POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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STATE VIOLENCE AND YOUTH RESISTANCE

Perspectives from Indian-held Kashmir

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Introduction

On July 8, 2016, Burhan Muzaffar Wani, the 22-year-old Hizbul Mujahideen commander in Indian-held Kashmir was killed, along with two of his associates, in an encounter with Indian forces in the village of Bumdoora in South Kashmir.¹

The young rebel had been abducting Indian forces for nearly seven years, when he joined the militancy at the age of fifteen. The son of a principal of a higher secondary school and a Qur'an teacher who completed his post graduation in the sciences, Wani was born in Tral, a town in South Kashmir that has served as a major site of resistance to Indian rule. Wani left his comfortable middle-class life and joined the militancy in October 2010, in the immediate aftermath of a summer of protests and killings of Kashmiri youth. His family members and close friends reported that Wani was deeply troubled by an incident during which he, and his brother, Khalid, and another friend, were beaten up by Indian forces while they were riding their motorcycle in their hometown. The forces frisked the boys and asked for cigarettes in return for permission to ride on the road. His brother complied, but was still beaten by the soldiers. As he lay unconscious, Wani and his friend managed to escape, with Wani swearing that he would seek “revenge” for the incident.²

Wani quickly rose through the ranks of the Hizbul Mujahideen, a militant group that has been operating in Kashmir since the insurgency of the late 1980s and 1990s. Although the group seeks the joining of Kashmir with Pakistan, the young Kashmiri that join it do so for a variety of reasons. While some may be pro-Pakistan, others want an end to the Indian occupation, with the desire for “azadi” or freedom leaving open the political possibilities of Kashmir’s future. They join the Hizb because it is the primary militant group operating currently in Kashmir; the pro-independence group, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, gave up arms in the mid-1990s while the Pakistan-based Lashkar-i-Taiba has limited its militant activities since the 2008 attack in Mumbai.
Wani was the first militant in years to receive a considerable following in Kashmir, especially amongst the youth. There are multiple reasons for this. First, Wani was young and managed to escape being killed for years, in a political climate in which the lifespan of a militant is months, even days. Wani was also a local. Many militants operating in Kashmir have been foreign—either from Pakistan or Afghanistan—but Wani was one of the first in the new group of "home grown" militants. In addition, Wani's personal story is one that many Kashmiris could relate to—an average middle class family that inevitably became embroiled in Kashmir’s political conflict. Finally, Wani had a considerable social media presence; he shared videos and images of him and the other militants playing cricket in the forests, posing in mountainous landscapes, and urging Kashmiri youth to join the militancy. As the anthropologist Mohamad Junaid states, these images evoked a "tender affection," as they claimed "the humanity of the ‘Kashmiri militant’ and reconnected the idea of the rebel with his people at the visceral level." Since 2010, he achieved a folk-like status, with tales being narrated of his narrow escapes from Indian forces and his generosity towards the people of the various villages where he would hide.

Where there is no evidence of Wani ever conducting an attack, he may have been the mastermind behind several. As his popularity increased throughout the Valley, the Indian state issued a $15,000 (one million rupees) bounty for his capture. It was on July 8 that local informers brought Indian forces to Wani and his two associates, as they were hiding in a home in the village of Bumdoom. While reports of the actual encounter vary, all three were killed.

After news of Wani's killing spread, there was collective mourning throughout Kashmir. Shams Irfan, a local journalist who was in Tral, Buthan's hometown, when the body arrived, states:

By next morning, tens of thousands of mourners from towns and villages across Kashmir had gathered in Tral. They came in trucks, buses, tractor trolleys, cars; they came on motorcycles, scooters, and cycles; and they came on foot. … The crowd of mourners was so dense and so immense that it took me an hour to walk a few kilometers. The last 500 meters, I didn't even have to walk. The crowd carried me into the eidgah, which was packed tight, bursting beyond its capacity. The eidgah, which normally accommodates about 50,000 people at one time, was packed to the brim, and after each round of funeral prayers people kept leaving and new mourners filled it again. By the end of the day, about 200,000 people would have joined the multiple rounds.

In the ensuing protests throughout Kashmir after Wani's death, nearly 100 people were killed and more than 15,000 were injured. Over 1,000 of those injured—mostly youth—were blinded by the use of pellet guns. 8,000 people were arrested.

Wani's death reenergized the new wave of youth resistance that had been on the rise since 2008. Online and on the streets, a generation of young Kashmiri Muslim boys and girls made their protest against Indian rule clear. His death also led the Indian state and its local intermediaries to reinforce older modes of suppressing
dissent, while devising new ones. This chapter examines how a new generation of youth activists has played a critical role in redefining the Kashmiri movement for self-determination as well as the precarious political and social conditions in which they function. It argues that we must see youth resistance in Indian-held Kashmir in the context of ongoing state violence and repression and the lack of political resolution of the “Kashmir dispute,” now surpassing its seventh decade.

Five sections follow the introduction. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of the historical roots of the youth movement, beginning with pre-Partition Kashmiri political formations up until the armed insurgency of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The second section considers the year 2008 as the start of the shifts in the modes of activism, and the year that the generation that was born during the insurgency became heir to the struggle for self-determination. The third section examines the multiple spaces where youth resist, how that resistance has shaped the understandings of the occupation and the challenges that exist for building a movement amidst the possibilities of betrayal or cooption. In the fourth section, I look at the variety of ways in which state violence and repression is meted out to the population at large, but youth in general. Finally, the last section addresses the issue of “political radicalization,” and challenges the simplistic understandings of the role of Islam in the ongoing youth movement.

**Historical roots of the youth movement**

While most histories trace the Kashmir conflict to 1947, I begin with the year 1931, when Kashmiris launched their first mass agitation against the Dogras, a Hindu monarchy that ruled over the Muslim-majority region from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, during the period of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. This realignment of the timeframe for the dispute allows us to situate later developments as not simply spurred by the creation of the Indian and Pakistani nation-states, and their subsequent rivalry, but also as a result of the internal dynamics of the state. During the 1931 agitation, Kashmiris called for a more representative government and better economic and educational opportunities, especially for the region’s Muslims. Early Kashmiri nationalists began to articulate the demand for a “Naya Kashmir,” a socialist, democratic, secular state that, as a Muslim-majority would safeguard the rights of its religious minorities, both Hindus and Sikhs. Nonetheless, the region’s struggle for an end to Dogra rule became entangled with political developments across the Indian subcontinent. As a princely state, the state of Jammu and Kashmir (as it was officially termed, Jammu was the region the Dogras hailed from) had the option of acceding to either of the two dominions, Hindu-majority India or Muslim-majority Pakistan. A murky transfer of sovereignty by the then Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir led a majority of the territory to be incorporated into the Indian Union through a treaty of accession, which gave India control over foreign affairs, defense, and communications of the region in return for military protection against an invading
tribal raid. The treaty promised that the state’s future would be determined “by a reference to the people.” Both India and Pakistan went to war in 1948, resulting in two-thirds of the former princely state being controlled by India, while one-third was controlled by Pakistan. India took the dispute to the United Nations, which called for a plebiscite in the region once hostilities had ceased.

Local demands for a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir were sidelined throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Corrupt and unrepresentative pro-Indian governments were installed in the state, whose role was primarily to secure the accession for India and quell pro-Pakistan or pro-independence sentiments in the region. Through these local governments, India eroded the state’s political, economic, and judicial autonomy, resulting in even greater unrest. For example, a number of the elections were rigged, and the election machinery would not allow oppositional parties to contest. The state became increasingly dependent on its fiscal ties with India, which provided much of the budget to run its socio-economic programs. A number of groups emerged, including the Political Conference, Plebiscite Front, and student groups that sought the implementation of the UN resolution for plebiscite in the region. They held protests, wrote to international bodies, and visited towns, cities, and villages throughout the region to gain public support. As the demand for plebiscite increased, the Indian state managed to coopt the leadership of the primary group, the Plebiscite Front, into an agreement that rendered the plebiscite obsolete, and placed its leadership at the helm of power. Yet, the political mobilization of the masses had already spread. The failure of secular and constitutional means to resolve the issue, as well as the realignments in global politics after the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, resulted in a turn to more violent means. From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Kashmir was embroiled in a violent uprising between Kashmiri and foreign fighters against the Indian state. The insurgency was supported by Pakistan. It was initially led by the secular, pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, but was, with the help of Pakistan, overtaken by the pro-Pakistan, Islamic Hizbul Mujahideen. The Indian state managed to quash the movement through direct force, the introduction of counter-insurgency militant groups such as the Ikhwan, and a policy of divide and rule that contributed to infighting within the militant and pro-freedom ranks. During this time, over 700,000 Indian security forces, including soldiers and para-military, became part of the permanent landscape of the region, and are so until today. The uprising also led to the forced migration of a vast majority of Kashmir’s Hindu minority, the Pandits, many of who lived in camps in Jammu or other cities in India.

For most of the 2000s, it appeared that the Kashmiri movement for self-determination had been quashed, as Indian and international analysts projected a “return to normalcy” and the local populace grew disillusioned with militant groups. Nonetheless, the scale of militarization continued and a series of draconian laws, including the Public Safety Act and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, remained. In 2008, a new wave of largely non-violent protests began to emerge in Kashmir, calling for azadi, or freedom from Indian rule. They were led by the generation that was born during the period of heightened militancy.
A new generation inherits the struggle

The triggers for this new wave of protest include the Indian state’s attempted land grabs, extrajudicial killings, and the torture and killing of Kashmiri youth. In 2008, 2009, and 2010, three separate instances occurred that revitalized the movement for azadi. The first year saw the Amarnath land transfer controversy in the summer months. The government had reached an agreement to transfer nearly 100 acres of land to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, an organization that oversees the annual Hindu pilgrimage in Kashmir, to erect permanent facilities for the pilgrimage. For the first time since the height of the militancy, peaceful mass protests erupted in the Kashmir Valley, opposing the land transfer, saying it would pave the way to develop Israel-like settlements within the region and that the transfer was a “land grab” by the Indian state that would sever Kashmir’s autonomy. The following summer, two young Kashmiri women were found raped and murdered in the town of Shopian. Locals alleged that Indian forces were the perpetrators. The forces denied the allegations, saying that the women had drowned in a stream. As the investigations became embroiled in accusations of a cover up—an independent, women-led commission later stated that “at every stage, those responsible for unmarking the culprit/s, have systematically and deliberately destroyed, tampered, diluted the evidence and thus misdirected and obfuscated the investigation”—the Valley once again erupted in protest. Finally, in the summer of 2010, which was later dubbed the “year of killing youth,” locals protested the extrajudicial killing of three villagers, who were accused of being militants by the Indian army. The incident was later discovered to be a fake encounter. Over 115 people, mostly young boys, were killed in subsequent protests.

The previous two years had provided the build up to 2010, which was a pivotal year for the new youth movement. Analysts dubbed it as Kashmir’s own “intifada,” making reference to parallels with Palestinian resistance against Israel. It saw the rise of the use of social media; videos and images circulated of protests, state violence, and of the bodies of those who were killed. These were circulated not just locally, but also internationally, with the intent that the outside world would see what was happening in Kashmir under the aegis of the world’s “largest democracy.” It also saw the rise of youths who were involved in stone throwing during protests, arguing that in the face of Indian bullies, Kashmiris only had stones to defend themselves. Since 2010, the space for youth involvement, and engagement, has evolved, redefining the region’s historical movement for self-determination.

Shifting modes of activism

Kashmiri youths today are empowered with new information and communication technologies that increase the movement’s social and cultural reach. These technologies expand activists’ networks within Kashmir and also link the movement for self-determination with a global discourse of resistance, ranging from Palestine to Ferguson.
On one level, the youth movement has taken on elite or middle class contours, as it has been influenced by the upwardly mobile status of particular demographics within Kashmiri society. Many young Kashmiris from elite or middle class families are traveling abroad for their education—either to universities in India or the United Kingdom and the United States—where they encounter new ideas and types of activism. A large number of these Kashmiri students are studying the humanities and social sciences, and in the process becoming more aware of their history and the place of Kashmir among other decolonizing struggles. This emerging awareness has led to a blossoming of young Kashmiri artists, activists, writers, journalists, filmmakers, and academics that are producing political art, literature, music, and scholarship.

This Kashmiri youth-driven activism and cultural production has crafted a new discourse that—while relying on multiple, concurrent frames of reference and inspiration—is deeply connected to the desire for justice in Kashmir.

One such example is Kashmiri cartoonist Malik Sajad’s 2015 graphic novel, *Mumu: A Boy from Kashmir*. Sajad, who started drawing political cartoons for Kashmiri newspapers at a young age, narrates his personal story of growing up in Srinagar’s Batmaloo area during a period of heightened militancy and witnessing the harsh repression tactics of the Indian state and its security forces. Sajad deftly brings together the modern graphic art form with traditional Kashmiri embroidery and design, drawing upon contemporary cultural icons as well as Kashmir’s rich historical traditions and folklore. Using the language of memoir, human rights, Islamic mysticism, and political critique, Sajad does not pay homage to any particular political party or ideology, but shows the everyday struggles and heartbreaks of life under military occupation. It is both the universality of his themes as well as the specificity of the Kashmir context that draws in the reader. Sajad is one of many Kashmiri youth experimenting with different cultural forms—both online and off—to bring attention to the Kashmir issue.

The prevalence of multiple frames of reference in youth activism and cultural production challenge easy categorizations into “secular” or “religious” frames. The “Muslim” identity of Kashmir is refracted through a number of lenses: a struggle for freedom against an unjust rule, a source of identity, a spiritual retreat in the midst of chaos, and sometimes, a vision for justice. But it is also informed by a number of parallel influences, including leftism, knowledge of liberal theories and their limitations, feminist and Islamic feminist discourses, human rights and legal discourses, as well as critical theory. In one article entitled “The Pitfalls of Collaboration,” Kashmiri student and activist, Umar Lateef Misgar, analyzes the ability of a repressive power to sponsor a class of local collaborators. Utilizing a keen awareness of critical theory, Misgar critiques the statements of those Kashmiris who defend their participation in the state government saying that they are “changing the system from inside.” He argues:
A struggle against colonial system, throughout history, has almost always been motivated by the idea of national liberation. In other words, complete decimation of the colonial structure. Any attempts to modify the colonial structure are only cosmetic at best and deceptive at worst...In 68 years of Kashmir's military occupation, no "insider" has ever dared to either rebel or change the system once they are in it... How many genuine attempts at addressing the political demands of Kashmiris?12

Indeed, there are fierce discussions amongst youth circles on a variety of topics pertaining to their past, present, and future, leading to new spaces for discussion and modes of thinking on the future of Kashmir. This occurs in universities, in cafes, online, and during meetings and events. This has led to a broader vision of azadi and fierce debates on the nature of the Kashmir conflict. Kashmiri youths are at the forefront of defining what constitutes azadi, and challenging long-held perspectives on the role of religion, economy, culture, and education. Responding to various developments in society, they debate the use of violence versus other means of resistance, the role of gender in the conflict, the status of religious minorities, and the role of Islam and Muslim identity. While they connect to feelings of being marginalized as Muslims as a result of the so-called Global War on Terror, these new perspectives do not simply rely on religious identification, but also incorporate critiques of imperialism, religious nationalism, and global capitalism. For example, many youth are critical of Pakistan's role in Kashmir and are beginning to think beyond the ideals constructed by nationalist imaginaries—even those within Kashmir.

The activism of the new generation of Kashmiri youth points to another significant shift in Kashmir: a sphere of politics that exists outside of Kashmir's traditional pro-freedom parties.13

Since the late 1980s, the pro-freedom leadership, comprised of groups such as the Hurriyat and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), dominated Kashmiri resistance against the Indian state. Mired in their own political intrigues, infighting, and allegations of corruption, the influence of these groups and their leaders waned in recent years. While supporting these groups' ultimate aims, many in Kashmir have begun to question their modes of resistance, critiquing the overuse of hartal, or general strike, as well as their inability to do more than "simply keep the struggle alive."14 Some youths also feel that there is very little space for them to be involved in these parties, unlike the pro-Indian local parties that make space for youth to take on bigger roles.

Kashmiri activist Muzzamrul Thakur, who is the president of the Kashmir Institute of International Affairs and runs a number of development projects in the Valley, laments the prevailing predicament of the pro-freedom groups.

There doesn't seem to be a committee of qualified people that can move the movement forward, and provide us with a strategy. How many of our leaders have a background in negotiations or political theory? Where are the new strategies? Either we have hartal scaled by the pro-freedom leadership, or
curfews called by the government. Many youth are beginning to question the leadership—what have you succeeded in getting us? Political sentiment alone will not drive us forward—we must have a real strategy forward.13

Yet, not all agree that this is the primary reason for the pro-freedom groups’ waning influence. Furthermore, it is important to consider the role of the political and military occupation in restricting Hurriyat’s “ability to exercise political agency.” Wajahat Ahmad, who teaches sociology at OP Jindal University, thinks that most middle class activists are not interested in the harsh reality of membership.

Youth do not join Hurriyat or JKLF not because these parties are not welcoming but because of the harsh reality that associating with pro-independence groups means arrest, beatings, death of a career and in a classist and status conscious society like ours, an identity crisis. Middle class youth who are journalists, cartoonists, writers, academics, and human rights activists do not consciously engage with the pro-independence parties, as they know the cost of a formal association with these groups. Pro-freedom parties are more than happy to accept young people, but who would sit in a Hurriyat office all day and give up jobs or university degrees in return for a few thousand rupee monthly stipend and the risk of an arrest or beating or risk police harassment to one’s family?17

Despite differences of opinion on the efficacy of the pro-freedom parties today, many Kashmiri youths nevertheless acknowledge the important role the parties have played since the 1980s and the difficulties they face due to the limitations placed upon them by the Indian state.

Challenges from within

While the youth movement offers critical scope for revitalizing the movement for self-determination, is it not without its own challenges and contradictions. There have been a number of civil society initiatives that have emerged since 2008—some whose political motivations are explicitly linked to various state agencies, and others whose background and funding is not so explicit. These organizations conduct a variety of activities pertaining to human rights, media, development, youth empowerment, education, and conflict resolution. Yet, these organizations, and the individuals that are affiliated with them, are seen with suspicion on the ground. Rishat Rathor, a local Kashmiri journalist, says that there are, “Multiple agencies working in Kashmir (Indian, Pakistani, local Kashmiri state and its pro-Indian parties, American/British, etc.) who want to control indigenous dissent and propagate their own narrative of Kashmir. These agencies work in different forms in Kashmir, either as NGOs or through other organizations.” Speaking to the climate of suspicion and skepticism, Rathor suggests that the motives of these organizations have been exposed, “and now people have lost their trust.” From the perspective of the various agencies, youth are an important target for their efforts. The youths have been at the forefront of the past
decade of uprisings, and have unequivocally “raised voice against the injustice,” and thus, the agencies want to “divert their attention and silence their voices.” In bringing their attention to issues of arts or entrepreneurship, Ralth suggests that these discussions create a civil society space where topics that do not situate the occupation at the core, gain traction, and are posited as the “solution” to the trials plaguing Kashmir, instead of the root issues of confronting political and military occupation. Ralth also states that there are a number of youths who are interested in getting close to the corridors of power and the benefits and perks that it may bring. While they may present a pro-azadi stance on the outside, they are easily coopted by the state or other agencies. Thus, there is an element of suspicion for each initiative: Who is it funded by? What are its ostensible goals? What is the political end?

The two pro-Indian parties in the region, the National Conference (NC) and the PDP (People’s Democratic Party), engage in a widespread system of patronage, which includes active youth wings that seek to coopt Kashmiri youth. Many youths, however, are aware of how the conflict economy works, and the ways in which vested interests are able to exploit internal divisions, and create distrust in society. They also feel that people take advantage of the conflict to pursue their own ends. As a result, the possibility for betrayal and cooption exists, and is of concern to those who are engaged. Indeed, “India’s historical successes in weakening Kashmiri resistance have been realized by relying more on strategies of cooption than of violence,” Wajahat Ahmad argues. Ahmad refers to these individuals as “conflict entrepreneurs who thrive on the suffering of Kashmiris,” to achieve power. Critiquing the attendance of Kashmiris in state-sponsored track-two diplomacy initiatives, he locates their desire for relevance and attention, and how they are driven by pure personal ambition. Because of their access to resources, they are able to bring people to their side, and thus create further divisions within the movement. Critical to this, he argues, is an understanding of the class dimensions of the Kashmir conflict—a “petite bourgeois struggle,” according to Ahmad, is “bound to become corrupted.” It is these individuals who have high social and cultural capital that are then used by the vested interests to legitimize occupation or other political ends. In turn, these “conflict entrepreneurs” are able to gain access to travel opportunity, and power—upward mobility that is “aided by bourgeois class ideology that prizes economic achievement, status and maintenance of social order or status quo and frowns upon or criminalizes resistance, upheavals, and ideologies of revolutionary social or political change.” Meanwhile, it is the marginalized social classes that remain on the frontlines of protest, and end up being killed. Ralth agrees: “for common people, who have spilled their blood for the freedom struggle, they are just difference faces of the occupation.”

An invasive state

Alongside these important developments, Kashmiri youth remain in the immediate line of fire, facing violent suppression from the Indian government, affiliated right-wing groups, and the local state and security apparatus in Kashmir. While state repression has existed in Kashmir for most of its troubled history, it has evolved and
transformed in response to the new youth movement. This has led many, especially in the middle class, to refrain from participating too vocally, worried about repercussions for themselves and their families.

The massive, spontaneous popular response to Wani’s death precipitated the BJP-led Indian government to take on a more hardline approach to Kashmir than its Congress predecessors. The Modi government’s approach to Kashmir has been primarily informed by right-wing Hindu groups affiliated with the BJP that seek to abrogate Kashmir’s “special status” within the Indian constitution, allow Indians to buy land in Kashmir (which, under Article 35A of the Indian constitution, is not permitted as the local state has the authority to determine who constitutes a “permanent resident” that can buy land) and change the religious demographics of the state by developing army colonies and separate areas for Kashmiri Hindus. The Indian government’s approach to Kashmir has also been increasingly informed by what is known as the “Doval Doctrine.” Ajit Doval currently serves as the National Security Advisor, and is known as India’s “most powerful security bureaucrat.” As applied to Kashmir, the “Doval doctrine” entails the flexing of the Indian state’s (military) power, without any restrictions or considerations of morality. It considers the Indian state’s previous treatment of Kashmiri resistance as falling into a politics of appeasement, which has only emboldened Kashmiri “separatists.” As Sushil Aaron of the Hindustan Times argues, “Apart from the use of force to quell protests, Doval also endorses a hardline political approach with a view to conceptually reconfigure the conflict. India must reiterate unequivocally that J&K is an integral part of India. Delhi must insist that there is no political question to be settled in Kashmir.” Under the doctrine, there is no political aspect to the Kashmir problem, just Pakistan’s interference in bolstering Kashmiri separatists, a region that remains an “integral” part of India (not a disputed territory).

It is this hardline approach, that relies primarily on military might, covert operations, and brutal suppression of dissent, that has come to the fore in recent years. This is especially evident in the response to recent mass protests in Kashmir. Before 2016, most protestors were fired upon by live bullets, leading to countless deaths and injuries. As a result of limited protest from the international human rights community and domestic pressures, the state turned to the use of pellet guns, which, when fired, shoot small, but high-velocity lead pellets into the skin and damage internal organs. Many of these pellets were fired into young people’s faces, resulting in a number of youths being blinded. It appeared to many that the message from the state had taken on a more sinister tone: We may not kill you, but will leave you in such a state that you would rather wish you were dead.

Nevertheless, during the 2016 agitation, even with the use of pellet guns, nearly 100 youths were killed. Indian forces argue that they are facing unruly crowds of young Kashmiri stone throwers, and thus have no other means of response. Yet, anthropologist Mohamad Junaid argues that “anytime there is an injury or death, young people respond by throwing stones at soldiers, which gives the latter an alibi to escalate violence.”
In addition to brutally quashing protests, Indian forces also enter into neighborhoods, arresting and beating those who they believe are stirring the agitation. They work with a strong network of local informers, many of them who are forced to work for the occupation as a result of financial need or fear for their lives and families. They regularly arrest youths who are involved in stone throwing or participation in protests, many of whom are under the age of 18. These youths are booked under the notorious Public Security Act (PSA), which effectively brands them for the rest of their lives even if they are released. In 2011, Amnesty International called the PSA a “lawless law” and declared that it was a way for the government to circumvent the rule of law. The subsequent negative media attention given to this law resulted in an increase of illegal detentions outside of the PSA, as police try to deal with dissent under the radar. During their detention, youths are subjected to torture, including electric shocks and sexual humiliation.

The actions of the state also extend to other arenas of resistance. Just as new technologies have played a transformative role in youth activism, new technologies are also being used by various state agencies as an advanced method of invasive surveillance. Through an active internet cell, the state hires hackers to retrieve information about youth organizing online and to create fake social media accounts to troll online forums and instigate dissent in order to see who might be a potential threat to the state. “There is a lot of money being pumped in this area,” says Dilnaz Boga, a journalist who covers youth issues in Kashmir. “The state is able to control youth voices by furnishing information about them and then using it against them—including information about their personal and family lives.” Boga affirms that Facebook is used for multiple purposes. “The state is able to keep an eye on the likes and comments, and hire people to egg on young people. With this strategy, the government is essentially able to find out who is willing to die or not.” The internet cell also monitors those individuals who are the most active online, including journalists and academics. The names of these individuals are then circulated, and local and central intelligence agencies attempt to intimidate their families in order to get them to stop writing and becoming active.

In moments of heightened crisis, such as dates of commemorations or after killings of youth activists, the state clamps down on communication networks, sometimes for days or weeks at a time, including social media. As a result, youths are unable to mobilize and build momentum around particular issues. This illiberal and undemocratic muzzling of expression is meant to curtail dissent. The state also preempts calls for organized protests by declaring a curfew in the region, with strict shoot-on-site orders. A number of calls for marches to the United Nations headquarters, or protests to commemorate important historical dates, have been prevented in this way. Mohamad Junaid describes curfews in Kashmir as a “military siege,” stating that “Not only are people forced to stay inside their homes on pain of getting shot or arrested, but a blockade is imposed on essential supplies, like food, medicine and fuel.”

According to local activists, there have been more insidious means of curbing youth dissent. In one such example, local observers note how drug use has increased in Kashmir, especially in areas such as Tral, Pulwama, Islamabad, and Sopore where
resistance to Indian rule is most prominent. The coincidence is not lost on Kashmiris; many believe that drugs are being pumped into Kashmir through black markets, much like they were in Punjab, to distract the youths from activism. Many also become addicted while they are in jail.

Suppression in Kashmir goes beyond targeting youths that are agitating against the Indian state. The entire Kashmiri student body politic is deemed suspect; students in Kashmir have no space to organize or mobilize politically. Student groups, unless they eschew the politics of mainstream Indian parties such as the Congress or BJP, are not allowed to meet in universities. As a result, the Kashmir University Students Union has been working underground in recent years, and its leadership is regularly harassed and surveilled. Freedom of expression is restricted. Indeed, Facebook works in tandem with the Indian state to remove or suspend any posts that it views as being controversial. Mir Suhaib, another Kashmiri political cartoonist, had his cartoon marking the death anniversary of Afzal Guru removed and his account suspended for three days. After Wani’s death, a number of Kashmiri activists had their Facebook accounts suspended.

In addition to killings, arrests, torture, and restrictions on expression, youth activists say that there is also a “cultural” war that is being played by the state and its various agencies. An element of this was explained earlier in this essay, with a concerted effort by multiple agencies to influence civil society activities. There is also a parallel effort by the state apparatus to encourage youths to join administrative services, the police, or other careers where their ability to be political agents is restricted. These individuals are promoted as being the ideal for Kashmiri youth, with promises of access to state resources and economic and social status, in opposition to stone-throwers or militants, who are primarily blamed for all of the ills in society. Cultural warfare includes all activities that seek to undermine the people’s struggle for self-determination, often posing it as Islamic extremism or placing doubts in people’s minds about local activists—situating them as collaborators or circulating rumors about their character. The end result of this strategy is to generate feelings of skepticism and distrust in society, so that youths will decide that it is better to benefit from the existing structures, rather than strive to create new ones.

On “radicalization”

The increasing suppression and violence of the Indian state, especially since the summer of 2010, has led to an increase in Kashmiri youths joining militant groups. Unlike their predecessors in the late 1980s and 1990s, many of these youths are educated. Like Wani, they joined the militancy after facing harassment at the hands of the security forces or witnessing the death or atrocities committed against a family member or friend. From the perspective of the broader Indian state, media, and society, these youths are seen as Islamic terrorists—religious fanatics who, with the help of Pakistan, seek to turn Kashmir into an ISIS styled haven. While it is indeed true that these organizations espouse an Islamist ideology, and that there have been a few incidents of ISIS flags raised during protests, the rendering of these
youth as “Islamic terrorists” is highly simplistic. For example, while ISIS flags have been seen in protests, experts contend this is a move to taunt Indian security forces and there is no evidence to suggest that these youths are being recruited into ISIS or even endorse their ideology. In this section, I complicate dominant understandings of religion in the youth movement, in an attempt to highlight the role that state repression and state strategy plays in shaping religious ideologies, but also briefly consider the role that religion does play in shaping how Kashmiris view their struggle for justice. I argue that the Indian state apparatus is able to use the threat of the global Islamist fear by drawing links between the youths and global extremist groups in an attempt to undermine their dissent.

When Wani was killed, the dominant discourse in India referred to him as an Islamic radical and a terrorist, given his affiliation with Hizbul Mujahideen and a number of statements he had made in his YouTube videos that referred to his fight as a jihad against the occupying forces and relied primarily on Islamic idioms. Given the immense amount of support for Wani, in the Indian public’s perception, all Kashmiri Muslims became “Muslim terrorists” or “terrorist sympathizers,” and thus, their desire for self-determination was effectively undermined. In one such prominent example, the Indian journalist Barkha Dutt, in an article in the Washington Post, argues that “terrorists have ruined Kashmir,” and that Kashmiris must realize “that terrorists like Zakir Musa or Burhan Wani... are not benefactors, but enemies who have sabotaged and hijacked both their credibility and best interests.”

Curiously, in Dutt’s article, there is very little mention of the role of the Indian state in promoting this radicalization. By making a slight reference to “historic mistakes of omission and commission,” the state is completely erased from the narrative of militancy and religious radicalization, as if it appeared on its own or was an intrinsic part of Kashmiri resistance. As we have already seen, both the earlier iteration of activists, as well as the youths involved in mass protests starting in 2008, began peacefully, seeking nonviolent means to achieve self-determination. It was only when state repression became heightened that some within the movement turned to more violent or radical means.

This begs the question: what is the role of religion in the Kashmiri movement? The answer to this question is one that is not palatable to those who wish to see religion as the only driving force, or those who situate it as having no role whatsoever.

Zakir Musa, a Kashmiri militant who became the head of Hizbul Mujahideen after Wani was killed, but later began a new Al-Qaeda inspired outfit, espoused the most explicit expression of radical Islamism ideology in a statement that was released in May 2017. In the statement, Musa threatened to behead pro-freedom leaders for describing the movement as a freedom struggle, saying that the war in Kashmir should not be for an independent state or merger with Pakistan, but “for Islam so that sharia is established here.” The response amongst a number of youth activists, the pro-freedom Hurmey leadership, as well as the existing militant outfits, was resolute. They insisted that the portrayal of the struggle as linked to a global Islamist jihad or the creation of a Caliphate was false, and that groups such as “ISIS, Al Qaeda and the Taliban have no role in Kashmir’s struggle.” They reiterated that
the struggle was one of denied political aspirations and subsequent human rights violations, nor a historic conflict between Hindus and Muslims, nor a religious battle. Some also voiced skepticism of the root cause of this purported shift in militant discourse. As with all incidents in Kashmir, questions were raised whether this shift was the 'work of agencies' or a fabrication in an attempt to undermine and divide what had effectively become a mass movement of Kashmir's youth. They noted how the state had caused rifts between various religious communities in the past (for example, the Chithrisinghpura massacre, in which 36 Sikhs were killed), in an attempt to make the movement appear as a fundamentalist one. They pointed towards the ways in which particular religious ideologies have been given free rein in Kashmir, while others have met the brunt of state repression. While it is easier to link the increase in radicalization in response to state repression, it of course becomes harder to prove whether state agencies are actually behind the proliferation of extremist discourses. Nonetheless, the belief among many is that the latter is a possibility, and plays an important role in understanding how various religious ideologies take shape in a contested zone such as Kashmir. As Kashmiri journalist Mir Hafiznotes:

Many observers...believe that creating an Islamist bogey is: Kashmir is the unconscious desire of the State, if not the genuineprojects. It utilizes the Indian state to dismiss pro-freedom demonstrations and stone throwing by schoolgirls as an outcome of radicalization, preferably religious, instead of having to acknowledge it as an act craving political change.

As many young people articulate, 'who does it benefit the most to have the Kashmir struggle be one that is linked to a global extremist Islam?'

Nonetheless, Burhan Wani, and others, did join the Hizbul Mujahideen, a religious-political outfit. They believed they were embarking on a jihad (struggle) against the Indian state. Their rhetoric incorporates religious language and symbolism. People on the ground respond to this discourse, as their deaths are seen as shahadat, or martyrdom. So, how do we understand this particular turn to religion?

While some only see religion, others, mostly on the left, dismiss these factors as simply being instrumental — religion always stands for something else, and comes to symbolize something else. It is used primarily because of its ability to serve as a 'rallying cry.' Take, for example, a telling quote by one observer: 'It is only when you don't leave people with any choice that they turn to God. That is when Islamisation started.' In this view, one's religious identity is relegated to a particular private sphere, and only emerges once all other options have been spent.

This view is as simplistic as one that solely focuses on the role of religion. It does not take into account the critical role that religious identities have played in shaping Kashmir's history. Critically, it also assumes a binary between the religious and the secular, a binary that is, as many scholars have argued, not necessarily productive when attempting to understand Muslim societies. An individual's religious identity informs how he/she sees the world; in many cases it deeply intersects with a desire to fight for justice, or defines what justice is.
may shape how one views 'the political,' and how one situates their role within this realm. It is, however, not the only factor. Others include ones upbringing, life experience, educational background, and so on.

Religion also plays an important role at the level of community. There is a history of religious identity being used by the state to demarcate particular rights and privileges to certain groups, while also utilizing some groups over others. The religious question is therefore shaped and reshaped by both state and non-state actors. For example, the rise of Hindutva discourses in India have shaped how many Kashmiri Muslims view the Indian state and society, and has played a critical role in consolidating perceptions that they are being targeted for being Muslims. This consolidation of Muslim-ness then becomes re-articulated in their resistance to the Indian state.

Conclusion

Kashmiris youths are well aware that their struggle for self-determination is of little international concern. With rising authoritarianism and right-wing fervor in India, and continued geopolitical interventions in Pakistan, Kashmir is simply not a policy priority. The perceived intractability of the issue continues, but this might create new opportunities for Kashmiris to take ownership of their cause. Kashmir’s initial revolt has come full circle and a new generation is testing innovative ways of dissent, taking ownership of their narrative, and expanding their solidarity and networks through social media and other mediums. Yet, as this essay has illustrated, this movement is not without its challenges. Given that it continues to be people-led, and is organic, it does not have a leader, nor is there a concrete vision towards how the end—which it is loosely defined as self-determination or azadi, can be achieved. This leaves the movement vulnerable to cooption, as we saw in the case of civil society initiatives, or misrepresentation, as we see in the case of the movement being seen primarily through the lens of Islamic radicalism. As state surveillance and repression is likely to continue, it remains to be seen how the youths will respond to these challenges.

Notes

1 In this chapter, I use the term “Kashmir” to refer specifically to the Kashmir Valley, and not the entire Indian-held state of Jammu and Kashmir, as the uprising is most acute in the Valley.
2 Indian forces later killed Khalid Wani in 2015 accusing him of serving as an overground worker for the militants. The family alleges that he was tortured and killed in custody for being Burhan’s brother. See Basharat Masood, “If my son was killed in encounter, why his body didn’t bear a bullet wound,” *The Indian Express*, April 14, 2015, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/if-my-son-was-killed-in-encounter-why-his-body-didnt-bear-a-bullet-wound/ (accessed September 25, 2017).
5 A local rebellion against the Dogras was underway in the area of Poonch, which was crushed by the ruler's soldiers, resulting in estimates of 150,000–200,000 people killed and an equal number fleeing to Pakistan. As a result, Muslim tribesmen from northwest Pakistan, that were supported by officials in the Pakistani state, made their way to Kashmir in order to "liberate" Kashmir. The Maharaja sought military help from the newly formed Indian government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The Government of India made the Dogra ruler sign an Instrument of Accession before it would lend its assistance, and its army officially arrived in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, on October 27, 1947.


14 The pro-freedom leadership usually calls for hartals, or strikes, after the occurrence of human rights violations by the Indian state. Most businesses, banks, schools, and government offices remain closed and public transportation is limited. Critics of the hartal as a protest strategy decry that it harms the Kashmiri economy and keeps children from attending school; the leadership maintains that it is the only form of resistance that Kashmiris can use given the state prohibition of protests and larger public gatherings.

15 Muzzamul Thakur (activist) in discussion with the author, February 7, 2016.

16 Wajahat Ahmad (Faculty, O.P. Jindal Global University, India) in discussion with the author, February 27, 2016.

17 Ibid.

18 Rujit Rathor (journalist) in discussion with the author, September 25, 2017.

19 Ahmad, interview with author.


23 Rathor, interview with author.


27. Dilnaz Boga (journalist and filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 15, 2016.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


33. Ibid.


41. Huffpost Staff, “Al Qaeda Announces.”

