The Jihad Game

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Inside Pakistan's Dark War

Abhinav Pandya

juggernaut

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Dedicated to
Sadguru H.H. Paramahansa Prabhu Baa

Yeh khitta-e-Kashmir hai, Jannat ki ek tasveer,
Insaniyat ki daastaan mein, kuch bigdi hui tahreer.

This is Kashmir, a glimpse of heaven,
In the saga of humanity,
This is an unpleasant chapter.

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Introduction

On 22 April 2025, four terrorists of The Resistance Front (TRF), a proxy terror outfit of Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), brutally killed twenty-six tourists, mostly Hindus, in the meadows of the pristine, sylvan Baisaran Valley of Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Before they were shot dead, the men, who were tourists, were asked to reveal their religious identity. Some were asked to recite the Kalima, a sacred Islamic phrase that captures its core beliefs, and many others were forced to remove their pants.

Subsequently, India and Pakistan engaged each other in a short four-day war, exchanging drones and missiles before an abrupt ceasefire, allegedly mediated by the US, a claim denied by India. The Pahalgam massacre shook the nation. It brought the ugliest and bloodiest avatar of Islamic extremism face-to-face with commonplace Indians – at a time when Indian society was already intensely polarised along communal lines.

Gory images of the terror victims travelled across the country at lightning speed through social media feeds. The hyper-nationalistic frenzy generated by media coverage of the Pahalgam massacre and India's retaliatory action in Operation Sindoor led to a sudden spurt of curiosity among ordinary Indians about something that had been going on for quite a while: the jihad in J&K. During this time, I was invited by podcasters and media groups for interviews and panel discussions. The most common

and dominant theme was the evolution and architecture of the jihadist ecosystem in J&K. In the comments sections of these broadcasts, I found engineers, chartered accountants, writers, artists, doctors and designers asking questions about Islamic institutions and terror groups such as: 'What are Ahl-e-Hadith, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, The Resistance Front and Jamaat-e-Islami?'

I saw an extraordinary level of curiosity among urban Indians about terror financing and Islamic radicalisation in Kashmir. Their questions and comments, their rage and frenzy, define today's India and its citizens. Theirs is a quest for security in a turmoil-ridden world order where non-state actors riding on totalitarian and barbaric jihadist doctrines want to trample upon civil liberties, democracy and peace. Across the world, people attuned to democracy and liberal values feel existentially threatened by jihadist organisations.

Contrary to the Indian experience, in Europe, the Ottoman Islamic armies were stopped at the gates of Vienna by the combined forces of the Polish-Lithuanian army and the Holy Roman Empire in 1683, and prevented from conquering the entire continent. Following that, Europe underwent the Renaissance, an era of scientific, literary and intellectual inquiry, as well as the discovery of new nations and sea routes, and the global spread of trade and missionaries.

However, in India, the Islamic invasions beginning in 714 CE with the Arab invasion of Sind, ultimately led to roughly 700–800 years of subjugation and religious persecution in the form of attacks on the Hindu civilisational identity, Jizya tax,* forced conversions, temple demolitions and the resultant Hindu resistance. During Partition, the brutal communal riots left

* An Islamic tax levied from non-Muslims as protection money

millions dead and displaced. Even after 1947, Hindus and Muslims have fought each other in communal riots across the entire country of India, so much so that Hindu–Muslim communal rioting and killings are considered a nationwide phenomenon, occurring from Kashmir to Kanyakumari in the far south and Gujarat in the far west to Assam in the Northeast. In Pakistan, the Hindu minority faced the bloodiest persecution and has come down to merely 2–3 per cent of the population from 15 per cent in 1947. During the 1971 war for Bangladesh's independence, the Pakistani army killed 3 million Hindus in Bangladesh. This bitter and bloody history has added an additional element – the existential threat both perceived and faced by Hindus in general and amplified by the right-wing Hindu extremists. The uneasy quest among people for information on jihad and their eagerness to gain an understanding of it needs to be addressed amidst the barrage of fabrications, false propaganda, misinformation and disinformation they are inundated with, which can only worsen the widening fault lines among religious communities in India.

In this book, I intend to discuss and analyse how India's most sensitive security issue, that is, Kashmir's jihadist movement, originated and evolved over time. Today, Kashmir is home to extreme levels of Islamist radicalisation among the common populace, so much so that ordinary boys and girls from middle-class families are willing to become suicide bombers. Kashmir has some of the world's most brutal terror groups operating on its soil, with links to global terror groups like Al Qaeda and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). Besides, three decades of jihadi terrorism has unleashed other necessary concomitants – rampant drug abuse; prostitution; erosion of society, culture and family – and the trauma, stress and depression that comes in the wake of decades-long conflict. Hence, I felt that it was important for common people to understand the nuances of the evolutionary

trajectory of jihad in Kashmir and the different causal factors that went into it. This playbook is already being repeated in other parts of India and the world. Going through this journey in an anecdotal form will raise awareness about how threats to free society become monstrous over time. Many incidents, characters and trends discussed in this book are also part of my personal journey of understanding Kashmir and jihad; hence, I have refrained from using their real names, place and time coordinates.

Part 1

1

1979: The Year Jihad Mainstreamed in Geopolitics

Most Kashmir watchers focus on 1989-90, but any sincere effort to make sense of the beginning of the Kashmir jihad cannot skip the momentous year of 1979. In the history of global jihad, the year 1979 is a landmark, with three key developments that laid the groundwork for the post-Second World War global security and economic architecture, which is unravelling today at breakneck speed.

These three were: the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Ayatollah Khamenei's Islamic revolution in Iran and the siege of the holy mosque in Mecca by Wahhabi extremists, carrying the legacy of the brutal Ikhwan* jihadists of the early 1900s. The Russian invasion of Afghanistan led to the US intelligence agency CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) arming the Mujahideens, Islamic religious soldiers, a motley group of students from

* These are Saudi Ikhwanis, followers of Islamic scholar and founder of Wahhabism, Abdul Wahab (1703–92). They were the main force of jihadists who helped the Saud king Abdul Aziz to establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. These Ikhwanis are not to be confused with the Ikhwan force of disgruntled militants who supported the Indian security forces in the 1990s.

madrasas in the Af-Pak region and global jihadists from Sudan, Afghanistan, Turkey, the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc., to counter the Soviets with the support of Pakistan's intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). With that began the 'iron-clad friendship' of the US and Pakistan. Inter-Services Intelligence veterans like Col Imam (nom de guerre of Amir Sultan Tarar) and Lt Gen. Hamid Gul, a former ISI chief and father of the proxy war in South Asia, trained the Mujahideen.

Following its successful Afghan experience of using the proxy forces of jihadi terrorist groups in driving out Russian forces, proxy war became Pakistan's vital strategy to contain and counter its stronger adversary in conventional warfare, namely, India.

The first batches of the Mujahideen began rolling out from Karachi's Madrasa Binoria. In 1979, a Binoria graduate, Irshad Ali, aka Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil, founded Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), beginning the dreaded transnational Harkat network of the Deobandi extremist groups. Subsequently, Madrasa Binoria was flooded with students of jihad from across the world – Sudan, Somalia, Turkey, India, Malaysia and Central Asian countries, among others. The madrasa groomed some of the global stalwarts of jihad, including figures like Maulana Fazlur Rahman Khalil, the founder of the dreaded HuJI and the godfather of the Harkat terrorist movement that fought against the Soviets in 1980s, and Maulana Masood Azhar, India's nemesis and founder of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), the terror group that brought India and Pakistan twice to the verge of full-fledged nuclear war.

In the 1980s, HuJI underwent many internal splits following organisational politics and turf wars. However, by the end of that decade, with its successful Afghan experiment of running proxies with the American and Arab petrodollar funding, Pakistan had mastered the art of running a proxy war using terrorist

organisations. The Afghan template became a standard that could be exported to other theatres like Kashmir with minor customisations. General Headquarters (GHQ) Rawalpindi's expertise and vigour in running proxy wars was tested in its successful experiment in destabilising Indian Punjab by facilitating and aiding the Khalistan movement there. Globally, the anti-Soviet jihad opened the floodgates for the emergence of transnational Islamist groups like Al Qaeda. This resulted in the galvanisation of scattered jihadist terror outfits, from Africa to the Philippines, under a global pan-Islamist vision.

The Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) became an example of a radical Islamist movement overthrowing a legitimate secular government. During the authoritarian reign of pro-Western monarchy led by Mohammad Reza Shah Pehlevi, Iranian society experienced extensive Westernization of its culture and attitudes. It was common to see women dressed in Western outfits like shirts, miniskirts and bikinis. The youth openly visited discos and enjoyed music and alcohol. The discourse and education in universities and colleges resembled those of any Western campus, focusing on modern science and European political and intellectual movements. A firebrand Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his band of followers, fuming and fretting with the massive Westernisation, incited the Iranians against the Shah's Westernisation of Iran. Besides, the people, particularly the religious ones, were also annoyed with Shah's authoritarianism, suppression of dissent and pro-Western foreign policy. Finally, they overthrew his regime in February 1979, forced him to flee and declared Iran an Islamic republic in April 1979.

The success of the Iranian revolution motivated Islamist organisations far and wide to aspire to duplicate the Iranian model. The Islamic regime of Iran survives to this day, sponsoring a range of terrorist actors like Hamas and Hezbollah in West

Asia and threatening the existence of Israel with its nearly enriched nuclear arsenal. Since 1979, the world has witnessed terrorist organisations uprooting democracies and dictatorships, capturing the state and forming governments. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over in Syria and Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan and most recently the Al Qaeda-affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

The famous siege of Mecca (November–December 1979) by radical Islamists brought back fear of the brutal Ikhwan raiders who, merely a few decades ago, had ravaged the countryside of central Arabia and Jordan with King Abdul Aziz and laid the foundations of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The hardline Wahhabi Islamic clergy was disgruntled with the debauchery and moral corruption that had crept among the Saudi royals riding high on petrodollars. They felt that the Saudi regime had not remained pious enough. Enraged with the Saudi regime's moderate approach to Islamic issues, such as allowing female TV presenters in the country, a band of jihadists, mostly the remnants and successors of the Ikhwanis of the 1920s and 1930s, led by a conservative ideologue, Juhayman-al-Utaibi, occupied the Mecca Mosque. Finally, with the help of French commandos, the terrorists were neutralised. Subsequently, to satisfy the Wahhabi leadership, the Saudi monarchy, awash with petrodollars, opened its treasury for the Wahhabi clergy, resulting in the global spread of a fundamentalist and orthodox Wahhabi Islam which believed in the literal interpretation of Islamic scriptures. Between 1985 and 2005, US $75 billion was spent on the global spread of Wahhabi Islam.[1] In addition to satisfying the Wahhabi clergy, another key underlying motivation was to export a standard version of Islam, marginalise the local variants and strengthen Saudi Arabia's image as the leader of the Islamic world.

The bond was one of quid pro quo. In return for opening its coffers, the Wahhabi religious leadership had to guarantee absolute support to the Saudi monarchy, leaving no space for ultra-radicals to question the legitimacy of the Saud dynasty on Shariah-related matters. Following that, Wahhabism spread at a phenomenal pace across the globe, manifesting in lavish Arab-style mosques, colleges, seminaries, religious centres and institutions in places as far apart as Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Africa, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

The Saudis were second only to the Americans in funding the anti-Soviet Mujahideen fighters and, later, the Taliban in Afghanistan. Several jihadists of the Mecca Mosque 'seize' later joined Al Qaeda. The spread of Wahhabism to Kashmir severely damaged the local syncretic traditions of Sufi Islam, known as Etqadi thought, replacing it with a fundamentalist and extremist version of Islam. Incidentally, Kashmir was one of the recipients of the Wahhabi money.

2

Pakistan ka Matlab Kya, La Ilaha Illallah

Pakistan's embarrassing defeat in the 1971 war that resulted in independence for Bangladesh had demoralised its army. The ignominy of signing the surrender papers with 90,000 prisoners of war sent Pakistan's security establishment into a morass of depression first, followed by a frenzy for revenge later. Following the humiliating defeat of the Pakistani army by the Indian armed forces, both countries signed the Shimla peace accord in July 1972 to resolve the disputes peacefully and bilaterally. However, in the Shimla treaty negotiations, Pakistani prime minister (PM) Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto cleverly outmanoeuvred his Indian counterpart Indira Gandhi. Reportedly, he had clear informal instructions from the Pakistan army generals not to cede even an inch of territory, without worrying in the least about Pakistan's prisoners of war.[1] During the private conversations, allegedly, Bhutto was in tears, feigning genuine intent to resolve the Kashmir issue.[2] He successfully duped the Indian leadership into releasing the Pakistani prisoners of war. In return, he promised that his country would respect the Line of Control (LoC) as the de facto border and never try to destabilise it; however, he requested not to formally enter this in the agreement, lest it would

create problems for him in Pakistan.[3] He also requested some more time to bring something concrete on Kashmir, citing that he was under huge pressure from the Pakistan army.[4] Besides, in the formal draft, Pakistan agreed to maintain peace, refrain from anti-India propaganda and respect India's territorial integrity and sovereignty.[5] However, as time proved, Pakistan turned all these lofty and moralistic promises on their heads. Thus, having secured the release of 93,000 prisoners of war and 13,000 sq. km of territory[6] lost to India on the Western front, without ceding an inch of territory in Kashmir, Pakistan wrested diplomatic victory and nullified India's military success.

The rout of Pakistan in the war had driven home the message that it was no match for India in a conventional war. Much earlier, after the mixed forces of Kabaili Pathans and the Pakistani army, disguised as irregulars, were driven out of Kashmir in 1948, the founder of ISI, Major General Walter J. Cawthorn, had realised that Pakistan could not defeat India in a conventional war. India was too big a country with vast resources.[7] However, as General Cawthorn suggested, Pakistan could exploit India's regional, caste-related, religious and linguistic fault lines and weaken it from within.[8]

In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq, better known as Mard-e-Momin in Islamic circles because of his devoutly religious nature and services to promote Islam, upended Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government and imposed martial law across Pakistan. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government was already facing opposition from the Islamist and conservative segments and political groupings for suppressing dissent, election fraud and corruption. After the coup, Bhutto was executed in 1979, allegedly on charges of murdering a political opponent,[9] reportedly after an unfair trial, despite pleas for clemency from several heads of states.[10]

Under Zia, Pakistan's passion and dedication toward jihadism and Islamism were turbocharged. It fell upon General Zia-ul-Haq to resuscitate the Pakistan army, shore up its waning morale and strength and do something about India. Zia, known for keeping a low profile, kept a deceptive face of friendliness towards India, typical of his personality, a trait that Benazir Bhutto, Zulfikar's daughter and former PM of Pakistan, and Nusrat Bhutto, Benazir's mother, had recognised long back. Once, in a private dinner conversation Indian high commissioner, Gopalswami Parthasarathy, long after Bhutto's hanging, told Nusrat Bhutto that Zia's eyes were 'cold' and 'expressionless', discussing one of his meetings with Zia. In reply, Nusrat asked, 'Did they not remind of the eyes of a cobra?'[11]

With Morarji Desai, then PM of India, Zia enjoyed a strong bonhomie. Over their frequent phone calls, Zia befriended him. He also befriended Bollywood star Shatrughan Sinha, who later became a BJP MP. Zia's benign warmth extended to India's high commissioner in Pakistan, K. Natwar Singh. He addressed High Commissioner Singh as Kunwar Sahab, pandering to Natwar Singh's royalty lineage.[12] Kunwar Sahab was indeed overwhelmed with Zia's warmth and humility.[13]

Zia also felt a kinship with the students of his alma mater, St. Stephen's College in Delhi. A group of history honours students from that college even visited Pakistan on his invitation. The students received a warm welcome and the best of Pakistani hospitality, with Zia going to the extent of sending his state plane for their use.

After the ousting of the Janata Party government in 1979 in India, Zia continued to keep a low profile and charm with his friendly demeanour. He made several visits to India to watch cricket matches. Zia's cricket diplomacy became a buzzword among the strategic community of experts, security czars and diplomats.

However, parallel to his low profile, Zia was silently investing in Pakistan's nuclear programme as well as in the Khalistan movement, in line with his strategy of bleeding India with a thousand cuts, by exploiting India's religious, caste, regional, linguistic and racial fault lines. Pakistan's defeated army could not dare to think of colliding with Indian tanks and fighter jets in another war so soon after losing the last one. Hence, the best option was a proxy war. However, the astute Indira Gandhi was always sceptical of Zia. Interestingly, Zia and Indira shared a mutual unease and discomfort towards each other. She could see through his reptilian gaze and never got herself to trust him. Indira believed that General Zia was the main architect of Pakistan's covert support to Sikh separatist militancy in Punjab.[14] On the other hand, Zia was also perceptive enough to realise that Indira could not be trusted vis-à-vis Pakistan's security. He moved with religious passion in internationalising the Kashmir dispute by convincing the Islamic nations and Western powers to buy Pakistan's narrative; yet he was cautious and sceptical. He feared Indira Gandhi because of the defeat in the 1971 war, and the defeated Pakistan army was still no match for India's superior conventional forces. His unease with Indira and her distrust of Zia was clear when Zia told the British PM Margaret Thatcher that Indira's son and successor as PM, Rajiv Gandhi, was more open-minded about India-Pakistan relations than his mother.[15]

Beginning in 1954 with the anti-Ahmadiyya riots orchestrated by the Deobandi hardliners, by the late 1980s, Pakistan's own social, cultural and political milieu had sufficiently progressed on the path to jihadism with the Deobandi extremist onslaught. General Zia finally cemented the Islamist infrastructure in Pakistan and Islamised a range of governmental institutions. He introduced Islamic laws, strengthened the colonial-era blasphemy laws, making it punishable by law to criticise Islam.[16]

He Islamised the educational curriculum. The judicial system was also Islamised. Islamic punishments such as public floggings became common, selling alcohol was banned and hardcore Islamists were introduced into the army and bureaucracy.[17] Additionally, he established several institutions led by Islamist clerics to oversee government affairs.[18] Further, it was during his reign only that ISI, with CIA's money and weapons, facilitated, supported and trained Mujahideen fighters under the banner of jihadist organisations such as HuJ, Harakat-ul-Mujahidin (HuM), etc., laying the robust foundations of Pakistan's proxy war strategy.

3

Zia's Dilemma

Zia plotted to engulf Kashmir in a violent, Pakistan-supported jihad. However, his distrust of Kashmiris as reliable allies deterred him. He believed that Kashmiris being Brahmin converts were not true Muslims and lacked martial traits; hence arming them with weapons would serve no purpose. Zia's apprehensions about the Kashmiri temperament were not unfounded, as the state's culture had robust civilisational roots in Hinduism and Buddhism. This is amply reflected in the ruins of temples, stupas and viharas that dot the region, in Kashmir's religio-cultural traditions and in the historical texts from or about Kashmir. Understanding Zia's dilemmas, apprehensions and scepticism about Kashmiris requires a brief overview of Kashmir's Hindu and Buddhist history and the spread of Islam in the region.[1]

Kashmir's earliest mention is in the Neelmat Purana in the legend of the demon Jalodbhav and Sage Kashyap. Lord Krishna said that Kashmir was Goddess Parvati's territory, and the kings of Kashmir have Shiva's essence. In the Mahabharata era, Magadh king Jarasandha's relative Gonananda ruled Kashmir. After him, a long era passed in insignificance before the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (273–232 BCE) conquered Kashmir. He patronised Buddhism, built many Buddhist viharas and stupas. Kushana kings came after 300 years. Kanishka adopted

Buddhism, patronised it and organised the fourth Buddhist council at Kundalvar.

After the Kushanas, Shaivite monism thrived in Kashmir. Starting in the eighth century, Karkota king Lalitaditya Muktapida expanded his empire into the Indian interior and Central Asia. Lalitaditya, a devoted follower of Lord Vishnu, supported arts, culture and temple building. The Utpala dynasty governed Kashmir in the ninth and tenth centuries, with its kind king, Avantivarman, known for peace and stability, as well as for building temples in Avantipura and implementing irrigation and drainage systems. Over time, Buddhism and Sanatana Dharma blended in Kashmir, reflecting similar trends across India. Queen Didda's fifty-year rule is marked by court intrigue, treachery, promiscuity and overall decline, which created conditions that allowed foreigners to enter Kashmir.

In 1320, Mongol commander Dalucha ravaged Kashmir, massacring thousands and destroying everything in his path. Rinchana, an exiled Buddhist prince from Ladakh living in Baramulla, took advantage of the political instability and chaos following Dalucha's invasion to seize the throne. He converted to Islam. Shortly after his death, Shah Mir (1339–42) took the throne. Early Muslim rule under Rinchana and Shahmir was peaceful; however, Kashmir's encounter with Islam had begun. Later, except for the reign of Zain-ul-Abidin (1420–70), most Islamic rulers used force, money and Sufism to convert people, demolished temples and killed Hindus, leading to several waves of Kashmiri Pandits fleeing the region. After the decline of the Mughals, Pathans ruled Kashmir. Frustrated by their brutality and persecution, a Hindu minister named Birbal Dhar invited the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh to take control of Kashmir. In 1819, the Sikh army conquered Kashmir.

After the final decline of the Sikh empire in 1846, the British gave Kashmir to Gulab Singh Dogra, Ranjit Singh's governor

of Kashmir, signing the Treaty of Amritsar with him.[2] During the Dogra rule, the British were the real masters, increasingly strengthening their control and interference through their political agent.

After the British passed the Independence of India Act, 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh, Gulab Singh's great-grandson, was in a state of confusion as to whether to join the Indian Union or not. He delayed signing the instrument of accession to India until the Pakistani army and tribal raiders invaded Kashmir on 22 October 1947. On 24 October, the Maharaja asked the Indian state for help and formally acceded to India on 27 October. The Pakistani raiders, the Afridi and Mahsood Pathans, occupied Muzaffarabad and reached up to Baramulla, where they killed and looted civilians, and raped women. Here, it is worth mentioning that by the nineteenth century, the state's population was predominantly Muslim, which motivated Jinnah to invade Kashmir, thinking that its Muslim majority would side with the Pakistani raiders.

In the immediate pre-Independence period, religious tensions were quite visible.[3] The Muslim subjects complained of atrocities under the Dogra rulers. Even Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the popular leader, had named his political party, the Muslim Conference initially, which was later changed to the National Conference (NC), after it came close to the Indian National Congress (INC). However, the Muslim Conference continued under the leadership of some Islamist figures, such as Chowdhury Ghulam Abbas and Maulvi Yusuf Shah. On 10 May 1946, Sheikh Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir movement against the Maharaja, inviting people to jump into the battlefield of 'jihad'. When Pakistani raiders attacked Kashmir, a large number of Muslim soldiers deserted the Maharaja's army. The Dogra generals were not ready to accept this dark reality. Lt Col Narain Singh refused to disarm his Muslim soldiers.[4] They betrayed and

killed him while he was sleeping. Muslim soldiers also helped overthrow Ghansara Singh, Dogra governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, and raised the Pakistani flag.[5]

It is worth mentioning here that there were sufficient indications of Pakistan's intent to attack J&K in October 1947. Mainstream media houses like *The Tribune* were writing about Pakistan's expansionist and aggressive policies to conquer Kashmir.[6] As early as 1946, Jinnah, during his Kashmir trip, had given provocative speeches about the two-nation theory, inciting the Kashmiris to join Pakistan. After the ceasefire following the Kabaili invasion of 1947–48 on 1 January 1948, Nehru took the Kashmir conflict to the United Nations, which today is considered a strategic blunder.

The United Nations Security Council resolution of August 1948 explicitly stipulated that Pakistan withdraw its forces since it was the aggressor; that India limit its armed strength as India was the victim of the aggression; and that both countries ascertain the wishes of the people of Kashmir by a plebiscite. The UN assured India that the plebiscite was conditional on fulfilment of the first two conditions. However, Pakistan never withdrew its forces. Hence the demand for a plebiscite became meaningless over time.

In 1988, after the withdrawal of the Russians from Afghanistan, followed by the Americans, Zia felt insecure and Pakistan stood vulnerable to India's superior military power. Zia felt the West would not come to Pakistan's rescue as it had no immediate vital interests in the region after the end of the Afghan jihad. Adding to his worries was India's Operation Brasstacks of 1987, a large-scale military exercise on the Rajasthan border, which Zia saw as a precursor to an offensive by India against Pakistan. Hence it became a compulsion for Pakistan to do something to keep the Indian army engaged in Kashmir.

Zia devised 'Operation Tupac' – a three-stage plan to destabilise Kashmir through a blend of psychological warfare, insurgency and proxy militancy, with a view to ultimately annexing the region. Essentially, Zia wanted to replicate the Afghan jihad model in Kashmir. In Afghanistan, following the Russian invasion in 1979, ISI, under CIA's patronage and funding, trained Mujahideens to fight and weaken the Soviets. Inter-Services Intelligence created Deobandi terrorist groups like HuJI, HuM, etc., popularly known as the Harkat network. The terrorist cadres included local madrasa students and youth from Afghanistan, Pakistan and a motley group of international jihadists from far-off regions like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Sudan and Bangladesh. In the 1980s, these Mujahideens fought against the Soviets and weakened them. During this period, Pakistan received massive funding from the Arab world as arming the Mujahideens against the atheist and communist Soviets was considered a pious Islamic jihad. In the process, ISI amassed huge profits. Ultimately, the Soviets caught in the mire of the low-intensity war of attrition with the Mujahideens, withdrew in 1988. General Zia and his ISI, loaded with wealth, jihadist veterans and experience, wanted to create similar terrorist groups in Kashmir, weaken the Indian state and ultimately oust them. Also, after the Russian withdrawal from the region, a huge force of trained jihadists was idle and had to be utilised.

In the first stage, the idea was to instigate a low-intensity insurgency by infiltrating trained militants into J&K, sabotaging communication networks and subverting local institutions in the state. Phase two involved building direct pressure along the LoC through armed sabotage and shelling to disrupt Indian military operations. Finally, in the last phase, the ISI masterminds visualised the mobilisation of religious sentiments to prop up full-scale jihad in Kashmir supported by local insurgency, and ultimately conquest of J&K.

4

Early Whispers of Jihad

In the 1980s, overt signs of the tension and bloodletting that would engulf Kashmir by the decade's end began showing. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's death in 1982 created a political vacuum, which was captured by the separatist and jihadist elements without much struggle. Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), an Islamist outfit subscribing to the orthodox and extremist thought of Maulana Maududi, an Islamic scholar and a pioneer of Islamism in modern South Asia, active in British India and later in Pakistan, was at the forefront in the political, social and cultural space in the region amidst growing political instability there, tensions with the central government and dissatisfaction among the youth.

The early signals of the upcoming storm could not elude the perceptive gaze of Jagmohan Malhotra, whose first stint as J&K governor was during the troubled 1980s, from 1984 to 1989. Jagmohan was unconventional in many ways. Generally, considering the sensitive security situation, the central government followed the unwritten practice of sending retired bureaucrats from Indian Civil Services and army generals as governors to J&K. Jagmohan was neither. His letters to the central government during his gubernatorial tenure, speak volumes about the trouble brewing in the valley. Having started his career in the Punjab provincial services, he had joined Delhi Development Authority