

## **COUNTER-TERRORISM PERSPECTIVE**

*Writings on armed militant insurgencies, islamist violence, radicalisation, violent jihad and other forms of asymmetric conflicts and policy responses in South Asia and beyond.*

### **Potent Threat: Despite setbacks, Jaish- e-Muhammed Pakistan may demonstrate rage and resilience in Kashmir**



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On February 14 (2019), over 40 Indian paramilitary force personnel belonging to Central Reserve Police Force were killed near Awantipora in Pulwama district, when a Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) fidayeen (suicide) squad member Adil Ahmed Dar ambushed the security convoy with an explosives-laden vehicle (VBIED), or simply put, with a car bomb. While the use of car bomb in itself is not new in Kashmir region, but the terrorist outfit led by Masood Azhar used this method after a gap of almost 14 years. JeM had earlier employed the car bombing method twice in April and December 2000 targeting the headquarters of Indian army in the State capital, Srinagar. Again it applied the same method in the Nowgam area of Srinagar in early November 2005. The return of JeM's VBIED tactic and other novel terror technologies has already kick-started a complete overhauling of terror surveillance and perimeter security in the State.



*(Wreath laying ceremony at the CRPF camp in Budgam for Pulwama Heroes:PTI)*

### **Post Pulwama Offensive:**

Following the Pulwama attack, Indian security forces have been arresting or eliminating militant commanders and foot soldiers in Baramulla, Shopian Kupwara, Budgam and Pulwama districts in Jammu and Kashmir virtually on a daily basis. According to the latest available official media estimation, 120 militants, including eight top commanders, have been killed since January 2019. Out of these 120 militant fatalities, 45 belong to Pakistan's Jaish e-Muhammad.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Killing of JeM militants will help restore peace in south Kashmir: DGP", Greater Kashmir, June 19, 2019, <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/front-page-2/killing-of-jem-militants-will-help-restore-peace-in-south-kashmir-dgp/>

Since a resurgent JeM would prove to be a major nuisance for Indian security forces, there has been a relentless effort to eliminate its leadership and foot soldiers in J&K for the last few months. Several senior JeM operatives have been arrested or killed in subsequent search and sweep operations across the State in the weeks following mid-February this year. According to Indian Army sources, JeM's six top commanders, including Mudasar Ahmad Khan and the Pakistani militant with expertise in IED (Improvised Explosive Device) Abdul Rasheed Ghazi (Kamran), have been killed so far.

Not surprisingly, by mid April, Indian agencies claimed to have eliminated the entire JeM team that was involved in the Pulwama suicide attack. According to the General-Officer-Commanding (GoC) of the Indian Army's Srinagar-based 15 corps Lieutenant General KJS Dhillon, JeM leadership has become non-existent in Jammu and Kashmir due to the massive counter offensive against the Pakistan based terrorist group following the Pulwama incident.

Certainly, a sustained counter terror offensive in Kashmir has crippled the JeM to a large extent in the last few months. However, the Masood Azhar led JeM's resilience to stage a violent comeback in Kashmir by either co-opting other Pakistan based terror groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) or activating local recruits through close ally Mustaq Zargar led Al Umar Mujahideen largely remains intact.

Two recent incidents that prove the still robust militant network and not so depleted firepower of JeM are:

*May 16:* a prolonged gunfight between security forces and JeM militants resulted in death of one soldier and a civilian at Dalipora, Pulwama. This encounter also witnessed death of three top Jaish militant commanders -- Khalid Bhai (a Pakistani national), Naseer Pandith and Umar Mir.<sup>2</sup>

*June 12:* Six security force personnel were killed and two others injured in an ambush led by Jaish-e-Muhammad militants in Anantnag, J&K.<sup>3</sup> Banned terror group Al Umar Mujahideen (AuM) has claimed responsibility for the attack. It is an open secret that Zargar is working closely with Masood Azhar and their groups have carried out militant operations jointly in the past. For instance, in Mid June 2017, Mushtaq Zargar and AuM

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<sup>2</sup> "Top JeM commander among 5 killed in J-K gunfight", Hindustan Times, May 16, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/top-jem-commander-among-5-killed-in-j-k-gunfight/story-n22iPafwgW8u704qU3ijbP.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Jammu And Kashmir Cop Arshad Khan, Injured In Anantnag Encounter, Dies In AIIMS", Outlook India, June 16, 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-jammu-and-kashmir-cop-arshad-khan-injured-in-anantnag-encounter-dies-in-aiims/332346>

claimed responsibility for four grenade attacks in Tral, Pulwama, Awantipora and Safar Kadal that were carried out jointly by Jaish-e-Muhammad and Al-Umar Mujahideen.<sup>4</sup>

## **JeM's Kashmir Jihad**

Masood Azhar, one of the world's most notorious jihadi ideologues, was released from Indian prison along with two other fellow terrorist associates -- Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar and Omar Saeed Sheikh -- in a prisoner-hostage swap following the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC 814 in December 1999. Since then, he and his Pakistan based terror entity JeM have been orchestrating mindless violence against India, including the audacious suicide attacks targeting Indian Parliament building in December 2001.

While other active Pakistan origin militant formations in Kashmir such as Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) continue their efforts to remain relevant in Pakistan sponsored militant movement in J&K, Masood Azhar-led JeM has carved a niche by introducing daring tactics with sophisticated arms and ammunitions to stay ahead of the curve. The bigger question grappling India at this juncture is what makes JeM so potent and lethal? Over the years, JeM has emerged as the most violent terrorist organisation in J&K in comparison to other Pakistan backed Kashmir-centric Jihadi entities. Since early 2000, JeM stormed Kashmir militant movement with two hitherto unknown tactics in Kashmir's militant landscape: Fidayeens (militants on a suicide mission) and foreign fighters. These daring tactics remain JeM's core strength till today. The VBIED tactic, coupled with IED capability and imported weaponry, has given JeM the advantage to inflict maximum damage on the security forces in India since late 2014.

## **Fury and Firepower**

After a brief lull in its activities due to several factors, including the ban on JeM in Pakistan and increasing crackdown on its assets and offshoots there, JeM and Masood Azhar showed a massive comeback in Kashmir in early 2014, thereby igniting the on-going Jihad in Kashmir afresh by launching a suicide squad called the 'Afzal Guru Squad (AGS)' named after the Indian Parliament attack convict Muhammad Afzal Guru. Similar to the recent Pulwama suicide bombing, JeM in 2016 carried out two violent strikes targeting security forces, one in early January at Pathankot (Punjab) air base and the other in mid-September at Uri (Kashmir).

Several suicide strikes in Kashmir thereafter were blamed on JeM's 'Afzal Guru Squad' which was operational under the supervision of two senior commanders, Mufti Waqas and Noor

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<sup>4</sup> "Terror commander Zargar released in Kandahar vows more attacks in Kashmir", Deccan Chronicle, June 15, 2017, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/150617/terror-commander-zargar-released-in-kandahar-vows-more-attacks-in-kashmir.html>

Muhammad Tantray, who were close confidantes of Masood Azhar. These local commanders and several other over-ground workers in J&K have been instrumental in recruiting local youths for JeM's Kashmiri jihad. Waqas, a Pakistani national, was the chief architect of several suicide operations in the State, including that of February 2018 Sunjuwan army camp attack in Jammu that was considered the worst attack since JeM's September 2016 assault on another Army camp in Uri, Barmula district of J&K. Even after deaths of both Waqas and Tantray, suicide attacks and recruitment drive for fideyee mission of JeM did not stop. At the time of Waqas's death in March 2018, over 70 JeM terrorists were active in the State, which undoubtedly signalled a robust presence of JeM. Evidently, JeM's mouthpiece *Al Qalam* (Urdu) praised Waqas's contribution for having infused life to the earlier dormant JeM network in Kashmir, streamlining the supply line and for convincing many locals to join the outfit, "who are now ready for their turn to carry out violent attacks".<sup>5</sup> Few other senior militant commanders who have expedited the resurgence of JeM in J&K are Nasrullah Mansoor Langrial and Mushtaq Muhammad Zargar. Both are close to Masood Azhar and helping the JeM networks in Jammu and Kashmir to flourish.<sup>6</sup>

Indian security agencies have assessed JeM's sophisticated arms and ammunitions which show that its firepower is growing manifold since past few years. Although the regular weapon of choice of JeM militants remains AK-47 and AK-56 assault rifles, a range of foreign weaponry (e.g. US made M-4 Carbine and Russian AK-74 and Chinese hand grenades) are found in its arsenal now. Investigations into the 2017 JeM suicide attack on a police camp in Pulwama revealed the use of armour piercing steel bullets for the first time in J&K.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, investigation into the June 12 (2019) Anantnag attack has revealed that similar steel bullets were used by the terrorists to cause severe injuries to the security personnel using bullet proof vests.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, a spike in JeM's sniper strikes was noticed between September–October 2018 with at least four incidents targeting security force personnel in Nawa, Tral and Nowgam areas. One of the nephews of Masood Azhar identified as Usman Haider was in charge of JeM's

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<sup>5</sup> "Dead in 2013, JeM gets 'fresh life' with 70 active terrorists in Kashmir", *Economic Times*, July 13, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/dead-in-2013-jem-gets-fresh-life-with-70-active-terrorists-in-kashmir/articleshow/63262461.cms>

<sup>6</sup> Nasrullah Mansoor Khan Langrial, who was in jail in India for 18 years and repatriated to Pakistan in 2011.

<sup>7</sup> "Pak-sponsored terrorists with Chinese weapons making counter-insurgency in Kashmir bloodier", *Hindustan Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/pak-sponsored-terrorists-with-chinese-weapons-making-counter-insurgency-in-kashmir-bloodier/story-MkIMDPSNSG4nReucYMa0KK.html>

<sup>8</sup> "J&K: Use of steel bullets by terrorists worries forces", *DNA India*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-jk-use-of-steel-bullets-by-terrorists-worries-forces-2763326>

sniper squad. He was killed on October 30, 2018.<sup>9</sup> While JeM's sniper squad may still be active in South Kashmir with night vision equipment, this newly found capability created massive security scare late last year (2018) within the security forces and political elites who are always on the terror radar.

### **Vengeance of a Fugitive**

The United Nations on May 01 (2019), designated Masood Azhar as a "global terrorist" after China lifted its hold on a proposal to blacklist the JeM founder. The UN listed Azhar as a global terrorist being associated with Al-Qaida for “participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of”, “supplying, selling or transferring arms and related material to”, “recruiting for”, “otherwise supporting acts or activities of”, and “other acts or activities indicating association with” Jaish-e-Muhammad.<sup>10</sup> Now the much awaited UN designation would restrict Masood Azhar and JeM's operation and movement with international arms embargo, travel ban and asset freeze, among other things.

The demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (India), rise of Kashmir freedom struggle and state atrocities against Muslims are some of the issues that encouraged Masood Azhar to wage jihad against India. In November 2018, Azhar reiterated his anger over the Babri Masjid issue and threatened India to face severe consequences for it, putting the blame squarely on the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and its leaders like present Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. By threatening to carry out more terror attacks inside India, Azhar has outlined several plans through his weekly columns in Al Qalam to target Indian institutions operating in Afghanistan as well.

Certainly JeM has been quite successful in creating havoc in J&K and in keeping the security apparatus in tenterhooks. In Afghanistan, JeM and Masood Azhar have immense clout within the Taliban circle and JeM has targeted India's interests there successfully in the past. However, its capability to perpetrate big strikes inside India is limited even though it tried to collaborate with home-grown Islamic terror outfits such as Indian Mujahideen for possible joint operations.

Through his writings and speeches that are full of anti-Hindu and anti-Jews hatred, Masood Azhar incites youths to take up guns against India and India's interest elsewhere (e.g. in

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<sup>9</sup> “Jaish chief's nephew was sniper squad's deputy chief”, Indian Express, October 31, 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/oct/31/jaish-chiefs-nephew-was-sniper-squads-deputy-chief-1892515.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Mohammed Masood Azhar Alvi”, UNSC, April 30, 2019, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/mohammad-masood-azhar-alvi>

Afghanistan). The major propaganda mouthpiece of JeM -- Al Qalam and Rangnoor -- run by Masood Azhar himself regularly attack PM Modi for the increasing atrocities against Muslims in India. His writings urge Indian Muslims to avenge all atrocities by sacrificing their lives (suicide terror) and to increase passion for jihad. He also advises how not to depend upon traditional weaponry for waging Jihad. In one of his writings he said, "there is no need of any bomb, bullet shot, gunpowder, gun, rocket launcher or training; People launch big operations with the help of cars, electricity, petrol, fertilisers, grains of sand and pesticides."<sup>11</sup>

Jaish-e-Muhammad's increasing firepower and intent to strike terror in Kashmir notwithstanding, several of its plots to strike within India's hinterlands have been foiled in the past. At the same time, it is still plausible, despite recent setbacks, this Pakistan based Jihadi terror group may demonstrate rage and resilience in Kashmir again, as Masood Azhar remains free and potent in Pakistan, even with a UN designation. Azhar's regular incitements and calls for jihad against India may inspire more recruits to spread mayhem in Kashmir and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> "Al Qalam Online/ Rangnoor," September 2017, <http://www.alqalamonline.com/index.php/rangnoor-english/8524-601-intisaar-the-retaliative-jihaad>