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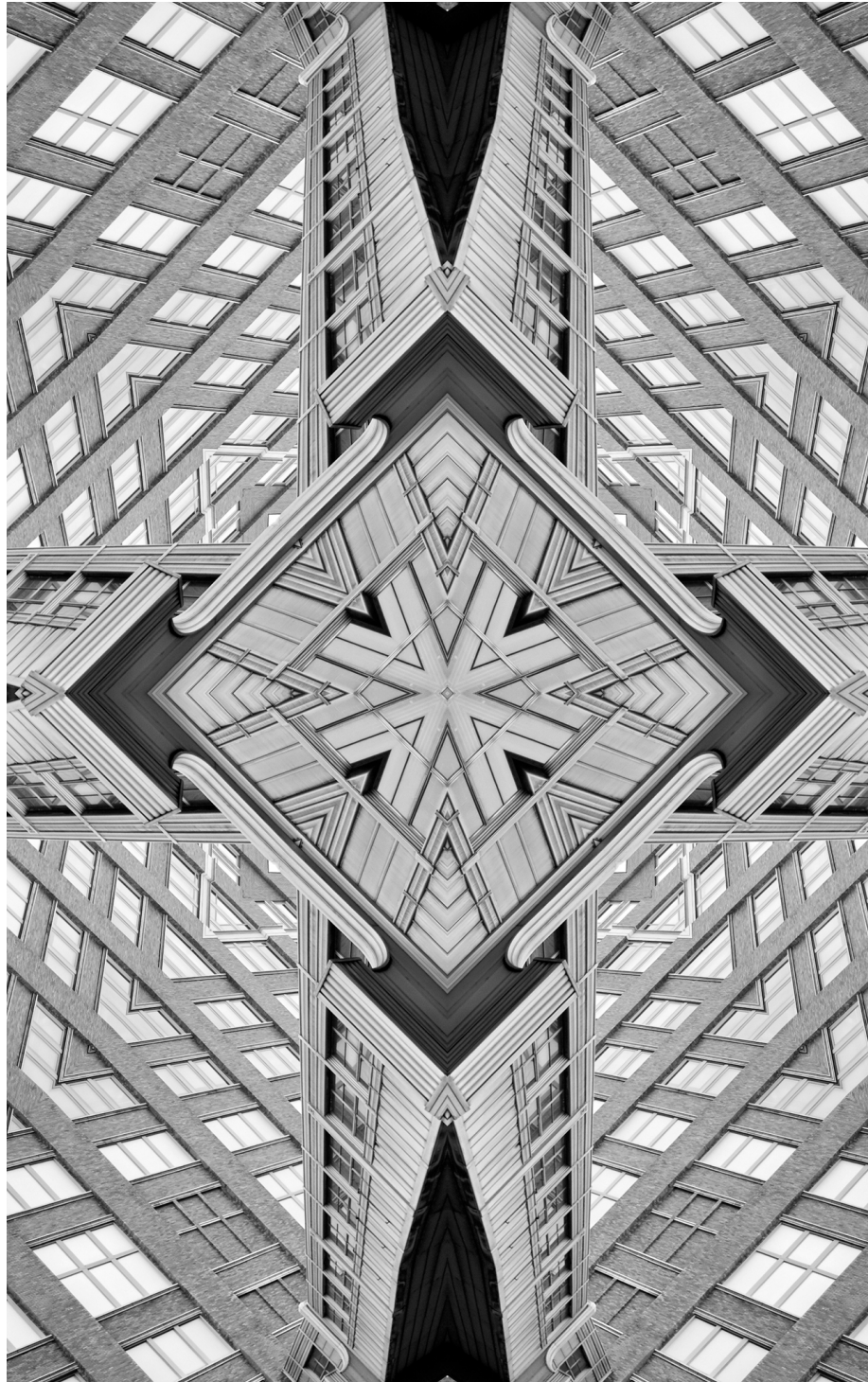
Building Indian Narratives and Battling New Militancy in Kashmir

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Abstract

'Us vs. Them' narratives fuel conflicts and make them thrive. This brief examines the role of such narratives in impeding the path to peace and stability in Kashmir, especially in the current era of so-called 'new militancy' that is aided by social media. This brief explores how India should build a broad, collective identity in Kashmir—one that will supersede radicalism and a desire for secession. It outlines a history of past and current efforts by the armed forces to enhance Indian narratives by winning hearts and minds in the Valley, and identifies the gaps in these initiatives.

Introduction

Societies saddled with conflicts often reproduce the differentiation and distancing between two broader collectives, thus sharpening the divide between 'Us' and 'Them', which in turn reinforces the very same conflicts.[1] In such a vicious cycle, narratives of rivalry and hostility[a] take ground and upend national identity.

This is true in Kashmir. The violent secessionist outbreak in 1989,[b] and since then, the government's anti-militancy and counterinsurgency operations, have embedded strong 'Us vs Them' narratives amongst the Kashmiris and alienated them from the Indian polity.[c,2] These state actions have included crackdowns, arrests, killings of local militants, and heavy enforcement of laws such as the Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).[3]

Consequently, a negative perception of India and its policies has been nurtured; there is popular perception amongst the Kashmiri people of the Indian state being a "coloniser" or an "occupier". The impacts of these perceptions have only been exacerbated in more recent years, amidst what analysts call "new militancy"—where the locals dominate the militant movement, and social media facilitates mass radicalisation and the spread of anti-India propaganda. It is in this context that India needs to exert greater effort in shaping its narratives to address the widespread negative perceptions and maintain its territorial integrity.

This brief discusses the prevalence of new-age militancy in Kashmir and its role in magnifying the differences between the broader collectives of the Kashmir people and the rest of the Indian population. It examines India's attempts, including its policies, to build a broader Indian identity within Kashmir vis-à-vis narratives, both before and in the current period of new militancy. The brief offers recommendations to arrest radicalisation and promote narratives of a broader Indian identity within Kashmir.

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a   A narrative is a story with meaning, characters, and a plotline, used to refamiliarise people with their collective identity (ethnic, regional, or national) or to even mobilise and seek their support for a particular policy or action. Narratives are thus important in regions widely affected by conflict and violence. They are often used by the state to supplement its actions or policies and meet its strategic ends. See: Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (October 2016): 610–627, https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article-abstract/12/4/6 10/2469903?redirectedFrom=fulltext; Gautam Nair and Nicholas Sambanis, "Violence Exposure and Ethnic Identification: Evidence from Kashmir," *International Organization* 73, no. 2 (2019): 329–63, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/violence-exposure-and-ethnic-identification-evidence-from-kashmir/CD167A6E5B4438E0A837F4F41DB07F86#.

b   After years of separatist tendencies and religious mobilisation, several Kashmiris, supported and armed by Pakistan, induced a mass secessionist uprising against the Indian state, on the grounds that the central government did not respect their electoral mandate and rigged the 1987 federal elections.

c   In these narratives, 'Us' is regional Kashmiri identity, and 'Them' is the national Indian identity.

'New Militancy'

Islamist and secessionist sentiments in Kashmir began with the onset of conflict in 1989 when organisations such as the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front used Islam to mobilise Kashmiris against India.[4] A similar but radicalised form of Islamist interpretation and mobilisation unfolded in the succeeding phases, as Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) started dominating the insurgency and equating secessionism to *Jihad*.[5] Although its mentor—Jamaat-I-Islami—had long worked to replace the locally practised Sufi Islam with the Sunni Islamic culture of Pakistan, it was HM that invoked violence to "Muslimise" the valley and integrate it with Pakistan. [6]

In the mid-90s, when terrorist groups with more radical interpretations of Islam, such as Jaish-E-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-E-Taiba (LeT) started to take over the militant movement, it backfired.[7] Locals distanced themselves from the militancy, finding an unfamiliar culture that was dominated by foreign fighters. Yet, Islam remained a mobilising agent in the fight against India.

It was with the onset of the "new militancy" phase from 2014,[8] that radical versions of Islam and anti-India propaganda became entrenched once again in the Valley. Analysts point to an increase in access to social media from 25 percent of the people in 2010 to 70 percent in 2015, which facilitated this mass radicalisation and spread of anti-India propaganda amongst the Kashmiri youth.[9,10] Access to social media not only contributed to an increase in recruitments for Pakistani organisations such as LeT, HM, and JeM, but also created a new breed of militants whose primary devotion is to Islam. Thus, organisations such as Al-Qaeda's Ansar Ghazwat Ul Hind and the Islamic State made their debut in the region's militant movement, albeit with less success than the Pakistani organisations (i.e., LeT, HM, and JeM).[11]

The Islamist propaganda and the anti-India content created a façade of Pakistani militant organisations supporting the Kashmiri cause. Social media gave Kashmiris new channels for their grievances and political aspirations.[12] Anti-India narratives grew stronger, and mass radicalisation and alienation heightened.

In particular, social media platforms allowed militants to humanise themselves and their ideology, while demonising India.[13] An increasing number of local Kashmiris turned to militancy and started supporting, interacting with, and participating in terrorist organisations that had previously recruited only

Pakistani and other foreign militants.[14] Messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram helped militants mobilise crowds; they also served as channels for training local militants and briefing them on weapons, explosive devices, and the actual conduct of attacks.[15] Between 2014 and 2020, there was a significant increase in local militancy and stone-pelting incidents in the region (see Table 1).

Table 1:
Local recruitment and stone-pelting incidents in the new-age radicalisation

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Local Recruitments	53	66	88	126	218	126	167
Number of stone-pelting incidents	449	730	2,653	1,412	1,458	1,999	55

Sources: Observer Research Foundation,[16] *The Print,*[17] *Hindustan Times,*[18] *Economic Times.*[19]

In 2017 the Indian armed forces launched 'Operation All Out' to eliminate the militant networks, their overground workers (OGW), and top militant commanders.[20] However, as the militants' ranks were dominated by the locals, these operations only reinforced the 'us vs. them' line.

'New Militancy'

'New Militancy'

Meanwhile, in August 2019, the central government revoked the special status of Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution of India. Multiple reports from the Concerned Citizens Group[d] stated that the loss of Kashmir's special status provoked widespread anger in the region, and heightened local perceptions that the people of Kashmir should not expect much from the Indian state.[21] An ORF report by Ayjaz Wani in early 2020 found Valley residents expressing similar sentiments: they were scared, skeptical, and suspicious of the Indian state, which in their view was treating them as second-class citizens.[22]

To be sure, people felt some semblance of safety too, as stone-pelting incidents dropped significantly, by 87 percent, in 2020.[23] Analysts attributed this to heavy on-ground deployment and outreach efforts by the Army first, during the security lockdown after Article 370's amendment and later, when the country was placed in lockdown as a response to COVID-19. [24,25]

At the same time, however, there were more than 160 local Kashmiris who joined the militants' ranks in 2020 alone—this disproves any assumptions that radicalisation is no longer present in the Valley. [26] An uneasy peace prevails.

> " In the era of 'new militancy' in Kashmir, social media platforms allow militants to humanise themselves while demonising India. "

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d   The Concerned Citizens Group is a voluntary group comprising former ministers and bureaucrats that aims to assess the public mood in Kashmir and disseminate their findings to the Indian public.

Winning Hearts and Minds

India has attempted to reduce the alienation of Kashmiris, foster state legitimacy, and build a narrative of the state being a "development agent" and "benevolent power". A succession of central governments have undertaken strategies to promote cross-Line of Control trade, implement reservation in educational institutions, initiate skill enhancement and employment schemes, provide education scholarships, and introduce education and livelihood schemes such as USTTAD, Udaan, and Nai Manzil.[e,27]

It is the Indian Army, however, that has had the primary responsibility to counter militancy, beginning in the conflagration in 1989. The Army adopted a strategy of Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM) to counter the negative perceptions of India, and also provide a quality life for the Kashmiris.[f] The Indian Army's version of WHAM was launched in 1998 under the banner of Operation Sadhbhavana (goodwill).[28] The operation consisted of various projects and was given a budget of INR 40 million.[29] This had increased to INR 4000 million by 2015, and further to INR 5500 million by 2020. [30,31]

A key beneficiary demographic of this operation are the Kashmiri youth. According to the Indian Army website, they have so far built two residential schools and 46 goodwill schools,[g] and have assisted in the modernisation of nearly 1,900 government schools.[32] In 2020, the Chief of Defence Staff declared that no students from these schools have either joined the insurgency or engaged in stone-pelting.[33]

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e   USTTAD (Upgrading the Skills and Training in Traditional Arts/Crafts for Development) is a scheme aiming to promote arts and crafts of Minority communities. The Udaan scheme provides skills and job opportunities to educated, unemployed Kashmiris. Nai Manzil aims to provide educational and employability skills for school dropouts or individuals with no formal schooling.

f   WHAM gained its initial popularity through the 1948 Malayan conflict. It refers to a population and spatial control strategy, where the priority is to win the trust and loyalty of a hostile/indifferent population and limit them from supporting and sheltering the adversaries or rivalling parties. See: Christopher Paul et al., "Malaya, 1948–1955," in Paths to Victory, Detailed Insurgency Case Studies (RAND Corporation, 2013), 51–63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.14.

g   Army Goodwill schools refer to a number of schools established by the Indian Army as a goodwill gesture to promote quality education and social indices in the Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh regions.

Moreover, the Army conducts around 100 "national integration" tours for young Kashmiris every year, where they are introduced to history, culture, and development opportunities across India. The Army also works to promote the youth's interest in sports, music, and arts, and to encourage them to take central and state civil service examinations.[34,35] They also help students access scholarships and gain admissions to institutions outside Kashmir, and some are even allowed to interact and be trained by regimental forces.[36]

Other initiatives have focused on meeting the basic needs of the people: providing medical care and medicines, micro-hydro projects, electricity, water, transparent and friendly governance, and sponsoring and funding children orphaned by the conflict.[37] In 2014-15, over 127,019 people were treated in 283 medical camps.[38] The Army has also initiated the setting up of vocational training centres, and the launch of literacy classes, skill development programmes, and health and financial awareness programmes.[39]

Operation Sadbhavana, however, has had limited success as it is being conducted in parallel with the hard tactics—i.e., the killing of militants, arrests of local OGWs, and the heavy-handed use of AFSPA and PSA laws. The goodwill initiatives are therefore viewed with skepticism and perceived as mere tactics of occupation.[40] It is in these cases that scholars like Nabi, Ye and Chakrabarti have asserted that the Kashmiri people would prefer their own governance rather than good governance, and would prioritise political ambitions, goals, and collective memories over economic incentives. [41,42]

Indeed, the Valley continued to witness mass protests in 2008, 2010, and 2016, even after the Sadhbavana programme had taken strides. Further, the targeting of Sadhbavana projects during the 2010 mass protests indicates that regardless of their purported benefits, these initiatives were being seen as vehicles of occupation.[43] Therefore, these projects had neither countered the extremist narratives nor integrated the Kashmiri nationalism within the broader Indian identity.

Winning Hearts and Minds

As the new militancy posed a novel challenge to India—with increased local recruitment and mass radicalisation, along with the use of the internet and social media—the Army launched 'Operation All Out' in 2017. The operation aimed to use military means to eliminate the militant networks, their over-ground workers, and top commanders in the Valley. This led to a steep increase in the number of local militants being killed and arrested (see Table 2), triggering hostility and protests from the locals.

Table 2:
Local militants killed, arrested, and surrendered (2014-2020)

Year	Militants killed	Arrests	Surrenders
2014	110	70	-
2015	108	82	2
2016	150	92	4
2017	213	210	8
2018	257	213	5
2019	157	185	11
2020	225	300	7

Sources: Ministry of Home Affairs,[44] *Economic Times,*[45] *South Asian Terrorism Portal.*[46,47]

In 2020, statements from Army officials indicated that they intended to reduce the intensity of Operation All Out. In October 2020, Lt Gen. B.S. Raju told journalists, "Just because you [the militants] have held a gun, taken a picture, doesn't mean you have to die. We get no pleasure by killing young boys, who have picked up the arms a month ago or bit earlier. We will be doing more work on ensuring surrender takes place."[48] The Army is encouraging surrenders, even inviting parents of these militants to encounter sites so that they can convince their children to lay down their arms.[49]

Narratives Against New Militancy

Narratives Against New Militancy

This has become more vital as the number of surrenderee local militants continues to remain low when compared to the number of arrests and deaths (see Table 2). Learning lessons from its previous surrender and rehabilitation policies of 1995, 2004, and 2010, the Army is focusing on the rehabilitation process, as well as providing surrenderees job and economic security.[50] Indeed, the Army has the opportunity to promote benign narratives of India engaging in less violence and looking after the youth of Kashmir, who might be "misguided".

Along similar goals, within a week of the revocation of Kashmir's special status in early August 2019, the Army launched 'Mission Reach Out'.[51] It was aimed at assisting the locals with water supply and other essential services, rations, emergency transportation, communication, and financial transactions as the region was placed under security lockdown by the Centre. It arranged for the provision of essential medicines, the deployment of medical staff, and the setting up of medical camps and mobile care units. The operation was extended to include some elements of Operation Sadbhavana, such as organising sports events and campaigns and workshops on empowerment and communal harmony. Army officers also held recruitment rallies and over 200 medical camps, 90 veterinary camps, and 100 capacity building tours throughout 2019.[52] The Army also provided assistance to the state administration amidst the COVID-19 crisis, to improve basic healthcare facilities.[53]

Perhaps noting the role of social media in the radicalisation of Kashmiris, the Army is utilising the same platforms to win the hearts and minds of the people. First, the armed forces, alongside the local police, are limiting extremist content and narratives on social media by monitoring and reporting them to tech platforms, and countering them with genuine news.[54,55] Furthermore, the Indian security forces are disseminating their own content on these platforms. These include, for instance, videos where the armed forces are helping the locals, appealing to militants to surrender, or

> " Learning lessons from its previous surrender policies, the Army is focusing on rehabilitation, as well as providing surrenderees economic security. "

reuniting a surrenderee with their family.[56,57,58] These videos not only seek to counter anti-India propaganda, but also attempt to bring down the emotional and psychological barriers that Kashmiris have erected against the Indian army and state.

A recent initiative by the Army is called 'Mission Pehal', launched in 2021, where officers conduct face-to-face interactions with the Kashmiri youth.[59] The initiative, which is the first of its kind, aims to encourage the youth to express their grievances and the reasons they may have for mistrusting the Indian state; the Army officers, for their part, articulate their perspective.

Overall, these recent WHAM efforts aim to address both the material and emotional/psychological needs of the Kashmiris; they appear to have had some positive impacts. A report authored by ORF's Ayjaz Wani in March 2021 found that the Army's outreach efforts have contributed to a decline in stone-pelting incidents.[60]

To be sure, history has proven that whatever "peace" there may be in Kashmir at the moment is volatile. It is the slightest flare-ups that have contributed to mass protests and stone-pelting in the past, and if any such tensions happen now, people will prioritise political ambitions and goals over economic incentives and good governance.

Thus, despite already having exerted extraordinary efforts to build a broader Indian narrative, there is a need for additional efforts in the region that can supplement the WHAM policies. The time seems ripe while there is an absence of violent battles in the region. India can work on some of the following recommendations.

Narratives Against New Militancy

Recommendations

1. District Development Councils: After Jammu and Kashmir lost its statehood, the political focus in Kashmir shifted to District Development Councils (DDCs) and grassroots development. Kashmiris who have long had to deal with bureaucratic red-tape can find new hope with the elected local leaders who can ensure good governance and local development. This will help them counter the extremist narrative and bridge the gap in narratives following the disempowerment of several traditional elites following 5 August 2019. Perceived as one of 'us', these leaders enjoy relatively more trust and can ensure coordination on development efforts with the state and the armed forces. This can reinforce the states' development narratives and reduce the 'Us vs Them' disparity, too. However, the state should continue shielding these representatives from being targeted[61] and must attempt to empower them, in terms of political and financial jurisdictions.[62] It is only with the perception of "efficient good governance" and "governed by us" that the violent narratives can be countered.

2. Social media: Social media has become a pivotal source of information—as well as misinformation and propaganda—in the time of new militancy. Although the government has used reactive tactics such as blanket bans, monitoring, censoring and reporting extremist profiles and content, it has been unable to deter the spread of extremist content through social media.[63] Such content and narratives must be contradicted with consistent counter-narratives.

   Although the use of videos that give the Army a human face indicates a slow move toward this trend, there is a long way to go to counter these extremist narratives. More research, content writing, and psychological and civil society guidance are needed to go under the storyline of the states' counter-narratives.[64,65] The state will still need to invest in artificial intelligence (AI) and other technology to discourage extremist content and should also find creative ways where Kashmiris can consume the narratives produced by the Indian state and army.

3. Justice: Narratives of humiliation, shame, and injustice from India have been strongly entrenched amongst the Kashmiris.[66] In the past, cases against the extrajudicial conduct of the armed forces have been denied/ dismissed for trial by the Centre or suspended by the armed forces tribunal.[67] This has presumably happened to avoid the morale damage of the deployed troops that could impact the conduct of counter-militancy operations. However, with the need for enhancing stronger narratives,

the state must find a delicate balance between building narratives and not impacting their anti-militancy operations. In this context, the state has a great opportunity to enhance its narratives and build trust amongst the locals, by using the case of extrajudicial killings in Shopian in September 2020.[68]

4. Technology: Certain narratives of Kashmiris, such as India being an 'occupier' or 'coloniser', emerge from the fact that India has adopted a policy of mass deployment in the region. As India cannot afford to demilitarise the Valley, it can start focusing on *smart* rather than *hard* deployment. It can invest more in technologies such as UAVs or drone technology and deploy them in relatively peaceful areas. These technological tools can be used to conduct surveillance, maintain law and order, and also deter the use of drones by militants and militant supporters.

5. Education: In the long term, the state should start re-emphasising on education, which will be crucial in narrative-building—especially the social sciences. A variety of historical distortions and unfamiliarity prevails in the educational curriculum of Kashmir and the rest of India.[69] The educational curricula, as seen with the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) does not distinguish between peaceful and conflict-affected regions.[70] In this context, it is important to promote topics and themes that can be more relatable and applicable, such as constitutional remedies for people in conflict-affected regions. There is also a need to provide knowledge of the 'other' through a delicate balance that is neither perceived as propaganda by the locals nor fails to build a bridge. This has now become easier for the central government as it has direct control over education in Kashmir; it has also asked NCERT to revise the social sciences curriculum in Jammu and Kashmir.[71] Moreover, there is a need to facilitate education through the virtual space, using for instance, pre-recorded educational videos; this can help ensure that the disruption of education during times of unrest does not create space for radicalisation.

Recommendations

Conclusion

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Narratives play a vital role in bridging the 'Us vs Them' divide. Such divide between Kashmir and India has widened in the recent years, with the advent of 'new militancy' in Kashmir, on one hand, and on the other, state policies such as Operation All Out and the revocation of Kashmir's special status. The Indian state and the armed forces are therefore attempting to enhance their nation-building narrative by supplementing traditional missions that seek to win hearts and minds, with social-media initiatives.

Although these policies are intended to remove the emotional and psychological barriers that Kashmiris have erected for the Indian state, there is plenty of work that remains. Kashmir continues to be alienated, and New Delhi must make use of the current absence of armed and violent conflict to strengthen its narrative-building efforts and bring the region closer to lasting peace. ORF

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