

An eyewash or a turning point?



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Drawing parallels: Supporters of Jamaat-ud-Dawa in Karachi protesting against the house arrest of Hafiz Saeed. | Photo Credit: [AKHTAR SOOMRO](#)

In all likelihood, the arrest of Hafiz Saeed is more a tactical escape by the Pakistani state than a strategic ‘policy decision’

The decision by Pakistan to raid the office of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) in Lahore recently and put its leader [Hafiz Saeed and some of his associates under preventive house arrest](#) for an indefinite period

has come as a surprise. What could have precipitated this? Was it the result of something he did which the Pakistani authorities were unaware of? Or did it come after pressure from the Trump administration? Further, will Pakistan follow it through? Or, will history repeat itself in a cycle of house arrest, a court case, an investigation and insufficient proof leading to him getting a clean legal chit?

Real or otherwise, the arrest, if not pursued with real intent, may in fact enhance his position as well as boost the popularity of the JuD within Pakistan.

Something did change in January this year which led to the crackdown. In the past, despite both international sanctions and American initiatives against Saeed and his organisations, Pakistan did not make any serious attempt to pursue his case.

No domestic cases against Saeed

Today within Pakistan, there are no major domestic cases against Saeed; neither is there a paradigm shift in Pakistan's terror strategy calling for action against all militant groups on Pakistani soil. So it was surprising when the Interior Ministry made a statement on his arrest and the Punjab government issued a notification under the Prisons Act, declaring his house as a sub-jail for confinement.

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Just before Saeed's arrest, *The News* had published a report that hinted at consultations on the JuD between the U.S. and Pakistan's Ambassador in Washington DC Jalil Abbas Jilani. This apparently was based on a report by the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering. In a meeting on January 11, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher, reportedly raised objections "regarding the activities and the financial traffic of JuD" and warned that the U.S. would blacklist Pakistan. Subsequently, the Ambassador wrote to the Pakistan Foreign Office asking for a report before January 31. Saeed was placed under house arrest in Lahore on January 30. Could this have been a mere coincidence?

The Inter Services Public Relations press release calling the arrest "a policy decision taken by state institutions keeping in view the national interest" was a surprise addition. Though unclear whether the "national interest" in arresting Saeed was external or internal, the military statement is significant.

Good militant-bad militant

One would want to believe that the reason is internal. A section within Pakistan, which demands action against all militant groups, is keen that the establishment sees all of the groups through the same prism.

Media reactions to the arrest have highlighted this point as well.

Do state institutions in Pakistan share the same perspective? The seriousness of the state in acting against the JuD will depend on the legal case it builds. This is how the JuD and Saeed escaped last time and are likely to get a reprieve this time too. There is no visible plan to take on armed non-state actors. The good militant-bad militant argument is still alive. The JuD has not engaged itself in any major anti-Pakistan activities. Perhaps that is why Saeed has challenged the Interior Ministry to come up with even a single FIR against his cadres or organisations. Focussing on Kashmir, he has kept away from any major jihadist activity on Pakistani soil.

Both Saeed and the JuD play a substantial role in Pakistan's strategic calculations, not only concerning Jammu and Kashmir but also the rest of India. In all likelihood, the arrest is a tactical escape than a strategic policy decision.

Hafiz Saeed is unlikely to protest strongly. There are alternatives that would suit his trajectory. As he did last time, he is likely to legally challenge the arrest. Unless the state builds a strong legal case (which is less likely), a shabby trial could end up with him walking out free. The UNSC resolutions, American briefs and Indian dossiers have all drawn a blank so far. Another failure to get a legal conviction will only boost his profile and that of the JuD politically.

Public protests

Second, public protests, which have already begun, will end up creating more space for the JuD and his affiliates. The Jamaat-e-Islami-led opposition protest recently in the Punjab provincial assembly, which criticised the government for "bowing to foreign pressure and putting a sincere Pakistani like Hafiz Saeed under house arrest", is an indication.

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Though the protests have not turned violent, given the trajectory now, it is likely that religious-minded political parties may take the lead, followed by non-state actors. It could also see the return of the Difa-i-Pakistan Council, a group of right-wing parties. Though Punjab will be the main battleground for the DPC, it would like to strengthen its area of influence elsewhere.

Third, the protests are likely to rally behind Pakistan's "principled position" on Kashmir. Slogans on the streets and some reports in the media are an indication of this. It is bound to lead to a misleading projection — if you support Kashmir, support the JuD and Hafiz Saeed. Finally, with the street protests, the popularity of the JuD is likely to increase further.

Unless the Pakistani state has indeed taken a U-turn and decided to take on all militant groups including the JuD, Hafiz Saeed and the LeT may emerge stronger within Pakistan, especially in Punjab. And this could spell further trouble for Jammu and Kashmir and the rest of India.

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