

# Special Report#14

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## Islamic State in Kashmir: Black Fags and Black Shrouds



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## **Abstract**

*As the Islamic State seeks to regain its diminishing clout to expand into new theatres, it appears to be making a desperate attempt to gain foothold in Kashmir, where internal dissent and an externally sponsored proxy war has been the reason for significant violence. Till now, compared to the local as well as foreign militants belonging to various terrorist outfits, followers of the Islamic State are minuscule, limited to less than a dozen militants. However, a slow trickle of young men and growing popular support keeps the outfit's expansion plan alive. That must be a cause of concern for the government.*

On 8 September 2018, Asif Nazir Dar's dead body was recovered outside the Kashmir University campus in Srinagar. Dar was the third emir of the Islamic State's Jammu & Kashmir chapter (ISJK) to have been eliminated by the security forces in 2018. Nine other militants affiliated with the global jihadist organization have been killed since October 2017 in Kashmir. While for the security forces this indeed is an achievement, the continuous trickle of young men into the fold of the Islamic State in the extremely crowded militant landscape of Jammu & Kashmir is still a matter of concern.

## **Young, Educated, and the Daring**

23-year-old Dar, hailing from Panzgam Awantipora of Pulwama district, was bit of an outfit hopper. A Bachelor of Technology student at Jammu, he disappeared in January 2017 to join the Hizb ul Mujahideen (HM). Soon he parted ways with HM to join the Zakir Musa-led Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind that claims itself to be the al Qaeda's chapter in Jammu & Kashmir. Dar appeared in an online video holding a rifle and claiming his allegiance to the al Qaeda. He then shifted allegiance to the ISJK to talk about imposition of sharia and Khilafat in Kashmir. Under his nom de guerre Abu Anwar al-Kashmiri, Dar led the ISJK for less than three months before his death in early September. Unidentified gunmen, who later were identified as police personnel had shot him dead under circumstances that are yet to be made public.[1] Dar is remembered by locals and friends as a "polite and religious person who never participated in street protests"[2].

Dar's predecessor, 33-year-old Dawood Ahmad Sofi, according to police sources, was a 'stone-pelter' and joined militancy few years back. He was initially affiliated with Tehrek-ul-Mujahideen (TuM)[3] outfit and subsequently joined the ISJK. Sofi was killed on 22 June 2018 along with three other militants of his group in Anantnag district. Incidentally, Sofi's 22-year old cousin brother Gowhar Nazir Dar had been killed in November 2017 after the CRPF personnel opened fire on a group of protesters at Zainakote HMT, the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi was visiting Srinagar. Sofi was buried next to Gowhar's grave.

Before Sofi, Eisa Fazli headed the ISJK. An engineering student of the Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University (BGSBU) in Rajouri, Fazli left his studies in August 2017[4] to be associated with the LeT, then the HM, before announcing his joining the Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind using a video uploaded on social media. Subsequently he shifted his loyalties to the ISJK. Eisa was killed in an encounter at

Hakoora Anantnag on 11 March 2018. Killed with Eisa was Syed Owais Shafi of Vailoo area of Kokernag, who too was pursuing his engineering degree from the same university before joining the ISJK in 2017. The third militant killed in the encounter, was identified on social media as Abu Zarr al-Hindi, alias Sultan al-Hyderabad, from distant Hyderabad.[5] Police investigations revealed that Abu Zarr al-Hindi was indeed 26-year old Mohammad Taufeeq from Hyderabad who had been radicalized online and had travelled to Kashmir to join the ISJK.[6]



*(From left to right: Asif Nazir Dar, Dawood Ahmad Sofi, and Eisa Fazli)*

Profiles of Dar, Sofi, Eisa, and Owais point at two new trends that militants in Kashmir valley including those belonging to the ISJK exhibit. First, ISJK cadres, who have been killed or are still active in Kashmir, come mostly from well-educated and aspiring middle-class families. Dar's father was an employee with the state-run BSNL; one of his brothers teaches at a government school while another is pursuing an MBA course. Eisa's father is a college principal, who was so worried of Kashmir's turbulence having an impact on his family that he sent him to a missionary school in Srinagar and arranged for his Quran lessons at home.

The narrative of the young and educated youth joining militancy is true for all militant groups operating in the state. According to a study carried out by the security agencies in mid-2017[7], out of the 67 local youths who joined militancy between July 2016 and May 2017, 63 are below the age of 30, including two 16-year-olds and one 15-year-old[8]. Apart from a Ph.D., an M. Phil. and two post-graduates, there are six graduates and five who were pursuing engineering and technical courses: two B Tech, one BE (Computer Science), one Polytechnic student and one diploma student in computer science. Eight were pursuing Bachelor's degree, ten had cleared Class 12, 12 have completed Class 10, and only three were *madrassa* students, including a Hafiz/Imam. Eleven had studied until high school. Only three had never been to school.

Second, especially in the context of the ISJK, 'outfit hopping' or 'recycled militants' (in the parlance of the security forces) is rather common. The ISJK, in spite of the Islamic State's attempts since 2015, has never been the outfit of first choice, for none of its cadres. They have hopped from one outfit to the other, before finally deciding to opt for the ISJK. Exact reasons, while hard to explain are probably rooted in a combination of factors such as search for a definite world view, influence of Wahabi preachers, and frustration with the lack of success that either the Pakistan sponsored terrorism or internal dissent. The growing influence of Wahhabism remains one of the less studied

aspects of militancy in Kashmir. A pointer towards this was provided by a friend of Eisa Fazli, who wrote the following lines on Facebook in the aftermath of his killing.

*“I curse the Wahabi preachers who mislead (sic) him, the Tehreeki (TUM) leaders who inspired and encouraged him, the careless relatives and friends who never stopped him from taking the leap into the dark abyss. They are all alive and well today—ranting and raving—but Eisa is not.”*<sup>[9]</sup>

The combination of youth, education, financial status, and the conviction in their acts have resulted in militants using to social media without much fear. In spite of their rather short life span as militants, these videos continue to form the backbone of a very effective strategy of mobilization.

### **From black flags to black shrouds**

Early 2015, the Islamic State announced the creation of the Wilayat Khorasan. Soon thereafter, Kashmir valley begun to witness occasional incidents of waving black flags of the outfit. Sometimes masked men waved black flags that looked similar to the ones used in Iraq and Syria by the parent outfit, and sometimes young men did so without covering their faces. This was soon followed by a practice in which black flags were placed on top of dead bodies of militants killed in encounters. While dead bodies are traditionally wrapped with black shrouds in Kashmir valley, the new shrouds were indeed flags of the Islamic State.

Dar, for instance, was wearing a black Kashmiri dress at the time of his death. At his funeral, attended by thousands, he was wrapped in a black flag with Islamic State inscribed on it. At least three rounds of funeral prayers were offered as villagers from Chakoora, Gulzarpora, Dogripora, Reshipora, Padgampora and adjoining villages made a beeline to Panzgam to pay their homage to the slain militant.<sup>[10]</sup> Dawood Sofi’s dead body was not covered with a black flag, but several Islamic State flags were being waived by the youth among a sea of mourners who raised pro-Islamic State, pro-Pakistan, and pro-freedom slogans.

Such flags have started appearing, with increasing frequency, during public processions, street fights with security forces, and also in graffiti painted on walls and shutters of shops. In June 2018, flags were waived after the Eid prayers were offered in mosques. It indeed appears that the Black Flags of the Islamic State have become the brand-new symbol of resistance and popular mobilization in Kashmir.



*(Women display a black flag — similar to the ones used by the Islamic State — during the funeral procession of a militant in Srinagar on 18 November 2017. Photo Courtesy: The Hindu)*

### **Does ISJK Exist?**

The government, however, treats these developments as insignificant. In fact, the ‘ISJK does not exist’ is the official position. New Delhi’s narrative portrays militancy in Kashmir as a Pakistan-sponsored movement and onset of global jihadism in Kashmir as an imaginary proposition. On 19 September 2018, First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of India in Geneva Mini Devi Kumar said in the United Nations, “The real problem in Jammu and Kashmir is cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan.”<sup>[11]</sup> In January 2018, speaking in the Parliament, Minister of State for Home Affairs categorically told, “Nothing has been established on ground that ISIS is operating in any part of Kashmir valley”<sup>[12]</sup>. In February 2018, a senior Home Ministry official claimed that ISJK does not have any physical infrastructure in Kashmir valley. The police establishment in Jammu & Kashmir which estimates that more than 200 militants are active today in the state, continues to maintain that the ISJK does not have more than 10 cadres. Experts find merit in it as highlighting a ‘not so prominent’ threat may add to its potency.<sup>[13]</sup>

That sort of a position is now becoming untenable. The gradual growth of ISJK’s appeal is being factored into the private assessments of officials. For instance, an unnamed senior official in India’s Home Ministry told during an interview to *The Hindu*:

*“Number-wise their presence is minuscule. But it is the radical ideology propagated by this group that is spreading fast. Their numbers are nothing in terms of Hizbul, who have organisational backing from Pakistan, but they are a serious challenge...”*

The near absence of violence perpetrated by the ISJK so far may have been bolstered the official assessments. So far, the ISJK has claimed responsibility for only two attacks on security forces, one in 2017 and the other in early 2018. On 17 November 2017, a J&K police Sub-Inspector was killed, a Special Police Officer was injured and an alleged militant Mugees Ahmed was gunned down in the Zakura area on the outskirts of Srinagar. At the time, the TuM had claimed responsibility for the attack. In February 2018, however, the ISJK used its social media channel, the *Al Qaraar* to claim responsibility for the same attack. On 25 February 2018, J&K police Constable Farooq Ahmed Yattoo was killed while he was guarding the residence of separatist leader Fazal Haq Qureshi in Soura, on the outskirts of Srinagar. That attack was also claimed by TuM and AGuH. *Al Qaraar* too claimed responsibility. Then J&K police chief had dismissed the ISJK’s role in the killing, while admitting that “Eisa Fazli was seen near the site where the policeman was killed” and the incident could have been a “lone wolf attack” inspired by someone with Islamic State ideology.[14]

The police, however, admit that till now the ISJK have been involved only in weapon-snatching incidents from the police. On 7 September, police in national capital Delhi claimed to have arrested two Kashmiri youth- 24-year Parvez Ahmad Lone (24) and 19-year old Jamshed Zahoor Paul, for allegedly collecting weapons for the ISJK. Incidentally, the ‘weapons’ seized were two low caliber pistols and 10 cartridges, one of which was bought for a mere INR 17,000 (Approximately US\$ 240).[15] Irrespective of the truth in this incident, the ISJK’s violence potential at the moment doesn’t seem high enough to worry the Indian state.

The outfit, however, is making up for its failure to indulge in violence by its activism on social media, especially through its dedicated channel, *al Qaraar*. Since October 2017, the *al Qaraar* is competing with the *al Qaeda* to promote its propaganda in Kashmir. Indian officials suggest that the *al Qaraar* could possibly be in some arrangement with *Amaq* to air its messages on the latter’s platform. *Amaq* is the Islamic State’s media platform.

Interestingly, both the Pakistan based United Jihad Council (UJC) and the over ground separatists belonging to various factions of the Hurriyat, too deny the existence of either the *al Qaeda* or the ISJK in the state. The United Jihad Council has accused the group of “creating confusion” and warned it of “dire consequences”. A part of the reason for their stance that reflects the Indian government’s official position, is the ISJK and AGH’s bitter criticism of the separatists and Pakistan for having failed the real aspirations of people. Both outfits deem the Hurriyat and UJC too soft and are calling for a more hardline approach. Dawood Sofi, for instance, had posted a 14-minute video in December 2017 criticizing Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). He termed outfits like the HM, LeT, and JeM as proxies of the ISI.

### **From Trickle to a Stream?**

Eisa Fazli’s father Naeem Fazli had taken to the Facebook to make a passionate call to his son to return to the family.[16] It was first such appeal made by any parent. In the message he had appealed

him, in vain, to return insisting that he was not on a right track. In a state, where the security establishment has started using the services of parents to make the active militants surrender and have succeeded on odd occasions, are finding the level of radicalization among the ISJK cadres far too intense. While the lack of violence may provide a momentary respite, the growing support for ISJK and the steady trickle of youth and active militants belonging to other outfits into the ISJK's fold must be seen as a source of concern. About a year and half back, the ISJK was nothing more than odd youth waving the black flags on few occasions. From such a hopeless situation, in the over populated militant landscape of Kashmir valley, the ISJK has managed not just to enlist youths, but have succeeded in making ten young men die in the name of the outfit. Whether the trickle is on its way to becoming a stream is a critical question.

## End Notes

[1] Peerzada Ashiq & Vijaita Singh, "Belying police claims, Islamic State shadow lengthens over Kashmir Valley", *The Hindu*, 15 September 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/belying-police-claims-islamic-state-shadow-lengthens-over-kashmir-valley/article24956847.ece>. Accessed on 16 September 2018.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The TuM outfit was active in the 1990s when militancy was at its peak in the Kashmir Valley. It appears to have resurfaced in the latter half of 2017 by claiming responsibility for a number of attacks.

[4] "Kashmiri Father, Who Made A Passionate Call Last Year To His Militant Son To Return Home, Announces His Son's Death In Encounter That Killed Three", *Outlook*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/kashmiri-father-who-made-a-passionate-call-last-year-to-his-militant-son-to-retu/309377>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.

[5] "2 ex-engg students among 3 ultras killed", *Tribune*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/2-ex-engg-students-among-3-ultras-killed/556761.html>. Accessed on 11 September 2018.

[6] Khalid Gul, "3rd militant killed in Hakora encounter from Hyderabad, admits DGP", *Greater Kashmir*, 15 March 2018, <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/print/3rd-militant-killed-in-hakora-encounter-from-hyderabad-admits-dgp/278739.html>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.

[7] Muzamil Jaleel, "From PhD and MPhil to BTech and BE: New local militants are young and educated", *Indian Express*, 2 June 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kashmir-burhan-wani-from-phd-and-mphil-to-btech-and-be-new-local-militants-are-young-and-educated-4683621/>. Accessed on 13 September 2018.

[8] Faizan Ahmad Bhat, the 15-year-old boy who ran away from home to join the HM, was killed in an encounter with the security forces on 27 May 2017. Fardeen Khanday, 16-year old son of a Jammu-Kashmir policeman from Nazneenpora area of Tral was among the three militants killed on 31 December 2017 during an attack by the Jaish-e-Mohammad on a CRPF training camp in

Pulwama district. The JeM released an undated, eight-minute video of his appeal to Kashmiri youths and Muslims across the country to join the “fight against India”. In November 2017, another 16-year old militant of Chimmer village of Damhal-Hanjiopora area heeded to his parent’s calls and shunned militancy.

[9] “Slain Anantnag Militant’s Friend Pens Passionate Warning to Others”, Quint, 15 March 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/slain-militant-eisa-fazili-friend-makes-a-passionate-call>. Accessed on 17 September 2018.

[10] Bilal Habib, “South Kashmir: Thousands attend funeral of ISJK militant in Awantipora”, *Kashmir Reader*, 9 September 2018, <https://kashmirreader.com/2018/09/09/south-kashmir-thousands-attend-funeral-of-isjk-militant-in-awantipora/>. Accessed on 10 September 2018.

[11] “India at UN: ‘World doesn’t need lessons on democracy, human rights from Pakistan’”, *Indian Express*, 19 September 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-at-un-world-doesnt-need-lessons-on-democracy-human-rights-from-pakistan/>. Accessed on 20 September 2018.

[12] Response of Hansraj Gangaram Ahir, Minister of State of Home Affairs, in Rajya Sabha to the Unstarred Question no. 1819, on 3 January 2018. <https://mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2018-pdfs/rs-03012018/1819.pdf>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.

[13] Author’s interview with a former Home Secretary, Government of India, New Delhi, May 2018.

[14] Vijaita Singh, “No evidence of Islamic State hand in Kashmir policeman’s killing: J&K DGP”, *The Hindu*, 27 February 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/islamic-state-doesnt-exist-in-kashmir-valley-says-home-ministry/article22868177.ece>. Accessed on 12 September 2018.

[15] Manish Sahu, “Arrest of ISJK men: Delhi Police trace pistol to Amroha contractor”, *Indian Express*, 10 September 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/arrest-of-isjk-men-delhi-police-trace-pistol-to-amroha-contractor-5347762/>. Accessed on 14 September 2018.

[16] Zulfikar Majid, “Man announces militant son’s death on social media”, *Deccan Herald*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/664183/man-announces-militant-sons-death.html>. Accessed on 17 September 2018.

***(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director of Mantraya. This Special Report is published as part of Mantraya’s ongoing “Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network” and “Islamic State in Asia” projects. Mantraya Special Reports are per reviewed publications.)***

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