
A camouflaged Pakistani hand may be behind the expanding footprint of Al Qaeda in Jammu & Kashmir

Over the last few years, amidst an ongoing and effective offensive against Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups by Indian security forces in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), complemented by robust diplomacy and international outreach that has exposed and driven in Pakistan's use of terror as a policy of State, a new and aberrant trend that has raised its head in the restive state is the mysterious advent of international terrorist organizations such as the Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The ideology and goals of these international terrorist organizations are very different to that of local and Pakistan-backed terrorist outfits such as the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and others. The residents of J&K have traditionally been immune to the alien and culturally discordant narrative sought to be peddled in J&K by the Al Qaeda and its ilk, and have been dismissive and closed to them.

The last two years has seen this position change in J&K, albeit slowly and incrementally. The Al Qaeda in 2017 announced the formation of a J&K-specific wing called the Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), and although this outfit has not grown anywhere close enough to threaten the establishment of a Caliphate in J&K, it has nonetheless achieved some traction and planted the seeds of a divisive and even more violence-driven ideology in the state. This is reflected in the fact that Al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri last week released his first video specific to J&K in which he called for *"unrelenting blows"* against the Indian government and its security forces in order to *"bleed"* the economy and make the country suffer. In the video, which was posted on the *As-Sahab* channel of Al Qaeda, Zawahiri warned terrorists in J&K not to fall into the trap of Pakistan, which he termed a puppet of the United States (US). He said, *"All the Pakistani Army and government are interested in exploiting the mujahideen for specific political objectives, only to dump or persecute them later"*. He described Pakistan's conflict with India as essentially *"a secular rivalry over borders managed by the American intelligence"*, adding that the *"fight in Kashmir"* is not a separate conflict but part of the worldwide Muslim community's *"jihad against a vast array of forces"*. Describing Pakistan's intelligence agencies as the US' primary tool in Pakistan, Zawahiri stressed that these agencies would do everything in their power to keep the *"Mujahideen"* firmly under their control forever as a political bargaining chip.

Experts on the region are intrigued at the sudden and increasing level of acceptance that the Al Qaeda has managed to conjure up in recent times. They have been confounded by statements of support for Al Qaeda in J&K that even leaders of the separatist, Pakistan-backed and funded Hurriyat Conference have come up with. Quite obviously, the Pakistani military establishment, which firmly and possessively controls the country's J&K policy, would not brook any interference in, or dilution of, its monopoly over terrorism in J&K, which the emergence of Al Qaeda and ISIL would imply. This has led some experts to postulate the complicity of the Pakistani military establishment in this new phenomenon at a time that Indian and international pressure on Pakistan to act against its proxies such as the HM, LeT and JeM has been so concerted and incessant that it has become unfeasible, at least temporarily, to persist with these outfits on the ground without inviting severe retribution.

A brief timeline of Al Qaeda's tryst with J&K

Al Qaeda had first mentioned India as a target in 1996, when Osama bin Laden had made a reference to both J&K and Assam. However, for the following several years the outfit did not succeed in achieving anything significant in these places.

Reports of Al Qaeda's presence in J&K date back to 2002-03, in the immediate aftermath of the war against terror launched by the US in Afghanistan in response to the 9/11 attacks on the US. An article titled '*Al Qaeda imprint seen in Kashmir*' that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in May 2002 averred that "*Islamic militants with ties to Al Qaeda and possibly directed by Al Qaeda leaders are operating in the disputed territory of Kashmir, intelligence officials and analysts say, in what may be an effort to provoke a war between India and Pakistan*". The article added that US officials were "deeply concerned" that Al Qaeda fugitives appeared to be teaming up with Pakistani militants as they waged war against India in J&K. It quoted a US intelligence official as saying, "*We do know that there are militants in Kashmir with ties to Al Qaeda. We don't know if Al Qaeda are in Kashmir directing or conducting operations, but it is a matter of deep concern*". The article further contended that "*The extremist groups blamed by India for carrying out the recent terrorist attacks that provoked the latest crisis in Kashmir have a long history of ties to Pakistan's military establishment and to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization. The militant groups have a history of ties to Al Qaeda, dating to the jihad in Afghanistan against occupying Soviet forces. Operationally, the groups involved in Afghanistan and those involved in Kashmir were not linked, but their shared allegiance to the goal of establishing an Islamic state throughout the region has given them a common cause in the months since Musharraf abandoned the Taliban to back the US-led war against terrorism*". However, the article concluded that the reason behind the Al Qaeda's involvement in J&K related not to J&K but to Afghanistan. It quoted Imtiaz Alam, current affairs editor at the Lahore-based *The News*, to elaborate that "*Al Qaeda's main enemy is not India but America, and they want to have Pakistan and India go to war because this whole American exercise in Afghanistan would go away. War with India would create chaos and give Al Qaeda breathing space in Afghanistan*".

However, barring stray and unconfirmed reports over the subsequent decade and a half of inroads being made by the Al Qaeda in J&K, not much tangible emerged to demonstrate that the outfit had broken the barrier to enter the Kashmiri psyche. In a significant development, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the formation of the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in September 2014. The head of AQIS, Asim Umar, then spent years disseminating recruitment videos in J&K, but these did not yield tangible results. An intelligence report, meanwhile, disclosed in July 2014 that the prophecy of *Ghazwa-e-Hind*, or the '*final battle in India*', was being used by the Al Qaeda in its efforts to attract recruits in J&K, and social media platforms were the preferred route to get the message across.

After Burhan Wani, the social media savvy commander of the HM, was killed by Indian security forces in 2016, Zakir Musa, an engineering dropout-turned-militant, was appointed as his replacement. Musa, however, abandoned the HM in July 2017 to form and head the AGH. Taliban commander Haji Mansoor Mehsood praised the establishment of AGH and credited the "*hard work*" of AQIS for its formation. The AGH, under Musa, imparted a new twist to the terrorist narrative in J&K by emphasizing that the group did not view independence or merger of J&K with Pakistan, the stated aim of all the existing Pakistan-backed terrorist groups that were already active in the state, as its goal. Musa underlined that jihad is "*not for nationhood or nationalism*" and that "*Kashmir's war, particularly of the Mujahideen, is only to enforce Shariah. It is an Islamic struggle. I see that many people in Kashmir are engaged in a war of nationalism, which is forbidden in Islam*". In response to a 2018 statement of

the Hurriyat Conference, which is an umbrella grouping of pro-Pakistan Kashmiri separatist organizations, that described the Kashmir movement as a political movement and an indigenous struggle that had nothing to do with the Al Qaeda and ISIL, Musa warned the Hurriyat leaders that *“If you will be a thorn in our way, we will leave the infidels and kill you first”*. He also criticized Pakistan severely. He accused the Pakistani government of betraying the people of J&K and described its army as a *“slave of America”*. He also forbade Kashmiris from raising pro-Pakistan slogans or draping the bodies of slain militants with the Pakistani flag. Importantly, his pan-Islamic worldview sought to negate the traditional portrayal of terrorism in J&K as a freedom struggle.

Despite the lofty pronouncements of Musa, in the initial period the presence and activities of AGH in J&K did not expand much, with only a few youth joining the group. Their actions were limited to carrying out a few minor attacks, paying tribute to their slain comrades, and glorifying themselves on social media. However, with the passage of time the group succeeded in pooling together a small bunch of cadres. Abu Dujana, a senior commander of the Pakistan-supported LeT and Abu Hammas, a similarly placed JeM leader, switched sides to join the AGH. In April 2018, the arrest of four AGH members while they were attempting to procure weapons demonstrated at least partial success of the outfit’s recruitment drive. In an audio message released in April this year, Musa claimed that *“Many people from both India and Pakistan have joined Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind. We are stronger than ever. Our numbers have gone up. We will restart our operations soon”*. However, it was not the number of youth joining AGH ranks that concerned Indian security agencies, but the introduction of another potentially damaging ideology. Musa, meanwhile, gained in popularity and slogans praising him were chanted on several occasions during anti-India protests in J&K.

Musa was eventually killed by Indian security forces in May this year in a village in Tral area of Pulwama district of J&K. Dujana and Hammas, his partners in crime, along with some other AGH members had been killed earlier. In June this year, Indian forces killed the spokesman of AGH Shabir Ahmad Malik (alias Abu Ubaidah) along with four other AGH members, Ahmad Mir, Hafiz Azad Ahmad Khanday, Suhail Yousuf Bhat and Rafee Hassan. Despite this, the AGH has not downed its shutters and in June appointed Abdul Hameed Lelhari, a 30-year-old native of Pulwama, as its new head. Lelhari had earlier served as Musa’s deputy. In a video announcing the decision, an AGH spokesperson said that Ghazi Ibrahim Khalid had now been appointed as Lelhari’s deputy.

Impact of the advent of AGH in J&K

The emergence of the Al Qaeda in J&K took the Indian government, the Hurriyat Conference and the terrorists operating in J&K all by surprise, and presented different new challenges for each. Former J&K police Chief SP Vaid described it as an *“ideological shift”*. Some Indian security experts have interpreted the emergence of the AGH as another major security challenge with a hard-line Islamist outlook that may appeal to sections of Kashmiris and encourage more youth to take up arms against the Indian State. As Ajay Sahni, head of the Institute of Conflict Management in New Delhi, opined, radicalization of young Kashmiris was the real threat that India needed to watch out for.

The new dangerous ideology that the AGH sought to introduce into J&K had the potential to linger on in times to come and usher in a new discourse that was alien to the culture and polity of the region. As Fahad Shah, an independent journalist and editor from J&K, put it in April 2018, despite it being evident that AGH and ISIL exist primarily as ideas rather than armed outfits, and this is likely to remain the case for some time, the extreme ideologies alone were dangerous for the region’s already-tense political arena. He recalled a conversation with a senior counterinsurgency official in J&K in which the

official opined that *“ISIS or Al-Qaeda may not be able to establish a powerful armed force, but the ideologies are growing and the idea itself is dangerous for Kashmir”*. Shah added that *“If their perceptions begin to influence some Kashmiri youth, ISIL and Al-Qaeda have the potential to fracture the ongoing political movement in the valley, creating divisions among the political outfits against India or in favor of Pakistan. This could lead to infighting among militant outfits, similar to the mid-1990’s era. Musa’s polarizing rise as a militant icon has foreshadowed the potential for these groups to rip apart the social and political fabric of the valley”*.

It was due to this reason that when Musa began exploiting social media to reach out to disillusioned youth in J&K, leaders of separatist and terrorist groups, apprehensive of the threat to their influence and relevance that the new ideology presented, were quick to disassociate themselves from his activities. Syed Salahuddin, the head of the HM and chief of the United Jihad Council (UJC), a Pakistan-created conglomerate of over a dozen militant groups operating in J&K with its headquarters based in Pakistan Administered J&K, issued a statement in which he averred that *“there is no scope or room for any international organization like Daesh (ISIL) and Al-Qaida, we don’t need them nor is there any necessity for their presence”*. He also issued a video in which he asserted that *“The freedom movement of Jammu and Kashmir has no worldwide agenda, and no links with organisations like ISIL or Al-Qaeda. Such organisations have no role in Kashmir”*. The LeT also issued a similar statement in which it contended that *“Groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS are being brought up to label the legitimate freedom struggle as terrorism. Al-Qaeda and ISIS thrive on Takfeer. All they have done has just greatly affected the Muslims and brought upon them injustice, brutality and oppression”*.

Leaders of the Hurriyat Conference including Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq were equally shaken. They let this be known by issuing a joint statement in which they claimed that *“Terrorism and the freedom movement are poles apart. Our movement is local in nature and indigenous in character... there is no role for these groups (Al Qaeda and ISIL) within our movement”*.

The jury is still out on the real impact that the AGH has had over the last two years on the existing terrorist structures in J&K. Three things are clear, though. Firstly, as a police officer from J&K was quoted in the media as saying, Zawahiri’s video may not replace the existing Pakistan-sponsored militancy in J&K, and would not lead to the creation of a Caliphate. It appeared to be aimed at boosting an already existing ideology in J&K, which it may well succeed in doing. Secondly, without direct support from Pakistani intelligence agencies as well as safe havens within Pakistan, any terrorist outfit in J&K would find it extremely difficult to survive. As brought out in EFSAS Study Paper titled [David Coleman Headley: Tinker, Tailor, American, Lashkar-e-Taiba, ISI Spy](#), Al Qaeda was known to have linkages with some of the Kashmir-centric groups based in Pakistan Administered J&K in the past. Further, in 2014 Syed Salahuddin had announced that he was willing to take the help of *“Al Qaeda, the Taliban or any other organization or country”*. Thirdly, the AGH, despite not having succeeded in recruiting a large number of members in J&K, does pose a significant threat to the Indian government. Lieutenant-General DS Hooda, who commanded India’s Northern Army Command that operated in Kashmir until recently, explained this aptly by saying, *“As we saw in the Pulwama attack, that claimed the lives of 40 Indian policemen, it does not take too many men or too much logistics to carry out a major attack. Just a few men could do this, and that is why al-Qaeda and ISIS in Kashmir is a very different threat than the ones already there. All it takes is good planning, technique and they have both”*.

Pakistan's possible game-plan

Counter-terrorism expert Ajai Sahni has pointed out that Al Qaeda had been “*struggling to get a toehold in India for decades but had failed abysmally*”. Other experts believe that the successes, even if limited in scale, that the outfit has had in J&K in recent years could mean that it may well have reached some sort of hand-in-glove understanding for logistical support with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). They base their conclusion on the ISI's track record in handling its terrorist assets over the years. The ISI has mastered the art of creating new terrorist outfits which step into the shoes of other ISI-created terrorist groups operating in J&K once international pressure kicks in forcefully against the existing group. Thus, over the decades the prominence of HM as the primary terrorist outfit fighting on behalf of the ISI in J&K was passed on to the LeT once the heat against HM became unpalatable. Similarly, in recent years, especially after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the LeT was replaced by the JeM.

With China lifting its hold over the proscription of JeM leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Sanctions Committee, and with the sword of blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) perched over its head, Pakistan finds itself no longer in a position to persist with its musical chairs policy with its existing terrorist proxies. The timing of the AGH's introduction into J&K and the attempt to link it with a pan-Islamic ideology, as well as to the conscious attempts to align it with a global terrorist outfit, the Al Qaeda, is viewed by security experts with considerable suspicion. They believe that it could be a new deceptive ploy by the ISI to promote the AGH while simultaneously projecting it as a hard-line radical Islamist organization with nothing in common with the existing Pakistan-sponsored outfits that promote the merger of J&K with Pakistan, thereby creating the false impression that the ISI has nothing to do with the AGH. Zawahiri, like his predecessor Osama Bin Laden, had lived in Pakistan for long, more likely than not with the tacit support and protection of the ISI. To get him to release a video to add credibility and believability to this deviously contrived ISI narrative may not consequently have been very difficult. The anti-Pakistan portions of Zawahiri's averments in the video could have been a conscious attempt by the ISI to cater for deniability for itself.

The Economic Times quoted a senior Indian government official as saying that “*Pakistan has been using proxies to stoke trouble in the Valley. Though the group (AGH) claims affiliation to the Al-Qaeda, their links with Pakistan-based militants cannot be ruled out*”. That Pakistan has evolved some degree of complicity with the AGH can be inferred from the fact that leaders of the Hurriyat Conference and the HM, who invariably parrot Pakistan's language on J&K and never dare step out of the Pakistan-drawn line, have in recent months seemingly shed the hostility that they had announced towards the AGH in the last couple of years. Syed Salahuddin of the HM and the Hurriyat Conference in its aforementioned joint statement were, less than a couple of years ago, unambiguous in their assertion that Musa and the AGH had no place or role in J&K. In a complete change of tone and position, following Musa's killing in May this year, Salahuddin issued a statement saying, “*Zakir Musa sacrificed his life for the glory of Islam and the freedom of Kashmir*”. Hurriyat leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani called for a *hartal* (shutdown) in J&K over Musa's killing, and eulogized Musa by saying that “*Whosoever strives for implementation of divine law in his land with his conviction and dedication, are the real heroes of the movement and nation is indebted to hail their precious sacrifices*”. The references to Musa's “*sacrifice*” for “*the freedom of Kashmir*”, which was contrary to his stated aim and closely in tune with Pakistan's intentions, as well as the fact that these Pakistan-dictated leaders praised an opponent whose ideology directly threatened their own survival, have led to raised eyebrows and a quizzical gaze directed at Pakistan and the ISI.

As prominent Indian security analyst Ajai Shukla wrote in the *Business Standard* on 29 May, “*With both Geelani and Salahuddin known to receive guidance from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, officials in New Delhi are evaluating whether their remarkable turnaround reflects a*

redirection of ISI's support, from Kashmiri nationalists to fundamentalist Islamists". Shukla also referred to the recent trend of growing coordination at the operational level in J&K between Pakistan-backed groups such as the HM and the AGH to drive home his point.

Sushant Sareen, author and Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) think tank, commenting on Zawahiri's statement on 12 July wrote that *"there are some reports that the Pakistanis have been offering to supply weapons to Al Qaeda affiliate Ansar Ghawat-ul-Hind"* as the AGH would require Pakistani assistance to set itself up. Interestingly, AGH's new Chief Abdul Hameed Lelhari recently released his first audio address in which he also revealed that *"an agency from Pakistan reached out to us and offered a deal of weapons"* in return for the AGH meeting *"some conditions"*. The first condition was that the AGH would not act *"without permission from the agency"*, and the second that *"no action would be big and impactful"*. Lelhari, surprisingly, called for cooperation among various militant outfits operating in J&K in order *"to breathe new life into the Kashmir jihad"*, and the setting up of a new representative militant council (*shura*) to take consensus decisions regarding military actions against India.

As Sareen summed up, "Pakistan would rather collaborate with Al Qaeda and let it take the lead and the heat — even as it profits from the actions of Al Qaeda, which it facilitates. Zawahiri railing into Pakistan works well for the Pakistanis who can use this as an alibi — just as they used planted stories of Taliban harbouring Pakistani terrorists to ward off US pressure to capture Osama bin Laden by claiming that they had no control over the Taliban... The threat of Zawahiri is real; his rant against Pakistan is a subterfuge".

The Indian government's response to Zawahiri's video has been apt. It chose to downplay the video and deny it the importance and publicity that it was intended to generate. Raveesh Kumar, the spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), said, *"We keep hearing of such threats and it is not the first time that we received such a threat. I don't think we need to take it seriously. Al Qaeda is a UN-prescribed terror organization and their leader is a UN-designated terrorist. Our security forces are capable and equipped... not to worry about these threats. They have the capability of taking care of our territorial integrity and sovereignty"*.

The Indian security apparatus would, the dismissive nature of the MEA statement notwithstanding, do well to recognize that the AGH needs to be monitored closely to ensure that it is not able to capitalize in the years ahead upon the trend of growing radicalization amongst sections of the youth in J&K. The role of the ISI in strengthening the AGH as part of a new strategy to keep violence alive in J&K in order to protect the pre-eminence of the Pakistani military establishment, especially, needs to be watched with a hawk's eye and countered promptly and robustly.



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