ORF OCCASIONAL PAPER
231
JANUARY 2020

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ISBN: 978-93-89622-30-0
ISBN Digital: 978-93-89622-31-7

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ABSTRACT

The new militant movement in Kashmir, which began with Burhan Wani in the southern areas, has escalated the conflict in the Valley. While militancy is not new in Kashmir, the Pulwama attack put the conflict back on the radar of the international community. This paper examines the changing nature of militancy in Kashmir, specifically with regard to training, recruitment patterns and the use of social media, public support for militants, and an apparent ideological drift. The paper identifies four new variables that have changed the contours of militancy in Kashmir, further complicating the security threats to the Indian state.

(This paper is part of ORF's series, 'National Security'. Find other research in the series here: https://www.orfonline.org/series/national-security/)

Attribution: Khalid Shah, 'Ideological Shift, Public Support and Social Media: The 'New' in Kashmir's 'New Militancy'', *ORF Occasional Paper No. 231*, January 2020, Observer Research Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

On 14 February 2019, a VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) attack in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) claimed the lives of 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel.[1] It was the biggest terror attack the Kashmir Valley had witnessed since militancy first broke out in the 1990s.[2] Following the attack, India and Pakistan—both of them nuclear powers—seemed to have come closer to the brink of war. India's retaliation to the Pulwama attack—the Balakot airstrikes and the dogfight in the wake of the retaliatory strike—set a new benchmark in the country's efforts to counter cross-border terrorism.[3]

Adil Ahmed Dar, the 20-year-old suicide bomber and a local resident of Pulwama, had joined the internationally designated terror group Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) a year before the attack. Adil was amongst the hundreds of youth who joined the ranks of terrorist groups after the killing of Burhan Wani.[4] That the suicide attack was conducted by a local Kashmiri was especially worrying, being a rare occurrence in the history of 30 years of militancy in Kashmir. It was perhaps symptomatic of the cycle that started off with the emergence of Burhan Wani on Kashmir's militancy scene.[5]

The Pulwama attack called for deep introspection and wide-ranging debate on the changing nature and contours of militancy, and the need for well-calibrated responses. The new militancy, beginning with Burhan Wani's rise not only in the ranks of Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) but more importantly in popularity amongst the people of the Valley, is markedly different from the militancy of the past. Many analysts and scholars have argued that the previous phase of militancy in Kashmir, which began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had been contained and defeated by 1996. The new, post-internet phase has distinct trends and patterns that

sets it apart from the previous phases of militancy. These include the wide and clever use of social media, the extent of geographical spread, the training of cadre, recruitment patterns, ideological persuasions and inter-group links. The new phase began with the appearance of images and videos of Burhan Wani on social media in 2013.

Indeed, the internet has played an important role in the rise of the new militant movement—popularising militants and their ideologies and glorifying violence. While this paper looks at the post-internet phase of militancy in Kashmir, the argument cannot be extended to the period beginning on 5 August 2019, as the internet shutdown in the Valley, which had continued for over 5 months, has changed the overall scenario and context.

To devise appropriate responses that suit the contour of the new militancy problem, it is necessary to first identify the variables responsible for altering the nature of militancy. In this context, this paper identifies four such variables: the synergy between foreign and local terrorists; cyber jihad and the use of social media by militant groups; the wide public support for militancy and disruptive mobs; and the ideological shift that sets apart the new militancy from the previous phases. These variables, however, define the symptoms of the new problem, not the causes and reasons for its emergence.

WHY 'NEW MILITANCY'

The early phase of militancy in Kashmir emerged in the late 1980s. Inspired by the success of the Afghan Jihad, the deep state of Pakistan instigated a widespread insurgency in J&K, aiming to push India out of the state. Fuelled by the outrage against the rigging of the elections of 1987, a large number of Kashmiri youth exfiltrated across the Line of Control (LoC) to join the training camps in Pakistan-administered

Kashmir. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was amongst the first few outfits to recruit and train Kashmiri youth in a rebellion against the Indian state. The rebellion has now lasted for more than 30 years.[6]

Statistics show that the attacks on Indian security forces increased by 2,000 percent in 1990, with 1,098 incidents of violence recorded in that year, compared to 49 in 1989.[7] In subsequent years, attacks on the forces increased progressively, with 5,500 of them witnessed during 1991 and 1992. In 1991 alone, 2,000 incidents of violence against Indian forces were reported; the number increased to 3,413 in 1992, the highest recorded in J&K.[8] From 1993 onwards, the number of attacks on security forces gradually decreased and came down to 806 in 2005.[9]

Data from the Ministry of Home Affairs of India shows that by 2012, the number of incidents was down to 220, marking a drastic shift in J&K.[10]

Table 1. Violent Incidents in the Valley (2005-12)

Year	Incidents	SFs killed	Civilians killed	Terrorists killed
2005	1990	189	557	917
2006	1667	151	389	591
2007	1092	110	158	472
2008	708	75	91	339
2009	499	79	71	239
2010	488	69	47	232
2011	340	33	31	100
2012	220	15	15	72

Source: MHA, Annual Report, 2012–13.

By government-specified standards, 2012 can be considered the year when the Valley returned to normalcy. Around 1.3 million tourists visited J&K,[11] and the local people started converting their houses into hotels and lodges to accommodate these visitors. The fear of militancy and militant violence seemed to have ended.[12] The change in the overall environment is also reflected in the number of casualties recorded since 1989: 92 in 1992 and 4,507 (the highest ever) in 2001.[13] Following 2001, the number started to decline significantly, with the lowest number of deaths since 1990 recorded in 2012.[14]

However, the most significant shift in the patterns of militancy started in the early 2000s, when local Kashmiri youth became disenchanted with the idea of militancy. The popular sentiment in the Valley had started to favour democratic means of resolving the Kashmir conflicts, and in 2002, J&K witnessed its most successful elections in its history.

Table 2. Local and Foreign Militants Killed in Kashmir (1990-2001)

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001*
Local	536	832	805	1220	1474	1247	1070	878	680	777	742	710
Foreigner	14	12	14	90	122	85	139	197	319	305	870	1032

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal.

Until 2008, the situation remained stable and the number of local militants killed in the encounters had gotten much lower than the number of foreign terrorists. Various reports show that the recruitment of local youth into the ranks of militancy had also reduced by 2012–13, dropping to 21 in 2012, and further to 16 in 2013 (See Table 3).[15,16]

Table 3. Local Youth Recruited to Militancy (2010-2018)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Recruitment	54	23	21	16	53	66	88	126	218

Source: Official data collected from news reports.

Kashmir analysts have argued that by 1996, the first wave of local militancy in Kashmir had been defeated. Manoj Joshi, a noted Kashmir analyst who has studied the Kashmir conflict for many decades, argues that India had managed to contain and defeat the first wave of insurgency in Kashmir by 1996.[17] According to another analyst, David Devadas, the militancy in J&K abated in the 2000s. He attributes the decline of the militancy of the 1990s to the fact that "militants found it extremely difficult to get shelter or assistance in Kashmiri homes."[18]

However, in 2018, for the first time in 18 years, more local militants were killed in encounters than were foreign militants, indicating a resurgence in local participation in militancy. Jason Burke, an expert on terrorism, while describing the rise of Burhan Wani, pointed out that a "new wave" of militants had emerged in Jammu and Kashmir. "[The] new breed of militants is rising in Kashmir – young, educated, tech-savvy."[19]

Definitions

It is difficult to conclusively define 'militancy' in Kashmir. Many analysts and security experts believe that the ongoing conflict in the state is a "proxy war" sponsored by Pakistan. Others view it as a "hybrid war," while some consider it "cross-border terrorism." The top officials of the armed forces have frequently used the word "militancy" in their lexicon. Additionally, public opinion regarding militancy varies significantly. Consequently, it is difficult to choose an objective set of identifiers to explain the problem. While all the terms attributed to J&K's militancy—such as "hybrid war" or "cross-border terrorism"—have some merit, for the sake of lucidity, the paper uses the term "militancy."

Components of Militancy in Kashmir

There are two distinct subsets of militancy in the state.

Foreign Elements: The foreign cadre of terror outfits, such as JeM and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), come under this category. Most of these terrorists are citizens of Pakistan who have been recruited and trained by their respective outfits. Many active militants in the past phase of the militancy came from Afghanistan, Central Asian countries, Chechnya and Palestine. These fighters cross the LoC to enter the Indian side of J&K. Security forces have labelled them as Foreign Terrorists (FTs).

Local Militants: The local elements include the local Kashmiri youth who are recruited by various militant groups active in J&K. This aspect of the militancy is homegrown, localised and closely connected with the local population on the ground.

The Dynamic between Foreign and Local Elements

After 2012, the recruitment of local militants spiked and continued to increase in the next years. From 16 in 2012, the recruitment of locals increased to 53 in 2013, around the time the first pictures of Burhan Wani started appearing on Facebook. It is thought that it was through these pictures that the idea of militancy gained popularity in Kashmir.[20] Wani's first guide and mentor was his cousin Adil Mir, a divisional commander of HM at the time of his death. He was instrumental in recruiting and mentoring Burhan Wani and his equally popular comrade, Zakir Bhat, famously known as Zakir Musa.[21]

In the militancy of the 1990s, Kashmiri youth crossed the LoC for training in various camps located in Pakistan-Administered Kashmir and other provinces of Pakistan. The process of joining the militancy was intense, with recruits travelling through rough terrain, jungles and

heights along the LoC for many days. In the early stages of militancy, terror training camps mushroomed along the LoC. Later, new camps emerged in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan and Rawalpindi. Recruits would be inducted into programmes and subjected to extensive training. Thereafter, they would acquire weapons and infiltrate back into the Indian side of the LoC.[22]

In the new phase of militancy, the process of recruitment for locals became much easier. While the heavy presence of armed forces along with the fencing has made exfiltration nearly impossible,[23] recruits no longer need to cross the LoC. Now, the process of recruitment and its announcement is linked to pictures posted on social media. The militant outfits release photos (usually selfies) of new recruits posing with a weapon to declare the inductions.[24] As a result, the new militancy has become highly localised, and two distinct trends have emerged. One, the recruitment process has become easier. Two, the local recruits are poorly trained.[25] During the 1990s, the training process was rigorous. Each camp had designated training programmes, which would last for weeks or months, depending upon the intensity. Training manuals were elaborate and included not only the basics but also lessons on the use of rocket-propelled grenade (RPGs) and light machine guns.[26]

Literature on the early phase of militancy suggests that some of the training programmes lasted for six months to a year, and recruits trained alongside Afghan Mujahedeen and even the Pakistan Army. Thus, the fighters were battle-hardened and capable of carrying out severely damaging attacks.[27] However, in the new phase of militancy, the recruits receive rudimentary training. Videos released by the militant groups have shown new recruits being trained in dense jungles and orchards.[28] Poorly trained, these militants do not last long in combats with security forces. For example, the gunfight in the encounter of Burhan Wani only lasted about 15 minutes, and Wani showed little

combat experience.[29] The local recruits of new militancy are best known for their online exhibitionism, i.e. putting out selfies with automatic rifles, videos of playing sports, and audio messages threatening cops and civilians on social media.[30]

In August 2015, Wani released a video calling for young Kashmiris to join the renewed cause of jihad. By then, he had been designated as a "top recruiter" by Indian security agencies. Some estimates suggest that he had by then recruited 30 young boys from the southern parts of the Valley. His focus was on increasing the cadre strength of the HM, sometimes even without weapons, leaving the responsibility of conducting more lethal attacks to the well-trained Pakistani fighters of LeT. The training of the cadre of LeT and JeM is far superior, since they undergo extensive training programmes such as Daur-e-Aam and Daura-e-Khas, in the training centres based in Pakistan.[31,32]

New recruits often receive rudimentary training from the Pakistani cadre of the LeT and JeM, or from the police/army men who desert their ranks to join the militants. Recruitment of the army and police personnel has served a dual purpose: they do not require training and they can fulfil the shortage of weapons by stealing from their force.[33]

Table 4. Army and Police Personnel Recruited to Militancy (2010-2018)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Recruitment	54	23	21	16	53	66	88	126	218

Source: Official data collected from news reports.

In the 1990s, dozens of militant groups sprung up across J&K. Many of the groups, such as HM, JKLF, Al Barq, Al Jehad and Muslim Janbaz Force, had an indigenous character, since most recruits were Kashmiri. For their part, outfits such as LeT, JeM, Harkat-ul-Ansar and Harkat-ul-

Mujahideen had foreign cadre—mostly Pakistanis or Afghans.[34] In the earlier phase of militancy, indigenous groups jostled for space and dominance, leading to a brutal internecine conflict. The intragroup clashes intensified after 1992 and weakened many of the terror groups.[35] Groups that had well-trained and better-equipped cadre survived longer.[36] HM, LeT and JeT are the only groups that have survived since the 1990s; many were wound up or rendered defunct; a few joined the political process after giving up on violence. HM is the only indigenous group of Kashmir-based militants to have survived the test of time. Even today, all of its recruits are local Kashmiris.

In the early phase of the militancy, there were clear demarcations of the groups. Each group was distrustful of the other or they had ideological rivalries. However, in the new phase of militancy, these lines have blurred, and there is a great deal of synergy between the Lashkar, JeM and HM.[37,38] Burhan Wani is credited for having developed greater interoperability and cooperation between Pakistani groups and HM. With increasing international pressure on LeT, this strategy worked well for the group. In the past, Kashmiris had stopped sheltering foreign militants in their houses, having become increasingly disenchanted with violence and militancy. This made it difficult for the LeT cadre to survive in the counterinsurgency grid of J&K.[39] Once LeT started recruiting local Kashmiris, it regained the support of the people of the Valley in organising food and shelter and traversing unknown terrains. Additionally, LeT circulated the pictures and videos of these Kashmiri faces on social media for propaganda.

The local support also gave LeT and JeM an ostensible cause. LeT could now masquerade as an insurgent group fighting for Kashmiris. A terror outfit comprising mostly ethnic Punjabis recruited from the southern part of Pakistan's Punjab province turned into a mixed group of Pakistanis and Kashmiris—a lethal concoction of well-trained

Pakistani cadre, with a Kashmiri façade to help Pakistan avoid global scrutiny and criticism.

Similarly, JeM, with its resurgence in the Valley, started recruiting local cadre. The terror outfit returned from the shadows on 1 January 2018, with a suicide mission on a paramilitary force camp. One of the attackers was a 16-year-old local student, Fardeen Khanday, and the other, a Pakistani national. A pre-recorded video of Khanday was released on the web to assign a Kashmiri face to the attack, even though the main attacker was a Pakistani. JeM had employed its old hand, Noor Muhammad Trali, to train the local cadre, a four-feet-tall operative who had jumped parole in 2013.[40]

Demographic profiles of 393 local militants killed in encounters in J&K, from January 2017 to June 2019, reveal that nearly 43 percent of the local youth were recruited by the LeT and JeM, and another 45 percent joined HM. The rest joined other smaller groups such as Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), ISJK and Tehreek ul-Mujahideen.[41] While HM has always included only local militants.[42]

Due to this growing synergy between the local and foreign elements of militant groups, the geographical spread of militancy has also changed. While in the past, militant groups were mostly active in the northern parts of Kashmir (bordering the LoC), new militancy has found its geographical and ideological ecosystem in South Kashmir. Studies have shown that the new recruits for militant groups are predominantly from the Pulwama, Shopian, Kulgam and Anantnag districts of Jammu and Kashmir. A study of the of 393 'new militants' show that 291 came from southern parts of Kashmir, while only 72 came from northern Kashmir districts and 27 from central Kashmir. The militant groups have become dominant in South Kashmir primarily because most of the local militants, and much local support comes from

these areas. Since local support is important for the survival of the militants, their activities are limited to a 10–20 km radius of their home villages. Burhan Wani's home district, Pulwama, has contributed the highest number of recruits to the militant groups, since 2014. Due to their increased synergy with local elements, the foreign militants, too, are increasingly finding the ecosystem in South Kashmir more viable.

'MULTIMEDIA JIHAD'

Social media has proven to be the most effective weapon of the new militancy.[43] Militants no longer need to use coercive means to get some column space in the press, as they did in the 1990s. Today, hundreds and thousands of militancy pictures and videos are on social media sites every single day. New content is published frequently through encrypted platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp, e.g. dying declarations of militants trapped in an encounter; their last phone call conversations with friends, family or even security officials; videos of training in the jungles of South Kashmir; selfies showing bonhomie amongst the cadre; pictures of militants playing cricket in the open fields of the Valley. Such content—consumed mostly by young Kashmiris— has flooded the popular culture of J&K. The new militants use this content to spread the call of jihad and inspire the youth to join their ranks.[44]

In December 2015, LeT Chief Hafeez Sayeed launched its cyber cell, taking inspiration from ISIS. The intent was to propagate the group's ideology and propaganda, and it managed to stoke prolonged unrest in the Valley.

Burhan Wani was perhaps the first tech-savvy militant of Kashmir. Even though he joined HM in 2010, he rose into becoming a cult figure only after his pictures appeared on Facebook in 2013. Social media now

drives the recruitment of local militants. On the first death anniversary of Burhan Wani, on 8 July 2017, HM launched a propaganda campaign for the recruitment of more Kashmiri youth.[45] These recruitment drives are similar to those conducted by the police or the army, with droves of local youth flocking to the centres and many of them getting rejected. On the second death anniversary of Burhan Wani, the following message was put out by HM on WhatsApp groups: "We request all those brothers who have been kept in waiting to not lose hope and be steadfast, as very soon you will be called to join the ranks, Insha Allah. Hizbul Mujahideen JK will always uphold the principles of Justice and will continue to be at the forefront of Freedom struggle of Kashmir. We appeal [to] our people to stay calm and steadfast on the mission of Mujahideen brothers."[46]

For militants, social media is not just a tool of communication; it is a weapon of war.[47] After Wani's death, the mantle of HM was taken over by Sabzar Bhat. As his pictures and videos started appearing on WhatsApp groups, Bhat went from being on the fringes of the public imagination to becoming a household name.

When Zakir Musa dissented against HM through the summer of 2017 and launched a rival group by pulling out some cadre from other outfits, the drama unfolded in virtual space. His group failed to attract any significant support, only a paltry half-a-dozen recruits. However, the power of social media led to chants of "Musa, Musa, Zakir Musa" on the streets of Kashmir. Without social media, the emergence of new militancy and gun culture might not have been possible. Most importantly, the public support that a few hundred untrained militants galvanised would have been impossible.[48]

In his penultimate video released in June 2016, Burhan Wani had given a call for jihad and asked the youth to disrupt the security cordons during encounters. His words sounded churlish. How could the

deployments of battalions of force be penetrated? Many months later, his words were followed in letter and spirit. On numerous occasions, the news of a trapped militant galvanised massive mobs on the encounter sites, pelting stones to disrupt the cordon. Many such cordons were disrupted. LeT commander Abu Dujana earned the title of "cordon breaker" for having escaped all security cordons except his last.[49]

In April 2017, Jamaat-ud-Dawah (JuD) issued multiple advertisements announcing social media workshops. The handouts sought volunteers for a training programme designed to instigate another unrest in the Valley. One digital poster read: "Join #SocialMedia workshops to know Social Media as an instrument for Kashmir uprise 2k17, an advertisement by Cyber Team JuD North Punjab." The poster blatantly called this workshop a means for hybrid warfare and declared social media as the new battleground.[50] After the workshops were conducted in multiple cities of Pakistan, hundreds of WhatsApp groups emerged, with members predominantly from the local population in J&K. Weblinks to join these groups were put out by JuD on its website, on Twitter and other social media platforms. While some were operating with the JuD name, others masqueraded as newsgroups; many of the admins used Pakistani mobile numbers.[51]

A video of 16-year-old Fardeen Khanday calling for jihad, released after his death in a fidayeen attack on 1 January 2018, led to a new crop of recruits for JeM. It is possible that the Pulwama suicide bomber followed the path of Fardeen after watching his video.[52] Ahead of the Republic Day celebrations in 2018, a video appeared on social media showing the principal of a school in Pulwama pleading before a man holding an AK-47 weapon. The video was released to disrupt the Republic Day celebrations in South Kashmir by issuing a message to the youth participating in the parade. In the video, the principal pleads for mercy and promises to keep the students of his school away from the

parade.[53] Such a warning was not a new tactic, but the power of social media made this video viral and available on every smartphone, instilling a sense of fear amongst the population.

In 2018, a month after the LeT commander Naveed Jutt, a Pakistani national, escaped from prison in Srinagar, with the help of HM, a video surfaced on social media, which appeared to be a reunion of sorts. Another, more significant video showed Jutt posing on the streets of Anantnag town, walking down the road, surveying the area. It seemed to send a message that despite the might of security forces in J&K, his movement and activities were going unbridled.[54]

The scale of the social media operation of terror outfits is not yet known. There is no information on how many such groups existed in past or still do, since it is not easy to track encrypted messenger platforms. Some of these groups had localised branding. For instance, a group that had members from Pulwama was operating under the name "Pulwama Tigers." These groups circulated militancy-related content and issued announcements when a known militant was trapped in a cordon launched by the security forces. The audio messages circulated would call for villagers to storm the encounter site to help the militants escape. Some reports also suggest that Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, ISI, is running around 18,000 social media accounts for information operations and to push the anti-India propaganda.

Social media is used not only to create a narrative for gun culture and to glamorise militancy amongst the local populace, but also to expose the weakness of the state. It has changed the meaning of "battlefield victory." While the state and the security forces view victory in terms of the conventional notions of the battle, counting their success in the killing of militants or their surrender, the public view as a defeat of the state the videos of large funeral processions where the slain gets a gun

salute and a hero's farewell. For security forces, an encounter and the killing of a militant is the end of the battle. Unfortunately, it is actually the beginning, and the glorification of his death inspires many more to join the militant ranks. Analysts have argued that a man (Burhan Wani) who did not fire a single bullet at the security forces during the fateful encounter that turned the history of Kashmir has become lethal in his grave. Wani's death triggered an unrest where militants gained a foothold in the southern districts of Kashmir valley and motivated another generation of Kashmiris to take the violent path. And the deaths of many new militants who followed his path has now created a mirage of bravado and heroism—an illusion of victory that pushes Kashmir into a deeper abyss with each passing day.

The politicians in New Delhi and the officers of the Indian Army celebrate their success in the year-end press conferences, offering as proof the number of militants killed in a particular year. However, the claims of breaking the back of the militancy are unfounded. There is an army of social media warriors who keep the battle alive in the minds of the populace. Guns cannot kill clicks, constructs and imaginative heroism, as social media activity and the narrative of the gun goes unchallenged. The jihad now plays out in virtual space.

DISRUPTIVE CROWDS AND POPULAR SUPPORT

On 13 April 2018, Khudwani village of Kulgam district in South Kashmir witnessed an incredible tactical defeat of Indian security forces. Thousands of protestors forced the army to withdraw a 'cordon and search' operation. Four civilians were killed and 60 injured in an attempt to break the tight cordon of the Indian Army, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the J&K Police around a cluster of houses where three militants were trapped. The drone footage showed a mob of thousands descending upon the cordon. Despite the added deployment of the forces

and aerial surveillance of military choppers and drones, the cordon could not sustain the assault of the mobs, and the militants escaped.[55]

Hours after the incident, videos of the militants appeared on social media. In one of two videos, the militants were seen on a motorcycle parading in the locality with people in tow. "It did not matter if they killed four or five of us. We managed to save five (militants). Their sacrifice did not go in vain today," a government schoolteacher in Khudwani later told *Scroll.in*.[56]

In recent times, such incidents have become common. Reports have surfaced of mobs not only disrupting counter-terror operations but also facilitating the escape of militants. The first such case was reported in 2011 in Pulwama. In the encounter that killed the LeT terrorist Shakoor Ahmad, locals from nearby villages gathered on-site and started pelting stones on the security forces in the middle of gunfire. The clashes resulted in the injuries of nine policemen and six civilians. Before this incident, the locals would run away from the encounter sites and remain indoors. At that time, the police recorded it as a one-off occurrence, but years later, such incidents have become a new trend, a new variable in militancy.[57] Since the Burhan Wani encounter, at least 120 civilians have been killed while attempting to disrupt counterinsurgency operations near the encounter sites. In 2017, 78 civilians were killed; in 2018, 46. "Civilians are rushing in front of the heavily armed trucks, using stones and their own bodies to try to block security forces," once reported the *New York Times*.[58]

Mobilisation of crowds on the encounter sites mostly happens through WhatsApp groups, announcements made in mosques and through word of mouth. However, Whatsapp and Telegram chat groups make crowd mobilisation much more dangerous. In late 2016 and early 2017, many localised WhatsApp groups were created to share

information regarding the movement of troops in case of a search and cordon operation. These groups started out as local newsgroups but eventually turned into an effective tool for sharing militant propaganda and rallying crowds to gather at encounter sites.[59] New reports suggest that the disruptors travel miles to the encounter sites to pelt stones and distract the security forces from ongoing operations. "Among the locals was 17-year-old Aqib Shafi who had travelled more than 20 km to be at the encounter site. He is sad for the four lives lost but considers it a mission accomplished since the militants were saved."[60]

The commanders of militant outfits have labelled the act of stone-pelting mobs trying to disrupt kinetic operations as a jihad. Burhan Wani's last audio message requested the youth of Kashmir to join the cause of jihad by pelting stones on the security forces during such operations. Zakir Musa made the same appeal in of his audio messages. This strategy gives militant outfits an edge over the security forces. The security forces are burdened with not only engaging in active combat but also having to protect the law-and-order situation. This tactic also works well in keeping recruits involved in activities against the security forces, even if they cannot join a militant outfit due to the dearth of weapons.[61]

With the assistance of stone-pelting mobs, militants have managed to break the cordons of the security forces on many occasions. This new phenomenon has also introduced a new term in Kashmir's vocabulary: "cordon-breaker." Many top militant commanders have attained this sobriquet. Notable amongst them is the top commander of Al Badr, locally known as a cordon breaker, for having slipped out of many search operations, particularly an encounter in Dragad, (the Shopian area of South Kashmir) on 1 April 2018, in which seven other militants were killed. Other cordon-breakers include HM Commander Sameer Tiger and HM Deputy Field Operations Commander Altaf Dar (alias Altaf Kachroo).[62,63]

Cordon-breaking techniques also allow militants to gain popularity. Each time a militant escapes a cordon of security forces, the myths about his valour gain strength. Before the encounters on militants intensified as part of Operation All-Out, many of these militants remained elusive nightmares for security forces. The longer each militant spent amongst the local population, the more followers he gained. This made counter-militancy operations all the more difficult to carry out. Not only did the militants have local informers to tip them off about troop movement, but they also had crowd support to help them during encounters and gunfights. Moreover, their popularity allowed them to posthumously recruit people.

Another form of public support comes in the form of the organised funerals. The local populations perceive large funerals as a symbol of victory for the militants. After each gun battle, thousands would travel to attend the last rites of militants in Kashmir. Social media is littered with viral videos of militant funerals, with as many as 10,000–30,000 people in attendance. "[At these funerals], women sing songs of blood and valour. Young men push through the jostling crowd to kiss the militant's forehead. Then they touch his feet and rub their hands on their body as if performing a religious ritual," reported BBC. Usually, the funerals are followed by gun salutes by the compatriots of the deceased militant. These funerals glorify death, presenting the dead militants as martyrs. Consequently, funerals also become open fields for recruitment.[64]

A study done by the J&K Police found that militant funerals were fertile grounds for new recruitments. The report states that 50 percent of the total recruitments of locals in militant groups happened within a 10-km radius of the encounter sites and residences of the militants. Fresh recruitments happened within 40 days of the encounters. The report stated: "Each encounter sets off a surge in recruitments and new inductions into militancy far exceeds militants killed in operations

rendering even successful counterinsurgency a zero-sum game. It has been observed that many a time, friends of killed militants manifest a tendency of pledging to join militancy on seeing the dead bodies and funerals of their friends. During the Bamnoo encounter, which took place in Rajpora, Pulwama where Jahangir Khanday of Keller was killed, his friend joined militant ranks on spot at the encounter site."

Large funerals of militants have also witnessed the presence of active militants, who give gun salutes to their dead associates. The presence of militants in these funerals not only eulogises the deaths of militants but also brings active militants into open interaction with civilians. Such an interaction is one of the first and important steps in facilitating recruitment.[65]

The Government of India (GoI) has also raised concerns regarding the large funeral processions of the militants. The Ministry of Home Affairs stated on the floor of Parliament: "As per the report of state government, a few instances of militants making brief appearance in large gathering of funeral of militants have been observed. In these instances, the militants after making brief appearances disappear, taking advantage of a large gathering. In order to prevent such activities of militants, numerous steps have been taken including strengthening of operational grid with enhanced human intelligence and use of technical intelligence grid.[66] Further, the intensity of counter-insurgency operations has been increased resulting in neutralising of several militants."[67]

During these funerals, family members of the militants make speeches inciting the members of the crowd to join militancy. In one such occasion, the mother of a deceased militant asked the angry youth gathered at the funeral whether they would like to become militants. The crowd roared in response. There have been countless cases of militant

funerals, which are a barometer of the public support enjoyed by the new militancy in Kashmir. At times, a single deceased militant gets multiple funerals, based on the extent of the individual's popularity. To tackle this new phenomenon, the security forces have attempted to develop tactics to disrupt large gatherings at funerals: increased deployments of forces around the residential areas of a slain militant; installing blockades and security checks after encounters; and enhanced surveillance.[68]

IDEOLOGY AND NEW GROUPS

One of the most significant aspects of the new militancy in Kashmir is the changing nature of the ideology of terror groups.[69] While the militancy in J&K has always used religion for mobilisation, inspiration and garnering support, the extent to which religiosity was used has changed with each phase of the militancy.

The first phase of the militancy was primarily led by the JKLF, which stood for the independence of J&K from both India and Pakistan. It was an ethno-nationalist group that took the path of jihad to overthrow India's rule from Kashmir and eventually establish an independent state. However, this was not desirable to Pakistan. Owing to the growing popularity of the JKLF in the early 1990s, Pakistan and its intelligence service started forming new small groups of militants. These groups stood for the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan, changing the ideology of militancy forever.[70]

In the second phase of militancy, more and more pro-Pakistan groups were formed, which recruited and trained in Pakistan. To ensure a full grip on the insurgency, Pakistan also robbed the militancy of its ethno-nationalist character. Simultaneously, it pulled support away from the JKLF. The militant groups in the second phase started recruiting Pakistani nationals in their fold. Around 1994, veterans of Afghan jihad

(including Pakistani nationals and Afghans) had a with a pan-Islamist agenda. They bolstered the ranks of militant groups along with the Kashmiri cadre. When the pro-Islamist HM emerged as a dominant group, it started attracting more Kashmiris into its fold. The ideology of militancy shifted from being pro-independence and became pro-Pakistan. HM drew its ideological inspiration from Jamaat-e-Islami, which was the strongest and the biggest religious right-wing group in J&K.[71]

However, as the fatigue caused by intense violence set in, the local Kashmiri population drifted away from militancy, with fewer Kashmiri youth showing interest. The recruitment of local Kashmiris became negligible. This gave way to the third phase of militancy. New groups with a pan-Islamist ideology, such as JeM, LeT, HUJI, now dominated the militancy in Kashmir. Studies have shown that these groups largely comprised Pakistani citizens.[72,73]

In all the phases, Pakistan remained central to the ideological outlook of the groups. Most of them sought the annexation and merger of Kashmir with Pakistan. However, with the rise of new militancy, some groups emerged to oppose nationalism. For the first time, the rhetoric of militant groups openly condemned and criticised Pakistan, seeking instead to establish Islamic rule in J&K.

This phase of the militancy has seen a greater ideological drift.[74] The emergence of groups such as AGH and ISJK has significantly changed the ideological contours of the militancy in Kashmir. Burhan Wani, the pioneer of "new militancy" in Kashmir, espoused a pan-Islamist cause and called for the establishment of Shariah rule, while remaining a part of HM, which was largely seen as an Islamist separatist organisation.[75]

Burhan Wani's first call for jihad came in the form of a video clip addressed to the people of Kashmir. The video release was stylistically

similar to those by global Islamist terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zahwari. In the six-minute-long video clip, Burhan had a copy of the Quran on a desk in front of him, sitting alongside two other militants holding assault rifles. More pertinent were the contents of the speech, which was markedly different from a traditional anti-India stance to a more pan-Islamist agenda of establishing a caliphate. [76]

In a video released in August 2015, Wani, then serving as the divisional commander of HM in South Kashmir, spelt out the raison d'etre of the new militant movement: "Leaving our homes, our families, the comforts of the world and sacrificing our future, we have come into the field of action so that the honour of our mothers and sisters is safeguarded so that a caliphate is established in Kashmir. We will not stop until a caliphate is established over the entire world."[77]

On the anniversary of Wani's death in July 2019, his successor, Zakir Bhat, popularly known as Zakir Musa, issued an audio message, claiming that Burhan had started the militant movement in Kashmir for the cause of establishing a caliphate: "Burhan and militants did not do this for the love of country (freedom), but he laid down his life for the establishment of caliphate/khilafat. Will meet Burhan soon."[78] Interestingly, weeks before this audio clip was released, Musa had openly rebelled against Pakistan and the separatist conglomerate Hurriyat Conference. Breaking ranks with HM, which is a pro-Pakistan group, Zakir claimed that the new movement was a struggle to enforce Shariah:

> "If Hurriyat has to run its politics it shouldn't be a thorn in our way, otherwise we will chop their heads off. If you will be a thorn in our way, we will leave the infidels and kill you first. They (Hurriyat) are indulging in politics. Mujahideen's war is only to enforce Shariah. It is an Islamic struggle. People need not be confused. We have been hearing these slogans from childhood

that *Azadi Ka Matlab Kya, La Ilah Ha Ilallah* (What is the meaning of Azadi, it is that Allah is one). *Pakistan Se Rishta Kya, La Ilah Hah Ilallah* (Relationship with Pakistan is that Allah is one). If this is a political struggle, then why have you people been using the mosque for politics? Then you should hold a protest on the roads if this is a political struggle. Why have you been using the pulpits of the mosques for a political struggle? If this a political struggle then why are they coming to the funeral of the Mujahids? I am not a scholar and there are people who ask me that I shouldn't interfere in such matters. But those who should are afraid of death and that is the reason we are leading from the front. There are some people who have become contractors of Islam. If they would have told people what is Islam then we wouldn't have been forced to speak. There is a clear message from Allah in the Quran against the hypocrites."[79]

There was a marked difference between Zakir Musa and Burhan Wani. While giving his call for jihad and stating the new movement was to establish an Islamic caliphate, Wani did not show any diffidence towards Pakistan. However, Musa established AGH (Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind), the first Al-Qaeda offshoot in Kashmir, with a pan-Islamist agenda. The group derives its name from the Islamic prophecy of Ghazwat-ul-Hind, whose primary tenet was the establishment of Islamic rule in the Indian subcontinent. The announcement about the establishment of this group came from the Al-Qaeda-linked media groups. Since its formation, many of the chiefs of the group and its cadre have been killed in encounters with security forces in J&K. After Musa's death, Al-Qaeda glorified him as the first chief of AGH.[80]

Abdul Hameed Lelhari, Zakir Musa's successor, called for a new shura, a consultative council of leaders of various groups active in Kashmir —breaking free from Pakistan—for jihad in Kashmir. This call

came after differences between HM and the AGH led to an intra-group clash. The emergence of the pro-ISIS faction of jihadists in J&K has also cemented this ideological drift. A small number of militants killed in the Valley has been claimed by ISIS media outlets. However, the ISIS-inspired militants have failed to organise as efficiently as those from AGH, which has shown continuity in its leadership succession and has been able to attract more recruits in the region. Both groups have run extensive social media campaigns, particularly on encrypted chat platforms such as the Telegram.[81]

In February 2016, the Islamic State for the first time announced its plans to establish its foothold in Kashmir. In November of the same year, ISIS carried out its first attack in Srinagar, in which one policeman was killed and some others injured. Amaq reported this as "the first attack in Kashmir valley." One of the attackers, a local Kashmiri Mughees Mir was also killed in the ensuing gunfight. He was said to be the first proponent of ISIS in Kashmir. ISIS flags were unfurled at his funeral. While much of this group's activity was limited to the online realm, it managed to attract a small number of recruits. In December, ISIS released a video using #WilayatKashmir, which showed its Kashmiri recruits owing allegiance to Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi and inviting more Kashmiris to join the caliphate. [82]

Some analysts and members of the security establishment have belittled these groups, since they failed to attract many recruits. Most of the recruits of AGH and ISJK have come from HM and LeT. In the absence of logistical and financial support from Pakistan, they failed to flourish or pose a serious threat. However, the ideological disruption of these groups has changed the contours of new militancy in Kashmir and gained widespread public support.[83] Moreover, the ideological positions of the militant groups have ossified in this new phase. The groups are openly calling for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Kashmir.

Amidst the changing ideologies, the nature of militant operations has remained largely the same. Militant groups still rely on grenade attacks and fidayeen attacks on military establishments. As in the past, they actively target the military and civilians that they consider threats. The Pulwama incident was the first one in which a VBIED was used to attack J&K. That the attacker was a local Kashmiri as well as the events following this attack—particularly a failed attempt by another suicide bomber—are red flags that need consideration. The changing ideological nature of militancy in J&K may lead to more fidayeen attack missions by local Kashmiris. However, the evidence available so far does not show a significant trend in that direction.

RISE OF NEW MILITANCY: DRIVERS

By 1996, local Kashmiris had become disillusioned with militancy and violence. The election that year, and the installation of a popular state government, shifted the tide. However, it was the peace process between India and Pakistan that gave a sense of hope that the Kashmir issue could be solved politically.

While the peace process between India and Pakistan led to many confidence-building measures, it eventually failed to achieve a lasting settlement. This, in turn, gave rise to a new generation of cynical Kashmiris. Thereafter, the agitation of 2008 and 2010 radicalised the public opinion sharply against India. This was primarily because the security responses had not changed much despite the advent of militancy. While the political expression of Kashmir has become less violent, relying on mass demonstrations on the street, the security responses continue to be driven by a counter-insurgency approach. The security forces responded to the mass demonstrations and stone-pelting incidents with immense force, comparable to their reaction to violent militancy. It took the security establishment a

considerable amount of time to develop capacities to deal with the protesting crowds.

Concurrently, the agitation of 2008 polarised the public discourse along religious lines. The Amarnath land row created a huge divide between the populations in the Jammu region and in the Kashmir region. In both regions, agitations were led by the religious right. In Kashmir, the agitations were spearheaded by the hardline Islamist faction of the Hurriyat Conference. It got them control of the streets and dominance over the public discourse, directing it towards a more hardline anti-India stance.

The agitation in 2010 popularised stone-pelting, and it spread across Kashmir. The responses to the agitation showed that the security forces lacked the capacity and training to deal with mass protests. They used disproportionate force, meant for militancy and terrorism. It is important to note that Burhan Wani joined militancy after he was humiliated and beaten by the special operations groups (special counter-insurgency force) of the J&K Police. Similarly, the majority of the youth who eventually joined the militancy began as stone-pelters. Security forces were not just unequipped to stop the graduation to militancy but, as David Devadas argues, their counter-measures actually pushed more and more youth towards militancy.

The 2014 elections resulted in a split verdict, where the PDP emerged as the single-largest party with a majority in Kashmir and the BJP swept the polls in Jammu. The coming together of the BJP and the PDP, which was seen as an effort to bridge the divide between the two regions—essentially between the Hindu and the Muslim populations—failed.

The BJP–PDP alliance pushed South Kashmir, which had overwhelmingly voted for the PDP, towards a radical path. The PDP's

main vote bank in South Kashmir was the cadre and support base of the right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami. After the alliance with the BJP, the Jamaat vote bank of the PDP felt betrayed and went against the latter, whose chief minister was at the helm of the affairs.

Jamaat's rebellion against the PDP led to a widespread agitation against the killing of Burhan Wani in 2016. This created renewed ideological and logistical support for militancy, particularly for HM. However, it was not the mere existence of the alliance that worsened the matter. The alliance—due to ideological differences and internal tussles—functionally led to policy ad-hocism. The policy flip-flops by the PDP–BJP government, in turn, strengthened militancy. The Central government was in favour of following a hardline approach, while PDP wanted to follow a "support approach" of dialogue and reconciliation to deal. Since the Central and the state governments could not agree on a policy to deal with the situation, there was complete disarray in the functioning of the security forces. Consequently, the polarisation in the Valley increased manifold, ultimately leading to a shift in favour of militancy. The new militant movement was thus born. Burhan Wani's death led to more mass agitations in Kashmir, the first in two decades against the killing of a militant. These events became a catalyst in the increase of militancy, particularly in South Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

Much of the analysis presented in this paper is based on the evidence obtained before 5 August 2019, when the Government of India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution, bifurcating the J&K into two Union Territories. The restrictive measures brought in by the government in the state included a prolonged communication clampdown and internet shutdown. At the time of writing this paper, the shutdown had gone on for more than 156 days.

The Pulwama attack was conducted, planned and executed by the internationally designated terror group JeM. However, the group gave it a local façade by deploying a Kashmiri to conduct the attack. The synergy between HM and Pakistani groups such as LeT and JeM has made the militancy in Kashmir more resilient and much stealthier. The LeT and JeM will continue to utilise its Kashmiri cadre to conduct attacks in the Valley, to ensure that the Pakistani deep state does not leave its fingerprints on terrorism in Kashmir. Moreover, the widespread popular support enjoyed by the militant groups gives the terror activities local legitimacy.

There is a possibility that the internet shutdown will lead to a decline in recruitments as the militant groups have not been able to push their propaganda as effectively as they had done before. However, an internet shutdown is only a stopgap and unsustainable in the long run. When the government decides to restore internet in the Valley, militant groups will restart their use of social media for propaganda and communications. Indeed, some reports have suggested that the groups are using satellite phones to overcome the restrictions placed by the government. This means that while the outreach of the groups to masses is at a grinding halt, intergroup communications could be continuing. For as long terror groups have local legitimacy, militancy will remain resilient in J&K, prolonging the conflict.

Despite the new technologically advanced methods of the new militancy, e.g. the use of social media, India has continued to respond in a traditional manner. The old counter-insurgency group has mainly relied on a military approach of neutralising active militants and scaling down the threats. However, the challenges posed in the cyber domain have not been tackled with effective counter campaigns. Similarly, the cooperation of militant groups on the ground has not been tackled effectively.

What the militancy lacks in terms of cadre strength and weaponry is fulfilled by the support of the local population and disruptive crowds, which facilitates the planning of attacks such as the one in Pulwama. It is imperative that the government tackle the problem of public support for militancy.

In the aftermath of the constitutional changed made in August 2019, the Valley has witnessed a political vacuum. Traditional political groups—both separatist and mainstream—stand discredited. In the absence of any political activity, there is likely to be an increase in public support for militant groups. The geographical spread of the militancy may increase and span over parts of Jammu, where Muslims reside in large numbers, as well as the Kargil district of the Union Territory of Ladakh, which has witnessed significant protests against the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state.

The emergence of new groups such as AGH- and ISIS-inspired groups gives Pakistan plausible deniability, as these groups seemingly challenge the pro-Pakistan groups. The hardcore pan-Islamist ideological drift of the conflict in Kashmir is only going to aggravate the threats of fidayeen missions.

The approach to countering militancy cannot be primarily focused on kinetic operations, since they will fail to address the security threats in the cyber domain. Similarly, there is a dearth of preventive measures to cull the radicalisation and recruitment of local youth. While there has been some success in weaning youth off militancy and mainstreaming them, the government does not yet have a clear policy to address the issues of rehabilitation and de-radicalisation. Thus, the changing contours of militancy in Kashmir demand a redefinition of policies and responses that go beyond traditional approaches. ORF

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