



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 69

January 2015

Exploring Transnational Jihad Roots and Caliphate in Kashmir



Shweta Desai is a former Associate Fellow of CLAWS, focussing on conflict and security in Syria and transnational Jihad. She traveled to Kashmir as a part of a field research trip.

There is no presence of Al Qaeda or ISIS establishing base in India. However, the roots of militancy in Kashmir have linkages to transnational Jihad. The growing support for the extremist group in the J&K remains a worrying factor.

In the plethora of anti-India posters and graffiti¹ scrawled at various interjections from the walls of residential neighbourhoods, besides mosques in down-town Srinagar, to the narrow by-lanes of Anantnag, on the shutters of shops, voicing the popular sentiments of 'Boycott elections' and 'Quit India'², there is a sudden spurt of affinity towards the dreaded militant group of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, whose brutal savagery has taken the world by storm. Large and small scribbling of 'Welcome ISIS', 'We want ISIS', 'Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir' (ISJK) have emerged since 2014.

As an Muslim majority state (68.3 per cent of J&K state follows Islam as a majority religion³) with active terrorism activities for the last three decades, various militant outfits including Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Taiba, (Army of the

Key Points

1. The rise of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) and the subsequent joining of Indian nationals in its rank has raised concerns for the security agencies
2. It has also renewed fears that the global Islamist militancy could attract the low-intensity conflict in Kashmir, particularly after some flags and graffiti supporting the extremist militant organisation were spotted in the valley.
3. Kashmir, has a long history of militancy sponsored by Pakistan based militant groups, with threads even linking it with al Qaeda.
4. This paper explores the facets of transnational terrorism currently unleashed by ISIS and al Qaeda in Kashmir.

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Exploring transnational Jihad ...



Graffiti scrawled on a shop in Anantnag (left) and (right) on the highway to Srinagar (*Shweta Desai*)

Pure), Jaish-e-Muhammad, Hizbul Mujahedin and Al Qaeda, have tried to hijack the narrative of 'liberating Kashmir from Indian occupation,' towards a question of Islamic identity into global Jihad. In the past these groups have ineffectively attempted to colour the political conflict in Kashmir between India and Pakistan into a religious conflict to unleash Jihad and establish an Islamic State by rule of Allah.

Since the 2014 rapid onslaught of ISIS and its rival Al Qaeda's Jabhat al Nusrah in Iraq and Syria, that has triumphantly captured territory to bring in a religious sanctioned governance and uses religion to justify violence and terrorism against the 'kufirs' (infidels) in its quest to purify Islam, there are ominous signs of the global Jihad finding its sway in Kashmir. Apart from sporadic ISIS flag waving, posters and graffiti, one Kashmiri is implicated to have joined the group. Al Qaeda too has announced the formation of a new branch of the militant group in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)⁴ and has urged Kashmiris to follow the 'brothers' in Syria and Iraq to wage Jihad against India. ISIS or Al Qaeda have no military presence in India as of date, but do these groups have any potential to gain foothold in Kashmir in future?

ISIS and Kashmir

Weeks after ISIS established the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria at the end of Ramadan in July 2014 and its leader Abu Baqr al Baghdadi declared himself as a Caliph of all the Muslims in the world, there is a continuous flurry of young volunteers to join the militant group as its fighters. Amongst the 600 such volunteers from Australia, is a 26 year old Adil Fayaz, who hails from Kashmir. Fayaz is believed to have travelled to Syria from Turkey in June 2013 after completing his MBA from Queensland University in Australia and is the only Kashmiri from the list of 17 Indian nationals, fighting with the extremist groups.⁵ Kashmiri locals in the past have crossed into Pakistan for training with militant organisations with Jihadist orientation. However, this is the first known instance of a Kashmiri from Indian administered part joining a global militant group.

The valley has also witnessed more than a dozen instances of demonstrators following the Friday prayers waving flags bearing a close resemblance to those of ISIS. It is pertinent to note that these are not ISIS flags—a black flag with inscription in white reading, "There is no god but Allah. Mohammad is the messenger of Allah"—but its poor imitation (see

photos). Local Kashmiris say that waving flags of ISIS does not mean they support the militant group or its savagery; rather it is a way of registering protest to provoke the Indian armed forces. It is similar to the waving of Pakistani flags which are unfurled during any protest or demonstrations. Kashmiris seem to convey that if the Indian state feels threatened by the pro-freedom militants against whom more than 7 million armed forces are deployed, what strategy will it adopt if a dreaded militant group like Taliban or ISIS professes its ideology here? The ISIS flags, should be seen as a provocation and protest against India's multi-cultural democracy which has failed to recognise the demands of Kashmiris.

But reports of a group called ISJK inferring to the Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir have also surfaced in the valley. Lt Gen Subrata Saha, GOC of 15 corps, said there is no co-relation of ISJK with the core group of ISIS. "There is no pattern and trend of ISIS presence here. There is some appeal of the group amongst certain sections in Kashmir who are inspired by its actions on social media," he said during an interaction in July.

This is substantiated in a national survey by intelligence agencies which found that the youth from Srinagar are the top online surfers tracking news and activities related to ISIS.⁶ The availability of ISIS related propaganda in the open-domain has

increased the risk for radicalisation through internet and social media. With J&K witnessing the highest online traffic for ISIS related information, the group's extremist ideology has found a more fertile ground here. Intelligence agencies however warned that interest in ISIS's activities or its online sympathisers does not translate into active supporters or members. It does mean that there is an appeal of the militant outfit's acts amongst certain segments.

ISIS has strategically exploited social media and uses it for raising funds, recruitment and propaganda. According to one estimate, it has over 90,000⁷ accounts just on Twitter. Around 20,000 non-Syrians from Europe, US, Canada, Australia and even India⁸ have joined ISIS, mainly by getting radicalised through online 'handlers'.⁹

The appeal of Islamic State

For centuries, Kashmir has a tradition of following Islam in its spiritual and mystic form of Sufism, and has been central to the belief and culture of the valley and its population. Experts and scholars have rejected export of radical ISIS ideology amongst Kashmiris who adhere to Sufism, the benevolent form of Islam. Locals visit the Sufi shrines of the great saints dotted across the valley and believe in their healing powers. ISIS considers those venerating such places and deviating from the original practices of Islam as



Left: The original ISIS flag (Right) File photo of demonstrators in Kashmir with ISIS like flags, *India Today*

mentioned in the Quran as devil worshippers and idolaters. It has demolished tombs, ancient shrines and massacred its followers. The group has raged sectarian violence by declaring people as *takfirs* (apostates) to eliminate Shias, Christians and other non-Muslim minorities.

Most of Kashmir valley is Sunni dominated, with Shias living as minority in small enclaves. While tensions between the two sects exist as they do due to historical and religious reasons¹⁰, they have rarely spilled into mass scale sectarian violence. Shias, form 5-8 per cent of the population reside in the ghettos along Baramullah, Pattan, Sopore belt. A Shia village is identified by a poster or a board of Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini or ex-President Ahmedinijad, .

Outside every Shia village Although Pakistan sponsored militancy in the 90s and the entry of hardened Islamists, Afghan/Arab Jihadi veterans led to persecution of religious minorities. Constant threats, gruesome killings resulted in mass exodus of the Hindu minority Kashmiri Pandits from the valley, while Sikhs too have been targeted and massacred. The handfuls of native Christians live obscurely.

The minorities agree that although the neighbours and locals coaxed them to stay back, they couldn't take the risk in the face of threats to life coming mostly from the foreign militants. The winning of the Soviet war, led Jihadis in the hunt for the next battleground. Pakistan's ISI directed these Islamist warriors towards Kashmir through Azad Kashmir, which it established in October 1947, after capturing the territory from the Indian side, soon after the partition. Both Sunni and Shia have been part of the militancy as they saw the armed struggle in political context and their participation was on the basis of their Kashmiri identity, not on religious divisions.

In recent years, however there are growing inferences that the soft Sufi influenced ideology of Kashmir is lapping up to radical ideas. A 2012 report on the survey of Kashmiri youth found that six per cent of those who believe in Azaadi are beginning to identify it with promulgation of Islamic rule or government.¹¹ The percentage of Kashmiris with such a belief may be minor, but the hardening of attitudes can be attributed to the rising intrusion of Wahhabi thought or Ahle Hadees promoted by the Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith foundation. Primarily funded by Saudi Arabia, the group of Sunni Muslims adhere to the Salafis interpretation of Quran and reject many practices prevalent among the mystics (Sufiyas) of this day as un-Islamic accretions.¹² The Ahl e- Hadith foundation has 700 mosques and madrassas propagating the Salafi/Wahhabi faith with 15 lakh followers accounting to over 16 per cent of J&K's Muslims.¹³ The foundation also runs 150 schools, several colleges, orphanages, clinics and medical diagnostic centres, making it popular amongst the masses for its charitable role. The Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith's leaders condemn terrorism and have denied any role in exploiting sectarian divisions. The foundation however is known to share close links and facilitate funding from foreign Islamist organisations to the militant group Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen which is also associated with Lashkar-e-Taiba¹⁴ and other Jihadist organisations following Ahl-e-Hadith or Wahhabi ideology.¹⁵ The TuM is a part of the PoK based United Jihad Council supported by Pakistan's ISI and headed by Hizbul Mujahedin commander Syed Salauddin. Considered as the largest and the most active militant organisation in Kashmir, Hizbul has hazy but deep alliance¹⁶ with global Jihadist network based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In 2014, Kashmir born Salahuddin (now based in Pakistan) declared support for the entry of Al Qaeda in Kashmir.¹⁷

The Al Qaeda factor in Kashmir

Al Qaeda has long tried to establish its presence within

India¹⁸. Although India has remained un-touched by the global group's attacks directly, the country and the conflict in Kashmir has been referred in its propaganda for a long time now. Its Kashmir obsession goes back at least two decades and since then it has made several attempts that have failed to transform the political conflict between India and Pakistan as an Islamic problem. Osama Bin Laden first started including Kashmir in his speeches¹⁹ (in 1996) to draw attention to the massacres of Muslims by India. Laden considered the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Afghanistan, following the defeat of Soviets, to provide 'strategic depth' to wage Jihad against the suppressed people of Kashmir and Pakistan. In fact, at the end of Afghan Jihad, Al Qaeda looked towards Kashmir to liberate it from the Hindu rule; it was however denied permission by Pakistan's People's Party Government. In a 1998 interview, shortly after India conducted its second nuclear explosion, Laden announced that Jihad against India is an obligatory duty of all Muslims but bitterly complained that when Al Qaeda's Mujahed were not allowed to enter Kashmir and were instead arrested or killed. Pakistan's ISI, instrumental in launching the Kashmir militancy, was perhaps wary that AQ's entry will sideline the cause of Kashmir's liberation into international terrorism. It will also risk Pakistan's relation with the US and provide irrefutable proof to the international community that the country is a haven for terrorist organisations to operate from.

Laden, continued to support the armed struggle in Kashmir as a Jihad and as an Islamic problem. Al Qaeda developed close links with Pakistan based Kashmir centric militant groups, prominent amongst which is Lashar-e-Taiba and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) or Harkat ul Ansar, now known as Harkat ul Mujahideen (HuM). Both the groups share Jihadist ideology, with an aim of merging Kashmir with Pakistan and establishing *sharia*.²⁰ The indisputable link between of Al Qaeda and Kashmir emerged in 2010 when Ilyas Kashmiri, a commander of HuJI and Brigade 313, a special

unit operating its activities in J&K and India,' was named as the leader of al-Qaeda in Kashmir. Prior to this, in 2007 Al Qaeda claimed to have formed 'al-Qaeda fil' al-Hind, or Al-Qaeda in India,' calling for Jihad in Kashmir and establishing an Islamic State. But barring the video announcement by a masked Kalashnikov holding unidentified militant, there was no militant activity by the group.

The announcement naming Kashmiri, was followed by the blast at German bakery in Pune, for which Kashmiri claimed responsibility and vowed to continue launching them 'across India until the Indian Army leaves Kashmir and gives Kashmiris their right to self-determination.'²¹ Kashmiri has connections with trans-national terrorism and Jihad: he is believed to have fought in Afghan Jihad, have links with Taliban and master-minded terrorist attacks in Pakistan.²² He also allegedly met and helped David Headley, who scouted targets for the LeT for the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai. Kashmiri is the only Kashmir centric Jihadist to have risen in the ranks of Al Qaeda core leadership. He was killed in a US drone strike attack in South Waziristan in 2011.²³ He was listed by the US as a specially designated global terrorist for his role and actions in HuJI and Al Qaeda.²⁴

More recently, Al Qaeda has increased its operations in the region through its newly established AQIS branch: the attack at a naval yard in Karachi and has claimed targeted murders of Pakistan and of bloggers in Bangladesh²⁵ though it is yet to execute any major attack. AQIS has appointed Indian born cleric Asim Umar, former member of Pakistan based anti India group Harkat ul Mujahedeen who trained militants in Batrasi camp in Mansehra district in PoK to launch attacks against Indian armed forces.²⁶ In the inaugural issue of Al Qaeda's English language magazine, Resurgence, Umar wrote an article 'The Future of Muslims in India' accusing the 'Indian establishment' and Hindu culture of oppressing and

... for Peace

acting against the Muslim minority. “We have little doubt that, sooner or later, the Muslims of India too will come to the realization that their future is inextricably linked to the success of the Afghan Jihad,” Umar wrote.²⁷

The AQIS’s India operation has included the local Islamist group Indian Mujahedin²⁸, a prominent Islamic terror group. IM’s foot soldiers come from the Student Islamic Movement of India²⁹, which prior to 9/11 bombings hailed Laden and coaxed Indian Muslims to launch an armed jihad which would have the establishment of a caliphate at its final aim. IM was listed as a terrorist organisation by US and UK for its aspirations to establish Islamic laws through Caliphate. The IM is held responsible for almost all major attacks in the Indian cities: Varanasi, Delhi, Jaipur, Pune, Ahmedabad and Mumbai since 2005. Almost all of these attacks were made by placing crude bombs in pressure cooker, bicycle and cars. While sophisticated weaponry and firearms may be missing from IM’s operations—emphasising its local and indigenous nature funding--the group is proficient in the use of cyber technology in organising and planning terror attacks, courtesy it’s engineering and IT expert cadres. This trait has been a crucial in enabling IM operatives in exchanging messages and communicating with their Pakistani handlers using encrypted codes on proxy sites, thus evading from the eyes of security agencies. IM’s success received a staggering blow since the arrest of one of its founder Yasin Bhatkal in 2013.³⁰ The following year, the Indian security agencies were able to detain majority of its top leaders and commanders, dismantling the terror network.³¹ Currently, the IM’s operations in India has weakened, with few sleeper cells which can be revived by its surviving leadership-- brothers Riyaz and Iqbal Bhatkal—reportedly based in Pakistan.

In what appears like coming a full circle for home-grown terrorist groups, the current status of IM within

Pakistan has established linkages with both ISIS and Al Qaeda. Ansar ul-Tawhid ul-Hind (AuT), a splintered IM faction, has pledged allegiance with ISIS and is part of its 35 global affiliates³² AuT uses its cyber skills for propaganda and recruitment of volunteers to the war in Iraq and Syria. It translates ISIS videos in Indian languages to lure Indian Muslims to join global Jihad. The other part of IM is loyal to Al Qaeda.

Conclusion

Terror networks have murky alliances and are formed or abandoned on the convenience of availability of funding, resources which ultimately manifests into the group’s capacity to launch big attacks and wield influence. When the insurgency in Kashmir started in 1988, it was an indigenous movement which was overturned into militancy by Pakistan sponsored fighters. The ISI’s support in providing logistical, operational, financial and strategic help, facilitated entry of Islamist/ Jihadists who attempted to link the local conflict in the grand narrative of global Jihad.

More than a decade later, the revival of Salafi-Jihadism and the use of religious theology by militant groups in their quest to establish an Islamic Caliphate, could attract Kashmir centric militant groups—whose main sponsors are in Pakistan. Kashmir’s geo-strategic position is at cross—roads of global Jihad. The ongoing wave of rising militancy of Islamic groups from West Asia (Iraq, Syria) and North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Yemen) to Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh) can easily spill-over from the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Militant outfits based in Kashmir enjoy patronage, financial assistance, logistics support for planning and operations with terrorist and Jihadist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Already Indian Mujahedin faction of AuT has pledged allegiance to ISIS and so has a faction of Tehreek-e-Taliban. Al Qaeda has linkages with Kashmir centric United Jihad Council and LeT. Both

ISIS and Al Qaeda are trying to expand their footprint in the previously uncharted territories of South Asia: India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Maldives which is home to some of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

The conflict in Kashmir has a number of conditions which trans-national terror groups may attempt to exploit. Kashmir provides a perfect opportunity for these groups to launch attacks from and connect the narrative of oppression of Muslims by Hindu majority with global Jihad. To do so, the porous borders of PoK, remains an attractive gateway. The Line of Control dividing the Indian part of Kashmir with that occupied by Pakistan is effectively guarded by the Indian armed forces, cutting down the chances of infiltration by ISIS and Al Qaeda recruits (unless aided and abetted by Pakistan). It is however likely, that groups within Kashmir may attempt to ride on the success of the global Jihadist groups or use the cover of their brands to provoke the armed forces.

To change the dynamics of the stalemate, these groups may try to associate with the radical global Jihadist network and revive the three decade old armed struggle. Recently, Burhan Wani, the 21 year old commander of Hizbul from Tral village in South Kashmir, appeared in a video to urge the youth to fight the armed forces and the J&K police to side with militants. Wani invoked religion and quoting Quran said, "We have left our families... our mothers and sisters...so that the chastity of your mothers and sisters is safeguarded. We are here so that Khilafah is established in Kashmir."³³ This is the first time that a local Kashmiri militant has appeared in a video and referred to the idea of establishing a Caliphate or an Islamic State.

Groups owing allegiance to ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra are guaranteed supply of financial resources, arms, ammunition and other supporting operational resources. While this may augment the

number of activities and sophisticated organising of terror attacks, the groups will not be able to emulate an ISIS like governance to form an Islamic State in Kashmir with strict interpretation of *shariah*. There are three reasons for this: i) the state of J&K has an elected government in place and even if some sections are disgruntled with the governance issues, there is no political vacuum (as prevalent in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sinai, Nigeria, parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where ISIS is currently active) for an ISIS like entity to grab power ii) even if an ISIS or Al Qaeda affiliated group attempts to control parts of valley to implement religious sanctioned governance, the multiple security agencies currently operating in the valley will dismantle any such effort iii) in the failure of the first two reasons, the people of Kashmir themselves will reject any such harsh impositions which contradicts the very ethos of Kashmiriyat as an ethnic identity.

An Islamic State of Kashmir will alienate the separatist movement into a religious jihad which will undermine the interests of various political factions. Perhaps sensing the future implications, Hurriyat hardliner and separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani has rejected ISIS's Caliphate calling the group, 'un-Islamic and defaming Kashmir's legitimate freedom struggle.' A delegation of 40 Sufi scholars from J&K also met Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling Indian state to spread awareness among Muslims that organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda do not represent the path of Islam.³⁴ The ideology espoused by both Al Qaeda and ISIS that remains worrisome for the security and intelligence agencies.

To counter that, more than effective hard military measures, it is Kashmir's unique brand of Islam that can stand in defiance against the savage and radical Jihad, let loose by ISIS. Kashmir being a political problem will need a political solution. Doctrines of counter-insurgency and counter-infiltration are already established and used effectively to contain

... roots and Caliphate in Kashmir

the militancy. Creating a narrative to highlight Kashmir's benevolent form of Islam, along with a counter-radicalisation strategy, will be rewarding in preventing the young generation from falling prey

to religious influenced militant ideology. It will also enable Kashmir's Sufi Islam to fittingly respond to why there is no space for an idea like ISIS's Caliphate or Al Qaeda's global Jihad to take root here.

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010
 Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, Email: landwarfare@gmail.com
 Website: www.claws.in
 CLAWS Army No. 33098