

Terrorism Trends in Kashmir

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On the surface, there is lull in terms of terrorism in Kashmir today. The number of terrorist attacks has been steadily going down for the past three years. The incidents of infiltration remain in check. Tourists are flocking to the beautiful meadows and lakes in large numbers. There have been fewer violent protests this year. There is relative peace and calm in Kashmir. But, how real is the peace? And, how long will it last? These are questions which have no easy and instant answers. They must therefore be examined more closely by joining disparate dots scattered from Sopore to Kandahar.

Terrorism in Kashmir has largely been influenced by external actors and events. There is no point in denying that there has been a persistent dissent and rebellion among the local people about the Indian state's various acts of omission and commission since 1947 but it has been the external spark which set the fire of militancy erupting in the valley after 1989. Without the active role and support of Pakistan Army and its intelligence wing, ISI, militancy in Kashmir would have either been still-born or nipped in the bud. Pakistan Army not only trained and armed jihadis from Kashmir, Punjab and other provinces in Pakistan to launch terrorist attacks in Kashmir and elsewhere in India to create a 'nuclear hot spot'.

It was the 'success' of Afghan Jihad which spurred Pakistan Army to create similar asymmetric operations in Kashmir to achieve a strategic goal which the army could not achieve through military means. The jihad in Afghanistan had spawned countless jihadis, training infrastructure, weapons and enough money

to launch the proxy war in Kashmir. The Western countries, particularly the US which spearheaded the jihad in Afghanistan, had no stomach or interest left in the region and hence paid no attention to what Pakistan was brewing in South Asia.

The militancy that raged throughout Kashmir since the end of Afghan Jihad saw thousands dead and incapacitated and million others held hostage by terrorist groups. Their agenda was not only limited to Kashmir but elsewhere in India and other parts of

South Asia. It was the military genius and determination of the Indian Army and its intelligence agencies which brought the virulent militancy to an end. Terrorist groups were systematically hunted down and their support base eliminated. Though terrorists and insurgent groups tried to revive their fortunes, the combined power of military and intelligence services kept them in check.

Quite like the mid-80s, the region is once again on the cusp of dramatic changes, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US drawdown in the next 24 months from Afghanistan is likely to create circumstances which may trigger another wave of violence as in the early 90s. By all accounts, the NATO and other allied forces are leaving Afghanistan without defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaida decisively enough. The terrorist groups active in Pakistan have, in any case, remained untouched despite the 'global war on terrorism'. Many of these Pak-based terrorist groups have been created with the sole purpose of carrying out Pakistan Army's proxy war in Kashmir.

Two of these —Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and Jaish-e-Mohammad—need to be closely scrutinised. Both have carried out series of major attacks in Kashmir and in other parts of India at the behest of Pakistan Army. Both have anti-India agenda and have openly advocated wresting away Kashmir from the Indian union as one of their priorities. Both, in a way, are by-products of Afghan Jihad and have been Pakistan Army's 'strategic assets'. LeT was created in Kunar province of Afghanistan in 1986-87 with the objective of leveraging events after the departure of the Western forces. JeM was created out of Harkat-ul Ansar, one of Pakistan Army's terrorist groups active in Afghan Jihad. Both, incidentally, have persisted with creating underground networks and allies in Kashmir and in other parts of India with mixed success.

And, both are operational and remain in the protective umbrella of Pakistan Army. LeT has grown over the years to become one of the most dreaded terrorist

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groups in the world today. JeM, stymied by some tactical blunders the group did during the Musharraf regime, is back on tracks and is busy expanding not only in Pakistan with new bases in Karachi and Peshawar but also reviving its transnational networks in Bangladesh and India.

These two factors alone give an indication of the trajectory of terrorism in Kashmir in the near future. There are other dots which need to be brought into the picture. The July 2012 arrest of seven LeT members from Sopore and frequent attempts by the group to recruit the youth, and even teenage boys, are some of the indicators of LeT's renewed bid to activate the proxy war at the behest of Pakistan Army.

The mushrooming growth of Wahhabi madrasas in Kashmir in the recent years has helped LeT to garner sympathy and support from the local population. The group, in the guise of civil society groups, has also been instigating civilian protests across the valley on some pretext or the other, deepening the distrust between the people and the state. It is also suspected that LeT militants engage the security forces in open public places to cause civilian casualties which, in turn, helps the group's objective in keeping the pot burning.

Of the 300-odd hardcore terrorists active in Kashmir, at least 90 of them owe allegiance to LeT. Others belong to Hizb-ul Mujahideen, al Badr and JeM. These numbers are likely to increase in the months ahead. There is already a noticeable increase in the attempts to infiltration and ceasefire violations by Pakistan Army which are nothing but covering fire to let the terrorists escape into Kashmir.

There are increasing numbers of reports from Pakistan occupied Kashmir of several hundred new trained cadres waiting to infiltrate. LeT has been active for quite some time in training new cadres drawn from Pakistan and in other parts of the world, including India. In fact, LeT had shifted its training from Baitul Mujahideen, where the Mumbai attackers first trained, to Dulai within months of the Mumbai 2008 attack. Several hundred new recruits since then have been trained in Dulai and other camps run by LeT. HM and other groups run their own set of training camps and have been doing so over the months with the active support of Pakistan Army and ISI.

LeT, in the last few years, has added some sharp edges to its operational capability. Its cadres are today younger than in the past and are capable of longer and tougher regimen of exercises and training. The lone surviving Mumbai attacker, Ajmal Kasab, is a case study. The group has also a boast of former army commandos as trainers in these camps and the new recruits have not only shown a better knowledge of weapons but also in navigation, intelligence

gathering, armed assault, hostage taking and use of hi-tech information tools. The trained cadres are adept at operating on land as well as maritime environment with equal felicity. The group has also adapted social media tools to recruit, generate funds, pass messages and execute operations. In Kashmir, these capabilities are likely to be deployed with greater impact as the mobile and internet penetration in the valley is quite substantial.

The group has also been active in finding local recruits. Although it has not been successful in creating a large base in the valley, it has been steadily, if slowly, gaining grounds in militancy-prone areas like Sopore. With many young men influenced by the recent spate of stone pelting protests against the state and security forces, terrorist groups like LeT with sophisticated recruitment strategies are likely to attract increased number of candidates to their cause.

It is quite clear that operational capabilities to re-launch the proxy war in Kashmir do exist among the terrorist groups sheltered. What needs to be examined is Pakistan Army's intent. One, there is no indication of the army giving up its Kashmir agenda or its policy of using terrorist groups like LeT and JeM as instruments of state policy. Two, the army is increasingly finding itself marginalised in its Afghan Gameplan and is therefore more than likely to throw a spanner in the works of the American strategy in Afghanistan. Its own social capital among the people remains doubtful as the country's economic crises creates widespread dissent and anger. Perhaps the only way for the army to reassert itself would be to create a diversion—the most convenient being revival of proxy war in Kashmir and a major terrorist strike in India.

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