

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Secularization of Militancy in Kashmir: Myth or Reality?

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Summary

Post-abrogation of Article 370, India successfully ensured that the internal political rearrangement did not attract negative international attention, despite vocal efforts by Pakistan and Turkey. This waning international support has led militant groups to seek renewed legitimacy and support for their activities. The rhetoric of 'struggle for resistance' against 'occupational forces' is being aired, as opposed to calls for jihad. While the language of communication is sought to be 'secularised', militancy in its essence – in terms of the choice of targeted killings, and the objectives driving the selection of targets for attacks, has remained communal.

The Resistance Front (TRF) released a pamphlet on 5 May 2022 threatening attacks on the Amarnath yatra. The TRF pamphlet warned that “blood will spell (spill)” of those acting as “stooges” of the Union government, even as it tried to convey a sense of religious tolerance by assuring safety to pilgrims “till you (they) are not indulged in the Kashmir issue.”¹ The yatra began on 30 June, after two years of travel restrictions on account of the pandemic. The 2019 yatra was curtailed due to the abrogation of Article 370. Nearly 600,000-800,000 Hindu pilgrims are expected this year, as opposed to a few thousands in the preceding years.

Such messaging by the TRF appears to be another addition to a series of attempts that seek to ‘secularise’ militancy in J&K, even as terror outfits like the Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) continue to be active. In the first week of May, for instance, three LeT terrorists suspected of planning to attack the Amarnath *yatra* were also killed in an encounter in Srinagar.² Targeted killings of Kashmiri Pandits, as well as migrant Hindu workers, moreover, suggests that attempts to ‘secularise’ militancy in the state are a red herring.

The Brief explores the veracity of claims suggesting secularisation of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), post abrogation of Article 370. It examines the communication strategies of militant outfits through online and offline mediums. It then explores indicators of militancy, to see if they correspond to the sentiments being aired in the information domain, seemingly devoid of communal angst. In doing so, the Brief places in context the rising significance of perception management as a part of information warfare being waged by terrorist outfits operating in the state.

Terror Outfits and Perception Management

In the information domain, militancy has indeed experienced a marked shift post-2019. This can be majorly credited to the older existing groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) experiencing a waning presence due to the collective effect of state-crackdown and reducing external aid. Simultaneously, several new groups such as TRF, United Liberation Front of Kashmir (ULFK), Kashmir Tigers, and People’s Anti-Fascist Force (PAFF) have emerged.

Images 1 and 2: Logos of People’s Anti-fascist Forces and The Resistance Front



Source: Logos retrieved from pamphlets

¹ Ahsraf Wani, “[“Blood will spill”: Terror group issues threat ahead of Amarnath Yatra in J&K](#)”, India Today, 22 May 2022.

² Nazir Masoodi, ‘[2 Terrorists Planning to Attack Amarnath Yatra Killed in Kashmir Encounter: Cops](#)’, NDTV, 14 June 2022.

These groups are different from the older terrorist outfits in terms of their nomenclature, logos and slogans, as well as the nature and tone of messaging and communication through their pamphlets. For instance, to begin with, the names of each of the newly emergent groups depict a clear departure from Islamic nomenclature as adopted by their predecessors. Whether it is TRF or the PAFF, the emphasis is on ‘Kashmiri resistance’ against ‘occupational’ and ‘fascist’ forces,³ as opposed to a call for *jihad* against infidels.

This change is also seen in the logos used by each of these outfits, as also their respective slogans. The slogan ‘Resist to Exist’ of the ULKF, is a visible contrast to logos of, for instance, the HM (*‘inil hukmu illa lillah’* – legislation is for none but Allah) or LeT (*‘al dawatal irshad’* – the invitation to move under the instruction of the LeT, that is, the Army of the Good).

Images 3 and 4: Logos of LeT and Hizbul Mujahideen



Source: Logos retrieved from news reports.⁴

Pamphlets periodically released by these new outfits add to this tone of messaging. The threat letter regarding the Amarnath *yatra*, as noted earlier, deliberately tried to separate religion from politics.

Another pamphlet by the TRF dated 15 June 2020 asserted

“...Jammu Kashmir ke har shehari ko barabar haq hai yahan rehne ka, chahe wo kisi bhi dharma se taaluq rakhta ho...iss tarah Jammu Kashmir mein jo sayah aate hain humaare mehmaan hain...magar humaari guzaarish hai ki sayah sayah rahein, humaari nasl-fasal-imaan-makaan ko khatm karne waale Hindustan ke khaakun mein rang na bharein.”

(Every inhabitant of Jammu and Kashmir has an equal right to reside here regardless of their religious identity...Incoming tourists in Jammu and Kashmir are our guests, but it is our request that tourists shall stay here as tourists and not try to collude with the Indian establishment that is attempting to attack our demography and property).⁵

³ Rohit Sai Narayan Stambamkadi, [Positioning the Resistance Front \(TRF\) in Kashmir's militancy landscape](#), ORF, 11 January 2022.

⁴ [Canada lists Hizbul Mujahideen as “terrorist entity”](#), *The Kashmir Walla*, 4 February 2021; [Lashkar-e-Taiba militant arrested in Srinagar](#), *The Economic Times*, 4 January 2020.

⁵ [The Resistance Front](#), Twitter.

Image 5: Pamphlet released by TRF

Source: Twitter handle of TRF⁶

Even while claiming attacks or inciting popular support, the language used is carefully distanced from Islamist references. For instance, while claiming the murder of a Sikh school principal, Supinder Kour, and a Kashmiri Pandit teacher, Deepak Chand, on 7 October 2021,⁷ the TRF pamphlet names “politicisation of education sector” as the reason behind the attack. Note that no mention of the religious identity of the victims is made. Instead, the pamphlet emphasises that “...our fight is to safeguard our Freedom that thee occupier has been illegally occupied (the occupier has illegally occupied), snatched from us and in this fight everyone the citizens of JK are welcome to fight against the occupier India.”

This line of justification was also evident while claiming the murder of Kashmiri Pandit Makhanlal Bindroo, just a day prior on 6 October 2021. The TRF pamphlet called him an RSS ideologue who was mobilising Kashmiri youth under the pretext of undertaking “health activities” and involved in “immoral trafficking and drugs supply.”⁸

Militant Attacks and Targeted Killings

Data suggests that recruitments for the previously existing organisations continues to far surpass that of the ‘secular’ outfits, both in 2020 and 2021.⁹ As of March 2022, of the 168 militants active in the Valley, around 82 belonged to the LeT, 41 with JeM,

⁶ [The Resistance Front](#), Twitter.

⁷ Peerzada Ashiq, [‘Principal, teacher shot dead inside Srinagar school’](#), *The Hindu*, 8 October 2021.

⁸ Sunil Ji Bhat, [‘J-K: द रेजिस्टेस फ्रंट ने कश्मीरियों से शोक नहीं मनाने को कहा, हमले का भी किया दावा’](#), *Aaj Tak*, 6 October 2021.

⁹ Anees Zargar, [‘Kashmir’s Insurgency Situation Worsens Despite low Recruitment, Military Successes’](#), *News Click*, 30 December 2021.

38 with HM, three with Al Badr, and merely two with the TRF.¹⁰ The number of foreign militants in the Valley has also been rising in 2022, after a fall for the past two years.¹¹

Graph 1: Organisation-wise recruitment in J&K in 2020 and 2021



Source: News Click¹²

In terms of the number of incidents and the involvement of terror outfits in carrying out each one of those, two things need to be looked at – the nature of the incidents and those owing responsibility for them. A look at the timeline of the incidents is crucial in this respect.

Table 1: Timeline of targeted killings (2020-22)

Date	Incident	Undertaken by
1 January 2021	Satpal Nischal, jeweller in Srinagar and first to get domicile in J&K under new law killed	TRF
2 June 2021	Rakesh Pandita, BJP leader, killed in Pulwama	
23 July 2021	Javid Ahmed Malik, peon in a school in Pashtuna, shot dead	HM
9 August 2021	Ghulam Rasool Dar of the BJP and his wife, Sarpanch and Panch of a village in Kulgam	TRF
17 August 2021	Javid Ahmad Dar of the BJP shot dead in Kulgam	TRF
19 August 2021	Ghulam Hussain Lone of the JK Apni Party	
6 September 2021	Sarpanch Mehrajdin Mir killed in Sopore in Baramulla	
17 September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shankar Chaudhary, labourer from Bihar, killed in Kulgam Railway Constable Bantu Sharma shot dead in Kulgam 	
5 October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makhnhal Bindroo, Kashmiri Pandit chemist shop owner killed in Srinagar Virendra Paswan, chaat seller from Bihar killed in Srinagar Mohd Shafi Lone, President of cab drivers' association killed in Naidkhai area of Shahgund 	TRF
7 October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School principal Supinder Kour and teacher Deepak Chand shot dead in school in Srinagar 	TRF

¹⁰ Majid, Z. (2022, March 1). *Hizbul relegated on militancy landscape of Kashmir as LeT, Jaish take centrestage*. Deccan Herald. Retrieved June 28, 2022, from <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/hizbul-relegated-on-militancy-landscape-of-kashmir-as-let-jaish-take-centrestage-1086424.html>

¹¹ Zulfikar Majid, *Presence of Foreign Militants going up in Kashmir*, Deccan Herald, 5 April 2022.

¹² Zulfikar Majid, 'Hizbul relegated on militancy landscape of Kashmir as LeT, Jaish take centre stage', Deccan Herald, 1 March 2022.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two labourers Raja Reshi Dev and Joginder Reshi Dev shot at in Kulgam 	ULF
16 October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arvind Kumar Sah, labourer from Bihar, shot dead in Srinagar Sagir Ahmed, labourer from UP, gunned down in Pulwama 	ULF
8 November 2021	Mohd Ibrahim Khan, salesman of Pandit businessman Sandeep Mawa shot dead in Srinagar	LeT
2 March 2022	Panch identified as Mohammad Yaqoob Dar of Kulpura Srandoor Kulgam shot dead at his residence	HM
9 March 2022	PDP Sarpanch Sameer Bhat was killed in Khonmoh area of Srinagar	TRF
11 March 2022	Sarpanch identified as Shabir Ahmed Mir from Audoora Kulgam killed near his residence	HM
4 April 2022	Kashmiri Pandit Sonu Kumar Balaji shot at in Shopian, injured	Not clear
13 April 2022	Satish Kumar Singh, a Kashmiri Rajput, shot dead inside his home in Kulgam's Kakran	Kashmir Fighters
15 April 2022	Independent sarpanch namely Manzoor Bangroo killed by militants in Pattan area of Baramulla district	LeT
12 May 2022	Kashmiri Pandit Rahul Bhat working in revenue department killed in Tehsil office Chadoora Budgam	TRF
15 May 2022	Ranjit Singh, employee at Liquor shop in Baramulla, killed in a grenade attack inside the liquor shop	Not clear
26 May 2022	TV artist Amreena Bhat of Hushroo, Chadoora killed in her home	LeT
31 May 2022	Hindu teacher, Rajini from Samba, killed by militants in Gopalpora Kulgam	TRF
2 June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vijay Kumar, a bank manager at Ellaquai Dehati Bank, hailing from Rajasthan killed inside his office Two migrant labourers shot in Budgam's Chadoora. One of them identified as Dilkush (resident of Bihar) dies 	TRF

Source: Data compiled by author from news reports.

While not exhaustive, the table lists major incidents of targeted killings that followed the abrogation of Article 370.¹³ Majority of victims are identified as Kashmiri Pandits, a Sikh, and Hindu migrant labourers. A number of Muslim civilians too have become targets of these outfits. However, it is notable that most of these targeted killings involving Muslim victims, Kashmiri or otherwise, carry some political motivations. For instance, they belonged to the local BJP cadres, or Sarpanches, or were working for the government. This made them 'stooges' of the government and hence were targeted. Non-Muslim victims like migrant workers or school principals and bank employees, though, have often been singled out for their communal identity.

While a majority of these attacks have been claimed by the TRF (along with a handful linked to the HM and the LeT), it is noteworthy that in each of these attacks, open claims have been made only by the newer outfits – most prominently the TRF. No official statements claiming such attacks have been released by the LeT or HM since.

Given the fact that most of these new organisations are termed as Front Organisations of the previously existing ones,¹⁴ it could partly explain why older militant organisations have not made any recent claims. Most of these attacks are

¹³ It must be noted that the timeline includes only targeted attacks on civilians, since it is assumed that any killing of a state force personnel is with the intention of attacking the State. This is unlike civilian killings who are targeted based on other individual identities including religion, political affiliations, etc.

¹⁴ Kamaljit Kaur Sandhu, '[What is TRF? “Lashkar offshoot” behind killing of BJP workers in Kashmir](#)', India Today, 30 October 2020.

claimed by the TRF even as no significant recruitment has been recorded by the organisation since its inception (as depicted in Graph 1). The possibility that the new ‘secular’ outfits are but a mere cover for the pre-existing Pakistan-sponsored organisations is more likely the bitter truth.

War in the Information Domain

While the appearance and language of communication has been carefully ‘secularised’, the militancy in its essence – in terms of the ability to gather popular support, its choice of targeted killings, and the objectives driving the selection of targets for attacks, has remained communal. In terms of local recruitments, the previously existing Islamist outfits continue to attract more recruits. The targeted killings reflect motivations of these outfit to hamper rehabilitation efforts of Pandits. The en masse withdrawal of Kashmiri Pandits following the murder of Vijay Kumar on June 2 is a case in point.¹⁵

Pakistan’s compulsions with the Paris-based watchdog, Financial Action Task Force (FATF), is an important reason accounting for the drying up of Pakistani sponsorship to terror outfits in terms of funds and weaponry. Given that the consequences of Islamist terrorism have adversely affected most of the Western world, the popular acceptability of any struggle following an Islamist path has generally decreased over the years. With India highlighting Pakistani involvement in sponsoring terror and destabilising the country’s internal security, international perceptions have indeed experienced a gradual shift. The 2016 Uri attack and 2019 Pulwama attack only further strengthened India’s case before the international community.

Post-abrogation of Article 370, India successfully ensured that the internal political rearrangement did not attract negative international attention, despite vocal efforts by Pakistan and Turkey. This waning international support has led militant groups to seek renewed legitimacy and support for their activities, in the garb of calls for safeguarding human rights and rhetoric of ‘struggle for resistance’ against ‘occupational forces’ as opposed to previous calls for *jihad*. The nomenclature, iconography, and language appear to aim to portray the militancy as a strictly indigenous movement for ‘freedom’ with no external actors and interests involved. The idea also appears to target sections of the national population who might be possibly influenced by calls for ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’ as opposed to that of ‘*jihad* against infidels’.

Going Forward

Despite the best efforts of militant outfits and their masters, international perceptions have reflected little change. The popular support within the Valley for a ‘secular’ face of militancy is limited as well. However, the use of these new organisations as fronts for other Pakistan-backed Islamist organisations could sustain militancy in the state. This calls for careful monitoring of their tactics, *modus operandi*, reach, and popular response to their influence operations. The operations of these fronts in the information domain must be tackled at par with those in the physical domain. After all, every act in the physical domain emerges from an idea in the cognitive domain – through information consumed, or on many occasions, force fed.

¹⁵ Peerzada Ashiq, [‘Kashmiri Pandits flee Kashmir Valley’](#), *The Hindu*, 3 June 2022.

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