
Hafiz Saeed: A Series of Curious Developments

Last week the US Secretary of State for Defence, General James Mattis met Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa in Rawalpindi. They had much to discuss – America's desire to fight jihadists in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's perennial concerns about Indian activity featured in the [Inter Services Public Relations press release](#). General Mattis was good enough to thank his hosts for their efforts in opposing terrorism, whilst General Bajwa acknowledged 'miscreants' from across the border may be exploiting Pakistan's generosity towards Afghan refugees.

Both parties were too polite, in public at least, to comment on the release of long term jihadist Hafiz Saeed, from Pakistani custody on 23/11/17. Both the US and India consider Saeed a terrorist, the latter seeking his trial for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which killed 166. There is near unanimity that Pakistan, and Saeed's group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, co-ordinated the rolling gun and bomb attacks which targeted India's largest city. Britain, whose mosques and university Islamic societies once served as a welcoming home to Saeed's calls for jihad in Kashmir, has also closed the door on LeT and its charitable wing Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD).

The view of Pakistan's courts, that there is no evidence to link Saeed to Mumbai, is unwelcome news for Indo-Pakistani relations, and may even have had President Trump's trigger finger hovering over the Twitter icon on his mobile phone. But it certainly clears the way for the next projected stage in Saeed's career – an entry into politics. This is through a new party, [the Milli Muslim League](#), which claims, rather unconvincingly, to be acting in the political lineage of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The MML has struck an early obstacle though in the form of Pakistan's Electoral Commission, which is reluctant to register the party.

The MML's founders do seem to have some unexpected friends. On 28/11/17, former Pakistani dictator General Pervez Musharraf gave an extraordinary interview to ARY News from his exile in Dubai. He praised both LeT and JuD, and spoke of the necessity of working with them against India: *"Yes they (LeT) are involved in Kashmir. In Kashmir, it is between us and India. I was always in favour of action in Kashmir and they (LeT) are the biggest force to suppress Indian army in Kashmir."*

This outbreak of unrequited love made even hardened observers blush. Not least as Musharraf himself had proscribed LeT in 2002. In his autobiography, he had talked of 9/11 bringing issues around terrorism to a head, but that under his leadership Pakistan was already itching for action against its own armed groups. How times change.

In the absence of a published national security strategy, commentators have struggled to pin down the exact components of President Trump’s military doctrine. Tweeted blunders aside, Trump has though been surprisingly consistent. He expects countries - from Europe to the Gulf – to step up and take responsibility for their own defence, whilst working bi-laterally against common foes. Not for the first time, Pakistan does not seem to be ‘down with the programme’.

The release of Hafiz Saeed, and Musharraf’s admissions of duplicity, will win it few friends. Whilst politics in Northern Ireland was stabilised by bringing former paramilitaries into the political process, few would hold out such hopes, at this stage, in Pakistan. Indeed, any consequent ‘reforms’ are likely to include a hardening of attitudes towards minority groups, rigid enforcement of blasphemy laws and a resurgence of the Kashmiri armed struggle. Which is rather where Hafiz Saeed came in, in the first place.

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Views expressed are the author’s own and independent of his institutional affiliations.

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