



***THE PAHALGAM ATTACK IN  
KASHMIR: WHY WE SHOULD EXPECT  
A FORCEFUL RESPONSE FROM INDIA***

BY MAX ABRAHMS

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On April 22, four terrorists armed with automatic rifles shot dead 26 tourists in the Baisaran meadow of Pahalgam in Kashmir. The murdered victims were male civilians and all but one was Indian. Witnesses [report](#) that the assailants were Islamist extremists who determined whom to spare based on whether he could recite Islamic verses. Those who could not pass the Islamist test were summarily shot at point-blank range. In this policy paper, I draw from political science research to elucidate the behavior of the terrorists and even how the India-Pakistan crisis will likely unfold.

Immediately after the mass casualty attack against civilians in Kashmir, the terrorist group known as The Resistance Front (TRF) claimed responsibility on the messaging app Telegram. Founded in 2019, The Resistance Front may be understood as a close offshoot—or even just a front—of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the more well-known Pakistan-based Islamist terrorist organization behind the November 2008 Mumbai attacks that seeks to establish an Islamic state in South Asia. As one analyst [put](#) it, “All TRF operations are essentially LeT operations.” A few days later, TRF then reversed its public stance by denying organizational involvement in the attack. On its website, TRF [issued](#) this credit claiming denial: “In the Name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful. The Resistance Front (TRF) unequivocally denies any involvement in the Pahalgam incident. Any attribution of this act to TRF is false, hasty, and

part of an orchestrated campaign to malign the Kashmiri resistance.” TRF tried to explain away the initial attack credit claim: “After an internal audit, we have reason to believe it was the result of a coordinated cyber intrusion. We are conducting a full investigation to trace the breach, and early indicators suggest fingerprints of Indian cyber-intelligence operatives.” Michael Kugelman, the director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center, [opined](#) on X that there is thus a lack of “clarity about the culprit” behind the civilian massacre, possibly reducing the likelihood of a punishing response.

I have [published](#) extensively on the credit-claiming patterns of terrorist groups around the world. My research leaves little doubt that the attack was indeed carried out by the Islamist group that originally claimed organizational credit. Many militant groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation, Fatah, and Red Brigades have conditioned credit claims on whether the attacks got positive press coverage. And the TRF denial [reportedly](#) came after the Pakistani security establishment pressured the LeT-linked terrorist group to distance itself from the mass slaughter given the massive protests by Kashmiris that erupted across the Valley against the attack and the international community’s understandable expressions of sympathy towards the Indian victims.

Statistically, I have [found](#) with Justin Conrad that militant groups are significantly more likely to claim organizational responsibility when the targets are military personnel compared civilians like the 26 tourists in Kashmir. Indeed, it is quite standard for perpetrators to eschew organizational responsibility when attacks harm civilians. For example, the official position of the African National Congress was that it had nothing to do with the May 1988 attacks on amusement arcades, fast-food outlets, sports stadiums, and shopping centers around Johannesburg and Pretoria. Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly pretended that the damaging reports of al Qaeda in Iraq attacks on civilians were just “lies concocted by the mainstream media” to discredit the group. Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah’s deputy chief, swore in November 2005 that his group “has never been involved in or responsible for any of these incidents [against civilians].” In July 2014, militant Islamists shot dead

a Muslim woman near the southern Somali town of Hosingow for refusing to wear a veil. To soften its image, an al-Shabaab spokesman denied the group had killed the woman. An BBC analyst noted, “Al-Shabaab wants to distance itself from the shooting because it is likely to provoke a strong public reaction.” In October 2017, a suicide bomber carried out the largest terrorist attack in Somali history when he detonated a truck packed with explosives in the streets of Mogadishu. As could be expected, thousands of Somalis took to the streets to demonstrate against the loss of over three hundred innocent lives. No official credit claim was issued to mitigate the reputational costs to the group. Leaders of the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria likewise engaged in a denial strategy for a March 2017 suicide bombing of a restaurant in Damascus, insisting that the group focused “only on military targets.” In August 2017, a Neo-Nazi named James Alex Fields drove his Dodge Challenger into a crowd of protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia. Hours before the lethal car-ramming, he had been photographed brandishing a shield emblazoned with a white supremacist emblem and other insignia of Vanguard America. As the pictures of Fields toting Vanguard America items circulated, the hate group distanced itself from the suspect over Twitter: “The driver of the vehicle that hit counter protesters today was, in no way, a member of Vanguard America. All our members had been safely evacuated by the time of the incident. The shields seen do not denote membership, nor does the white shirt. The shields were freely handed out to anyone in attendance.” Boko Haram leaders are also suspected of denying attacks “typically against civilian targets,” according to UNICEF spokeswoman, Marixie Mercado.

In South Asia, militant groups have a long history of conditioning credit claims on the target of the attack. During its long insurgency, Taliban leaders tended to claim organizational responsibility for attacks against military personnel but not civilians. For instance, the Taliban “quickly claimed responsibility” when operatives ambushed Mohammad Qasim Fahim, leader of the alliance that toppled the Taliban in 2001, on a road in northern Kunduz in July 2009. By contrast, the Taliban released the following statement when operatives struck the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jalalabad: “The Islamic Emirate

of Afghanistan wants to clarify to everyone that it was neither behind the May 29th attack on the I.C.R.C. office in Jalalabad city nor does it support such attacks.” The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) affirms that Taliban attack denials are “frequently issued following civilian casualty incidents...perhaps highlighting the Taliban’s continuous interest in gaining the Afghan people’s support.” The governor of Farah Province also remarked: “Whenever there are civilian casualties, the Taliban deny responsibility.” After a Taliban attack on a Kandahar wedding for which the group denied responsibility, Radio Free Europe reported that the leaders “routinely deny causing civilian casualties.”

In fact, the Taliban leadership was known to reverse its public stance upon discovering an attack harmed civilian targets rather than military ones. Instead of taking credit for civilian attacks, the leaders try to attribute them to government forces. In February 2014, for instance, UNAMA published a detailed report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Of the 8,614 to occur in the previous year, 6,374 or 74% were assessed as Taliban perpetrated. Predictably, though, the Taliban leadership refused ownership of these attacks and asserted that “civilian casualties are caused by the enemy itself” and that “the enemy is responsible for most incidents of civilian losses.” Its spokesman protested that such reports linking Taliban fighters to civilian casualties in Afghanistan are “propaganda,” “far from reality,” and “lies, all lies” intended to “cover up the blatant crimes of the Pentagon.” Like the Taliban and many other militant groups, The Resistance Front appears to have engaged in a public relations strategy that I have dubbed as “Denial of Organizational” to mitigate the political fallout from the controversial attack. And like these other groups, TRF tried to duck responsibility by pinning the blame on the opposing government.

Civilian attacks depress the likelihood of a credit claim for a simple reason—they tend to backfire both politically and organizationally on the perpetrators. I have [published](#) numerous [statistical](#) studies showing that compared to attacks against government targets, civilian attacks significantly [reduce](#) the odds of government concessions while increasing the odds of

the target country employing military force—often, in devastating fashion as Hamas and many other terrorist groups have learned. On a sample of hundreds of militant groups, I [find](#) that governments are over four-times as likely to employ lethal violence against a group when it attacks civilians compared to military targets.

My political science research therefore predicts that India will respond forcefully to the recent Pahalgam attack given the civilian carnage. Already, India has responded to the terrorist attack by expelling Pakistani nationals from the country, suspending the [Indus Waters Treaty](#), shutting down airspace, and exchanging fire across the Line of Control, among other retaliatory measures. But we should expect a proper military response my large-n research indicates. The Feb. 14, 2019 Pulwama attack is a useful point of comparison. Unlike the April 22, 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, the Pulwama suicide attack was directed against Indian security personnel rather than civilians. And predictably, the Islamist terrorist group claimed organizational responsibility. On Feb. 26, 12 days after the Pulwama attack, the Indian Air Force launched Operation Bandar in which 12 Mirage 2000 jets crossed the Line of Control and dropped bombs on a terrorist training camp in Balakot, Pakistan. This time the Indian military response will be even more extensive given the target selection of the Islamist extremists regardless of whether they stand behind their heinous attacks.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*