
"The Resistance Front": Old Wine in a New Bottle

It is a well-known fact that terrorist and insurgent groups best flourish in an environment fraught with instability, chaos and social upheaval, which provides them with favourable conditions to exploit local grievances and run recruitment and propaganda campaigns among the vulnerable population. This is not an exception to the case of the freshly-established terrorist organisation “The Resistance Front” (TRF), which is currently operative in the region of Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). Years of violent conflict and proxy warfare, coupled with the ongoing deadly COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to a sense of disarray in the area, which has been readily hijacked by violent extremist ideologies.

The current article will describe in-depth the genesis and organisational structure of the TRF. It will further illuminate its links with Pakistan’s military establishment and its intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and discuss its ongoing strategy of diverting attention from Rawalpindi’s trusted terrorist proxies such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul-Mujahideen (HM) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), for the purposes of giving them space for recalibration and ostensibly changing the character of the violent extremism in the region. In order to highlight the latter argument, the article will thoroughly examine the TRF’s social media approach and stress upon the group’s innovativeness and activeness vis-à-vis the utilisation of digital platforms, which has been rather unseen before in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). The article will conclude by arguing that what is widely described as a new wave of terrorism in Kashmir is simply an old wine in new bottle – a fresh label placed on already existing practices. The birth of the TRF carries with itself feelings of *déjà vu* from the 1990s when similarly, scratching under the disguise of secularism, one could recognise the radical Islamist agenda. As argued by Shastri (2020), “*the wheel has gone full circle*”.

Background

The TRF first came to the attention of intelligence officials shortly after the nullification of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution by the Government of India in August 2019. On 12 October 2019, the terrorist outfit claimed responsibility over its *Telegram* channel for a grenade attack in Srinagar’s Hari Singh High Street, which was followed by a similar attack two weeks afterwards (Routray, 2020). On 2 February 2020, the blast of a grenade again disturbed life on the streets of Srinagar in the area of Lal Chowk (Sandhu, 2020), yet it was not until 23 March when the group’s activities started to appear in major media headlines, with the Jammu & Kashmir’s police first successful apprehension of six members of the group and the seizure of a considerable stack of weapons, which reportedly included 89 hand

grenades, eight AK rifles, 10 pistols, 20-odd detonator fuses and ammunition (Bhattacharya, 2020). An interrogation of the arrested individuals revealed that the weapons were smuggled on small portions from across the border with Pakistan by other terrorists who compiled the arms for the purposes of using them against local politicians and security forces (Routray, 2020).

Just a few days afterwards, on 5 April, the TRF claimed responsibility for an attack in Kashmir's Kupwara district, alongside the Line of Control (LoC), in which five Indian soldiers of the Indian Army's 4 Para regiment were killed in a gunfight (ibid). Five members of the terrorist outfit were also killed, two of which were Pakistani (Singh, 2020). In its official statement, the group argued that its members killed "*18 Indian paratroopers and severely injured 6 others*" (Kashmir Open Source Intelligence, 2020). Shortly after the deadly encounter, on 18 April, the TRF struck once again; this time a lone gunman attacked with an AK-47 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel at a security checkpoint in Sopore, Baramulla District, ultimately killing three and injuring three others (ibid). The TRF social media channels described the attack as retaliatory in response to the recent killings of its members by Indian security forces (Routray, 2020). After that, a few more deadly attacks on Indian army personnel have followed, during which reportedly two commanders of the group Sajad Ahmed and Abu Anas have been killed and later on, a LeT commander, Haider, a Pakistani national, was killed as well (KashmirOSINT, 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020). Yet, despite those losses, the terrorist outfit has not stopped to be active – recently, the group claimed responsibility for the killing of Ajay Pandita, a Kashmiri Pandit and elected leader of a local village administrative committee from the Anantnag region (Shastri, 2020) and a month afterwards the killing of a local BJP leader Sheikh Waseem Bari and his father and brother in Bandipore (Jameel, 2020).

Thus, it is clear that the group has become a major security threat in the region, keeping the Indian Army on its toes. Yet, in order to adequately address the menace the terror outfit imposes, one needs to first rigorously examine its organisational structure, mechanisms and objectives. A consensus forming between intelligence forces and analysts dealing with violent extremism in J&K has concluded that the TRF is yet another terrorist front created by the Pakistani Military establishment and the ISI, in their pursuit of using Kashmiri youth as proxies against India. Its formation was particularly intended to lift international pressure and scrutiny over Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism, which is also the reason why the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammed have remained rather on the low since the Pulwama attack in 2019 (KashmirOSINT, 2020). By doing so, Pakistan is hoping to evade blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and come out of its grey list (ibid). That is why, by giving the group a name, which carries so-called secular connotations, Pakistan is blatantly aiming at portraying the terror outfit as an indigenous '*freedom-fighting*' movement in comparison with its other proxies which wear a cloak of Islamist extremism. As Kumar (2020) explains, "*this secular sounding name would help in concealing the tag of Jihadist movement and to gain sympathy and traction from global left liberals and human right activists*", subsequently helping Pakistan to "*steer clear from the tag of "incubator of terrorism"*".

In all probabilities, the TRF is currently acting as an umbrella organisation for all LeT, JeM and HM operatives including their over ground workers (OGWs) (KashmirOSINT, 2020). Hence, by placing attention on the TRF, the Pakistani deep State is looking forward to receiving breathing space to recalibrate the rest of its terror groups (ibid). Yet, despite Pakistan’s attempts to portray the group as a ‘*homegrown resistance movement*’ (Bhattacharya, 2020), the *modus operandi* and rhetoric of the TRF remain strikingly similar to other pro-Pakistan terrorist outfits (KashmirOSINT, 2020). For instance, most of its attacks, the group has carried out using grenades or improvised explosive devices (Kaul, 2020). However, since April the TRF has predominantly conducted its operations thorough using assault rifles, directly targeting Indian security personnel; this altogether with having the presence of highly trained and battle-hardened terrorists among its cadres, have distinguished their tactics and operational capabilities from the rest of the terror groups in the Valley (ibid).

A closer inspection at the abovementioned aspects of sophisticated armed training and weapon acquisition provided to TRF members particularly highlights Pakistani footprints. As explained thoroughly in a report issued by the Kashmir Open Source Intelligence (2020):

“One of the crucial evidences that associates TRF with Pakistan is the recent Kupwara gunfight, two of the five militants killed in the gunfight were Kashmiris who had travelled to Pakistan as civilians on valid visa via Wagah/Atari crossing. It wouldn’t have been possible for them to stay in Pakistan for 2 years and infiltrate illegally via Kupwara as militants without backing of Pakistani state. It would have been impossible for these Kashmiris to go underground for two years, train and then sneak into Kupwara via Neelum Valley without Pakistani deep-state backing them. It’s also nearly impossible for a Kashmiri to get Pakistani visa unless it is recommended by any pro-Pakistan separatist or militant group operating in the Kashmir valley”.

Social Media Strategy

What further speaks of the TRF’s connections to Pakistan are its social media handles, which have not only been overtly sympathetic to groups such as LeT, but have been further traced back to Islamabad and other cities in Pakistan (Routray, 2020). The interrogation of apprehended militants in March revealed that they had received their instructions via a Pakistan-based operative known as “Andrew Jones” on Telegram and “Khan Bilal” on WhatsApp (Kaul, 2020).

The outfit’s well-crafted social media strategy has currently no match in respect to resourcefulness and ingenuity in comparison to the rest of the running Pakistani terror cells in the region. The TRF is presently active on Telegram, Twitter, WordPress, TamTam, Discord, Hoop, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram for the purposes of spreading its narrative and propaganda through written, audio and video statements (KashmirOSINT, 2020). The group further utilizes those channels to issue intimidating and provocative messages, which target security forces, mainly J&K Police, mainstream politicians, Kashmiri political bodies and civilians (ibid). For instance, in early June 2020, the terror outfit openly declared through its social media platforms, that “*any Indian who comes with the intention to settle in Kashmir will*

be treated as an agent of RSS and not a civilian and will be dealt with appropriately” (Chaudhury and Pubby, 2020). The statement came weeks after the Indian government introduced a new domicile law of the union territory of J&K. In another case, on 29 August and 2 September 2020, the TRF prepared and published on its social media accounts ‘hit lists’ containing 62 names and details of civilians, activists, political workers and security force personnel (Javaid, 2020). Curiously, as per the official statement of the J&K Police, the list was uploaded and circulated with the assistance of ‘cyber OGWs’, *“a first-of-its-kind reference to ‘overground workers’”* (ibid), once again highlighting the level of innovativeness regarding the utilization of digital technologies.

A report published by the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (Kaul, 2020) further provides an analysis of the group’s online behavior over the month of April 2020, during which the outfit claimed a series of high-profile attacks targeting Indian security personnel, and draws attention to the value the TRF attributes to social media insurgency, which not only mirrors, but further complements their real-life violent activities. As analysed in the report through now-deleted TRF Facebook page accessed via CrowdTangle, the page received its highest interaction rate on April 26, 2020, and May 3, 2020, which coincided with the days during which TRF terrorists were involved in armed encounters with the security forces.



Source: (@dfrkaul/DFRLab via CrowdTangle)

Curiously, reminiscent of the style of the infamous Islamic State (IS), the TRF’s social media profiles tend to release a statement after the perpetration of every attack in the region,

regardless whether it has been carried out by its members or not (KashmirOSINT, 2020). Its channels have even praised operations, which have been implemented by non-Pakistan/anti-Pakistan terrorist groups such as Ansar-Ghazwat Al-Hind (AGH) and IS, which is rather intriguing considering there have been well-known clashes between pro-Pakistan and non-Pakistan outfits in Kashmir (ibid; Kaul, 2020). On one hand that might be part of a strategy of distancing themselves from the image of being under the aegis of Pakistan, while on the other, it could suggest that the TRF is not keen in getting itself involved with internal clashes and instead aims to unite all terror groups under one umbrella.

Local Terrorist Group Dynamics

Although in recent months claims appeared of a small-scale turf war between the HM and TRF, first over a Hizbul commander who defected to TRF after disagreements with his commander, and later on, over the credit of the perpetration of the Handwara attack on 2 May (IANS, 2020), an audio statement issued by now late HM operation commander Riyaz Naikoo denied any such rifts, arguing such statements provide a false sense of division between the two terror groups (Shah, 2020). Thus, as further argued by Khalid Shah (2020), Associate Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the establishment of the TRF should be viewed as “*an attempt to consolidate strengths, manpower, weaponry, and training of various militant outfits into one outlet*” by the Pakistani State. More importantly, the formation of the group is an attempt to portray it as a local non-Islamic liberal uprising, thus attempting to provide it with a level of legitimacy and repudiating any ties to Pakistan (Kumar, 2020).

That has clearly become the current strategy of Rawalpindi vis-à-vis its proxy warfare in J&K considering the latest establishment of another terror group, “People's Anti-Fascist Front” (TimesNow, 2020). The outfit released a video on 28 July, claiming responsibility for the killing of J&K police personnel, while the terrorists in the video were holding American M-4 rifles which have been earlier available only to the JeM (ibid). At a later date, on 17 August, the new proxy terrorist organisation released a body-cam footage of the killing of two troopers of the CRPF and a special police officer of the J&K Police, perpetrated by two of its members (Philip, 2020). Analysts have argued that this freshly adopted strategy aims at attracting more local youth by trying to glamorize their actions in the eyes of online viewers and yield a sense of spectacle and excitement (ibid).

As earlier mentioned, however, there is nothing novel in Pakistan’s ongoing game plan of using secular-sounding names for their terror pawns. A closer historical look at its operations during the late 80s, early 90s, exhibits a similar strategy where the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) received weapons and training from the Pakistani ISI, when its Islamist groups did not have just yet enough currency and logistical support in the Kashmir Valley (Mirza, 2019). Despite the JKLF’s ostensibly secular and pro-independence image, the terror outfit was “*fanatically religious in content*” (ibid), which was revealed the moment they went berserk on massacring Kashmiri Pandits in their bid of cleansing the Kashmir Valley from ‘*infidels*’ (Koul, 1999). Thus, as further argued by Koul (1999), “*the treatment that was meted*

out to the Hindu minority as an acid test exposed its commitments to secularism as fake, false and mere presence". The fact that mosques became a focal center for the dissemination of their objectives, further exhibited the Islamist nature of their agenda (ibid). Yet, it was during that time that the ISI established the Hizbul Mujahideen and saw them as a more promising cadre due to their openly pan-Islamic doctrine, as a result of which the ISI started cutting off money and arm supplies to the JKLF, ultimately leading to the latter's fracture (Sirrs, 2016). Nevertheless, despite the sacrifice of the JKLF at the expense of the HM, the latter was also not supposed to dominate the scene for too long (ibid). Therefore, as Sirrs's (2016) words regarding that era, still reverberate the realities of today "... ISI never put all its eggs in one basket".

Conclusion

As discussed throughout this article, the development and rise of the TRF should be seen through the prism of certain regional and global factors at play. The group emerged soon after the de-operationalisation of Article 370 by the Indian Government on 5 August, which gave an impetus to Pakistan to launch a terror outfit, which appears as a reaction to the move by New Delhi and provides it with a liberal secular image (Bhat, 2020). Yet, despite attempts to portray the terror outfit as an indigenous movement, the Pakistani terrorist cadres found among its ranks speak volumes about the country's involvement.

Yet, the Pakistani deep State's desire for crafting such an alibi and saving its face has been particularly precipitated by the upcoming review of the FATF vis-à-vis its sponsorship of terrorism. As argued by Shah (2020), "*FATF has perhaps served as the biggest nightmare of Pakistan*". Yet, indisputably, that has not halted the country's cross border terrorism strategy. That is further visible from Pakistan's latest move of sending COVID-19 infected terrorists into the Kashmir Valley to spread the disease, as argued by the Director General of J&K Police Dilbag Singh (Economic Times, 2020).

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for security officials and policy analysts to take into consideration Pakistan's hybrid warfare tactics in the region in order to design an adequate response. The promise by the Government of India of a decrease in Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities after 5 August and the simultaneous emergence of such new terrorist outfits, warrants a need for Indian authorities to recalibrate and improve their security approach in the region.

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