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# Kashmir Militancy After 370: An Assessment of Pakistan's Proxy War

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## Abstract

*India's peaceful abrogation of Article 370 was a major geopolitical setback and an intelligence failure for Pakistan. In one stroke, India severely dented Pakistan's complex and layered infrastructure of militancy. Contrary to expectations when there was no widespread backlash against it, the ISI-masterminds pressurised the local terrorist organisations and Islamist groups to execute a large-scale terror attack or orchestrate a massive civil uprising. However, when they failed, clueless and perplexed Pakistan made drastic strategic and tactical changes in running Kashmir's militancy to gain its lost ground. The most significant change was to minimise the role of local terrorist groups like Hizbul Mujahidin (HM) and strengthen the foreign terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and Al Badr as the leading groups. While to elude the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) scrutiny, many front organisations were created such as the LeT-led The Resistance Front (TRF) that emerged as the most active offshoot, claiming most terror attacks after 370. Another significant development is the emergence of Turkey as a critical stakeholder in Kashmir's conflict theatre- working on multiple fronts ranging from militancy, diplomacy to inciting civil unrest. Given this context, the paper discusses and critically analyses the strategic and tactical changes ushered in by Pakistan in Kashmir's proxy war after the abrogation of Article 370.<sup>1</sup>*

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## Introduction

On 25 May 2020, Islamabad's (Pakistan) Deputy Commissioner's Twitter handle informed of a cylinder blast in an abandoned car in the street at G-10/2, in Islamabad.<sup>2</sup> Reportedly, the residence of Syed Salahuddin, 'designated global terrorist' (by the US State Department),<sup>3</sup> supreme commander of Kashmir's banned terrorist group Hizbul Mujahideen and also the chief of the United Jihad Council (UJC), an ISI-controlled umbrella organisation for all militant groups in Kashmir, which manages the nuts and bolts of militancy and separatism in India-administered Kashmir.

The author's informed interlocutors in Kashmir and Indian intelligence agencies confirmed that the ISI orchestrated the attack to threaten Salahuddin, of dire consequences if he did not refrain from publicly damning ISI in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK).<sup>4</sup> However, due to Pakistan's tightly controlled media, the event more or less escaped the global counter-terrorism analysts' critical scrutiny.

A closer analysis signals towards alarming strategic and tactical changes in Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir. After India abrogated Kashmir's quasi-autonomous status on August 2019, Pakistan has been giving a big push to Kashmir's militancy. However, in the new strategy, the role and relevance of the local terrorist groups like HM stand diminished. In the post-370 militancy scenario, the foreign terrorist groups, primarily ISI's core assets, such as JeM and LeT, have emerged as the most powerful actors in Kashmir, marginalising the local groups such as the HM. Furthermore, global state and non-state jihadist actors such as Turkey, Iran, and the Taliban are emerging as critical players in shaping the contours of Kashmir's terrorism. This brings into perspective the changing dynamics of the Kashmir conflict and in light of this, the paper seeks to discuss and critically analyse the strategic and tactical changes ushered in by Pakistan in Kashmir's proxy war after the abrogation of Article 370.

## **Abrogation of Kashmir's Special Status—A Shocker to Pakistan**

Over the last three decades of militancy, Pakistan established a robust constituency in Kashmir, rooted in a network of its proxy terrorist groups (both local and foreign) and their Over Ground Worker (OGW) network, separatist Hurriyat, radical Islamist organisations like Jamaat-i-Islami, Hawala operators, Human rights activists, mainstream politicians, media and the charity organisations.<sup>5</sup> This well-knit and internally cohesive constituency has also enabled Pakistan to build, sustain and develop its highly complex and sophisticated intelligence network with an intense penetration in the state administration and intelligence agencies. Such a complex and layered intelligence set-up provided ISI with timely inputs on the existing and emerging social, political, and security-related developments.

However, in August 2019, its 'deep-state' failed when India shocked Pakistan by abrogating Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which gave a semi-autonomous status to Kashmir.<sup>6</sup> India's Kashmir move was not only a massive intelligence failure but also a significant blow to ISI's terror juggernaut in Kashmir, which it had built systematically and strategically over the last three decades. Contrary to Islamabad's expectations, there was no popular revolt and social unrest. Except for a few minor incidents of protests and civilian deaths, the Kashmir valley remained peaceful and cooperative in implementing the abrogation decision on the ground.

### **Reasons for the Peace after August 2019**

After the encounter-death of a celebrity militant Zakir Musa of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind, Al Qaeda's local affiliate, fatigue was setting in among the local militants. The ordinary people in the valley had long become weary of conflict.<sup>7</sup> Besides, they also showed symptoms of massive disillusionment and even hatred for Pakistan—realising that Pakistan was shedding the blood of local youth for its geopolitical interests.

In this perspective the factors that called for peace after 5 August are primarily two-fold: First, to note, in the five years that preceded Delhi's historic decision, Indian security forces had launched an aggressive drive against militancy and killed a record number of militants, the majority of whom were untrained locals, primarily motivated by religious factors rather than the secular separatist ideology.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan was content with the growing number of locals joining militancy and getting killed in encounters, in turn aggravating the hatred for India, which it thought was strengthening its own constituency. It was also economically cheaper and less risky as due to enhanced border vigilance and barbed-wire fencing, infiltrating terrorists from PoK had become a challenging task. However, Pakistan failed to perceive that along with the growing hatred for India's security forces, its own sleazy game was getting exposed to the local populace- making a significant dent in the Pro-Pakistan narrative.

Second, along with India's kinetic approach against militancy, its systematic and organised crackdown on the terror-financing network and radical Islamist organisations also ruptured militancy's infrastructure. In this domain, in particular, certain measures such as ban on the Line of Control (LoC) trade, reportedly one of the major sources of terror financing employed for smuggling cash, narcotics, and weapons, in the valley, National Investigation Agency's (NIA) offensive against Hawala operators and separatist leadership, and the Ministry of Home Affairs' (MHA) ban on Jamaat-i-Islami, the central feeder organisation to terrorist groups, acted effectively. All these measures were immensely helpful in maintaining peace for almost a year-and-a-half in Kashmir after repealing its special status. As noted, in the period 2018-2020, there was a decline in the number of terrorist incidents (5 per cent) and sponsored stone-pelting protests (75 per cent), which has been the most critical law and order challenge since the 2008 Amarnath row agitation.<sup>9</sup>

## **What Prompted the Change in Strategy and Tactics?**

The long and disturbing silence following Delhi's Kashmir move was indeed a puzzle for intelligence and security affairs analysts in Delhi and Srinagar. However, for Pakistan, it was turning into a nightmare. Prime Minister Imran Khan's attempts to rally the global diplomatic community against India on Delhi's '5 August' decision ended in a disaster. The majority of the Arab nations and the western world supported India, and Pakistan was left with allies like Turkey, questionable for its secret ties with terrorist groups, and to some extent, Malaysia. Having failed in global diplomatic outreach, Pakistan intensified ceasefire violations after the abrogation, to get global attention. As noted, the number of ceasefire violations increased from 1629 (2018), 3168 (2019) to 2027 (until 10 June 2020).<sup>10</sup>

Despite its well-planned motivation props such as global propaganda in the UN bodies and continuous ceasefire violations on the border with India, its proxies failed to galvanise the people into public revolt or even execute a large-scale terror attack. The ISI masterminds felt that Kashmir might slip out of Pakistan's grip, which means a geopolitical catastrophe. Kashmir is a jugular vein of the Pak army-quintessential to justify its disproportionate share of the budget and overweening control over the polity, economy, and society.<sup>11</sup> Further, Kashmir is also a potent symbol in popular perception- giving the Islamic republic's collective consciousness a much-needed threat to unite in an overall socio-political milieu marred by threatening fault-lines in the form of sectarian rifts and separatist insurgencies. On the Indian side, Indian political leaders<sup>12</sup> were raising the pitch on PoK,<sup>13</sup> in parliamentary debates on Article 370, maybe for entirely domestic gains; however, it led to growing suspicions and fears about a potential Indian offensive into PoK.

Pakistan could not afford to let Kashmir slip out of its grip. However, Islamabad knew it well that a full-blown conventional war with India would never be in the former's interest. Even with both countries having

nuclear weapons, the odds are heavily in India's favour. With regard to the nuclear question, Pakistan's top-level military leadership believes it to be futile to indulge in a nuclear misadventure.<sup>14</sup> The reason being, after Pakistan's strike, India would be left with many cities; however, Pakistan will be faced with disproportionate retaliation as per India's nuclear doctrine, resulting in Pakistan's complete annihilation. Hence, a proxy war against India continues to remain the best bet given India's limitations in launching a full-fledged military offensive.

Even though, after 2014, the Modi government has given clear indications of an aggressive force posture and heavy retaliation through Uri surgical strike (2016) and Balakot air-strike (2019) after the Uri fedayeen attack and Pulwama suicide-bombing; respectively, it has not deterred Pakistan from abetting terror in India. It is so because Pakistan knows that India cannot respond to every terror attack with an air strike inside its territory. Anything above that is likely to escalate into a full-blown war involving other powers like China, the US and Turkey. India is least likely to precipitate such a scenario. Hence, proxy war remains a time-tested and most effective strategy; however, it had to be revitalised and improvised because India's rigorous communication and security lockdown made it extremely difficult for the HM, and the Hurriyat Conference, the local non-violent separatist group working under the firm grip of ISI, to organise terror attacks and civilian protests on a large scale. Such a realisation unleashed a significant change in the strategy and tactics of a proxy war.

The change was initially evident when ISI threatened to choke HM's finances and weapons' supplies when UJC led by Syed Salahuddin failed to organise widespread protests and terror strikes in Kashmir. The ISI gives Rs 3 crore to HM each season for operational expenses.<sup>15</sup> The prospects of losing such a hefty funding source were undoubtedly a setback for Syed Salahuddin and his HM.<sup>16</sup> The rift widened after the encounter death of Riyaz Naikoo in May 2020, Salahuddin's deputy and HM commander

in Kashmir, who was eluding the security forces for the last five years. In his funeral prayer rallies in PoK, Salahuddin said that Indian forces had the upper hand in Kashmir. Reportedly, he even ranted against ISI in his public speech during the funeral prayer; however, its recording is not available for reasons more than obvious.

As a result, ISI's Kashmir desk began prioritising foreign terrorist groups like LeT and JeM and sidelining Salahuddin from its core meetings convened to chart out the strategy for militancy in post-370 Kashmir. Reportedly, in some meetings, there were heated arguments between Salahuddin and his ISI-handlers. Finally, the story ended with the cylinder blast outside his residence. To which, the message was clear

- The local groups like HM are redundant for ISI because they failed to deliver after Article 370.
- The tone and tenor of the proxy war would undergo massive changes.

### **A Brief Overview of Pakistan's New Strategy**

In the new strategy, foreign terrorist groups such as LeT and JeM are the pillars of militancy in Kashmir. For all the operational aspects, they will be the primary force. These groups are much better trained and disciplined vis-à-vis the HM cadres. They are under the firm control of the ISI as their leadership and cadres are mostly from Pakistan. ISI has always reposed higher trust levels in the foreign terrorist groups mentioned above vis-à-vis Kashmiri terrorist groups such as the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front and HM. In 2003, when the Indian Kashmir-based HM commander Majid Dar dared to challenge the ISI-backed Salahuddin,<sup>17</sup> he was killed by unidentified gunmen, allegedly at the behest of ISI.<sup>18</sup>

With the US all set to leave Afghanistan, there is a strong likelihood of Taliban and IS-KP (Islamic State of Khorasan Province) fighters joining ISI's Kashmir-centric terrorist groups. LeT has strong ties with the Haqqani network, and both have conducted many joint terror operations in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> In the past, LeT also trained foreign fighters from the

United States, Chechnya, and many European countries, joining Al Qaeda.<sup>20</sup> Most recently, Afghan Security Forces (NDS) arrested Aslam Farooqui, the IS-KP chief and the mastermind of the attack on the Sikh gurudwara in Kabul, killing 27 civilians (March 2020).<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the NDS interrogations revealed that Farookhi was a former LeT cadre and had strong connections with the ISI.<sup>22</sup> The other outfit, JeM,<sup>23</sup> believes in the hardline Deobandi Islam to which the Taliban subscribes.<sup>24</sup> Recently, in a raid at Taliban training camp in Nangarhar, NDS killed ten JeM cadres, clearly bringing forth the ties between them.<sup>25</sup>

Reportedly, in the February 2020 meeting at Lakhwi's (Lakhwi is the deputy of the UN proscribed terrorist Hafiz Saed (carries a bounty of US\$ ten million) in LeT and an alleged mastermind of Mumbai attacks 2008) residence, the ISI's Kashmir desk officials met all the militant commanders.<sup>26</sup> Most interestingly, Bakht Zameen, the chief of Al Badr, was also invited to the meeting mentioned above.<sup>27</sup> Al Badr terrorist group was active in Kashmir in the 1990s. However, by the mid-2000s, it became defunct in Kashmir. However, it was active in the Af-Pak border region, where it developed robust links with the Haqqani group, the Taliban's sword arm. Reviving Al Badr in Kashmir clearly brings forth the essence of the new strategy, i.e., strengthening the foreign terrorist groups.

Further, as per the information provided by a senior Jammu and Kashmir Police official, on the condition of anonymity, the ISI handlers did not allow Salahuddin to participate in that meeting.<sup>28</sup> In the meeting, it was decided to give a big push to the infiltration of terrorists into the Indian side of Kashmir and shift cadres from Afghanistan to Kashmir.<sup>29</sup> Reportedly, Pakistan's intelligence set-up promised all kinds of logistical, operational, and financial support for the large-scale infiltration bid. The news reports of 450 terrorists (April 2020) waiting in the PoK launch pads to enter into Indian Kashmir confirm the implementation of the decisions taken in the meeting mentioned above.<sup>30</sup> Later, Indian



intelligence agencies confirmed the interception of Pashto conversations in PoK launch-pads, suggesting a substantial likelihood of Pakistan shifting jihadist cadres from Afghanistan to Kashmir.<sup>31</sup>

Notably, the foreign terrorist cadres of LeT and JeM are much better trained and skilled than the cadres of the local terrorist groups like HM. Also, they have a very extremist outlook and higher levels of religious motivation vis-à-vis the local terrorists. It is pertinent to mention that JeM executed some of the most lethal fidayeen attacks in India, such as the most recent Pulwama suicide bombing (February 2019), in which 42 soldiers died, and India and Pakistan came on the verge of a full-blown war. Before that, Jaish also conducted deadly fidayeen attacks in Uri, Pathankot, and the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament, which also brought the two nations very close to war. Jaish's precursor Harkat-ul-Mujahidin was responsible for hijacking the Indian airliner IC-814.<sup>32</sup> In return, India released three terrorists, one of which Maulana Masood Azhar went on to lead JeM and continues to give nightmares to Indian security forces. Similarly, LeT has also perpetrated some of the deadliest terror attacks, including the Mumbai attacks in 2008, resulting into the death of 166 people, which included many Americans.

### ***Changes in Tactical Matters to Avoid the FATF Scrutiny and Optimisation of Resources***

- Pakistan is creating front organisations, as Pakistan's ties with LeT, JeM and Al Badr are an open secret. As a result, LeT and JeM have faded into the background, and most of the terrorist attacks have been claimed by the front organisations.
- They are deliberately given secular names to portray them as local and homegrown militant groups against the abrogation of Article 370 to dominate the global propaganda theatre in the war of narratives. Pakistan also intends to convincingly appeal to the international human rights and advocacy groups by secularising the

names of the new groups. The idea is to project a secular image of the Islamist separatist movement in Kashmir to derive credibility in global forums.

- It can be reasonably argued that Pakistan is sidelining the local groups like HM. However, it does not imply that Pakistan is refraining from recruiting local cadres. In fact, the new entities with secular sounding names like TRF and Jammu and Kashmir Pir Panjal Peace Forum have been created with the purpose of expanding the recruitment base, attracting more and more local boys. However, the leadership and decision-making powers will be vested with foreign terrorist groups.
- These groups make excellent social media use to assert their presence, motivate youth to join them, sustain and strengthen resentment as a dominant narrative and run psy-ops to demoralise the security forces. This is a part of Pakistan's larger information warfare against India (outlined in Pakistan's 2020 Green Book), to keep the global attention focused on Indian Kashmir and to severely dent India's goodwill and development efforts in Kashmir with fake videos, twitter posts, thereby incite the local population into unrest.<sup>33</sup>
- They have bypassed the communication lockdown by using VPN (Virtual Private Networks) systems, using telecom companies' private networks. Reportedly, some FTs also carried Satsleeve devices which can convert a normal mobile phone into a satellite-based internet phone.<sup>34</sup> Militant cadres use customised and highly advanced encrypted communication apps, mostly coming from Pakistan and Turkey. Initially, they were using the Russian application Telegram, trusted for its privacy features. Later, Turkish apps such as BiP provided a reliable channel as its servers are in Turkey, a friendly nation. They also use Conion, a TOR (The Onion Router) based application.<sup>35</sup> In TOR-based applications, a small group of three to four people can develop their servers, making it extremely challenging to break

into their systems. Apart from these, there are many customised and advanced applications developed by ISI's cyber experts. It is not easy to detect them because they are not even on Google Play Store. Skype and Calculator are two examples of such encrypted communication applications. Skype has the advantage of working on VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), enabling the user to make regular calls to landline numbers or mobile numbers.<sup>36</sup>

- They have specifically targeted non-local labourers, truck drivers, traders, and those who are getting domicile certificates to create an impression that the resistance is against the end of special status and plans of altering the demography of the region. However, the underlying objectives are to build a massive popular resistance against the abrogation of Article 370 by getting the sympathies of a larger audience, including relatively secular and liberal-minded individuals who would not have come strongly in support of a purely religious objective, and strengthen the narrative of Kashmir militancy being a local and homegrown resistance, in the international narrative and propaganda domains.
- In the new strategy, the militants joining the terrorist groups are not uploading their pictures on social media, which was a practice before 5 August 2019. This is to keep themselves off the radar of SFs and hinder intelligence gathering on them. Further, the purpose is to tire and frustrate the SFs by projecting the militancy as leaderless, structure-less, and spontaneous. Also, running militancy through such hybrid, vague, and scattered terror outfits creates smokescreens that hamper the intelligence gathering.
- In the terror attacks, the new outfits have focused on killing security forces personnel, including senior officers, which is damaging for the morale of SFs. Lately, the militants have conducted many terror attacks in Srinagar city, some even close to VVIP areas, during foreign diplomats' visit. Such audacious attacks demonstrate their capabilities,

intelligence penetration, and competence and also demoralise the SFs. They also serve the purpose of conveying to the international community that India's claims of restoring normalcy and peace in Kashmir are hollow.

- The nature of attacks, combat skills, and marksmanship displayed by terrorist cadres belonging to these front organisations suggest that they have highly trained foreign terrorists from Pakistan and Afghanistan. In one of the attacks on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp, the militants took an accurate headshot, and in the Handwara (February 2020) encounter, officers of the rank of Colonel and Major were killed. Such expertise comes only after rigorous training, under the supervision of the Pak army's Special Forces.
- Besides, in some of the encounters in 2020, advanced weaponry has been recovered. In one of the recent encounters in the Kulgam district of South Kashmir, the police recovered a Pika machine gun, a significant departure from the past.<sup>37</sup> In Kashmir, mostly terrorists have been using AK 47 rifles, Self-Loading Rifles (SLRs), Chinese pistols, and Pakistan's Shaheen pistol. The militant groups have been found with armour piercing bullets.<sup>38</sup> Also, the presence of trained snipers cannot be ruled out.

### **The Resistance Front—A New Wing of LeT**

Some of the prominent front/virtual terrorist groups include The Resistance Front, People's Anti-Fascist Front, Jammu and Kashmir Pirpanjal Peace Forum, Lashkar-i-Mustapha, Kashmir Tigers, and Muslim Janbaz Force.<sup>39</sup> TRF has emerged as the most active and lethal terrorist outfit after 370. Reportedly, it is a front of LeT; however, its cadres have also come from HM and JeM. According to Indian intelligence sources, it is controlled by three LeT handlers Sajad Jat for North Kashmir, Khalid for Central Kashmir and Hanzala Adnan for South Kashmir.<sup>40</sup> It has claimed some of the deadliest terrorist acts. With a commanding presence

on social media, it creates smokescreens by claiming responsibility for terror attacks. It maintains an excellent outreach through its audio and video communications and pamphlets.

The incidents that the TRF claims are as follows:

- In 19 October, five labourers from West Bengal were killed.<sup>41</sup> The attack coincided with European delegates' visit, for the desired messaging, i.e., to convey to foreigners that Kashmir is far from normalcy.<sup>42</sup> No group ever officially claimed it. On the condition of anonymity, the local officers told the author during his field research that JeM was behind the killings. However, TRF targeting of non-locals suggests a substantial likelihood of TRF being involved in it.
- In the same month, four non-local truck drivers were killed, and a trader from Punjab was killed.<sup>43</sup>
- In February 2020, TRF claimed to have exploded a grenade in the high-profile Lal Chowk area.<sup>44</sup> It also claimed the encounter of SFs in Handwara-Colonel Ashutosh Sharma (CO 21 RR) and a Major martyred. However, Jammu and Kashmir Police (JKP) refuted their claims and stated that it is an offshoot of LeT. Further, JKP said that one of the militants killed was Haidar, a Pakistani national and the commander of LeT in Kashmir.<sup>45</sup>
- In April 2020, TRF's name featured in the five-day-long Keran encounter (Operation Rangdouri Behak) in which five soldiers martyred.<sup>46</sup> Three of the slain militants were locals who were missing since 2018 and had travelled to Pakistan on a valid visa through the Wagah-Attari route for weapons training, proving that TRF is not as local as it claims to be.<sup>47</sup>
- In May 2020, in Wangam (Kupwara) attack in which three CRPF personnel died. Reportedly, the assailants were foreign terrorists and highly trained in handling weapons as they took headshots.<sup>48</sup>
- In July and October 2020, the assassination of nine Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers. Of which, three workers were killed

in Qazigund (Kulgam), BDC Chairman Bhupinder Singh and BJP District President, Abdul Hamid Nazar in Budgam, Sarpanch, Sajjad Ahmad Khandey in Qazigund (Kulgam) and BJP state executive president, Wasim Bari and two of his family members in Bandipura.<sup>49</sup>

- In January 2021, TRF claimed to have killed a non-local jeweller in Srinagar who had acquired a domicile certificate.<sup>50</sup>

Lashkar-i-Mustapha is a front for JeM. Its chief Hidayatullah Malik was arrested in Jammu's Kunjwani area with a grenade and a pistol.<sup>51</sup> He also conducted in India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval's office in New Delhi, as per JKP.<sup>52</sup> His arrest from Jammu makes a strong case for the organization being JeM's front as JeM cadres frequently use the Jammu-Punjab border for infiltration, which Pulwama investigations finding already confirmed.

Further, on the Pulwama suicide bombing's second anniversary, 6.5 kg of IED was also recovered from the Jammu bus stand.<sup>53</sup> JKP arrested Suhail Bashir Shah of Pulwama, who disclosed in the police interrogation that he received instructions from Pakistan's Al Badr to plant the IED at the Jammu bus stand.<sup>54</sup> Maulvi Altaf, the chief of the newly formed group Kashmir Tigers, was apprehended from Anantnag (Kashmir).<sup>55</sup> He was earlier a member of JeM, which brings forth JeM's another offshoot, i.e., Kashmir Tigers.<sup>56</sup>

Another front group, Muslim Janbaaz Force, claimed the most recent attack (17 January 2021) on a son of a restaurant owner (Krishna Dhaba), in Srinagar, in the vicinity of highly secure zones like Gupkar Road and the residence of the High Court Chief Justice. After the attack, they claimed its responsibility in a letter on the internet in which they warned non-locals against obtaining the domicile certificate. The attack coincided with the visit of European diplomats in Kashmir.<sup>57</sup>

## **Emerging Scenario: What to Expect?**

In this perspective, the future trends in Kashmir can be assessed in the following ways:

- In none of the cases, the parent organisations, that is, the JeM and LeT, claimed any link with the offshoots. It is a deliberate strategy to create smokescreens of scattered, dispersed and leaderless, and unstructured militancy. In the future, this trend will continue. The local groups like HM will continue to survive, but only to maintain the façade of honouring local sentiments and strengthen popular support.
- After the ban on Jamaat-i-Islami (February 2019), initially, Jamaat cadres hibernated in rural areas. However, over the last six to seven months, they have significantly revived their activities through clandestine religious congregations and meetings. Jamaat's activities have picked up the pace in Shopian, Pulwama, and Srinagar downtown. However, the current strategy is to multiply the numbers and strengthen the social base and refrain from overt display of religious symbols to elude the intelligence agencies and political activities. However, such grassroots-level mobilisation work can prepare a fertile ground for revitalising the support system for terrorist groups and organising massive social unrest in the future at the opportune moment.
- Between 2018 and 2020 (up till December 2020), there was an increase of 22 per cent in recruitment into terrorist organisations, which implies that Pakistan's strategy to sustain the anti-India resentment and increase the number of local terrorists has been relatively successful.<sup>58</sup> Besides, in the post-370 period, there was a massive infiltration of FTs. Though there is no precise data about the action numbers, broad estimates from the author's expert interlocutors put the figure between 500 to 600.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, out of the total 152 terrorists killed, 32 were FTs, and in 2020, out of

the total 203 terrorists killed, 37 were FTs, which implies that a significant number of them are safely sheltered in Kashmir and other parts of India.<sup>60</sup> Some of the recent attacks have taken place in safe and militarised zones of Srinagar, which amply suggests that militants have made a firm base in Srinagar city.

- Given the robust presence of foreign terrorists, in the future, Kashmir will witness more Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) attacks on the convoys of SFs, fidayeen attacks on civilians and military installations, and killings of non-Kashmiri Indians. The terrorist groups will also target the Kashmiri police and administrative officers who were at the forefront in supporting the government on the Article 370 issue and efficiently maintaining law and order and managing the administration after August 2019.<sup>61</sup>
- Despite that ISI-controlled FT organisations like LeT, JeM, and Al Badr have emerged as the principal actors in Kashmir theatre, the local militants will continue to form a sizable chunk of terrorist groups. The Transnational Terrorist Groups (TTGs) like Al Qaeda and ISIS have made forays in Kashmir. However, they will function under the overall leadership and protection of ISI. They will not be able to go against Pakistan and occupy the mainstream space in militancy. Hence, militancy is less likely to go Iraq-Syria way even though the state has gone through intense Jihadi radicalisation. It merits a mention here that Kashmir's syncretic and moderate Islamic roots are a strong barrier against entities like the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS in no small measure. Hence, Kashmir is less likely to witness suicide bombings on a large scale, with local boys volunteering for fidayeen missions. Lastly, India's SFs are professional, trained and firm, and have a robust intelligence network; hence militancy will never dominate the socio-political space.
- After the US withdrawal, Pakistan is likely to shift the launch-pads and training camps of terrorist groups to Afghanistan, which will give



Pakistan plausible deniability in the event of a major terror attack in India. JeM cadres' interception at a Taliban training camp in Nangarhar (April 2020) confirms that Pakistan has already started training a part of its Kashmir-centric terrorist cadres in Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup>

- After 5 August 2019, Turkey and Pakistan have done a massive propaganda exercise to sustain and strengthen anti-India resentment, anger, and hatred. In the international forums, Imran Khan and RT Erdogan launched a tirade against India. In Kashmir, they have tried to project the abrogation of Article 370 on the lines of the alleged election rigging of 1987 and build a resistance narrative around it through provocative videos, songs, rap songs, soaps, and media coverage in Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) world.<sup>63</sup> They are available on google and youtube.<sup>64</sup> The main themes in the propaganda videos and literature are anti-India.<sup>65</sup> However, they are a concoction of lies, deceit, and exaggeration. They have provoking lyrics motivating people to fight for 'Azadi'. The videos depict ordinary people as victims with pellet gun injuries on their faces and the Indian security forces as brutal violators of human rights. In TRT world reports, communication lockdown and security lockdown issues were blown out of proportion, cleverly sidelining the aspect of jihadist radicalisation, which in the first place was the reason to resort to such strict security measures. They often fabricate the actual incident. In one of the videos, they showed a child sitting on his father's dead body, with soldiers marching in uniforms.<sup>66</sup> In the actual incident, the father died in the cross-firing between the SFs and militants, reportedly at the hands of the militants because the SFs follow detailed protocols of not harming the civilians. They have also shown ordinary people, including the females, being beaten ruthlessly with clubs and civilians being fired upon in other videos.<sup>67</sup> Further, Turkish videos have a distinct trait of featuring Kashmir and Palestine to equate them and internalise the Kashmir issue.<sup>68</sup> They are

in Turkish and Urdu so that they appeal to Turkish-speaking people across the globe. The idea is to seek sympathy from across the globe, from the governments, human rights activists, and intellectuals, by painting Kashmir militancy as a secular struggle against a ruthless dictatorship. Such biased videos and rap songs are poisoning young minds in a major way. Through the human rights plank, Pakistan and Turkey are luring young minds who are relatively secular and moderate. Further, TRT world pays Rs 20,000 (US\$ 280) to Kashmir-based freelance writers for their one-sided news stories and opinion pieces, made to look objective and credible.<sup>69</sup>

Turkish serial “Diliris Erutgrul” became a massive hit in Kashmir. It was widely watched during the Corona pandemic and communication and security lockdown post-August 5, 2019.<sup>70</sup> Its theme of glorifying Muslims’ Ottoman history coincided with the security and communication clampdown in Kashmir, which local people perceived as persecution and humiliation on account of their religious identity. After Ertugrul, an average Kashmiri identifies himself with Turkey. Many of them want to visit the grave of caliph Osman in Turkey. Such a popular sentiment can be the force that Pakistan and Turkey can use to orchestrate a massive civil resistance in the future. Also, year-and-a-half-long lockdown, internet shut down, poor governance, shoddy infrastructure, corruption, bureaucratic apathy and arrogance, and political vacuum have fuelled the resentment, alienation, and anger against Delhi, further strengthening the anti-India narrative.

- Given Erdogan’s ties with transnational terrorist groups in the Middle East, strengthening ties with Pakistan, and his recent activism on Kashmir, Turkey, is likely to train the cadres of Kashmir-centric terrorist groups and supply them with its sophisticated and advanced drone technology. As per the latest intelligence reports, terrorist groups will use drones to attacks police posts and

military installations. Turkey's sophisticated Byraktar and Anka drones proved a great success in Syria<sup>71</sup> and, more recently, in the Armenia-Azerbaijan war.<sup>72</sup> So far, militants groups have been using drones for dropping weapons. With the rapid advancements in sophistication, there is a possibility of using them for infiltrating terrorists across the border.

- Besides, Turkey's private paramilitary group, SADAT, having close ties with Erdogan and known for training jihadis in Syria and Libya, is likely to become active in Kashmir. However, there is not much evidence of SADAT's direct involvement in Kashmir, except that US-based Ghulam Nabi Fai (a Kashmiri), ISI-lobbyist, and the chief of Kashmir American Council is a member of the Union of NGOs of Islamic World (IDSB) a front organisation of SADAT.<sup>73</sup> He has been seen with the SADAT chief, Tanriverdi, on various occasions. However, SADAT has robust ties with Pakistan's army and intelligence. SADAT is likely to establish a firm footing in Afghanistan, where it can train terrorists of all kinds, i.e., Taliban, ISKP, Haqqani Network, and all the Kashmir-centric groups. Additionally, SADAT can also train and raise coordinators in Kashmir who are experts in mobilising people and organising massive social unrest.

## Policy Recommendations

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the policy recommendations in detail, at such a critical stage, a few measures (in brief) are mentioned below:

- Win back the hearts and minds of the local population with outreach, political dialogue, good governance, and providing a healing touch.
- India must reinvigorate its efforts to check infiltration by all means and continue a harsh crackdown against terrorist groups and jihadist organisations.

- Special operations to apprehend and prosecute the dispersed cadres and sympathisers of Jamaat-i-Islami, a banned local Islamist group, will deprive the foreign terrorists of the local support base, which will make it immensely difficult for them to operate.
- India needs a strong and aggressive force posture with Pakistan, i.e., to make Pakistan's transgressions costly. It may lead to more cross-border surgical strikes and air strikes; however, such an approach runs a perennial risk of intentional or unintentional escalation.
- India has to provide a robust counter to Pakistan-Turkey's propaganda war in both international theatres and the local theatre of Kashmir. Delhi needs to mobilise global opinion in its favour and exert pressure on Pakistan through global forums, advocacy groups, and NGOs. It may require considerable efforts in building a favourable narrative on Kashmir in global academic, diplomatic and journalistic circles, which may be an extremely tough task for Indian politicians, diplomats, and security agencies, given the limitations of their resources, priorities, skills, and confusions.
- Extending full-fledged diplomatic and moral support to Pakistan's internal insurgent groups like the Baluch separatist movement, Sindh agitation, and the Pashtun Tahfuz movement may put Pakistan in a discomfiting position. India can also consider hosting the 'government-in-exile' of such regional separatist groups of Pakistan.

## Conclusion

After India's abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, Pakistan's investment of three decades received a major setback. Realising that Kashmir, its jugular vein, might slip out of its control, Pakistan changed tactics and strategy. There is also a rapid rise in the role of international actors in the Kashmir theatre. Most prominently, Turkey's role has direct relevance to militancy; however, other powers like Iran, China and Saudi Arabia have also developed robust stakes and networks in Kashmir. In addition to the

state actors, in the future, the global non-state actors will also be active in Kashmir.

Further alarming alienation levels among the local populace and the government's anti-Muslim image may make the situation even more complex and exacerbate Delhi's problems. By all measures, it seems India is in for challenging times in Kashmir. Hence, India's Kashmir-specific policymaking needs to be mindful of the developments taking place in the Kashmir theatre- both internally and externally.

## Notes

1. This article is primarily based on the author's 40-day field trip to Jammu and Kashmir from January-February 2021 as part of research for his upcoming book project on the issue of terror financing in Kashmir, mostly during the communication and security lockdown phase following the abrogation of Article 370. During his research work, the author has interacted with a diverse range of interlocutors, including security officials, intelligence officers, militants, ex-militants, OGWs (Over Ground Workers) of militants, religious clerics, members of Jamaat-i-Islami, separatist leaders, mainstream politicians, students of the colleges and universities, ordinary citizens, government servants, as well as some deeply placed informers. The assessment is based on the corroboration of the findings from the field visit with secondary sources, which includes open-source news analysis. In the paper, names of certain interviewees have been kept anonymous.
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