

The Threat of Transnational Terrorist Groups in Kashmir

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Abstract

The present analysis is based mainly on personal local observations in Kashmir. The situation on the ground is vulnerable and can facilitate the penetration of transnational terrorist groups (TTGs) in Kashmir as parts of society are going through intense radicalization. Militancy, in ideology and tactics, is increasingly assuming Syria-Iraq-Afghanistan style features, with IED attacks and suicide bombing becoming more widespread. New terrorist organizations like ISJK (Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir), and AGuH (Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind) fight for the idea of an Islamic Kashmir. The conflict is passing into a new phase of internationalization, and the penetration of TTGs is a part of that process. The recent abolition of Kashmir's special status, addressed in a Postscript, is likely to strengthen the alienation and, hence, create enabling conditions for TTGs to establish a firm foothold in Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmir conflict, India, TTGs, Al Qaeda, IS, ISJK, radicalization, Wahhabism, AGuH, Political Islam, fidayeen, alienation, Article 370

Introduction

On 9th July, AQ chief Zawahiri released a video message calling Kashmir-based jihadist groups to “single-mindedly focus on inflicting unrelenting blows on the Indian Army and government so as to bleed the Indian economy and make India suffer sustained losses in manpower and equipment.”[1] In a video, exclusively focused on Kashmir, he also shunned Pakistan as no longer being a trustworthy ally for the liberation of Kashmir. He accused Pakistan of betraying the cause of jihad and helping the ‘crusaders’. Zawahiri also said that Kashmir is a bleeding wound in our heart, “...a tragedy made even direr by the fact that they are caught between Hindu brutality on one hand and the treachery and conspiracies of Pakistan’s intelligence agencies on the other hand.”[2]

Al Qaeda first stated its ambitions of creating an Islamic emirate in South Asia by obliterating the boundaries created by the British in 2014 when AQIS—the acronym for Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent—began taking entire South Asia in its ambit, thereby showing AQ’s disregard for the existing boundaries of sovereign states in South Asia. Since then, AQ has been making attempts to expand in India. While these attempts have so far not resulted in substantial success, according to the author’s informed sources in India’s intelligence circles, AQ has made inroads in the Indian hinterland and even in South India.[3] Nevertheless, Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGuH), AQ’s Kashmir affiliate, is still considered a fledgling one by prominent strategic analysts and the intelligence brass of India.

Kashmir had already figured in AQ videos on South Asia many years ago, although not very prominently. In 2006, Zawahiri had praised the jihadist organizations fighting against the Indian government in Kashmir.[4] More recently, in December 2017, an Urdu-language video clip of *Nasheed* (Islamic chants) titled “Kashmir Lost but not Forgotten,” was released by AQ’s as-Sahab Media Foundation.[5]

Like in the past, many of India’s top terrorism experts and security mandarins in Delhi are likely to treat Zawahiri’s most recent video message as another desperate attempt to find a foothold—high on optics and weak on real substance. The Indian intelligence brass is still dominated by the old school of thought, which tends to believe that the possibility of a ramping up of the activities of international terrorist actors in Kashmir theatre is remote. Their views are the result of previous experiences. Their generation had dealt with the Kashmir problem very tactfully so that it quite successfully escaped the spread of Taliban, AQ, and other international actors in the past, thereby largely remaining a localized conflict theatre. Besides, the situation on the ground, of the regional affiliates of AQ and IS, indicates that they are in poor shape, lacking cadres, weapons, and

organizational integrity. Overall, a massive crackdown on militancy since 2016 has neutralized all the top commanders and ushered in a feeling of fatigue among them.[6] Their finances are exhausted, and there is a considerable dearth of weapons. Recruitment has also come down.[7]

However, this author believes that the recent message of AQ was unique in its timing and that it needs to be taken seriously for a variety of reasons that have developed in Kashmir, especially during the violent phase of civil unrest-cum-militancy that trailed after the Security Forces (SFs) neutralized the militant commander Burhan Wani in 2016. These developments, discussed below, have the potential to enable a smoother ride for AQ and other Transnational Terrorist Groups (TTGs) in Kashmir. Furthermore, on August 5, 2019, the government in Delhi abolished the semi-autonomous status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In a parallel decision, the central government of India bifurcated the state into two Union Territories (UTs) of J&K and Ladakh, directly controlled by the central government in Delhi.[8] Delhi's recent Kashmir move is likely to create favorable conditions for TTGs, enabling them to find a firm foothold or maybe even a leading place among Kashmir's militants. The following analysis seeks to make clear how critical and sensitive the situation in Kashmir is. If not tackled perceptively, it may facilitate the entrenchment of AQ and other TTGs in Kashmir.

The author intends to offer a holistic understanding of the emerging trends in the Kashmir conflict. However, it is pertinent to mention that the article is mainly descriptive in nature and has no theoretical ambitions.

Kashmir Conflict: History in Brief

Given the complex nature of Kashmir's conflict, a critical analysis of the emerging threat of TTGs merits a journey back into its history.[9] The conflict began right after India achieved independence from the British in 1947. Kashmir's king was dreaming of independence and of creating an Asian Switzerland in his Himalayan kingdom.[10] However, his plans were foiled when Pakistan claimed Kashmir because of its Muslim majority and sent tribal "marauders" into Kashmir. These raiders inflicted all kinds of brutalities on the local populace and came within a few miles of the capital city of Srinagar. The king, in haste and under pressure, signed an *Instrument of Accession* (Oct. 26, 1947) in return for India's intervention to push back the invaders. In 1948, the UN recommended a plebiscite to decide the final status of Kashmir, after the complete demilitarization of the region, allowing India to keep a minimum level of troops since Pakistan was the aggressor. The armies never returned to barracks, and the plebiscite never happened. Since then, India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir. For the last three decades, Pakistan continues to bleed India with its proxy terrorist groups. [11] It is pertinent to mention that separatist militancy is confined to the Kashmir valley with its ten districts. It constitutes 16% of the total area of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and 52% of the population. [12] According to the 2011 census, the Kashmir valley had a population of 6.9 million, out of which 97% were Muslims. 14% of the 6.6 million Muslims of the valley are Shia Muslims who are mostly confined to central Kashmir's Ladakh region and the capital city of Srinagar.[13] Until now, Shias have primarily stayed away from the Sunni-dominated separatist movement.

Ever since the violent separatist militancy began in the early 1990s, the subtext of jihad and Islamism was always there, most explicitly evident when Kashmiri Hindus were threatened and told to leave their homes in 1989–1990. Many of them were killed, and reportedly, 160,000–170,000 Kashmiri Hindus were forced to emigrate by Pakistan-backed terrorist groups.[14] However, over the last decade, Islamist ideology has figured more prominently in Kashmir's separatist movement, eroding its quasi-secular character. In fact, it is rapidly becoming the main driving force of separatism. The narrative of "*Azadi baraye Islam*" (Sharia-ruled Islamic Kashmir or Kashmir as a part of global Islamic caliphate) is fast becoming a dominant narrative, phasing out the previous narratives of "*Azadi baraye Kashmir*" (Independent Kashmir) and "*Azadi baraye Pakistan*" (Kashmir joining Pakistan).[15]

Growth of Pan Islamism and Wahhabi Radicalization in the Last Decade

Over the last decade, Kashmir has gone through a wave of intense religious radicalization accompanied by fundamentalism. The local variant of Islam, mystic Sufism, better known as *Kashmiriyat*, is essentially syncretic and liberal. Amenable to coexistence with diverse faiths, it is now facing an existential threat from the Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, popular in the shape of the Ahl-i-Hadith sect in Kashmir. Once reviled, Wahhabism has grown exponentially since 2011. According to the latest estimates, out of six million Sunni Muslims in Kashmir valley, 1.6 million are Wahhabis.[16] Ideologically, the essence of the separatist movement has always been the narrative of Jihad against “Hindu India.” Against this background, puritanical forms of Islam, like Wahhabism, were bound to find a space, and eventually, did so. Additionally, in the last six centuries, Kashmiris were mostly ruled by foreigners such as the Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, and Dogras. In the existing conflict milieu, the extremist and fundamentalist clerics blamed the pacifist local Sufi Islam for the ignominious foreign rule. Additionally, they justify the exclusivist and extremist doctrines of Takfirism to purge the local Islam of syncretic and pagan practices. As a result, in much of popular perception, the local Sufi Islam has, over the last three decades, become an apostasy inspired by Hindu practices, depriving Muslims of the martial traits needed for jihad. Hence, the young generation born after militancy emerging in the 1990s has no love left for “*Kashmiriyat*.” They grew up with an enhanced exposure to extremist Islamic schools.[17]

Secondly, with massive petrodollar funding, Wahhabis recruited highly qualified Imams, built lavish mosques in Arabic style with huge minarets and luxurious hammams. They also offer generous scholarships to young students so that they can pursue higher studies in Saudi Arabia. They talk at lengths about the jihad in Palestine, Chechnya, and Myanmar, but hardly utter a word about the local Kashmir conflict to avoid the wrath of state authorities. However, they are disseminating puritanical and fundamentalist teachings of Wahhabism, which are at odds with the local pacifist Sufi Islam. Against the overall background of militancy in which Islam has long been a mobilizing factor, such teachings are increasingly being subjected to distorted and extremist interpretations, offering a fertile ground for the spread of violent jihadism combined with an exclusivist Takfiri ideology, as practiced by transnational terrorist groups like ISIS. Wahhabi teachings are drawing a large number of followers, especially from the younger generation, which finds Sufism superstitious and holds its pacifism responsible for the suppression of Kashmir by foreign powers. Salafi missionaries have intensified the religious conversion activities.

In recent years, one can find a sea-change in attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns. Until 2004–2005, it was quite difficult to find a single burqa-clad woman at Kashmir University (KU). Today the situation is the opposite, i.e., it is difficult to find a single woman not wearing a burqa or hijab. A political science professor in KU told this author that when he used the word ‘secular’ when discussing the Indian Constitution in his class on polity, the students protested that the word “secular” is haram and un-Islamic. Lately, incidents of burning Sufi shrines have occurred. Sectarian conflicts between the local Etaqadi Sunnis and Wahhabis have intensified (Interested readers can turn to this author’s book *Radicalization in India: An Exploration* for a detailed analysis of the subject).

Apart from this, the idea of a more political Islam has also made deep inroads in Kashmir. Jamaat-i-Islami, a pro-Pakistani extremist organization, allegedly the backbone of militancy in Kashmir, is founded on the philosophy of Maulana Maududi, an extremist Islamic cleric from Pakistan. JI, a South Asian version of the Muslim Brotherhood, believes in the supremacy of sharia in governing state, society, and the personal lives of people. With a vast network of district coordinators (rukoon) and with sympathizers running in millions, JI has deeply penetrated politics, administration, police, academia, as well as sociocultural and religious domains. It has a robust organizational presence in remote rural areas, controlling hearts and minds through religion, social service, money, and terrorism.

In a random visit to Srinagar’s market (the capital city), one can find an ample variety of books on political Islam in small shops as well as with roadside vendors, some of these made to look like proper academic books of political science. It speaks volumes of the popularity of Maududi’s ideology. Such Islamism is massively

influencing the educated young generation. For them, Maududi's idea of Sharia-based society has no lesser standing than political theories propounded by Montesquieu, Thomas Hobbes, or Rawls elsewhere. For these students, it is an alternate model of existence, sanctioned by the divine Quran, governing life from one's bedroom to the affairs of the state. Manan Wani, a Ph.D. scholar who joined the militants, invoked Islamism in his letter to the youth of Kashmir.[18] Likewise, Burhan Wani, the poster boy of new-age militancy in Kashmir, glorified the idea of the caliphate and of a sharia-ruled Kashmir. The popularity of Burhan Wani can be gauged from the fact that his death in an encounter with security forces (SFs) in 2016 led to massive civil unrest, engulfing all 10 districts of the valley. In the first week of the protests, 44 people died from police fire. The long-term fallout was the rise of homegrown militancy in South Kashmir in which SFs have so far killed 733 militants.[19]

In interviews with the author, post-graduate students of KU of different departments suggested that when democracy and governance fail, the natural alternative is a political Islam, which has "divine" solutions for running the state and society. In Kashmir, disenchantment with corrupt, arrogant, and elitist mainstream politicians and bureaucrats, bad governance, and tampering with democratic procedures, has pushed many people into the fold of Islamism. Further, students at KU informed the author that the conflict of the last three decades had pushed their society into a state of "collective depression." With so many young lives lost and excesses committed by SFs and militants, this worldly life has, in the eyes of many of them, become meaningless. Many, if not all, of the young generation are going through deep psychological crises, given the fact that they have no opportunities to develop their talents. For them, Islam becomes the best recourse in such a situation. For those searching peace, it becomes a source of anchorage, spiritual strength, and relief through prayers, and for those seeking identity and empowerment, political Islam offers a strong platform and mobilizing narrative.[20] In such a surrounding, vulnerable young minds become an easy target for extremist clerics providing them with religious justifications for engaging in violent jihad. Since 2010, Wahhabism and Maududi's political Islam have been on the rise, paralleled by significant changes in militancy, sociocultural attitudes and behavioral patterns, as well as the collective psychology of the people in Kashmir.

Development of the ISIS Grid

Today following of ISIS is quite entrenched in central Kashmir. This author's investigation included interviews with 300 young boys and girls (aged 15–30) in Down Town, Srinagar, and in the districts of Budgam, Bandipura, and Ganderbal. 90% of the interviewees were studying in schools managed by Jamaat-i-Islami and Ahl-i-Hadith sects. In the unstructured interviews, the interviewees expressed hatred for SFs and a huge belief in the narrative of new-age militants like Burhan Wani and Zakir Musa (who had publicly vowed to establish an Islamic caliphate in Kashmir, disregarding Pakistan). Furthermore, these students also expressed great sympathy for ISIS and AQ. However, they did not approve of the brutality of ISIS towards Muslims. They preferred AQ's model over the one of ISIS for Kashmir. Most alarmingly, almost 80% of them, including 70% of the girls, hailed Adil Dar, the suicide bomber behind the Pulwama Fidayeen attack of February 14, 2019 which led to the death of 44 SFs personnel and brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war, as a hero and a martyr. All of them had Adil's last video message in their phone in which he had urged females to "wear veils," "not fall in love," and urged friends and relatives to "celebrate his martyrdom for Islam." [21]

One of the interviewees, Mushtaq Bandey (name changed), was a former militant of Lashkar-i-Taiba, a UN proscribed terrorist group responsible for the November 29 Mumbai attacks in 2008. Mushtaq is still facing a trial for murdering a policeman. However, he is a reformed man and out on bail. He informed the author that post-2016, the new generation, especially boys above 13 years of age, is immensely inspired by ISIS. Further, he suggested that the most important source of their radicalization was online propaganda material. A loosely structured grid has come up from Budgam to Bandipura where one can witness a massive following for the caliphate ideology—the vision of Kashmir's destiny as a part of the global Islamic Caliphate. Srinagar has become a significant center of it. Every Friday, after prayers, one can witness the waving of several ISIS flags. Recently, the pulpit of Mirwaiz, the chief priest of Jamia Mosque (in downtown Srinagar) and a prominent separatist leader, was vandalized by ISIS supporters.[22] When the author inquired about recent fencing of the

mosque with barbed wire, a close associate of Mirwaiz informed the author that their worst fear these days is that a prayer congregation might get bombed by a fidayeen of the Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK), the self-proclaimed local affiliate of ISIS (no bay'a allegiance) or AGuH. It is pertinent to mention here that Mirwaiz is the follower of local Sufi Islam (Etqadi sect), and an ideological opponent of Wahhabi ideology.

From Srinagar, the caliphate ideology is spreading fast into the remote areas of South Kashmir. Tral, Anantnag, and the Shopian districts in South Kashmir have emerged as new strongholds of jihadi terrorist outfits like Jaish-e-Muhammad (a Maulana Masood Azhar-led Pakistan-based jihadi terrorist organization with expertise in suicide attacks and allegedly responsible for the attack on the Indian parliament in 2001 as well as the recent Pulwama suicide bombing in February 2019), ISJK, and Ansar Ghazwatul Hind. These groups have confirmed ideological links with transnational terror groups like the Taliban, IS, and Al Qaeda, respectively. The Pulwama fidayeen attack, which brought India and Pakistan on the verge of a full-fledged war was planned in the Marhama village of Anantnag.[23]

The new narrative gaining currency is not one of an independent Kashmir or Kashmir's accession to Pakistan. The new narrative of "Azadi" or freedom is that of *Azadi baraye Islam*, i.e., freedom through Islam. Zakir Musa left Hizbul Mujahiddin (HM), the old Pakistan-supported militant organization fighting for the freedom of Kashmir and its accession to Pakistan, and formed a new terrorist organization—Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGuH), the local affiliate and the ideological front of Al Qaeda in Kashmir.[24] The AGuH formation was declared by the Global Islamic Media Front, the online propaganda distribution arm of AQ.[25] On Zakir Musa's death (May 23, 2019), AQIS paid rich tribute to him and welcomed the declaration of the new commander of AGuH in June: Abdul Hamid Lelhari.[26]

Zakir Musa who studied at the elitist Navodaya School and graduated in engineering, categorically stated that the fight in Kashmir is for Allah and Islam. He even threatened to slit the throats of the prominent separatist leaders of the Hurriyat conference for betraying the cause of Allah.[27] Seeing his popularity among the young generation, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, the most popular separatist leader, had to acknowledge that he was acting according to the principles of Islam. Zakir Musa's popularity among the teenagers and young generations seemed to know no bounds. He was a celebrity militant and a youth icon. Eight-year-old boys have started participating in stone-pelting on security forces and government officials, and proudly display the symbol of Musa. The author, in his visits to primary and higher secondary schools, found that the classroom walls were marked with graffiti referring to Musa's army. Zakir Musa marks a significant ideological shift from "azadi" to Islamism, though Islamism was there since 1990, but only as a sub-text.

Indian intelligence agencies and security forces realized that Musa could radicalize an entire generation. Neutralizing him became a top priority to save Kashmir from slipping away into the clutches of jihadi forces. However, there were fears of a mass uprising. The fear-stricken state authorities remained extraordinarily vigilant, and nothing severe happened. After his death, Musa's telephonic conversation with a militant Abu Dujana, reflecting his firm belief in Islamic rule, was released by AQ. It put to rest the rumor spread by Pak-supported militant groups like HM that Musa was a brain-child of Indian intelligence.[28]

After his death, Musa is inspiring more young minds to fight for the cause of Allah. Many militants have left HM and joined AGuH. HM commander Riaz Naikoo had to release an audio message that initially accused ISJK and AGuH of having intentions to turn Kashmir into a 'Syria-Iraq.' However, later he appealed them to stop the infighting with Pakistan-supported terrorist groups like HM and LeT (Lashkar-e-Taiba). The audio message shows the desperation of HM over the rising popularity of TTGs like ISJK and AGuH.[29] However, the dominant trend now is to join radical Islamist terrorist groups like Jaish-e-Muhammad, ISJK, and AGuH. According to informed sources, there are hundreds of young men willing to join AGuH, but they do not have weapons. Besides, there are thousands of highly radicalized stone-pelters and OGWs who are willing to join outfits like AGuH, Jaish, and ISJK, the moment they get hold of weapons. While it is generally acknowledged that currently, outfits like AGuH and ISJK do not have a very robust structural integrity, an organized cadre, strong leadership, or financial resources and weapons, the sentiment has taken deep roots. In a milieu like

the existing one, TTGs like AQ and IS can fill that leadership vacuum. It can help their local fronts acquire structural integrity and train them in motivating and recruiting impressionable minds.

Disenchantment with Mainstream Politics and Pakistan

Furthermore, in today's Kashmir, there is enormous disenchantment with mainstream politicians and with the democratic system which elected them. This also goes for separatist leaders due to their corruption and due to Pakistan's alleged duplicity. That said, there is a strong likelihood of common folks sympathizing with those who are fighting for the cause of religion rather than, as in the past, for political goals. With such a sentiment dominating hearts and minds, transnational terrorist groups like AQ and ISIS can easily project themselves as dependable warriors of Allah indulging in jihad. Other factors that might induce the Sunni-extremist Wahhabi groups to intensify their activities in the state include Iranian inroads and Shia radicalization, rapidly pacing towards dangerous levels in Kashmir.[30]

Emerging Craze for Suicide Bombing and IEDs

The militancy, in tactics, is also taking on Middle Eastern features. Due to India's strengthening of its counter-infiltration grid, it has become immensely difficult to smuggle weapons from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan is also under the pressure of international financial action task force (FATF) sanctions while also facing a significant economic crisis. Whether FATF's grey listing of Pakistan has brought any tangible reduction in financially and logistically supporting proxy terrorist groups (HM, LeT and JeM) operating in India, needs more rigorous evidence-based analysis. However, a brief look already points to the complexity of the terrorist-financing system which Pakistan's deep state built over the years in Kashmir (see endnote).[31]

That said, Pakistan is not able to allocate enough financial resources to fuel Kashmir's proxy war. In addition, its government cannot afford losing legitimacy any further by facilitating the smuggling of weapons. Hence, the dearth of weapons has compelled militant organizations to explore fidayeen attacks and use Syria-Iraq styled IEDs and VBIEDs (Vehicle-borne IEDs). In 2018, there were eight IED attempts in Kashmir, but many of them failed to explode.[32] In 2019, the IED system improved in terms of better quality of the explosives and better training of their handlers. In the last months of 2019, 60 foreign terrorists infiltrated from Pakistan.[33] Reportedly, they are training local militants in Kashmir in making IEDs and how best to place them. In the first half of 2019, three successful IED blasts had taken place.[34] After the Pulwama incident, a car-borne fidayeen attack was averted on the Banihal pass.[35]

Such attacks have high news value as they brutally strike terror of a much higher magnitude with maximum casualties and with an element of surprise, multiplying people's fears and insecurities. They also have a debilitating effect on the morale of SFs. One can witness an emerging trend of increased fidayeen attacks in Kashmir—a phenomenon until now confined to FTs (foreign terrorists) only. However, it has to be recalled that Jaish and Lashkar have carried out suicide missions in the past as well. As early as 2001, Jaish carried a suicide bombing mission ramming an explosives-laden car into Kashmir's state assembly. After that, Kashmir-centric terrorist groups like Jaish and Lashkar executed suicide missions in their attacks on the Indian parliament in 2001 (Jaish) and in Mumbai in 2008, respectively. However, in most of these attacks, local Kashmiri boys were rarely involved. The groups mentioned above are foreign terrorist groups, presumably controlled by Pakistan-based ISI handlers. The involvement of a local Kashmiri in the 2001 assembly attack was an exception.

However, unlike in the pre-Burhan Wani (that is before 2016) militancy, the post-Burhan Wani suicide missions are linked to the spread of a belief in Islamic Kashmir and a more robust influence of global Islamist movements. Post-Burhan suicide missions have drawn local Kashmiri boys in the dragnet. Already before Pulwama, in January 2018, there was a suicide attack in Tral, involving a local Kashmiri youngster.

After the Pulwama attack, the fidayeen Adil Dar got overnight fame by bringing two countries in possession of nuclear weapons on the brink of war. The fact that Adil Dar, a native Kashmiri, volunteered for a suicide bombing speaks volumes about the psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral changes occurring in Kashmir's society. One can witness a newfound inclination among some youth for making IEDs and VBIEDs. One of the most important reasons for joining militancy in south Kashmir is the desire for recognition, social status, and glory among the jobless youth, which has otherwise nothing to look forward to, except doing drugs. Joining militancy and posting pictures on Facebook in war-like gear gives some of them instant fame and, in their imagination, an entry ticket to the Islamic paradise. Ever since Adil Dar got overnight fame, one can witness a craze among young militants to volunteer for body-strapped suicide bombings and vehicle-based improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs).

Given that Kashmir's Muslim community is traditionally considered as being much more liberal in comparison to Muslims from other parts of the Indian subcontinent, local youth's inclination towards suicide attacks is extremely disturbing. Some astute observers of social trends have told this author that in the future, even girls may be willing to volunteer for such acts. If this is indeed true, TTGs like ISIS and AQ will not face problems in recruiting young people.

TTGs in Kashmir: Impact of the US Withdrawal and Internal Dynamics in Kashmir

The emerging geopolitical scenario also bodes well for TTGs. The late IS chief Baghdadi announced in 2019 Kashmir as IS' new Wilayat, i.e., the province.[36] While Baghdadi is dead now the future trajectory of IS is a matter of strategic forecasting at best and speculation at worst. However, the ideology which ISIS represents has found a foothold in Kashmir, and in the future, it is likely to gain strength. Even if ISIS should decline, any group representing Pan-Islamism will be able to poach upon local ISIS sympathizers. If not IS, then Al Qaeda is likely to make further inroads in Kashmir. In his interviews, this author noted among local youth a preference for AQ over IS.

Having suffered territorial reverses in the Middle East, IS is likely to beef up its activities in places like Kashmir, Libya, and the Philippines to project its relevance and existence. Sri Lankan agencies' investigations revealed that some of the IS fidayeen who had executed Easter Sunday bombings had travelled to Kashmir for training in explosives.[37] Besides, ISKP (Islamic State in Khorasan Province) has shown a substantial presence in Nangarhar (Afghanistan). A number of Indians from Kerala have already joined them in Afghanistan. It is highly likely that Kashmiri boys are also caught in the IS dragnet. With the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan on the cards now, both AQ and ISKP are likely to find safe havens in Afghanistan, at least in areas under the control of the Taliban. Mr. CD Sahay, former chief of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence service, suggested to the author in a telephonic interview that if TTGs wish to find a strong foothold in Kashmir, then they have to keep Pakistan's deep state in good books. Furthermore, Pakistan's decades of experience and ground network in Kashmir may be immensely helpful to TTGs in terms of logistics, shelter, and other operational requirements. He further opined that, given the fact that Pakistan has sheltered AQ operatives in the past, it is highly likely that Pakistan may support the entrenchment of TTGs in Kashmir. Such an arrangement suits Pakistan also, as it offers its military a semblance of plausible deniability in the event of any major terrorist incident happening in India. According to the high-value sources consulted by the author, Pakistan is already shifting terrorist training camps from PoK (Pak Occupied Kashmir) to Afghanistan.

Transnational terrorist groups like AQ and IS have internal disputes, and many times they are seen at the crossroads. In Kashmir, as mentioned above, AGuH was bitterly opposed by Pak-proxy groups like HM—so much so that they tried to brand Zakir Musa as an Indian asset. That said, one question that puzzles the strategic minds is what if AQ and IS clash with each in Kashmir, through their proxies. However, the author, while researching for this article, found that the majority of the militant groups are on the verge of arriving at a consensus that they must have a tactical compromise keeping aside the ideological differences because they have a common enemy viz. India. Zakir Musa and Riaz Naikoo had earlier appealed to militants to put up a

united front. In Zawahiri's most recent video message, he can be seen urging the mujahids to wage a "united jihad" against India.

Furthermore, it also merits attention that there is a strong likelihood of TTGs using Kashmir as a base to expand their activities into other parts of India. As it is already known, IS-mindset has deeply penetrated part of the society in Kerala, parts of Telangana (mainly Hyderabad), and Maharashtra.[38] We should remember that Kerala contributed to the highest number of IS fighters from India.[39] Besides, in the North Indian heartland, Muslims are getting radicalized—the dominant narrative of Hindu-nationalism is instilling existential fears in their minds. Recent incidents of mob-lynching by Hindu extremists, the Supreme Court's decision in favour of Hindus in the Babri-mosque dispute, and the new citizenship amendment act, which is seen as anti-Muslim, have strengthened their insecurities. A cache of weapons was recovered from a madrasa in district Bijnor in Uttar Pradesh, the heartland of India.[40] The National Investigation Agency (NIA), India's premier counter-terrorist agency, found a Kashmir link to an ISIS cell in the Amroha district of UP.[41] In Delhi, NIA discovered a new ISIS-linked group "Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam." [42] NIA also arrested 14 men in Tamil Nadu as they were trying to set up an ISIS cell.[43] That said, such a radicalized youth may be an easy target for AQ and IS. For them, Kashmir might be a new battleground to lay down their lives for a religious cause. If radicalized young Indian men and women can join ISKP in Afghanistan, they are even more likely to come in droves to join a jihad in Kashmir.

Alienation and Depression in Society

Turning to a widespread feeling in society: many people in Kashmir appear to be going through acute depression and alienation and are in a state of mourning. Many local residents feel that Delhi is following a kinetic approach (963 militants neutralized, the majority of which being local militants).[44] Ordinary citizens feel that Delhi is very high-handed and shortsighted in ignoring the impact of extrajudicial killings and civilian deaths in encounters, as well as other human rights violations by security forces—although many of the claims are exaggerated. Adding to the discomforts of routine life are highway closures for civilian traffic and rigorous frisking of people, which includes seizing their mobile phones to make sure that individuals do not store a picture of militant heroes. The general level of alienation can be witnessed by the fact that when Cordon and Search Operations (CASOs) take place to apprehend militants, thousands of people assemble to pelt stones at security forces and seek to rescue stranded militants. In the most recent example in Kulgaam in South Kashmir, one civilian was killed, and 70 were injured in police actions in May 2019 when a crowd was disrupting a security operation undertaken.[45] Unofficial sources of the author informed him that not 70 but 260 civilians were injured in this particular clash. Nevertheless, the crowd was successful in rescuing a Jaish militant from being arrested. Another sign of the times is that voter turnout in the most recent parliamentary elections has been very low, namely, less than 14% in Srinagar. The Anantnag constituency of the militancy-hit South Kashmir registered the lowest voter turnout with just 2.81%.[46] Signs of depression can be noticed everywhere. Mothers happily participate in the funeral processions of their militant-sons, hailing them as martyrs. People assemble by the thousands for funerals, and the dead militants draw such a vast fan-following that people kiss their blood-soaked feet during funeral processions. Behind such celebrations of death lie deep-rooted depression and trauma that the conflict of the last three decades has generated. Young boys joining the militancy are well aware that they will most likely be killed within months, if not days. In spite of that, they join in the hope of finding an identity, recognition, and anchorage. Such a mindset of seeking glory in death is fertile ground for recruitment for TTGs.

Cases of depression and mental illness are reaching major proportions in Kashmir. Drug abuse is one consequence. According to a survey sponsored by the United Nations' Drug Control Program, there are 70,000 drug addicts in the Kashmir Division, including 4,000 women.[47] A recent survey concluded that 65% to 70% of the students are drug users, including 26% of female students, with a significant number doing hard drugs such as heroin which are carrying greater health hazards.[48] Government psychiatric hospital statistics show that 90% of the users belong to the age group of 17–35.[49] A society in depression and people who feel

alienated are more likely to lean towards religious fundamentalism. In a conflict zone like Kashmir, the lines between religious fundamentalism, extremism, and jihadi terrorism are blurred. Further, drug-addicted weak and vulnerable minds with no sense of purpose and a big burden of guilt are easy prey for the recruiters of TTGs, as has also been witnessed in Europe where young Muslims—many of whom having drug problems and/or being petty criminals—were radicalized in prisons and gained a new sense of purpose and seemingly got rid of their baggage of guilt when becoming foreign fighters.[50] [51]

Conclusion

Finally, if the increasing penetration of transnational terrorist groups is not looked at in isolation, it will appear that it is the part of the process of internationalization of Kashmir, a process that is unfolding in various stages. This phenomenon is not entirely new. It began in 2008–2009 when Kashmir saw a Palestinian-intifada styled civil unrest with stone pelting. The Arab Spring of 2011 had also affected the hearts and minds of Kashmir's people. In 2011, after the death of Tufail Mattoo, a civilian, during a police teargas shelling, the protestors were even planning to stage a Tahrir-square-like event in Lal Chowk of Srinagar. The Arab Spring brought two parallel streams of thought into Kashmir. In the first stream, the minuscule minority of secular-cum-left-leaning youth started seeing Kashmir as a major humanitarian crisis. They started seeing Kashmir through a global prism, equating it with Palestine, Myanmar, or Xinjiang. The second stream of thought was one of the global jihad and pan-Islamism. It has had a robust influence on separatists, in addition to the religious-minded people and the religious extremists.

Furthermore, in addition to non-state actors like IS and AQ, many state actors have become active in Kashmir, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and Turkey. Though Turkey has always sided with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, its contemporary activism is driven by its larger geopolitical ambitions in South Asia.[52] President Erdogan's dubious links with TTGs have come to light time and again. Reportedly, Turkey has supported terrorist groups in Africa and Syria with weapons and logistics.[53] In the future, the possibility of Turkey and Pakistan joining efforts to support TTGs in Kashmir cannot be ruled out.

That said, the conflict is transitioning into its next phase. The passage is holistic, i.e., the changes are visible on multiple fronts in terms of militant tactics, changing sociocultural attitudes, and new ideologies, with Pan-Islamism becoming dominant. Having said that, the changes are subtle; only perceptive and intuitive strategic minds can sense them and foresee probable developments, including that in the next phase of the conflict TTGs are likely to play an important role in Kashmir.

Short Postscript on the Impact of the Abolition of Article 370 [54]

Last but not least, the impact of the abolition of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status on the subject of this article merits a brief discussion. The government in Delhi has purportedly taken such a historic step to change the separatist narrative to an economic-development narrative while creating a new political leadership through local self-governing bodies. India's central government hopes to attract investment, create jobs, and make militancy irrelevant by fully integrating Kashmir into India. However, in local popular perception, Article 370 was a symbol of Kashmir's unique cultural and religious identity. Its abrogation has generated many fears. Local Muslims fear that the Modi government will bring outsiders into Kashmir who might occupy their lands, change the demography, and exploit the natural resources of the state. Most such fears appear to be based on ignorance or are the result of malicious propaganda emanating from Pakistan's deep state, local politicians, or from Islamist organizations. Over the last 30 years, religious radicalization has turned out to be the biggest threat to "Kashmiriryat." However, a detailed exploration of the merits and demerits of article 370 would go beyond the space allocated to this article.

In general, the abrogation of article 370 has not gone down well with most local people. It is likely to strengthen the trust deficit and increase alienation. Earlier, in this article, the author has alluded to the alarming levels of alienation and trust deficit in the last three years due to Delhi's heavy-handed approach in dealing with militancy, human rights violations by its security forces, corruption in the state government, lack of outreach, poor governance, and the entirely bureaucratic nature of governance. While after the decision to abrogate article 370, there has not been massive civil unrest or a significant terrorist strike, this may be the result of the massive security clampdown and a communications lockdown. However, resentment is simmering, and in the future, it may lead to significant civil unrest and a sharp rise in militancy.

Furthermore, with Delhi's Kashmir move, the mainstream political process in Kashmir has more or less come to a halt. Jammu and Kashmir will be directly controlled by the central government, leaving little scope for local politicians. Many of the local politicians facing corruption charges stand discredited and were not well accepted by most of the people. They were the biggest beneficiaries and votaries of article 370, which is dead now.[55] Also, the pro-Pakistan separatist leaders also stand exposed as corrupt (facing inquiries in terrorist financing), and some opportunistic politicians who accepted bribes from the intelligence agencies of India and Pakistan also stand exposed. On the other hand, India does not appear to have a long-term vision for post-article 370 Kashmir. So far, one hardly comes across any genuine outreach and sincere efforts to improve governance. The present attitude of Delhi signals that in the future, its approach towards Kashmir will be bureaucratic and military based.

Pakistan has also failed to do anything significant to compel India to backtrack from the abrogation move and, hence is fast losing credibility. Against this background, transnational terrorist groups are offered bright prospects to flourish in the vacuum created by the separatist movement on the one hand and mainstream Indian politics on the other hand.

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N.B.: The author could not reveal the names of some of his sources because of the security threat to their lives. Most developments discussed in this article are very recent, which explains the lack of much academic research on the subject. Also, the security situation in Kashmir is very challenging, and hence, a researcher faces many limitations and restrictions. The author has lived in Jammu and Kashmir for the last two years. A large part of the research for this article was primarily done for the author's recently published book, "Radicalization in India: An Exploration." During his research work, the author has interacted with a diverse range of interlocutors, including security officials, intelligence officers, militants, ex-militants, OGWs (Over Ground Workers) of militants, religious clerics, members of JI, separatist leaders, mainstream politicians, students of the colleges and universities, ordinary citizens, government servants, as well as some deeply placed informers. In addition, the author has used reputed journalistic sources, as reflected in the endnotes.

Notes

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