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TRF and TMI: Lashkar-e-Toiba's new tools in Kashmir



(Banner of the TRF)

Bibhu Prasad Routray

Abstract

In Kashmir, since the abrogation of Article 370, two new militant outfits have emerged to lay claim to a number of violent incidents. Both the TRF and the TMI also claim to represent the local Kashmiris. But several links exist between the two and the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Nonetheless, unless checked, both could initiate the launch of a new phase of violence and instability in the valley.

The TRF

The Resistance Front (TRF, also known as JK Fighters) came into existence immediately after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution in August 2019. On 12 October 2019, the TRF claimed responsibility for the grenade attack in Srinagar's Hari Singh High Street. Within a fortnight, a similar attack that killed a civilian in the city was also claimed by the outfit. On 23 March 2020, police in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) arrested four militants and three of their associates. The four terrorists, all from North Kashmir, were identified as Ahtisham Farooq Malik, Shafqat Ali Tagoo, Musaib Hassan Bhat, and Nisar Ahmad Ganai. Police said they have busted the outfit's first-ever module.

The interrogation of the four led to the recovery of a huge consignment of weapons, which reportedly included 89 hand grenades, eight AK rifles, 10 pistols, 20-odd detonator fuses and ammunition. This was a sizeable cache, given the fact that local militant organisations like the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) have struggled in recent months to acquire weapons. Interrogation of the arrested TRF militants revealed that these weapons were brought in small quantities from across the border by terrorists who infiltrated into India and were being amassed at a particular location to be used against local politicians and security forces.

On 5 April 2020, the TRF claimed responsibility for the encounter in Kashmir's Kupwara district in which five Indian soldiers of the Indian Army's 4 Para regiment were killed along with five terrorists. The TRF social media channels displayed photographs of all the five killed terrorists who were trying to infiltrate into Kashmir. [Three of the killed terrorists were local Kashmiris](#), identified as Sajjad Ahmad Hurrah of Daramdora, Shopian; Aadil Hussain Mir of Mallapora, Liver, Anantnag; and Umar Nazir Khan of Liver, Anantnag. According to the J&K police, Hurrah and Mir had left separately for Pakistan for training via the Attari-Wagah border in April 2018.

Further on 18 April, the TRF claimed responsibility for an attack on Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) troops in Sopore in which three personnel were killed. The TRF social media channels described the killing as a retaliation for the death of their cadres in recent incidents.



(Arms and ammunition recovered from a TRF dump in March 2020)

Commander of the TRF has identified himself with an assumed name, 'Abu Anas'. In the first week of April, the TRF released its first audio message that lasts for 8.20 minutes. In the message, reading out a prepared statement in Urdu, Anas asks Muslims to wage a 'jihad against India'. He warns the 'Kashmiri collaborators of India' to stop supporting India, lest they want to be eliminated. Abu Anas also affirmed to live and die like a martyr. He asked the family of Farooq Abdullah to support the Kashmiris, not India.

Indian security officials have indicated that the TRF's attempt to showcase itself as an indigenous outfit like the HM notwithstanding, it could have been supported by the LeT and the Pakistani establishment. Three factors confirm this suspicion. First, the infiltration route used by the TRF in April 2020 is known to be a typical LeT infiltration route. Secondly, some of the TRF's social media handles/ accounts ('Andrew Jones' on Telegram Messenger and 'Khan Bila'l on Whatsapp) are overtly sympathetic to the LeT and have been traced to Islamabad and other cities of Pakistan. Moreover, J&K police sources [claim to have gathered](#) human intelligence pointing at a common link between the two TRF over-ground workers and a LeT militant.

The TMI

The Tehreek-i-Milat-i-Islami (TMI) is the second new armed grouping to have surfaced in Kashmir valley. Soon after its inception in April, its 'commander' 'Nayeem Firdous' issued an audio statement, asking all militant groups operating in Kashmir to unite. However, having originated only in April, little is known about the group. Similar to the TRF, the TMI has a prominent presence on social media channels and is also suspected to be backed by the LeT.

Indian intelligence agencies believe that the LeT, acting on behalf of the Pakistani establishment, is attempting to portray both the TRM and the TMI, as indigenous Kashmiri uprisings against India. Recruiting local Kashmiris appear to be the modus operandi of both to maintain deniability. At one level, the near-simultaneous rise of two native armed groups could also be an attempt to make the anti-India feelings in Kashmir appear intense and wide-spread. At the other, it is also an insurance against quick annihilation, a fate that has befallen many of the militant groupings previously. Significantly, neither the TRF nor the TMI have denied their links with the LeT. The world's attention on a proscribed group like LeT and its leadership constrains the group and may prevent it from carrying out full-fledged militant activities in the valley. But nothing would stop it from operating in the guise of local uprisings against New Delhi.

Another factor supports the Lashkar-behind-TRM/TMI-narrative of the Indian security establishment. Both the TRM and TMI have set a new trend. In recent years, the angry and disenchanted youths of Kashmir have conventionally chosen between existing militant groupings and have never attempted to set up a new outfit to wage war against India. Due to that, the global jihadist groupings like the al-Qaeda and Islamic State have struggled to establish base in Kashmir. Thus, the sudden rise of these weapon and ammunition-affluent new groups militates against this known trend.

The rise of these two groups claiming to be indigenous in character, on the other hand, has clearly perturbed the HM, which has been targeted and weakened by the security forces in the past years. In an [audio statement](#) in the second week of April 2020, the HM disowned both the TRF and TMI. It, however, termed them as 'plants of the Indian intelligence agencies'. It appealed to the people of Kashmir to 'stay away from supporting these two groups'.

A New Phase of Violence?

Kashmir's relative peace since New Delhi's August 2019 decision to abrogate article 370 of the Indian constitution hangs in a delicate balance. Thus, the birth of TRF and TMI could potentially lead to the start of a new phase of violence in the region. Kashmir has witnessed the killing of 40 militants in 2020. However, in spite of that more than 30 local youths have joined various militant outfits since August 2019. Summer months are the most ideal for terrorists trying to infiltrate into Kashmir from across the border. The Indian army is currently [implementing a modified re-deployment of troops](#) along the Line of Control (LoC) for stopping infiltration. Unless the strategy succeeds, local recruits as well as Pakistani terrorists could reinitiate a bloody campaign of violence in the valley.

(Dr. Bibhu Prasad Routray is Director of Mantraya. This policy brief is published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building" and "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network" projects. Mantraya Policy Briefs are peer reviewed publications.)

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