Violent Non-State Actors and the Kashmir Conflict

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Abstract

In this study, we examine five active Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) and their capacity for violence in a potential conflict in the Kashmir region. The four VNSA include Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Al Qaeda. Drawing from both the Leadership for the Extreme and Dangerous for Innovative Results project, we focus on each VNSA's organizational and leadership capabilities. Our findings suggest that two VNSA, LeT and Al Qaeda have high levels of destructive capacity based on their organizational features. The other two VNSA, HM and JeM, have moderate levels of destructive capacity. In our conclusions, we also speculate as to the potential role of the Islamic State in the Kashmir region.

LEADIR Dataset and Key Terms

In this study, we utilize the LEADIR project to assess differences in organizational sophistication and leadership decision-making between four VNSAs. Broadly speaking, the LEADIR project houses data on 279 active VNSAs and 303 of their corresponding leaders. For this effort, we examined degrees of organizational sophistication, which consists of three interlinked concepts: centralization, formalization, and specialization (Logan & Ligon, 2019). Centralization refers to the degree to which decision-making is concentrated. Formalization refers to the extent to which rules and procedures are used to govern the behaviors of members of the organization. Specialization refers to the degree to which the organization is composed of many interrelated parts. In general, VNSAs with high degrees of organization sophistication are better equipped to engage in complex tactics and operations and coordinate with other VNSAs. Table 1 also shows the stated goals and interests for each VNSA examined here. Stated goals refer to the desired goal of the group relative to the Kashmir conflict. Interest in conflict here refers to what the group seeks to achieve if there were to be a conflict in the region.

Lashkar-e-Taiba

Founded in the early 1990s, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) or the "army of the pure" is an Islamic militant organization based in Lahore, Pakistan which seeks to eliminate Indian forces from Kashmir and establish an Islamic caliphate in the Indian subcontinent (D'Souza and Routray, 2016). The organization is said to have several thousand fighters under their command (Bajoria, 2010). LeT is comprised of a tight-knit, hierarchically structured leadership team who is responsible for fundraising, recruitment, and other organizational functions (Ligon et al, 2017). At the head of the organization is founder and former Islamic studies professor, Hafiz Muhammad Saeed. Hafiz Saeed openly supports and encourages violence in the Kashmir region, and is known for attracting thousands to hear his fiery sermons (Roul, 2018). To help manage organizational activities in Pakistan and abroad, Saeed relies on an extensive top-management team (TMT) that runs various departments such as the Department of Preaching and Reform, the Department of Public Relations, and the Department of Education (Ligon et al, 2017). These departments enhance LeT's ability to fundraise, recruit, and maintain its public image. Tactically, one of the most unique features of LeT's attack profile is their use of a tactic known as *fidayeen*, which involves heavily-armed militant units who attack specific targets intent on causing maximum damage (Ligon et al, 2017). The capacity to coordinate and secure the resources to engage in such attacks is likely a function of LeT's

organizational sophistication. If conflict escalates in the Kashmir region, we suspect that LeT would be a major player in operations against Indian military forces.

Hizbul Mujahideen

Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) was founded in 1989 to unite the Pakistan and Indian controlled sections of Kashmir and merge it into the Pakistani state. HM has taken a more militant approach to uniting Kashmir, starting with the appointment of Mohammed "Syed Salahuddin" Yusuf Shah. Despite Salahuddin's lack of battlefield experience, he is highly regarded for his military knowledge and popularity and has threatened to increase the number of suicide attacks executed by HM (Roul, 2014). A major differentiator between HM and other groups operating for the independence of Indian Kashmir is that HM is primarily composed of Kashmiris versus LeT and JeM which are composed primarily of Pakistanis (Ramachandran, 2017). While HM's attacks has declined in recent years, the group still carries strategic influence, exemplified in 2016, when a popular HM commander and youth leader's death in a clash with Indian Armed Forces led to large protests in Kashmir. Salahuddin also leads the United Jihad Council umbrella group that includes JeM, LeT, and HM (Shahid, 2017). This has helped to create ties between HM and other groups, wherein HM receives funds from other groups and has collaborated on attacks with LeT (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019).

TABLE 1. Breakout of VNSA Motivations

VNSA	Stated Goal	Organizational Sophistication	Interest in Conflict
Lashkar-e-Taiba	Establish Islamic caliphate in Indian subcontinent	High	To fight for Kashmir independence
Hizbul Majahideen	Unite Kashmir under Pakistani rule	Moderate	To advocate for Kashmir independence
Jaish-e-Mohammad	Unite Kashmir under Pakistani rule	Moderate	To re-establish organization's power
Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent	Establish themselves in the region	High	To unite other groups under them
Islamic State Wilayat-e-Hind	Wants to overtake AQIS in the region	Low	To gain power

While HM is unlikely to lead operations during an escalation of tensions, due to their soft power in the region, they could help to encourage people to take up arms. HM would likely side with Pakistan, but would be happier to simply be fighting against the Indian government.

Jaish-e-Mohammad

Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), also known as the Army of Mohammad, was founded in 2000 by Masood Azhar and works to annex Indian Kashmir into Pakistan. The group is based out of Pakistan and wants to unite Kashmir under Pakistani rule and implement Shari'a. Azhar is a well-educated ideologue, having graduated from Uloom-al-Islamia in Karachi, which is well known for producing a number of radical Islamist leaders (Roul, 2013). Azhar's ideology, *Qital fi Sabeel Allah* (armed fighting for the sake of Allah), aligns with al-

Qaeda's ideologues including al-Zawahiri (Zahid, 2019). JeM is reported to have the support of Osama bin Laden and the Afghan Taliban during their founding. In recent years, JeM has started to expand into Afghanistan, to push out US and coalition forces (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2019). Azhar is also known for being well written and well-spoken leader. The group went into hiding in 2007 and has struggled to regain power since. To avoid detection while still raising money and recruiting, JeM has utilized many front groups including an educational charity to operate behind (Roul, 2013). The current estimate of JeM forces is only approximately several hundred, where most are semi-literate, unemployed youth who are recruited from small towns and madrasas with the promise of money and a better life (Hashim, 2019; Honawar, 2015). Because of their expansion into Afghanistan, JeM forces include Pakistanis, Kashmiris and Afghanis.

JeM has been previously supported by the Pakistan government, with Pakistan's intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has been accused of having a hand in the creation of the group. However, due to Pakistan outlawing JeM in 2002 as a terrorist organization, there has been bad blood between the two. Due to their attempt at revival, they are more likely to attempt large scale attacks such as the suicide attack they carried out in February 2019, where they killed 40 Indian soldiers.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has been long interested in penetrating the South Asia sphere. In 2014, Al-Qaeda created their al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) branch in order to expand their influence to Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). With this interest in Kashmir, AQIS and AQ-affiliate Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind have become critical of Pakistani-backed groups for focusing on nationalistic ideas rather than jihad and that these groups needed to free themselves from Pakistani influence (Roul, 2017; Joscelyn, 2019). AQIS has started to create closer ties to the Afghan Taliban by training Taliban members. AQIS has also started to recruit more people from Pakistani groups. To avoid associating themselves with ISIS, AQIS has created a code of conduct that will help re-establish themselves in the region (Soufan Group, 2019). AQ Central has looked to also support the Kashmir conflict with leader al-Zawahiri making a video in July 2019 that encouraged jihad and fighters going against the Indian army and state in Kashmir (Joscelyn, 2019).

Conclusions

In conclusion, LeT and AQIS are highly sophisticated VNSAs who have the destructive capacity to strike Indian Armed Forces if a conflict were to erupt between Pakistan and India. However, we suspect that, while LeT would likely maintain a strategic relationship with Pakistan, AQIS would not, allowing them unrestricted violence. HM, and to a slighter lesser extent, JeM are moderately sophisticated and both organizations may be inclined to take advantage of conflict to reestablish themselves by attempting to attack high-value targets. It is also important to note that one group that has not been discussed to this point: Islamic State's Waliyat-e-Hind (India Province). This branch of IS was established in May 2019 to little fanfare, being placed under the control of IS-Khorsan. The history of IS-K in the region has seen little success, hence why the group has rebranded their branch in India to Waliyat-e-Hind. IS-Hind will likely take the current struggle in Indian Kashmir as a way to establish itself in the region and attempt to overcome AQIS. IS-Hind has already clashed with Indian security forces since its establishment and there have been reports of IS flags being flown in Kashmir (Joscely 2019; Zahid, 2019). To date, IS-Hind may not have the organizational sophistication relative to the other groups. However, it is important to document their growing influence in the region.

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