



# A Tale of Two Lands

## Kashmiri Resistance to Talibanisation

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**T**he fact that Al Qaeda was a virtually unknown organisation in Kashmir before it hit world headlines following Sept 11 is certainly of some significance. At this time there are quite a few Pakistani and Afghan militant groups active in Kashmir, but the Taliban or Al Qaeda have never been active in Kashmir under their own names. In fact, the Home Minister, Mr. L.K. Advani, had said not long ago that there are no Taliban in India.

These facts indicate the true connection between the situations in Afghanistan and Kashmir. While the Afghan militants active in Kashmir and some Kashmiris have fought against the erstwhile Soviet Union in Afghanistan, there is no real Afghan organisation fighting in Kashmir. Osama Bin Laden has been quoted as saying that he did not want to fight India because he is “worried about the fate of millions of Muslims” in this country. The other reason lies in the psyche of the people of Kashmir. Dr. O.N. Wakhlu, a writer and a political activist, believes that “the armed struggle in Kashmir had the support of the people so long as the JKLF was running the show. Once it degenerated into a fundamentalist-led movement it lost the support of the people and that is the reason foreign militants were not able to get into the act in a big way.” There certainly is at least some truth in this observation. In Afghanistan, during the battles for Kunduz and Kandahar, it was reported that the indigenous members of the

Taliban were willing to surrender, but were not doing so because the Al Qaeda militants, most of whom were Arabs and other foreigners, were threatening to turn against them if they did. It is highly unlikely a similar scenario will be enacted in Kashmir, but the foreign militants here tend to be more tenacious than the Kashmiris. And there is resentment against them among the people, both overt and covert. On November 20, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, which has begun to talk peace, said that the foreign militants active in Kashmir should not have a say in ‘policy matters’.

This also underscores the fact that while Kashmiris— at least some of them— are willing to see the armed movement as a Muslim uprising, they do not want it to be usurped by pan-Islamists, because then Kashmir will really become like Afghanistan and the situation will become untenable. Only a handful of politicians, like Syed Ali Shah Geelani and the Dukhtaran-I-Millat leader Ayesha Andrabi, have come out with statements that they are fully with Al Qaeda and the Taliban. In fact, Ms Andrabi wants her son to become another Osama Bin Laden. However, this is really fringe thought in Kashmir. By and large Kashmiri Muslims do not identify with the Taliban and do not want them active on Kashmir soil.

### Response to Afghanistan

There is yet another significant fact: There have been violent protests in far away places like Indonesia against

the American strikes on Afghanistan and several deaths have taken place; in Kashmir, which has been witnessing bloodshed for about a decade, there have been no violent protests against the American action in Afghanistan. What is more, people have made it amply clear that this is not due to indifference to the killing of civilians in Afghanistan. A couple of weeks after the bombings in Afghanistan started, the militant organisation Lashkar-e-Toiba gave a call for a *hartal* in Kashmir to protest against civilian casualties in Afghanistan. The Hurriyat Conference got into the act and announced that since it has already said that no *hartal* would be observed unless it gave the call and since it had not called for a *hartal* the next day, there would be no *hartal*. The next day there was a near-total strike all over Kashmir.

The reaction of Shabir Shah, whom Amnesty International had adopted as a Prisoner of Conscience, typifies this. In a memorandum addressed to Kofi Annan he condemned the September 11 attack on America as terrorism, but has equally condemned the American reprisals as terrorism. He writes in the memorandum: “If terrorism is unacceptable, so is war. No war, particularly the one in which the poor Afghans are made to suffer, shall wipe out terrorism from this world. If anything will, it is doing away with injustice from this world...These injustices have been perpetuated on the weak, the poor and the miserable

of this world...” Shah tried to lead a peaceful procession of his party workers (he is the president of the Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Freedom Party) to the office of the United Nations Military Observer Group in Srinagar, but was stopped by the police.

The reaction of the ordinary Kashmiri has been rather similar. There is a little sympathy for the Taliban. By and large, people reject their brand of Islam; the repeated attempts of fundamentalists to make Kashmiri women wear the *abaya* keep failing, despite the fact that they use violence and target civilians every now and then. However, there is a sense of outrage at the suffering of the Afghan people and the consensus seems to be that while the September 11 attacks were terrorism, the American-led retaliation is terrorism as well. Says Ali Mohd. Mir, an engineer: “What else do you call the murder of innocent children living in mud huts except terrorism?”

Similar views are expressed by a majority of Kashmiris but no one is talking about going to Afghanistan and fighting alongside the Taliban and the Al Qaeda. There have been no big rallies or protest marches, unlike in Pakistan, where some tribal groups picked up the gun and went to Afghanistan to help the Taliban. These particular ethnic and linguistic loyalties do not exist in Kashmir and the bond of religion seems to be expressing itself in a restrained manner.

### US “War on Terror”

If there is a consensus on anything across the political spectrum in Kashmir, it is the belief that America’s “War of Terror” is totally focussed on American self-interest. Not just politicians in Kashmir, even the Government of India has been echoing similar views. Says Shah: “I don’t know what America means by terrorism. I have always called a spade

a spade and have unequivocally condemned terrorism on a number of occasions. It is difficult to say what America will label as terrorism. The Prophet said that one who kills a single innocent person has destroyed the whole universe. Islam does not allow it at all.” Dr. Wakhlu is even more forthright: “America’s war on terrorism will be determined purely by its political, commercial and defence interests. It would be naive to believe



that America will come to India’s—or for that matter, any country’s rescue — and fight terrorism on its behalf.”

However, there is a possibility that the interests of America and India may coincide. America has already given indications that it will strike at terrorists in places other than Afghanistan. Could this mean strikes on training camps in Pakistan and POK? This is possible, but the government of India is not betting on it and has repeatedly said that India is self-sufficient in its battle against terrorism; other countries are welcome to join it in its fight, but India is perfectly capable of doing it on its own.

In spite of this, it would be wrong to assume that America’s new determination to fight terrorism (even if it does define “terrorist group” as a

group which is harming American interests and “other terrorist groups” as those who are active against other countries in other parts of the world) will have no consequences for Kashmir. The Jaish-e-Mohammed, which claimed responsibility for the October 1 suicide attack on the State Assembly, had to backtrack and deny involvement following American pressure on the Pakistani establishment to crack down on the organisation. Also, the assets of the organisation were seized in America and it was put on the terrorist groups list. The Laskhar-e-Toiba also got included as a terrorist organisation by the USA after some weeks of dilly-dallying over its inclusion.

The fall of the Taliban is being viewed with caution in Kashmir. Dr. Wakhlu expresses the fear that having been routed in Afghanistan, the Taliban might try and score victories in Kashmir. He describes this as the worst case scenario. The best case scenario, he says, is that as a result of the fall of the Taliban, peace might come to Kashmir.

### Glimmer of Hope

On November 20, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen called a press conference and announced that it might turn into a political party, saying that if it has a gun in one hand, it has an olive branch in the other. Again, there seems to be a consensus that the solution to the Kashmir problem is that Kashmir should be used as a bridge between India and Pakistan. Says Shabir Shah: “It has long been my slogan that India and Pakistan should use the people of Kashmir as a bridge between them. The two countries have fought three wars over Kashmir. There is a threat of nuclear war because of the issue. One says that Kashmir is an *atoot ang* (inseparable part) of it and the other says that it is its jugular vein. Yet neither country has ever asked the people of Kashmir what they want.” Ideally,

Shabir Shah would like a referendum to be held in Kashmir in order to decide its political future, but he says that he has a flexible attitude and if this is not possible, the issue should be decided through dialogue. In his view, Kashmir should be used as a means of bringing India and Pakistan closer to each other.

Mrs. Khemlata Wakhlu, who has recently joined the Congress Party, expresses similar views. She feels that there should be a critical mass of people among the intellectuals both in India and in Pakistan who can take this idea of Kashmir and its people becoming a bridge between the two countries to the people. It can then be translated into political action. The biggest opposition to this idea will most probably come from hardline Islamists in Pakistan. And here the American interest comes into the picture. According to a recent article in *The Times of India*, America's ultimate aim is the creation of a moderate Pakistan because the fact is that it is in the Madrassas of Pakistan that the Taliban was born and nurtured. And a moderate Pakistan is very much in India's interest. Once the rabid voices in Pakistan are neutralised or weakened (Hamid Gul, the former chief of the ISI, blamed the Jews for the bombing of the WTC towers!), the country's *raison d'être* will cease to be hatred of India and making Kashmir a part of Pakistan will cease to be an obsession.

The fall of the Taliban has raised hopes that a sane solution will be found to the Kashmir problem. What is required is that India and Pakistan should stop merely trying to grab a piece of land and sincerely get down to looking for ways of settling their differences. This outcome would be good for the people of Kashmir. And the Kashmiris are only too willing to give the two countries a helping hand. □

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