LeT having planted other trained terrorists in countries beyond South Asia, for activation when the climate was more favorable or the situation more desirable, is indeed real.

The long-term solution, however, does not lie in piecemeal tracking down of individual terrorists. The Headley case clearly reveals that such a myopic strategy contains many loopholes that could condemn it to failure. Use of the teeth that the international community is armed with to holistically deal with rogue nations and their terrorist proxies would be much more appropriate in such situations. Conversely, the absence of firm punitive steps will only embolden the terrorists and their backers. It will also encourage them to persist with their time-tested policy of hiding behind lies and denials, smug in the knowledge that the only punishment coming their way will be painless words. They will even have the temerity to claim victim status for themselves despite knowing fully well that their problems are essentially a result of their own machinations. During a visit to Pakistan in March 2000,

the then US President Bill Clinton reportedly warned his interlocutor General Musharraf that terror would consume the country if it did not stop harboring so many terrorists. Eighteen years later, well over a hundred thousand Pakistanis have died in terrorist-related incidents. The terrorist infrastructure nevertheless remains intact with the military establishment actively complicit in its survival.

Steps such as the broad suspension of US aid to Pakistan announced in January this year that included the US holding back \$500 million in aid to Pakistan under the Coalition Support Funds (CSF) earlier this year and another \$500 million last week are more in tune with what is required. Subsequent tranches of the CSF as well as the other largesse that has been lavished on Pakistan by the US since 2002 also need to be held hostage to Pakistan demonstrating action against its terrorist proxies on the ground. A steady ratcheting of pressure, including at the International Monetary Fund, the route Pakistan is expected to take to seek funds to repay the loans from China that it has burdened itself with, could be expected to have an impact. If even that does not work, economic and military sanctions need to become the order of the day. Sanctioning individuals is another strategy that has the potential to be effective in Pakistan. Whenever an ISI officer comes to adverse notice for aiding terrorism, whether in Afghanistan, India or elsewhere, he could be sanctioned at the UN and put on international wanted lists. Throughout all this, the one lesson that the Headley affair taught painfully should never be forgotten – there can be no distinction between terrorists no matter who their primary targets have historically been. The message to Pakistan should be crisp and clear – action against just the Haqqanis or just the LeT will not suffice. Only when it demonstrably acts against all its terrorist proxies will any review of the punitive steps be forthcoming.

Till this message gets across loud and clear, Major Iqbal, by now almost certainly rewarded with promotion to a higher rank, will continue to remain an officer of the ISI directing assets, such as Sajid Mir, to train and exhort people like Headley and other impressionable terrorists to wage jihad to further the dubious cause of the Pakistani military establishment.



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