Dear Center for Global Policy,

We are writing on behalf of Critical Kashmir Studies and the Kashmir Scholars Advocacy and Consultative Network. As scholars of Kashmir in fields ranging from history, anthropology, political science, law, policy studies, sociology, religion, to cultural studies, we wish to express our strong protest in regards to your event on December 16, 2019, entitled “Religious Extremism, the Kashmir Crisis, and U.S. South Asia Policy” as well as the establishment of the Kashmir Policy Group.

We have witnessed and taken part in the emergence of new, critical scholarship that has focused on the implications of the prolonged occupation of Kashmir and the effects of war and militarization on Kashmir’s society, economics and politics. This critical body of scholarship has centered Kashmiri voices and perspectives in order to challenge the status quo and provide new ways of thinking about the past, present and future of the region.

As a result, we are deeply concerned over the CGP’s intervention in the debate on Kashmir, which has set back scholarship a few decades in regards to its completely superficial and trite framing of the Kashmir issue.

In our judgment the ahistoricism of such a frame overlooks the Kashmiri movement for self-determination, and frames the issue as one of a “proxy war,” “bi-lateral dispute,” and “terrorism.” This form of knowledge production about Kashmir continues to sustain the national, regional and global power structures that have suppressed the Kashmiri right to self determination and institutionalized, maintained, and reproduced the longstanding legal, military, economic, and political occupation of Kashmir.

It has been 4 months – and counting – since India illegally annexed Kashmir and imposed a communications blackout and physical siege. The way this event has been organized by CGP extends and replicates the forced silencing of Kashmiris. Purported “advocates” for Kashmir who refuse to hear from actual Kashmiris about the on-going state of occupation or continue to frame the conversation in skewed inter-state or anti-Islam frameworks only further the problem.

In a very short summary, the Kashmir Policy Group recently established by CGP diagnoses the situation thus: “Kashmir has seen an increase and intensification of violence over the past five years, with terrorist attacks increasing by about 176 percent.” Already obfuscating the occupation of Kashmir by framing it as a problem of terrorism, the DC group aims to “lead policy discussions on how to understand and best address the ongoing problems in Kashmir.”

It is unfortunate that the policy group has decided to set the tone of its approach to Kashmir as one that is simply about counter-terrorism, given that the government of India itself states that the number of active militants in Kashmir is just over 200 and that militancy has come to a “nil.”
The summary completely neglected to include even the basics of the military occupation of Kashmir: the massive human rights violations, the complete legal impunity provided to the Indian forces in Kashmir, in addition to the impending settler colonial project and processes of demographic change in Kashmir. None of these factors, which have resulted in immense suffering on the ground, seem to be of any consequence for a group that seeks to be leading policy discussions on this issue. Nor is the very crucial demand for a UN backed plebiscite foregrounded. Not only does this reveal a complete or deliberate lack of knowledge about the Kashmir issue, it also enables an imperial intervention that is of no service to those who are most impacted by these processes.

It bears mentioning though that none of the three “experts” that are chairing the Kashmir Policy Group have actually worked on Kashmir. We wish to ask what sort of expertise the individuals mentioned could provide on Kashmir, why they have been selected to serve on this policy group, and what the extent of their involvement on this issue has been. Have any of them traveled to Indian occupied Kashmir and what is their familiarity with Kashmir? How does CGP formulate its “expertise?” Is it simply that this is another Muslim-majority problem prone area that can be absorbed into the same frameworks as some of the other issues the experts have worked on, whether it is the Rohingya, the Uighurs, or the Syria crisis?

Following the “counter-terrorism” aspirations of the think tank, we note with dismay that CGP has scheduled an event for December 16, 2019 titled “Religious Extremism, the Kashmir Crisis, and U.S. South Asia Policy.” Without delving too deeply into the merits – or lack thereof – of the individual panelists who have been selected over Kashmir studies scholars and experts to discuss the issue, we wish to focus instead on the framing of the occupation and the current siege as a problem of “religious extremism.”

Religious extremism as a diagnosis, either for the Kashmiri movement for liberation or for the Indian state’s violence, is an obfuscation on several levels. While the panel aims to address the rise of Hindutva ideology as having informed the “crisis,” the occupation of Kashmir has predated the right wing turn of the government and has in fact thrived under more liberal-secular administrations of India as well. For those who have conveniently ignored the long standing Islamophobic repression by the Indian state in Kashmir this recent violence comes as a surprise blow to the promise of Indian secular democracy. On the other hand, religious extremism as a misrecognition of Kashmiri Muslims and of the movement for Azadi (liberation) has been a common trope, even among purported advocates for Kashmir. The latter establish a moral hierarchy of “armed” versus “nonviolent” resistance and believe it their place to dictate to those under active colonization how the yoke of the oppressor must be “peacefully loosened” rather than “violently overthrown.”

While the panel makes no mention of the anti-Islam policies of the state, India’s revocation of Article 370 was conducted as part of an explicit attempt to counter the force of Islam in the
region. In a nationally televised speech, Modi claimed that the territory has been stripped of autonomy due to “terrorism and separatism.” Kashmiris, of course, have long suffered as a result of their physical and moral resistance [1] being collapsed under the bogeyman of the misguided or irrationally violent Islamic militant. We should not forget that the convergence of global anti-terror/anti-Islam interests is directly connected to the Indian state’s repressive paranoia in Kashmir which is part of a growing anti-Islam alliance between Israel, the United States, and India.[2] And it should also not be surprising that this global war’s beneficiaries have repeatedly disenfranchised Islamic movements that have anticolonial aspirations.

However, the rhetoric of the Indian state’s Islamophobia is not simply a reflection of the “religious extremism” of the state, given that the discourse that allows both the right-wing government and those on the liberal-left end of the political spectrum to label the Kashmiri movement as religiously extreme – and hence deserving of violence – shares political similarities.[3] It is striking that the panel mentions India, Pakistan, and China, and yet there is no mention of the Kashmiri movement for liberation. Kashmiris themselves as actors are always erased, spoken on behalf of, and condemned for not abiding by impossible standards of purity in resistance and survival.

So, while we keep track of the ways there have been recent shifts in Hindu India’s governance, we must also remember that secular-securitized governance has a global structure that has long established Islam as a threat. Those who hide behind condemnations of the Indian state’s supposedly Hinduism-driven oppression of Muslims, pave ground to “equally” condemn the religious leaning of the resistance movement. The problem emerges as one of religion rather than a sustained analysis of the mechanisms of India’s governance. As long as we keep misidentifying the problem as one of “religious extremism,” we keep throwing Kashmiris under the bus and hosting events that further feed the imperial war machine. We must recognize that blanket framing of “religious extremism,” only serves to hide the real decades long violence of the Indian state, and only paves the way for the more sinister condemnation of Kashmiris resisting under occupation.

We respectfully request the Center for Global Policy, which is a think tank that focuses on “terrorism” and radicalization to stop participating in legitimizing continued oppression against Kashmiris. We condemn CGP for their work in obfuscating imperialism by their focus on counter-terrorism and we demand that the Kashmir Policy Group be disbanded. Any form of engagement necessitates that those who wish to engage must make a sustained and disciplined effort to learn about Kashmir first and foremost.


Signatures:

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