



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 7356, 15 March 2018

Kashmir: March 2018 update

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Summary

This briefing covers events in Indian-administered Kashmir since July 2016, which have been characterised by a dramatic upsurge in protest and violence on the ground – what some have [called](#) the “worst crisis in a generation”.

On 8 July 2016, Burhan Wani, a 22-year-old leader of the armed group Hizbul Mujahedin, was killed by the Indian security forces. Following Wani’s death, the Kashmir Valley saw its biggest outbreak of protest and violence since 2010. By mid-October 2016 at least 91 civilians had been killed, thousands arrested and thousands more injured.

As the clashes increased, a war of words also broke out between India and Pakistan, with the former reiterating its accusation that the Pakistani army provides support to pro-separatist armed militants. Within a month or so the war of words had escalated into firing bullets and shells at each other across the Line of Control. Infiltration and attacks by armed militants, which India accuses Pakistan of supporting, also increased.

In mid-September 2016, militants attacked an army base at Uri, killing 19 Indian soldiers – the army’s worst loss of life for 14 years. This provoked outrage across India and at the end of that month India retaliated with what it called “surgical strikes” against militant camps on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control.

Winter then brought some brief respite, but during 2017 protest and violence remained at high levels. Indeed, the International Crisis Group confirmed at the end of 2017 that it had been the deadliest year since 2010 in Indian-administered Kashmir, with over 200 militants, about 80 members of the Indian security forces and at least 57 civilians killed.

For example, there was an upsurge in protest and violence in March-April 2017 around by-elections held in central and south Kashmir. On voting day there were clashes between protestors and the security forces that left eight civilians dead and over 200 people injured. Overall, the turn-out was reportedly in single figures.

In August 2017, in the worst attack on a security installation since the 2016 Uri attack, eight Indian police were killed in a militant attack on their camp in south Kashmir. February 2018 saw another significant militant attack on an Indian army base, in which six soldiers and one civilian were killed. The incident revived the war of words between the two countries, with India once again threatening retaliation.

The director of one Indian think-tank has predicted: “We are looking at a tense summer in Kashmir”.

The opposing forces on the ground in Indian-administered Kashmir appear to be in a ‘stand-off’, with all sides waiting for the other to blink and with few ideas circulating about how permanently to reduce tensions. Western governments continue to restrict themselves to urging India and Pakistan to resume dialogue in pursuit of a resolution.

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One of the few experts to express any optimism is Gareth Price at Chatham House, who claimed last year that the Indian Government might have got to the point where it was beginning to develop a “plan”. He was referring to its appointment of a retired senior intelligence official, Dineshwar Sharma, as an interlocutor.

But Price acknowledged that previous similar initiatives by the Indian authorities over the years have all foundered, including most recently in 2012. He also accepted that the prospects for a wider resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan, without which most observers accept that peace will be impossible to achieve, appear remote.

For deeper historical background, see: [Kashmir](#) (March 2004).

1. The killing of Burhan Wani and its immediate aftermath (July 2016-February 2017)

On 8 July 2016, Burhan Wani, a 22-year-old leader of the armed group Hizbul Mujahedin, was killed by the Indian security forces. Wani had been highly active on social media and had been called the “Twitter terrorist”. Tens of thousands attended his funeral, at which clashes broke out between the security forces and protestors. The security forces fired live ammunition into the crowd, killing several people. One police officer was also killed.

Protests, strikes and curfews

Following Wani’s death, the Kashmir Valley saw its biggest outbreak of protest and violence since 2010. The authorities declared a succession of curfews and closed down mobile phone services and the media. Protestors organised a series of general strikes and there have been regular public rallies against Indian rule. Schools, colleges and universities were closed and the economy was badly hit. Funerals often led to further clashes between protestors and the security forces.

By mid-October 2016 at least 91 civilians had been killed, thousands arrested and thousands more injured.¹ Around the same time, it was claimed that at least 434 people had been detained under the Public Safety Act, which provides for detention for up to six months without trial of people who pose a threat to state security.²

The arrival of deep winter as 2016 turned into 2017 led to some reduction in the level of protest as 2016 turned into 2017. But there were a couple of well-observed general strikes in February 2017 to mark the anniversaries of the hanging of two Kashmiri separatist leaders, Muhammad Afzal Guru and Mohammed Maqbool Bhat.³

Response of the Indian Government

The Indian Government sent 2,000 additional forces to the Kashmir Valley in the immediate aftermath. But, as protests intensified, it was also forced to create an expert panel to consider alternatives to the use of supposedly ‘non-lethal’ pellet guns, which caused serious injuries to protestors, by the security forces. The use of these weapons had been controversial for some time.⁴ It was reported in October 2016 that 1,000 people had sustained eye injuries from pellets.⁵

¹ “Kashmir Valley remains shut for 103rd consecutive day”, *Chennai Online*, 19 October 2016

² “100 days of Valley ferment: over 400 detained under PSA”, *Indian Express*, 20 October 2016

³ “Hurriyat (G) thanks people of Kashmir for making shutdown call a ‘success’”, *Kashmir Monitor*, 11 February 2017

⁴ “Rajnath says the Centre is looking at alternatives to pellet guns after several protestors were blinded by the weapons in J&K”, *Mail Online*, 21 July 2016

⁵ “Jammu and Kashmir: Three months, 1,000 eye injuries by pellets”, *Indian Express*, 13 October 2016

The authorities promised that alternatives would be introduced, but they did not make clear what they would be. There were reports that chili powder shells were being used instead.

Flaring up of tension between India and Pakistan

As clashes increased following the death of Burhan Wani, a war of words also broke out between India and Pakistan, with the former reiterating its accusation that the Pakistani army provides support to pro-separatist armed militants. Within a month or so the war of words had escalated into firing bullets and shells at each other across the Line of Control. Infiltration and attacks by armed militants, which India accuses Pakistan of supporting, also increased.

In mid-September 2016, militants attacked an army base at Uri, killing 19 Indian soldiers – the army’s worst loss of life for 14 years. This provoked outrage across India and at the end of that month India retaliated with what it called “surgical strikes” against militant camps on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, killing at least a dozen. In October, the Indian army reported that it had killed seven armed militants who had attempted unsuccessfully to enter a military encampment in Kupwara District.

There were growing fears of a major escalation in conflict between the two countries. India moved thousands of civilians from the border areas and strengthened its fortifications. A senior BJP figure said that India will no longer respond proportionately to attacks, saying “for one tooth, the complete jaw”. Prime Minister Modi called Pakistan the “mother ship of terrorism” and declined to attend a regional summit that was due to be held in Islamabad. The summit was eventually [cancelled](#). He sought to mobilise other countries behind India’s stance, trying to get a sympathetic statement from the other members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group at its [summit](#) last year.

Pakistan’s defence minister [said](#) that his country’s nuclear weapons were “not just showpieces”. Its government launched its own diplomatic lobbying campaign – for example, sending [parliamentarians](#) to the UN, European Parliament and foreign capitals in the hope of persuading other governments to exert more pressure on India.

Clashes between the Indian security forces and armed militants continued into early 2017. For example, in mid-February there was a gun battle between security forces and militants in which at least eight people died – four militants, two soldiers and two civilians.⁶ There were more clashes a couple of days later, in which at least three soldiers and four armed militants were reportedly killed.⁷ Both India and Pakistan continued to accuse the other of firing across the Line of Control.⁸ In

⁶ “Eight killed in gun battle”, *Daily Mirror*, 13 February 2017

⁷ “Seven killed in Indian Kashmir gunbattles”, *Agence France-Presse*, 14 February 2017

⁸ “Three injured in Indian shelling”, *Dawn*, 11 January 2017

the same month, four Pakistani soldiers were reportedly killed by their Indian counterparts following an exchange of fire.⁹

When the Pakistani authorities placed Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Saeed under house arrest in January 2017, some hoped that this might open the way for a relative thaw in India-Pakistan relations. However, in mid-February, a senior Indian official was reported as saying that currently India had no interest in beginning peace talks.¹⁰

⁹ "Four Pakistani soldiers killed by Indian Army in Kashmir", *European Press Agency*, 15 February 2017

¹⁰ "Indi will decide time and place of peace talks with Pakistan, says government", *Financial Express*, 12 February 2017

2. Developments over the last 12 months¹¹

2017 the deadliest year since 2010

While levels of protest and violence have ebbed and flowed over the last 12 months, overall they have remained high – and with no apparent end in sight. The International Crisis Group confirmed at the end of 2017 that it had been the deadliest year since 2010 in Indian-administered Kashmir, with over 200 militants, about 80 members of the Indian security forces and at least 57 civilians killed. By mid-March 2018, a further 15 members of the security forces had reportedly been killed.

Main flashpoints and incidents

There was an upsurge in protest and violence in March-April 2017 around by-elections held in central and south Kashmir. Syed Ali Gilani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Kashmiri separatist leaders from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, along with Muhammad Yasin Malik, the leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), called for a boycott of the vote and a general strike while the by-elections were taking place. All three were detained until their release in December.

On the day of the by-elections, clashes between protestors and the security forces left eight civilians dead and over 200 people injured. In some places, the by-elections were rescheduled. Overall, the turn-out was reportedly in single figures. In the same month, at least three Indian soldiers and two militants were killed in clashes at a military camp near the Line of Control.

In May 2017, there were numerous exchanges of fire across the Line of Control, with India accusing Pakistani soldiers of killing and mutilating two Indian soldiers. Despite Pakistani denials, India threatened retaliatory actions. In the following month, there were discussions between the two countries at senior military level aimed at reducing the number of clashes across the Line of Control, but they came to little.

There was a high security presence for the first anniversary of the death of Burhan Wani in early-July 2017. Demonstrations and protests took place but there were no reported fatalities. There was no let up, however, in exchanges of fire across the Line of Control. There was also a militant attack in Anantnag in which seven Hindu pilgrims were killed and others injured.¹²

In the same month, Al-Qaeda announced the existence of a cell in Indian-administered Kashmir, Ansar Ghawzat-ul-Hind, led by Zakir Musa. To date, most experts assess that Ansar Ghawzat-ul-Hind will prove to be only a minor player in the region.¹³

¹¹ This section draws extensively on the International Crisis Group's [monthly summaries](#) of events in Kashmir.

¹² "Attack by militants kills at least seven Hindu pilgrims in Kashmir", *Guardian*, 10 July 2017

¹³ "How al-Qaeda came to Kashmir", *The Diplomat*, 20 December 2017

In August 2017, in the worst attack on a security installation since the 2016 Uri attack, eight Indian police were killed in a militant attack on their camp in south Kashmir. This came several weeks after a Lashkar-e-Taiba commander in the same area had been killed by the security forces. There was a general shut-down across much of Kashmir in protest at killings of civilians by the security forces.

In October 2017 the Indian Government appointed a retired senior intelligence official, Dineshwar Sharma, as an interlocutor with a mandate to hold talks with all parties to the conflict in Indian-administered Kashmir. Sharma's efforts appear to have come to little so far.

In late-November 2017, Lashkar-e-Taiba leader Hafiz Saaed was released from house arrest by order of a Pakistani court. India protested vociferously, as did the US. In what some saw as a more welcome sign, the Pakistani authorities subsequently announced plans to take control of the group's charitable operations, which operate under the name 'Jamaat-ud-Dawa'. They began doing so in February 2018.

The same month saw another significant militant attack on an Indian army base, in which six soldiers and one civilian were killed. The incident revived the war of words between the two countries, with India once again threatening retaliation.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a militant attack on a base in Srinagar, in which there were further fatalities. Exchanges of fire across the Line of Control continued, with media reports indicating that the Indian army had fired heavy artillery across the Line for the first time in 15 years.¹⁵

On 4 March, another four civilians and two militants were killed by the security forces in a clash in south Kashmir. In the days that followed, tens of thousands of people were reported to have taken part in protests against the killings.¹⁶ Nearly 50 people were reportedly injured. There was also a shut-down of shops, businesses and petrol stations in the Kashmir Valley. There were more clashes and protests over subsequent days. In mid-March flags of the so-called Islamic State were seen at a funeral of militants killed by the Indian security forces.¹⁷

Last week it was reported that an investigation by the state police wants to prosecute 23 army personnel in connection with the death on south Kashmir in August 2016 of Shabir Ahmad Mango, a lecturer. The army has so far refused to hand the men over.¹⁸

There are also reports of growing public anger about a recent decision by the Indian authorities to house detainees outside of Jammu and

¹⁴ "Pakistan will have to pay for attack in held Kashmir: India", *Dawn*, 13 February 2018

¹⁵ "Upcoming elections increase risk of cross-border exchanges between India and Pakistan in Kashmir and northern Punjab", *IHS Insight*, 1 March 2018

¹⁶ "Kashmir: civilian killings threaten new anti-India protests", *Al-jazeera*, 6 March 2018

¹⁷ "IS flags seen at funeral of militants in indian-run Kashmir", *BBC Monitoring South Asia*, 13 March 2018

¹⁸ "Jammu and Kashmir police holds 23 army personnel responsible for death of lecturer in 2016", *Financial Express*, 10 March 2018

Kashmir. This decision is said to have been taken to reduce the chances of attacks aimed at releasing suspected militants in custody.¹⁹

With Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir claiming that are increasingly becoming a target of Islamist terrorism, the provincial government announced in mid-March that it had agreed in principle to establish a commission to protect the rights of minorities in the state.²⁰

Nitin Pai, the director of an Indian think-tank, the Takshashila Institution, has predicted: "We are looking at a tense summer in Kashmir".²¹

¹⁹ "India struggles to maintain peace in Kashmir", *Eurasia Review*, 10 March 2018

²⁰ "Kashmir's government may set up minority commission for Hindus", *Siasat Daily*, 13 March 2018

²¹ "India warns Pakistan 'will pay' for Kashmir attack", *FT.com*, 13 February 2018

3. Low-key response from Western governments

The US response

The previous Obama Administration [called](#) on India and Pakistan to find a solution to the Kashmir issue through “meaningful dialogue” – a reiteration of the US’s longstanding position.

In the run-up to the presidential election in November 2016, Donald Trump offered to [mediate](#) between the parties to the Kashmir conflict. Before taking office on 20 January 2017, then Vice-President Elect Mike Pence said that the future President Trump’s “[extraordinary deal-making skills](#)” could help to resolve the conflict. Any mediation role would have been a break with past US policy. No initiatives have been announced since the new US Administration took office.

During the first year of the Trump presidency, the US-India relationship grew closer while the US-Pakistan relationship again came under strain. In June 2017, it was announced that the US would be selling unarmed surveillance drones to India. Pakistan’s protests were to no avail.

In June 2017, a [senior leader](#) of one of the main militant armed groups operating in Indian-administered Kashmir, Hizb-ul-Mujahedin, was designated a ‘Specially Designated Global Terrorist’. In August, the [group](#) itself was designated a ‘Foreign Terrorist Organization’.

India’s [appointment](#) of retired intelligence official Dineshwar Sharma as an interlocutor with all stakeholders in Jammu and Kashmir came the day before a visit to the country by former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Pakistan’s recent moves to gain control over Jamaat-ud-Dawa (see above) may be part of efforts to improve relations with the US. During 2017 they [deteriorated](#) markedly over Pakistan’s failure to clamp down on terrorism.

The UK response

The UK Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, issued a public [statement](#) condemning the attack on the Indian army base at Uri in mid-September 2016.

In January 2017 there was a [backbench business debate](#) on Kashmir in the Commons. At the end of the debate, FCO Minister Alok Sharma reiterated the UK Government’s longstanding position on the issue (c1133):

The long-standing position of the UK is that it can neither prescribe a solution to the situation in Kashmir nor act as a mediator. It is for the Governments of India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. In our discussions with both India and Pakistan, we encourage both sides to maintain positive dialogue, but the pace and scope of that dialogue is for them to determine.

This position has been reiterated on numerous occasions since then too:

[Kashmir: Politics and Government: Written question - 128746](#)

Asked by [Sarah Champion](#)

(Rotherham)

Asked on: 20 February 2018

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what his policy is on the establishment of a mediation panel to engage with interested parties to work towards a long-term settlement of the Kashmir dispute during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April 2018.

Answered by: [Mark Field](#)

Answered on: 28 February 2018

The UK's longstanding position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator. We encourage India and Pakistan to maintain positive dialogue and good relations, but the pace of progress must be for them to determine.

In July 2017, the acting British High Commissioner to India issued a [statement](#) condemning the militant attack on Hindu pilgrims at Anantnag, in which seven were killed.

On 17 October 2017, there were a number of [exchanges](#) on Kashmir during oral questions in the House of Commons.

On 21 November 2017, there were a number of [exchanges](#) on Kashmir during oral questions in the House of Lords.

Other responses

In August 2016, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed its "[regret](#)" over India and Pakistan's refusal to accede to its request to send a team to Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir to investigate alleged human rights abuses on both sides of the Line of Control. Pakistan subsequently said that it would reverse its position. India, which has long opposed international involvement on the issue, has refused to [do so](#).

In a March 2018 presentation to the Human Rights Council, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein [said](#) that unconditional access continued to be refused to his Office on both sides of the Line of Control. He has also been reported as saying that his Office will publish a report on the human rights situation in Kashmir in June 2018.²²

In July 2017, China offered to mediate between the two countries. However, India rejected the offer. China has long had close ties with Pakistan and awkward relations with India.

²² "UN official speaks of Kashmir crisis urgency", *The News International*, 13 March 2018

4. Impasse without end?

The opposing forces on the ground in Indian-administered Kashmir appear to be in a 'stand-off', with all sides waiting for the other to blink and with few ideas circulating about how permanently to reduce tensions.

No substantive moves towards resuming negotiations

There have been contacts between India and Pakistani senior officials aimed at reducing the protests and violence but no substantive moves towards resuming negotiations that might address the 'root causes' of the conflict. Biannual talks between India's Border Security Force and Pakistan's Punjab Rangers in November 2017 produced a statement calling for a revival of the "spirit of the 2003 ceasefire agreement", but neither government has so far backed up words with meaningful action. With national elections due in both countries over the next two years, it seems unlikely that either will do so for some time to come.

Does India prefer a 'military solution'?

Many commentators have argued that events over the last 18 months or so reflect the anger that has long been "simmering beneath Kashmir's uneasy calm."²³

Critics allege that the response of the Indian authorities to the upsurge of protest and violence since July 2016 shows that they continue to prefer military responses to a political solution in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Those who take this view have their suspicions confirmed by the fact that the Indian Government continues to be so resistant to lifting the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in Jammu and Kashmir – emergency legislation which has long given the security forces immunity from prosecution and which is detested by many Kashmiris.²⁴

For many on the Indian side, the 'root cause' that needs to be addressed first is Pakistan's support for terrorism. Only then will a solution be possible.

In addition, in theory the BJP is committed to repealing Kashmir's 'special status' under Article 370 of the Constitution – a move that would further anger many Kashmiris. However, its coalition partner in the Jammu and Kashmir provincial government, the People's Democratic Party, is strongly committed to Article 370, and wants to see a resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan.²⁵

Predictably, Pakistan sees it all very differently. Although there have been press reports that the Pakistani chief of staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, is keen to resume dialogue on the basis reached by the Congress

²³ "Kashmir's uneasy calm shattered after killing of 'Twitter terrorist'", *Financial Times*, 13 July 2016

²⁴ "Impunity, immunity: continuing debate around the AFSPA", *Indian Express*, 1 August 2016

²⁵ "India warns Pakistan 'will pay' for Kashmir attack", *FT.com*, 13 February 2018

Party-led Indian Government and then Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf in 2005-7, many analysts are sure that elements within the Pakistani security establishment continue to provide support to the militant groups carrying out attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir.²⁶ This does not create an atmosphere conducive to dialogue.

Is India beginning to develop a plan?

One of the few experts to express any optimism at all is Gareth Price at Chatham House, who claimed in October 2017 that the Indian Government might have got to the point where it was beginning to develop a “plan”. He was referring to its appointment of a retired senior intelligence official, Dineshwar Sharma, as an interlocutor with a mandate to hold talks with all parties to the conflict within Indian-administered Kashmir.

But Price acknowledged that previous similar initiatives by the Indian authorities over the years have all foundered, including most recently in 2012. He also accepted that the prospects for a wider resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan, without which most observers accept that peace will be impossible to achieve, appear remote.²⁷

So far, Dineshwar Sharma does not seem to have made much progress. Kashmiri separatist leaders have refused to talk with him.²⁸ Sceptics may feel that the initiative is primarily about being seen to be doing something.

While the emergence during 2017 of an Al-Qaeda affiliated group in Indian-administered Kashmir (see above), along with some signs of support for so-called Islamic State, may cause western governments some concern, it is highly unlikely that it will be enough to change their ‘semi-detached’ stance on the conflict.

²⁶ “Pak army backs talks, even as India hangs tough”, *Kashmir Monitor*, 31 January 2018; “Pakistan Army supplied military equipment to LeT in Kashmir: Afghan envoy to the US”, *Times of India*, 30 January 2018

²⁷ “Is India getting serious about dialogue in Kashmir?”, Chatham House, 30 October 2017

²⁸ “Can India jumpstart the Kashmir peace process?”, *The Diplomat*, 29 November 2017

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