COMMENTARIES

After Operation Sindoor: Why JeM Could Emerge as a Greater Terror Threat to India

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Operation Sindoor has potentially reshaped the threat posed by Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) to India. The personal losses suffered by Masood Azhar, combined with JeM's longstanding connections to the Taliban, al-Qaeda and militant networks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, may create new incentives and opportunities for terrorist operations. While Lashkar-e-Taiba faces growing resistance to militant recruitment in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, JeM appears to be drawing upon experienced fighters and alternative infiltration networks in the Jammu theatre. Recent JeM-linked arrests across multiple Indian states also raise concerns about the organisation's potential expansion into the Indian hinterland. This commentary examines how these developments could increase the threat of a high-impact terrorist attack and why India's counterterrorism strategy must adapt to JeM's evolving operational networks.

Operation Sindoor altered Jaish-e-Mohammed's (JeM) threat calculus in a manner that is difficult to ignore. The May 7, 2025 strike on Bahawalpur hit the organisation at its symbolic centre, killing ten relatives of Masood Azhar, losses that he subsequently acknowledged. The consequences therefore extended beyond the destruction of terrorist infrastructure. JeM's leadership has historically combined religious ideology with deeply personalised narratives of sacrifice and revenge, giving the organisation motivations that may not always correspond with Pakistan's conventional calculus of calibrated proxy warfare. For Pakistan, terrorism against India has historically been an instrument whose

intensity can be raised or lowered according to strategic requirements. JeM now has an additional motivation that may not necessarily follow this calibration. Azhar's personal losses introduce an element of revenge into an organisation already built around his authority, family and ideological network. The possibility that JeM may pursue retaliation driven by its own leadership's motivations deserves particular attention.

This becomes more consequential when viewed against JeM's historical connections beyond Pakistan's India-focused militant infrastructure. Its Afghan relationships predate the organisation itself. JeM emerged from the Harkat militant tradition, whose cadres had fought in Afghanistan and developed relationships with the Taliban, al-Qaeda and figures within the Haqqani network. The UN records that Azhar established JeM with support from the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and other extremist organisations. The connection extends into the Haqqani Network with Sirajuddin Haqqani as having connections with JeM. JeM's organisational predecessors, particularly Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and the wider Harkat network, had already operated in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban and Haqqanis. The UN Security Council's May 2022 report mentioned that JeM maintained eight training camps in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, three reportedly under Taliban control. Earlier UN reports from 2018 and 2020 also documented JeM's presence alongside Taliban forces. These relationships have operational significance because militant organisations survive through networks that often outlast their original circumstances. Personal relationships, facilitators, training arrangements, movement corridors and sanctuary networks can remain functional despite changes in political authority. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021 therefore created a more permissive environment for JeM's older relationships to operate.

The same applies to its historical connections with al-Qaeda. JeM's relationship with al-Qaeda runs deeper than occasional cooperation. The organisations from which JeM emerged had interacted with Osama bin Laden's network before JeM itself existed. Harkat-ul-Mujahideen leader Fazlur Rehman Khalil signed bin Laden's 1998 declaration, while Harkat personnel facilitated access to bin Laden in Afghanistan. Harkat camps were also hit during American cruise-missile strikes following the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings. The Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent dimension is particularly relevant. AQIS emerged from the same Pakistani jihadist milieu in which JeM, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami operated. Personnel, ideological and logistical overlap between AQIS and JeM is well documented. For JeM, this provides potential node within a transnational jihadist ecosystem extending far beyond Kashmir.

Following India's Balakot strikes in February 2019, JeM relocated parts of its training infrastructure towards the Durand Line in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), seeking greater strategic depth against future Indian strikes. The deteriorating security situation in Pakistan's northwest has since created conditions that JeM could exploit. Although JeM is not a constituent of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), their militant histories overlap. After 2001, dissident JeM cadres entered the Punjabi Taliban, TTP and al-Qaeda milieu. These relationships are better understood through the movement of personnel, shared facilitators and organisational cross-pollination than through formal alliances. Years of escalating militancy in KP have created a substantial reservoir of combat experience, weapons, facilitators, illicit financing channels and recruitment networks. Consequently, JeM may be able to draw upon battle-hardened fighters and cross-border logistical arrangements without necessarily becoming directly involved in the TTP's confrontation with the Pakistani state.

Developments in Jammu may already offer indications of how JeM is translating this wider ecosystem into India's security environment. Since 2024, Kashmir Tigers (KT), a JeM front, has appeared repeatedly in the security landscape of the Chenab region. Reporting on the Doda-Kathua belt has identified suspected JeM cadres originating from both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistani Punjab. Our own OSINT monitoring of KT cadres operating in the Jammu theatre reveals a similar pattern. Analysis of available imagery, profiles and tribute material suggests that a considerable proportion of these cadres originated from KP, with the remainder largely from Pakistani Punjab. JeM-linked accounts

have also claimed in tribute videos that some of these fighters previously fought American forces in Afghanistan. Another notable feature is the frequent appearance of M4-pattern rifles equipped with optics and, in some cases, night-fighting accessories. Most appear to be high-quality replicas of the American Colt M4 rather than weapons whose American provenance can be independently established. Similar weapons and accessories are commonly observed among Pashtun militants operating in KP. Taken together, these indicators raise the possibility that JeM has increasingly drawn upon fighters, equipment and logistical networks associated with the wider Afghan-Pakistan militant ecosystem. Its growing operational emphasis on the Jammu theatre, particularly the Chenab region and the Doda-Kathua belt, suggests an attempt to exploit infiltration networks and terrain beyond the organisation's traditional areas of activity in the Kashmir Valley.

This emerging pattern becomes particularly important when compared with the challenges confronting Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Unlike JeM's increasing reliance on networks extending into KP and Pakistani Punjab, LeT has historically depended heavily on PoJK for recruitment, mobilisation, logistical support and infiltration into India. However, recent developments suggest that its ability to recruit young men from PoJK is encountering growing local resistance. In April 2025, the Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) reportedly condemned militant organisations for exploiting local youth and sending them across the Line of Control to be killed in India. It opposed funeral processions for slain militants and public gatherings organised by militant groups. Similar resistance emerged in Rawalakot in July, when the family of a slain LeT operative opposed the organisation's participation in his funeral and local residents confronted its representatives. These incidents indicate that LeT can no longer assume uncontested access to the communities from which it has traditionally drawn recruits. They do not establish that recruitment has ceased, but they point towards a weakening of the social acceptance that previously facilitated such activities.

The continuing JAAC-led protests across PoJK have further complicated this environment. What began principally as a movement over economic grievances, political representation and governance has developed into a prolonged confrontation with Pakistani authorities, involving strikes, demonstrations and restrictions on movement. The unrest has continued through 2026, including renewed confrontation in Rawalakot. Although these protests are not primarily an anti-militancy campaign, they are creating wider political and social disruption in territories that LeT has long used for mobilisation and logistical support. Public opposition to militant recruitment, combined with sustained civil unrest, could make overt recruitment and militant gatherings increasingly difficult. JeM, meanwhile, appears to be pursuing a different operational trajectory by drawing on the militant ecosystem of KP and Pakistani Punjab while increasingly concentrating its infiltration efforts on Jammu. This divergence could have significant consequences for India's counterterrorism priorities.

Pakistan's recent treatment of Masood Azhar introduces another complication. On September 14, the Federal Investigation Agency retained Azhar in its 2026 Red Book and announced a PKR 7 million reward for information leading to his arrest. The timing preceded the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) plenary scheduled for October 28–30, 2026. Islamabad can legitimately present the listing as evidence of counterterrorism action. However, the designation also creates an unintended political advantage. By formally describing Azhar as a fugitive, Pakistan strengthens its ability to argue, should JeM subsequently conduct an attack against India, that the organisation's leader was operating beyond state control. This would not establish that Pakistan had lost influence over JeM, but it could provide Islamabad with an additional argument for denying responsibility.

Consecutive counterterrorism successes by Indian security forces since 2024 have significantly constrained the operational space available to both LeT and JeM in Jammu and Kashmir. Recent security estimates suggest that approximately 35 foreign terrorists remain active in the Union Territory, alongside just two local militants in the Kashmir Valley. However, this decline should not be confused with the disappearance of the terrorist threat. Rather, it may encourage organisations to explore alternative operating environments. Since Operation Sindoor, Indian law

enforcement agencies have reportedly arrested at least 28 individuals allegedly affiliated with JeM across nine cases in multiple Indian states, excluding J&K. On the other hand, LeT linked arrests in India (excluding J&K) stands at 14. While arrests alone cannot establish a coordinated post-Sindoor expansion, their geographical distribution raises concerns that JeM may be attempting to compensate for shrinking operational space in Kashmir by developing recruitment, facilitation and operational networks across the Indian hinterland.

Date	Location of arrest	No. arrested	Authorities involved	Supporting source
29 June 2025	Rajouri, Jammu & Kashmir	1	Indian Army	Hindustan Times
2 September 2025	Batala, Punjab	3	Punjab Police, Mohali Police, Batala and Gurdaspur Police	Indian Express
August–October 2025	Dharmavaram, Andhra Pradesh; Amroha, Uttar Pradesh; Malegaon, Maharashtra	3	Andhra Pradesh Police, UP Police, Maharashtra ATS; central intelligence agencies involved in the initial operation	PTI / New Indian Express
25 January 2026	Navsari, Gujarat	1	Gujarat ATS, Navsari Police; subsequently NIA	Indian Express
Early March 2026	Govandi, Mumbai, Maharashtra	1	Maharashtra ATS	Hindustan Times
4–5 April 2026	Kurla and Kalyan, Maharashtra	2	Delhi Police Special Cell and Maharashtra ATS	India Today
22 June 2026	Jaipur, Rajasthan	1	Rajasthan ATS, following Military Intelligence inputs	Indian Express
3–15 July 2026	Banaskantha, Patan and Navsari, Gujarat; Dewas, Madhya Pradesh	13	Gujarat ATS; investigation subsequently taken over by NIA	Indian Express (8 arrests) / Indian Express (5 more)
30 July–3 August 2026	Purba Bardhaman and Howrah, West Bengal; Sahibganj, Jharkhand	3	West Bengal Police Special Task Force	Indian Express / Hindustan Times
16–17 August 2026	Meerut, Uttar Pradesh	1	Uttar Pradesh ATS	Hindustan Times

Confirmed arrests in JeM-linked investigations after Operation Sindoor

The table includes documented arrests where Indian security agencies explicitly alleged links to Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). The arrests are verified through published reporting, but organisational involvement remains an allegation unless established by a court.

Date	Location of arrest	No. arrested	Authorities involved	Supporting source
16 May 2025	Magam, Budgam, J&K	3	Jammu & Kashmir Police	India Today
22 June 2025	Pahalgam, Anantnag, J&K	2	National Investigation Agency (NIA)	Indian Express

8 July 2025	Bengaluru and Kolar districts, Karnataka	3	NIA	NIA official release
6 August 2025	Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi	2	Counter Intelligence Kashmir (CIK), J&K Police, Delhi Police	NDTV
17 August 2025	Bandipora, J&K	2	J&K Police and Indian Army	India Today
24 September 2025	Kulgam, J&K	1	Srinagar Police, J&K Police	Indian Express
1 November 2025	Bemina, Srinagar, J&K	1	State Investigation Agency (SIA), J&K Police	Kashmir Observer
22 February 2026	Kolkata, West Bengal; Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu	8	Delhi Police Special Cell	Akashvani News
By 26 March 2026	J&K, precise arrest location not established	1	Counter Intelligence Kashmir, J&K Police	Indian Express
29 March 2026	Ghazipur border, Delhi	1	Delhi Police Special Cell	Indian Express
Reported 7 April 2026	Malerkotla, Punjab (2); remaining three arrest locations not specified	5	J&K Police Special Operations Group, with central agency assistance	Indian Express
21 July 2026	Chatroo, Kishtwar, J&K	1	Kishtwar Police, J&K Police	NDTV
14–15 September 2026	Rajouri, J&K	3	Rajouri Police, J&K Police	Akashvani News

LeT-linked arrests in India after Operation Sindoor

The table includes documented arrests where Indian security agencies explicitly alleged links to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) or its reported front, The Resistance Front (TRF). The arrests are verified through published reporting, but organisational involvement remains an allegation unless established by a court.

Right now, JeM possesses an unusually combustible combination of a deeply personal grievance at the leadership level, a history of ideological, logistical and operational links with Taliban and other transnational terrorist outfits, access to the militant ecosystem in KPK, and a potentially greater room for Pakistani deniability. Together, these developments increase the risk of a spectacular JeM attack against targets in India's hinterland. Elements within Pakistan's establishment might also see renewed terrorist activity as a means of diverting attention from mounting internal and external pressures, or as an opportunity to revive recruitment in Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan. Whether JeM acts through Pakistani encouragement, permissive tolerance or its own leadership's motivations, the consequences for India could be serious. Indian security agencies must therefore look beyond declining militant numbers in Kashmir and place greater emphasis on identifying and disrupting JeM's emerging recruitment, financing, facilitation and operational networks across the country.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

?ImageSource: ChatGPT