Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan

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SUMMARY

Formed: September 6, 1985

Disbanded: Group is active

First Attack: March 24, 1987: A bomb exploded at a meeting of the Anjuman Ahle Hadith party in Lahore, killing six including the party's leader, Ihsan Ilahi Zahir, and wounding more than 100 others. SSP operatives were believed to be responsible (6 killed, 100+ wounded).[1]

Latest Attack: May 28, 2010: A clash between SSP and Shia activists in Karachi left one person dead and several wounded (1 dead, 1+ wounded).[2]

OVERVIEW

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was founded with state support in 1985 and has since been the dominant anti-Shiite religious-political organization in Pakistan. Using politics and sectarian violence, the SSP aims to conform Pakistani society to its rigid interpretation of Deobandi Islam. The group's offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), serves as an ultra-violent faction of the same movement, and the two have long-standing ties to other militant groups, including al Qaeda. SSP and LeJ's growing links to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have led some analysts to consider some of their members to be part of an umbrella group called the Punjabi Taliban, named after the groups' traditional base and where they retain ties to the provincial government.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was founded in September 1985, a time of rising Sunni-Shia tensions in the Punjabi city of Jhang. With support from the regime of Zia al-Huq and funding

from Saudi Arabia, the SSP soon became Pakistan's most prominent anti-Shia militant group. It has since been involved in terrorism, violent sectarianism and local and national electoral politics.

The SSP initially emerged as a response to the increasing political solidarity of Pakistan's Shia community in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a byproduct of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Growing sectarian tensions were particularly prevalent in the central Punjab district of Jhang, where a Shia feudal aristocracy had traditionally dominated local politics in the Sunni-majority area.[3] Growing Sunni resentment dovetailed with the interests of the state, which sought to counter Iranian-allied Shia activism because it threatened the Zia's attempts to impose his Sunni Islamic agenda. In this context, the Pakistani intelligence community sponsored Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, a stridently anti-Shia Deobandi prayer leader in Jhang, to head the new sectarian group.[4]

Prior to becoming the founding leader of the SSP, Jhangvi had been the deputy head of the Punjab chapter of Jamaat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), a Deobandi party active in Pakistani politics since the state's founding.[5] JUI leadership reportedly played a role in Jhangvi's selection.[6] Although JUI and the SSP would eventually diverge over SSP's use of violence against Shias, "they shared – and continue to share – many of their rank-and-file members and office-holders."[7]

Since its formation, the SSP has actively fueled sectarian violence in Punjab and beyond. Its primary methods are targeted killings of prominent Shias – including political activists, doctors, businessmen and intellectuals – as well as indiscriminant attacks on worshippers at non-Deobandi mosques.[8] In addition to targeting Shias, the SSP has also been implicated in attacks on members of the Ahmadi sect and followers of the Barelvi school of Sunni Islam. The SSP's actions have spurred a cycle of violence and assassinations and several of its leaders have been killed – including Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in 1990, Isar ul-Qasmi in 1991, Zia ul-Rehman Farooqi in 1997, and Azam Tariq in 2003.

SSP members have a history of electoral politics, with many running for election under the banner of JUI until the early 1990s.[9] From 1993 to 1996, the SSP allied with then-prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). While some factions of the group actively engaged in politics in the 1990s, other factions – along with SSP offshoot Lashkar-e-Jhangvi – fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. SSP and LeJ members are believed to be responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Hazaras (Afghan Shias) and more than a dozen Iranian diplomats in northern Afghanistan in August 1998.[10]

The SSP has links to a variety of other terrorist groups, including Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkatul Hujahideen, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and al Qaeda.[11] Since 9/11, the SSP and LeJ have become "a mainstay of al Qaeda planning in Pakistan."[12] As of 2012, the SSP maintained madrassas, mosques and training camps across Pakistan that served as "conduits for foot soldiers, arms and funds from Punjab to other parts of the country, including [the North-West Frontier Province] NWFP and [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] FATA."[13] The SSP and LeJ's growing ties to the TTP have led some analysts to consider some of their members to be part of an umbrella group called the Punjabi Taliban.[14]

Although the SSP was officially banned in January 2002, questions remain about the status of its links to the Pakistani state. For example, in October 2002, then-SSP leader Azam Tariq was released from jail (where he was being held on multiple murder charges) and allowed to contest parliamentary elections on the condition he support the Musharraf government.[15] More recently, "Punjab's civilian government, run by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's opposition party (PML-N), has sought reconciliation" with militant groups, including the SSP.[16] On February 21, 2010, the minister of law in Punjab province, a PML-N member, "campaigned for the by-election in the Jhang district" with current SSP leader Muhammad Ahmad Ludhianvi.[17]

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

List of SSP's top leaders:

1. Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (September 1985 to February 22, 1990): Killed
2. Isar Qasmi (February 1990 to January 1991): Killed
3. Zia ul-Rehman Farooqi (1991 to January 18, 1997): Killed
4. Muhammad Azam Tariq (January 1997 to October 6, 2003): Killed
5. Ali Sher Hyderi (October 2003 to August 17, 2009): Killed
6. Muhammad Ahmad Ludhianvi (August 2009 to Present): Current

When SSP was founded, its central executive committee consisted of 28 founding members.[18] Among these were some of the group's leading ideologues: Ilyas Balakoti, Muhammad Salim Butt, and Zia ul-Qasmi, the chairman of the group's supreme council.[19]

Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (1985-1990): The SSP was founded by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in 1985. Jhangvi was born to a poor Sunni family in 1952.[20] Although he received no traditional schooling "beyond the fourth grade," Jhangvi spent several years memorizing the Quran and learning grammar and recitation in religious seminaries around Punjab.[21] In 1973, he became a preacher and prayer leader at the Piplianwali mosque in Jhang city.[22]

Like many of those who later played a leading role in the SSP, Jhangvi was influenced by his participation in the successful anti-Ahmadi agitation of 1974, which resulted in legislation declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims.[23] Jhangvi would later try to get Shia Muslims classified the same way. In his role as mosque leader, Jhangvi distinguished himself as a "fiery Deobandi cleric…with a one-point anti-Shia agenda," and he was eventually appointed deputy leader of the Punjab chapter of JUI, a long-standing Deobandi political party.[24]

On September 6, 1985, Jhangvi formed the Anjuman-e-Sipah-e-Sahaba (later renamed SSP) as a "semi-autonomous" faction of JUI. Fueled by Jhangvi's sectarian rhetoric, the SSP launched a political campaign against the Shia land-owning class in Jhang.[25] The SSP believed "this landed gentry not only exploit[ed] the peasantry in social and economic terms but also led them astray in matters of faith."[26] As his party gained popularity, Jhangvi's efforts to fight the Shias increasingly received outside support and financing, primarily from the Zia regime and Saudi Arabia.[27]

The brewing sectarian conflict became more violent when Pakistani militants fighting in Afghanistan returned after the Soviet withdrawal. As part of the escalating cycle of sectarian violence, four assailants gunned down Haq Nawaz Jhangvi outside his home on February 22, 1990, less than a year after the assassination of a prominent Shia leader.[28]

Isar Qasmi (1990-1991): After Jhangvi's death, Isar Qasmi became leader of the SSP and was soon elected in Punjab to both the national and provincial assemblies, demonstrating the consolidation of SSP's political position in Jhang.[29] Qasmi was the first SSP official to serve as a member of the national parliament. (Jhangvi ran for a seat in 1988 but lost.)[30] Qasmi was assassinated by Shia extremists in Jhang in January 1991.[31]

Zia ul-Rehman Farooqi (1991-1997): Zia ul-Rehman Farooqi assumed control of the SSP after Isar Qasmi's death. Farooqi helped transform the SSP into a nation-wide organization and, by allying the group with the ruling Pakistan's Peoples Party from 1993 to 1996, he further enmeshed the SSP into the national political scene. However, Farooqi also oversaw a period in which internal conflicts emerged within the organization.[32]

SSP members fell into three broad categories with regard to the use of violence: those who felt Jhangvi's original mission should be pursued using all possible means (including terrorism); those who felt the party should shift toward politics and establish a separate but related militant force; and those who felt sectarian violence was never appropriate.[33] Because the third group was an “extreme minority,” the true battle for control of SSP occurred between the first two factions.[34]

The tactical disputes resulted in the emergence of several splinter groups. Some of these splinter groups were transitory, formed to attack a specific target and then disband, while others were used by individual SSP leaders as "personal mafias" to settle their own scores.[35] One SSP splinter group – Lashkar-e-Jhangvi – became a resilient stand-alone organization.

Farooqi was killed on January 18, 1997, when a bomb attached to a motorcycle exploded upon his arrival to a Lahore courthouse, where he was being tried for the murder of rival Shia leader.[36] The bombing killed 25 and wounded dozens, including Farooqi's second-in-command, Azam Tariq. In response, SSP members set fire to Iranian cultural centers in Lahore and Multan and rioted in parts of Punjab.[37] Between January and May 1997, "the SSP assassinated seventy-five Shia figures.”[38]

Azam Tariq (1997-2003): After surviving the Lahore bombing that killed Zia ul-Rehman Farooqi, Azam Tariq became the leader of the SSP. Tariq's career spans both Punjab and Sind provinces, and “thanks in part to him, so does the influence of his organization.”[39] Born in March 1962 in the small Punjab town of Chicawatni, Tariq studied religion and Arabic at a seminary in Karachi, the capital of Sind.[40] Accounts of Tariq's life after graduation place him in Karachi, but differ on his exact activities.[41] These accounts agree, however, that Tariq joined the SSP in the late 1980s and quickly rose up the ranks.

When Jhangvi's successor, Isur Qasmi, was killed in 1991, Tariq ran for his seat in the Pakistani parliament and won.[42] Tariq tried to use his position as a member of parliament to

place SSP officials in government positions at both the national and provincial level.[43] He also introduced anti-Shia legislation, notably the Namus-e Sahaba (Honor of the Companions of the Prophet) bill, "which sought to add the names of the four Rightly-Guided caliphs (632-661) to the list of those covered by the Blasphemy Law."[44] "The intention was to greatly limit the scope of popular Shia commemorations during which aspersions are cast on the first three caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman), for usurping Ali's right to the caliphate."[45]

Despite his participation in electoral politics, Tariq was not a democrat. He was charged with the murder of several Shia officials and civilians in the 1990s and served a two-year prison term. He was also "a frequent visitor to Afghanistan during Taliban rule."[46] After taking control of the SSP at the beginning of 1997, Tariq strengthened SSP's ties to other militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Harkatul Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammad.{{Amir Mir, The Fluttering Flag of Jehad (Lahore: Mashal Books, 2008), p. 217.}}

Tariq was detained in Pakistan on February 21, 2001.[47] Although the government formally banned the SSP in January 2002, Tariq was allowed to contest the October 2002 parliamentary elections from his jail cell.[48] After he won, Tariq was freed from jail and allowed to take his seat in the parliament on the condition that he support the pro-Musharrah alliance.[49] He held up his side of the bargain until October 6, 2003, when he was killed in a shootout, "apparently in a revenge attack by rival Shia militants."[50]

Yusuf Ludhianvi (2000-unknown): Yusuf Ludhianvi was a "chief commander" of the SSP in 2000; his close ties to Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) founder Masood Azhar later led to his appointment as "supreme leader" of JeM.[51]

Ali Sher Hyderi (2003-2009): Ali Sher Hyderi, a "rousing orator" who hailed from Khairpur in southern Sind, served as leader of the SSP in the years after it was banned by the state.[52] Hyderi was gunned down after leaving a rally in Sind on August 17, 2009, leading to riots in Karachi.[53] Hyderi is believed to have been replaced by Muhammad Ahmad Ludhianvi, the current leader of the SSP.[54]

B. NAME CHANGES

- 1985: Anjuman-e-Sipah-e-Sahaba. The group's original name.
- 1989: Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan.
- 2002: Millat-e-Islamia Party (MIP). New name after the SSP was banned
- 2003: Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat. New name after MIP was banned.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2004: 5000-6000 (International Crisis Group)
- 2009: 100000 (Hassan Abbas)
- 2009: 2000-3000 (Hassan Abbas)

D. RESOURCES

Since its founding, the SSP received financing and support from Persian Gulf countries and the central Pakistani government.[55] Most state financing was used to construct and operate Wahhabi and Deobandi madrassas, which have proliferated in Pakistan in recent decades. In Punjab alone, the number of madrassas has risen from about 700 in 1975 to more than 3,000 in 2000.[56] As of 2009, there were approximately one million madrassa students in Pakistan.[57] Nationwide, the number of madrassas grew from 13,000 in 2007 to more than 17,000 in 2010.[58] Deobandi madrassas in southern Punjab offered a replenishing supply of militants to the SSP.[59]

Beyond recruiting, state financing has also enabled the SSP and allied groups to build their militant infrastructure and purchase requisite materiel. SSP gets additional resources from the narcotics trade and other criminal activities.[60] Although the Pakistani government officially banned the group in 2002, some elements of the Pakistani military and intelligence services, perhaps rogue elements, continue to turn a blind eye toward the group. This support, whether tacit or explicit, occurs for a variety of reasons, including ideological compatibility, a view that the SSP retains value in the conflict with India, and/or fear that any crackdown would elicit harsh retaliation.

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

SSP has carried out operations in Punjab province, Sind province, and FATA.

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The SSP is driven by a rigid interpretation of Deobandi Islam that considers Shias and non-Deobandi Sunnis heretical. "If Islam is to be established in Pakistan," SSP leader Azam Tariq once said, "then Shias must be declared infidels."[61]

B. POLITICAL ACITIVITES

SSP has been involved in Pakistani politics since its founding. In 1988, SSP founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi unsuccessfully ran for a seat in the national assembly.[62] Two years later, his successor, Isur Qasmi, was elected to the national assembly and the provincial assembly in Punjab.[63] After Qasmi was assassinated in 1991, Azam Tariq, who later became head of the SSP in 1997, took his assembly seats.[64] From 1993 to 1996, the SSP was formally allied to then-prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan's Peoples Party and had members serving in the Punjab government.[65]

The SSP has also been involved in non-violent activism. In 1993, the party organized a 300-mile protest caravan to Islamabad "to press its demand that the government enact a law to punish sacrilege against holy men," legislation later sponsored by assembly member Azam Tariq.[66] In 1995, the party joined the Milli Yikjahati Council (National Reconciliation Council), a "cross-

sectarian body intended to stop the growing conflict" between Sunnis and Shias.[67] The council eventually became defunct after the SSP and its Shia rivals began attacking each other again.[68]

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The SSP is a takfiri group, meaning it declares as infidels those who do not accord with its view of piety.[69] The SSP can – and has – used takfiri reasoning to justify the murder of almost anyone who stands in the way of its goals. Traditionally, however, the SSP has focused on the Shias, Ahmadis and Barelvis of Pakistan. The SSP targets activists of opposing groups as well as prominent civilians of non-Deobandi sects, including doctors, businessmen and intellectuals.[70] The SSP also targets Iranian interests in Pakistan and, increasingly, Pakistani state institutions.[71]

The SSP uses two primary tactics: "targeted killings of prominent opponent group activists," and indiscriminate shootings of "worshipers in mosques operated by opposing sects."[72] SSP has also been implicated in bombing attacks and reportedly has connections to Mumbai-style ambush and assault operations such as the October 2009 attack on the headquarters of the Pakistani military in Rawalpindi and the May 2010 attack on an Ahmadi mosque in Lahore. Punjabi militants allied with the TTP – which includes some factions of the SSP – are "likely to conduct fidayin attacks… [in which] the attacker comes equipped with weapons and ammunition and is willing to fight to the death."[73]

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

August 5, 1988: Assailants believed to be associated with the SSP gunned down Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini, the leader of the Pakistani Shia group Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan, after leading morning prayers in Peshawar (1 killed, unknown wounded).

December 19, 1990: SSP members gunned down Sadiq Ganji, an Iranian diplomat and the head of Lahore's Iranian Cultural Center, as he got out of his car near a hotel in Lahore. The attack reportedly came in response to the assassination of SSP founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, who was killed on February 22, 1990 (1 killed, unknown wounded).

January 11, 1998: Three SSP operatives in a jeep pulled up to a group of Shia mourners at the Mominpura graveyard in Lahore and opened fire with automatic weapons. SSP member Muhammad Aslam Muawia was later sentenced to life in prison for the attack (27 killed, 34 wounded).

October 28, 2001: Gunmen walked into a Catholic church in Bahawalpur in southern Punjab province and opened fire on worshipers, who were preparing to leave Sunday services. The SSP was reported to be responsible for the attack (18 killed, 9 wounded).

February 26, 2002: Gunmen attacked a Shia mosque in Rawalpindi. In subsequent days, police arrested more than a dozen SSP operatives and accused the group of being behind the attack (11 killed, 14 wounded).

March 2, 2004: Three assailants attacked a procession of Shias commemorating the holy day of Ashura in Quetta with grenades and automatic weapons. SSP members were among those later arrested in connection to the attack (40 killed, more than 150 wounded).

March 19, 2005: A large bomb exploded at a Shia shrine in Gandhawa, Baluchistan province. Four SSP members were later arrested for alleged involvement in the attack (50+ killed, 100 wounded).

April 6, 2006: SSP operatives launched a failed assassination attempt against Shia leader Hasan Turabi (0 killed, 3 wounded).

June 30, 2006: SSP member Muhammad Saleem, alias Hafiz Bilal, planted a four-kilogram explosive device at the Bal-al-Imran mosque in Malakwal, Punjab. Saleem was arrested after a two-hour long shootout on December 9, 2007 (unknown casualties).

February 4, 2008: Militants bombed a bus carrying security personnel near the General Headquarters of the Pakistani Army in Rawalpindi. Six days later, police raided a militant safe house, owned by SSP member Rustam Ali, and arrested several LeJ members who were believed to be involved in the attack (10 killed, 10 wounded).

May 28, 2010: A clash between SSP and Shia activists in Karachi left one person dead and several wounded (1 dead, 1+ wounded).[74]

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The primary social service provided by SSP is religious education. "As state-sponsored education becomes too expensive for poor parents," madrassas in Pakistan have proliferated: there are now more than 17,000 madrassas across the country.[75] Most of the SSP's madrassas are in Punjab and Karachi.[76] "While it is true that these madrassas are the main source of education in the backward areas of southern Punjab, they do serve as a major source of recruitment for fresh militants."[77]

According to an International Crisis Group interview with a former SSP activist in 2004, the group "also cultivated professional communities and launched welfare projects for its workers."[78]

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The SSP's most well-known and consequential offshoot is the LeJ, one of Pakistan's deadliest groups. Scholars differ on when the split between SSP and LeJ occurred and the exact nature of their ongoing relationship. Describing the split with LeJ, Chairman of the SSP's Supreme Council Zia ul-Haq Qasmi said: "We parted ways because Lashkar-e-Jhangvi's way of pursuing its policies were different from the SSP's. The Lashkar does not like our moderate policies."[79] Another potential reason for the split is financial: "The size of the financial endowment of the SSP's madrassas has been so great that after the assassination of its first two leaders (Haqnawaz Jhangvi and Isrur-ul-Haq Qasimi) in 1989 and 1991 respectively, factional conflicts over the control of the purse and the madrassas ensued."[80] Though the exact cause of the split is unknown, the strong links between the groups are not disputed. Some observers – including SSP and LeJ activists – allege the groups split because they disagreed over how best to pursue SSP founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi's vision, with LeJ advocating harsher, more violent tactics. Other observers dispute that a genuine split ever occurred. They describe LeJ as the armed wing of SSP and say the split was contrived "to protect the political integrity of SSP and enable the so-called breakaway faction to transform itself into a purely paramilitary-terrorist organization."[81]

Scholars also dispute the timing of LeJ's creation. One scholar says LeJ was formed in 1990 but remained a part of the SSP until 1995, when it formally split to protest an emerging dialogue between the SSP and militant Shia parties.[82] Another says LeJ was formed in 1994, immediately after its founder escaped from police custody.[83] Still others contend the group was first created a year or two later, in 1995 or 1996, in response to the SSP's participation in cross-sectarian reconciliation efforts.[84]

Regardless of the exact timing and circumstances of the split – or whether the split actually occurred – the ongoing links between SSP and LeJ are well documented. The groups operate in "the same sectarian circles and appeal to the same constituency."[85] LeJ "proclaims fidelity to the founder of the SSP, and there is little that distinguishes between the ideological positions of the two organizations."[86]

SSP has also spawned a number of smaller groups. For example, after the assassination of SSP's founding leader, internal disputes led to the emergence of at least six splinter groups: the Jhangvi Tigers, Al Haq Tigers, Tanzeemul Haq, Al Farooq, Al Badr Foundation, and Allah Akbar.[87] These small splinter groups were headed by regional SSP leaders in Jhang, Faisalabad, Sargodha, Sumandari, Karachi and Chiniot, respectively. These groups were "in essence 'more personal mafias of influential fuedals, led by local mullahs, than organizations in the real sense of the word."[88] Although some of the divisions between them have been meaningful, "the SSP has continued to maintain close ties with its splinter groups, some of which have collapsed back into it."[89] Others – namely, the Jhangvi Tigers, Al Haq Tigers and Allah Akbar – have since formally merged into LeJ.[90]

The SSP has long-standing relationships with many other militant groups. In the 1990s, thousands of SSP members fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, targeting rival warlords (including Ahmad Shah Massoud) and ethnic Hazaras (Afghan Shias).[91] The Taliban and SSP are both Deobandi organizations that "hail from the same madrassa structure and networks – and even training camps in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and southern Afghanistan."[92] The

links between them "are solid because of the common ground they share… both are united in their vehement opposition to the Shia sect and Iran."[93] Additionally, "it is reputed that the Taliban commander, Mullah Omar, routinely called on Deobandi madrassas across Pakistan to provide him with recruits whenever Taliban troops had to be bolstered."[94]

When the Pakistani government began cracking down on domestic Sunni militancy in 1998, SSP "leaders fled to Kabul where they were offered sanctuary."[95] "Hundreds of SSP militants have trained at the Khost training camp run by the Taliban and Bin Laden."[96] These training camps were handed over by the Taliban to JUI-linked Pakistani groups, including SSP, LeJ and Harkatul Ansar.[97]

SSP and LeJ members are believed to have been involved in the 1998 massacres of Hazaras in Herat province, which followed the Taliban takeover of Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. During the takeover, "a small Taliban unit…including several Pakistani militants of the anti-Shia, Sipah-e-Sahaba party entered the Iranian Consulate in Mazar, herded 11 Iranian diplomats, intelligence officers and a journalist into the basement and then shot them dead."[98]

While in Afghanistan, SSP members developed relationships with al Qaeda members who trained with them at camps in Khost and Kandahar.[99] These camps were later targeted by U.S. cruise missiles after the 1998 bombing of two U.S. embassies in East Africa.[100] Since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, SSP and LeJ have become a "mainstay of al Qaeda planning in Pakistan."[101]

Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a Deobandi group formed by Masood Azhar in 2000, also has ties to SSP, although JeM officials have denied any link.[102] Soon after its creation, JeM held a "Crush India" rally where then-SSP leader Azam Tariq declared that "one hundred thousand Sipah-e-Sahaba workers will join Jaish-e-Mohammad to fight the infidels."[103] Later that year, in October 2000, JeM held a "jehad conference" attended by SSP leaders. At the conference, Zia ul-Qasmi, chairman of SSP's supreme council, "took a vow of jehad on the hand of Maulana Massod Azhar, declaring that the two organizations were working shoulder to shoulder."[104] In recent years, increasing cooperation between SSP, LeJ and JeM – and the trio's growing ties to the TTP – have led some analysts to consider the three groups part of the Punjabi Taliban.[105]

The SSP also forged links with Central Asian terrorist groups that have been exiled to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan during the 1990s, SSP members fought alongside the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), in part because they were "keen to establish for themselves a… pan-Islamic pedigree, rather than being labeled simply anti-Shia militants."[106] In 1999, SSP and LeJ fighters joined IMU leader Juma Namangani in Afghanistan and took part in the IMU kidnapping of Japanese geologists. "Sipah militants also provided the IMU with supplies, communication facilities and other help from Pakistan."[107]

The SSP also has several rival groups. The SSP arose out of opposition to Shia political solidarity and has opposed Shia political groups – particularly Tehrik-e-Jafaria Pakistan and its militant offshoot, Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan – since its founding. The SSP's narrow interpretation of the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam has also brought it into conflict with groups representing other Sunni schools, especially the Barelvi group known as Sunni Tehrik.

The SSP has been linked to Ramzi Ahmed Yousuf, the mastermind of the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.[108]

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Since its founding, the SSP received money from several Persian Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[109] These countries funded the SSP and other Sunni militant groups primarily to counter the rising influence of Iran's revolutionary Shiism.

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to assume control of SSP operations in all of Sind province and later to become the deputy leader of SSP operations nationwide.

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