In April 2019, India’s Hindu nationalist government banned civilian traffic on Kashmir’s arterial highways for two days every week. In the months that followed, tens of thousands of security personnel were added to India’s already overbearing military presence in the region — 80,000 in August and September alone. On August 5, 2019, the government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, doing away with the autonomy accorded to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Simultaneously, the state was divided up into administrative divisions to be ruled directly by the central government. This marks the completion of a long-standing program of the Hindu far right, the full “integration” of Kashmir into India. Article 370 of the Indian Constitution had allowed Kashmir a special status, reflecting the very unusual conditions of its incorporation into the country at the time of independence in 1947. Kashmir was granted a great degree of autonomy, and the Indian government had limited powers over

the state when compared to its authority over other states in India’s highly centralized federal structure.

Although Article 370 had been reduced to a dead letter by the 1960s, something that Kashmiris resisted fiercely at every step, its formal revocation is a signal that the de facto erosion of Kashmir’s rights has now become de jure. Kashmir has since been subject to a near total communication blackout, punitive restrictions on mobility, the virtual cessation of essential services, frequent night raids, and mass arrests. The *entire* political leadership is under arrest, including BJP allies. Anyone who has shown a capacity for organizing, even in their neighborhoods, has been harassed or detained. This state of total siege is only a formalization of what has been Kashmir’s reality for decades; it is held by force and maintained in a permanent state of emergency.

Although layered with complexity, the core issue from the point of view of most Kashmiris is a simple one: they have been denied the right to determine their political future. In 1947, the British partitioned their former empire on religious lines, creating the Muslim Pakistan and the ostensibly secular India. Of more than 550 princely states under the suzerainty of the Crown, each was expected to join either dominion, depending on the religion of the majority of their subjects. Jammu and Kashmir, with a Muslim majority population and a Hindu maharaja, was one of a few princely states where rulers and subjects professed different religions. Although, by the logic of partition, Jammu and Kashmir had “Pakistan potential,” the unpopular maharaja acceded to the Indian Union. Military advances from both India and Pakistan resulted in the division of the state, with both countries claiming the entire territory as rightfully theirs. The state’s accession to India has remained bitterly contested by Pakistan, and by a majority of Kashmiris. The Valley of Kashmir, currently under Indian control, has been struggling for self-determination ever since.

Since the beginning of a popular armed campaign to end Indian rule in the 1990s, Kashmir has been subject to a ferocious
counterinsurgency — an indiscriminate war on Kashmiris that admits no restraints, constitutional or moral. The evisceration of public institutions, heavy surveillance, and a quickness to fatal violence severely limit the scope of a peaceful political opposition, while security forces are guaranteed immunity from civil prosecution. For the 80,000 killed, the nameless thousands in mass graves, countless instances of torture and rape, and the thousands of enforced disappearances, there has been one instance of military prosecution, and the objections of but a handful of conscientious activists. In public discourse, a legacy of bitter religious antagonism left by the partition, and actively deepened by the Hindu right wing, dovetails neatly with the Islamophobia whipped up post-9/11. The Indian national consensus on Kashmir—that it is an “integral” part of India—encompasses the entire political spectrum. While liberals and the parliamentary left lament human rights abuses, they do not question the politics of India’s presence in Kashmir, maintained by a force of more than 700,000 soldiers.

**THE COLONIAL LEGACY**

In the early nineteenth century, Kashmir, then a part of the Sikh kingdom, came to acquire an immense strategic significance for the British owing to its proximity to Central Asia, the frontier between Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Britain’s empire in the Indian subcontinent. In 1846, the British wrested control of Kashmir and, unwilling to bear the risk and expense of governing directly, signed it over to their ally Gulab Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Ladakh. The British influenced frontier politics through the newly created state and, consequently, were keen to underwrite the power of the new regime, allowing it an unusual degree of latitude vis-à-vis its subjects. A predatory tax burden on agriculture, manufacture, trade, and professions severely damaged the productive base, contributing to the ruin of urban industry and the depopulation of the countryside.\(^2\) Under no

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\(^2\) Vanessa Chishti, “Articulating Kashmir: Commodity Economy and the Politics of
compulsion to seek legitimacy from their overwhelmingly Muslim subjects, the rulers adopted an explicitly religious idiom of statehood and directed much of their patronage at Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri Hindus. The regime was anchored in the Valley by predominantly Hindu officials and landlords, while the artisans and peasants were almost entirely Muslim. Although the overlap between religion and class was not seamless, material entitlements were explicitly tied to religion. A ban on political activity, a vast network of spies, and the loyalist bent of the Mirwaiz, the Valley’s foremost Muslim spiritual leader, precluded sustained political challenges to the regime. This exercise of power without legitimacy or consequence continued virtually unchallenged until a mass revolt in 1931.

As the full force of the Great Depression hit the Kashmir Valley, export markets contracted, and agricultural commodity prices plummeted, causing widespread distress. In July 1931, news of deliberate insults to the Quran by the maharaja’s troops catalyzed the simmering discontent among the urban poor into open rebellion against the regime and its collaborators. The reins of the agitation were quickly taken by an emergent petty-bourgeois leadership, which brokered an unpopular truce and brought the uprising to an end. Subsequently, when the ban on political parties was lifted, it allowed for the emergence of a nationalist organization, the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJKMC). By the early 1900s, an aggressive program of enclosures and a policy of making large land grants to Hindu state officials led to the creation of a powerful landlord class and a large class of landless agricultural laborers. The AJKMC’s sharp rhetoric against the former drew them an especially committed following in the countryside. Sheikh Abdullah, a young schoolteacher, emerged as its most popular leader. The newly formed Communist Party of India also won a small circle of adherents in the AJKMC, an association


that consecrated Abdullah’s claim to being a champion of the people. These heady days of radicalism were, however, short-lived.

Following the revolt, the maharaja constituted a token legislative assembly, to be elected based on a very narrow property franchise. This naturally left most Muslims disenfranchised, since they comprised the bulk of the poor and laboring population. These poor and middling groups had become the social base for Sheikh Abdullah and the AJKMC. Seeking a rapprochement with the propertied classes, most of whom were not Muslim, he pushed for the party to be renamed the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (NC), ostensibly to secularize it. Although potentially a progressive move, championed by party leaders with credible secular and socialist commitments, this marked the beginning of a rightward shift in the NC’s politics. It lost considerable support among Muslims who resented its overtures to the predominantly non-Muslim propertied sections, without gaining any among Hindus and Sikhs, most of whom saw their interests as tied to the maharaja’s regime. The few who joined did so at the cost of isolation within their communities. With his popular base slipping, Abdullah aligned himself with Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian National Congress, an umbrella party with a vocal Hindu right wing. This consolidated the disillusionment with the NC. Shortly after a large section of the NC broke away and constituted a new political party, the Muslim Conference (MC), which promptly aligned itself with Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s Muslim League, the largest Muslim party in the subcontinent. The NC was virtually wiped out in the Jammu province, and its base in the Valley was significantly dented. The Muslim Conference base consisted largely of Muslim landlords, traders, and the prosperous middle classes. The NC had a sizable base among workers, artisans, and peasants, but an undemocratic organizational culture allowed them little say in the political direction of the party.

In the mid-1940s, the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religion was an impending reality. While Abdullah and the NC

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stressed a principled affinity with secular India, the Muslim Conference advocated for a merger with Pakistan, a homeland for Muslims. The Indian National Congress threw its considerable weight behind Abdullah and the maharaja, who had for some time been cooperating against the pro-Pakistan Muslim Conference. A popular revolt in what is today Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir triggered a military skirmish between the two newly formed states in 1947. Kashmir was integrated into the Indian Union in the midst of the fighting. The border established at that moment, after the cessation of hostilities with Pakistan, came to serve as the permanent border between Indian Kashmir and the Pakistani state.

In March 1948, Abdullah was appointed prime minister in the new administration, with the maharaja retaining wide powers. However, a growing constituency was critical of the accession. The large-scale massacre of Muslims by the maharaja’s troops and RSS volunteers in Jammu had swung uncommitted opinion in Kashmir away from “Hindu” India. Formed initially to repel the Pakistan-backed irregulars who marched on Kashmir, and protect religious minorities from their depredations, the NC’s “peace brigades” were turned to the task of silencing the growing pro-Pakistan constituency in the Valley: hundreds were incarcerated, attacked, and interned. 5 In these circumstances, Abdullah was able to press for the removal of the maharaja. Hoping to placate Kashmiris, Nehru agreed. As the linchpin of India’s Kashmir policy, Abdullah enjoyed a wide latitude in internal matters until his dismissal and subsequent arrest in 1953. Thereafter, India’s policy remained one of throwing their economic, political, and military weight behind “personalities,” so long as they assured the finality of Kashmir’s integration into India, while tolerating, if not actively encouraging, the suppression of organized political opposition or popular mobilization.

THE BROKEN PACT

In 1947, immediately after Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India, Nehru had been outspoken in declaring the accession a conditional union, subject to popular ratification through a plebiscite. In a public broadcast, Nehru said, “We have declared that the fate of Kashmir is ultimately to be decided by the people. That pledge we have given not only to the people of Kashmir but to the world. We will not and cannot back out of it.” Nehru referred the dispute to the UN Security Council. Not long after, however, India’s own intelligence reported that public opinion was against the accession. Abdullah and the NC were unlikely to be able to secure a verdict favorable to India. Indeed, it is improbable that Abdullah would have been able to withstand an organized opposition without the presence of the Indian Army, as well as the state’s greatly expanded police and surveillance apparatus. He disavowed the need for a plebiscite, arguing that Kashmiris had announced their decision by refusing to cooperate with the Pakistan-sponsored incursion. As for the Kashmiris who objected, Nehru condoned the use of force against them. Abdullah, however, failed in his endeavor to conceal the popular mood from the UN commissioner, Josef Korbel: “The party which has the most serious reason to be fearful of the result of a plebiscite — the government in Srinagar — has been doing everything in its power to delay this day of reckoning.”

The legitimacy of the state’s accession to India, already tenuous, was further diminished by the acute economic crisis precipitated by

6 The practice of a plebiscite was hardly unique. A plebiscite in the state of Junagadh, with a Muslim ruler and a predominantly Hindu population, resulted in its accession to India.
9 Josef Korbel, Danger in Kashmir (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 198. Korbel’s red-baiting has led many writers to reject his indictment of the NC government. His claims are, however, consistent with the accounts of numerous left-wing and progressive contemporaries.
the division of the state between India and Pakistan in 1947. Kashmir lost its most vital trade links, and much of its forests, which were the most important source of state revenue. To cope with a staggering deficit, the government increased customs duties, which pushed up the cost of living. Cut off from markets and starved of investment, manufacturing suffered. Unemployment soared and wages fell. Forced procurement of grain by the state continued. Post-partition disturbances kept peasants from seasonal wage labor in the plains, depriving them of their main source of cash savings. The provision of essential commodities, suddenly in short supply, was controlled by the government and disbursed as political patronage. While members of the NC visibly enriched themselves, the popular mood was increasingly more favorable toward Pakistan, perhaps expressing a hope for the reunification of the state and the restoration of economic and social links.

Under the terms of the accession, the state of Jammu and Kashmir ceded control over defense, communications, and foreign policy. While Nehru expected a fuller integration, Abdullah resisted, apparently wanting to enjoy Indian protection but at a distance. Soon after taking power, Abdullah’s government initiated the program of land reform and debt cancellation promised by the party. While Nehru hoped that addressing the two great woes of the restive peasantry would win their support for the accession, Abdullah hoped to recover lost support and strengthen his position vis-à-vis his patrons. Debt realization, repossession, and proceedings in revenue courts were stayed, and boards were set up to scale back or even cancel large debts. Simultaneously, land held in excess of a ceiling of 22.5 acres was seized without compensation, to be redistributed. Although not insignificant, these reforms were an “economic palliative,” directed at consolidating a loyal class of beneficiaries to stabilize the regime politically. Much of the land seized was cornered by those in or close to the NC hierarchy. Petty tenants and landless laborers were allotted very small holdings of the worst lands, if anything at all. Debt cancellation froze agrarian credit; many new owners found themselves liable to pay revenue but
unable to secure credit to buy inputs. Those officially allotted land were unable to secure possession without bribing revenue officials.

Unsurprisingly, the reforms provoked a vitriolic reaction from landlords and moneylenders, a majority of whom were Hindus. They joined with Hindu businessmen and former officials of the maharaja, smarting from the shift of power from a Jammu-based Hindu elite to a Kashmir-based Muslim elite, to form the Jammu Praja Parishad (Council of Subjects). Guided by right-wing Hindu organizations and bankrolled by the maharaja, they denounced the NC as anti-Hindu and campaigned for the full integration of the state into India. This reactionary agenda found unusually fertile ground among Hindus in Jammu who feared, legitimately, that Muslims — still a majority in the state despite the massacre and forced migration — would opt for Pakistan in a plebiscite. Poor representation and relatively lower budgetary allocations for the Jammu and Ladakh provinces did little to endear the NC to people in those areas. Resentment mounted as the fraudulent conduct of the Constituent Assembly elections by the NC cadre deprived the Parishad of likely victory on a majority of seats in Jammu. Although locked out of the assembly, the Parishad emerged as a significant force in Jammu and the only organized political opposition in the state.

Negotiations between Nehru and Abdullah on the question of further integration resulted in the Delhi Agreement. Concluded in 1952, this agreement conceded some control to New Delhi but stopped very well short of integration. This consolidated resentment against the new Kashmir-based Muslim political elite, and catalyzed sporadic protests in Jammu into a mass agitation. Led by the Praja Parishad, the agitation contributed significantly to the persistent conflation of religion and region that continues to frame political articulation in Jammu today. Abdullah’s government responded with the usual baton charges and mass arrests, but where the Indian political leaders and the media had ignored or applauded the repression of thousands of

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pro-Pakistan and pro-Independence dissidents, largely Muslims, the repression of Hindu Parishad activists provoked outrage. In Kashmir, the agitation raised the specter of the restoration of “Hindu Raj” and deepened anti-India sentiment. Posturing to manage discontent, and evidently too assured of his indispensability to New Delhi, Abdullah publicly questioned the finality of Kashmir’s integration into India—this after having strenuously argued for it, including at the UN. Nehru came under pressure to rein in Abdullah and the NC. In 1953, as Pakistan entered the US orbit, the USSR, keen on encouraging India’s nonalignment, rescinded its support for Kashmir’s self-determination. The USSR’s consistent backing at the UN eased the pressure of international opinion against India and emboldened Nehru to officially backpedal on the promise of plebiscite. In August 1953, Abdullah was dismissed from office, charged with conspiracy, and imprisoned. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, an old NC hand with close ties to the Indian National Congress (INC), was made prime minister. The move was supported by a majority in the party, pro-India elements, party malcontents, and the left wing of the NC, no doubt influenced by the turnaround in the Soviet position. A wave of angry protests against New Delhi’s high-handedness was swiftly crushed by the Indian Army.

The Bakshi government (1953–1963) implemented an aggressive program of integration. The fraudulently constituted Constituent Assembly adopted a constitution declaring Kashmir an “integral” part of India, and allowed the extension of numerous provisions of the Indian constitution to the state. In the decade that followed, the authoritarian political culture coauthored by Abdullah and Bakshi, who had served Abdullah as an enforcer, turned more violent. Bakshi commanded the peace brigades, informal militia, and a vast network of informers, and he was notoriously unsparing in his personal use of violence. Under Bakshi, the state ranked higher than India’s national

12 Championing the Soviet position, the Communist Party of India had declared Abdullah a stooge of American imperialism.
average in per-capita expenditure on the police. Contrary to Abdullah’s insistence on fiscal independence, Bakshi accepted substantial Indian aid. In addition to central expenditure, the state got higher grants-in-aid (as opposed to loans) than other states and had fewer liabilities. Until the 1970s, the state of Jammu and Kashmir had the highest subsidies and the lowest taxes in India. Bakshi was able to abolish customs duties, reduce taxes, raise wages and government salaries, and subsidize food grains without forcible procurement. Education was made free up to the university level. The regime was able to deliver these gains at the cost of burgeoning debt and dependence on India.

Bakshi’s economic policy set many trends that created a moribund, dependent economy. Much of public spending was unproductive. The security apparatus and publicity departments consumed a substantial part of the budget. While public investment in industry was low, political uncertainty discouraged private investment. For instance, the First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956) allocated Rs 10.35 million to the army and Rs 3,561 million to industry. Rent-seeking was rife and certainly tolerated, if not encouraged, leading to the embourgeoisement of party notables. State industries accrued huge losses. The budget for cooperative societies functioned effectively as a slush fund. Given high levels of unemployment, government jobs were an especially coveted form of patronage. This led to the creation of a large bureaucracy with a huge wage bill. Productivity remained low in the countryside, owing to small holdings and low technical inputs.\(^\text{13}\) Even with the construction of the Banihal Tunnel, markets for high-bulk, low-value commodities such as fruit, which now dominated Kashmir’s exports, remained a problem. These economic difficulties were largely due to the Valley’s separation from its traditional economic hinterland, and a direct consequence of the political situation.

Meanwhile, Abdullah’s dismissal and incarceration gave him fresh political cachet. In 1955, Abdullah loyalists who had been forced out

of the NC formed the Plebiscite Front (PF). Led indirectly by Abdullah himself, it campaigned aggressively for self-determination, calling upon India to fulfill its promise of holding a plebiscite, the very thing that Abdullah, secure in his power, had disavowed. Its leaders were outspoken against the excesses of Bakshi’s government, demanding the release of political prisoners, many of whom, ironically, had been imprisoned by Abdullah’s regime. Abdullah’s new organization was immensely popular, with estimates of membership between 75,000 and 200,000. Even at the lower limit, it was larger than any political organization in the state thus far. Over the next decade and a half, the Plebiscite Front was the vanguard of pro-self-determination politics in Kashmir. While the meaning of self-determination was left conveniently unspecified, the PF’s leadership made clever pro-Pakistan insinuations. Mirza Afzal Beg, Abdullah’s loyal lieutenant, would carry rock salt wrapped in a green handkerchief at PF rallies, a potent symbol given that rock salt was mined in Pakistan and quite scarce after the division of the state. Ultimately, Abdullah used these mobilizations as leverage in negotiations with New Delhi.

Throughout the 1950s, the question of Jammu and Kashmir was widely acknowledged as a dispute pending a just settlement. In the 1960s, the status quo began to stabilize. India’s humiliating defeat in the Indo-China War in 1962 prompted Nehru to accept US military aid. Under US pressure, Nehru offered to convert the cease-fire line into a permanent border. In 1963, Pakistan willingly ceded a part of the erstwhile state to China. These developments threatened to foreclose the reunification of the state. India’s difficulties were further compounded in the winter of 1963, when a holy relic was stolen from Hazratbal, Kashmir’s most revered shrine. The outrage that followed swelled into a mass mobilization that took an explicitly political turn. Slogans like “yeh mulk hamara hai, iska faisla hum karenge” (this country is ours, we will decide its future) resounded in mass protest meetings.14 After a decade of deteriorating economic conditions,

political repression worse even than the years under the maharaja, and two rigged legislative assembly elections (in 1957 and 1962), the resentment against Bakshi’s regime was unsurprising. Nehru replaced Bakshi with Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, the leader of the NC’s left wing.\(^{15}\) During his term, Delhi assumed the same power to dismiss state governments in an “emergency” that it had over other states, provoking another round of mass demonstrations. Hoping to take advantage of the upsurge, Pakistan sent several thousand armed men across the border. Kashmiris were largely indifferent. This was certainly not for a lack of animosity toward India though: there were mass student demonstrations and an attempt to assassinate Sadiq.

With the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the balance of power in the subcontinent shifted decisively in India’s favor. Sensing his weakness, Abdullah changed tack, seeking a restoration of the state’s autonomy within the constitutional framework of India, a significant climb down from the demand for a plebiscite with the option of independence that Abdullah had advocated for twenty-two years. Indira Gandhi, Nehru’s daughter and successor, flatly refused. In 1975, after the Indira-Sheikh Accord, Abdullah was promptly released from jail and appointed chief minister. Article 370 was nominally retained, even though India’s power already exceeded what it permitted. However, Abdullah’s capitulation could not undo the PF’s insistence that the accession was temporary, subject to either ratification or rejection by the people. Although the PF was merged into the NC once Abdullah was back in power, the questions it so forcefully raised could not be wished away. Many of those who led the struggle for self-determination in the 1980s and 1990s were the products of the Plebiscite Front’s politics.\(^{16}\)

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15 Sadiq was communist, one of the earliest labor organizers in Kashmir, and a man of some integrity. His complicity in India’s unscrupulous maneuvers may have been motivated by the contortions of logic and morality demanded by adherence to the Stalinist line of the Communist Party of India.

The years between 1975 and 1986, often mistaken as a period of quiescence, were in fact a time of intense churning, as the question of self-determination found articulation in different political formations. This period was marked by a heightened regional antagonism with a distinct religious character. Indira Gandhi had returned to power, after being ousted by a motley coalition, by appealing to Hindu majoritarian sentiment. As a consequence, the INC emerged as a significant opposition in the 1983 state elections. Farooq Abdullah, Sheikh Abdullah’s son and chief minister of the state, had invited Gandhi’s wrath for efforts to build a non-Congress national opposition. He was dismissed. After attacks on Kashmiri Pandit homes and temples in 1986, engineered by a rival pro-India politician, the state was placed under the rule of Governor Jagmohan, who, appointed directly by New Delhi, became the de facto ruler. Jagmohan’s hostility toward Kashmiri Muslims was evident in a number of instances, but none more widely resented than a sharp decrease in recruitment to government jobs. In these circumstances, confessional Muslim organizations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir (JIJK), hitherto politically marginal, began to find a wider audience. Politically pro-Pakistan and ideologically pan-Islamist, JIJK spoke of resisting interference of the center, and a just settlement of Kashmir’s political future — the very things that few political formations had addressed with integrity.

In the run-up to the election of 1987, a robust, political opposition not controlled by or beholden to New Delhi announced itself in the form of the Muslim United Front (MUF), a coalition of eleven parties ranging from secular to confessional. The MUF call for responsible government, economic development, and the settling of the “political question” drew an enthusiastic response. The election saw a turnout of 80 percent, the highest ever recorded in Kashmir. The

NC-Congress alliance ought to have been routed. Instead, election administrators blatantly manipulated results, and the alliance “won” an overwhelming majority. Prior to this, institutions had been subverted by “local chicanery and national laissez-faire”; this was direct interference by the center. Very rarely in politics can a watershed be pinpointed so precisely. Though efforts toward an armed resistance dated back to the 1960s, it is only after this election, when the bankruptcy of political institutions in the Valley was thoroughly exposed, that the armed insurgency emerged as the most dominant and credible mode of pursuing the goal of self-determination. Yusuf Shah, one of the defrauded MUF candidates, known today as Syed Salahudeen, went on to become the commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, the largest pro-Pakistan militant organization. Yasin Malik, a central figure in the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the pro-independence organization that launched the insurrection in the Valley in 1989, was Shah’s campaign manager. Malik was one of thousands of young Kashmiri men who, convinced of the futility of institutional politics, crossed the border into Azad Kashmir and Pakistan seeking arms and training. Armed militancy appeared to them to be the only way to unsettle the firm consensus between New Delhi and their clients in the Valley, from which a vast majority of Kashmiris were perforce excluded.

**THE INSURGENCY EXPLODES**

The 1987 election conclusively demonstrated that India would not allow the question of self-determination to be raised through political institutions, and that even an organized and popular political force was powerless to change that. In the mass demonstrations that followed,

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millions rallied around slogans such as “no election, no selection, we want freedom!” In this context, the fall of Soviet-backed regimes in Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the defeat of the Soviet Union by the Afghan mujahideen had a profound effect. The impact of the latter development was more than just symbolic. US and Saudi patronage had transformed pan-Islamism from an inchoate idea into a well-resourced global network—“Jihad International, INC”21—and Pakistan was its chief staging ground. With the end of the Afghan war, this infrastructure—money, sophisticated weapons, men, and training camps—was directed toward Kashmir. Under President Zia-ul-Haq, a military general instrumental to the Islamization of Pakistani politics and society, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) funded numerous militant organizations in Kashmir in pursuit of its own strategic ends. The first group to cooperate with the ISI was the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front. Formed in 1965, the JKLF was formally committed to the creation of an independent, secular, democratic Jammu and Kashmir. It was a poor fit for the ISI’s design, but the pro-Pakistan JIJK, unwilling to expose its organization to attack, had declined the ISI’s overtures.22

The tehreek (armed resistance) announced itself in the summer of 1988 with bomb blasts targeting government buildings and the assassination of key figures in the establishment—pro-India politicians, administrators, and those suspected of being informers or intelligence agents. The JKLF actions found immense popular support, despite the fact that the organization did not have an overground political network nor any concerted program for mass mobilization. A call to boycott the 1989 parliamentary elections was a resounding success. That year, two-thirds of all working days were marked by strikes. The ruling coalition at the center depended on the support of the BJP,


allowing them to push for an aggressive counterinsurgency policy. In January 1990, Jagmohan returned to Kashmir as governor. The day after he was sworn in, Indian paramilitary forces shot and killed more than a hundred unarmed demonstrators and severely injured hundreds more. This massacre, the first of many to come, provoked massive outrage. In the following days, hundreds of unarmed demonstrators were killed by security forces, but the marches demanding freedom continued. In the early months of 1990, virtually the entire population was in revolt, undeterred by the fatal use of force. Although vastly outnumbered and outgunned, mass support allowed the JKLF to effectively paralyze the state apparatus. An Indian journalist reported the following conversation with Abdul Ghani Lone, a Kashmiri leader: “I told Lone that New Delhi might be willing to have a dialogue with ‘the boys’, and his view was that India should first re-establish its authority in Kashmir because its writ did not run there. What should Delhi do? I asked him. ‘You will have to kill at least 20,000 people before you can establish your authority.’” These proved to be fateful words.

When a few hundred dead failed to stem the tide, Governor Jagmohan dismissed the civilian government, called in troop reinforcements and enacted a battery of indemnifying laws to prepare for a more extensive use of force without the encumbrance of civil government or legal accountability. Extrajudicial executions of suspected militants were combined with the widest possible persecution of the population — murder, detention, sexual violence, torture, beatings, invasive searches, daily harassment and humiliation, destruction of property, and extended curfews — all without any possibility of redress. Militant attacks on army personnel became pretexts for retaliatory violence against civilians — the rape of more than thirty-one women in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in a single night is just


one of several such instances. This strategy, described by Jagmohan as the “collective punishment of a disloyal population” fueled further popular support for the tehreek and dramatically drove up the recruitment of fighters to the JKLF — so much so that the training camps in Pakistan could not keep up with the hundreds who showed up every month. Although it is disingenuous to suggest (and Indian intellectuals of various ideological persuasions often do) that the counterinsurgency created the disenchantment with India — the tradition of autonomist politics was already decades old — there is no doubt that it rendered the breach irrevocable.

The massive popularity of the JKLF, entirely unanticipated, was alarming for the ISI in Pakistan. Although they had set out with the comparatively modest aim of precipitating an international intervention, the JKLF found itself at the helm of a spirited mass uprising. The moment presented the pro-independence JKLF a bigger opportunity — and posed a much bigger threat — to the ISI’s agenda than they had anticipated. In 1991, hoping to steer the mobilization in Kashmir in a pro-Pakistan direction, the ISI set about sabotaging the JKLF; it cut off funding to the JKLF and encouraged defections to pro-Pakistan groups. Simultaneously, the ISI extended lavish patronage to the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a pro-Pakistan militant group linked to the JIJK. Starting in 1993, the ISI also encouraged the proliferation of radical Islamist groups dominated by foreigners, a move calculated to undermine the HM, whose leadership, although by no means autonomous, had shown an inclination to act independently. The JKLF, which had suffered heavy losses from Indian forces, now faced relentless attacks from pro-Pakistan groups, especially the HM. Between 1992 and 1994, numerous pro-independence intellectuals critical of Pakistan’s baleful influence on the struggle were killed. The JKLF’s declaration of an indefinite cease-fire in 1994 did not stop Indian forces from continuing to kill their cadre. By the mid-1990s,

the JKLF was decimated and the HM militarily ascendant. This did not, however, translate into support for their ideology. Nevertheless, the HM enjoyed a grudging support because it was the only countervailing force to a counterinsurgency operating entirely outside the law.

Starting in January 1990, a majority of Kashmiri Hindus left the Valley in a matter of weeks. Indian whataboutery invokes the suffering of Kashmiri Hindus to deflect questions about the denial of the right to self-determination, and the monstrous abuses inflicted on Kashmiri Muslims by the counterinsurgency. Kashmiri Muslims often respond by denying that Kashmiri Hindus left under duress, suggesting instead that their exit was instigated by the Indian government to project the resistance as Islamist and clear the field for the unrestrained massacre of Muslims. On the one hand, it is difficult to justify the claim that violence targeting Kashmiri Hindus had a sectarian religious motivation. JKLF assassinations were motivated by an anti-establishment sentiment: a majority of the targets were pro-establishment Muslims. On the other hand, it is disingenuous to deny that these killings frightened Kashmiri Hindus, especially in the context of a long-standing hostility that turned openly belligerent in the 1990s. Although there is no firm evidence, Governor Jagmohan reportedly discussed plans to evacuate Kashmiri Hindus with journalists in Jammu. While the precise circumstances of the departure of Kashmiri Hindus from the Valley must await further research, it must be counted as a loss to Kashmir. It is the denial of this that has allowed India to press the hardships faced by Kashmiri Hindus into service of a Hindu majoritarian narrative. It

26 Bose, Kashmir, 96.
bears mentioning that Kashmir’s record on sectarian violence compares very favorably to that of most parts of South Asia. Kashmir was peaceful in 1947 when parts of North India and the newly created Pakistan erupted in a paroxysm of violence, including Jammu and present-day Azad Kashmir. In 1963, the theft of the holy relic from Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir (mentioned above) led to anti-Hindu violence in present-day Bangladesh, but no instances of violence were reported from Kashmir, despite mass outrage.29

In the late 1990s, Kashmiris started showing signs of weariness and disillusionment with the direction the armed struggle had taken. They were frustrated by the bewildering profusion of groups, internecine clashes, and a growing criminal element in the ranks of the militants. Renegade militants, who became an especially ruthless detachment of the counterinsurgency, further complicated a murky landscape of “unidentified gunmen.” The high price borne by Kashmiris had brought no visible political gains. The possibility of a military victory over the Indian state, if ever plausible, was increasingly remote. In 1993, several pro-independence and pro-Pakistan political groups came together to form a coalition that called itself the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference. The Hurriyat attempted to shift the struggle from a military mode to a political one. The late 1990s saw a concerted push by radical Islamist groups into Kashmir and the border districts of the Jammu province. Composed largely of non-Kashmiri militants, their deliberately targeted attacks on Hindu civilians did incalculable damage to the cause of self-determination. This was grist for India’s propaganda mill, which already caricatured the resistance as Pakistan-sponsored mischief, collapsing very real distinctions between the motivations and methods of different militant groups. Although the HM and the Hurriyat condemned their actions, these groups were not subject to political control. Politics was emphatically not in command of the gun,

29 Maulana Masoodi, a widely respect cleric and senior NC leader, was instrumental in preventing the large and emotionally charged demonstrations from turning against Hindus. For precisely this reason, he was executed in 1990 by pro-Pakistan militants. See Bose, Kashmir, 79–80.
and the gun did not seem to be serving the political ends of self-determination. The frustration with the murk surrounding the militancy was not, however, a retreat from the demand for self-determination.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, India and Pakistan made noises about dialogue and a resolution of the Kashmir question. However, both have been singularly insincere in this respect. India consistently refused to negotiate on both self-determination and greater autonomy within the Indian union. There was no decrease in counterinsurgency operations. Quite the contrary — Indian forces killed many former militants and ideologues who had renounced armed struggle in favor of dialogue. When, in 2000, in deference to the popular mood, the HM announced a unilateral cease-fire and indicated a willingness to negotiate, Indian security forces stepped up attacks on them. India was and remains committed to a military solution. Likewise, Pakistan’s unflagging lip service to the right of Kashmiris to self-determination is contradicted by its willingness to demobilize and attack popular forces it cannot control. Abdul Ghani Lone was a pro-independence Hurriyat leader who advocated talks with India, and he was an outspoken critic of Pakistan’s opportunism vis-à-vis the Kashmir struggle. In an interview, he said, “Our freedom movement has been hijacked by the confrontation of these two countries. So we stand nowhere.”

In May 2002, he was shot dead, very likely by pro-Pakistan militants. His murder was a turning point — the Hurriyat lost a crucial unifying figure and split into warring factions that have failed to unite since. The split owed as much to intimidation from Pakistan as it did to ideological and strategic differences among the Hurriyat’s constituents. Pakistan forced the leader of the centrist faction to cease talks with New Delhi. It was subsequently announced that talks would resume when the Hurriyat had been reunified. The wait continues.

With the insurgency significantly weakened by the mid-1990s, India decided to hold state elections in 1996, the first since 1989.

Kashmir’s nominal return to civil governance would serve as proof that people had rejected the militancy. India presented electoral participation as a proxy for a plebiscite. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, a genuinely Machiavellian politician and longtime member of the Indian National Congress, was tasked with staging an election, complete with fake rallies, dummy candidates, promises of managed victories, and coerced voting amid violence and intimidation by security forces and renegades. Despite all this, the call for an election boycott issued by pro-freedom militant and political groups was successful. The NC, India’s client of choice in Kashmir, stood thoroughly discredited, its political structure all but destroyed. Some of its cadre had been killed, and many resigned out of fear or disillusionment. Renegade militants became the regime’s collaborators in Kashmir and were decisive in turning the military tide in India’s favor. The elections were part of a move to create the space for a new set of unarmed collaborators, for “normalcy.” This space was filled in 1999 by Sayeed’s newly created Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), a truly Janus-faced organization. Formed with the support of the Indian security forces, the PDP chose the election symbol of the Muslim United Front, advocated talks with militants and pro-freedom politicians, insinuated that they had links with militants, and demanded a greater degree of autonomy within the Indian union. The PDP succeeded in creating a slim middle ground, albeit one viewed with deep skepticism by most Kashmiris. Despite the usual armed coercion and racketeering, calls to boycott assembly elections in 2002 and 2004 were successful, though to varying degrees. Although the low voter turnouts pointed to a smoldering resentment, Kashmir’s capacity for active resistance appeared to have been exhausted. India proclaimed a return to “normalcy,” and national newspapers carried articles about tourists returning to the picturesque valley.

In the summer of 2008, the image of normalcy was punctured by the most widespread and sustained protests in recent memory. The immediate provocation was the permanent transfer of a large piece of
land to a private body managing a Hindu pilgrimage site in Kashmir. This was in violation of the legal provision that only those domiciled in the state could own land. The pilgrimage also had some political significance. Radical Islamist militants had threatened to disrupt the pilgrimage in retaliation to the demolition of a historic mosque in India by Hindu militants in 1992. During a war with Pakistan, the Press Information Bureau of the government of India had promoted it as an act of solidarity with Indian soldiers! Protests in Kashmir led to the transfer being rescinded, which provoked mass protests in Hindu-dominated districts in Jammu. Led by the BJP, protestors blocked the single highway that connects Kashmir with North India, starving it of essential supplies and choking access to markets. Protests were savagely dispersed in Kashmir, while demonstrators in Jammu were treated with lenience. The grossly disparate treatment enraged Kashmiris, while the blockade was a humiliating reminder of Kashmir’s dependent economic position. The Hurriyat leadership was incarcerated, but the surging crowds, led by a loose coordination committee, defied curfews and bullets, reclaiming the streets and public squares that had been closed to them for a decade and a half. The most numerous and assertive among protestors were the young, inevitably each with personal stories of grave losses and deep humiliations. Armed only with stones, organized groups of young men fought pitched battles with security forces. Though this was also a fight to reclaim space and dignity from the all-pervasive security grid, an unambiguous opposition to Indian rule was clearly expressed, and the response was ruthless. Shooting at peaceful demonstrations, security forces killed fifty-seven and injured 1,500.

The summers of 2009 and 2010 were marked by a similar cycle of violent repression of protests leading to more protests and more

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repression. The immediate provocations for each year were specific and had their own intricate dynamics. In 2009, it was the rape and murder of two women, most likely by security forces, followed by a brazen cover-up, that galvanized people. In 2010, it was the murder of a seventeen-year-old boy by security forces. The immediate provocations aside, unrest was fueled by the fact that life in Kashmir had been saturated with gratuitous and unaccounted violence, with not even the barest shell of legal or constitutional recourse. Although the number of active combatants in Kashmir dropped from over 10,000 in 1990–1993 to a few hundred, the number of troops had only increased, as had security-related expenditures. Clearly, civilians were *intended* to be the targets of counterinsurgency operations. The huge cost of the counterinsurgency further crippled the virtually insolvent state government, already grappling with a staggeringly high debt-servicing burden. Social spending was low, and disbursement was heavily controlled by a rent-seeking elite loyal to India. Furthermore, there was resentment against the army occupying tens of thousands of acres of land, much of it cultivable. In 2010, the unrest reached a crescendo, with protests larger, more assertive, and more sustained even than those of 2008. Stone-pelting was on the rise, drawing in men and women of all ages at various points. While a smattering of militants continued to engage security forces, the charge was being led by masses of unarmed people. This was Kashmir’s new *intifada*.

Always on a simmer, discontent in Kashmir came to a boil once again in 2013. On February 13, an ex-militant named Afzal Guru was hanged for his alleged involvement in an attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. The trial, a caricature of due process violating every conceivable norm, became a major media event, and Guru became the object of a widespread jingoistic hatred. Guru was tortured and his brother detained by a notorious counterinsurgency

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militia to coerce a confession that was televised before his trial. The judgment sentencing him to death said the following:

As is the case with most of the conspiracies, there is and could be no direct evidence of the agreement amounting to criminal conspiracy ... The incident, which resulted in heavy casualties, had shaken the entire nation and the collective conscience of the society will only be satisfied if the capital punishment is awarded to the offender.\(^{34}\)

The Congress government, threatened by the ascendance of the BJP, was trying to look tough on terrorism. Like every surrendered militant, Guru’s renunciation of the “gun solution” did not extricate him from the grip of the counterinsurgency grid. He was routinely detained, tortured, and blackmailed. Guru said in an interview that an official of the counterinsurgency militia had him accompany two of the would-be attackers to Delhi and help them buy a car that would later be used in the attack. Guru had no inkling of the plan. Nevertheless, he was arrested shortly after the attack. His request for phone records to be produced, since he claimed to have called the man who sent him, was refused. Guru was executed furtively; his family found out about it after the fact, denying them the right to appeal the rejection of a clemency petition. For Kashmiris, this was a glaring instance of the disposability of Kashmiri lives. Afzal Guru became emblematic of courage and quiet dignity in the face of an utterly immoral adversary. A monthlong curfew could not prevent mass protests. Guru’s hanging was a turning point; it led to a resurgence in support for armed militancy and a steady uptick in local recruitment for the first time since 2001–2002.

The most influential figure in local recruitment to the HM was twenty-one-year-old Burhan Wani. After being beaten without

\(^{34}\) Cited in *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*, 105. Emphasis added.
provocation by security personnel, Wani left home in 2010 at the age of fifteen. He became a commander in the HM, and through his very popular video and audio statements on social media, he was instrumental in rallying support for militancy. In South Kashmir, foreign militants had for years outnumbered local ones, but in the early 2010s, the ratio was reversed. When Wani was caught in a gun battle in July of 2016, thousands pelted the security forces with stones, trying to help him. His death provoked a wave of mass protests that surpassed those of 2008–2010. No part of Kashmir was untouched. Even without an official call by the Hurriyat, and despite a complete communications blackout, massive processions and shutdowns continued for months. Hundreds of stone-pelting incidents were reported; the young participated in large numbers. Security forces, as usual, were shooting to kill. Pellet guns, touted as a means of nonlethal crowd control, caused mass blinding, in addition to other severe injuries. Although hospitals and ambulances had been attacked by security forces before, in 2016, they were targeted with a vengeance. The toll was grievous: ninety were killed, 15,000 injured, over 1,000 blinded, and 16,000 arrested.35

This was a total uprising. People were confronting security forces. In one instance, a group of a hundred activists preparing for a freedom rally were attacked and injured by security forces. “But just as a deathly silence engulfed the area, tens of thousands of villagers from the neighbouring hamlets, armed with stones and sticks, stormed into the ground from all directions and filled it. The show was on. Speaker after speaker pledged not to give up until Azadi [freedom]. The crowds roared, returning the pledge.”36 In the years since, the small armed detachment of the HM, still active in the Valley, has seen a surge


in open support. Thousands attend the funerals of militants, and shutdowns are called when one is killed. In numerous instances, civilians have tried to interrupt gun battles between security forces and militants with huge protests and stone pelting. In some cases, they manage to help the militants escape, while in others, they demand the bodies of the fallen militants be handed to them. Security officials freely admit that the number of militants is small, but it is the crowds defending them that makes it difficult to assert control. In April 2017, a by-election in parts of Srinagar was disrupted by protestors, leading to the indefinite postponement of the by-election in another area.\footnote{Shujaat Bukhari, \textit{The Dirty War in Kashmir: Frontline Reports} (New Delhi: Left Word, 2018).} The writ of the Indian state was under threat again, as in the 1990s, but with a much smaller armed element and a total insurgency by the civilian population. India had maintained its unwavering commitment to a military approach.

\section*{CONCLUSION}

India’s military presence has saturated virtually every aspect of individual and collective life in Kashmir for the last thirty years. It has made the conduct of everyday life all but impossible, robbing it of even the most mundane certainties. There is no recourse against the military. It functions without oversight by any civil institution, and it is sheltered by a canopy of indemnifying laws and deft perception management. India’s war in Kashmir is dirty and conducted largely in secret. New Delhi has exercised near absolute control over political space since 1947. No political formation has ever been allowed to take executive power that is not loyal to or controlled directly by India.

The BJP government’s approach, while fundamentally continuous with that of previous regimes, is also markedly more aggressive. Counterinsurgency operations have been especially ferocious and unrelenting; during the 2016 uprising, security forces frequently
rampaged through hospitals, shooting the injured and the sick. All political leaders in Kashmir have been incarcerated since the lockdown began. India now appears to be cultivating a class of petty beneficiaries among local government representatives (panchayats), likely to be more pliable, and forming them into a political party. India will continue to rely primarily on armed strength to maintain its control. Meanwhile, India insists that Kashmir is an internal matter and refuses offers for mediation. A damning report by the UN from June 2018 on human rights abuses by security forces was simply dismissed as false and motivated.38

The BJP’s brand of muscular Hindu nationalism is a key element that marks the current conjuncture in Kashmir as distinct. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a key figure from the Hindu right wing, wrote in 1953, “If the Muslims of Kashmir do not want to remain with us, let them go away, but Kashmir must and will be ours. This is a vital matter for the security of India.” So long as it is in power, the BJP will dig in their heels — they are ideologically committed to Kashmir’s integration and pacification, at any cost. The notion of Kashmir as an integral and indispensable part of India has an astounding reach, owing in no small part to right-wing propaganda. On the entire political spectrum in India, no force exists that has a real chance of taking power, that could absorb the political cost of allowing territorial secession from the union. Moreover, the Indian state has the resources to continue escalating their expenditures, and to absorb much greater costs from the resistance. One reason for this is that the establishment making the policy decisions about Kashmir is not suffering. The BJP regime is inured to the human and material costs of the occupation of Kashmir.

The broad strategic directions that the resistance can take, and has taken, merit some careful rethinking. A successful military campaign

against the Indian state is implausible, and it does not appear to have been the chief motivation of the armed resistance. The focus has been on drawing international attention to the dispute, driven by the overly sanguine hope that UN Security Council resolutions will bind the conduct of nations. India’s economic and military clout has grown significantly since Nehru first took this Kashmir question to the UN in 1948. With the abrogation of Article 370 and the transformation of Kashmir into a centrally administered territory, India has achieved the ultimate success in converting Kashmir into an internal issue. No Western power has moved to intervene: India is a lifeline for their ailing economies and a counterweight to China. International attention has not meant international action. India has gotten away, yet again, with what it has done in Kashmir.

Though the mass resistance by Kashmiris has been uncompromisingly militant in its opposition to Indian rule, it suffers from a lack of credible, unified leadership. The political imaginary is built around notions of sacrifice, and political actions are often directed toward the defense of everyday life. What Kashmir needs is a politics that is devoted to the long-term preservation of human life. What form this might take is exceedingly difficult to say, not only because information about Kashmir is scarce at the moment, but also because the current situation is one of deep uncertainty. Irrespective of the precise direction that things take, there is little doubt that something momentous is developing. The central worry for those committed or sympathetic to the cause of self-determination is the simple fact that the Indian government appears willing to escalate costs, while continuing to absorb higher losses, indefinitely.