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## **COUNTERING INSURGENCY IN KASHMIR: The Cyber Dimension**

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# COUNTERING INSURGENCY IN KASHMIR: The Cyber Dimension

## ABSTRACT

Countering the militancy in Kashmir has become a highly challenging task due to the exploitation of new information and communication technology by insurgent groups. The battlefield is now a multidimensional one, encompassing both physical territory and cyberspace. The overall capabilities of insurgents have been enhanced by tools in cyberspace that are inexpensive, ever more sophisticated, rapidly proliferating, and easy to use. Militants are systematically exploiting the Internet to generate moral support, recruit personnel, and transmit propaganda, leading to the further militarisation of the Kashmiri youth. This paper examines the potentially disastrous consequences of the use of cyberspace by an already strong insurgency in Kashmir. The objective is to understand the most effective means to counter the cyber dimension of the Kashmir insurgency.

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals, civil society organisations, and governments are investing tremendous energy and money in cyberspace, transforming innumerable aspects of peoples' daily lives. Cyberspace has also had a transformative impact on the evolution of all sorts of conflicts. Just as the French Revolution (1789-1799) saw a “democratization of communications, an increase in public access, a sharp reduction in cost, a growth in frequency,

and an exploitation of images to construct a mobilizing narrative”,<sup>1</sup> today's internet-driven technological revolution has led to a phenomenal growth in connectivity while giving individuals and small groups disproportionate power. Audrey Kurth Cronin argues that “blogs are today's revolutionary pamphlets, websites are the new dailies, and list serves are today's broadsides”.<sup>2</sup>

Describing the characteristics of a fast evolving 'network society', Manuel Castells, a renowned thinker on communication and information society, argues that “conflicts of our time are fought by networked social actors aiming to reach their constituencies and target audiences through the decisive switch to multimedia communication networks”.<sup>3</sup> John Mackinlay has contended that changes in mass communications have deeply affected the nature of insurgencies in which physical space has been rendered less important. With the rise of a “deterritorialised” state, insurgents are capable of using propaganda crafted and disseminated from distant locations. Mackinlay writes that “the techniques of an insurgency evolve with the societies from which it arises...if the communications revolution has given birth to global communities and global movements, so too can it herald a form of insurgent energy that is de-territorialised and globally connected.”<sup>4</sup> It is clear that insurgencies are being shaped by cyberspace, shifting the centre of gravity from the physical world to the 'virtual' domain or cyberspace. Noted security expert, Bill Gertz, has similarly argued in his latest book, *iWar: War and Peace in the Information Age*, that “warfare in the twenty-first century will be dominated by information operations: non-kinetic conflict waged in the digital realm”.<sup>5</sup>

Concern over 'communications strategies', 'network society', 'information operations' and other variations on propaganda reflects Castells' point. According to political scientist, Joseph Nye, “In an information age, communications strategies become more important, and outcomes are shaped not merely by whose army wins but also by whose story wins. In the fight against terrorism, for example, it is essential to have

a narrative that appeals to the mainstream and prevents its recruitment by radicals. In the battle against insurgencies, kinetic military force must be accompanied by soft power instruments that help to win over the hearts and minds (shape the preferences) of the majority of the population”.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Nye's words, Britain's former Chief of Defence Staff, General David Richards had contended that “Conflict today, especially because so much of it is effectively fought through the medium of the communications revolution, is principally about and for people – hearts and minds on a mass scale.”<sup>7</sup> As triggering a conflict through cyberspace can be low-cost and potentially devastating in impact, insurgents and terrorists throughout the world have come to rely heavily on cyber mobilisation, which is designed to conduct psychological warfare, to propagandise the success of insurgents and counter the claims of governmental agencies, to recruit, finance, and train more fighters to the cause.<sup>8</sup> These factors are compelling counterinsurgents to turn their attention to the cyber environment. There is still, however, a great deal of debate about how insurgency can be waged in the cyberspace. Counterinsurgency experts would ask whether it is simply an 'old wine' in a 'new bottle' or an arena for a completely new dimension that has not existed before.

To answer this question, it is important to understand terms such as the 'virtual ummah', 'digital umma', and 'Dar al-Cyber Islam', which highlight how Muslims have created transnational Internet communities in cyberspace beyond the geographically limited institutions. Even though personal blogs and other social-media tools allow Muslims to represent themselves anew, it also helps terror groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) to subvert traditional religious authorities by propagating interpretations of *jihad* that disseminate radical worldviews. Al-Qaeda has been heralded as the first terrorist organisation to revolutionise its operations by exploiting the Internet. The high level of sophistication achieved by cyber jihadists was illustrated in a manual issued by an al-Qaeda mouthpiece, the *Global Islamic Media Front*, which provided a detailed guide for creating Internet proxies in order to ensure

anonymity.<sup>9</sup> It has also been speculated that '*digihad*' has “made it easier for potential Jihadis to reinforce their world view without ever leaving home” and to get “eventually introduced to extremist ideology”.<sup>10</sup>

The outgoing US President Barack Obama had once observed: “Social media and the Internet is the primary way in which these terrorist organizations are communicating. Now, that's no different than anybody else, but they're good at it.”<sup>11</sup> Obama was simply repeating what former US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, had said as early as in 2007: “It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America.”<sup>12</sup> With the emergence of IS, not only the world of jihadism has been transformed but the jihadists have also begun to innovatively use the Internet for galvanising support for their cause.

IS has become a master at social media communication, from content creation to dissemination. It regularly uploads videos, with content that is easy to understand and practical, increasing its potential to become viral. While al-Qaeda was more dependent on the Internet, IS has shifted to the use of social media, prompting outgoing US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter, to term IS as “the first social media-fueled terrorist group”.<sup>13</sup> According to Gulshan Rai, India's National Cyber Security Coordinator in the Prime Minister's Office, more than 70 percent of terrorists and terror groups across the world are using various cyber tools like Voice over Internet Telecom, social media and encryption to spread their vision and objectives.<sup>14</sup>

## **Kashmir Conflict**

The Kashmir conflict has evolved dramatically and traumatically since the tragic partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Three factors are primarily responsible for the enduring character of the conflict: Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir, India's colossal political mismanagement of Jammu and Kashmir, and the emergence of a radical Islamist ideology in the state.

Pakistan has constantly challenged India's territorial rights over Kashmir. Its strategic objective of dividing India and controlling Kashmir has shaped its policy of supporting terrorism against India. Having failed to defeat India through conventional military means, Pakistan's security establishment, since the late 1980s, has been supporting and financing the insurgency in Kashmir. Cross-border infiltration from Pakistan has complemented the insurgency being waged by local actors. It has also sought to exploit the Kashmiri people's growing dissatisfaction with the Indian state.

India's own inept handling of the insurgency has further worsened the situation in Kashmir. A hollow rhetoric can never be a substitute for a successful Kashmir policy.<sup>15</sup> The former chief of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), A S Dulat, has candidly written in his memoirs that “we in India wasted so many years in containing the Kashmir militancy. And once it was contained, we sat back and were happy with the status quo, instead of taking advantage of the situation to forge a political solution.”<sup>16</sup>

The Kashmir issue also has its roots in radical Islam. The ideological aspect of the Kashmir insurgency should not be underestimated nor should it be reduced entirely to an 'accidental guerrilla' syndrome, where local grievances need to be addressed.<sup>17</sup> The newly resurgent Kashmiri insurgency has local roots, but there are concerns that it could get internationalised owing to links with transnational jihadist groups. The Kashmiri youth, who are joining the militancy, are drawing inspiration from such groups.

The Indian Army's doctrine in 2006 defines insurgency as “an organised armed struggle by a section of the population against the state, usually with foreign support. Possible causes of an insurgency including ideological, ethnic or linguistic differences; or politico-socio-economic reasons and/or fundamentalism and extremism. Interference by external forces may act as a catalyst to provide impetus to the movement.”<sup>18</sup> As compared to insurgency, a terrorist act is defined by Indian law as an



activity that is carried out “with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, security, economic security or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India or in any foreign country”.<sup>19</sup> Despite the difference between the two, terrorism is often used as an instrument by an insurgency, as has been the case in Kashmir.

A lasting solution to the Kashmir problem in today's polarised political atmosphere seems remote, but further repression of an already angry and alienated people will only create more problems. After years of enduring violence, mutual distrust, communal polarisation and Pakistani interference, secessionist sentiments are now firmly entrenched in Kashmiri society. The misuse of social media by terrorists and insurgents has led to further radicalisation of the people, posing greater challenges for the Indian State.

The Kashmiri youth have frequently opposed the presence of the Indian State during times of social unrest. The virulent protests of 2010 and the subsequent State crackdown caused much anger, resentment and widespread anti-India feelings in the Kashmir Valley. In the recent years, there has been a new surge in the incidence of Kashmiri youth taking up arms against the Indian establishment. The new phase of unrest that unfolded in 2016 is qualitatively different from previous scenarios in terms of intensity, scale, and the nature of mobilisation. Violent incidents and fatalities in the Kashmir Valley have shown a substantial increase in this new phase.

The '*Azadi*' slogan is gaining popularity among the Kashmiri youth, mobilising them in large numbers. No single factor can be attributed to this phenomenon. Like all Indians, Kashmiris also have the right to protest in a peaceful and non-violent manner. In a democratic society like India, Kashmiris cannot be expected to remain in constant fear of laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Public Safety Act (PSA), which grant sweeping powers to security forces and have led to several

cases of human rights violations in the state. When constitutional rights are undermined and all forms of dissent are outlawed, the line between peaceful protest and armed resistance often gets blurred, radicalising even the moderate voices. The PSA continues to be used repeatedly to detain Kashmiri separatist leaders.<sup>20</sup> In such an atmosphere, 'popular' discontent and local 'uprisings', fuelled by the separatist forces, are being exploited by the state and non-state actors in Pakistan.

The two most alarming aspects of the current phase of Kashmir's terrorism-driven insurgency are the rise in the number of homegrown militants, and the growing legitimacy of the militancy among the civil society and the educated classes of the Valley. It would be self-defeating to put the entire blame for Kashmir's present predicament on Pakistan.

## **KASHMIR INSURGENCY'S CYBER DIMENSION**

The use of modern information technology by the militants today to further their strategic objectives reflects another important departure from the past. The suppression of their rights to freedom of expression in the physical space has pushed the Kashmiri youth towards the 'virtual' space to vent their resentment and feeling of alienation. The battlefield is now a multidimensional one, encompassing both physical territory and cyberspace. The insurgents are exploiting the internet for recruitment, propaganda and support, as well as for strengthening their cross-border linkages.

The indications of a shift from the physical to the virtual domain were already visible during the 2010 protests. At the time, misguided and angry youth in Kashmir displayed their resentment by engaging in heavy stone-pelting and massive protests using social media tools, particularly text messaging via mobile phones.<sup>21</sup> Social media has shifted the paradigm in terms of the tools available to protesters in Kashmir. They no longer need to resort to illegal measures to protest and, instead, social media has given

them the space to raise awareness, spread information and plan protest rallies through completely legitimate means.<sup>22</sup> The number of people in Kashmir with access to social media has increased significantly from 25 percent in 2010 to about 70 percent by the end of 2015.<sup>23</sup>

The violent protests, sparked off in July 2016 by the killing of a Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HuM) commander, Burhan Wani, stunned the Indian security agencies, paralysing them and rendering them incapable of reacting appropriately. In the last five years before his death, Wani had emerged as the face of HuM. He threatened security forces and attracted more youth into the insurgency. Known as a top jihadist recruiter in the Kashmir Valley, Wani was part of the breed of educated youth, who joined the insurgency after the 2010 street protests. Before Wani, most of the Kashmiri insurgents operated clandestinely, even covering their faces when in public spaces. They were not commonly known among the people, except when their names were released by security forces after being killed. However, Wani—whose most enduring image is perhaps one photographed against a picturesque Kashmir hillside, dressed in combat uniform and bearing a rifle—has managed to make the insurgency appear 'glamorous'. He posted his photographs and videos on social media that were widely circulated in Kashmir, especially among the youth, soon allowing him to become a household name.

In August 2015, Wani uploaded a video on Facebook, carrying messages released by other jihadist leaders, that called for the setting up of a *Khilafat* in the region. He urged the youth to join him and asked the police to eschew their fight against the terrorists. The video, which was made with Wani and two others in combat fatigues, with a Kalashnikov and a holy Quran prominently at his side, was widely circulated on WhatsApp in Kashmir.<sup>24</sup> In another video in early June 2016, this time uploaded on both YouTube and Facebook, Wani threatened to launch attacks against the proposals to set up separate Sainik colonies and township for Kashmiri pundits. He warned that HuM “will act against every man in uniform who

stands for the Indian Constitution”, while asking the youth to keep a record of police personnel of their locality and provide information about their activities.<sup>25</sup>

Zakir Rashid Bhat, HuM's new commander and successor of Burhan Wani, released a video message in August 2016, which was widely circulated through WhatsApp. Calling upon the people to support the protests, Rashid asked the Kashmiri youth to boycott the recruitment drive for special police officers, warning them that they will be used to “create another Ikhwan”,<sup>26</sup> a pro-government counter-insurgency group, created in the 1990s comprising reformed Kashmiri insurgents. In October 2016, he released another video claiming that Sikh militants have also requested to join HuM, and asking the Kashmiri youth to snatch weapons from the security forces. His videos and messages that were widely circulated among the Kashmiri youth on various social networking sites provoked several gun snatching incidents in South Kashmir, which unnerved the security agencies. From July till mid-October, more than five dozen weapons, including AK-47s, INSAS, Carbine, SLR, .303 rifles, were snatched from police personnel. These were seen as a “cause of concern”<sup>27</sup> by Kashmir's Army Commander, while Kashmir's Inspector General of Police, Syed Javed Mujtaba Gilani claimed that the snatched weapons were likely to fall into the hands of people who “may use them for militancy”.<sup>28</sup>

Through the use of relatively cheap and accessible media, HuM has been trying to recruit the Kashmiri youth to their cause. In fact, Wani's expanding base of supporters had translated into a sudden upsurge in the numbers of local militants. In 2015, the Kashmir police examined the cases of 111 youngsters who had joined militancy; 58 of them eventually returned home. At least 88 of them were between the ages of 15 and 30, and more than half were radicalised though the internet.<sup>29</sup> As more youth joined militant ranks, the number of locals operating in the region outnumbered foreign terrorists for the first time in a decade. According to Intelligence Bureau sources, more than 100 Kashmiri youth joined the insurgency after Wani's death.<sup>30</sup> While the numbers may be contested, the

fact remains that today's 'homegrown' Kashmiri insurgents represent a new phenomenon, entirely different from what Kashmir had become accustomed to during the last two decades. India's former National Security Adviser, M K Narayanan, admits that “in marked contrast to earlier phases of trouble in Kashmir, the present movement is almost entirely home grown”.<sup>31</sup>

### **South Kashmir: Hotbed of Insurgency**

South Kashmir's four districts – Pulwama, Anantnag, Shopian, Kulgam – have increasingly become epicentres of the insurgency. They had been relatively calm during the height of insurgency in the 1990s, but the situation has changed during the last few years. The Islamic proselytising sect Tablighi Jamaat has mushroomed in South Kashmir and has financed training camps in all the four districts, with its headquarters in Tral.<sup>32</sup> Since 2014, there has been a rise in the number of local youth taking up arms. It is no longer required to send Kashmiri youth to Pakistan for training or even for indoctrination as computers and mobiles phones have made the terrorists' task easier.

Wani's tech-savvy tactics turned south Kashmir into a hotbed of insurgency. During the first half of 2015, two dozen fresh inductions into the militancy were reported from South Kashmir.<sup>33</sup> Wani's recruitment strategy factored in the changing psyche of South Kashmir's youth, who have become increasingly vulnerable to jihadist recruiters. In August 2015, an Urdu journalist was quoted as saying that the terror groups “now don't waste time on sending youngsters to Pakistan. They first ask them to get a weapon. Then they assign them a target. Those who clear the first two stages are recruited. This serves an ulterior purpose: once a youngster carries out a strike, he can't go back”.<sup>34</sup> A police officer posted in South Kashmir claimed that Burhan's popularity caused an upsurge in recruitment and training of local youth in Kashmir; more than 60 local militants were active in South Kashmir in July 2016, who received their training in local camps.<sup>35</sup> According to a media report in mid-August, all the

four districts of South Kashmir descended into anarchy with no hint of administrative apparatus at work. As thousands held 'Azadi' rallies, only three police stations functioned out of 36 in South Kashmir.<sup>36</sup>

## Islamic Radicalisation

An environment with pre-existing violence or political tension is an enabling condition of jihadism. As a recent study highlights, the “synergy between jihadism and violence, whether perpetrated by repressive regimes, militia rivalries, terrorist groups, sectarian differences, tribal tensions, criminal organizations, or foreign intervention. Jihadism exploits local tensions; it fuels and is in turned fuelled by these tensions.”<sup>37</sup> A conflict zone provides jihadist groups with permissive environments to proselytise and recruit. Unfortunately, Kashmir is on the verge of becoming such a conflict zone, where jihadist movements are likely to grow as local groups adapt to it to fit their needs.

Realising the crucial role of cyberspace in stimulating a global Islamist identity among Kashmiri Muslims, radical and jihadist organisations have been trying to create a cyber Islamic environment in Kashmir, which would provide them with a psychological platform to transmit their message for propaganda, indoctrination and recruitment to ever-expanding audiences. One of the most relevant aspects of the 'virtual dimension' of the Kashmir insurgency has been its gradual tilt towards global Islamist extremism. A Kashmiri police officer compared the Internet with “a tap running 24x7, gushing out Islamist propaganda” over which the police have no control.<sup>38</sup>

For many years, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and many of his hardcore followers have sought to frame their struggle for 'Azadi' entirely in Islamic terms with very little success.<sup>39</sup> However, it is only recently that there has been a sudden surge in Islamic terminology and symbolism in Kashmir's socio-political landscape that is gradually delegitimising the previously dominant ethno-nationalist agenda of the insurgency. The People's Democratic Party politician and former Deputy Chief Minister of the state,

Muzaffar Hussain Baig, has rightly warned that Kashmir's conflict “is on the verge of becoming religious extremism, which is not a political goal but a religious vision...infecting the hearts and minds of youths”.<sup>40</sup> As explained earlier, HuM's Kashmiri cadre have begun to employ propaganda tools and imagery used by the IS, including the rhetoric of a worldwide caliphate. During the initial protests in Kashmir after Wani's death, IS flags were seen along with those of Pakistan.<sup>41</sup>

In January 2016, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) deported Sheikh Azhar-ul-Islam, who hailed from Kangan tehsil in Ganderbal district. He became the first Kashmiri youth to be arrested by the National Investigation Agency for alleged links with IS.<sup>42</sup> It is suspected that he became attracted to IS' ideology after hearing sermons in the local mosque, and later online contacts with like-minded people facilitated his trip to UAE. The GOC of the Indian Army in Kashmir has already termed IS “a live threat that cannot be ignored”.<sup>43</sup>

As a part of a survey conducted by the state police on youth radicalisation in Kashmir, messages, posts and conversations were intercepted based on certain keywords on popular online platforms. Out of 500,000 conversations related to certain keywords, around 100,000 were identified as “a matter of concern” by the Additional Director General of Police, CID, S M Sahai.<sup>44</sup> Besides easy availability of Internet, another key factor responsible for growing Islamic radicalisation has been the decrease in the practice of Sufi Islam, the traditional form of religious practice in this region, and the growing congregations of the Wahhabi ideology through various Ahl-e-Hadith factions.

This growing radicalisation trend has replaced whatever little was left of the syncretic practices of Islam in Kashmir. The language of the recent mass protests has also been more religious than political. An organisation called Ittehad-e-Millat has come into being, consisting of elements from religious organisations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Ahl-e-Hadith. Its leaders have been reportedly asking people, particularly in South Kashmir, to take

an oath of turning away from mainstream political parties.<sup>45</sup> All this indicates a larger political shift in the Valley and the Indian government is yet to fully grasp the dangerous potential of this change.

## Cyber Sabotage

Taking a cue from the IS, Pakistan-based terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), along with HuM have entered the cyberspace. It was reported that the Jamaat-ud-Dawah (JuD), LeT's charity arm, launched its cyber initiative during a conference on social media that it organised in Lahore in December 2015. Emphasising the growing importance of social media in disseminating propaganda, the JuD chief Hafiz Saeed called upon his followers to use this medium to strengthen the Kashmiri separatist movement.<sup>46</sup> The LeT has been using the cyberspace to fuel the Kashmiri insurgency. A few years ago, it used the Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) – a technology that allows data encryption making it difficult to decode messages - for communication purposes. The LeT is said to have its own private VoIP, Ibotel, to communicate with its cadres in both Pakistan and Kashmir.<sup>47</sup>

If cyber-insurgents can be readily identified, it would be easy to track and monitor their activities. But the cyberspace provides anonymity to the insurgents, allowing them to cloak their identity and activities. Cyberspace “is an unregulated environment in which anonymity provides more opportunities than ever to disseminate extreme views, deliberate misinformation, and create hoaxes without revealing the person or organisation behind the creation of the content”.<sup>48</sup> Despite the sustained efforts of security agencies, according to an internal communication of Jammu and Kashmir Police in 2014, the terrorists and separatists could have uninterrupted communications through VoIP and other social media platforms such as Skype and WhatsApp. Moreover, there was concern that most of the offensive and subversive Facebook pages that the police got blocked in early 2014 were reactivated. For instance, a Pulwama-based group restored a page blocked twice by the police.<sup>49</sup>



Pakistan's state and non-state actors are conducting aggressive intelligence against Indian security personnel in Kashmir for accessing strategic information. It was revealed in March 2016 that the Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was using a software 'SmeshApp', easily available on Google playstores, to infect the smartphones and personal computers of Indian security personnel, particularly those deployed along the India-Pakistan border. Using this spyware, Pakistani handlers were luring the Indian Army, the Border Security Forces and the Central Reserve Police Force personnel through Facebook accounts. Once installed, the app could track all movements, phone calls, messages and photographs, with the mobile phone and the Facebook account acting as a database.<sup>50</sup> The pressing need to prevent vital information from being compromised and being released to mainstream media, forced the Union Ministry of Home Affairs to issue fresh guidelines for all the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs). These sought to regulate the storing and sharing of secret operational and service data on internet based social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and others.<sup>51</sup>

According to an analysis of reactions on social media platforms, after the killing of Burhan Wani, during July 8-14, 2016, it was found that out of a sample of 126,000, 45 percent of respondents were from unknown geographical locations, 40 percent from Indian locations and about eight percent from Pakistan. None of this should come entirely as a surprise. As there is no robust mechanism for cyberspace surveillance in Kashmir, insurgents and separatists are tweeting or commenting unchecked on social media that can spark off trouble.<sup>52</sup> Minister of State for Home, Hansraj Ahir, told the Rajya Sabha in 2016 that the "Pakistan strategy has been to try and promote radicalisation through vested groups and social media so that this can be given the shape of a civil resistance".<sup>53</sup>

It can be argued that the cyber dimension has become prominent in escalating protests and political violence in Kashmir in the recent years.

The most extreme and catastrophic expression of this trend was seen following Wani's death. The government buildings were targeted as usual, but violence this time was not confined to government symbols alone; families of security, and civilians seen as 'collaborators' also increasingly came under attack. The large-scale protests benefited to a greater degree from the newfound ability of protesters and insurgents to send and receive information on platforms that were not controlled by the establishment they were up against. Clearly, social media has offered insurgents a unique platform for preparation as well as after-action deliberation. The unconstrained circulation of videos and pictures allows the perpetuation of a certain narrative that in turn fuels further unrest.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Counter Cyber Propaganda

The emergence of electronic jihad and cyber insurgency as modern manifestations of terror have made winning the hearts and minds of local people and, simultaneously, discrediting terrorist propaganda the most challenging task for any counter-insurgency strategy. Censorship, removal of content and government sponsored counter-narrative efforts are mostly inadequate in suppressing extremist ideology from spreading online. If not handled with greater energy, planning and resources, the terrorist and insurgent propaganda could emerge as the dominant narrative.

If Kashmiri youth are to be dissuaded from joining the e-jihad, it is important to find more effective strategies to discredit Islamist radicals both on the battlefield and in cyberspace. The Indian government needs to better understand the full scope of 'information engagement' in its counterinsurgency policy. The police, the paramilitary forces and the Army in Kashmir must assertively employ all available social media platforms as well as all traditional propaganda tools to present an accessible, helpful, professional, efficient and accountable image of

themselves. In Kashmir, this kind of perception management should be central to the tough task undertaken by security forces.

Jihadist recruiters prey on underlying grievances to recruit volunteers, both transnational and national. India's security establishment would do well to put less emphasis on a heavy-handed, knee-jerk, and only tactical response to terrorism-driven insurgency in Kashmir. Given the growing importance of the insurgency's virtual dimension, it is vital to frame a 'strategic narrative'; a compelling storyline which can explain the government's side convincingly. Its absence means that the counter-insurgent cedes the crucial virtual dimension to the insurgents, allowing them to shape the narrative instead to suit their purpose.

### **Cyber Surveillance**

The Indian government has come under criticism for shutting down all Internet and mobile communication during the 2016 protests, instead of effectively countering the cyber insurgency waged by local insurgents and Pakistan-based jihadi cyber networks. The government's move deprived its security agencies of vital clues, trends and information in the cyberspace. Cyberspace can be useful for counter-insurgency as well. Although the networking effects of cyberspace allow insurgents to link as never before, they also allow security agencies to map social media networks, providing vital clues about the leadership, structure, whereabouts and insurgents that would otherwise be impossible to gain.

Cyber-intelligence is unlikely to follow the classic intelligence cycle. Hence, the intelligence structures at all levels in Kashmir should be connected by robust and secure communications architecture. Given the rapidly emerging threats from cyberspace, the Indian government should form a dedicated cyber warfare/cyber security team in Kashmir, employing cutting-edge technology. Intelligence agencies should remain vigilant for indications of emerging threats – a threat that is amorphous and poorly understood, but one that could rapidly and unexpectedly emerge.

## Manage Demonetisation

Post-demonetisation, the declared objective of the central government to promote cashless economic transactions cannot be achieved without ensuring uninterrupted Internet connectivity. The existing counter-insurgency practice of shutting down the Internet in Kashmir after large-scale violence and unrest must take this aspect into account. The Indian government cannot expect to win back the goodwill of the Kashmiri population if the Internet is shut down for indefinite periods, paralysing their economic activities.

## Cyber Specialisation

There is a lack of a specialist culture in India's security agencies and armed forces. There are no cyber specialists or information warfare specialists, who would continue to work in their area of specialisation after their limited tenures. The paramilitary and the Army continue to be led by, what is often referred to as, generalist officers. Even when these officers develop a degree of specialisation in the cyber domain, their next appointment often takes precedence over retaining domain expertise.<sup>54</sup> India's cyber capabilities lag significantly behind global players, and due to "little control over the hardware used by Indian Internet users as well as the information that is carried through them, India's national security architecture faces a difficult task in cyberspace".<sup>55</sup> Despite having a National Cyber Security Policy (2013) and a National Cyber Security Coordinator, the overall ecosystem of cyber security in India has not improved much.<sup>56</sup> For counterinsurgency strategy in cyberspace to be effective, India must develop mechanisms for ensuring that global best practices are translated into practice.

## CONCLUSION

The homegrown insurgents that the government forces have been fighting in Kashmir are mostly small and loosely linked. Notwithstanding

differences over tactics or goals, they have an alliance of convenience with Pakistan-based extremist and terror groups. Capturing territory or overthrowing the government may be the long-term goal of insurgents, but their immediate objective is to tie down the government and provoke it to take disproportionate measures that could further alienate the local population.

In today's fast-changing socio-political scenario in Kashmir, it is not sufficient to focus on organisational and doctrinal changes in the military domain alone. In the long run, what really counts is the large-scale mobilisation of people. Cyber-mobilisation has emerged as a crucial element, not just in generating numbers of fighters but, more importantly, in inspiring violence and struggle. Thus, the government needs an effective cyber counter-insurgency strategy in Kashmir, turning more attention to analysing, influencing and countering the mobilisational tactics of the insurgents.

The Internet revolution in the Kashmir Valley is not just altering the way local people think but also changing the way they exhibit resistance to the establishment. Although jihadist guerrillas are not going to be replaced by cyber-insurgents operating in a virtual battlefield, cyber dominance in Kashmir may well make the difference between success and failure. India has to contend with a restless Kashmir, which has been exposed to incessant online provocations. New Delhi cannot afford to lose control of the narrative. Contesting the war of narratives is as vital as restoring normalcy. [ORF](#)

## ENDNOTES

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