

## **Profile of Jaish-e-Muhammad and Leader Masood Azhar**

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# South Asian Militant Landscape in the Context of the Pulwama Attack and its Aftermath

The suicide attack on India's paramilitary Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) in Kashmir's Pulwama district has once again exposed the sharp fault-lines between India and Pakistan, pushing them to the brink of war. The February 2019 attack, claimed by Pakistan-based anti-India militant group, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), killed 40 CRPF personnel. This attack and its aftermath underscores a new phase of militancy in violence-ridden Kashmir and renewed hostilities between India and Pakistan.

India's retaliatory airstrikes on alleged JeM camps inside mainland Pakistan (after a hiatus of five decades) have redefined the conflict threshold. In 1999, even at the height of the Kargil crisis between the two states, the Indian air force did not cross the Line of Control. Indian airstrikes signal a qualitative shift in the Indian position from the strategy of deterrence-by-denial to deterrence-by-punishment. Consequently, this will result in a new unstable equilibrium, lowering the threshold of a low-intensity, limited conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Moreover, the absence of a functional India-Pakistan crisis management mechanism further increases the probability of a limited conflict.

The United States (US) and international community's response to the Pulwama attack and its aftermath is also pertinent. Instead of urging both India and Pakistan to desist from escalation, for the first time, the US and international community acknowledged India's right of self-defence and emphasised de-escalation only after Indian airstrikes on alleged JeM camps in Balakot. Barring China, no other country condemned India's violation of Pakistani sovereignty. This will have long-term implications on strategic stability and balance of power in South Asia. The Pulwama attack has also witnessed emergence of new interlocutors in India-Pakistan tensions such as China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

JeM has 40,000 trained militants in its ranks and returned to Kashmir in 2016 with the Pathankot air base attack. Between then and the Pulwama attack, it has increased its activities and presence in parts of Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir (IAJK). The use of a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) to hit a military convoy in a highly-militarised zone like Kashmir shows

JeM's enhanced operational capabilities. Accumulating 80 kilograms of highly explosive 'RDX' and preparing a VBIED signify the expertise of JeM's cadres. The suicide bomber Adil Rashid Dar was a local Kashmiri, whom JeM had recruited by exploiting his anger and quest for revenge against the Indian state to serve its agenda of 'liberating' Kashmir. After witnessing a dip between 2008 and 2013, violence and militant recruitment have spiked in Kashmir since 2015. The number of militants killed in Kashmir rose from 130 in 2016 to 200 in 2017 and 240 in 2018. In the first two months of 2019, 31 militants have been killed in Kashmir.

At the policy level, Pakistan's response to the JeM threat is critical. Kinetic measures against militant groups such as sanctions, arrests and crackdowns, helpful in the short-term, need to be supplemented. Non-kinetic measures like an effective counter ideological narrative and a comprehensive de-radicalisation and rehabilitation plan would be necessary to create incentives for JeM members to shun militancy. The larger question is how will Pakistan create a counter ideological narrative against JeM without compromising on the state's identical stance on Kashmir? Moreover, effective rehabilitation of a large number of militants will require massive time and resources and a strong political will by the Pakistani military and political leadership. In 2002, when the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf banned JeM and took action against its cadres, the group retaliated with two assassination attempts on him, alongside several high-profile attacks inside Pakistan. In the event of another round of crackdowns initiated against JeM, a serious backlash cannot be ruled out. Moreover, if JeM splinters as a result of heavy-handed crackdowns, some of its members might gravitate towards terror groups like Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

India and Pakistan, beyond proxy warfare, will have to dispassionately discuss the security challenges arising out of various terrorist groups operating in the region. India and Pakistan will have to create joint counter-terrorism and counter-extremism frameworks to overcome the challenge of militancy, notwithstanding who launched and supported these groups since the 1980s. Against this backdrop, the current issue features four

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articles looking at different aspects of the Pulwama attack and its aftermath. In the first article, **Farhan Zahid** traces the background and current status of JeM and its founder Maulana Masood Azhar. The author maintains that Azhar's ideology had a significant impact on the evolution of Kashmir's militant landscape. Headquartered in Pakistani Punjab's Bahawalpur province, JeM has longstanding ties and nexuses with other militant groups in the region such as Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). These ties have allowed JeM to evade bans and crackdowns from the Pakistani security forces in the past. Notwithstanding information that Azhar is critically ill and his brother Mufti Abdul Rauf Asghar and brother-in-law Qari Talha are running JeM's day-to-day operations, the author emphasises the need to create counter-narratives against Azhar's violent ideology.

The second article by **Mohammed Sinan Siyech** dissects the Pulwama attack using Louise Richardson's conceptual framework of the Three Rs (Revenge, Renown and Reaction). According to the author, the Pulwama attack manifested all three Rs making it a highly successful attack for the JeM. The suicide bomber was seeking revenge for repeated arrests and humiliation faced at the hands of Indian security forces. JeM also drew maximum attention from mainstream and social media in the aftermath of the attack. The attack centre-staged Kashmir as a core dispute between India and Pakistan and a nuclear flashpoint that needed serious international attention. It also prompted immediate reactions from India in the form of retaliatory airstrikes on JeM camps in Balakot, escalation of India-Pakistan tensions and stringent security measures in Kashmir. The author argues that such security measures in Kashmir would likely provide JeM with fresh recruits and funding. To mitigate this likelihood, there is need to examine India's domestic responses in Kashmir, with continued diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to take action against anti-India militant groups. It is also necessary to strengthen international ties to ensure timely information and intelligence sharing to curtail terrorist networks and their financing.

The next article by **Damien Chong** and **Neo Loo Seng** discusses whether Kashmir could

turn into a future bastion for the Islamic State (IS) akin to Marawi in the Philippines in the aftermath of the Pulwama terrorist attack. Various arguments are discussed for and against such a scenario. On one hand, continued violence, socio-economic and political instability in Kashmir, similar to the situation in Marawi in 2017, are pull factors for transnational threat groups such as IS. This is particularly in light of the recent collapse of IS' territories in Syria/Iraq prompting it to re-group elsewhere. Proponents of the contending view argue that such an outcome is implausible as threat groups have thus far failed to effectively exploit the Kashmir conflict, given it is framed as a territorial and political dispute as opposed to an Islamist conflict. By assessing a broad spectrum of scenarios, the article discusses the pitfalls of the Marawi case and how they can be avoided in Kashmir.

The last article by **Abdul Basit** and **Sara Mahmood** looks at the security and geopolitical implications of possible US withdrawal from Afghanistan on South Asia's complex and diverse militant landscape in the context of the Pulwama attack. After 9/11, the US presence in Afghanistan had kept India-Pakistan tensions under control to ensure Islamabad's cooperation in the border areas to track and hunt AQ remnants. A case in point is the US-brokered 2003 cease fire agreement between India and Pakistan. Now that the war in Afghanistan is nearing its end, tensions between the two South Asian nuclear rivals over Kashmir threaten to provide fresh fuel for regional militancy and bilateral tensions to persist. It seems that several militant groups like JeM which diverted their fighters to Afghanistan after 9/11 to assist the Afghan Taliban in fighting the US are now returning to their old conflict zones through incidents like the Pulwama attack. The Afghan Taliban's perceived victory in Afghanistan will create a triumphant jihadist narrative for a plethora of militant groups in the region, giving them new zeal and fervour which will make the South Asian militant landscape more lethal and violent.

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# Profile of Jaish-e-Muhammad and Leader Masood Azhar

Farhan Zahid

## Synopsis

*Jaish-e-Mohammad's (JeM) impact on the jihadist landscape in Pakistan is immense. The February 2019 Pulwama attack in Indian Kashmir carried out by the JeM has highlighted that the terror group would remain a thorny issue between India and Pakistan. This article examines the background and profile of JeM and its founder, Maulana Masood Azhar, and the impact of his thoughts and ideology on Kashmir's militant landscape against the backdrop of the Pulwama attack and subsequent escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan. The article further elucidates the ramifications for Pakistan in the light of JeM's jihadist activities in India.*

## Introduction

On 14 February 2019, Adil Dar rammed his explosive-laden vehicle into the convoy of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), a police paramilitary force in the Pulwama district of Indian Kashmir. The attack killed 44 CRPF personnel and wounded 80 others. A Pakistan-based anti-India militant group, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), claimed responsibility for the attack on social media. In response, India blamed JeM and its chief, Masood Azhar, for the suicide attack. Considering that relations between India and Pakistan were already tense, the attack further worsened their relations and brought both countries to the brink of war.

However, this was not the first time that JeM had perpetrated a terrorist attack that

triggered hostility between the two rivals. The assaults on the Indian Parliament in 2001, Pathankot airbase in 2015 and Indian security forces in Uri in 2016 were some of the high-profile attacks carried out by JeM. Moreover, former President and military ruler of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, also accused JeM of two assassination attempts on him in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the Pulwama attack, there is thus an urgent need to critically explore the JeM phenomenon. As such, the contribution of this article is threefold. Using data collected from original jihadi texts and discussions with security analysts and practitioners, this article studies the personality, ideology, and motives of JeM and its chief, Masood Azhar.

## Background

Maulana Masood Azhar was born in Bahawalpur, a southern district of the Punjab province, in 1969.<sup>2</sup> After receiving early education in his hometown, he moved to Karachi where he studied at Jamia Binoria, a seminary notorious for its links with different jihadist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Azhar also briefly taught at the seminary after completing his religious education.<sup>3</sup> He started his jihadi career in 1983 with another anti-India Kashmiri jihadist group, Harkat ul Jihad ul Islami (HuJI). Following the split between HuJI and Harkat ul Mujahedein (HuM) in 1987, he became the general secretary of the latter. Azhar has been touted as a jihadi ideologue, propagandist and

<sup>1</sup> "Pulwama Attack: Jem Could Have [Been] Involved, They Tried To Kill Me Too, Says Musharraf," *The News*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/434646-pulwama-attack>.

<sup>2</sup> "A Profile Of Maulana Masood Azhar," *Hindustan Times*, December 9, 2008,

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/a-profile-of-maulana-masood-azhar/article1-356854.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Suhasini Haider, "Who Is Masood Azhar And Why Did India Release Him In 1999?" *The Hindu*, February 23, 2019,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/who-is-masood-azhar-and-why-did-india-release-him-in-1999/article26351803.ece>.

mentor who has authored several books on extremist ideology and jihad.<sup>4</sup>

As he was overweight, Azhar was rarely involved in direct fighting. Nonetheless, he remained actively involved in directing and planning acts of terrorism in Indian Administered Kashmir. He disseminated jihadi propaganda through his writings and audio statements.<sup>5</sup> While visiting Indian Kashmir on a fake Portuguese passport, he was arrested by Indian security forces in 1994. HuM then hijacked an Air India plane (Flight IC 814) from Nepal to negotiate his release in 1999. After lengthy negotiations, Azhar was freed in exchange for passengers, along with terrorists/militants Mushtaq Zargar and Ahmed Umar Saeed Shaikh<sup>6</sup>. The latter went on to behead the Wall Street Journal correspondent, Daniel Pearl, in 2002.

Immediately after his release, Azhar left HuM and established JeM in late 2000.<sup>7</sup> Initially, JeM drew most of its membership from like-minded Deobandi jihadi groups such as HuM, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and its militant faction, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and HuJI. The insertion of JeM into Kashmir's jihadist landscape increased competition amongst jihadi outfits which were already operating in Kashmir.<sup>8</sup>

### Masood Azhar's Evolution as a Militant Leader

#### Thoughts and Ideology

Azhar's jihadist ideology revolves around *Qital fi Sabeel Allah* (armed fighting for the sake of Allah) i.e. killing of *kufar* (disbelievers) and *munafiqeen* (hypocrites) during jihad.<sup>9</sup> His thoughts are not very different from Al-Qaeda's (AQ) ideologues such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, Saeed Qahtani, Abu Mohammad al-

Maqdisi and Abu Musab al-Suri. In his 850-page book *Fazail-e-Jihad* (Attributes of Jihad), Azhar compares jihad with other forms of worship in Islam. In this book, he focused on a wide range of Quranic verses and Hadith (Prophetic Sayings) on the issue of jihad and declared jihad as a core element of the Islamic faith. According to Azhar, jihad is an act favored by God based on the vigour of the *mujahid* (*martyr*), risks involved, physical and mental fatigue, rewards in this world and the hereafter.

Azhar asserts jihad as the protector of Islam or the 'First Line of Defense'.<sup>10</sup> In his writings and speeches, Azhar is explicitly anti-Semitic and designates Israel as one of the *hadaf* (targets). In this regard, he has stated, "our target is Israel and those Jews who participated in the plan of destroying the Babri Mosque in India."<sup>11</sup>

#### Azhar's Impact on the Pakistani Militant Landscape

Azhar's leadership has significantly impacted the evolution and development of the Pakistani militant landscape. In 1993, he played a role in establishing Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA), a Pakistan-based broader platform of groups focusing on Kashmir jihad, as a broader attempt to gain support for the 'liberation of Kashmir' in Pakistan. Azhar's leadership also allowed JeM to persevere despite various actions by the local and international authorities against it. After the US intervention in Afghanistan post the 9/11 attacks, JeM splintered and became rogue. The organisation then reportedly perpetrated several high-profile terrorist attacks such as the December 2001 Bahawalpur Church attack that killed 18 Christian worshippers<sup>12</sup> and the March 2002 Church attack in Islamabad's Diplomatic Enclave killing 5.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Azhar has written more than 20 books.

<sup>5</sup> Azhar wrote voluminously on jihad. His books *Khutbaat-e-Jihad* (Vol. I & II), *Mujahid ki Azan* (Vol. I & II), *Jihad: Rehmat ya Fisad, Mera Bhi Eik Sawal Hai*, *Islam Aur Jihad ki Tayari*, *Allah Walay and most prolific 850-page long Fazail-e-Jihad-e-Kamil* are the most quoted works in Pakistan jihadi circles.

<sup>6</sup> "Jaish-e-Mohammad", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/andk/terrorist\\_outfits/jaish\\_e\\_mohammad\\_mujahide\\_en\\_e\\_tanzeem.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/andk/terrorist_outfits/jaish_e_mohammad_mujahide_en_e_tanzeem.htm).

<sup>7</sup> "Jaish-e-Mohammad, Mapping Militant Organizations," Stanford University,

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/95>.

<sup>8</sup> Discussions with a senior Islamabad-based journalist on 10 March 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Masood Azhar, *Khutbaat-e-Jihad Vol-II*, (Bahawalpur: Maktaba Hasan: 2000), 19-23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Azhar, Vol-I, 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Azhar Vol-II, 165.

<sup>12</sup> "Christians Massacred In Pakistan," *BBC News*, October 28, 2001,

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1624223.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1624223.stm).

<sup>13</sup> "Five Die In Islamabad Church Attack: Us Diplomat's Wife, Daughter Among Victims; 41 Hurt,"

Later in 2003, JeM' militants were found to be involved in orchestrating attempted assassinations of then President Pervez Musharaff in Rawalpindi.<sup>14</sup>

The splintering in JeM invited a crackdown from security forces in 2002. After several operations by security forces, the splinter groups led by Asmatullah Mauviya and Qari Abdul Jabbar were dismantled. Azhar, on the other hand, remained focused on Kashmir and kept the remaining militant cadres of JeM intact. He finally relaunched JeM in Kashmir with the Pathankot and Uri attacks in 2015 and 2016 respectively. Following its proscription by Pakistan in January 2002 and designation by the US Department of Treasury as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), JeM has been renamed several times. It was first renamed as Jamaat ul Furqan and later surfaced as Khadim ul Islam<sup>15</sup> and was most recently renamed as Al-Murabitoon.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2015, the Indian government has been actively trying to proscribe Azhar under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1267. Although there were at least four moves made by India, the US, United Kingdom (UK), Germany and France at the UNSC, China had always put up a technical hold and blocked the moves. The last move was blocked by China on 13 March 2019 while the UNSC voted 14-1 in favour of proscription.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Links/Nexuses: South Asian Jihadist Groups*

When the Taliban was in control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, Azhar

developed a close bond with AQ. This was so as JeM was formed with blessings from the Deobandi scholar, Mufti Nizamud Din Shamzai, head cleric of Jamia Binoria. As many Taliban leaders studied at his seminary,<sup>18</sup> Shamzai had longstanding ties with AQ and the Taliban. As such, he played a pivotal role in the formation of HuJI, HuM and LeJ. In fact, Shamzai used his influence over all Deobandi-Wahabi outfits and Islamist parties to develop these ties.

Right after JeM's formation in 2000, the Taliban allowed JeM's rank and file to receive training at AQ-run training camps in Afghanistan. With the commencement of the war on terror in Afghanistan, JeM reciprocated by launching an attack on the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001.<sup>19</sup> The terrorist attack resulted in an India-Pakistan military standoff, and provided breathing space to AQ leaders besieged in tribal areas by Pakistani security forces. The 2002 kidnapping and murder of Wall Street Journal correspondent Daniel Pearl was an AQ-JeM joint operation.<sup>20</sup> Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, AQ chief planner of the 9/11 attacks, had also been involved in the incident.<sup>21</sup>

JeM has also developed relations with a number of jihadi groups operating in Pakistan. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), an anti-Shia violent sectarian terrorist group, has overlapping membership with JeM. JeM had also cooperated with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in the Indian Parliament attack of December 2001.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has co-opted a number of JeM militants in the

*Dawn*, March 18, 2002,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/405728>.

<sup>14</sup> Ashfaq Ahmad, "Pulwama Attack: How Did Masood Azhar Form Jaish-E-Mohammad?" *Gulf News*, February 17, 2019,

<https://gulfnnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pulwama-attack-how-did-masood-azhar-form-jaish-e-mohammad-1.62132919>.

<sup>15</sup> "Mapping Militant Organizations: Jaish-e-Mohammad," *Stanford University*, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/95>.

<sup>16</sup> "Masood Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammad Renamed to Al-Murabitoon," *India Today*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/watch-right-now/video/masood-azhars-jaish-e-mohammad-renamed-to-al-murabitoon-1122254-2018-01-04>.

<sup>17</sup> Seema Sirohi, "China's Message Is Clear—It Does Not See Masood Azhar as a 'Terrorist'," *Wire India*, March 14, 2019, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/chinas->

<message-is-clear-it-does-see-masood-azhar-as-a-terrorist>.

<sup>18</sup> "Mufti Shamzai—a profile," *Daily Times*, May 31, 2004,

[http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_31-5-2004\\_pg7\\_24](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_31-5-2004_pg7_24).

<sup>19</sup> "Indian Parliament Attack: Court Upholds Death For Two Kashmiris," *Daily Times*, October 30, 2003, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_30-10-2003\\_pg7\\_9](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_30-10-2003_pg7_9).

<sup>20</sup> "Daniel Pearl's Murder: Omar To Utilise Khalid's Claim," *Daily Times*, March 19, 2007, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=20070319story\\_19-3-2007\\_pg7\\_5](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=20070319story_19-3-2007_pg7_5).

<sup>21</sup> "Khalid Sheikh Slit Pearl's Throat: FBI," *Daily Times*, December 20, 2004, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_20-12-2004\\_pg1\\_4](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_20-12-2004_pg1_4).

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Reid, "Blame Pakistani Spy Service For Attack On Indian Air Force Base," *Daily Beast*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/blame->

tribal areas of Pakistan and splinter groups of JeM have remained involved in scores of terrorist attacks in cooperation with TTP.

### Sources of Funding

JeM has an elaborate structure for collecting charity and donations to bankroll its activities. The charity wing of JeM, Al-Rashid Trust (ART), was established by Mufti Mohammad Rashid and Mufti Abu Lubaba in 1996.<sup>23</sup> It is known to have supported and cooperated with the Afghan Taliban regime during Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Initially, ART focused on providing assistance to the Afghan Taliban by establishing a network of madrasahs in Afghanistan and opening up a chain of bakeries across Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> It was during that period that ART managers developed a close relationship with AQ that continued even after Taliban was ousted from its governmental perch in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> In 2001, ART was listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist Entity by the US Treasury Department under Executive Order 13224 for having ties with terrorist groups.<sup>26</sup> According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, the Al-Rashid Trust was reported as one of Osama bin Laden's financial sources. In the early 2000s, it was linked to the Taliban, JeM and other terrorist outfits active in India's Jammu and Kashmir region.<sup>27</sup> The trust's formation coincided with the Taliban capture of Afghanistan in 1996.<sup>28</sup> Before being banned in Pakistan in 2002, the ART was also involved in publishing JeM's official monthly journal, Zarb-e-Momin, in both English and Urdu.

[pakistan-spy-service-for-attack-on-indian-air-force-base.](#)

<sup>23</sup> "Al-Rashid Trust," *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*,

[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid\\_Trust.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid_Trust.htm).

<sup>24</sup> "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing," Security Council Committee Pursuant To Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) Concerning Al-Qaida And Associated Individuals And Entities, 1267/1989,

[http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE00501\\_E.shtml](http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE00501_E.shtml).

<sup>25</sup> "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing: **QE.A.121.05. Al-Akhtar Trust International,**"

Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, 2011,

[http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE12105\\_E.shtml](http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQE12105_E.shtml).

<sup>26</sup> Executive Order 13224, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, US Department of State, 2001,

<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/122570.htm>.

Azhar has regularly written for the said journal to purvey his ideology.<sup>29</sup>

### JeM's Current Status

In February 2019, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi confirmed that Azhar was in Pakistan and was unwell and unable to leave his home.<sup>30</sup> Currently reported as being hospitalised, Azhar's brother and brother-in-law, Mufti Abdul Rauf Asghar and Qari Talha respectively, are managing the organisation's day-to-day activities. The niche construction of JeM is a testimony as Azhar has managed to develop JeM into a robust and resilient organisation with fresh blood with a multitude of operational activities in Indian Kashmir. Since the Pulwama attack, the government of Pakistan has launched a countrywide crackdown against JeM. As such, scores of its leaders and members have been taken into preventive custody by law enforcement agencies. Both old and new complexes of the JeM headquarters located in Bahawalpur - Madressatul Sabir and Jama-e-Masjid Subhanallah<sup>31</sup> - have been taken over by the government of Punjab. Administrators have also been assigned to manage the madrasahs associated with JeM in Punjab and other parts of Pakistan. JeM is already a proscribed organisation in Pakistan and designated as a terrorist entity in the UN. Moving past the failed UNSC effort to blacklist Azhar on 13 March 2019, the US has filed a draft resolution on 29 March to blacklist Azhar and is paving

<sup>27</sup> "Al-Rashid Trust," *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*,

[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid\\_Trust.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid_Trust.htm); "Al-Rashid Trust," Stanford University: Mapping Militant Organisations, July 19, 2012,

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/117>.

<sup>28</sup> "Al-Rashid Trust," *South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP)*,

[http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid\\_Trust.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/terroristoutfits/Al-Rashid_Trust.htm).

<sup>29</sup> "Jaish-e-Mohammad, Mapping Militant Organizations," *Stanford University*,

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/95>.

<sup>30</sup> "Masood Azhar Is In Pakistan, He's Really Unwell, FM Qureshi Tells CNN," *DAWN*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1466861>.

<sup>31</sup> "Pakistan Takes Control Of Jaish 'Headquarters' In Bahawalpur," *Arab News*, February 22, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.pk/node/1456541/pakistan>.



the way for a UNSC vote to be held.<sup>32</sup> There is no further information regarding a vote on this draft resolution and it could again be vetoed by China.

According to Pakistani security analyst, Azaz Syed, JeM currently has an estimated strength of 40,000 militants.<sup>33</sup> The JeM structure can be categorised as cell-based and operates in Punjab's southern districts where the government has recently taken action against it. JeM is known to have established both high-end and low-end collaborations with a number of related organisations in Pakistan. Its relations with TTP and LeJ may be deemed as high-end whereas its relations with HuM, Al-Badr, LeT, Lashkar-e-Omar and Hizb ul Mujahedeen can be considered as low-end, in view of the limited level of interactions and cooperation during terrorist operations. Azhar's fiery speeches, jihadi literature, and sermons have kept recruitment going and the group afloat. Despite the heavy crackdown and international visibility, JeM is still highly resilient due to its fluid structure.

## Conclusion

On several occasions, JeM's acts of terrorism have led Pakistan and India to the brink of war. As JeM gains momentum in Indian Administered Kashmir, it may result in future conflicts between the two nuclear-armed hostile neighbors. In order to de-escalate the crisis between the two countries and prevent further terrorist attacks by JeM, it is key to deal with the Masood Azhar variable. Azhar's writings, firebrand speeches and some work in the field have allowed him to forge a significant following among South Asian jihadists. Even in his absence, it is unlikely that the ideology he has proliferated for several decades will die. Hence, there is a need to formulate counter-narratives, through the state and moderate religious ideologues, to de-legitimise the violent jihad narrative that has gained traction because of him. In addition, the authorities need to take strict actions against JeM hideouts and sanctuaries

in the country. Policy-makers in both India and Pakistan also need to strengthen bilateral ties and increase cooperation to avoid future hostilities arising from terrorist strikes carried out by JeM.

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<sup>32</sup> "Masood Azhar Ban: How US Move At UNSC May Put China In A Tight Corner," *Times of India*, March 28, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/masood-azhar-ban-how-us-move-at-unsc-may-put-china-in-a-tight-corner/articleshow/68615254.cms>; "US moves draft resolution in UN to blacklist JeM chief Masood

Azhar," *The Hindu*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/us-moves-draft-resolution-in-un-to-blacklist-jem-chief-masood-azhar/article26661588.ece>.

<sup>33</sup> Azaz Syed, "Kal adum jamaaton ke khilaf karwai kaisa amal hai," *DW Urdu*, March 3, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2FV8bbZ>.

# The Pulwama Attack: Significance, Implications and the Way Forward

Mohammed Sinan Siyech

## Synopsis

*The 14 February suicide attack that killed more than 40 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in the Pulwama district of Indian Kashmir has resulted in a number of security and political challenges for the Indian government. The attack almost brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war. Following Indian airstrikes on Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) camps in the Balakot district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, Pakistan responded with its own retaliatory strikes in the Indian Kashmir. This article examines the significance and implications of the Pulwama attack and consequent state responses. It argues that terrorist groups like JeM, through their terrorist attacks, have repeatedly influenced foreign policy and the regional security of South Asia. Given the adversarial ties between India and Pakistan and the lack of a credible crisis management mechanism, terrorist groups may continue to exploit this gap to precipitate crises between the two countries in future as well.*

## Introduction

On 14 February 2019, a suicide bomber rammed an explosive-laden car into a 16-vehicle convoy of the CRPF, killing more than 40 personnel in Kashmir's Pulwama district.<sup>1</sup> In a video released on social media, the Pakistan-based terrorist group, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), claimed responsibility for the attack, which has been deemed one of the deadliest attacks on Indian forces in decades. The attack drew worldwide condemnations and strained the already fraught relations between India and Pakistan and

consequently, almost precipitated a war between them.

Notwithstanding the precedence of terrorist attacks from Pakistan-based groups in Kashmir in the past, such as the Uri and Pathankot attacks in 2016, the Pulwama incident has brought to centre-stage the Kashmir conflict as a core issue between the two South Asian neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Further, it has lowered the threshold of conflict, given India's readiness to strike terror camps inside Pakistan (in case of future attacks) and the latter's willingness to retaliate. Against this backdrop, this article uses secondary reports and journal articles as well as personal interaction with members of the Indian public to assess the nature of the Pulwama attack, as well as its security and regional implications. The first section analyses the objective and goals of the attack. The second section looks at the ability of terrorist groups to influence foreign policy and regional security, and the final section provides some policy implications and recommendations.

## Dissecting the Attack

The Pulwama attack can be analysed using Louise Richardson's framework of the three 'R's. In her incisive analysis on the objective of terrorist groups, Richardson situated and compared various terrorist groups with seemingly different agendas. She observes that in order to defeat a terror group, it is crucial to understand every aspect of their ideology and operations. She noted that terrorist groups, above and beyond their overarching objectives and ideological agendas, are motivated by and driven by three 'R's i.e. Revenge, Renown and Reaction.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sameer Yasir and Maria Abi-Habib. "Kashmir Suffers from the Worst Attack There in 30 Years," *New York Times*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/world/asia/pulwama-attack-kashmir.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The JeM was also responsible for two attacks in 2016 both of which were aimed at Indian Military targets. "Is Nirmala Sitharaman giving clean chit to

Pakistan on Uri, Pathankot attacks: P Chidambaram," *Economic Times*, January 13, 2013, [www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67516132.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/67516132.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>3</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*,

(i) *Revenge*

The 'Revenge' motive was seen on two fronts in the Pulwama attack; first, the suicide bomber conducted the attack as retaliation for his past arrests and humiliation by the Indian military, an opinion voiced by his father.<sup>4</sup> It is natural for terrorist groups to leverage individual factors like revenge to meet their own goals, thereby circumventing an otherwise lengthy process of radicalising individuals. The second motivation was the killing of JeM leader Masood Azhar's son in a gunfight with the Indian security forces in 2018.<sup>5</sup> In their ideological narratives, jihadist groups like JeM offer redemption to individuals by linking their personal grievances and/or factors of marginalisation with a collective sense of alienation and offering redemption through armed-struggle. The reward is framed in physical (revenge) and spiritual redemption (blessings in the hereafter and glorification of Islam).

(ii) *Renown*

Being 'Renown', or the quest for recognition, is another common motive behind terrorist attacks like the Pulwama incident. Generally, militant groups maintain the strategic equilibrium of violence between terrorists and counter-terrorists. They step up the intensity of violence when they feel that their cause and struggle have been neglected by the international community. High-profile attacks like the Pulwama suicide bombing are carried out to regain the attention of the international community. This was further magnified by social media which has a multiplier effect.<sup>6</sup>

(New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), pp. 95-132.

<sup>4</sup> "How Pulwama bomber Adil Ahmad Dar's father made different claims about son joining Jaish", *India Today*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-terror-attack-adil-ahmad-dar-father-different-claims-reuters-india-today-jaish-e-mohammed-1457506-2019-02-16>.

<sup>5</sup> "Pulwama attack: JeM chief's revenge as motive behind IED blasts," *Times of India*, February 15, 2019, <https://m.timesofindia.com/videoshow/68007228.cms>.

<sup>6</sup> Francois Lopez, "If Publicity is the Oxygen of Terrorism – Why Do Terrorists Kill Journalists?" *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(1), 2016, 65-77.

<sup>7</sup> Observations of the author who is part of some of these online groups.

<sup>8</sup> Ashiq Hussain, "Pulwama terror attack suicide bomber's funeral held sans body," *Hindustan Times*,

The news of the attack was shared across Facebook and WhatsApp, with many younger Indians who were previously not part of political debates now thrust into it.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the attack instantly catapulted Adil Dar, the Pulwama suicide bomber, to the stature of a hero, martyr and a symbol of resistance for segments of the local Kashmiris. This could be witnessed by large number of Kashmiris who turned up for his funeral despite government restrictions.<sup>8</sup> This follows the trend of Kashmiri youth turned 'hero-militants' who continue to inspire other youth to turn against Indian forces, likely a continuation of the trend that began with the killing of Burhan Wani, a prominent commander of the Hizbul Mujahedeen (HuM) rebel group, in 2016. This generation of terrorists often posts photos of themselves on social media attracting large numbers of admirers to their cause.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, it also thrust the idea of Kashmiri liberation into the international limelight again; further highlighting India-Pakistan tensions, an issue that terrorist groups felt was being forgotten by much of the global community.<sup>10</sup>

(iii) *Reaction*

This sought-after fame was also supplemented by the 'Reaction' factor when India launched airstrikes into Pakistani territory to hit JeM camps in Balakot district.<sup>11</sup> As Richardson argues, terrorist groups often expect spectacular results from the attacks they launch. While this may not pan out in most cases, the attack on the CRPF led to a strong reaction by the Indian air force leading

February 16, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pulwama-terror-attack-suicide-bomber-s-funeral-held-sans-body/story-A606sa8sH8elAZb9aCPS3H.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "30 years on, 'new age militancy' stokes Kashmir conflict", *Straits Times*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/30-years-on-new-age-militancy-stokes-kashmir-conflict>.

<sup>10</sup> Samreen Mushtaq and Mudasir Ameen, "Why has Kashmir been forgotten?", *Al Jazeera*, March 02, 2019,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/kashmir-forgotten-190301213038382.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Saheli Roy Choudhury, "India and Pakistan say they've launched airstrikes against each other. Here's what you need to know," *CNBC*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.cNBC.com/2019/02/27/india-pakistan-air-strike-claims-what-you-need-to-know.html>.

to the international community viewing the event with consternation and fearing a nuclear war. This fulfilled a major motive of JeM, i.e. bringing the countries to the brink of war.

It is important to note that in 2002, an attack carried out by the group on the Indian Parliament also almost led to a India-Pakistan war.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, JeM is not the only militant group that has influenced Pakistani or Indian foreign policy. In 2014, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda's (AQ) South Asian affiliate, tried to steal a Pakistani naval frigate with the intention of attacking an Indian vessel, which could have sparked another diplomatic crisis.<sup>13</sup> Two years later, the 2016 attacks on two military targets by JeM also led to Indian retaliatory strikes into Pakistani territory. By perpetrating this latest attack, JeM knew that India would be forced to respond.

Domestically, the attack may likely lead to stringent counter-terrorism measures in Kashmir which may alienate the Kashmiri youth. This will further drive recruitment by terrorist groups. For example, shortly after the Pulwama attack, Islamist group Jamaat-e-Islami in Kashmir was banned, hundreds of its leaders were arrested by Indian police, and local elections were postponed.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, reports of Kashmiri youth based in other parts of India being attacked was also cited by many as a worrisome development<sup>15</sup>; since this, combined with the above mentioned measures, may further drive already alienated Kashmiris to violence. Indeed, as Richardson argues, terrorist groups often hope for vicious

repressive measures that will only increase the number of people who would likely join the group in anger.<sup>16</sup>

To put this into context, one should look at the suicide bomber Adil Dar, 22, who dropped out of university.<sup>17</sup> His involvement in the Pulwama attack is symptomatic of a broader trend in recent years of young college and university dropouts, estimated to number in the low 100s, being radicalised by Islamist terror groups to take up arms. Such efforts have found traction among Muslim youth disgruntled by poor socio-economic conditions in Kashmir. Additionally, social media compounded this problem with many Kashmiri youth following charismatic militant figures such as Burhan Wani and Zaki Musa on Facebook.

### The Indian Response: Regional Effects

India swiftly responded with a series of surgical air strikes, which allegedly killed about 250-300 members of JeM in Balakot.<sup>18</sup> The Pakistan government immediately contested the kill count proclaimed by India, although actual figures still remain unknown.<sup>19</sup> The Indian response also prompted retaliatory strikes from Pakistan's air force. A highly tenuous standoff ensued following the capture of an Indian pilot by Pakistani authorities. The standoff only dissipated after the pilot's subsequent release.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, India was ready to launch a number of missiles had

<sup>12</sup> Sajid Farid Shapoo, "How Non-State Actors Could Cause War in South Asia," *The Diplomat*, November 16, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/how-non-state-actors-could-cause-war-in-south-asia/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The JI in Kashmir was once part of mainstream politics until its engineered defeat led some of its cadres to support militancy from the late 1880s. Accordingly, it still remains a force to contend with in Kashmir intellectually and politicians like the former chief minister have criticised the ban on the organisation. For more on this see: "Ban on Jamaat-e-Islami J&K, not the first & probably not the last," *Economic Times*, March 02, 2019, [www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68221215.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppsst](http://www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68221215.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppsst).

<sup>15</sup> Nazir Masood, "Attacks On Kashmiris After Pulwama Have Undone Years Of Hard Work," *NDTV*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/blog/attacks-on-kashmiris->

[after-pulwama-have-undone-years-of-hard-work-1997806](https://www.ndtv.com/blog/attacks-on-kashmiris-after-pulwama-have-undone-years-of-hard-work-1997806).

<sup>16</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), pp. 128-129.

<sup>17</sup> "Pulwama bomber Adil Ahmad Dar became terrorist after he was beaten by troops, say parents," *India Today*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-bomber-adil-ahmad-dar-became-terrorist-after-he-was-beaten-by-troops-say-parents-1457317-2019-02-15>.

<sup>18</sup> Saheli Roy Choudhury, "India and Pakistan say they've launched airstrikes against each other. Here's what you need to know," *CNBC*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.cnb.com/2019/02/27/india-pakistan-air-strike-claims-what-you-need-to-know.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

Pakistan harmed the pilot they captured or if they did not de-escalate tensions.<sup>21</sup>

Indian retaliatory air strikes in Balakot indicates a bold shift in strategy to respond to any potential terrorist attack on Indian soil originating from Pakistan. Previous terrorist attacks would elicit international pressure by the Indian government to economically and politically isolate Pakistan. This would be accompanied by deterrence-by-denial actions through target-hardening to raise the cost of attacks on Indian soil.<sup>22</sup>

However, the kinetic response used in the Pulwama attack has prompted the adoption of a deterrence-by-punishment approach. This refers to one country threatening heavy economic sanctions or military strikes on another as retaliation for offensive action (in this case, supporting terrorist organisations).<sup>23</sup> This is evidenced by India's willingness to undertake conventional air strikes without breaking the nuclear threshold.<sup>24</sup> This shift can be viewed as a new red line in the standoff between the South Asian neighbours.

India's more aggressive stance owes to several factors. Firstly, Indian diplomatic moves have not always succeeded in isolating Pakistan, given the pivotal role Pakistan plays in the Afghan conflict. Pakistan's close alliance with China is also viewed as an attempt to contain India's geo-political ambitions.<sup>25</sup> Other factors include the ineffectiveness of the previous deterrence by denial strategy and other failed measures to stem terrorist financing.<sup>26</sup>

Going forward, it is likely that any government that aspires to retain power centrally will have to position itself as a strong and decisive administration when the country comes under attack from foreign terrorists. Thus, it can be expected that the minimum threshold could be raised to accommodate more aggressive responses by either India or Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

The Indian government in Kashmir will have to revise and strengthen its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), particularly with regards to convoy protocols in transporting security forces over long distances. Alongside this, it should address increasing border incursions. 2018 witnessed more than 1400 Cross Fire Violations (CFVs) – the highest in eight years, accentuating the problematic security situation along the border with Pakistan.<sup>28</sup>

There is also a need for India to examine the potential domestic impact of its responses and calibrate its approach accordingly. While it will understandably ramp up security operations in the aftermath of attacks to root out militants, it is also important for the state to gain the support of the Kashmiri populace. If not, India risks further marginalising the Kashmiris who are vulnerable to being exploited by militant groups.

India has to also continue its diplomatic efforts to pressurise Pakistan to crack down harder on terrorist groups. For instance, involvement of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi governments in lobbying Pakistan to return the captured Indian pilot has demonstrated

<sup>21</sup> Shishir Gupta, Rezaul H Lashkar and Yashwant Sinha, "India, Pakistan came close to firing missiles at each other on February 27," *Hindustan Times*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-pakistan-came-close-to-firing-missiles-at-each-other-on-february-27/story-rVsBjZ5qmxXMprktzDNqcM.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee, "From Denial to Punishment: The Security Dilemma and Changes in India's Military Strategy towards China," *Asian Security*, 2018 Vol. 15, pp.25-43.

<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," *Rand Perspectives*, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Mishra, "Can New Delhi Pursue its Own Brand of Tailored Deterrence?" *South Asian Voices*, February 19, 2019, <https://southasianvoices.org/hot-takes-contemplating-indias-response-to-the-pulwama-attack/>.

<sup>25</sup> Praveen Swami, "Pakistan guards China's Great Wall against jihadists," *First Post*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/pakistan-guards-chinas-great-wall-against-jihadists-6265931.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Akanksha Narain, "Terror Funding: What Can Be Done to Cut the Pipelines That Flame Militancy?" *The Wire*, March 13, 2019,

[https://thewire.in/economy/terrorism-finance-strategic-outlook/amp/?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://thewire.in/economy/terrorism-finance-strategic-outlook/amp/?_twitter_impression=true).

<sup>27</sup> Swati Chaturvedi, "Modi Administration Changes India Handling of Pak Decisively," *NDTV*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/modi-administration-changes-india-handling-of-pak-decisively-1999612>.

<sup>28</sup> Amir Karim Tantray, "2018 Sees Highest Ceasefire Violations by Pak In 8 Years," *Tribune India*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammukashmir/2018-sees-highest-ceasefire-violations-by-pak-in-8-years/636411.html>.

how international actors can positively impact a potentially dangerous standoff.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, organisations like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) – which had previously grey-zoned Pakistan for supporting terrorist groups - and the World Bank (on whom Pakistan is reliant for financial support) can push Pakistan to crack down even more on its terrorist organisations.<sup>30</sup>

However, the Indian government should also take note that simply pushing Pakistan to crack down on the group may not be enough. In the past, groups like JeM have gone through cycles of proscription although Pakistan did nothing to break them down. Indeed, JeM even tried to assassinate Pakistani ex-president Pervez Musharraf for attempting to dismantle its networks in late 2003.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, its then association with AQ ensured that the group was able to procure resources and recruits. Thus, Indian authorities should recognise that Pakistan's perceived tolerance of terrorist groups is significant as they are part of a more widespread network.

Finally, the Indian government should work on establishing more cooperative partnerships with various countries to ensure the sharing of information that will help the authorities to crack down on potential safe houses and networks of financing for terrorist groups. This should include the United States, as well the Gulf nations, from where terrorists often try to source funding.

To conclude, this attack has displayed terrorist groups' resilience and capacity in launching attacks on Indian soil. Three points can be observed from this incident. First, such attacks can definitely be expected in the future. Second, Kashmir will likely go through varying degrees of turmoil in the near future especially during the summer.<sup>32</sup> Third, while foreign policy has not been redrawn substantially, the nature of responses to such terrorist attacks will definitely continue to be similar to the response taken by the Indian state in the wake of the Pulwama attack and this may occasionally threaten the stability of South Asia. Ultimately, India, Pakistan and the international community will have to recognise the long-entrenched presence of terrorist groups and should take multifaceted steps to tear down such networks without getting too caught up in blame games.

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<sup>29</sup> Mohammed Akbar Notezai, "New Trends in Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Ties," *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/new-trends-in-pakistan-saudi-arabia-ties/>.

<sup>30</sup> "FATF condemns Pulwama attack, keeps Pak in 'Grey' list for failing to stop terror financing," *Economic Times*, February 22, 2019, [www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68110929.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68110929.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>31</sup> "Musharraf admits JeM carried out attacks in India during his tenure." *Economic Times*, March 07, 2019, [www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68301288.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68301288.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>32</sup> Militants in Kashmir are more active during the summer season due to favourable weather conditions, with harsh winters limiting their mobility and capability to conduct attacks.

# Can Kashmir Turn into Another Marawi? An Assessment

Damien D Cheong and Neo Loo Seng

## Synopsis<sup>1</sup>

*In the aftermath of the Pulwama terrorist attack last month in Indian-administered Kashmir, some observers have cautioned that the so called Islamic State's (IS) influence and appeal could increase in the disputed Kashmir region. The loss of its bases in Syria and Iraq could prompt IS to re-group elsewhere, with Kashmir viewed as a potential IS bastion akin to Marawi in the Philippines, in light of existing pull factors. Several analysts have challenged this view and suggest that this outcome is implausible given formidable barriers to entry (i.e. existing security measures and nature of dispute). This article takes a different approach in analysing the issue. It starts off with a possible future outcome, and works backwards to see how this outcome can be avoided using a backcasting methodology. As such, five factors have been identified that could turn Kashmir into another Marawi. Additionally, another five factors that could prevent this outcome will be discussed. In so doing, it is hoped that some of the pitfalls from the Marawi siege can be avoided.*

## Introduction

IS has tried to establish branches and/or networks in conflict zones involving Muslims such as Palestine, Kashmir and the Philippines. It was relatively successful in the Philippines where the Abu Sayyaf group pledged allegiance to it, and an IS chapter (the

Maute Group) was established in the city of Marawi.

IS' infiltration of Marawi had disastrous consequences: Filipino security forces spent five long months attempting to oust the Maute Group and its pro-IS associates (the Marawi siege of 2017). During the siege, 1,132 militants, soldiers, police and civilians were killed, 400,000 locals were displaced<sup>2</sup>, and the city's infrastructure was destroyed.

At a strategic level, Marawi was also a game-changer vis-à-vis the threat landscape in Southeast Asia. The key lesson learned was that "IS seemed to have anchored its build-up into Southeast Asia on the exploitation of [local] conflicts, and particularly on the disenchantment of Muslims in Southeast Asia towards their governments. By playing upon the political, economic and religious tensions in the region, IS had made Southeast Asia a potential battlefield for its war".<sup>3</sup>

The loss of its territories in Syria and Iraq has made it imperative for IS to find another territorial base to regroup. A possible location, according to the Global Threat Forecast 2019, is Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> This is because the social, economic and political conditions in Kashmir at present are arguably conducive for IS to exploit.<sup>5</sup>

IS, through its "Rumiyah" magazine, has attempted to reach out to Kashmiri Muslims to fight "under the banner of Khilafah" and "behead Indian and Pakistani" adversaries.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank LTG. Ata Hasnain and Mr. Jasminder Singh for their useful insights.

<sup>2</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 'The Siege of Marawi: Significance and Implications', in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2018*. Available: <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asiapacific-regional-security-assessment-2018/rsa18-06-chapter-4>.

<sup>3</sup> Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy, *Ramadi to Marawi: Proceedings of the Conference*

*on Peace and the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Southeast Asia*, (Philippines, 2018), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," *International Crisis Group*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>.

<sup>6</sup> Bharti Jain, "IS asks Kashmiris to behead Indian troops," *Times of India*, December 12, 2017, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/62030>

Instances of Kashmiri youth waving IS flags and IS' claims of responsibility for attacks in the Valley seem to suggest a growing IS presence.<sup>7</sup>

However, several analysts have argued that IS' attempts to gain a foothold in Kashmir is unlikely for multiple reasons. Firstly, the Kashmiri conflict is framed as a territorial and political dispute between India and Pakistan rather than an ideological dispute driven by religious factors. Moreover, it does not occupy the same level of importance for Muslims as conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

Secondly, Kashmir is a heavily militarised conflict zone that has a strong presence of over 700,000 Indian military personnel. This means that Indians or global members of IS who might use mainland India to travel into Kashmir will find it difficult to escape the elaborate security measures of Indian security forces.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it has a history (since 1987) of active insurgency/militancy spearheaded by locals and driven by domestic/national concerns and issues.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is worth asking if Kashmir can become another Marawi given IS' penchant for exploiting conflict zones involving Muslims.<sup>10</sup> This article takes a different approach in analysing the issue. It starts off with a possible future outcome (IS successfully establishes a stronghold in Kashmir), and works backward (i.e. a backcasting methodology) to identify factors that can prevent this outcome.<sup>11</sup>

[366.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst.](https://www.southasianvoices.org/real-dangers-islamic-state-al-qaeda-kashmir/)

<sup>7</sup> Fahad Shah, "The Real Dangers of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Kashmir," *South Asian Voices*, April 20, 2018,

[https://southasianvoices.org/real-dangers-islamic-state-al-qaeda-kashmir/.](https://southasianvoices.org/real-dangers-islamic-state-al-qaeda-kashmir/)

<sup>8</sup> For example, Mohamed Sinan Siyech, "Why Has the Islamic State Failed to Grow in Kashmir?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Volume 10, Issue 5, May 2018, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CTTA-May-2018.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Comment by S Mahmood April 12, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, "Conflict in Thai south could be exploited by ISIS, warn analysts," *Straits Times*, June 10, 2017. Available: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/conflict-in-thai-south-could-be-exploited-by-isis-warn-analysts>.

## Five Factors that Could Turn Kashmir into Another Marawi

### (i) Entry of Foreign Jihadist Groups into Kashmir

The growing dissent and amplification of an inter-communal divide in Kashmir would only serve the cause of foreign jihadist groups. Although attention has generally been focussed on IS, other transnational groups such as Al-Qaeda should not be ignored. The presence of such groups can result in the shift of "both the ideological terms of the jihad and the source of the conflict's legitimacy...[and]...transform Kashmir into the center of gravity for jihadists in South Asia".<sup>12</sup>

For example, according to a 2019 report by the Soufan Centre, Al-Qaeda wants to exploit the fact that the Kashmir dispute is an "emotive issue" not just for Kashmiris but also for millions of Muslims in Pakistan and India.<sup>13</sup> Like IS, Al-Qaeda has not been able to establish a stronghold in Kashmir. However, their appeal seems to have increased with the formation of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2014. For example, in 2017, Zakir Musa established Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind, a Kashmiri militant group, and pledged allegiance to AQIS.<sup>14</sup> A counter-insurgency officer in Kashmir observed: "Though the Ansar remains a small organisation, it appears to have won some cachet among young Kashmiri Islamists disillusioned with the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Lashkar".<sup>15</sup>

Such developments suggest that Al-Qaeda can spread its ideological influence through

<sup>11</sup> See for example, "Tools: Backcasting from Scenarios." Available:

<https://www.innovatechange.co.nz/news/2015/6/21/backcasting-from-scenarios>.

<sup>12</sup> The Soufan Center, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia*, 2019, p. 33. Available:

<https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "Ansar Ghazwatul Hind' claims slain militant in Anantnag was from Hyderabad," *Deccan Herald*, March 14, 2018,

<https://www.deccanherald.com/content/664568/ansar-ghazwatul-hind-claims-slain.html>.



these groups that have operated primarily in Kashmir. It can also further strengthen their narrative in Kashmir.<sup>16</sup>

The situation in Kashmir is not dissimilar to Marawi, where the Maute Group was able to “indigenise pre-existing jihadist content from the IS core and tweak it for their domestic audience”.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the ability of transnational threat groups to hijack local Kashmiri issues and incorporate them into their global narrative could enhance their appeal to the local populace.

### (ii) Siege Mentality Among Kashmiris

Despite being the majority in Kashmir, the Muslim population believes it is being discriminated against. Cultural, religious, and linguistic differences have created a general perception that Kashmiris are fundamentally different from Indians.<sup>18</sup> Past conflicts, demands for secession and past violence (e.g., the 2016-2017 unrest in Kashmir) have reportedly led to Kashmiris being branded as ‘terrorists’.<sup>19</sup> Attacks on Kashmiris residing in India can also fuel negative perceptions. For example, in the wake of the Pulwama attack, it was reported that Kashmiri students studying in India were harassed while some Kashmiris were also targeted in hate crimes.<sup>20</sup>

Kashmiris may ultimately develop a ‘siege mentality’ and adopt drastic measures to ensure their self-preservation. According to Eidelson and Eidelson’s research on

‘dangerous ideas’, the warped perception that one is constantly living under threat from ‘enemies’ can lead individuals to become more hostile towards other parties in order to ensure their own safety.<sup>21</sup>

Similarities to Marawi can be gleaned from the manner in which the Moro people living in Mindanao often feel discriminated against by the Christian-led central government.<sup>22</sup> For example, media reports have highlighted instances of discrimination faced by Muslim graduates from Mindanao when applying for jobs in major cities such as Manila.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with the lack of economic development and poverty in Mindanao, a culture of insurgency subsequently took root, wherein the locals perceived it necessary to employ violent methods to secure their survival and rights. Hence, the development of a siege mentality in response to the perceived discrimination and grievances faced by Kashmiris may encourage the view that extreme violence is a legitimate response.

### (iii) Sustained Youth Despair

Kashmiri youth are a group that is often targeted as susceptible to radicalisation and violent extremism because they have an acute awareness of their outsider status. Kashmiri youth face discrimination when they seek work outside the state as they face difficulties renting houses, according to Ahai Shukla, a former Indian Army officer.<sup>24</sup> These anti-Muslim themes are further reinforced by a

<sup>16</sup> The Soufan Center, *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)*, op. cit. p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Franco, “Confronting the Threat of an ISIS Province in Mindanao,” op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Jasmininder Singh March 14, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> “Hate in India: Kashmiris attacked by right-wing mobs in aftermath of Pulwama blast,” *Telesur*, February 18, 2019. Available:

<https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Hate-in-India-Kashmiris-Attacked-by-Right-Wing-Mobs-in-Aftermath-of-Pulwama-Blast-20190218-0008.html>

(accessed 250319); “Fear grips Kashmiris living in India after deadly suicide attack,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 17, 2019. Available:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/fear-grips-kashmiris-living-india-deadly-suicide-attack-190216150244206.html>;

“Kashmiri students ‘called stone-pelters’, beaten up in Rajasthan university,” *Hindustan Times*, May 3,

2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmiri-students-called-stone-pelters-beaten-up-in-rajasthan-s/story-Uah6PNKfO0YEclrUq6dl8H.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> R.J. Eidelson & J.I. Eidelson, “Dangerous Ideas: Five Beliefs that Propel Groups Toward Conflict,” *American Psychologist*, 58(3), 2003, pp. 182 –192.

<sup>22</sup> “Philippine Muslims fear Marawi fighting may deepen communal discord,” *Reuters*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-muslims/philippine-muslims-fear-marawi-fighting-may-deepen-communal-discord-idUSKBN19J132>.

<sup>23</sup> “Discrimination a hurdle for job-seeking Mindanao youth,” *Rappler*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/180528-youth-mindanao-unemployment-discrimination>.

<sup>24</sup> A 2017 study on youth radicalisation concludes “From our focus groups, youths who were the most susceptible to radical messaging were those who perceived themselves to be politically and/or economically marginalised, resulting in a pervasive sense of purposelessness and lack of hope for the future. However, it was not poor socio-economic status itself that pointed toward susceptibility, but rather a sense of relative deprivation, coupled with feelings of political and/or social exclusion”. See Julie M. Norman and

lack of economic opportunity and the absence of political engagement, which causes estranged young people to pick up the gun”.<sup>25</sup> In fact the suicide bomber responsible for the Pulwama attack was a 22-year old Kashmiri who, according to his family, was radicalised following a brutal encounter with local police in which he and his friends were beaten.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of economic, social and political development are also major contributory factors. An Indian Defence Review article noted that “a major reason behind youth becoming terrorists is the lack of economic opportunity which leads to unemployment and frustration. Kashmir is experiencing a “youth bulge,” where 71 percent of the population is under the age of 35. An estimated 48 per cent – almost half – of the population aged between 18 to 30 in the Kashmir Valley is currently unemployed. The fragile socio-political landscape, affected by continuing violent conflict and instability, has created a deep sense of uncertainty amongst the local population, particularly the youth. Kashmiri youth have grown up in this adverse environment and have faced tremendous stress. Feelings of desperation, anger and helplessness are largely prevalent among them”.<sup>27</sup>

The similarities to Marawi are apparent. According to a World Bank report, “the main challenge for Mindanao, like the rest of the Philippines, is how to speed up growth that creates more and better jobs and reduces poverty”.<sup>28</sup> The decades of armed conflict

have hampered development in Mindanao and have left the affected communities in dire conditions.<sup>29</sup> The lack of initiatives by the central government in improving standards of living and reducing poverty, has been a push factor for individuals choosing to join terrorist groups. Joseph Franco, a researcher focusing on violent extremism in the Philippines, observed: “Given the limited opportunities in the city and the province as a whole, membership with the Maute Group promised economic mobility and substantial financial gain”.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the continued lack of opportunities in Kashmir may become an indirect flashpoint for conflict, and make violence an attractive option for the youth.

#### (iv) Online Radicalisation

The death of Burhan Wani, a prominent rebel leader, who in July 2016 was killed in battle with Indian security forces, sparked massive protests across the valley. Wani, “is largely credited with reviving and legitimising the image of militancy in the region as a result of his social media posts”.<sup>31</sup> His social media savviness resulted in both Indian and Pakistani news media crowning him as the emerging cult figure in Kashmir responsible for kickstarting a new phase in the separatist movement, which had been largely dormant – at least among the Kashmiri youth – since 2010. He had a dedicated fan following in the Kashmir Valley and in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK).<sup>32</sup> Wani also used social media to recruit other youth into the separatist movement.

Drew Mikhael, “Youth radicalization is on the rise. Here’s what we know about why,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2017,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/25/youth-radicalization-is-on-the-rise-heres-what-we-know-about-why/?utm\\_term=.ef81a8780787](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/25/youth-radicalization-is-on-the-rise-heres-what-we-know-about-why/?utm_term=.ef81a8780787).

<sup>25</sup> Ajai Shukla, “Kashmir is in a perilous state because of India’s pivot to nationalism,” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/03/kashmir-in-perilous-state-because-of-indias-pivot-to-nationalism>.

<sup>26</sup> “Kashmir suicide bomber radicalised after beating by troops, parents say,” *Channel News Asia*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/kashmir-suicide-bomber-radicalised-after-beating-by-troops-parents-say-11247920>.

<sup>27</sup> Farooq Wani, “Finding a way forward for the youth of Kashmir,” *Indian Defence Review*, April 5, 2018, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/finding-a-way-forward-for-the-youth-of-kashmir/>.

<sup>28</sup> The World Bank, “Unlocking Mindanao’s Potential is Key to Reducing Extreme Poverty in the Philippines,” 2018,

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/04/06/unlocking-mindanaos-potential-is-key-to-reducing-extreme-poverty-in-the-philippines>.

<sup>29</sup> J. Gavilan, “FAST FACTS: Poverty in Mindanao,” *Rappler*, May 28, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/171135-fast-facts-poverty-mindanao>.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Franco, “Preventing Other “Marawis” in the Southern Philippines,” *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, Vol. 5: 2 (May 2018), p. 365, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/app5.227>.

<sup>31</sup> “Kashmir: Why India and Pakistan fight over it,” *BBC*, February 27, 2019. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/10537286>.

<sup>32</sup> Prabha Rao, “Online Radicalisation: The Example of Burhan Wani,” *IDS*, July 16, 2016, [https://idsa.in/issuebrief/online-radicalisation-burhan-wani\\_prao\\_160716](https://idsa.in/issuebrief/online-radicalisation-burhan-wani_prao_160716).

Similarly in the Marawi case, the Maute and Hapilon groups “cleverly utilised social media and the IS brand to boost their own profiles”.<sup>33</sup> Also, “in the months leading up to the siege, there had already been speculation that extremist groups were trying to use social media to reach and recruit Muslims across Mindanao and Southeast Asia. Stories collected from schools and universities in Marawi following the siege confirm that this was the case”.<sup>34</sup>

The use of social media by terrorist groups will grow, with the emergence of new technology especially encrypted technology, and thus necessitates a more coordinated response.<sup>35</sup>

*(v) Continued Flow of Illicit Arms and Ammunition into the Valley*

Despite the harsh mountainous terrain in Kashmir, local militants have been able to smuggle resources from across the border with Pakistan. The inflow of illicit weapons is facilitated by secret trans-border tunnels along the border.<sup>36</sup> For example, the Indian authorities recently discovered a cache of arms dumped in a forest area in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>37</sup> The continued influx of illicit weapons and other resources would enable terrorist groups to carry out attacks.

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, “Southeast Asia from Scott Circle: Marawi Battle Highlights the Perils of a Stalled Peace Process in the Philippines,” *CSIS*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/southeast-asia-scott-circle-marawi-battle-highlights-perils-stalled-peace-process>.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan Shea, “Philippines: The Black Flag Flies on Facebook,” *The Asia Foundation*, February 13, 2019, <https://asiafoundation.org/2019/02/13/philippines-the-black-flag-flies-on-facebook/>.

<sup>35</sup> It should be acknowledged that the law enforcement is already working with tech companies to regulate and remove extremist content online, however, challenges still remain. For example, according to Rita Katz, executive director of SITE Intelligence Group, “A lot of video still manages to slip through the cracks and onto social media for several reasons including: the massive volume of uploaded content; terrorists’ ability to disguise the nature of their posts; and more recent efforts to disseminate video footage using links to largely unmonitored tools such as Google Drive. YouTube—the world’s second-most visited Web site, behind Google—receives 300 hours of uploaded video

In the case of Marawi, the proliferation of illicit firearms and ammunition in the city enabled the Maute group to not only carry out attacks but to sustain the fight against Filipino security forces during the Marawi siege.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the continued smuggling of illicit arms into Kashmir could embolden and increase the formidability of local terrorist groups.

**Five Factors that Can Prevent This Outcome**

*(i) Prevent the Nationalist/Localised Complexion of the Conflict from Being Hijacked by IS and Other Jihadists*

Kabir Taneja, an analyst from India’s Observer Research Foundation (ORF), suggests that at present, IS would find it extremely difficult to gain a foothold in Kashmir or form coalitions with local militant groups as the conflict is primarily a territorial one involving two states. As such, “the quagmire of India and Pakistan’s overtures in Kashmir may actually help in keeping IS out”.<sup>39</sup>

Taneja’s study suggests that some within IS acknowledge that any attempt to establish a foothold in Kashmir would pit the group against the “Indian Kuffar Army” on one side, and the “Pakistani...groups Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) etc... [on the other side]”.

every minute. And terrorist groups often upload YouTube videos as “unlisted,” meaning the videos cannot be searched and can be accessed only if a potential viewer is given the link”. See Larry Greenemeier, “Social Media’s Stepped-Up Crackdown on Terrorists Still Falls Short,” *Scientific American*, July 24, 2018,

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/social-medias-stepped-up-crackdown-on-terrorists-still-falls-short/>.

<sup>36</sup> Ravi Krishnan Khajuria, “Security along India’s porous border with Pakistan needs a revamp,” *Hindustan Times*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/security-along-india-s-porous-border-with-pakistan-needs-a-revamp/story-xq871nqnAL8RCw5l6hWzjK.html>.

<sup>37</sup> “Indian Army unearths massive arms dump in Poonch district of Jammu & Kashmir,” *The Economic Times*, July 6, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-army-unearths-massive-arms-dump-in-poonch-district-of-jammu-kashmir/articleshow/64879134.cms>.

<sup>38</sup> Franco, ‘Confronting the Threat of an ISIS Province in Mindanao’, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

More importantly, the Pakistani groups are rooted in nationalism and patriotism and would not accept a merger with IS as the latter strays from these elements as it views the conflict through a jihadi lens.<sup>40</sup>

The complexion of the conflict at present remains essentially nationalist and localised.<sup>41</sup> If IS or other jihadists are successful in reframing the conflict as a jihadist cause, it could fuel extremism, create 'buy-in' for their ideology, aid recruitment efforts, and essentially enable them to justify their presence in the region. This possible eventuality is not in the interests of the states, people and/or militant groups involved in the conflict.<sup>42</sup>

### (ii) Active Social Media Engagement to Manage Radicalisation and Attempts to Reframe the Conflict

Countering attempts by IS or other jihadists to reframe the conflict will increasingly be fought in cyberspace, particularly on social media. Social media's utility in generating narratives to glamourise jihadists and stoke existing tensions is well-documented.<sup>43</sup> For example a 2017 *India Today* report cites an intelligence assessment that as IS continues to steadily attract the Kashmiri youth, existing terror groups are also following in the footsteps of IS to attract and recruit more youth – as these youth consider themselves to be more dedicated when they appear to be fighting for Islam as opposed to the Kashmir state.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Kabir Taneja, *The ISIS Phenomenon: South Asia and Beyond*, (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2018), p. 57.

<sup>41</sup> As Prof. Navnita Chadha Beheraon writes: "The Kashmir conflict has acquired a multifaceted character. On the one hand, it involves national and territorial contestations between India and Pakistan and on the other, various political demands by religious, linguistic, regional and ethnic groups in both parts of the divided Kashmir that range from seeking affirmative discrimination, a separate political status within the state, to outright secession". See Navnita Chadha Beheraon, "The Kashmir Conflict: Multiple Fault Lines," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 3(1), 2016, pp. 41 – 63. See also, Mehmood ur Rashid, "Black Flags in Kashmir – Mere Shadows or the Coming of Islamic State?" *The Wire*, January 7, 2019, <https://thewire.in/politics/kashmir-isis-jamia-masjid-azadi-politics>.

<sup>42</sup> Fahad Shah, "The Real Dangers of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Kashmir," op. cit.

Lt Gen (Retd) Syed Ata Hasnain, former commander of the XV Corps of the Indian Army, believes that active engagement in the social media space is necessary to manage radicalisation and jihadist overtures. He observes that with social media, "it has become so much easier to galvanise support in Kashmir. It has become so easy to send out messages to sympathisers, collect people together and collect what you would call flash mobs. Half your ideological war and partially your non-military side of it is fought through social media. You have to fight them with (lots of) content. If they talk about Islam, we should have a pool of researchers on Islam who are able to counter them tooth-and-nail".<sup>45</sup>

### (iii) Creating Positive 'Facts on the Ground' to Win Hearts and Minds

The war of words (online) must also be supported by positive 'facts on the ground' (offline) to be effective as this will increase credibility and undermine jihadi narratives. The major challenge is when hard measures to combat terrorism result in civilian fatalities and casualties. Such outcomes invariably validate jihadi narratives and increase their appeal. For example, a Japan Times report argues that the clashes between residents and security forces invariably fuel anger and youth radicalisation. As such, it is expected that after the recent March 2019 crackdown, more youth may take up arms.<sup>46</sup> Without continuing engagement with the population and demonstrating positive and tangible

<sup>43</sup> See for example, Parjanya Bhatt, "Cyber Jihad: The biggest challenge in Kashmir," *ORF: India Matters*, June 30, 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/42391-cyber-jihad-biggest-challenge-kashmir/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ajit Kumar Jha, "Is Pakistan indirectly paving way for ISIS in Kashmir by using its videos to fuel militancy?" *India Today*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/pakistan-kashmir-terrorists-isis-islamic-state-jihad-hizbul-mujahideen-983196-2017-06-17>.

<sup>45</sup> Lt Gen (Retd) Ata Hasnain, "Difficult to return to pre-2014 days in Kashmir now," *National Herald*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/interview/difficult-to-return-to-pre-2014-days-in-kashmir-as-situation-is-so-bad>.

<sup>46</sup> "The Making of Militants in India's 'paradise on Earth' of Kashmir," *Japan Times*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/25/asia-pacific/making-militants-indias-paradise-earth-kashmir/#.XKFzPzqza70>.

results, animosity, resentment and anger will naturally build and fuel radicalisation.

The Indian Army has conducted successful outreach programmes in Indian-administered Kashmir that included economic and social packages designed to restore dignity and develop useful skills of the population.<sup>47</sup> According to Lt Gen (Retd) Hasnain, it is important to not only continue but to enhance such outreach programmes.<sup>48</sup> He adds that an all-of-government approach is needed as part of an enhanced engagement strategy since “people are the centre of gravity and without their being won over the conflict cannot end”.<sup>49</sup>

#### (iv) Improving Economic Conditions

An effective way to create positive facts on the ground is via the economy. The Kashmiri economy has been negatively impacted by the ongoing conflict. The 2016 Economic Survey observed that the conflict and the resulting unrest and militancy have negatively affected the state’s development. The conflict has stalled private investment and created major obstacles for infrastructure that are meant to deliver public services. In short, the

<sup>47</sup> For instance, “the local police...set up at least 10 youth and sports clubs across the region. Indian authorities [were] offering young men employment counselling, and soldiers [were] studying the Kashmiri language to better understand local culture.” See Aijaz Hussain, “India tries sports, job training to pacify Kashmir,” *Arab News*, May 6, 2011, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/376638>.

<sup>48</sup> Syed Ata Hasnain, “In 2019, A New Outreach,” *The Indian Express*, January 7, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/in-2019-a-new-outreach-india-pakistan-ties-india-global-ties-indian-army-5525915/>.

<sup>49</sup> Email response from Syed Ata Hasnain to authors March 21, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Government of Jammu & Kashmir, *Economic Survey 2016*, <http://ecostatjk.nic.in/ecosurvey/Economic%20Survey%202016%20PDF.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Wajahat Habibullah, “The Kashmir Problem and its Resolution,” April 27, 2004, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) website. Available: <https://www.usip.org/events/kashmir-problem-and-its-resolution>. For the full report see [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr1\\_21.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr1_21.pdf). An attempt was made in 2010 by Students in the Master of International Public Affairs (MIPA) program in the Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin Madison to analyse how economic development could be used to reduce secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir. They concluded that “Indian development

conflict has affected the livelihood of the Kashmiris across various industries including tourism, horticulture, handicrafts and industries.<sup>50</sup>

As such, some observers have argued that significantly improving the economic conditions in Kashmir will help negate unrest. For example, in 2004, Wajahat Habibulla, a retired Indian diplomat “advocated [for] a more open private sector to provide Kashmiris with a greater stake in their future. Further, a vibrant economy overall, he noted, would remedy the crisis of high unemployment that currently afflicts Kashmir—a situation that clearly propels young Kashmiris toward insurgent movements, much as it has in many other conflict zones around the globe”.<sup>51</sup>

It would be naïve to think or suggest that the conflict can be resolved overnight. Hence, the most viable approach at this juncture is for incremental but vital steps to bring about a period of calm and an eventual cessation of hostilities. Confidence-building measures (CBM), such as barter trade between India and Pakistan via Kashmir, could be a useful starting point in this endeavour.<sup>52</sup> Traders on both sides seem to recognise the importance

programs for agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure in Jammu and Kashmir stand to increase absolute levels of development, increase economic decentralization, increase net capital inflows, and increase trade dependence with India provided that popular perception of these changes mirrors reality, we predict that current development programs will decrease secessionist sentiment”. See Zachary Jones et. al., “Economic Development as a Tool to Reduce Secessionism in Jammu and Kashmir,” *Workshop in International Public Affairs*, Spring 2010, <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/43875/southasia.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>52</sup> It should be acknowledged here that barter trade has its own set of challenges. As a report by Conciliation Resources, an international NGO, notes: “Cross-border trade has also helped Kashmiri communities to start to rebuild severed relationships across the LoC – although so far this outcome has been limited by restrictions on movement of people across the border, and it is also somewhat coincidental, since peacebuilding is not a primary objective of the initiative. Nevertheless, cross-border trade in Kashmir may ultimately have potential to provide an entry point to help build confidence in the India-Pakistan peace process, and to strengthen Kashmiri capacity to contribute to peacebuilding in Kashmir”.

See Ayesha Saeed, “Trading for peace in Kashmir”, *Conciliation Resources’ Accord*, Issue 22, 2011, [https://www.cr.org/downloads/Accord%2022\\_21Trad](https://www.cr.org/downloads/Accord%2022_21Trad)

of resuming trade as quickly as possible following confrontations.<sup>53</sup>

Investing resources to enhance cross-border trade could be a useful second step to sustain a stable environment, with the ultimate aim of facilitating long-term economic development to temper extremist tendencies. As Hilal Ahmad Turkey, Salamabad Cross LoC Trade Union President said: “If governments from both sides provide facilities, trade will see a fourfold rise and this area can become a business hub. It will bring down tension[s]”.<sup>54</sup>

#### (v) Improving Intelligence-sharing

One of the key takeaways from the Marawi siege was the need for enhanced intelligence sharing and cooperation. Various domestic intelligence and security agencies in the region have already established platforms for cooperation and information exchange which have been effective over time. While such agencies continue to lead the domestic counter-terrorism agenda in their respective countries, the defence community in the region has also enhanced their network through the Our Eyes Initiative.<sup>55</sup>

India<sup>56</sup> has intelligence-sharing agreements with Saudi Arabia, China, and the US. Pakistan’s intelligence-sharing agreement with the US has been suspended. In an ideal

[ing%20for%20peace%20in%20Kashmir\\_2011\\_ENG.pdf](#).

<sup>53</sup> For example, the 2013 and 2019 skirmishes. See “India, Pakistan resume barter trade amid tension in contested Kashmir,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2019, <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-kashmir-trade/india-pakistan-resume-barter-trade-amid-tension-in-contested-kashmir-idINKCN1QM1BH>. ‘India and Pakistan resume cross-border trade in Kashmir’, *BBC*, January 29, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-21241471>.

<sup>54</sup> “Border business: Where Kashmir unites India, Pakistan via trade,” *Hindustan Times*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/border-business-where-kashmir-unites-india-pakistan-via-trade/story-0QtjXon1LAd4MupcEk3N7N.html>.

<sup>55</sup> “Southeast Asian nations launch intelligence pact to counter terrorism threats,” *Channel News Asia*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/southeast-asian-nations-launch-intelligence-pact-to-counter-9896178>; “ASEAN countries had ‘underestimated’ threat of 2017 Marawi siege: Dr Ng,” *TODAY*, October 20, 2018, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/asean-countries-had-underestimated-threat-2017-marawi->

situation, both India and Pakistan should be partners of any intelligence-sharing pact, but inherent constraints<sup>57</sup> prevent this. If one expands the scope of focus beyond IS to include Al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist groups, then it is in the interest of India and Pakistan, not to mention China and Afghanistan, to share intelligence with each other to minimise the risks of such groups gaining footholds in their respective territories.

## Conclusion

Following the collapse of its caliphate in the Iraq-Syria theatre, the push for IS to find another territorial base to regroup is apparent. Kashmir and Marawi are both territories with conditions seemingly conducive for infiltration and exploitation, although IS has succeeded to some extent only in making inroads in the latter territory. Threat groups have thus far failed to effectively exploit the Kashmir conflict, given that it is framed as a territorial and political dispute as opposed to an Islamist conflict. There is growing evidence, however, of transnational groups forging links with local militia groups, while sustained local violence and the prevailing socio-economic and political instability gripping Kashmir, could be successfully exploited going forward. One clear takeaway which we can glean from the above-mentioned discussion is that if we want to prevent Kashmir from becoming another

[siege-dr-ng](#); “Jakarta minister cites Marawi siege to stress sharing of intelligence,” *Straits Times*, 5 October, 2018,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/jakarta-minister-cites-marawi-siege-to-stress-sharing-of-intelligence>.

<sup>56</sup> One of the pertinent issues raised following the Pulwama attack is how to improve domestic intelligence and security procedures. For a summary of the security/intelligence concerns related to the Pulwama attack, see Khalid Shah, “Post Pulwama attack: 10 questions for the government,” *ORF*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/post-pulwama-attack-10-questions-for-the-government-48250/>.

<sup>57</sup> A major constraint is Pakistan’s support and use of militant groups as part of its strategy – a claim which it denies. See for example, US Director of national Intelligence Dan Coats’s assessment regarding Pakistan “Militant groups supported by Pakistan will continue to take advantage of their safe haven in Pakistan to plan and conduct attacks in neighboring countries and possibly beyond...”. See “Trump’s Own Intelligence Chief Contradicted Him Several Times,” *TIME*, January 29, 2019, <http://time.com/5515473/trump-coats-senate/>.

Marawi, we cannot, as Robert Grenier, a former CIA station chief in Pakistan, put it, focus “on the illegitimate means of redress - the terrorism - without considering either the grievances which produce it or promoting more legitimate means of redressing those grievances”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> M. Fisher, “Understanding the Kashmir Peace Talks,” *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/07/understanding-the-kashmir-peace-talks/344865/>.

[0/07/understanding-the-kashmir-peace-talks/344865/](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/07/understanding-the-kashmir-peace-talks/344865/).

# Implications of Possible United States Withdrawal from Afghanistan on the South Asian Militant Landscape

Abdul Basit and Sara Mahmood

## Synopsis

*South Asia has one of the highest concentrations of jihadist groups in the world, including some of the most wanted groups by the United States (US). Ahead of the expected US withdrawal from Afghanistan, incidents such as the Pulwama suicide attack by Pakistan-based Kashmir-focused militant group, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), on India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Indian-administered Kashmir warrant closer scrutiny on the evolution of the South Asian militant landscape. This study argues that US withdrawal from Afghanistan may contribute to a possible uptick of violence in Kashmir, precipitating sporadic India-Pakistan tensions, cross-border skirmishes and the return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) to the region. Further, religiously-inspired radicalisation and violent-extremism could increase, necessitating joint frameworks for actions relating to the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) at the regional level.*

## Introduction

The Pulwama suicide attack by JeM not only killed more than 40 CRPF personnel in Kashmir, it also brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.<sup>1</sup> The high-profile attack has once again revived the concerns of a more lethal and dangerous militant landscape in South Asia after the expected US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Following its intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the US forged a counter-terrorism alliance with Pakistan to track and

hunt Al-Qaeda (AQ) remnants in the region around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In order to ensure smooth and uninterrupted Pakistani cooperation, among other things, the US had facilitated a border ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan in 2003.<sup>2</sup> This agreement required Pakistan to curb cross-border terrorism in Kashmir and take action against India-focused militant groups on its soil in return for normalisation of relations with India.

Now that the US is negotiating with the Afghan Taliban to politically terminate the war and withdraw from Afghanistan, incidents like the Pulwama attack underscore future security challenges that could emanate from a plethora of local, regional and global terrorist groups operating in and out of the region. Several factors such as porous borders, ungoverned spaces, easy availability of weapons, growing religious polarisation, unemployment and inter-state rivalries involving proxy-wars and geo-political competition provide terrorist groups with a conducive environment to expand and increase their activities.

This article examines the significance of the Pulwama attack against the backdrop of possible US exit from Afghanistan and the implications for the South Asian militant landscape. It argues that as the South Asian militant landscape becomes more lethal and complex in a post-US Afghanistan, it could precipitate a limited war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. This could result in a rise of violent-extremism, creating new

<sup>1</sup> Fayaz Bukhari, "Kashmir Car Bomb Kills 44; India Demands Pakistan Act Against Militants," *Reuters*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir/kashmir-car-bomb-kills-44-india-demands-pakistan-act-against-militants-idUSKCN1Q31PL>.

<sup>2</sup> Hari Kumar, "India and Pakistan Forces Agree to Cease-Fire in Kashmir," *New York Times*, November 26, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/26/world/indian-and-pakistani-forces-agree-to-cease-fire-in-kashmir.html>.



recruitment and funding opportunities for militant groups. Moreover, the absence of joint counter-terrorism and violent-extremism frameworks in South Asia will allow these groups to grow and further entrench themselves in different conflict spots in the region.

### Why is the Pulwama Attack Significant?

As a signature JeM attack, the Pulwama attack is significant for four reasons. First, the timing is instructive. Occurring before US withdrawal from Afghanistan, it indicates a revival and return of groups like JeM to Kashmir, its old theatre of conflict. After lying low for several years, JeM returned to Indian Kashmir with the Pathankot airbase attack in 2016. Since then, it has steadily increased its presence and activities in Kashmir. After witnessing a dip in attacks between 2008 and 2013, violence and militant recruitment have spiked in Kashmir since 2015. The number of militants killed in Kashmir rose from 130 in 2016 to 200 in 2017 and 240 in 2018. In the first two months of 2019, 31 militants have been killed in Kashmir.<sup>3</sup>

Second, it was a high-profile terrorist attack which had resulted in mass casualties. By ramming an explosive-laden vehicle in the CRPF vehicle-convoy in a highly militarised zone, JeM has demonstrated its ability to find gaps in security arrangements and displayed high-level expertise in assembling a Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED).<sup>4</sup> As the attack drew large-scale media coverage, JeM successfully received much publicity from the media.

Third, the Pulwama attack is similar to the 2001 Indian Parliament attack<sup>5</sup>, which likewise brought India and Pakistan to the

brink of war. This is extremely critical as this is the second time that JeM has successfully exploited the inter-state rivalry between India and Pakistan, escalating tensions between the two.

Finally, Indian retaliation was different in comparison to the past. For the first time in five decades, Indian Air Force (IAF) jets came deep inside mainland Pakistan to target a JeM training camp. Located in the Balakot district in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, Pakistan's redline was challenged.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, India has indicated its readiness to use retaliatory and pre-emptive strikes against terrorist hideouts in mainland Pakistan in the future. The Pakistani airstrikes in Kashmir in retaliation to the IAF strikes showed that within two days of the Pulwama attack, both countries were quickly moving up the escalatory ladder.<sup>7</sup> This will have far-reaching consequences for strategic stability and the balance of power in South Asia.

### The Complex and Lethal South Asian Militant Landscape

According to Aminesh Roul, over 100 Islamist terrorist groups of various sizes, strengths, political agendas and ideological leanings operate in South Asia.<sup>8</sup> A majority of these groups are active with the exception of a few which have been neutralised or have become dormant. Some of the world's most notorious and dangerous jihadist groups such as AQ, Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), the Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and JeM, among others, operate in and out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Since the Afghan Jihad in the 1980s, these groups have co-existed, cooperated and competed with each other.<sup>9</sup> Given their ideological agendas, these groups

<sup>3</sup> Amjed Javed, "Kashmir: Aftermath of Pulwama Attack," *Modern Diplomacy*, February 16, 2019, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2019/02/16/kashmir-aftermath-of-pulwama-attack/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, "Jaish-e-Mohammad: Under the Hood?" *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/jaish-e-mohammed-under-the-hood/>.

<sup>5</sup> In December 2001, members of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed targeted the Parliament House in Delhi and killed 14 people. This attack led to escalations of tensions and a stand-off between India and Pakistan between 2001 to 2002.

<sup>6</sup> "Indian Air Force Jets Crossed Loc, Claims Pakistan," *Times of India*, February 26, 2019, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68161>

[568.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://www.bbc.com/news/india-50467).

<sup>7</sup> Mansoor Ahmed and Maimuna Ashraf, "India and Pakistan Crisis Means New Arms Race," *National Interest*, April 2, 2019,

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/india-and-pakistans-crisis-means-new-arms-race-50467>.

<sup>8</sup> Animesh Roul, "South Asia: Hotbed of Islamist Terrorism," *National Bureau of Asian Research*, August 1, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Galperin Donnelly, "Foreign Fighters in History," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, [http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history\\_foreign\\_fighter\\_project.pdf](http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history_foreign_fighter_project.pdf).

can be categorised into three broad categories: local, regional and global. However, in a fluid operational environment with changing conflict ecologies, these lines get blurred. Hence, these groups have witnessed splintering, mergers, re-splitting and re-mergers amidst an evolving geopolitical environment that points to a complex and lethal threat landscape. These groups have conducted attacks against governments, security forces and civilians. A majority of the attacks that targeted civilians have focused on minority religious groups, such as Christians, and sectarian minorities, such as Shia Muslims.

## Implications

### *Increased Insecurity and Militancy*

The close linkages and shifting allegiances between different groups across Afghanistan, Pakistan and India underscore the volatility of the terrorist landscape. Broadly, a possible US exit from Afghanistan will create a new victory narrative for the Taliban. Since the appointment of Ashraf Ghani as President in 2014, 45,000 security personnel have been killed in attacks across the country.<sup>10</sup> Following the impending departure of US forces from Afghanistan, related violence between warring tribes, Taliban factions and other militant groups is likely to continue. Moreover, the victory narrative will embolden South Asian jihadist groups whereby they could begin to expect similar gains in their specific areas or countries of operations. In addition, militant groups specifically linked to the Afghan Taliban will focus on expanding their operations, opening up fresh recruitment and funding opportunities.

If this were to happen, it will be a *déjà vu* of the late 1980s when Afghan Mujahedeen groups defeated the former Soviet Union. Following the US intervention in Afghanistan

in 2001, several jihadist groups abandoned their primary agendas and sent their fighters to Afghanistan to help the Afghan Taliban fight the US. Some factions of these groups also joined hands with various AQ-linked groups, such as Jandullah, Punjabi Taliban and the Indian Mujahedeen (IM).<sup>11</sup> In a post-US Afghanistan, these groups will use Afghanistan as a launch pad to regroup and relaunch themselves in different local conflicts in South Asia with a new zeal. They will exploit existing communal and sectarian fault-lines, inter and intra-state rivalries for recruitment and amplify their propaganda, facilitated by social media tools and platforms. Consequently, the militant landscape in parts of South Asia will become more complex with further cross-border linkages and the formation of new allegiances.

In December 2018, former Director General of Police for Jammu and Kashmir, Rajendra Kumar, stated that US withdrawal from Afghanistan will have significant implications in Kashmir, leading local terrorist and insurgent groups to feel emboldened.<sup>12</sup> In terms of their narratives, terrorist actors in Kashmir could perceive US withdrawal as a victory over the *kuffar* (infidel) that can be replicated locally against India. In this case, the Pulwama attack is critical as it not only drew substantial attention from both India and Pakistan, but also possibly from other terrorist groups in the region. The capability of JeM to perpetrate a large-scale attack targeting the Indian security forces makes the group an attractive ally for other militant groups. Hence, the possibility of Kashmiri insurgent groups forging alliances with the Taliban cannot be discounted. Other sources have also claimed that after the US withdrawal, jihadists could most likely be redirected to wage jihad in Kashmir, framing it as the most important conflict zone in the region where Muslims are actively facing violence from the state.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hekmat Khalil Karzai, "The Afghan Government Can't Make Peace With the Taliban on Its Own," *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/02/the-afghan-government-cant-make-peace-with-the-taliban-on-its-own/>.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren McNally and Marvin Weinbaum, "A Resilient Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Middle East Institute* (Policy Focused Series), January 2016, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/F18\\_Weinbaum\\_AQinAFPAK\\_web\\_1.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/F18_Weinbaum_AQinAFPAK_web_1.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> "US Withdrawal From Afghan Will Have Implications In Kashmir," *Financial Express (India)*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/us-withdrawal-from-afghan-will-have-implications-in-kashmir-says-former-jk-dgp-k-rajendra-kumar/1424394/>.

<sup>13</sup> Vinay Kaura, "Pulwama Attack Ominous Sign For Valley As US Withdrawal From Afghanistan May Mean Advantage Pakistan," *First Post*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/pulwama-attack-ominous-sign-for-valley-as-us-withdrawal->

Overall, the complex and lethal threat landscape in South Asia is likely to witness more activity and violence after a US withdrawal with the possibility of the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan. This will have an impact in terms of violence and the allegiances of terrorist groups on the ground, specifically in India and Pakistan. In this regard, Islamic State (IS) has been looking to increase its visibility in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. After losing most of its territory in Iraq and Syria, IS is searching for opportunities to expand elsewhere. In fact, IS' local brand for South Asia – Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) - has established a physical stronghold in key conflict-ridden parts of Afghanistan. The latter provides the ideal sanctuary given: (i) the impending US withdrawal; (ii) presence of large ungoverned spaces; and (iii) existing ISK networks and presence. Despite being targeted by the Taliban and the US-backed Afghan National Army (ANA), ISK has maintained an active presence since its formation in January 2015. The group has conducted deadly large-scale terrorist attacks in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. While clashes between ISK and the Taliban will continue in Afghanistan, the group will be forced to look outside the country to expand its operations and linkages. It already has an active presence in Pakistan through alliances with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LeJ-A) and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) in particular.<sup>14</sup>

In light of the Pulwama attack, ISK could consider expanding into Kashmir and forging alliances with militants in the valley to gain visibility. IS has spoken about Kashmir and the persecution of Muslims in the valley in the past. In 2016, IS declared its intentions to expand into Kashmir to liberate the Muslims from the control of the Indian state. In 2017, the group's Telegram channel, Al-Qaraar, started a campaign that focused on the liberation of Kashmir, by calling for local jihadists to conduct attacks against Indian and

[from-afghanistan-may-mean-advantage-pakistan-6093301.html](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/is-is-really-a-threat-in-kashmir-44547/).

<sup>14</sup> Amira Jadoon, "Allied and Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Combating Terrorism Centre Report*, December 3, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/allied-lethal-islamic-state-khorasans-network-organizational-capacity-afghanistan-pakistan/>.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Elms, "Is IS Really A Threat In Kashmir?" *Observer Research Foundation*, September 27,

Pakistani forces.<sup>15</sup> More recently, Kashmir has also seen a rise in online propaganda and graffiti, which touts Kashmir as the 'University of Jihad'.<sup>16</sup> Insurgent groups in Kashmir, such as Hizbul Mujahideen, are inward-looking and may avoid de-legitimising their cause by publicly linking themselves to ISK. However, defections, particularly from the youth and the ranks of Kashmiri jihad-oriented groups, are a possibility.

Overall, the absence of US presence on the ground, coupled with diminished capabilities of the ANA, could permit Taliban, AQ, ISK and other regional groups and affiliates to reorganise and regroup, leading to an increase in violence. In addition, the cross-border threat of terrorism between Pakistan and Afghanistan and India and Pakistan is likely to continue unabated in the light of the Pulwama attack and US withdrawal. This is especially important, considering that cross-border movements of terrorists and militants have promoted the creation of alliances, bonds and transfer of weapons between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

#### *Proxy Battles in Geopolitical Sphere*

Reports have revealed that the Taliban currently control more territory now than they did during the start of the war in 2001.<sup>17</sup> A report to the US Congress by Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in 2018 confirmed that Taliban control has risen from 7% to 12.5% across districts in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Considering that US withdrawal is likely to advantage the Taliban, any increase in Taliban influence and control would not just negatively impact local security and stability in Afghanistan, but have far-reaching consequences in terms of militancy and bilateral ties for India and Pakistan. Historically, India and Pakistan have fought towards opposing ends, placing their rivalry with each other as a key determinant of their respective policies concerning Afghanistan.

2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/is-is-really-a-threat-in-kashmir-44547/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Why is Afghanistan More Dangerous than Ever," *BBC*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45507560>.

<sup>18</sup> Kara Fox, "Taliban Control of Afghanistan on the Rise," *CNN*, November 8, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/01/middleeast/afghan-report-taliban-gains-control-intl/index.html>.

To prevent being encircled by India at one end and an India-backed government at the other, Pakistan has implemented its conception of 'strategic depth'<sup>19</sup>- which sought to support and provide safe-haven to Afghan Taliban members and leadership. In comparison, India's primary goal in Afghanistan was to counteract Pakistan's influence. In the 1990s, this meant supporting the Northern Alliance Group, which was anti-Taliban, and has now extended to supporting and providing developmental assistance to the US-backed government in the country.<sup>20</sup>

Since August 2017, the US' fight-to-win Afghan policy had included India, and focused on targeting and eliminating terrorist sanctuaries. In this approach, the US had targeted Pakistan, pointing out that the country was not doing enough to eliminate terrorist strongholds in its territory and asking it to denounce its 'Good Taliban, Bad Taliban' approach. The possibility of the Afghan Taliban gaining power at the expense of the US-backed Afghan government, with the latter decreasing in influence and legitimacy, will most likely embolden Pakistan, with the country likely to be more open in its support of the Taliban.<sup>21</sup> In this case, India will find it difficult to influence the situation on the ground in the absence of the US in Afghanistan. Locally, India will face growing pressures to engage the Taliban, resulting in the continuation of a proxy battle between the two rivals in Afghanistan.

In light of the Pulwama attack and an impending US withdrawal, both countries will increasingly engage in heightened sub-conventional warfare outside of Afghanistan

<sup>19</sup> In military terms, this concept refers to the distance between the frontlines of the battlefield and the key centres of a country – capital cities and industrial centres.

<sup>20</sup> Avinash Paliwal, "New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role In Afghanistan," *Carnegie India*, June 2017, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6.15.2017\\_Paliwal\\_Afghanistan\\_Web.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/6.15.2017_Paliwal_Afghanistan_Web.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> James Dobbins, Jason H. Campbell, Sean Mann and Laurel E. Miller, "Consequences of a Precipitous U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *RAND*, January 2019, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE326/RAND\\_PE326.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE326/RAND_PE326.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Ahsan Butt, "What the Kulbushan Jadhav Saga Reveals About India and Pakistan's Balochistan Problems," *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2018,

as well. For instance, alleged Indian support for the active separatist insurgency in the Pakistani province of Balochistan reflects India's continuing engagement in a proxy war. The alleged Indian support for Baloch insurgency gained credence after Kulbushan Jadhav, an Indian spy, was captured by Pakistani authorities in Balochistan province in 2016.<sup>22</sup> In this scenario, local insurgent groups that oppose the Pakistani state and Chinese interests in the province are likely to engage in violence, especially considering the November 2018 attack by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) which killed four people in Karachi.<sup>23</sup>

On its part, Pakistan's historical funding and support for terrorist outfits, operating within its territory, that target Kashmir, including LeT and JeM, have not shown signs of diminishing. This has permitted India to frame attacks in its territory as being allegedly directed by the Pakistani state.<sup>24</sup> Pakistani authorities have not adequately dealt with LeT leader Hafiz Saeed and JeM leader Masood Azhar. Saeed has been placed on house arrest multiple times, but has been subsequently released and lives freely in Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Recent backing by China, as seen in the blocking of the UN Security Council resolution to designate Masood Azhar as a terrorist, also indicates that Pakistan will continue to support the Kashmir insurgency.

To meaningfully reign in the triggers of insecurity within the region in the aftermath of Pulwama and the impending US withdrawal, India and Pakistan should explore more effective platforms and forums for security cooperation and collaboration, either bilaterally or in conjunction with other

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/what-the-kulbushan-jadhav-saga-reveals-about-india-and-pakistans-balochistan-problems/>.

<sup>23</sup> Mir Shehbaz Khetran, "Indian Interference in Balochistan: Analysing the Evidence and Implications for Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>24</sup> Moeed Yusuf, "How the India-Pakistan Conflict Leaves Great Powers Powerless," *Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/10/954587-india-pakistan-mumbai-terror/>.

<sup>25</sup> "Pakistan reimposes ban on Islamist Charities Linked to Hafiz Saeed," *Channel News Asia*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/pakistan-reimposes-ban-on-islamist-charities-linked-to-hafiz-saeed-11279836>.

interested organisations. South Asia has very few regional mechanisms to counter and prevent terrorism, as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has largely remained ineffective due to India-Pakistan rivalry. Over its 30-year history, SAARC has only managed to conduct 18 summit meetings (that were meant to be held annually), due to bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> As such, sharing of information and intelligence, joint training programs, patrolling and operations between the neighbouring countries are rare. Without India-Pakistan cooperation, any such initiatives will remain elusive. To move towards better security and diplomatic relations, both countries will have to dispassionately discuss the security challenges posed by the various terrorist groups operating in the region.

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<sup>26</sup> Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Can SAARC Survive India and Pakistan's Squabbles?" National Interest, September 1, 2016,

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-saarc-survive-india-pakistans-squabbles-17556>.

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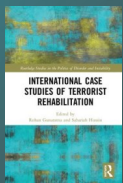
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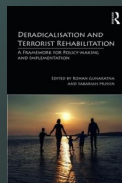


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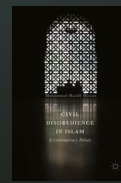
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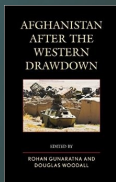
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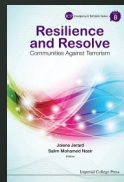
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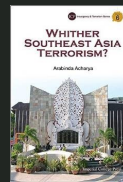
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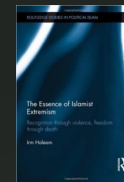
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## ICPVTR'S GLOBAL PATHFINDER

Global Pathfinder is a one-stop repository for information on current and emerging terrorist threats from the major terrorism affected regions of the world. It is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. This includes profiles from emerging hubs of global terrorism affecting the security of the world, as well as the deadliest threat groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The database also contains analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles. For further inquiries regarding subscription and access to Global Pathfinder, please contact Jolene Jerard at [isjolene@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isjolene@ntu.edu.sg).

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