

## Annual Threat Assessment

### Global Threat Landscape

#### Southeast Asia

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore

#### South Asia

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

#### Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

#### China

Xinjiang Province

### Islamic State's Narratives of Resilience and Endurance

### Debunking Jihadist Ideological Misinterpretations and Distortions



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# GLOBAL THREAT LANDSCAPE

Despite territorial, leadership and organisational losses in 2019, Islamist terror groups Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) continued to pose the most potent terrorist threat to global peace. This threat has been amplified by the virulence of Right Wing Extremist (RWE) groups, the spread of which remains a cause of concern in regions where there has been an intersection of religious and/or race-based radical groups.

In its opening, 2019 appeared to present some good news to those in the long fight against Islamist radicals and terrorists. The so-called IS caliphate was dealt a severe blow when its territorial reign was ended by American-backed coalition forces in March 2019. As the year progressed, the IS became scattered and, in a bid to overcome its ideological and physical decimation, became more decentralised across the globe. Reports emerged as to its new incarnation as a guerrilla, insurgent force in various countries and regions, augmented by fleeing foreign fighters looking for havens in which they could persevere and fight on. The death of IS' "Caliph", Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in October, raised further questions of the group's continued resiliency.

Yet, as 2019 ended, any premature claims of IS' demise were moderated. The IS' shape-shifting transformation into a decentralised outfit across the world belies its centrality, which vests on its ideological power, and continues to plague the global threat landscape. The IS' violent ideology continues to bind its myriad followers across regions, including Southeast Asia, which is the primary focus of this annual report. In the aftermath of its territorial deposition, IS' terror attacks and online offensives have been sustained. The reliance on kinship terror circles, the adoption of low-scale yet effective weapons, the resort to self-radicalised individuals and the use of online radical vitriol against the "enemy" – have all acted in concert to manifest how real the IS threat remains today.

2019 also resurfaced the threat that emanates from the Al-Qaeda (AQ), which remains active in Africa, South Asia and pockets of Southeast Asia. The unsettled peace process in Afghanistan between the Taliban, the US forces and Afghan national government has provided the back-drop for AQ forces to embed themselves further in the country and South Asia. The death of Hamza bin Laden in July, said to be the eventual heir to the AQ throne, has not damaged its prospects in the region as it hunkers down in its long war.

The global security landscape was complicated further by RWE groups stamping their imprint onto the world stage in 2019. The February Christchurch mass shooting, televised live on Facebook by an Australian right-wing terrorist, and subsequent far-right perpetrated attacks in the West heralded the maturation of RWE groups as violent actors.

The extremist and violent ideology of RWE groups has also demonstrated the potential to further fuel a cycle of retaliatory violence between different religious and race-based groups. Both the RWE and jihadist militants not only seemed to be learning from each other operationally but their adversarial encounters produced reciprocal radicalisation as well.

Developments in both the Islamist and RWE terror circles in 2019 continue to highlight how social media platforms are powerful avenues for non-state violent actors to publicise their toxic narratives and violent campaigns, recruit and amass followers beyond geographical boundaries and form online networks for ideological and funding purposes. Post-Christchurch, there has been a fresh urgency to formulate strong responses and take actions against online radicalism by social media platforms and security agencies. Yet, any incremental gains continue to be bedevilled by the innate nimble and inventive nature of social media technology, something which is exploited by

radicals and terrorists looking for online refuge.

Amidst the febrile terrorism landscape in 2019, the world also witnessed mass political protests from Chile and Venezuela to Spain, France, Lebanon and Hong Kong. Varied domestic causes underscored growing dissatisfaction with the present status quo, amid perceptions that some states are unable to articulate masses' aspirations and meet their demands. The violent variety of these movements has weakened established government frameworks, and exposed the impotency of some states to provide a robust response to violent movements. While such violent movements are not studied in this annual report, they bear continued watching, given the impact such movements may have on the public tolerance for violence as an acceptable tactical approach by non-state actors.

### **Islamist Terrorism**

Overall, the global jihadist movement suffered significant territorial, leadership and cyber-space losses. Both IS and AQ were hit hard online and offline. In December 2019, a Europol-led crackdown in partnership with Telegram, Twitter, Instagram and Google on IS' social media channels and accounts left it reeling in cyberspace as well. The largest crackdown was launched by Telegram - IS operatives' most favorite social media app - which took down more than 43,000 channels and accounts hampering the group's online activities. Going forward, however, IS has numerous places to go online; it will look to adapt to and exploit a rapidly evolving social media environment to advance its online propaganda and recruitment.

Notwithstanding these losses, jihadist militancy remains a threat across the world. IS commands a global network of affiliates, with franchise groups located in South Asia, Africa, Europe and several parts of the Middle East capable of plotting attacks. Following Baghdadi's death, IS central immediately replaced him with Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi and the worldwide IS affiliates renewed their pledges of allegiances to the so-called new Caliph. Prison breaks resulting from the sudden withdrawal of 2,000 US troops from north-western Syria and subsequent Turkish

incursions which displaced the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (guarding these prisons), have also helped IS to somewhat recover from the aforementioned setbacks.

### **Far Right Groups**

The March 2019 shootings by a lone-wolf attacker on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, where 51 people were killed, also brought into focus the rise of far-right terrorism in the West. According to the 2019 Global Terrorism Index, there has been a three-fold increase in far-right related incidents in the past five years, from a low of 9 recorded attacks in 2013, mainly in Europe and the U.S. The key perpetrators are white supremacists and neo-Nazi groups, which increasingly seek to establish global networks.

In their activities, far-right terrorists and transnational Islamist groups share several commonalities; offshoots of both propagate apocalyptic narratives of their followers facing an existential threat to their way of life, for which violence is the only solution. Both movements also cannily exploit the reach of social media and other online platforms to spread their tentacles across borders and seek to inflict mass casualty attacks and sow social discord in communities. Far-right and Islamic terror attacks also tend to spike at the same time, creating a cycle of retaliatory violence.

### **Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia faces a multi-faceted terrorist threat from regional fighters returning from abroad, online radicalisation and possible lone-wolf attacks. In 2019, Islamist terror groups increasingly relied on family or kinship networks to plan and execute attacks, with knife-related incidents among the most common. Moreover, while suicide attacks were intermittent and low-scale, they remained a preferred tactic. The deadliest such attack occurred during January's Jolo church bombing in the Philippines that killed 20 and wounded 102. The involvement of two Indonesian suicide bombers in the Jolo bombings revealed linkages between extremist movements in both countries, have expanded since the 2017 Marawi siege. Stalled progress in current rebuilding efforts in Marawi city has reignited fears the area

could again emerge as a hotspot for regional fighters to congregate. Swathes of Southeast Asia's porous and poorly patrolled borders continue to be exploited by terror networks in such operations.

Non-IS groups also posed security challenges, including the Jemaah Islamiyah, whose leader Para Wijayanto was arrested by Indonesian authorities in June 2019. Wijayanto's arrest revealed that JI, previously regarded as the Southeast Asian offshoot of Al-Qaeda, has made large strides in regenerating and consolidating itself, and is capable of exploiting issues in Indonesia, and the wider region, to further its interests. Militant groups also sought to embed themselves within nascent political Islamist movements in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, which if left unchecked, could foment or feed into extremism.

Additionally, various regional ethno-nationalist insurgencies escalated attacks against government targets in Thailand and Myanmar, countries in which majoritarian politics has exacerbated longstanding religious and ethnic tensions. Some insurgents also expanded into neighbouring countries in their funding and recruitment operations. Coupled with the ongoing Rohingya crisis, these developments have multi-dimensional security implications around the region.

### **South Asia**

South Asia remained one of the most volatile regions in 2019. Its complex threat landscape was characterised by inter-state rivalries, Islamist militant groups continuously trying to exploit communal and sectarian fault lines, rise of majoritarian nationalism and unresolved conflicts. The rise of majoritarian nationalism in India and Sri Lanka not only created a hostile atmosphere for religious minorities but precipitated on-off communal clashes as well. The plethora of militant groups operating throughout South Asia exploited polarised political environments to recruit disaffected youth and justify their extremist narratives.

In May 2019, the Islamic State (IS) announced a new Wilayah in India and Pakistan in addition to Wilayah Khorasan operating in Afghanistan demonstrating its

deep interest in the conflict-ridden region. IS also teamed up with some local radical Islamist outfits to orchestrate the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka—the most devastating terror attack in 2019. Likewise, AQ and its South Asian affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), persisted in providing ideological and material support to local jihadist movements, particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Though the decapitation of Hamza Bin Laden and AQIS chief Asim Umar were major AQ setbacks, its use of the eschatological Ghazwat-ul-Hind narrative gave it an edge over IS in South Asia. The long-standing conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir not only fuelled militant recruitment but provided various militant groups with sanctuaries to hide, train, grow and bounce back from leadership losses and organisational setbacks.

### **Outlook**

Islamist terrorism will persist into 2020, mainly in the form of low-end urban terror attacks involving knives or other stabbing instruments, vehicles and locally-assembled IEDs. This is exacerbated by the prospect of ideologically and battle-hardened regional militants returning home from the Syrian theatre. Counterterrorism officials have warned that terrorist tactics from the Middle East, including suicide bombings, are increasingly being exported to Southeast Asia and other regions via local chapters.

Ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen, which remain unresolved, also provide jihadist networks with sanctuaries to revive and bounce back. Further, the January 3 assassination by U.S. forces of General Qasem Soleimani, who commanded Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds force, and escalating U.S.-Iran tensions in the volatile Middle East, will have far reaching implications on geo-political developments as well as for counter-terrorism, providing opportunities for IS and Al Qaeda to exploit.

Escalating violence could also prompt further outflows of civilians in these regions to the West, where far-right networks increasingly pose a transnational challenge and are forming links in countries such as Australia, Ukraine, Norway and the United States. Such groups will likely exploit growing

Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in these countries to persist and grow.

Wherever they may fall on the ideological spectrum, toxic narratives of existential threat and perceived victimhood appear to underlie justifications for violent extremism. Overcoming the physical and ideological threat by global militant groups remains a work in progress. In these efforts, more effective and sustained community-based responses, law enforcement, and prosecutorial measures are required. There needs to also be greater coordination between government agencies, social media companies and community groups, both within and between countries and regions. A long war necessitates a global and multi-sectoral countervailing response.

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# SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore*

## INDONESIA

*There was a significant reduction in terrorist-related incidents in Indonesia in 2019. Compared to 15 attacks and 12 foiled plots in 2018<sup>1</sup>, at least eight attacks and ten foiled plots were recorded in 2019. In all, four civilians, a policeman, and four terrorist suspects were killed in various violent incidents, while at least 14 police officers, two terrorists, and three civilians were injured.<sup>2</sup> Pro-IS groups and individuals connected with Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (Congregation of IS Supporters/JAD), the largest Indonesian pro-IS network, continued to dominate the threat landscape. Others, including the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia/MIT), and various independent cells were also active. This is despite the JAD and other groups being organisationally crippled after counter-terrorism operations were significantly enhanced under a tighter new anti-terrorism law passed in May 2018. Going forward, terrorist groups may increasingly rely on family or kinship networks to plan and execute attacks in Indonesia, some of which may continue to leverage simple weaponry like knives.*

<sup>1</sup> Muh Nahdohdin et al, "Indonesia", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Volume 11, Issue 1, (January 2019), pp. 6-9.

<sup>2</sup> Desca Angelianawati, *Kumpulan Insiden Terorisme 2019*, Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalisation Studies (PAKAR), 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "Densus 88 Tangkap 41 Teroris Sepanjang Mei 2019", CNN, May 21, 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/2019052125832-12-397123/densus-88-tangkap-41-teroris-sepanjang-mei-2019>.

<sup>4</sup> "Ini Pengakuan Terduga Teroris yang Rencanakan Teror 22 Mei", *Kompas TV*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.kompas.tv/article/47439/ini-pengakuan-terduga-teroris-yang-rencanakan-teror-22-mei>.

## Threat Landscape

### *Targets and Tactics*

Law enforcement officials were the primary targets of attacks by pro-IS groups in 2019 in Indonesia. Extremist networks also attempted to exploit the restive atmosphere that prevailed during the year's hotly contested presidential election, although several attempts to conduct attacks failed.

In May, police arrested 41 pro-IS militants from six cells, some linked to the JAD, in several suburbs around the capital Jakarta. They had planned to conduct attacks during mass protests against Indonesian President Jokowi Widodo's re-election victory.<sup>3</sup> At least one cell had planned to attack election officials and civilians during street rallies.<sup>4</sup> Pro-IS groups are opposed to democracy (election, rallies) and consider those who participate in it as apostates, and legitimate targets for attacks.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, knife attacks remained the preferred tactic for threat groups, with attacks occurring in Jakarta, Bandung (West Java), Surabaya (East Java), and Poso.<sup>6</sup> The June attack in Poso, a longtime stronghold of the IS-linked MIT, resulted in two civilian deaths. A similar incident in 2018 in the area saw two miners killed.<sup>7</sup> Limited access to firearms and likely

<sup>5</sup> V. Arianti, "What Next for Indonesian Militant Groups?", *RSIS Commentary*, No. 185, September 23, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> "4 Anggota Polisi Alami Luka Sabetan Pisau saat Menangkap Terduga Teroris di Bandung Barat", *Tribun News*, April 5, 2019, <https://bali.tribunnews.com/2019/04/05/4-anggota-polisi-alami-luka-sabetan-pisau-saat-menangkap-terduga-teroris-di-bandung-barat>; "Kapolri: Penyerang Polsek Wonokromo Diduga Pendukung JAD", *Republika*, August 19, 2019, <https://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/pwhaeo428/ka-polri-penyerang-olsek-wonokromo-diduga-pendukung-jad>.

<sup>7</sup> "Motif Pembunuhan di Parigi Diduga karena Korban Tolak Serahkan Hasil Kebun", *Kompas*, June 28, 2019,



inspired by IS' emphasis on knife attacks in its online propaganda and other knife-related attacks elsewhere<sup>8</sup>, knifings and stabbings have been on the rise in Indonesia in recent years. There have been 24 attacks involving machetes, swords, knives since 2014, following IS' declaration of its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, with ten incidents attributed to MIT in Poso, which mainly targeted civilians.<sup>9</sup>

In October, a knife-wielding militant linked to the JAD, attacked Wiranto, Indonesia's then Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law, and Security,<sup>10</sup> who suffered two abdominal stab wounds (but has since recovered), at an event in Pandeglang, at the western edge of Java.<sup>11</sup> The attack is the first known assassination attempt by a terrorist group on a politician in almost two decades. The last successful attack on a prominent figure occurred in 2000 when Matori Abdul Djailil was stabbed by a Darul Islam (DI) splinter group led by Muhammad Ichwan alias Abu Omar. Matori, who was Vice Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and Chairman of an Islamic political party, National Awakening Party (PKB) then, suffered injuries to his head, neck and hand. A year later, he became the country's defense minister.

High-ranking Indonesian government officials have long been targeted by terrorist groups. In recent years, President Widodo –

along with other high-ranking government officials in charge of security portfolios such as the then Chief of Police Tito Karnavian and Luhut B. Pandjaitan, formerly the Coordinating Minister for Political, Law, and Security – have been mentioned as targets for attacks by pro-IS communities online.<sup>12</sup>

Suicide attacks were also a preferred tactic as witnessed in North Sumatra, where attacks in the cities of Sibolga and Medan, in March and November respectively, saw the respective bombers killed.<sup>13</sup> The suicide attacker was also the only casualty in another attack reported in Sukoharjo (Central Java) in June.<sup>14</sup> Low explosive bombs were allegedly used in both the Sibolga and Sukoharjo attacks.<sup>15</sup> The bombing device used in the Sibolga attack is considered the largest assembled by IS supporters within Indonesia to date, according to an IPAC report, with the blast not only decimating the bombers' house and three nearby properties, but also badly damaging 150 other houses located within a 100-metre radius.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Use of TATP and Biological Agents in Explosives*

Two other foiled bomb attacks targeting police in Bekasi, a suburb of Jakarta, revealed attempts to use TATP (*triacetone triperoxide*), a highly explosive material favoured by IS militants worldwide.<sup>17</sup> TATP

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/06/28/07302101/motif-pembunuhan-di-parigi-diduga-karena-korban-tolak-serahkan-hasil-kebun>.

<sup>8</sup> V. Arianti, "Analysing Use of Sharp Weapons in Terrorist Attacks in Indonesia", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Volume 10, Issue 4, (April 2018), pp. 12-16; Muh Nahdohdin et al, "Indonesia".

<sup>9</sup> V. Arianti, "The Stabbing of Wiranto: Growing Trend of Knife Attacks", *RSIS Commentary*, No. 207, October 17, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Polri Soal Serangan di Pandeglang: Pak Wiranto Luka di Bagian Depan", *Detik.com*, October 10, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4740820/polri-soal-serangan-di-pandeglang-pak-wiranto-luka-di-bagian-depan>.

<sup>11</sup> "Polri Soal Serangan di Pandeglang: Pak Wiranto Luka di Bagian Depan", *Detik.com*, October 10, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4740820/polri-soal-serangan-di-pandeglang-pak-wiranto-luka-di-bagian-depan>.

<sup>12</sup> V. Arianti, "The Stabbing of Wiranto: Growing Trend of Knife Attacks".

<sup>13</sup> "2 Anak Terduga Teroris di Sibolga Tewas saat Sang Istri Ledakkan Diri", *Okenews*, March 13, 2019, <https://nasional.okezone.com/read/2019/03/13/337/>

[2029266/2-anak-terduga-teroris-di-sibolga-tewas-saat-sang-istri-ledakkan-diri](https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/06/28/07302101/motif-pembunuhan-di-parigi-diduga-karena-korban-tolak-serahkan-hasil-kebun).

<sup>14</sup> "6 Informasi di Balik Sosok Pelaku Bom Bunuh Diri di Kartasura", *Liputan 6*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/3983325/6-informasi-di-balik-sosok-pelaku-bom-bunuh-diri-di-kartasura>; "Kapolda Sumut: Pelaku Bom Bunuh Diri di Sibolga Bernama Solimah", *Tempo.co*, March 14, 2019,

<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1185095/kapolda-sumut-pelaku-bom-bunuh-diri-di-sibolga-bernama-solimah>; "7 Fakta Bom Medan, dari Identitas Pelaku Hingga Jumlah Korban", *Detiknews*, November 13, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4782877/7-fakta-bom-medan-dari-identitas-pelaku-hingga-jumlah-korban>.

<sup>15</sup> "Bom Bunuh Diri di Pos Polisi Kartasura: Low Explosive, Kondisi Pelaku Kritis", *Kabar24*, June 4, 2019, <https://kabar24.bisnis.com/read/20190604/16/930579/bom-bunuh-diri-di-pos-polisi-kartasura-low-explosive-kondisi-pelaku-kritis>.

<sup>16</sup> "The Ongoing Problem of Pro-ISIS Cells in Indonesia", *IPAC Report* No. 56, April 29, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> "Mother of Satan Tersembunyi di Toko Ponsel Bekasi", *Detiknews*, May 10, 2019,



was previously used in the Surabaya church bombings in May 2018 that killed 12 people and injured dozens; this was the first successful suicide attack involving a family cell in Indonesia.<sup>18</sup>

Several factors explain the use of TATP-laden bombs by Indonesian terrorist groups. The material is relatively easy to prepare from commonly available household ingredients such as nail polish remover and hydrogen peroxide, which can also be easily procured online.<sup>19</sup> Bomb-making manuals, widely circulated online in recent years, have also enabled pro-IS militants in Indonesia to build their capabilities.<sup>20</sup> Groups such as the JAD may also be inspired by other IS networks globally. Several attacks that caused multiple fatalities, including the 2015 Paris bombing, the 2016 Brussels airport attack, as well as the Easter 2019 attack in Sri Lanka, involved the use of TATP bombs.<sup>21</sup>

In October, the authorities also foiled an attempted biological attack involving a JAD cell in Cirebon, West Java, which sought to assemble a high explosive bomb using abrin, a highly toxic biological agent. In a series of raids, police seized 310 grams of rosary pea seeds, the main ingredient used in abrin, from various militant-occupied locations. Forensic tests later revealed just 0.7 microgram of abrin was needed to launch a

biological attack that could kill 100 people.<sup>22</sup> The foiled plot was the first known instance of a bomb assembled in Indonesia that used a toxic biological substance as a key ingredient. It is also the second known instance in the past eight years of an Indonesian militant group attempting to use a biological agent to launch an attack. A previous plot detected in 2011 involved a militant group in Jakarta attempting to kill policemen by poisoning their food with ricin, another toxic substance.<sup>23</sup>

### *Targeting of Political Rallies*

Indonesian militant groups have long fought for the establishment of a caliphate and rejected modern nation states and democratic systems, which they perceive as un-Islamic. IS supporters also generally view political rallies as an opportunity to incite violence and conduct attacks, especially against police officers, who they deem as *thaghut* (oppressors).

The politically charged atmosphere that prevailed during the tightly contested presidential election in 2019, resulted in several major rallies in Jakarta and other areas being targeted by pro-IS groups and individuals. Demonstrations pervaded parts of the country in May, protesting President

<https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4543563/mother-of-satan-tersembunyi-di-toko-ponsel-bekasi>; "Tim Densus 88 Tangkap Sembilan Terduga Teroris JAD Bekasi – Bandung", *Suara*, September 23, 2019, [https://www.suara.com/news/2019/09/23/143823/tim-densus-88-tangkap-sem-bilan-terduga-teroris-jad-bekasi-bandung?utm\\_campaign=popupnews](https://www.suara.com/news/2019/09/23/143823/tim-densus-88-tangkap-sem-bilan-terduga-teroris-jad-bekasi-bandung?utm_campaign=popupnews); "Quantity of Explosive Found in Belgium Surprises Officials", *The New York Times*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/world/europe/brussels-explosives-tatp.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "18 Hari Dirawat, Satu Korban Bom Gereja di Surabaya Meninggal", *Detik News*, June 2, 2018, (<https://news.detik.com/jawatimur/4049232/18-hari-dirawat-satu-korban-bom-gereja-di-surabaya-meninggal>); "Polisi Harap Anak Pelaku Teror Bom Mapolres Surabaya Selamat", *Republika*, May 14, 2018, (<http://www.republika.co.id/berita/nasional/daerah/18/05/14/p8g4wm409-polisi-harap-anak-pelaku-teror-bom-mapolres-surabaya-selamat>).

<sup>19</sup> "Terduga Teroris di Cilincing Beli Bahan Pembuat Bom Secara Online", *Kompas*, September 23, 2019, <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2019/09/23/15083381/terduga-teroris-di-cilincing-beli-bahan-pembuat-bom-secara-online>; "5 Teror Bom Mother of Satan di Dunia", *Liputan 6*, November 15, 2015,

<https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/2366354/5-teror-bom-mother-of-satan-di-dunia>; "Quantity of Explosive Found in Belgium Surprises Officials", *The New York Times*.

<sup>20</sup> "Terduga Teroris di Bima-Kampung Melayu Belajar Bom dari Bahrin Naim", *Kompas*, June 19, 2017, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/06/19/11345891/terduga-teroris-di-bima-kampung-melayu-belajar-bom-dari-bahrin-naim>.

<sup>21</sup> "Indonesia Says It Foiled Plot Detonate Bombs via Wi-Fi", *New York Times*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/world/asia/indonesia-bomb-plot-wifi.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Terror Group JAD Plans Suicide Attacks with 'Poison Bombs'", *The Jakarta Globe*, October 15, 2019, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/terror-group-jad-plans-suicide-attacks-with-poison-bombs>; "Polri: Bom Pengantin di Cirebon Berdaya Bunuh 100 Orang", *CNN Indonesia*, <https://cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20191015184405-12-439754/polri-bom-pengantin-di-cirebon-berdaya-bunuh-100-orang>.

<sup>23</sup> V. Arianti, "Biological Terrorism in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/biological-terrorism-in-indonesia/>.

Jokowi's successful re-election<sup>24</sup>; and later in September against a controversial new law perceived as weakening the country's main anti-corruption agency.<sup>25</sup>

Indonesian police also revealed a JAD-linked cell had developed the ability to use Wi-Fi to detonate backpacks full of explosives, which they had planned to use during some of the political demonstrations in May. This indicates advances in bomb-making capabilities among local threat groups, who have traditionally used bomb detonators activated by a phone signal. The authorities have usually resorted to using phone-signal jammers during mass-gatherings for security reasons, including to prevent potential attackers from remotely activating explosive devices.<sup>26</sup>

### *Women and Family Networks*

The involvement of family networks, particularly wives, in militant activities continues to be a feature in Indonesia. In 2019, a number of foiled attacks involved women deployed as suicide bombers. In March, the wife of arrested Indonesian militant Asmar Husain alias Abu Hamzah detonated a bomb that killed herself and her children inside a house besieged by police in North Sumatra.<sup>27</sup> Police also discovered Abu Hamzah was in the process of marrying another two women, for the purpose of planning and executing future attacks. One of the two women he was going to marry, Yuliati Sri Rahayuningrum alias Khodijah, killed herself while in police custody by consuming

cleaning liquid.<sup>28</sup> These developments indicate a continued reliance on family or kinship networks amongst Indonesian militants, following on from 2018's Surabaya attacks, which marked the first instance of women and children conducting terrorist attacks in the country.

### *Jemaah Islamiyah*

The year also put a spotlight on the current status and future prospects of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network. Unlike pro-IS groups, JI, previously regarded as the Southeast Asian offshoot of Al-Qaeda, has not participated in terrorist activities in Indonesia for more than a decade. However, the arrest in June 2019 of JI leader Para Wijayanto, who had been on the run since 2003,<sup>29</sup> revealed how the group is actively recruiting members and cultivating various business interests to fund its long-term goal of establishing a caliphate in Indonesia.

Under Wijayanto's leadership, JI has built up a clandestine paramilitary wing in recent years and cultivated palm oil plantations in Kalimantan and Sumatra, among other commercial activities, to generate steady incomes for its key leaders and members. According to the police, these activities have enabled the group to pay its senior members a monthly stipend of Rp 10 – 15 million (US\$714 – \$1071), a sum well above average incomes in Indonesia.<sup>30</sup> While Wijayanto's arrest, given his reported considerable business nous, will likely hinder JI's business activities in the near-term, the

<sup>24</sup> "Ditarget Teroris dan Didemo, KPU Tetap Umumkan Hasil Pilpres 22 Mei", *Detiknews*, May 19, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4555471/ditarget-teroris-dan-didemo-kpu-tetap-umumkan-hasil-pilpres-22-mei>.

<sup>25</sup> "Polisi Sebut JAD dan Kelompok Anarco 'Bermain di Demo Mahasiswa 24-25 September'", *Liputan6*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4072354/polisi-sebut-jad-dan-kelompok-anarco-bermain-di-demo-mahasiswa-24-25-september>.

<sup>26</sup> "Pemimpin JAD Bekasi Bisa Pakai Wi-Fi untuk Picu Bom", *CNN Indonesia*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190510/70538-12-393811/pemimpin-jad-bekasi-bisa-pakai-wi-fi-untuk-picu-bom>; "Polisi Terduga Teroris JAD Bekasi Pakai Pemicu Bom Berbasis Wifi", *Tempo*, May 10, 2019, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1204087/polisi-terduga-teroris-jad-bekasi-pakai-pemicu-bom-berbasis-wifi/full&view=ok>.

<sup>27</sup> "The Ongoing Problem of Pro-ISIS Cells in Indonesia", *IPAC Report No. 56*, April 29, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> "Khodijah, Terduga Teroris Tewas Bunuh Diri Minum Cairan Pembersih di Sel", *Suara.com*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.suara.com/news/2019/03/21/151303/khodijah-terduga-teroris-tewas-bunuh-diri-minum-cairan-pembersih-di-sel>.

<sup>29</sup> Another four JI members who were arrested in June-July 2019 included the group's treasurer, deputy, and couriers.

<sup>30</sup> "Polisi: Jamaah Islamiyah Berbisnis Sawit Untuk Bangun Khilafah", *Tirto.id*, July 1, 2019, <https://tirto.id/polisi-jamaah-islamiyah-berbisnis-sawit-untuk-bangun-khilafah-ednU>; "Amir Jamaah Islamiyah Para Wijayanto Dapat Dijerat Pasal TPPU", *Tirto.id*, July 15, 2019, <https://tirto.id/amir-jamaah-islamiyah-para-wijayanto-dapat-dijerat-pasal-tppu-eej6>.

group can still tap on alternative sources to fund its operations, including members' and charity donations.

Compared to the past, JI has also become more sophisticated, adaptable and better organised. Largely based in Java, the group covertly and rigorously vets, trains and indoctrinates new recruits. Members are put through training programmes on intelligence gathering, bomb-making, and plotting attacks during political rallies, among other things. At least six batches of JI members since 2012 have also been sent to Syria<sup>31</sup> where they have gained combat experience fighting alongside the Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra. Further, JI has embedded itself within the nascent political Islamist movement in Indonesia, as part of its advocacy of a non-violent approach to campaign for Sharia law and an Islamic state.<sup>32</sup>

## Responses

Indonesia's counter-terrorism operations have been largely successful in capturing or killing terrorists and thwarting a number of potential attacks. The revised Anti-Terrorism law passed in May 2018 also enables the police to make pre-emptive arrests of members of banned terrorist organisations, even if they have not been directly implicated in plotting attacks. In the second half of 2018, Detachment 88, the police's counterterrorism unit, arrested at least 370 terrorist suspects.<sup>33</sup> In 2019, the counter-terrorism unit arrested at least 297 additional suspects.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the security apparatus continues to be hampered by a lack of interrogators, police-approved solicitors who provide legal assistance to detainees, and qualified prosecutors to indict terrorist suspects. Consequently, prosecutors remain

overwhelmed and are unable to effectively prosecute terrorist suspects. In addition, prison facilities continue to be overcrowded and under-staffed, and hence, vulnerable to the recruitment operations of pro-IS inmates. In Nusa Kambangan island, in Central Java, where high-risk terrorists are detained, at least 15 inmates have been radicalised in prison and have subscribed to IS ideology since last year.<sup>35</sup> The figure could be far higher if other prisons across Indonesia, where terrorist inmates are located, are also taken into account. Upon release, newly radicalised recruits could seek to raise funds or possibly participate in future attacks.

To address the issue, various government agencies, including anti-terror police force Detachment 88, the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT), Directorate General of Correction (Dirjen LAPAS), and some private sector NGOs have been involved in deradicalisation programmes in the prisons, often with varied results. In some cases, such programmes have been successful in ensuring that terrorists renounce violence, while in others, recidivism has occurred. In Nusa Kambangan, Detachment 88 officials claim to have successfully "deradicalised" influential pro-IS inmates – Pepi Fernando and William Maksum – who had recruited criminal inmates, including narcotic offenders. According to officials, Maksum has progressed to such an extent that he now actively persuades other inmates to turn away from terrorism. In contrast, Singaporean terrorist Fajar Taslim, currently serving time in Indonesia for killing a Christian teacher and plotting terror attacks in 2007, remains radicalised and unwilling to cooperate with the authorities. For various government agencies, effectively managing deradicalisation programmes involving at

<sup>31</sup> "Polisi: Jamaah Islamiyah Berbisnis Sawit Untuk Bangun Khilafah", *Tirto.id*; "Struktur Organisasi dan Strategi Kelompok Jamaah Islamiyah Mulai Terkuak", *Kompas*, July 13, 2019, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/07/13/08350391/struktur-organisasi-dan-strategi-kelompok-jamaah-islamiyah-mulai-terkuak?page=all>.

<sup>32</sup> This includes participation in political rallies and reaching out to Muslim clerics, Islamic groups as well as community figures and political parties. See "Polisi Sebut Jamaah Islamiyah Dekati Papol Sebagai Strategi Bentuk Negara", *Kompas*, July 16, 2019, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/07/16/0732>

[3391/polisi-sebut-jamaah-islamiyah-dekati-parpol-sebagai-strategi-bentuk-negara](https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/07/16/07323391/polisi-sebut-jamaah-islamiyah-dekati-parpol-sebagai-strategi-bentuk-negara); V. Arianti, "What Next for Indonesian Militant Groups?"

<sup>33</sup> "Sejak UU Terorisme Berlaku, 370 Tersangka Teroris Ditangkap", *Tempo*, January 10, 2019, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1163684/sejak-uu-terorisme-berlaku-370-tersangka-teroris-ditangkap/full&view=ok>.

<sup>34</sup> Desca Angelianawati, *Kumpulan Insiden Terorisme 2019*.

<sup>35</sup> Based on PAKAR's conversation with the Directorate General of Corrections Staff, August 2019.

least 432 terrorist inmates across 117 prisons<sup>36</sup> around the country, remains a challenge, especially given limited personnel and resources.<sup>37</sup>

## Outlook

Going forward, IS' long war of attrition campaign<sup>38</sup> continues to gain traction among jihadist movements, particularly online, and can still ideologically inspire pro-IS groups in Indonesia to conduct attacks. Police officials – along with other top government officials – are likely to continue to be targeted in attacks. Polling stations used during simultaneous provincial and district elections slated for September 2020 as well as places of worship, could also be targeted.<sup>39</sup> While easily accessible simple weaponry will remain in the terrorist tool-box, bomb attacks could also persist, if some terrorist cells gain sufficient resources to develop such capabilities. Compared to knife attacks and stabbings, bombings can generate far higher destruction to property, casualties as well as greater publicity and shock value.

The involvement of family units in future attacks could also persist, given that some children of pro-IS families continue to be indoctrinated by IS' ideology at home and have participated in *i'dad* (preparation for jihad)<sup>40</sup>. Religious study sessions for women within pro-IS communities also continue to operate, with one such programme known to be run by the wife of the right-hand man of JAD's former head in Central Java, Fauzan Mubarak. Threat groups such as the pro-IS Jamaah Anshar Khilafah (JAK) network, led by the former head of JI's education division, Abu Husna, also continue to recruit members in Central Java, West Java and Jakarta. For

this purpose, JAK organises weekly gatherings to induct new members into its fold. Participants are also put through monthly swimming, martial arts and archery training in preparation for future possible attacks.

In Indonesia, the rising number of women arrested for terrorist-related activities and the prospective return of a significant number of nationals from Syria in the near future, also highlights the need for deradicalisation initiatives targeting women and children, that should be differentiated from existing programmes that largely cater to male terrorist offenders and, to some extent, their wives.

Finally, JI remains resilient and has expanded its operational capabilities to eventually return to its militant roots.<sup>41</sup> The group has strategically opted to not conduct attacks in Indonesia over the last decade and instead focused on *i'dad*. However, JI has also sent 70 of its members to Syria since 2012 to join AQ affiliated groups, including the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly known as Jabhat al Nusra) and Huras al-Din in Syria, to gain combat experience. The majority have returned to Indonesia armed with battle-field experience and knowledge of weapons handling which they can transfer to other JI members, most of whom are recruited from at least 14 JI-affiliated schools around Lampung, Central Java, and West Java.<sup>42</sup> These developments have security implications for Indonesia in the near-term, and require effective counter-measures by the relevant agencies.

<sup>36</sup> This figure is as of 2018. See "Napi Teroris Dimasukkan di Lapas Super Maksimum Security", *Berita Benar*, Aug 22, 2019, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/lapas-maksimum-security-08222019140633.html>; The number of terrorist inmates this year increased substantially as hundreds of terrorist suspects arrested in the second half of 2018 alone have been sentenced or are awaiting trial.

<sup>37</sup> "BNPT Akui Kewalahan Lakukan Deradikalisasi Napi Terorisme", *Tirto.id*, May 30, 2018, <https://tirto.id/bnpt-akui-kewalahan-lakukan-deradikalisasi-napi-terorisme-clpQ>.

<sup>38</sup> "ISIS Releases First Videotape of Baghdadi in Five Years, US Vows to Track Down Surviving Leaders of Militant Group", *The Straits Times*, April 30, 2019,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/world/islamic-state-media-group-airs-video-message-from-leader-al-baghdadi>.

<sup>39</sup> V. Arianti, "What Next for Indonesian Militant Groups".

<sup>40</sup> *I'dad* as defined by Indonesian extremist groups usually covers military and paramilitary training or even basic physical training to prepare groups or individuals for when the time comes to wage jihad.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Valee, "Jemaah Islamiyah: Another Manifestation of al Qaeda Core's Global Strategy", *Center For Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/npfp/jemaah-islamiyah-another-manifestation-al-qaeda-cores-global-strategy>.

<sup>42</sup> PAKAR's conversation with a former JI leader familiar with JI's training programmes, August 2019.



## PHILIPPINES

*The 2017 Marawi siege continues to transform the Philippines threat landscape, as long-running, low-intensity conflicts increasingly adopt an international dimension. In 2019, terrorist activity persisted and subtly transformed in the Mindanao region, a longstanding hub of extremist Islamist terrorist activity in Southeast Asia. It is characterised by the following developments: (i) the emergence of Hajan Sawadjaan as potential emir of IS Philippines; (ii) a localisation of suicide attacks; (iii) use of fake information to attract attention and resources; and (iv) proactive recruitment of foreign fighters.*

### Post-Marawi Update

The five month-long siege in Marawi ended in October 2017, with the death of Isnilon Hapilon<sup>43</sup>, the then emir of the East Asia *Wilayah*<sup>44</sup>, and his prospective successor, Amin Baco<sup>45</sup>. However, two years after the government declared victory, the battle scars endure in the largest Muslim-majority city in the country. For one, the terrain continues to be ridden with unexploded bombs and improvised explosive devices (IED).<sup>46</sup> The long-drawn conflict also precipitated a massive humanitarian crisis, wherein hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced from their homes. Many have been

forced to seek refuge in make-shift, under-resourced and overcrowded refugee camps.

In the face of such challenging circumstances, which have inhibited the state's rebuilding efforts in the city, resentment and a sense of hopelessness has grown amongst many locals. This comes against the backdrop of a series of suicide attacks over the past year, orchestrated by terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), which points to IS continuing to drive and influence militant activity in the southern Philippines. As such, while the government remains committed to speed up rehabilitation efforts<sup>47</sup>, more progress is needed in order to curtail attempts by jihadist networks to exploit local grievances as they seek new recruits to replenish their ranks.

### Current Landscape

This year, the Maute Group, otherwise known as IS Lanao, and the Ansar Khilafa Philippines (AKP), led by the now deceased duo Abu Dar<sup>48</sup> and Mohammad Jaafar Maguid (aka "Tokboy"<sup>49</sup>), became inactive. However, four other IS affiliated terrorist groups remain active in Mindanao, broadly categorised into the IS-linked splinters of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)<sup>50</sup>. The break-away ASG factions, IS Sulu and IS Basilan, are led by Hajan Sawadjaan (also known as Hatib Sawadjaan) and Furuji

<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Philippines", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* Volume 11, no. 1 (January 2019), pp. 9–15, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA\\_Annual\\_2019-1.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA_Annual_2019-1.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> *Wilayah* is the word for "province" in Arabic.

<sup>45</sup> "Philippine Army Says Malaysian Amin Baco Is Dead", *Free Malaysia Today* (blog), November 7, 2017, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2017/11/07/philippine-army-says-msian-amin-baco-is-dead/>.

<sup>46</sup> Vito Barcelo, "53 Unexploded IEDs Need Recovering in Marawi City", *Manila Standard*, April, 20, 2018, <http://manilastandard.net/news/national/263711/53-unexploded-ieds-need-recovering-in-marawi-city.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen de Villa, "Rebuilding Marawi: Rising from Ground Zero", *Inquirer News*, 8 December 2018, <https://business.inquirer.net/261881/rebuilding-marawi-rising-from-ground-zero>; Divina M. Suson, "More Army Troops to Boost Debris Clearing in

Marawi", *Inquirer News*, August 7, 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1151374/more-army-troops-to-boost-debris-clearing-in-marawi>; Community and Family Services International-Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Marawi Recovery Project (MRP)", June 30, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MRP-v1.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, "Leader of Isis in Philippines Killed, DNA Tests Confirm", *The Guardian*, April, 14 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/14/leader-of-isis-in-philippines-killed-dna-tests-confirm>.

<sup>49</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, "Counterterrorism: Why the Death of AKP's Tokboy Matters", *Rappler*, January 9, 2017, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/157731-akp-ansar-khalifa-philippines-tokboy-death>.

<sup>50</sup> The BIFF is a breakaway group of the 12,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the main secessionist group that has been negotiating a peace deal with the central government.

Indama respectively.<sup>51</sup> IS Sulu's influence spans from Tawi-Tawi to the island of Jolo, while IS Basilan operates primarily in Basilan island. Within the BIFF, IS elements are contained within the Bungus faction led by Abu Turaife and a newly formed, and as yet unnamed, splinter, led by Salahuddin Hassan, also referred to as "Salman" or the "emir of North Cotabato" by followers. The Bungus faction operates in Maguindanao, while Salman's faction is known to be active in North Cotabato.

In 2019, BIFF's IS splinters conducted nine attacks, which injured 33 people, employing tactics consistent with previous attacks, including the use of remotely detonated IEDs. Meanwhile, the IS-linked ASG factions participated in fewer but more deadly attacks, killing 31 and injuring over 100 people in four attacks. Most of the casualties resulted from the Jolo church bombing in January, that killed 20 and wounded 102, one of the few instances where suicide attacks were used in the country.

Separately, several bomb attacks recorded in 2019, which did not result in fatalities, were linked to non-IS factions within the BIFF. These attacks were framed by officials as attempts to derail a plebiscite held early in the year, which ratified a long-awaited law to allow Muslim minorities in Mindanao to begin establishing a new autonomous region by 2022.<sup>52</sup>

## Leadership Transition

Counter-terrorism operations in Mindanao following the Marawi siege previously centred around the hunt for the apparent successor of Hapilon, believed to be Owayda Benito Marohomsar or "Abu Dar", the leader of IS Lanao. Abu Dar was subsequently killed in an

artillery strike on March 2019; although the authorities only confirmed his identity through DNA verification a month later, due to his body being charred beyond recognition as a result of the strike.<sup>53</sup> Abu Dar's death marked the demise of the final senior commander who participated in the Marawi siege, although his influence had long been curtailed in the years prior.

In the current context, while various groups appear to be acting independently of each other, Sawadjaan from IS Sulu seems poised to take up the mantle of leading the East Asian Wilayah.<sup>54</sup> Suspected of operating out of Jolo's mountainous and coastal areas in the north, IS Sulu has become the most influential faction within the ASG. Its leader Sawadjaan has succeeded to some extent in unifying radical elements in Sulu under the IS banner and is thought to command several hundred fighters. Another cell, led by Furuji Indama, operates in neighbouring Basilan. The two traditional strongholds of ASG, on Sulu and Basilan, are now effectively IS hotspots. Compared to Abu Dar's former sanctuary in Lanao, Sawadjaan's access to the Sulu Archipelago allows safer passage for militants trying to reach the Philippines by sea from Sabah, East Malaysia. His accommodation of foreign jihadists has enabled the successful transfer of suicide bombing capabilities among local threat groups.

## Localisation of Suicide Bombing

Suicide bombings provide a tactical advantage over conventional confrontations. Otherwise known as "smart bombs", suicide attackers are highly versatile, concealable and have a large impact, while being relatively inexpensive to recruit and train.<sup>55</sup> Based on the Global Terrorism Database,

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "The Changing Dynamics of Islamist Terrorism in Philippines", *The Diplomat*, February 28, 2019,

<https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/the-changing-dynamics-of-islamist-terrorism-in-philippines/>.

<sup>52</sup> The Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) is a legislation which, among other features, increases government funding and reduces taxes imposed on Muslims in Mindanao, while mandating a Muslim Mindanao representative in the Cabinet. Factions within the ASG were unaffected by the legislation as they do not seek to attain legal legitimacy. Factions of BIFF supported this legislation as it is perceived to be a form of Islamic law. However, the Catholic

population is generally against this legislation due to prejudice against the Muslims. Based on interview conducted by author with the Mayor of Cotabato, Cynthia Guiani-Sayadi, February 20, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Carmela Fonbuena, "Leader of Isis in Philippines Killed, DNA Tests Confirm", *The Guardian*, April 14, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/14/leader-of-isis-in-philippines-killed-dna-tests-confirm>.

<sup>54</sup> Dempsey Reyes, "Sawadjaan Acting IS Emir in PH", *The Manila Times*, February 7, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey W. Lewis, "Precision Terror: Suicide Bombing as Control Technology", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 2 (2007): pp. 223–45.



suicide bombings result in an estimated 9.7 kills per attack.<sup>56</sup> Yet despite its apparent tactical value, suicide operations were not adopted by Islamist terrorist groups in the Philippines until January 2019, when two suicide attackers blew up a church in Jolo.<sup>57</sup>

The lack of traction of suicide tactics can largely be attributed to a warrior culture within the Tausug tribe,<sup>58</sup> from which ASG splinters, namely IS Basilan and IS Sulu, have mainly recruited. The Tausug have long prided themselves as warriors, preferring head-on confrontations. Historically, the clan successfully defended their territory against both British and Japanese soldiers during World War II. To them, honour in battle is as important as victory.<sup>59</sup>

During the Marawi siege, deeply entrenched cultural values held by Filipino militants meant suicide tactics were not utilised even during Hapilon's last stand against state security forces.<sup>60</sup> However, in an apparent break from tradition, IS' Sulu branch has orchestrated a series of suicide attacks over the past year. An unintended suicide attack, orchestrated by Furuji Indama's IS Basilan in 2018, may have been the catalyst for its counterparts in Sulu province to adopt suicide tactics, according to analysts.<sup>61</sup>

The July 2018 Basilan VBIED attack, which was meant to be remotely detonated, was

foiled by paramilitary forces when suspicions were raised of a vehicle moving towards a parade near a government compound.<sup>62</sup> Abu Khatir Al-Maghribi, the Moroccan operative behind the wheel, prematurely detonated the 10-seater van packed with explosives, taking ten lives, including two civilians.<sup>63</sup> What could have been considered a *sui generis* case, would instead have a transformative effect on the Philippine threat landscape, with the Sawadjaan-led IS Sulu's subsequent adoption of suicide tactics, viewed as an attempt to gain more international recognition and attract foreign terrorist investments into the region. Sawadjaan's emergence shaped the threat landscape of 2019.<sup>64</sup>

On 27 January 2019, IS Sulu launched the first of two suicide attacks on the "Our Lady of Mount Carmel" church in Jolo. Two Indonesians, Rullie Rian Zeke and Ulfah Handayani Saleh, were recruited for the operation. Both were allegedly affiliated with the IS-linked terrorist network, Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) in Indonesia.<sup>65</sup> The two-stage attack, the first bomb going off inside the church, while another later exploding at its gates,<sup>66</sup> appears to have aided IS Sulu in developing a pool of local suicide bombers.

On 28 June 2019, the first suicide attack involving a local suicide bomber was recorded in the Philippines. Twenty-three-

<sup>56</sup> "Global Terrorism Database", *University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, 2018, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

<sup>57</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, "At Least 21 Dead, 71 Wounded in Jolo, Sulu Church Explosions — PNP Chief", *CNN Philippines*, January 27, 2019, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/01/27/jolo-town-cathedral-explosion.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Suicide Bombing: Is This the End of Filipino 'Warrior Culture?'", *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/suicide-bombing-is-this-the-end-of-filipino-warrior-culture/>.

<sup>59</sup> Amir Mawallil, "OPINION: A Perspective on Tausug Bravery", *ABS-CBN News*, July 21, 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/blogs/opinions/07/20/16/opinion-a-perspective-on-tausug-bravery>.

<sup>60</sup> ABS-CBN News, "TIMELINE: The Battle for Marawi", *ABS-CBN News*, October 17, 2017, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/17/17/timeline-the-battle-for-marawi>.

<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Suicide Bombing: Is This the End of Filipino 'Warrior Culture?'".

<sup>62</sup> John Unson, "Basilan Bomber Appears to Be Targeting School Children in Lamitan",

*Philstar.Com*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/08/03/1839322/basilan-bomber-appears-be-targeting-school-children-lamitan>.

<sup>63</sup> Jaime Laude, "Moroccan Bomber Eyed in Lamitan City Blast", *Philstar.Com*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/08/11/1841515/moroccan-bomber-eyed-lamitan-city-blast>.

<sup>64</sup> Dempsey Reyes, "Sawadjaan Acting IS Emir in PH", *The Manila Times Online*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.manilatimes.net/sawadjaan-acting-is-emir-in-ph/507888/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Indonesian Couple with Ties to JAD behind Jolo Church Attack: Police", *The Jakarta Post*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2019/07/24/indonesian-couple-with-ties-to-jad-behind-jolo-church-attack-police.html>.

<sup>66</sup> "At Least 21 Dead as Twin Bombing Hits Southern Philippine Church", *The Straits Times*, January, 27 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/at-least-17-dead-as-twin-bombing-hits-southern-philippine-church>.

year-old Norman Lasuca from Indanan, Sulu<sup>67</sup>, along with another unidentified individual, blew themselves up at a military base near Kajaban Village, in Sulu province, killing six people. The attack heralded the localisation of suicide tactics among domestic jihadist groups. Over the next few months, another two suicide plots targeting military checkpoints were foiled in the same area.

In September, an alleged IS-linked female suicide bomber also detonated herself at a military checkpoint.<sup>68</sup> Later in November, security forces foiled another attempted attack involving two Egyptian nationals and a local operative. The trio, believed to be affiliated to IS Sulu, were killed in a gunfight with military forces. Bomb vests, a handgun, a grenade and detonators were found in their possession. In all, there have been five attempted suicide attacks in the southern Philippines over the past 18 months.

### Weaponising False Information

Islamist militant groups in Mindanao have a track record of releasing false information as part of opportunistic attempts to gain attention and financing. BIFF is known to routinely issue warnings of imminent attacks and bombings to residents in North Cotabato and Maguindanao in order to instill fear in them.<sup>69</sup> In 2019, IS also falsely reported that the Jolo bombing, although a relatively small-scale attack, killed 100 “special anti-terrorist forces”<sup>70</sup>, displaying its creative use of false information.

The expanded utility of false information by local jihadists has widespread implications. Locally, the perceived damage caused by suicide attacks might prompt an acceptance of such tactics amongst armed non-state actors. The cyber *fête* of the attack could inspire disparate individuals to conduct martyr attacks themselves in the name of Islam. Moreover, the exaggerated reporting of fatalities in the Sulu attack may also indicate attempts by IS’ faction in Sulu to elevate its track record with the international IS network, possibly to court greater attention and resources.<sup>71</sup>

### Foreign Fighter Recruitment

The Philippines faces a limited threat from local foreign fighter returnees, following the collapse of IS’ self-styled caliphate in Syria in 2019. According to reports, there is only one known Filipino couple, Mohammad Reza Kiram and Ellen Barriga, who travelled from the country into Syria to join the Islamic State.<sup>72</sup> Both are believed to be presently incarcerated in a Syrian prison camp,<sup>73</sup> although their fate remains unclear following recent reports some IS detainees may have escaped from these camps, following Turkey’s recent incursion into northern Syria. Nevertheless, the southern Philippines continues to attract fighters from the region and beyond given its status as one of the destinations for *hijrah* (migration) for aspiring foreign fighters.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>67</sup> JC Gotinga, “AFP, PNP: Filipino Suicide Bomber behind Sulu Attack”, *Rappler*, July 10, 2019, <http://www.rappler.com/nation/235077-afp-pnp-say-filipino-suicide-bomber-behind-sulu-attack>.

<sup>68</sup> JC Gotinga, “Female ‘suicide bomber’ in Sulu blast was from Abu Sayyaf – military”, *Rappler*, September 9, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Terrorist or insurgent groups assert dominance over territory by controlling roads after sunset. Travellers could be harassed or extorted if they travel on these roads after dark. Based on interview with officers of the Philippines National Police (PNP) Special Force, February 21, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Based on various Southeast Asian Telegram Groups sharing Battlefield Reports prepared by Amaq News Agency, June 29, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> The IS linked Al Naba Weekly gives a summary of IS inspired or directed attacks by its affiliates around the world through the “Harvest of the Soldier” infographic. The “East Asia” Wilayah previously had an unimpressive track record of

attacks in comparison to the wilayats in Iraq, Sham, Khurasan, and West Africa. The exaggerated fatalities subsequently published in the Al Naba issue 189 elevated the East Asia Wilayah’s status as the second most destructive IS affiliate. Refer to Kenneth Yeo, “Suicide Bombing: Is This the End of Filipino ‘Warrior Culture?’”, *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/suicide-bombing-is-this-the-end-of-filipino-warrior-culture/>; “Harvest of the Soldier”, *Al Naba Publications issue 189*, July 5, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Hannah Beech and Jason Gutierrez, “An ISIS Couple’s Troubling Path to Terror Recruiting”, *The New York Times*, March 24, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/24/world/asia/isis-philippines-syria.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Zam Yusa, “Philippines: 100 Foreign Fighters Joined ISIS in Mindanao since the Marawi Battle”, *The Defense Post*, November 5, 2018,

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) are not new in the Philippines. The country has been a regional hub for training and operations by various Islamist terrorist groups since mid-1990s, when the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) established tactical alliances with the MILF and ASG.<sup>75</sup> Terrorists from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have since travelled to the country to join Islamist terrorist groups and participate in local conflicts.<sup>76</sup>

FTFs have played a significant role in the post-Marawi landscape in Mindanao. They have transformed local tactics and also played a role in developing bomb-making and other operational capabilities among networks regionally. Arguably, FTFs have also played an instrumental role in the gradual acceptance of suicide tactics among local fighters within threat groups.<sup>77</sup> Going forward, IS Sulu's partial control over the Sulu Archipelago and the maritime manoeuvrability of its forces will facilitate the smuggling of foreign fighters into the Philippines.

Key to these operations is the *Ajang-Ajang*, whose members comprise sons of deceased ASG militants. This group is believed to be controlled by Sawadjaan and involved in non-combat operations such as smuggling, scouting, kidnapping, and piracy. The Indonesian suicide bombers, Rullie and Ulfah, involved in the Jolo attacks, as well as the Moroccan bomber, Abu Khatir Al-

Maghribi, utilised Sawadjaan's smuggling networks to enter the Philippines.<sup>78</sup>

Besides the Sulu Archipelago which connects Malaysia's East Sabah to Philippines' Zamboanga, foreign fighters can also be illegally smuggled through Indonesia's North Sulawesi into the Philippines' Davao region through the Sangihe Islands.<sup>79</sup> Security agencies in the Philippines have commented on the difficulty of disrupting smuggling operations due to the long coastlines and archipelagic terrain along smuggling routes in these areas.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the relatively homogenous ethnic and cultural backgrounds among some Southeast Asians<sup>81</sup> as well as the tendency of FTFs to use forged Filipino documentation to gain entry into the country, make it difficult to identify and deport them.<sup>82</sup>

### Terrorist Financing Activities

Traditional fundraising methods of terrorist networks in the Philippines involve both criminal and legitimate sources. The drug trade, in particular, has proved lucrative for local terrorist networks. This is neither new nor unique to insurgencies in Southeast Asia as home-made drugs are cheap to manufacture and have high yields. Hence, the trade is considered to be the most lucrative illicit business in the region.<sup>83</sup> In the Philippines, the IS-linked BIFF sub leader Samad Masgal was recently arrested at the

<https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/05/100-foreign-fighters-join-isis-mindanao-philippines-marawi/>

<sup>75</sup> Justin V. Hastings, *No Man's Land: Globalization, Territory, and Clandestine Groups in Southeast Asia*, (NUS Press, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "After the Caliphate: The IS Threat in the Philippines", *Counter Terrorism Trends and Analyses Volume 11 Issue 7*, September 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Suicide Bombing: Is This the End of Filipino 'Warrior Culture?'".

<sup>78</sup> "The Jolo Bombing and the Legacy of ISIS in the Philippines" *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, March 2019,

[http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/03/Report\\_54.pdf](http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/03/Report_54.pdf); "Philippines: Abu Sayyaf Chief Likely Plotted Suicide Attacks", *Federal News Network*, June 29, 2019, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/government-news/2019/06/philippines-abu-sayyaf-chief-likely-plotted-suicide-attacks/>.

<sup>79</sup> Zam Yusa, "Malaysia and Indonesia Foreign Fighter Transit Routes to Philippines Identified", *The Defense Post*, November 20, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/20/malaysia-indonesia-philippines-foreign-fighters-transit-routes/>.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Philippines", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 11, no. 1 (January 2019): 9–15, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA\\_Annual\\_2019-1.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA_Annual_2019-1.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*, (University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> Interview with members of various security-related agencies in the Philippines, February 21, 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Niem Chheng, "Synthetic Drugs SE Asia's Lucrative Crime | Eleven Media Group Co., Ltd", *Eleven Myanmar*, July 19, 2019, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/synthetic-drugs-se-asias-lucrative-crime>; Amy Chew, "Drug Trade in Southern Philippines Still Bankrolling Pro-Islamic State Militants: Analyst", *Channel NewsAsia*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/drug-trade-marawi-mindanao-philippines-islamic-state-maute-10574894>.

Cotabato Regional Medical Centre for financing the BIFF with profits from the drug trade.<sup>84</sup>

Groups such as IS Sulu and IS Basilan, with access to the seas, have also diversified their fundraising tactics through kidnappings and piracy. While various maritime monitoring channels reported a significant drop in criminal activity along the Sulu-Celebes Seas in the last two years, the region still faces a considerable maritime threat.<sup>85</sup> Kidnap-for-ransom operations ceased between November 2016 and September 2018 but more recently, the area witnessed four kidnap-for-ransom attacks involving the abduction of fishermen, the latest of which occurred on 23 September 2019.<sup>86</sup> Treatment of abductees also continued to be brutal; for example, birdwatcher Ewold Horn who was kidnapped in 2012, was later killed on 31 May 2019 as he attempted to escape.<sup>87</sup> A resurgence of kidnap-for-ransom activity might signal an urgency within terrorist networks to raise funds for their activities.<sup>88</sup>

Conventional forms of fundraising mirror tactics employed by terrorist groups during the Marawi siege. They include the use of overseas wire transfers, cash couriers,

Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) registered remittance centres, the hawala or padala system, and anonymous mobile payments.<sup>89</sup> Online scams, the collection of *zakat*<sup>90</sup>, and terrorist-owned legitimate businesses also pervade in the Philippines. Terrorist groups are also beginning to exploit encrypted communication platforms and wireless fund transfer systems to scam users, solicit donations, and set up online platforms to raise funds both locally and abroad. One example is the setting up of charities by IS-linked operatives such as, Joyce Ann Fornal alias Fatima and Bai Nor Azis Buday, including orphanages, to raise funds for the activities of local terrorist organisations.<sup>91</sup> Intelligence agencies claim such organisations serve as fronts for funds from IS central to be transferred to its affiliates in the Philippines.<sup>92</sup>

## Responses

The Philippines government has adopted both hard and soft approaches to address the terrorist threat in the Mindanao region. On the one hand, there has been a heavy deployment of security forces in the Sulu Archipelago and Maguindanao<sup>93</sup>, where

<sup>84</sup> Edwin O. Fernandez, "Wanted BIFF Leader Nabbed in Cotabato Hospital, ending 5-Year Hunt for Extremist-cum-Drug Trader", *Inquirer*, September 5, 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1161233/wanted-biff-leader-nabbed-in-cotabato-hospital-ending-5-year-hunt-for-extremist-cum-drug-trader>.

<sup>85</sup> Alexandra Amling et al., "Stable Seas: Sulu-Celebes Seas", *One Earth Future Foundation*, February 2019, <http://dx.doi.org/OEF.2019.034>.

<sup>86</sup> Avila Geraldine and Poliana Ronnie Siddom, "Malaysian kidnap victim shot dead by Abu Sayyaf militants in Sulu", *New Straits Times*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/04/476480/malaysian-kidnap-victim-shot-abu-sayyaf-militants-sulu>; "10 Fishermen Feared Kidnapped by Abu Sayyaf Gunmen off Sabah", *The Straits Times*, June 18, 2019,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/10-fishermen-feared-kidnapped-by-abu-sayyaf-gunmen-off-sabah>; Jim Gomez, "3 Hostages Escape Muslim Militants in Philippines, 1 Drowns", AP NEWS, April 7, 2019, <https://apnews.com/b49b32dc4dd841abaf1be9be8765fca2>; "Three Fishermen on Malaysia boats feared kidnapped by masked gunmen off Sabah", *The Straits Times*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/three-fishermen-on-malaysian-boats-feared-kidnapped-by-masked-gunmen-off-sabah>.

<sup>87</sup> Raul Dancel, "Dutch Bird Watcher, Held by Philippine Militants since 2012, Killed in Clash", *The Straits Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/dutch-bird-watcher-held-by-philippine-militants-since-2012-killed-in-clash>.

<sup>88</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Kidnapping in the Sulu Sea: Implications on Terrorism in the Philippines", *The Diplomat*, October 4, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/kidnapping-in-the-sulu-sea-implications-on-terrorism-in-the-philippines/>.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Amparo Pamela Fabe, author of 'Financing Terrorism: Following the Money Trail in the Marawi City Siege', in *The Marawi Siege and its Aftermath* which is expected to be published on 2020 (September 5, 2019).

<sup>90</sup> *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam, mandating all Muslims to donate to a good cause as a form of tax. In countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, there are no regulatory bodies governing *zakat* monies and such donations could easily be channelled into terrorist organisations.

<sup>91</sup> Joseph Jubelag, "Two ISIS logistics officers nabbed in Gensan raid", *Manila Bulletin*, July 25, 2019, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/07/25/two-isis-logistics-officers-nabbed-in-gensan-raid/>.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Punongbayan, "More Soldiers Deployed vs Abus", *Philstar Global*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2019/06/03/192311>



security operations have included the targeted killing of terrorist leaders. These include Abu Dar, and Abu Talha, who were killed during such operations in March and November 2019 respectively. The latter, a trained IS bombmaker described by local officials as a high-value target, had reportedly served as an instructor to ASG militants plotting suicide attacks, and was also a “finance conduit and liaison” between foreign and local jihadists.<sup>94</sup>

The authorities have complemented such kinetic efforts with various other initiatives, including the provision of aid to internally displaced persons affected by skirmishes between IS militants and the AFP.<sup>95</sup> However, while efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate detained terrorists are complemented by the provision of basic necessities such as housing, education, and security,<sup>96</sup> cases of recidivism persist, illustrating that preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives can be further improved, including through closer collaboration with non-government organisations and private sector agencies.<sup>97</sup> Current efforts to enhance P/CVE programmes in the Philippines are, however, partially hampered by the poor state of the country's economy, which limits the dispensable resources available for rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.<sup>98</sup>

## Outlook

[3/more-soldiers-deployed-vs-abus](#); Raul Dancel, “Philippines Vows to Wipe out Abu Sayyaf Militants over Church Bombings”, *The Straits Times*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-claims-responsibility-for-philippines-church-bombing>; Edwin Fernandez and Noel Punzalan, “Army Ends Offensives vs. BIFF in Maguindanao”, *Philippine News Agency*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1077230>.  
<sup>94</sup> “Philippine army says it has killed militant behind suicide attacks”, *Channel News Asia*, November 24, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/philippine-army-says-it-has-killed-militant-behind-suicide-attacks-12120576>.

<sup>95</sup> Edwin Fernandez and Noel Punzalan, “1K Families Benefit from Maguindanao Outreach Program”, *Philippine News Agency*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1079185>.

<sup>96</sup> David Santos, “Duterte Wants Housing, Other Aid for ‘Abus’ Who Surrender”, *CNN Philippines*, March 27, 2018, <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/03/27/duterte-housing-aid-abu-sayyaf-surrender.html>; Roel

In 2020, the Philippines can expect the localisation of suicide tactics to be further entrenched within the threat landscape, at least with regards to terrorist networks along the Sulu Archipelago. Mindanao will continue to be a desired destination for aspiring foreign fighters from Southeast Asia and beyond, and they are likely to play an increasing role in Islamist terrorism there. It remains to be seen whether the death of combat-trained foreign operatives such as Abu Talha will curtail the transfer of attack methodologies among local militants, or if others can take their place in future. Additionally, the government can expect the expanded utilisation of false information as terrorist groups seek opportunistic ways of raising their profile and standing amongst local and international terrorist networks.

## MALAYSIA

*Malaysia faces threats from self-radicalised Islamic State (IS) sympathisers at home, and local nationals returning from Syria and Iraq who could attempt to stage attacks on home soil. Following the collapse of the IS’ “caliphate”, non-Malaysian foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from the theatre and other extremists may also seek refuge in the country. Going forward, home-grown cells with linkages to overseas terrorist networks, will dominate the threat landscape. Growing*

Pareño, “Ex-Abu Sayyaf Finish DepEd’s ALS Program”, *Philstar Global*, July 13, 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2019/07/13/1934212/ex-abu-sayyaf-finish-depeds-als-program>; “From Clashes to Classes: Former Abu Sayyaf Bandits Earn Diplomas”, *Inquirer News*, July 13, 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1141240/from-clashes-to-classes-former-abu-sayyaf-bandits-earn-diplomas>; Edwin Fernandez and Noel Punzalan, “Ex-BIFF Rebels Get Aid from Maguindanao Prov’t Gov’t”, *Philippine News Agency*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1077182>.

<sup>97</sup> Amina Rasul-Bernardo, “Amina Rasul-Bernardo - President of the Philippine Centre for Islam and Democracy”, *A Conversation With | Channel News Asia*, March 5, 2018,

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/podcasts/conversation-with/amina-rasul-bernardo-10014512>.

<sup>98</sup> Zachary Abuza, “[ANALYSIS] Philippine Defense Spending in 2018: What Data Tells Us”, *Rappler*, July 12, 2019, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/235184-analysis-philippine-defense-spending-2018-sipri-data-tells-us>.

*racial and religious fissures also have political and security implications, and require effective counter-measures and policies, lest they provide opportunities for extremists to exploit.*

### Domestic Threat Environment

In 2019, several terrorist plots involving IS-linked lone wolves and ‘wolf pack’ cells (including militants with no affiliation to terrorist networks) were thwarted by the Malaysian Special Branch (MSB). Since 2013, 547 people, including foreign nationals, have been arrested on various terrorism-related charges.<sup>99</sup> Between May 2018 to May 2019, more than 80 individuals were apprehended. Around 25 terrorist attacks were also foiled over the same period.<sup>100</sup>

#### *Infiltration by Foreign Networks*

Malaysia has long attracted the attention of Islamist terrorist groups. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, for example, some of the key Al-Qaeda operatives involved had met in Kuala Lumpur. More recently, a number of local and foreign jihadists were arrested in Malaysia, for activities ranging from bomb-making and weapons smuggling to recruitment and fundraising.

In February 2019, nine terror suspects, including six Egyptians and one Tunisian, were arrested in Klang Valley, Selangor and Sarawak<sup>101</sup> over their links with overseas terror groups. Two of them had entered Malaysia using false Syrian travel documents, and were members of the

Muslim Brotherhood (*Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) and Ansar al-Sharia, the latter designated an international terrorist organisation by the United Nations. A month later, 13 militants linked to the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Maute combatants and the Royal Sulu Force (RSF) in the Southern Philippines, were also apprehended,<sup>102</sup> heightening fears of foreign militant networks further infiltrating the country.

In May 2019, MSB also thwarted another plot, in which local grievances were, for the first time, exploited by IS to inspire foreign militants to launch attacks in Malaysia.<sup>103</sup> An IS-inspired “wolf pack” cell, which included two Indonesian nationals and a Rohingya Muslim, had planned to attack various religious sites and entertainment spots.<sup>104</sup> The cell also plotted to assassinate various high-profile local personalities, police said. The attacks were framed as revenge for the death of a Malay Muslim firefighter killed in November 2018, during clashes between a group of Malay Muslims and Indians near a Hindu temple in Selangor, an incident which exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions in the country then.<sup>105</sup>

#### *Malaysian Nexus in Regional Islamist Militancy*

The arrest in Indonesia of Para Wijayanto, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)’s leader in July, also raised concerns in Malaysia that the group may seek to revive networks in the wider

<sup>99</sup> Nadirah H. Rodzi, “16 terror suspects nabbed in Malaysia,” *The Straits Times*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/16-terror-suspects-nabbed-in-malaysia>.

<sup>100</sup> “Police say stopped 25 terrorist strikes planned across Malaysia since 2013,” *Malay Mail*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/10/02/police-say-stopped-25-planned-terrorist-strikes-across-malaysia-since-2013/1796368>.

<sup>101</sup> Melissa Goh, “Malaysia on alert after arrests of 9 terror suspects, including foreigners,” *Channel News Asia*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-heightens-alert-against-foreign-terrorist-fighters-11329166>.

<sup>102</sup> Nadirah H. Rodzi, “Malaysia detains 13 suspected militants, including 6 involved in Marawi siege,” *The Straits Times*, March 18, 2019, [https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-detains-13-suspected-militants-including-6-involved-in-marawi-siege)

[detains-13-suspected-militants-including-6-involved-in-marawi-siege](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-detains-13-suspected-militants-including-6-involved-in-marawi-siege).

<sup>103</sup> Nadirah H. Rodzi, “Malaysia foils terrorist plot to ‘avenge’ fireman’s death,” *The Straits Times*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-foils-terrorist-plot-to-avenge-firemans-death>.

<sup>104</sup> Amy Chew, “Islamic State ‘wolf pack’ in Malaysia planned wave of terror attacks, police say after detaining four suspects in sting operation,” *South China Morning Post*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3010061/islamic-state-wolf-pack-malaysia-planned-wave-terror>.

<sup>105</sup> Hindu activists had resisted the closure of the temple by local authorities, which sparked the violence. The fireman’s death was the subject of an inquest and was used by several conservative Islamic groups to portray that Islam is under siege in Malaysia.



region, which have long been dismantled.<sup>106</sup> While little has been heard recently about JI, the former Southeast Asian offshoot of Al-Qaeda, it is said to be actively building up a clandestine paramilitary force and has operated various business ventures to fund its operations.<sup>107</sup>

While there is no indication the group is planning attacks on Malaysian soil at present, it has made large strides in regenerating and consolidating itself, and is capable of exploiting issues in Indonesia and the wider region to further its interests in the near term.

Pro-IS individuals and cells also appeared to intensify their online recruitment efforts in Malaysia and the near region. In September 2019, police arrested 16 individuals, mostly Indonesian nationals, for plotting attacks on unnamed politicians and non-Muslim groups. The network was found to be propagating IS ideology online and recruiting new members on social media, with the aim of launching attacks in Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>108</sup> A local militant was among those detained.

Parts of eastern Sabah, including the towns of Sandakan and Tawau, also continued to be used by militants as transit points to join IS networks in the Philippines, exacerbating fears of the regional movements of terrorist operatives.<sup>109</sup> In 2019, two self-radicalised Malaysians were arrested in Sabah for spreading IS propaganda, ensuring the safe passage of prospective suicide bombers and arranging financing for the Maute terrorist group based in the Southern Philippines.

Another suspect, a 25-year-old Indonesian plantation worker, was also found to be a facilitator for the family cell which carried out the suicide attack on a church in Jolo in January 2019. He had previously also remitted funds to the IS-linked Maute group, during the Marawi siege in 2017.

### *Other Extremist Groups*

Separately, four militant Rohingya Muslims were arrested between May and June 2019,<sup>110</sup> for organising financing for the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), an insurgent group active in northern Rakhine state in Myanmar. Approximately RM80,000 (*ringgit*) (S\$26,262) was raised by the racket, with the funds distributed through the 'hawala' network, a traditional money transfer system which provides anonymity. One of the suspects was also revealed to have links to a pro-IS cell, reigniting long-held concerns that members of the persecuted Muslim minority in Myanmar - an estimated 100,000 Rohingyas live in exile in Malaysia - could be recruited by extremist groups.<sup>111</sup>

In October 2019, 12 men allegedly linked to the banned Sri Lankan militant group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were also arrested in Malaysia under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act. The arrests raised tensions within the four-party Pakatan Harapan (PH) governing coalition, as two of the detainees were state assemblymen with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), one of the political parties in the coalition.<sup>112</sup> The police said a non-

<sup>106</sup> At its height of operations at the turn of the century, JI had a presence in five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines and Australia, grouped under regional divisions labelled as "mantiqis". JI previously had regional branches around the region including in Malaysia, which it considered a transit point for its regional operations.

<sup>107</sup> Amy Chew, "Why a resurgent Jemaah Islamiah in Indonesia is also bad news for Malaysia and Singapore," *South China Morning Post*, July 7, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3017465/why-resurgent-jemaah-islamiah-indonesia-also-bad-news-malaysia>.

<sup>108</sup> Emmanuel Santa Maria Chin, "Malaysian planning attacks on politicians, non-Muslims among 16 terror suspects nabbed," *Malay Mail*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/09/26/malaysian-planning-attacks-on-politicians-non-muslims-among-16-terror-suspe/1794398>.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Hart, "Is Malaysia ISIS' Next Southeast Asian Hub?" *Asia Sentinel*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/is-malaysia-next-isis-southeast-asian-hub/>.

<sup>110</sup> Amy Chew, "Militant Rohingya group raises funds in Malaysia by extorting money from Muslim refugees," *South China Morning Post*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/3019396/militant-rohingya-group-raises-funds-malaysia-extorting-money>.

<sup>111</sup> "Malaysia Police: Rohingya Extortion Syndicate Funds Myanmar Rebels," *Radio Free Asia*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/malaysia-rohingya-07222019163430.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Hazlin Hassan, "Tensions rise within Malaysian govt after arrest of DAP lawmaker," *The Straits Times*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/tensions-rise-within-malaysian-govt-after-arrest-of-dap-lawmakers>.

governmental organisation (NGO) with branches across the country had been actively securing funds for LTTE-related activities and attempting to revive the terror group.<sup>113</sup>

Overall, confronting militancy as well as the cross-border flows of illegal drugs and firearms remain security priorities, with Islamist terrorist groups in particular continuing to exploit Malaysia's liberal immigration policies and porous borders along Sabah, to conduct their operations. According to Malaysia's then police chief Mohamad Fuzi Harun, foreign militants increasingly view the country as a "safe haven" transit and logistics base to "launch large-scale attacks in several countries", particularly since IS' demise in the Middle East.<sup>114</sup> Some foreign militants also marry local women to get spousal visas to enable them to live in Malaysia. Others enrol in education institutions and participate in business activities in the country.<sup>115</sup>

#### *IS Returnees from Syria*

Following the collapse of IS' caliphate in Syria, some of the estimated 102 Malaysians known to reside in Syria and Iraq have attempted to return home recently. The Malaysian authorities subject returnees to investigations, prosecution in the more serious cases and mandatory rehabilitation, as conditions before being permitted to re-enter the country. It also has an aftercare programme to reintegrate returnees into their respective communities. To date, a batch of 11 local fighters has returned from the conflict zone, with eight – all men – charged in court and convicted for terrorist-related activities.

Some 65 Malaysians still reside in refugee camps in Syria,<sup>116</sup> while 40 others are scattered across the immediate region.<sup>117</sup>

Turkey's brief offensives in October 2019 into northern Syria against Kurdish forces have complicated the government's plans to repatriate additional Malaysian nationals from the theatre, and also prompted fresh fears that some Southeast Asian jihadist fighters being held in prison camps may escape from detention and attempt to return home illegally. Malaysian security officials have warned such battle-hardened fighters, many with combat or bomb-making experience, could seek to recruit new members and launch attacks back home.

#### *Youth Vulnerability to Militancy*

According to a former Malaysian government official, around 80 percent of arrests made for terrorism-related offences in recent years involve individuals under the age of 40,<sup>118</sup> illustrating shifting terrorist recruitment patterns and militant profiles. Extremist ideologies have also gained traction among some university and school students, with dozens of students arrested for IS-related activities in recent years. Some were found to be in contact with Southeast Asian militants based in Syria and aspired to travel there, while others forged links with IS-linked student cells overseas, plotted attacks and channelled funds into various terror activities.

IS-linked groups employ several methods to radicalise and recruit Malaysian youths, notably through social media and *usrah* (small discussion groups) in local schools, colleges and universities.

<sup>113</sup> "Malaysian police chasing terror money trail of suspects linked to militant group Tamil Tigers," *Straits Times*, Oct 14, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-chasing-terror-money-trail-of-suspects-linked-to-militant-group-tamil>.

<sup>114</sup> Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Kuala Lumpur says foreign militants eyeing Malaysia as safe haven," *The Straits Times*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-says-foreign-militants-eyeing-malaysia-as-safe-haven>.

<sup>115</sup> Nadirah H. Rodzi, "Malaysia detains 13 suspected militants, including 6 involved in Marawi siege," *The Straits Times*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-detains-13-suspected-militants-including-6-involved-in-marawi-siege>.

<sup>116</sup> Amy Chew, "Isis version two: Malaysia, Indonesia fear return home of fighters jailed in Syria after Trump's troop withdrawal," *South China Morning Post*, Oct 13, 2019,

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3032671/isis-version-two-malaysia-indonesia-fear-return-home-fighters>.

<sup>117</sup> Desmond Ng, "Islamic State fighters heading home: Is Southeast Asia ready?" *Channel News Asia*, July 25, 2019,

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/isis-fighters-heading-home-is-southeast-asia-ready-terror-threat-11750854>.

<sup>118</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, "The Youth Battle in Malaysia's Islamic State War," *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/the-youth-battle-in-malysias-islamic-state-war/>.

Academics and students linked to militant movements have also long recruited within education institutes.<sup>119</sup> A well-known case involves Dr Mahmud Ahmad, a senior ASG operative, who was revealed in 2014 to have used his position as a senior lecturer at the University of Malaya, to lure students into terrorist activities. Dr Mahmud had also recruited and trained regional militants to fight for IS in Syria and Iraq.

Experts note that some youth may lack critical thinking skills, are easily impressionable and could be seeking atonement for past misdeeds. Radical groups exploit such individuals by asserting they can achieve redemption through violent jihad.<sup>120</sup> Aspirations to lead more adventurous lifestyles, alleged social and economic marginalisation, and the desire to defend Muslims against perceived oppression as purveyed by terrorist groups such as IS, are also key drivers of radicalisation among youth in Malaysia.<sup>121</sup>

## Responses

The reported deaths of two senior Malaysian IS operatives based in Syria,<sup>122</sup> Wan Mohd Aquil Wan Zainal Abidin and Mohd Rafi Udin, who were killed in Russian-led airstrikes in early 2019, will significantly disrupt the group's operations in Malaysia in the short term. Wan Mohd Aquil (also known as Akel

Zainal) had taken a leadership role and actively recruited other Malaysians to fight for IS in Syria, following the death of another Malaysian militant, Muhammad Wandy Mohamed Jedi in April 2017.<sup>123</sup> For his part, Mohd Rafi had featured in an IS propaganda decapitation video titled "*Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus*" in 2016, alongside an Indonesian and Filipino,<sup>124</sup> the first instance of Southeast Asian fighters being filmed carrying out beheadings.

Malaysia's domestic counter-terrorism operations have also largely been effective over the past four years as evidenced by the low number of actual terrorist-related incidents. The country has a high conviction rate for terror-related crimes, with over 100 individuals indicted in recent years on various charges.<sup>125</sup> The government has also replaced its Domestic Security Policy with an updated Public Security and Safety Policy, which encompasses strategies to deal with trans-border crimes and terrorism as well as human trafficking and money laundering.<sup>126</sup>

Apart from enforcement and legislation, rehabilitation and disengagement programmes have also shown encouraging results, with minimal instances of recidivism, government officials say.<sup>127</sup> To date, the authorities have developed over 152 programs for 190 terrorist detainees, ex-detainees and their family members,<sup>128</sup> with

<sup>119</sup> Ahmad El-Muhammady, "The Role of Universities and Schools in Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism: Malaysian Experience," in *Combating Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, October 31, 2018, [https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism\\_El-Muhammady.pdf/86c33d0c-53eb-4d6d-bf90-9aa528c95785](https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism_El-Muhammady.pdf/86c33d0c-53eb-4d6d-bf90-9aa528c95785).

<sup>120</sup> Mohd Mizan Mohammad Aslam, "Dealing with radicalisation in Malaysian universities," *Today*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/dealing-radicalisation-malaysian-universities>.

<sup>121</sup> Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response," Middle East Institute, May 3, 2016, [https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response#\\_ftn8](https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response#_ftn8).

<sup>122</sup> G. Prakash, "Bukit Aman: Ex-rock band drummer among two Malaysian IS fighters killed in Syria this year," *Malay Mail*, Nov 13, 2019, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/11/13/bukit-aman-ex-rock-band-drummer-among-two-malaysian-is-fighters-killed-in-s/1809504>.

<sup>123</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, "Commentary: The Life and Death of Wandy, Malaysia's Top IS Recruiter," *Benar News*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/asia-pacific-threat-update/Rohan-Gunaratna-05162017180047.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Remy Mahzam, "Abu Uqayl: Bringing the Threat Closer to Home," RSIS Commentaries, September 28, 2017, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co17178-abu-uqayl-bringing-the-threat-closer-to-home/>.

<sup>125</sup> "Returning Foreign Fighters," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, Volume 43, Issue 3, p.26, [http://apdf-magazine.com/iPDF\\_V43N3\\_eNG.pdf](http://apdf-magazine.com/iPDF_V43N3_eNG.pdf).

<sup>126</sup> Azril Annuar, "Malaysia's new national security policy needed to deal with digital challenges to country's safety, says PM," *Yahoo News*, October 3, 2019, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/malaysia-national-security-policy-needed-024216902.html>.

<sup>127</sup> "97 per cent success rate for Malaysia's deradicalisation programme, says Nga," *Bernama.com*, October 1, 2019, <http://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=1773576>.

<sup>128</sup> The success of Malaysia's rehabilitation and disengagement programme is partially attributed to

religious institutions playing an important role in the rehabilitation process.<sup>129</sup>

In November 2019, US-trained bio-chemist Yazid Sufaat, who recruited for terror groups and once attempted to produce chemical weapons for Al-Qaeda, was given a conditional release from prison, two years after serving the maximum term permitted under the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).<sup>130</sup> Among other conditions, Sufaat has been placed under house arrest, is required to wear an electronic monitoring device, and is also barred from using the internet. Having been jailed three times in the past 17 years on various terrorism-related charges, such measures were aimed at preventing him re-offending and carrying out further recruitment, Malaysian police said.

His case reflects the continued challenges countries face in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts, while also ensuring adequate post-release systems, including effective long-term monitoring, are in place. Given IS' continued and aggressive online recruitment campaign locally and the prospect of ideologically hardened Malaysian nationals returning from the Syrian conflict theatre, there is a need for extensive and rigorous updating of deradicalisation policies to ensure effective outcomes, and minimise the cases of recidivism.

## Outlook

Going forward, the threat landscape for Malaysia remains very much linked to Islamist terrorist developments globally. A whole-of-society approach is required to prevent the narrative of Islam being under siege from taking root among segments of the Muslim community. Elsewhere, such a narrative has been exploited by militant groups, operating in a plural society, to influence their sympathisers and followers to

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its use of a *wasatiyyah* (moderation) approach to promote tolerance, combating the ideology of takfiri (an extremist who sees Muslims who do not subscribe to their beliefs as infidels or non-believers) and empowering religious leaders, civil society groups and members of academia to challenge extremist narratives. See Remy Mahzam. (2019). "Beyond Marawi - Developing a Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism (P-CVE) Roadmap for Philippines", in Rohan Gunaratna and Sabariah Hussin (Eds.), *Terrorist Deradicalisation in*

reject "others" in their midst, leading to societal divides and violence along religious lines. Further, the foreign militant influence and access in Malaysia needs to be addressed holistically, so that Malaysia does not remain a transit point of choice, as it currently is. Related to this, the presence of overseas Muslim migrants, some persecuted in their home countries, such as the large Rohingya diaspora living in Malaysia, need to be closely monitored so that Malaysia does not become the launch-pad for the activities of those who have been radicalised. Appropriate counter-measures are needed to address these salient issues.

## MYANMAR

*Myanmar witnessed another year of instability, with clashes between the Arakan Army (AA), a Rakhine Buddhist ethnic armed group founded a decade ago, and the military, escalating sharply in 2019, adding a dangerous new dimension to the country's insurgency landscape. Meanwhile, the Rohingya insurgent group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is weakened and has become fragmented, yet is reportedly re-organising outside Myanmar. Renewed violence in northern Rakhine state will further diminish prospects for a resolution to the Rohingya refugee crisis, which has multi-dimensional security implications for Myanmar and its regional neighbours, including Bangladesh. With rebranded Buddhist hardliners from the Bamar majority re-emerging in the fluid political scene ahead of general elections in 2020, prospects for peace in Myanmar will remain dim in the near term.*

### Arakan Army: A Formidable Threat

The security situation in Rakhine state worsened in 2019, with an escalation of skirmishes between a resurgent Arakan

*Global Contexts: Success, Failure and Continuity*, 1st ed. United Kingdom: Routledge.

<sup>129</sup> "97 per cent success rate for Malaysia's deradicalisation programme, says Nga," *Bernama.com*, October 1, 2019,

<http://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=1773576>.

<sup>130</sup> "Malaysian terrorist who plotted to bomb Singapore released, on electronic tagging device," November 20, 2019,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-terrorist-with-9-11-links-released-on-electronic-tagging-device>.



Army (AA) and the Myanmar military, a conflict which has spread to several townships.<sup>131</sup> The latter has claimed lives on both sides and displaced tens of thousands, particularly in rural areas.<sup>132</sup> The group's increased operations on military targets have coincided with celebrations marking a decade of its founding and are also aimed at ratcheting pressure on Nay Pyi Taw for greater political autonomy for Rakhine Buddhists, who constitute the majority of the state's population. In the area, there are longstanding grievances about the central government's neglect of Rakhines and perceived exploitation of the state's natural resources.<sup>133</sup>

Along with its political arm, the United League of Arakan (ULA), the Arakan Army draws heavily on Rakhine diaspora networks overseas for its operational and funding needs.<sup>134</sup> Both domestically and amongst overseas networks, the AA has gained traction by successfully mobilising popular support for a Rakhine nationalist agenda<sup>135</sup>

that includes self-determination, safeguarding of Rakhine Buddhist identity and cultural heritage, and exploiting various socio-economic grievances.<sup>136</sup>

In 2019, AA used both terrorist and guerrilla offensives against the Myanmar military. In one attack on 22 June, the insurgents launched a rocket attack on a Myanmar Navy tugboat in Sittwe situated in Rakhine State, killing two security personnel and injuring another. This was possibly the first maritime attack in Myanmar by an insurgent group. The Northern Alliance<sup>137</sup>, a collection of armed groups fighting for greater autonomy for ethnic minorities that often carry out joint operations and include AA fighters, also conducted a high profile joint-attack on 15 August, in which an elite military college in Pyin Oo Lwin, (western Shan state) was bombed. At least 15 people were killed.<sup>138</sup> Further, the AA reportedly also kidnapped 19 firemen and 12 passengers aboard a passenger bus in Mrauk-U Township, Rakhine State on 11 October.<sup>139</sup> In another

<sup>131</sup> The most affected townships are Mrauk-U, Rathedaung and Buthidaung.

<sup>132</sup> Tatmadaw responded with major troop build-ups, heavy artillery and airstrikes. More than 65,000 civilians have been internally displaced.

<sup>133</sup> The main Rakhine party's landslide electoral victory in 2015 was followed by the then Myanmar President's imposition of an NLD government in the state and subsequent lack of meaningful engagement by the national government with Rakhine leaders. This created a deep sense of political exclusion within the ethnic Rakhines, many of whom now support the Arakan Army insurgency. See "Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar", *International Crisis Group*, Briefing No. 157/Asia, August 6, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b157-peace-and-electoral-democracy-myanmar>.

<sup>134</sup> Sources close to the Myanmar government believe the AA wants to establish a sizeable force of armed militants in the Rakhine State to emulate the autonomy that the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Myanmar's most powerful armed ethnic group, enjoys in Wa areas near the Myanmar-China border. This has also been reflected in remarks made by the AA's Deputy Chief, Brigadier-General Nyo Tun Aung.

<sup>135</sup> The AA espouses "the way of Rakhita", a rallying cry among Rakhine nationalists that evokes memories of the once powerful Arakan kingdom defeated by the Bamar Konbaung dynasty in 1784. Commemorating the anniversary of the Arakan Kingdom's fall has become a new way of expressing Rakhine nationalism. Another initiative is the "Arakan Dream 2020" slogan, which articulates the goal of

achieving self-determination by end 2020. It is noteworthy that the Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan) was an independent kingdom until it was annexed (1784–85) by the Konbaung dynasty of Myanmar. Since the 1950s, there has been a growing movement for secession and restoration of Arakan independence. In 1974, the socialist government under General Ne Win constituted 'Rakhine State' from Arakan Division, giving nominal acknowledgment of the regional majority of the Rakhine Buddhists. There was, however, no significant changes on the ground in terms of socio-economic development, which has emboldened local demands for self-determination.

<sup>136</sup> Rakhine remains one of Myanmar's poorest states – 78 percent of the population live below the poverty line (nearly double the national average). China has been investing heavily in projects within the Rakhine State, including a deep-sea port and a gas pipeline to Yunnan. However, locals have seemingly not seen any positive benefits.

<sup>137</sup> The Northern Alliance includes the AA, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

<sup>138</sup> "Myanmar insurgents attack elite military college, other targets; 15 killed", *Reuters*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-insurgency/myanmar-insurgents-attack-elite-military-college-other-targets-15-killed-idUSKCN1V50EH>.

<sup>139</sup> Min Naing Soe, "AA arrests fire fighters and passengers aboard Shwepyithit passenger bus," *Eleven Myanmar*, October 14, 2019, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/aa-arrests-fire->

instance, it reportedly kidnapped more than 40 police officers and soldiers in a brazen raid on a ferry travelling along a river north of Sittwe on 26 October.<sup>140</sup>

As skirmishes between militants and the Tatmadaw persist, the AA has announced its intention to launch attacks beyond Rakhine state,<sup>141</sup> even as it continues to recruit new members and train them in Kachin province, where the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), a fellow Northern Alliance member, is based.<sup>142</sup> The group has formed tactical alliances with the KIA, as well as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Myanmar's largest ethnic militia, which has enabled the pooling of resources such as arms, ammunition and sanctuaries. Its fighters have also gained combat experience fighting in Kachin and neighbouring Shan state, in concert with the KIA, UWSA, and other smaller militias.

The AA is estimated to have between 7,000 and 10,000 cadres in its ranks, with a significant portion being women. Many are drawn from ethnic Rakhine workers, who live and work in neighbouring Kachin State. The group also has a sleek presence on social media and a strong following among Rakhine diaspora networks overseas. However, while the four armed groups in the Northern Alliance have a standing agreement to help each other when under attack, more recently, the AA has been fighting the Tatmadaw in Rakhine without support from its alliance partners, who appear to have grown cautious about engaging there,<sup>143</sup> partly due to

Chinese overtures. China reportedly has influence over some of the insurgent groups, and wants to see its border with Myanmar stable in order to bring to fruition several planned development projects in both countries. There is also a view that the UWSA, which has a political pact with the Northern Alliance, might have also temporarily blocked any attempts by other alliance members to fight alongside the AA for its own interests.<sup>144</sup>

The AA is likely funded by supporters within the country as well as other diaspora communities, including in Singapore. In July, Singapore's Home Affairs Ministry announced the deportation of several Myanmar nationals from the country for mobilising support for the AA, including through fundraising activities.<sup>145</sup> The Mynamese authorities also accuse the AA of drug trafficking to fund its various operations. Methamphetamine, a raw material used in the manufacturing of a drug locally known as Ya Ba, is known to be sourced from China via the UWSA controlled areas in Shan State. Sources in Myanmar indicate AA has established a secure route for drug-smuggling by exploiting corruption and inefficiency within Myanmar's law enforcement agencies.<sup>146</sup>

The group also has within its arsenal, heavy weaponry, IEDs and landmines, which sources say are mainly procured from the UWSA or China.<sup>147</sup> The AA is also known to purchase weapons on the black market along

[fighters-and-passengers-aboard-shwepyithit-passenger-bus.](#)

<sup>140</sup> "Arakan Army kidnaps over 40 police, soldiers in Rakhine: military," *The Frontier Myanmar*, October 27, 2019,

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/arakan-army-kidnaps-over-40-police-soldiers-in-rakhine-military>.

<sup>141</sup> "Under Pressure at Home, Arakan Army Says it Will Take Fight to Myanmar Heartland", *Radio Free Asia*, October 27, 2019,

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/rakhine-army-10272019090330.html>.

<sup>142</sup> Steve Sandford, "Myanmar's Arakan Army is Recruiting and Training to Fight Government," *Voice of America*, October 16, 2019,

<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/myanmars-arakan-army-recruiting-and-training-fight-government>.

<sup>143</sup> Iftekharul Bashar, "Arakan Army: Myanmar's New Front of Conflict", *RSIS Commentary*, No. 140, July 12, 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CO19140.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> Lawi Weng, "AA Can't Count on Northern Allies for Help on Battlefield in Rakhine," *The Irrawaddy*, June 5, 2019,

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/aa-cant-count-northern-allies-help-battlefield-rakhine.html>.

<sup>145</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, "MHA Statement on Security Action Taken Against Myanmar Nationals Working in Singapore, for Organising Support for Armed Violence," July 10, 2019,

<https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/mha-statement-on-security-action-taken-against-myanmar-nationals-working-in-singapore-for-organising-support-for-armed-violence>.

<sup>146</sup> "Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State", *International Crisis Group*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/299-fire-and-ice-conflict-and-drugs-myanmar-shan-state>.

<sup>147</sup> "Analysis: Arakan Army - A Powerful New Threat to the Tatmadaw," *The Irrawaddy*, January 8, 2019,



the Thai-Myanmar border and from Kuki rebels based along the Myanmar-India border.<sup>148</sup> Going forward, the AA will remain a formidable security threat in the short and medium-term, and will continue to rely on the Northern Alliance's supply of finances, weapons and sanctuaries. Though the state's security forces have better firepower, the geographic and human terrain is more favourable to the insurgents.

### **ARSA: Weakened, Fragmented, and Evolving**

Although operating in the same region<sup>149</sup>, the ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) militant group poses a low-level threat compared to the AA. Over the past 12 months, ARSA carried out two relatively small-scale attacks on Myanmar security forces.<sup>150</sup>

While no official estimates of the ARSA's current pool of fighters are available, a recent media report indicated that the group has approximately 3,500 fighters based in various refugee camps in Bangladesh.<sup>151</sup> While weakened within Myanmar, the group has re-organised in Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazaar, where more than 1.1 million Rohingyas are housed in makeshift shelters, often in inhospitable conditions. ARSA has succeeded to some extent in exploiting the refugee crisis to recruit members from among the Rohingya, most of whom have been based there since late 2018.<sup>152</sup>

ARSA also has a following among Rohingya diaspora communities around Asia,

especially in Malaysia. However, compared to other militant groups such as the AA, ARSA is hampered by its lack of access to sophisticated weapons and explosives. As a result, it mostly conducts hit-and-run operations. ARSA also does not have a permanent training ground, akin to the AA in Kachin state, northern Myanmar. Bangladeshi authorities also deny claims that ARSA has an active presence within the Rohingya refugee camps around Cox's Bazaar.<sup>153</sup> Over the past two years, ARSA has shifted from a Myanmar-facing insurgent model to a network that routinely employs intimidation and other violent tactics (including abducting and killing Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh who oppose them).

ARSA also appears to be riven by internal disputes,<sup>154</sup> as the group increasingly partakes in various cross-border criminal activities such as murder, robbery and looting of weapons from law enforcement agencies in the Rohingya refugee camps across the border.<sup>155</sup> Bangladeshi authorities have claimed that at least 14 criminal groups are active within these camps in Cox's Bazaar, some reportedly linked to ARSA.<sup>156</sup>

In the near term, ARSA's operations will remain limited to northern Rakhine state near the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Without any external support in terms of sanctuary, finances, arms and ammunition, it will be challenging for ARSA to pose a more significant security threat to the Myanmar state. However, ARSA will continue to survive unless a resolution is found for the

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/analysis-arakan-army-powerful-new-threat-tatmadaw.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Though AA and ARSA operate in the same region, ARSA's area of operation is limited to the northern part of Rakhine state.

<sup>150</sup> Myint, Moe, "Govt Reports 2nd ARSA Attack in Northern Rakhine State This Month," *The Irrawaddy*,

January 24, 2019,

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/govt-reports-2ndarsa-attack-northern-rakhine-state-month.html>;

Interview with an analyst at the Myanmar Institute of Peace Studies (MIPS), May 2019.

<sup>151</sup> "Rohingya militants active in Bangladeshi refugee camps," *Deutsche Welle*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/rohingya-militants-active-in-bangladeshi-refugee-camps/a-50490888>

<sup>152</sup> Interview with an official of the Bangladesh Police, April 2019.

<sup>153</sup> "ARSA, Arakan Army Bases': Dhaka protests 'baseless' claim by Myanmar," *The Daily Star*, January 10, 2019,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/world/southasia/news/dhaka-blasts-myanmar-allegation-arsabases-bangladesh-1685146>.

<sup>154</sup> At least 17 Rohingya refugees have been killed in internal disputes in Bangladesh from January to May 2019.

<sup>155</sup> "Gangs taking control of Bangladesh Rohingya camps, report warns," *The Frontier Myanmar*, April 25, 2019, <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/gangs-taking-control-of-bangladesh-rohingya-camps-report-warns>.

<sup>156</sup> "14 Rohingya Criminal Groups active in Cox's Bazar," *The Prothom Alo*, May 27, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZfuC3M>.

Rohingya refugee crisis, which may disrupt support from diaspora communities.<sup>157</sup>

### Islamic State and Al-Qaeda: An Emerging Threat

Disgruntled and disenfranchised segments of Rohingyas, within Bangladesh and elsewhere, remain vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment by transnational Islamist terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The issue continues to be significantly played up in the social media propaganda of members and supporters in both groups, with the conflict on the ground portrayed within the frame of religion (i.e. Rohingya Muslims versus the Buddhist military), boosting the narrative of Muslim victimhood.

Al-Qaeda has also recently attempted to recast the Rohingya issue by framing it within an Islamic eschatological end-of-times narrative known as 'Ghazwatul Hind', describing one of the final battles that will occur in Al-Hind, which generally denotes the Indian Subcontinent/South Asian region, encompassing Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and, to some extent, the Rakhine state in western Myanmar.<sup>158</sup>

Militant groups in South Asia have long used concepts such as the Ghazwatul Hind in their radicalisation and recruitment efforts; in fact, there has been renewed interest among jihadists, particularly in the Bengali language domain recently. On 13 April 2019, one of Al-Qaeda's media arms, the "Ummah Network", uploaded a video on YouTube featuring Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani, a prominent

Bengali ideologue considered the voice of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh.<sup>159</sup> The 25-minute-long video, titled "Ghazwa-e-Hind is knocking your door", identified the Arakan as part of a global crisis facing the Muslim community. The video further exhorted Muslims to rise up against "apostate" forces against Islam in Muslim regions perceived to be under attack.

IS networks also continue to target Myanmar and have attempted to exploit the Rohingya issue repeatedly, with some sources suggesting the group plans to conduct attacks in Myanmar and its overseas interests using disgruntled Rohingya refugees. In May 2019, Malaysian authorities arrested two Rohingyas along with Indonesians and Malaysians for allegedly plotting IS inspired 'wolf pack' attacks in the country.<sup>160</sup> The revelation that IS-linked groups have recruited Rohingya refugees further afield, underscores the known risk that the Rohingya crisis can be exploited even beyond Bangladesh-Myanmar territory.

The penetration of transnational threat groups such as IS and AQ into Rohingya refugee camps persists as the Rohingya refugee crisis rumbles on without a resolution likely in the near term. Recent repatriation deals have been ineffectual. According to reports, most Rohingyas are afraid to return to Rakhine state without obtaining serious security guarantees from the Myanmar government, including restitution of lost land and property, access to public services, and formal recognition of their status as Rohingya, among other conditions, which the Myanmar government has refused to grant.<sup>161</sup> Growing Buddhist nationalism and radicalism

<sup>157</sup> Iftekharul Bashar, "Rohingya Crisis and Western Myanmar's Evolving Threat Landscape," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 11, Issue 6, June 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CTTA-June-2019.pdf>.

<sup>158</sup> The concept of 'Ghazwatul Hind' is premised primarily on three hadiths (Prophetic Sayings) which refer to the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>159</sup> Ummah Network (Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani), "The Prophecy of Ghazwatul Hind is knocking your door", YouTube Video, 24:14, April 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xi1bd3FqVds>.

<sup>160</sup> "Malaysian police foil terror attacks with arrests of four suspects," *ChannelNews Asia*, May 13, 2019,

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-police-foiled-terror-attacks-assassinationramadan-11528788>.

<sup>161</sup> David Scott Mathieson, "The Rohingya's Right of No Return: Why the refugees still aren't going back to Myanmar," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/opinion/rohingya-refugees-myanmar-return-bangladesh.html>;

Recently, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China, which plans to invest in several developmental projects in the area, agreed to establish a tripartite working group to evaluate the issue of Rohingya repatriation, although there has been no notable progress as yet. For details see "Bangladesh, China, Myanmar to jointly evaluate progress over Rohingya repatriation," *The Daily Star*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya->

in Myanmar is also a contributing factor to radicalisation among pockets of Rohingya Muslims – which could be further exploited by groups such as AQ and IS.

## Buddhist Nationalism

Myanmar has seen an upsurge in Buddhist nationalism since the end of military rule in 2011, which has fueled anti-Muslim rhetoric and communal violence across the country. This trend has continued into 2019.

One of the most prominent movements in this regard is the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation (formerly known as the Ma Ba Tha).<sup>162</sup> On 17 June 2019, the group held a public event in a monastery in north Yangon, which drew a 5,300-strong audience of monks, nuns, and laypeople.<sup>163</sup> At the event announcing its return to the political stage, the ultra-nationalist group made an open call for the Buddhist majority in Myanmar to not vote for the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD) party in the upcoming general elections. It later released a two-page statement framing the Rohingya issue as a matter of national security and asserted that ongoing attempts to prosecute the controversial monk U Wirathu were harmful to Buddhism.<sup>164</sup> The group has previously accused the Aung San Suu Kyi-led administration of allowing immigration of Muslims and has supported the military crackdown that precipitated the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017.

It is noteworthy that some soldiers from the state military attended the June event, some dressed in uniform, with one military commander also reportedly donating US\$20,000 to the foundation.<sup>165</sup> Military spokesman Brigadier-General Zaw Min Tun,

later justified the cash donation as “necessary” and done in the name of defending Buddhism. Although it purports to promote Buddhist principles of peace and harmony, the rebranded Ma Ba Tha has become a crucial source of support for hardline ethno-nationalists among Myanmar’s Buddhist majority, who have successfully lobbied for, among other things, several controversial laws designed to protect Buddhist concerns, but viewed by religious minorities as discriminatory to their interests.<sup>166</sup>

In the previous 2015 elections, Ma Ba Tha hardliners positioned themselves against Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, proclaiming then President U Thein Sein, a former military general, to be a true defender of Buddhism.<sup>167</sup> While their attempt at politicising Buddhism failed then, with NLD winning a landslide victory, the rebranded movement’s return to the political scene and continued backing of the military in the 2020 elections is significant, and could further exacerbate inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions in the country.

## Outlook

In the run up to the 2020 general elections, the Aung San Suu Kyi-led incumbent NLD remains in favour with the country’s ethnic-majority Barmars, which significantly boosts its re-election prospects. However, the military is increasingly consolidating its influence in the political sphere once again by, among other things, pushing in parliament for broader powers to be given to the military-dominated National Defense and Security Council (NDSC), including the power to call for the dissolution of parliament.<sup>168</sup>

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crisis/bangladesh-china-myanmar-jointly-evaluate-progress-over-rohingya-repatriation-1804615.

<sup>162</sup> Ma Ba Tha renamed itself as the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation in 2017 following the decision of the Ma Ha Na or State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee to ban the organisation.

<sup>163</sup> “Nationalist group condemns Myanmar sedition case against Buddhist monk”, *Today*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/nationalist-group-condemns-myanmar-sedition-case-against-buddhist-monk>.

<sup>164</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “The Return of Ma Ba Tha to the Political Scene in Myanmar,” *ISEAS Commentary*, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/ite>

[m/9847-the-return-of-ma-ba-tha-to-the-political-scene-in-myanmar-by-nyi-nyi-kyaw](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/commentaries/ite/m/9847-the-return-of-ma-ba-tha-to-the-political-scene-in-myanmar-by-nyi-nyi-kyaw).

<sup>165</sup> “Nationalist group condemns Myanmar sedition case against Buddhist monk”, *Today*.

<sup>166</sup> Amresh Gunasingham, “Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An Examination”, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol 11, Issue 3, March 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CTTA-March-2019.pdf>.

<sup>167</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “The Return of Ma Ba Tha to the Political Scene in Myanmar”.

<sup>168</sup> San Yamin Aung, “Myanmar Military Eyes More Powers for National Security Council,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 20, 2019,

As the 2020 election increasingly shapes up as a contest pitting pro-democracy forces against the military, minorities across the country increasingly feel excluded from the political process. This sense of alienation is clearest in Rakhine State where the future of the 700,000 Rohingyas expelled in 2017 remains uncertain. A continued sense of political exclusion is also fueling a more fervent nationalism within the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist population.

Separately, Myanmar's peace process has stagnated in recent years, with the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), the key peace-making instrument to bring an end to many of the country's conflicts, still in limbo. A coalition of armed groups known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), which includes several key players such as the Northern Alliance and the UWSA, has until now rejected the peace accord, saying it does not represent an effective path to peace in Myanmar. The UWSA, the country's largest ethnic armed group with over 30,000 soldiers, continues to insist on retaining an armed force, which is a significant bone of contention for the state military apparatus. Renewed attacks in Rakhine state (by the AA) and Shan state (by the Northern Alliance), further indicate that Myanmar's path to peace remains precarious in the near term.

## THAILAND

*2019 marked the sixteenth year of an ethnic and religious insurgency in Thailand's predominantly Malay-Muslim South, since violence resurged following a two-decade lull. During this period, more than 20,000 violent incidents have taken place, leaving over 7,000 people dead and 13,000 others*

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-eyes-powers-national-security-council.html>.

<sup>169</sup> "Summary of Incidents in Southern Thailand, August 2019," *Deep South Watch*, September 13, 2019, <https://deepsouthwatch.org/en/node/11935>.

<sup>170</sup> There were 1,794 incidents in 2013, 1,357 in 2014, 943 in 2015, 815 in 2016, 581 in 2017 and 548 in 2018. See Srisompob Jitpiromsri, "The Deep South of Thailand: 15 Years in Fields of Open Conflict, Violence and Peace Narratives," *Asian International Studies Review*. 20, Special Issue (June 2019), p. 83.

*injured.<sup>169</sup> Despite a continuing downward trend in violence<sup>170</sup> since the launch of a peace dialogue in 2013, progress in the talks has been slow and the conflict far from resolved. Coordinated bomb attacks in Bangkok in August, swiftly followed by another series of attacks in the violence-plagued Yala province in November, serve as a reminder of the insurgents' continued capacity to launch high-profile attacks. They also demonstrate the root cause of the conflict has not been addressed adequately.*

## Expanded Operations

The conflict in Southern Thailand, where Malay Muslims constitute about 80 per cent of the population, is essentially rooted in the annexation of the Patani sultanate at the turn of the twentieth century by Siam (Thailand's old name). Peaceful resistance against the Buddhist-dominated Thai rule and its assimilation policies gathered force in the 1940s but was met with strong suppression. Most notably, the mysterious disappearance of a prominent cleric Haji Sulong Abdulkadir, who spearheaded the autonomy movement in 1954, dashed hopes of a peaceful resistance.<sup>171</sup> It marked a watershed moment in Thailand's Deep South struggle, laying the foundations for the emergence of an armed separatist movement in the 1960s. Since then, the armed insurgency has waxed and waned over time but never completely ceased.

As of October 2019, there were 350 violent incidents recorded, leaving 148 killed and 219 injured, according to Deep South Watch, a monitoring group that tracks separatism-related attacks coming out of the region.<sup>172</sup> The year also saw the lowest casualties recorded since 2004. The number of attacks targeting civilians accordingly declined,

<sup>171</sup> For a detailed discussion of Malay Muslims' peaceful resistance against assimilation and the autonomy movement after the Second World War (1947–1959), see W.K. Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 66–70; Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University), pp. 62–110.

<sup>172</sup> Data from DSW/CSCD made available to author, November 20, 2019.



although some incidents sparked widespread public outrage, anger and fear.

On December 28, 2018, a group of militants held hostage staff at a community hospital in Rangae, Narathiwat and seized the building, from which they launched a gun and grenade attack on a nearby civilian defence volunteer base.<sup>173</sup> A month later on 10 January, 2019, suspected insurgents dressed as soldiers shot dead four state security personnel guarding a public school in Yarang, Pattani. The gunshots sparked chaos and panic among teachers and students, and a female student was reportedly injured.<sup>174</sup> The launching of insurgency operations inside a hospital and school drew widespread criticism among locals and humanitarian groups.<sup>175</sup>

Another attack on a Buddhist temple in Narathiwat's Sungai Padi district in January 2019, which saw two monks killed, also sparked public outrage.<sup>176</sup> The attack was suspected to be in retaliation against the killing of two insurgents by Thai security forces in Yarang district, Pattani, and an imam in Rueso district, Narathiwat, a few days earlier.<sup>177</sup> This was the first known deadly attack targeting monks since July 2015.<sup>178</sup>

Two other coordinated attacks outside the four southernmost provinces in 2019 suggest insurgent groups have retained the capacity to launch attacks beyond the conflict area. In March 2019, 11 bombs exploded in Phatthalung and six others in Satun, two

provinces adjacent to the violence-ravaged region. Although the attacks took place during an election campaign, Thai police believe it was linked to the southern insurgency rather than national politics.<sup>179</sup> The coordinated bombings caused minor damage to property but no injuries or fatalities.

In August, another series of coordinated bombings in Bangkok and an adjacent province targeted strategic locations symbolising the Thai state. On August 1, 2019, two home-made bombs were planted in front of the Royal Thai Police's headquarters in Bangkok. Both were defused in time. The next day, a further seven bombs were found in three locations around the capital and the adjacent Nonthaburi province, six of which exploded. The bombs had targeted a government office complex, the office of the Defence Ministry's permanent secretary and a public train station. Fires also broke out in Pratunam and Siam Square in Bangkok's downtown area on the same day. Bomb fragments were found among the wreckage.<sup>180</sup>

Soon after, police arrested two suspects linked to the bombs discovered in front of the police headquarters. Twenty-two-year-old Lu-ai Sae-ngae and 29-year-old Windan Maha were apprehended while returning to their hometown in Narathiwat's Rueso district. Their confessions helped police in making other arrests. As of September 2019, a further 19 arrest warrants have been issued

<sup>173</sup> "Federation seeks incentives for hospital staff in South." *The Nation*, January 1, 2019. While buildings were damaged, no casualties were reported.

<sup>174</sup> "4 volunteers slain in Pattani," *Bangkok Post*, January 11, 2019; "Poet senthang ni thim kha asachut 4 sop thi yarang chonotho pit lom lai la ik 5" [Reveal escape route of insurgents killing four Or So in Yarang, officials circle area going after five others], *Isra News Agency*, January 10, 2019.

<sup>175</sup> Thomas Davin, Representative, UNICEF Thailand, issued a statement condemning attacks on school and expressed concern for the safety of students, teachers and other personnel living in conflict area. "UNICEF ok thalaengkan kangwon to sawatdiphap dek lang koet het buk ying chaonathi nai rongrian changwat Pattani" [UNICEF issues statement expressing concern for children's safety after shooting of officials in school in Pattani], *Matichon*, January 11, 2019, [https://www.matichon.co.th/local/news\\_1313691](https://www.matichon.co.th/local/news_1313691)

<sup>176</sup> Waedaoh Harai and Napak Treedangnoi, "Fears for monks after temple attack," *Bangkok Post*, January 21, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> Telephone interview conducted by the author with a mid-ranking BRN member close to the BRN leadership, February 5, 2019.

<sup>178</sup> "Muea lueat tong puean chiwon ... 15 pi phaendin ron moranaphap 21 chep 27" [When blood soaks robe, 15 years of burning land, 21 monks killed, 17 injured] *Isra News Agency*, January 19, 2019, <https://www.isranews.org/south-news/stat-history/73068-blood-73068.html>.

<sup>179</sup> "Satun bombs linked to last year's blast," *Bangkok Post*, March 14, 2019.

<sup>180</sup> "Raboet krungthep phobo toro rabu phaen prathutsakam mai mueankap chon thai suan adit rong maethap phak 4 bok phonngan BRN" [Bangkok Bombing: Police chief states attack plan 'unlike Thai bandits', former fourth army chief believes BRN's work], *BBC Thai*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-49274203>.

and another suspect arrested.<sup>181</sup> Judging from the released names of the suspects, they appear to be Muslims and possibly from the southernmost region.

Evidence suggests that the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front, or BRN) was behind the Bangkok attacks. Suspect Lu-ai's background neatly fits the profile of many BRN fighters. He was reportedly a pious religious teacher who graduated from Thamavitya Mulniti School and taught Islam at a *tadika* (religious educational institute for elementary students).<sup>182</sup> Interviews with BRN members revealed that Thamavitya Mulniti School has been a hotbed for the activities of the Patani liberation movement, particularly when Sapaeing Baso, the BRN's chairman, was its headmaster.<sup>183</sup> The school's administrators have strongly denied these claims.

Statements from the apprehended suspects as well as police investigations also suggest the Bangkok attacks may have been planned in northern Malaysia.<sup>184</sup> An informed BRN source interviewed also confirmed his group's responsibility.<sup>185</sup> The group has previously ventured out of its usual theatres of operation to launch attacks elsewhere – it was linked to a bomb attack in the capital on New Year's eve in 2006, for example.<sup>186</sup>

The most recent large-scale attack occurred on November 5, when at least twenty gunmen attacked a security checkpoint in the Lam Phaya sub-district in Yala's Muang district, killing 15 people and wounding four others. Thirteen victims were Buddhists and two were Muslims.<sup>187</sup> Many of the slain victims were also village defence volunteers (known as *Cho Ro Bo*). The November attack, which the authorities blamed on the BRN, was significant for two reasons. It saw the largest number of casualties recorded in a single operation on state-affiliated defence volunteers since 2004.<sup>188</sup>

The attack also took place amid a general decline in militant violence in recent years. However, while recent attacks have succeeded in attracting media attention and causing public panic, both key objectives of insurgent groups, it remains unclear if this will alter the Thai state's approach to the southern conflict.

Further, the death of rebel fighters held in military custody is commonly also a motivational tool used by militant groups to recruit new fighters. A fresh case occurred on July 21, when Abdullah Isomuso, a suspected insurgent, was found unconscious inside a Pattani military camp, less than a day after his detention under an ongoing martial law.<sup>189</sup> He had been transferred to a hospital in a coma.<sup>190</sup> Abdullah died a month later; his

<sup>181</sup> "Arrest warrants issued for five more Bangkok bombing suspects," *The Nation*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30376448>.

<sup>182</sup> "Yat phu tong songsai mue buem bok khae pai thiao kothomo won ya phoeng duan sarup," [Relative of bomb suspects warns not to hastily jump to conclusions, he only went sightseeing in Bangkok] *Isra News Agency*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.isranews.org/content-page/67-south-slide/79068-kin.html>.

<sup>183</sup> Interviews with BRN members, 2016.

<sup>184</sup> Telephone interview with a senior military officer, August 10, 2019. Also see "CSD order to take lead in capital bomb blitz investigation," *Bangkok Post*, August 13, 2019.

<sup>185</sup> Telephone interview with an informed BRN member, August 28, 2019.

<sup>186</sup> The Bangkok bombing in 2006 claimed three lives and injured more than 15 people. Another attack in the Upper South in 2016 killed four and injured 37 people. For more details, see Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "Thai blasts a wakeup call for peace?" *New Mandala*, August 14, 2016, <http://www.newmandala.org/thai-blasts-wake-call-peace/>; "Changwat chaidan phaktai: Kradum 5 met

*nai kan kaekhai panha fai tai*" [Five issues to tackle to quell the Southern fire], *BBC Thai*, August 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-49290602>.

<sup>187</sup> Ten of them were men, and five were women. "Siang chak lam pha ya chut chut . chomti pom chorobo tai 15 koet khuen dai ngai" [Voice from Lamphaya, how did it happen?], *Isra News Agency*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.isranews.org/south-news/documentary/82290-fifteen-82290.html>.

<sup>188</sup> The Cho Ro Bo are civilians mobilised to guard their own communities against insurgents. The Interior Ministry-funded group, equipped with shotguns, have worked as part-time security guards since 2004. While the Thai military has portrayed them as civilians, the BRN perceives them as a legitimate military target.

<sup>189</sup> Martial law remains imposed throughout the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. It allows military officers to hold suspects for up to seven days without a court warrant. In most districts, an emergency decree is concurrently enforced, allowing for suspects to be held for up to 30 days. This enables the military to increase the detention period.

<sup>190</sup> "Phu tong songsai khadikhawm mankhong mot sati khao raksa tua hong ICU rongphayaban



funeral was attended by thousands of Thai Muslims, some of whom view him as a martyr.<sup>191</sup>

### BRN's Modus Operandi and Tactics

Since the early 1990s, the BRN, the strongest separatist group operating in the South, has been recruiting and training a new generation of fighters under the radar of the Thai authorities.<sup>192</sup> While the low-intensity conflict has rumbled on for decades, it was given a fresh spark on 4 January 2004, when suspected BRN operatives raided an army depot in Narathiwat, making off with 403 weapons, 366 of which were M-16 rifles.<sup>193</sup> The audacious raid marked the beginning of a dramatic upsurge in violence.<sup>194</sup>

The BRN has carried out its operations mostly in secrecy to escape infiltration and repression by the Thai state. Civilians, Muslim and Buddhist, have been particularly targeted in the violence. From January 2004 to October 2019, some 7,000 people were killed in the Deep South, with around 4,900 considered “soft targets”. Of these, about 3,100 slain victims were Muslims and most of the rest were Buddhists.<sup>195</sup> While the number of Muslim victims has been proportionally higher, attacks against Buddhists have arguably been more intense.

*pattani lang thuk khum tua khao khai thahan*”

[Suspected insurgent unconscious, transferred to ICU in Patani hospital after held in military custody] *Prachatai*, July 21, 2019, [https://prachatai.com/journal/2019/07/83518?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=push\\_notification&utm\\_campaign=rss\\_pushcrew-notification\\_source=pushcrew\\_rss](https://prachatai.com/journal/2019/07/83518?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=push_notification&utm_campaign=rss_pushcrew-notification_source=pushcrew_rss)

<sup>191</sup> Hara Shintaro, “The tale of Abdullah Isomuso – Not a movie,” *Prachatai*, September 20, 2019, [https://prachatai.com/english/node/8217#\\_ftn24](https://prachatai.com/english/node/8217#_ftn24).

<sup>192</sup> Interviews with dozens of former and active BRN members, 2016.

<sup>193</sup> Supalak Ganjanakhundee and Don Pathan, *Santiphap nai pleo phloeng* [Peace in the Fire] (Bangkok: Nation Books, 2004), p. 31.

<sup>194</sup> *Surat*, an internal BRN newsletter, defined the army depot raid on 4 January 2004 as the beginning of “a revolutionary war of Patani people against Siamese colonialists”. This should be understood in reference to the BRN’s seven-step revolutionary plan found in its training handbook for new recruits: raising people’s consciousness, organising the masses, establishing the organisation, setting up a military force, building national unity, preparing the revolution and finally igniting the revolution. The booklet became public after a Thai security official found it in the

Most insurgent attacks have gone unclaimed, which appears to be a strategy to throw the Thai state into confusion and in turn protect the organisation from criminal liability. Further, there is an increasing correlation between the BRN’s military operations and its political manoeuvres. In April 2017, for example, it issued a statement amid two major coordinated attacks, aimed at demonstrating its command of the vast majority of fighters on the ground, likely to signal that any attempts at conflict resolution arising from peace talks would not be sustainable without the involvement of the major insurgent force.<sup>196</sup> The BRN also seeks to raise the profile of the conflict so as to engage international observers in the peace process.<sup>197</sup>

More broadly, the BRN perceives its undertaking as an ethno-nationalist struggle against Siamese colonialism. It seeks to gain independence and establish a Shariah-based state in the specific territory historically known as Patani.<sup>198</sup> Unlike in Indonesia and the Philippines, Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand have largely focused on local issues and not forged links with global jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, nor shared in their vision of creating a transnational “Caliphate”.<sup>199</sup>

Narathiwat house of Masae Useng, a BRN senior leader, in 2003.

<sup>195</sup> Data from Pattani-based think tank Deep South Watch (DSW)/The Centre for Conflict Studies and Cultural Diversity (CSCD) made available to the author, November 13, 2019.

<sup>196</sup> The first coordinated attack occurred on 6 April involved 32 bombing, torching and shooting attacks spanning 19 districts in the four southernmost provinces. A second operation on 19 April, saw 21 attacks in 14 districts in Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla. The suspected insurgents threw or fired grenades at security forces or village defence volunteers. Interview with two senior BRN leaders in the political wing, undisclosed location, July 5, 2017.

<sup>197</sup> In a statement issued on April 10, 2017 amid two coordinated attacks, the BRN called for the inclusion of international observers in the peace talks as a pre-condition to its participation. In addition, the group also seeks mediation by a third party. The Thai state has rejected these conditions.

<sup>198</sup> BRN, “*Undang-Undang Dasar 1987*” [1987 Charter] (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), p. 2.

<sup>199</sup> From several interviews with BRN members. Interviews with a mid-ranking BRN member in the youth wing, May 22, 2017; two senior BRN members in the political wing, July 5, 2017; a senior

According to senior BRN members, the group is cognisant that any link to global jihadist groups could harm its cause.<sup>200</sup> Thus far, BRN's political vision and strategic considerations have served as a bulwark against transnational Islamist groups making significant inroads into southern Thailand. Nevertheless, a protracted conflict could create opportunities that transnational jihadists could exploit.<sup>201</sup>

In financing its activities, the BRN operates on a principle of economic self-reliance and does not appear to be heavily dependent on outside support. According to a BRN source and an internal document, the group has three main sources of revenue: *zakat* (Islamic tax), membership fees and profits from operating businesses.<sup>202</sup> A substantial amount of *zakat* is derived from Malay Muslims both in southern Thailand and abroad. Little is known about *zakat* received from outsiders, and the significance of these contributions to the movement's overall revenue is unclear.

BRN members are also expected to make financial contributions rather than receive monetary compensation from the organisation, with this practice framed as a religious obligation. Some BRN members also run businesses, particularly in trade and agriculture, with the profits used to support the group's activities.<sup>203</sup> BRN fighters have also stolen or seized weapons and vehicles

from Thai security forces and other victims during several of their operations, which they have subsequently used in other attacks.<sup>204</sup>

## Responses

The Thai state has generally adopted a two-pronged approach of counterinsurgency and economic development to address violence in the restive south, but with little success. The state has traditionally not favoured a formal peace process due to fears this would elevate the status of the insurgents and risk internationalising the conflict, which it regards as an internal affair. In 2013, the government of Yingluck Shinawatra did, however, formalise peace talks with the BRN, despite the military's opposition.<sup>205</sup>

While initial iterations of these talks, with Kuala Lumpur acting as facilitator, were short-lived and did not yield tangible results, they succeeded in pushing the BRN to reveal itself publicly for the first time and begin communicating with the general public through mainstream and social media - although its internal structure and operations remain largely secretive.<sup>206</sup> Later, when General Prayut Chan-ocha took over the premiership after staging a military coup in May 2014, he maintained the formalised peace dialogue, albeit under a new lexicon, despite being its most vocal critic while he was army chief.<sup>207</sup>

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BRN member formerly in charge of overseas youth members, September 18, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Interview with a senior BRN member formerly in charge of overseas youth members, September 18, 2016.

<sup>201</sup> Some Thai security forces also identify criminality as the primary source of insurgency in the Deep South, yet this perception is not substantially supported by evidence. Also see Joseph Chinyong Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts: Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010); Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Sascha Helbardt, *Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organisation and Insurgent Practices of BRN-Coordinate* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015).

<sup>202</sup> Interview with a BRN member who formerly took part in fund raising, May 21, 2017; [BRN], "*Kursus Motivasi, Terhadap Staff*" [Motivation Course for Core Staff] (unpublished manuscript, May 11, 2001), pp. 4–5.

<sup>203</sup> Interview with a former female BRN member, October 22, 2013; [BRN], "Motivation Course for Core Staff", 5.

<sup>204</sup> Interview with a mid-ranking BRN member, November 26, 2016.

<sup>205</sup> Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "The Shifting Battleground: Peace Dialogue in Thailand's Malay-Muslim South" in *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, ed. Michael J. Montesano, Terence Chong and Mark Heng (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 148–153.

<sup>206</sup> The BRN has released several video clips on YouTube, made public statements and given a few media interviews to foreign press since 2013. For contents of the six video clips released in 2013, see Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "*Senthang krabuankan santiphap patani*" [The Passage of Patani Peace Process] (Songkhla: Prince of Songkhla University and STEP project, 2015), pp. 118–146.

<sup>207</sup> The new lexicon *kan phutkhui phuea santisuk* (Dialogue for peace and happiness) bears overtones of the military's countrywide campaign to bring back *khwamsuk* (happiness) after years of

On the insurgents' side, the BRN has expressed no willingness to take part in the military-led dialogue. A new umbrella organisation called Mara Patani [*Majlis Syura Patani* (Patani Consultative Council)], was formed in March 2015 to represent Party B (identified as *phuhentang chak rat* or "people with different opinions from the state"). It comprised four liberation movements – *Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani* (Patani Islamic Liberation Front – BIPP), two factions of Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO-DSPP and PULO-MKP) and *Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani* (Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement – GMIP) – and a few BRN members.<sup>208</sup>

Most leaders of these separatist groups resided in Malaysia and seemed to have little role, if any, in controlling fighters on the ground. Mara Patani also suffered from a legitimacy deficit, with some observers accusing the group of being a proxy of Kuala Lumpur – an allegation its spokesperson has strongly refuted.<sup>209</sup> While some BRN members joined Mara Patani, it was questionable if they had a mandate from the organisation.<sup>210</sup> Despite its refusal to join these talks, the BRN has expressed its readiness to participate in future dialogues if its demand for international observers is heeded.<sup>211</sup>

At present, the peace process remains plagued by various obstacles. The absence of BRN in the process, when it is the key insurgent organisation on the ground, will

likely prolong the state of insecurity in the region. Conversely, Mara Patani's ability to sway the ground remains in doubt. The Thai authorities' foot-dragging has also raised doubts over their serious commitment to the peace process. For one, the junta has insisted that the peace dialogue was not about negotiation.<sup>212</sup> It also refused to officially acknowledge Mara Patani as its dialogue partner, fearing that this would amount to recognising the existence of organised armed groups and risk attracting international intervention.

The head of the government's negotiation team has also changed twice in less than a year. The appointment of General Udomchai Thammasararat, former southern commander, in late 2018 as the new head of the Thai dialogue panel, which followed Kuala Lumpur's appointment of Abdul Rahim Noor, a former Malaysian police chief, as a new facilitator, signalled an attempt to refocus attention on the BRN, although this has done little to break the current stalemate in talks.

In February 2019, Mara Patani called for Udomchai's removal, after taking offense at his BRN overtures, and suspended its engagement in the peace dialogue until after the general election scheduled on March 24.<sup>213</sup> Its chief negotiator Shukri Hari also resigned in May due to health reasons.<sup>214</sup> In September, Prayut, who took office for a second term after the Thai election, appointed General Wanlop Rugsanaoh, the

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political polarisation. The employment of a new term is tacitly meant to distinguish this track from the previous initiative. The junta also changed the government representatives in the peace dialogue, with military officials assuming the driver's seat.

<sup>208</sup> Abu Hafez Al-Hakim, "What is Mara Patani?", *Deep South Watch*, May 26, 2015, <https://deepsouthwatch.org/en/node/7211>. PULO-P4, led by Shamsuddin Khan, initially joined but later pulled out due to internal disagreement. The two factions of PULO agreed to merge on April 28, 2018.

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Abu Hafez Al-Hakim, senior BIPP member and Mara Patani spokesman, northern Malaysia, May 20, 2017.

<sup>210</sup> In a rare media interview in March 2018, Shukri Hari, a BRN member who joined Mara Patani, refused to answer the question on mandate, saying it was the BRN's secret. See "Exclusive: *huana thim mara patani mot wang rathaban wang phueng phra barami ro 10*" [Exclusive: Mara Patani leader pins no hope on government, calling for Rama 10's

help], *BBC Thai*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-43516716>.

<sup>211</sup> The BRN's statement, April 10, 2017.

<sup>212</sup> See, for example, "Nakkhao tham - nayok top : phutkhui santisuk rop mai yang mai henchop TOR" [Journalists ask - PM answers: TOR for new peace dialogue not yet approved], *Isra News Agency*, August 29, 2016, [https://www.isranews.org/content-page/67-south-slide/49597-tor\\_49597.html](https://www.isranews.org/content-page/67-south-slide/49597-tor_49597.html).

<sup>213</sup> Mara Patani was offended by Udomchai's request to meet Shukri Hari in person but refusal to meet Mara Patani as a group. See "Bik mao chaeng mai lom phutkhui mara pa tani tae yam tong tham tam khanton" [Big Mao clarifies talk with Mara Patani to continue, yet must follow procedure], *Isra News Agency*, February 3, 2019, <https://www.isranews.org/content-page/67-south-slide/73494-marapatani.html>.

<sup>214</sup> "Thailand 'Not Sincere' in Negotiating with Southern Rebels, BRN Leader," *BenarNews*, July 17, 2019.

outgoing secretary-general of the National Security Council, as the new head of the Thai peace dialogue panel.<sup>215</sup> Raksono has expressed a willingness to hold discussions with all parties, although he has given no indication when talks will resume.<sup>216</sup>

## Outlook

Hopes of significant progress in the current peace dialogue under the Prayut II government remain moot. Despite the change in the chief of the Thai dialogue panel, the government and the BRN are likely to continue to be at loggerheads over the issue of international observers. Without the BRN's involvement, Mara Patani would continue to suffer from a legitimacy deficit. Prayut's track record also shows that he has no intention of giving any political concessions or considering any form of regional autonomy. His approach remains to quell the violence, while maintaining the status quo.<sup>217</sup>

The recent high-profile attacks, however, could serve as a wake-up call for the government, signalling that a protracted conflict could have wider implications. While the Thai insurgency's strong ethno-nationalist character serves as an obstacle to transnational jihadist influence, there is little room for complacency. As seen in the conflict in southern Philippines, while the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an ex-Muslim rebel group, has publicly expressed opposition to IS, some of its splinter groups have pledged allegiance to the group, a development which has posed serious security challenges for the Philippines government. A similar scenario

cannot be ruled out in the Thai context, if factions within the Southern Thai militant movement agitate for a bolder approach and seek new alliances to achieve their objectives.

At the heart of this conflict is the question of local people's power to manage their own affairs and maintain their way of life. Some use the term "right to self-determination", which could be either internal or external. "Self-determination" could mean varying degrees of autonomy up to outright secession. While the latter is not an option under the Thai constitution, there is room for negotiation under the rubric of internal self-determination. The Thai state will eventually need to address this issue if the dialogue is to be meaningful.

## SINGAPORE

*Although the Islamic State (IS) has suffered territorial losses, directed fewer attacks and lost several of its prominent Syria-based leaders, the group continues to persist online and attracts supporters in the region. The terrorism threat to Singapore is multi-faceted and mainly derived from self-radicalised locals and foreign nationals. In 2019, multiple cases of influencers, recruiters and terrorist financiers, primarily radicalised via online propaganda surfaced. Singapore-based supporters of an ethno-nationalist armed group also caught the authorities' attention for attempting to mobilise support for armed violence overseas. Looming threats on several fronts necessitate the buttressing of various preventive and punitive policies, to*

<sup>215</sup> Mariyam Ahmad and Pimuk Rakkanam, "National Security Council Chief to Lead Thailand in Deep South Peace Talks," *BenarNews*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/Deep-South-peace-talks-09262019154331.html>. An NSC source said that it was meant to prevent a conflict of interest as Udomchai had been appointed as a senator. He denied that this had to do with Mara Patani's call for Udomchai's removal. This information was related to the author by an NSC official involved in the peace dialogue, September 26, 2019.

<sup>216</sup> "A Conversation with Thai Peace Dialogue Panel: Prospects and Challenges for Peace in the Deep South," *YouTube*, November 29, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eg\\_SCr3ymXQ&fbclid=IwAR2wKr9YIEXesX8kE35mw\\_paG1Y4SibLcTdSX\\_-PWloXhrxkkWGRz\\_5b5qA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eg_SCr3ymXQ&fbclid=IwAR2wKr9YIEXesX8kE35mw_paG1Y4SibLcTdSX_-PWloXhrxkkWGRz_5b5qA).

<sup>217</sup> In his first policy address to parliament on July 25, 2019, the newly sworn-in Prayut said the government's priority was to restore peace and security and improve people's lives. His statement reiterated the state's position that the southern conflict was an "internal problem" that did not require political solutions, such as some form of regional autonomy. It also echoed the thinking in some Thai military circles that conflates drug trafficking with the southern insurgency. "*Khamthalaeng nayobai khong khanaratthamontri phon-ek prayut chan-ocha nayokratthamontri thalaeng to ratthasapha*" [Policy address of the government of General Prayut Chan-ocha to the parliament], *Royal Thai Government*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.thaigov.go.th/news/contents/details/21750>.



*protect Singapore's social cohesion and religious harmony.*

### Multi-Dimensional Threat

The terrorist threat arising from Islamist terrorism in Singapore remains high. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), nine self-radicalised individuals were dealt with under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 2019, including three Indonesian domestic workers.<sup>218</sup>

#### *Terrorism Financing*

Throughout its history, IS and its predecessor groups have raised finances through a variety of means, which they have used to conduct a range of terrorist and military operations. With the end of its territorial caliphate, IS will almost certainly attempt a fresh comeback on several fronts as it adopts a global insurgency model. In 2019, pro-IS individuals in Singapore were charged for organising funding for various terrorist-related activities. In April 2019, Imran Kassim became the first Singaporean to be detained under terrorism financing laws for financing terrorist activities. He had wired a sum of \$450 to an individual based in Turkey to fund the publication of IS propaganda material.<sup>219</sup>

Later in September, Ahmed Hussein Abdul Kadir s/o Sheik Uduman became the second local charged under the same law: the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act,

<sup>218</sup> In 2017, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari became the first female in Singapore arrested under ISA. The former infant-care assistant was radicalised online, found to have actively propagated IS' materials on various online platforms and harbored intentions of joining IS. Prior to her arrest, she was actively planning to travel to Syria with her young child. As of June 2019, she has been released from detention with restrictions.

<sup>219</sup> Zhang, Lim Min. "Singaporean Man, 35, Charged with Providing Money to Support ISIS Propaganda Efforts." *The Straits Times*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-man-35-charged-with-providing-money-to-support-isis-propaganda-efforts>.

<sup>220</sup> Koh, Wan Ting. "Singaporean Man Who Supports ISIS Charged with Terrorist Financing, Detained under ISA." *Yahoo News*, September 16, 2019, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/singaporean-man-who-supports-isis-charged-with-terrorist-financing-detained-under-isa-101021823.html>.

<sup>221</sup> Abdullah al-Faisal is a 56-year-old Jamaican born, radical preacher and a former imam at the

Chapter 325. In July 2016, the former information technology engineer had allegedly given S\$1059 to an individual based overseas who was facilitating terrorist acts.<sup>220</sup> In the same year, he separately wired another S\$86 to another individual, with the funds subsequently channelled to Sheikh Abdullah al-Faisal, a U.S. designated Islamist propagandist who has recruited for IS.<sup>221</sup> Hussein was later sentenced to two and a half years jail, in the process also becoming the first Singaporean to be convicted for terrorism financing offences.<sup>222</sup>

#### *Radicalised Foreign Domestic Workers*

Separately, Singapore for the first time also detained three Indonesian domestic workers under the ISA for terrorism involvement, including providing funds to the Indonesian IS-linked group, Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD).<sup>223</sup> Apart from terrorism financing, they had also cultivated a network of pro-militant foreign contacts online, including online boyfriends, who shared their pro-IS ideology. Each woman also maintained several social media accounts to post IS-related propaganda. The trio, who knew one another and had worked in Singapore for between six and 13 years, had been radicalised in 2018 after viewing IS-related content online. They were encouraged by their online networks to emigrate to southern Philippines, Afghanistan or Africa to partake in the activities of pro-IS groups there.<sup>224</sup> One of them, Aninda Afiyantara, 31, was also

Salafi Brixton mosque in South London. He is considered one of the most prolific terrorist recruiters in the world, and had a role in recruiting some of the 7/7 London underground bombers. He also played a role in recruiting up to 250 people from the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago for IS.

<sup>222</sup> Wong, Cara. "Ex-IT Engineer First Singaporean to Be Convicted of Terrorism Financing, Jailed 30 Months." *The Straits Times*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/first-singaporean-to-be-convicted-of-terrorism-financing-jailed-for-30-months>.

<sup>223</sup> "3 Indonesian Domestic Workers Detained under ISA, Investigated for Terrorism Financing: MHA." *Channel News Asia*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/3-indonesian-domestic-workers-detained-isa-terrorism-mha-11934234>.

<sup>224</sup> "3 Indonesian Maids Detained under Internal Security Act for Supporting Terrorism: MHA." *Yahoo News*, September 23, 2019, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/3-indonesian-maids->

prepared to take up arms for IS in Syria and become a suicide bomber.

According to an MHA statement, this was the first instance detention orders were issued against foreign domestic workers; the authorities had previously deported 16 other radicalised foreign domestic workers since 2015. The development of networks of pro-IS supporters online with intentions of becoming suicide operatives, is a new development in the local threat landscape, albeit involving foreigners based in Singapore in this instance. The case sheds light on some of IS' propaganda tactics, which include the use of multiple channels pushing out different messages to various target audiences as well as the group's recruiting of influencers to draw further followers.

### *Links with Key Jihadist Figures*

Some local nationals detained in 2019 displayed a capacity to forge links with key leaders in overseas terror networks. In May, Kuthubeen Haja Najumudeen (Kuthubeen), a 36-year-old licensed money changer, was arrested for harbouring intentions of travelling to Syria to join IS. He was also revealed to have developed close links with Zahran Hashim, the radical preacher who masterminded the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka in April 2019. Having followed Zahran's online sermons over several years, Kuthubeen travelled to Sri Lanka to meet Zahran on several occasions between May 2015 and October 2016. He also regularly communicated with Zahran to seek religious

guidance and contributed funds to Zahran's group, the National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ).<sup>225</sup>

A second detainee, Mohamed Kazali Bin Salleh, 48, a Singaporean businessman, was found to have developed close links with a Syria-based IS militant, Wan Mohd Aquil bin Wan Zainal Abidin (also known as Akel Zainal).<sup>226</sup> The duo met in 2009 when Kazali became radicalised by Akel's extremist views and conspiracy theories.<sup>227</sup> When the latter subsequently decided to leave for Syria in 2013, Kazali provided him with financial assistance for his trip.<sup>228</sup> Kazali also promoted Akel's activities in Syria on social media to inspire other followers and had pledged allegiance to IS' then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Kazali kept in close contact with Akel; among others, Kazali was instructed by Akel in December 2018 to carry out an attack on the Freemasons Centre in Johor Bahru, but did not follow through.<sup>229</sup>

### *Support for Armed Violence Abroad*

In July, a group of Myanmar nationals were arrested and subsequently deported, for using Singapore as a platform to mobilise support for armed violence against the Myanmar state. Investigations found the group had lobbied some members of the local Myanmar community to support the Arakan Army (AA)<sup>230</sup>, an armed group that has conducted violent attacks in Myanmar, and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA).<sup>231</sup> Myanmar news outlets reported that one of the individuals arrested,

[detained-under-internal-security-act-for-supporting-terrorism-mha-092929124.html](https://www.mha.gov.sg/press-releases/2019/05/29/detained-under-internal-security-act-for-supporting-terrorism-mha-092929124.html).

<sup>225</sup> According to the Sri Lankan government, the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) and another associated group set up by Zahran, the Jamathei Millathu Ibraheem fi Seylani, were responsible for the Easter Bombings in Sri Lanka, in which more than 250 were killed and hundreds more injured.

<sup>226</sup> Akel was identified by the Malaysian authorities as responsible for the two recent IS-linked foiled plots to attack places of worship and police stations in Malaysia.

<sup>227</sup> "Two Radicalised Singaporeans Detained under Internal Security Act," *Channel News Asia*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/isa-two-radicalised-singaporeans-detained-internal-security-11245462>.

<sup>228</sup> "Six Detained in M'sian Anti-Terror Swoop, Johor Freemason Building Terror Plot Thwarted," *TODAYonline*, February 15, 2019,

<https://www.todayonline.com/world/six-detained-msonian-anti-terror-swoop-johor-freemason-building-terror-plot-thwarted>.

<sup>229</sup> "Two Radicalised Singaporeans Detained under ISA," *TODAYonline*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/two-radicalised-singaporeans-detained-under-isa>.

<sup>230</sup> The Arakan Army is an armed movement established in 2009 that draws on deep-seated historical resentment felt by some Rakhines towards the ethnic Bamar majority that dominates the central government, who sense that Myanmar's faltering transition to a democracy has not brought the western state greater prosperity or self-determination.

<sup>231</sup> Lai, Linette, "MHA Arrests at Least Six Supporters of Myanmar Insurgent Group in Singapore," *The Straits Times*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mha-arrests-at-least-six-supporters-of-myanmar-insurgent-group-in-singapore>.

Ko Aung Myat Kyaw, was a cousin of AA chief Tun Myat Naing.<sup>232</sup> Another unidentified individual was found to have coordinated fund-raising efforts for AA while in Singapore. According to reports, proceeds raised from these activities were channelled into a “National Fund” to organise militant activities. Socio-cultural events were also organised in Singapore to rally support for the ongoing militancy in Western Myanmar.<sup>233</sup>

## Responses

Singapore has developed a range of policies and programmes involving counter-ideology, terrorist rehabilitation and re-integration, and community engagement, to prevent radicalisation and counter the spread of extremist ideas. For example, Muslim community leaders and a group of volunteer *asatizah* (clerics) from the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) play a leading role in formulating effective counter-narratives to refute extremist teachings online. Community resilience is buffered through initiatives such as the SGSecure movement, which enhances counter-terrorism responses at the societal level. In addition to developing counter-narratives and community resilience, Singapore also relies on legislation to prevent disruptions to racial and religious harmony.

A significant emerging threat for governments around the world is falsehoods deliberately spread online to sow racial and religious discord between communities, exploit fault-lines, as well as undermine public institutions and democratic systems. Singapore’s diverse social landscape creates many opportunities for both state and non-

state actors to manipulate disinformation online, which can, over time, provide fertile ground for extremist ideologies to take root. Terrorist organisations such as IS, have used online disinformation to radicalise people around the world, including in Singapore.<sup>234</sup>

In October 2019, Parliament passed a new law, the Protection from Online Falsehood and Manipulation Act<sup>235</sup>, aimed at tackling the spread of online fake news, through the use of regulatory tools as well as criminal sanctions. It includes powers to order sites like Facebook, Google and Twitter to put warnings next to posts the authorities deem false and, in extreme cases, to take them down.<sup>236</sup> Singapore’s moves are in line with global trends, with France taking steps to enact similar laws against fake news and several other countries, including Australia, planning to follow suit.

Separately, laws on religious harmony, which have protected religious freedoms in Singapore by making clear the boundaries of mutual engagements, have been updated amid signs globally of rising religious extremism, both online and offline, which can lead to hate crimes, terrorism and violent clashes, if left unchecked. Key updates to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), include higher maximum punishments and immediate restraining orders to prevent offensive statements from spreading on social media, measures which enable the government to respond more swiftly to attempts to disrupt social harmony.<sup>237</sup> The updated legislation also curbs increasing attempts at foreign religious interference in the affairs of other countries. This is the first time the law has been updated

<sup>232</sup> Lim, Janice, “Several Myanmar Nationals Arrested for Supporting Armed Violence, Will Be Deported: MHA,” *TODAYonline*, July 11, 2019. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/several-myanmar-nationals-arrested-supporting-armed-violence-and-will-be-deported-mha>.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Parliament of Singapore, “Report of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods Executive Summary,” *Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/Press-Releases/executive-summary---report-of-the-select-committee-on-deliberate-online-falsehoods.pdf>.

<sup>235</sup> Yuen-C, Tham. “Singapore’s Fake News Law to Come into Effect Oct 2,” *The Straits Times*, October 2, 2019, [https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fake-](https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fake-news-law-to-come-into-effect-oct-2)

[news-law-to-come-into-effect-oct-2?utm\\_medium=Social&utm\\_campaign=STFB&utm\\_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2eqk9cHXXeHokSnJD3Au0Pg9wpxWP9\\_bnn9aVaW\\_AwdRx\\_8W50gT9Jgk#Echobox=1569922242](https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/fake-news-law-to-come-into-effect-oct-2?utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=STFB&utm_source=Facebook&fbclid=IwAR2eqk9cHXXeHokSnJD3Au0Pg9wpxWP9_bnn9aVaW_AwdRx_8W50gT9Jgk#Echobox=1569922242).

<sup>236</sup> “Online Falsehoods Bill Narrows, Not Widens, Government’s Powers: Law Ministry,” *Channel News Asia*, May 7, 2019. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/online-falsehoods-bill-pofma-fake-news-narrows-government-powers-11496172>.

<sup>237</sup> Ho, Grace. “Parliament Updates Religious Harmony Law; Stiffer Penalties to Deal with Religious Hate Crimes,” *The Straits Times*, October 8, 2019. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-updates-law-to-uphold-religious-harmony>.

since it was passed in 1990.<sup>238</sup> While never invoked previously, it has served as a deterrent to threats to religious harmony in Singapore.<sup>239</sup>

Complementing the counter-terrorism measures taken by MHA, the government has also taken steps to improve the resiliency of the country's national defence, with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) setting up a new Special Operations Command Centre (SOCC). It is part of a wide-ranging effort to enhance its ability to plan, monitor, and manage counter-terrorism operations.<sup>240</sup> The buttressing of security responses is timely for Singapore, as the threat moves closer to home.<sup>241</sup>

## Outlook

While IS seeks to regroup and expand on multiple fronts, the socio-political challenges in the immediate region, which has seen issues surrounding race and religion politicised, and social cohesion disrupted, provide avenues for local grievances to be exploited by groups such as IS. Online narratives propagated by IS may appeal to potential recruits, especially when using the internet or social media indiscriminately. Singapore is not spared from the pitfalls of extremism and overseas groups who could exploit religious fault lines here. This threat is exacerbated in cyberspace, which is also filling up with new narratives appealing to women to undertake more significant roles in terror networks.

An active security threat emanating from non-Islamist extremist and insurgent groups will also persist in the near term. Overseas movements will continue attempting to use Singapore, a cosmopolitan, globalised and highly-connected city, as a platform to import

their domestic political issues and mobilise support for various activities, including armed violence, which can have harmful national security implications for Singapore. Preventive and counter-measures need to be continually updated against forces that may erode social harmony and threaten Singapore's social fabric.

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<sup>238</sup> Kwang, Kevin, "Explainer: What Is Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and Is It Still Relevant Today?" *Channel News Asia*, August 30, 2019.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/explainer-singapore-maintenance-of-religious-harmony-act-11857020>.

<sup>239</sup> Kwang, Kevin, "Singapore's Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act: What You Need to Know about the Proposed Changes." *Channel News Asia*, September 2, 2019.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/maintenance-of-religious-harmony-act-what-you-need-to-know-11864292>.

<sup>240</sup> Soldiers will soon be equipped with "next generation" technology such as "robotics, unmanned systems, artificial intelligence and data analytics, enabling counter-terrorism operations to be faster, leaner and more lethal." See Zhang, Lim Min, "SAF to Set up New Command Centre by End-2019 to Plan, Monitor and Coordinate Counter-Terror Operations," *The Straits Times*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/saf-to-set-up-new-command-centre-by-end-2019-to-plan-monitor-and-coordinate-counter-terror>

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



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# SOUTH ASIA

## *Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*

### AFGHANISTAN

*In 2019, the conflict in Afghanistan has shown little signs of abatement. If anything, this year has only been deadlier coupled with confusion and uncertainty over the peace process. The Taliban continued to conduct high-profile attacks to weaken and discredit the government.<sup>242</sup> Despite the Taliban's involvement in peace negotiations with different stakeholders, the group has not been deterred from the use of violence. The Taliban will continue to operate along the same lines at least until it clinches a deal with the US. At the same time, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)'s sectarian brutalities in Afghanistan persisted. In November, ISK suffered a major setback when it was deprived of its sanctuaries in eastern Nangarhar province. The on-off peace process may materialise in a US-Taliban deal in 2020 before the US Presidential elections. However, the intra-Afghan dialogue remains uncertain against the backdrop of disputed Afghan Presidential elections, postponing the results.*

#### Insecurity

In its High-Risk List for 2019, the US Special Inspector General on Afghanistan (SIGAR) noted eight critical areas threatening the already fragile stability within Afghanistan. These include: (i) widespread insecurity; (ii) underdeveloped civil policing capability; (iii) corruption; (iv) sluggish economic growth; (v)

illicit narcotics trade; (vi) threats to women's rights; (vii) reintegration of ex-combatants; and (viii) restricted oversight.<sup>243</sup> These eight key areas have been used to discuss insecurity in Afghanistan as well as to analyse the current status of the US-Taliban negotiations, and the probable scenarios that lie ahead.

According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the first nine months of 2019 were as deadly as the same period last year. The Taliban and other militant groups accounted for more civilian casualties<sup>244</sup> compared to the Pro-Government forces (PGF).<sup>245</sup> A total of 8,239 civilian casualties (2,563 deaths and 5,676 injuries) were documented between January and September.<sup>246</sup> The Taliban alone were responsible for 3,823 civilian casualties (922 deaths and 2,901 injuries).<sup>247</sup> This marked a 31 percent jump in casualties compared to the same time period in 2018.<sup>248</sup> Majority of the casualties (42 percent) were caused by suicide and non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IED).<sup>249</sup> The second largest number of casualties was caused by ground engagements (29 percent), followed by aerial attacks (11 percent) in the first nine months of 2019.<sup>250</sup> Area wise, Kabul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Ghazni, and Faryab provinces were the worst-hit in 2019.<sup>251</sup>

#### Taliban's Hold on Afghanistan

Inaugurating the Abdul Raziq Police Academy in October, named after the

<sup>242</sup> "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," *US Department Of Defense*, 2019, p.22, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.

<sup>243</sup> "2019 High-Risk List," *SIGAR*, 2019, [https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/2019\\_High-Risk\\_List.pdf](https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/2019_High-Risk_List.pdf).

<sup>244</sup> Casualties include both injured and those who died as a result of different incidents related to the continuing war in Afghanistan.

<sup>245</sup> "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts: 1 January to 30 September

2019," *UNAMA*, 2019, p.1, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_in\\_armed\\_conflict\\_-\\_3rd\\_quarter\\_update\\_2019.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_-_3rd_quarter_update_2019.pdf).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Aerial attacks carried out by the Coalition Forces and the Afghan Air Force accounted for 74 percent and 19 percent of civilian deaths respectively.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

martyred police chief of Kandahar, the Interior Minister of Afghanistan, Massoud Andrabi, claimed that the Taliban have 'failed in their spring offensive'.<sup>252</sup> However, SIGAR data points to the contrary. Far from having failed, the Taliban were deadlier in 2019 with 3,500 attacks in the third quarter of 2019.<sup>253</sup> Compared to 2018, this marked a 10 percent increase in the lethality of Taliban attacks.<sup>254</sup> Similarly, 80 percent of the election-related violence was attributed to the Taliban.<sup>255</sup>

The kinetic effectiveness of Taliban attacks has also contributed to its overall effective control (and influence) over different territories across Afghanistan in 2019. Unlike 2018, while the Taliban did not take over any provincial capital, the proportion of Afghan territory under Taliban control or influence has increased. Official estimates on this remain unavailable as the Resolute Support mission had stopped publishing such calculations in the first quarter of 2019.<sup>256</sup> The last available estimates though indicated that the Taliban has seen an increase of 18 percent in the total area under its control or influence.<sup>257</sup>

The influence of the Haqqani Network within the Taliban continues to increase ever since Sirajuddin Haqqani became the deputy leader of the insurgent movement in 2015. According to the US Department of Defence (DoD), the Haqqanis have managed to spread themselves outside their original bases in Afghanistan, i.e. Khost, Paktia and Paktika.<sup>258</sup>

The ties between Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban may have weakened over the years, but they are far from over. While the threat of AQ persists, it might not pose a significant challenge to Afghan and Coalition interests.<sup>259</sup> However, a contrasting opinion prevails on the role of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).<sup>260</sup> Although it is an AQ affiliate, AQIS has taken a life of its own; presumably distinct from that of its parent organisation.<sup>261</sup> In Afghanistan, AQIS is likely to have a debilitating impact on the US-Taliban negotiations adversely impacting the Taliban's credibility to deliver on its promise to sever ties with terror outfits in return for a deal. Concerns ranging from AQIS' pledge of allegiance to the Taliban, to the reported killing of the AQIS chief Asim Umar, in a Taliban compound in Helmand in September 2019,<sup>262</sup> to the suspected role of the AQIS assisting the Taliban's takeover of Ghazni in 2018, only show that AQIS and Taliban ties are quite strong.<sup>263</sup>

### Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)

On August 17, 2019, the ISK claimed responsibility for killing 91 members of the Hazara Shia community and wounding 143 others while they were attending a wedding in Kabul. The sectarian tones of this attack, just like the many others that have preceded it, were quite evident. From its very inception, the IS has targeted communities which in its eyes do not conform to its extremist version of Islam. The ISK has simply imported this line of thinking, resulting in conscious targeting of people belonging to different

<sup>252</sup> "Taliban Failed in their Spring Operations: Andrabi," *Tolo News*, October 21, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/taliban-failed-their-spring-operations-andarabi>.

<sup>253</sup> Ayesha Tanzeem, "Taliban Attacks Getting More Effective, SIGAR Says," *Voice Of America*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/taliban-attacks-getting-more-effective-sigar-says>.

<sup>254</sup> Katie Bo Williams, "The Taliban Got Way Deadlier in 2019, Says Pentagon's Afghanistan IG," *Defense One*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/10/taliban-got-way-more-deadly-2019-pentagon/160998/>.

<sup>255</sup> "2019 Election Violence - Election-Related Violence in Afghanistan and its impact on Civilians," *UNAMA*, October 15, 2019, <https://unama.unmissions.org/2019-election-violence-election-related-violence-afghanistan-and-its-impact-civilians>.

<sup>256</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Afghanistan: A War In Crisis," *CSIS*, September 4, 2019, p.123, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-war-crisis>.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," p.21

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>261</sup> "The Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," *The Soufan Centre*, January 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>.

<sup>262</sup> "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia Chief 'Killed in Afghanistan,'" *BBC News*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>.

<sup>263</sup> "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)," *Counter Extremism Project*, November 2019, [https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-aqis#violent\\_history](https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-qaeda-indian-subcontinent-aqis#violent_history).

Islamic sects and other communities.<sup>264</sup> ISK's lethality is demonstrated by its ability to execute mass casualty attacks in Afghanistan's urban centres to cause maximum civilian harm. Having 2,500-4,500 fighters,<sup>265</sup> ISK was able to inflict 1,013 civilian casualties (229 deaths and 784 injured), constituting 12 percent of the total casualties in 2019.<sup>266</sup>

ISK has faced attacks from both the Taliban and Afghan forces periodically, resulting in the loss of 200 fighters and surrender of 254 fighters to the Taliban in northern Jowzjan province last year.<sup>267</sup> In November 2019, as many as 225 fighters of ISK and their families surrendered to the Afghan authorities in Nangarhar.<sup>268</sup> While this may affect ISK's operational capacity, it will be too presumptive to suggest that IS has been "obliterated" in Afghanistan.<sup>269</sup>

In 2019, following the killing of ISK leader Abu Omar al-Khorasani, Maulvi Aslam Farooqi succeeded him.<sup>270</sup> It is unlikely that the killing of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 will have an impact on ISK's organisational strength.<sup>271</sup> The new IS leadership, to which the ISK has pledged its allegiance, will continue to provide ideological agility to the movement in

Afghanistan. In fact, in what has been described as a "boost"<sup>272</sup> to the legitimacy of IS, the acceptance of the new leadership by its "influential affiliate" ISK only proves that the ties between the hub and its spoke are still intact.<sup>273</sup>

### Pro-Government Forces (PGF) – Causing and Incurring Casualties

The PGF, amongst other elements, include the various Afghan forces and Coalition support. The civilian casualties caused by PGF have declined in the second half compared to the first half of 2019 when they were responsible for more civilian injuries and deaths.<sup>274</sup>

The Afghan and coalition forces have been the primary targets of the different domestic rebel groups, particularly the Taliban. The military casualties incurred by the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) remain classified.<sup>275</sup> What is known is that most of the Taliban-led attacks were conducted on check-posts and military bases.<sup>276</sup> Some officials, however, have provided a glimpse of the number of ANDSF casualties. According to President Ashraf

<sup>264</sup> "ISIS's Persecution of Religions," *Counter Extremism Project*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions>.

<sup>265</sup> "Twenty-Fourth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," *UNDOCS*, July 15, 2019, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>.

<sup>266</sup> "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts," p.3.

<sup>267</sup> "Afghanistan: A War in Crisis," p. 185.

<sup>268</sup> "Hundreds of IS Fighters and Families Surrender to Afghan Authorities," *Gandhara RFE/RL*, November 18, 2019, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/hundreds-of-is-fighters-and-families-surrender-to-afghan-authorities/30278807.html>.

<sup>269</sup> Ahmad Sultan and Rafiq Sherzad, "Afghanistan's President Claims Victory over Islamic State," *Reuters*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamicstate/afghanistans-president-claims-victory-over-islamic-state-idUSKBN1XT1UQ>.

<sup>270</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "UN: Islamic State Replaced Leader In Afghanistan After Visit From Central Leadership," *Long War Journal*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un>

[-islamic-state-replaced-leader-in-afghanistan-after-visit-from-central-leadership.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/07/un-islamic-state-replaced-leader-in-afghanistan-after-visit-from-central-leadership.php).

<sup>271</sup> Ruchi Kumar, "Afghan Islamic State After Baghdadi," *The Hindu*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghan-islamic-state-after-baghdadi/article29865207.ece>.

<sup>272</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Key Islamic State Affiliate Appears to Back New Leader," *Voice of America*, November 5, 2019, [https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/key-islamic-state-affiliate-appears-back-new-leader?fbclid=IwAR1Uu7qbVv5XJ2VoeciGbYcylFpFiziYP\\_bOfsCys-frduC7Rm0mLSW-rYk](https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/key-islamic-state-affiliate-appears-back-new-leader?fbclid=IwAR1Uu7qbVv5XJ2VoeciGbYcylFpFiziYP_bOfsCys-frduC7Rm0mLSW-rYk).

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts," p.1.

<sup>275</sup> "Lead Inspector General Report on Operation Freedom's Sentinel," p.31.

<sup>276</sup> Apart from the static sites of attacks, according to Norland and Zucchini, roughly 10 percent of deaths reported amongst the ANDSF were as a result of attacks on convoys; snipers; insider attacks; friendly fire; and ambushes of soldiers or police who were on food runs, driving to work, in their homes, in bazaars, at weddings, in mosques," Rod Norland and David Zucchini, "As U.S. Nears A Pullout Deal, Afghan Army Is On The Defensive," *New York Times*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/12/world/asia/afghanistan-army-taliban.html>.



Ghani, more than 45,000<sup>277</sup> ANDSF soldiers have died during the course of his presidency, showing, as he said, “who is doing the fighting” in Afghanistan.<sup>278</sup> The number of American casualties is proportionately smaller – about 72 in five years.<sup>279</sup>

Structural problems continue to undermine the effectiveness of ANDSF, such as corruption, illiteracy, the lack of civil policing capabilities and effective leadership.<sup>280</sup> Corruption has become a major threat not only to the operational readiness of the ground troops, creating problems of misuse and under-use of equipment, but also leaving an adverse impact on the legitimacy of the leadership within.<sup>281</sup>

### Civic Complications to State of Insecurity

While the spiralling violence is a source of major concern, the absence of effective administration and governance only compounds the problem. Overall, there has been a decline in the effective control of territory by the Government of Afghanistan by 18 percent in 2019.<sup>282</sup> In terms of control over population, it is just 48 percent (15.8 million) of Afghanistan’s total population.<sup>283</sup> The initial popular enthusiasm for democracy, in particular, has worn off. A meagre voter turnout of 20 percent for the presidential elections of 2019 shows that a combination of spiralling insecurity and decline in popular faith in the due processes has had an adverse impact on the legitimacy of the constitutionally mandated institutions and practices.

<sup>277</sup> “Afghanistan’s Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014,” *BBC News*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> “Reconstructing the Afghan National and Defense Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experiences in Afghanistan,” *SIGAR*, September 2017, <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/reconstructing-the-andsf/index.html>.

<sup>281</sup> “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel - Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress,” *US Department of Defense*, August 21, 2019, pp.35, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/21/200217353/8/-1/-1/Q3FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OFS\\_REPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/21/200217353/8/-1/-1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OFS_REPORT.PDF).

<sup>282</sup> “Afghanistan: A War in Crisis,” pp.122.

<sup>283</sup> “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*,

## Responses

### Peace Process

The on-off peace negotiations between the US and the Taliban have only extended the wait for settling the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan. On one hand, the new-found American interest in talking to the Taliban has not been the most reassuring development for the people of Afghanistan and its government. On the other hand, the Taliban have been emboldened further due to the international legitimacy it has garnered particularly over the last two years.

Led by the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, the direct negotiations between the Taliban and the US had stretched for over a year. However, a tweet by US President Donald Trump scuttled the talks ahead of the signing ceremony at Camp David in September 2019. Trump had blamed Taliban’s persistent killing of American soldiers as the main reason to cancel the signing of the deal. However, beneath a seemingly conscientious decision by President Trump were probably some larger concerns.<sup>284</sup> These may have included: the timing of the deal, which was not only close to the anniversary of 9/11, but may have also fallen on the date on which Ahmad Shah Massoud was assassinated 17 years ago, creating terrible optics; the total bypassing of the Afghan government, which had already caused rifts within the White House;<sup>285</sup> and the criticism from former US diplomats on the content of the deal, which was seen as giving away too much in return for little.<sup>286</sup>

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

<sup>284</sup> “Was the Taliban Coming to Camp David for Secret Meeting, as Donald Trump Claimed?” *South China Morning Post*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3026273/critics-slam-donald-trump-after-secret-peace-talks>.

<sup>285</sup> Kimberly Dozier, “Mike Pompeo Declines to Sign Risky Afghan Peace Deal,” *Time*, September 5, 2019, <https://time.com/5668034/pompeo-afghanistan-peace-deal/>.

<sup>286</sup> Kevin Liptak and Kaitlan Collins, “Trump Overruled Advisers, VP on Taliban Camp David Meeting,” *CNN*, September 9, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/09/politics/camp-david-donald-trump-mike-pence-taliban/index.html>.

As of now, attempts are underway to revive negotiations. The respective visits by Khalilzad to Islamabad<sup>287</sup> and US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Kabul in October 2019<sup>288</sup> and the more recent Confidence Building Measures (CBM) involving two prisoner-swaps indicate that the deal is not yet dead.<sup>289</sup> The Taliban on its part paid visits to Beijing and Moscow, ostensibly to rally support. The probable scenarios that emerge from these on-and-off talks include: (i) unilateral withdrawal of American forces with or without a deal; (ii) scrapping of the deal entirely and maintenance of current or enhanced troop levels in Afghanistan; and (iii) phased and negotiated withdrawal and settlement. Different sources agree that the option to negotiate a deal towards ultimate withdrawal and settlement is likely to incur the least cost to the US and give impetus to the intra-Afghan peace process.<sup>290</sup>

The political actors currently not in power in Afghanistan have already warmed up to the idea of a deal between the US and the Taliban setting the stage for a domestic dialogue. The Ghani-led incumbent Afghan government has outlined a 'seven-point peace and reconciliation plan' to engage the Taliban.<sup>291</sup> Most of the points in Ghani's roadmap have already been part of one or the other frameworks he had worked out in the past. The only difference is that this does

not proceed towards but rather builds on a post-withdrawal scenario.

## Outlook

Whether Ashraf Ghani is able to see his seven-point plan through depends on the outcome of the Presidential elections, but it is likely that the spiralling nature of the conflict in Afghanistan may not have a linear, straightforward end. In its forty years of conflicts, Afghanistan has seen a considerable number of attempts to restore normalcy in the country, but none has managed to take off in a sustainable and lasting manner. In the light of these precedents, the present negotiations between the US and Taliban are haunted by the prospect of failure. However, both sides, motivated by their respective interests, have shown the desire to put an end to the fighting between them.

On the one hand, President Trump, who had once declared that the talks with the Taliban were 'dead',<sup>292</sup> seems to be in the mood to resume the dialogue with the insurgent group.<sup>293</sup> While this may have been attributed to more immediate 'goodwill gestures' like the prisoner-swap one must not discount the eagerness of the US to end its longest war. Exiting Afghanistan is imminent but exiting with a deal is more beneficial for the US.

While the publicly available details of the once-suspended peace deal appear to have

<sup>287</sup> "US Afghan Peace Envoy Khalilzad Wraps up Pakistan Visit," *Al Jazeera*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/afghan-peace-envoy-khalilzad-wraps-pakistan-visit-191030092022276.html>.

<sup>288</sup> "U.S. House Speaker Pelosi, Pentagon Chief Esper Make Surprise Afghan Visit," *Gandhara RFE/RL*, October 21, 2019, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/u-s-house-speaker-pelosi-pentagon-chief-esper-make-surprise-afghan-visit/30227382.html>.

<sup>289</sup> Ahmed Mengli, Mushtaq Yusufzai, and Phil Helsel, "Taliban to Release 2 Kidnapped American University of Afghanistan Professors in Prisoner Swap," *NBC News*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-president-taliban-release-2-kidnapped-american-university-professors-prisoner-n1080386>.

<sup>290</sup> "Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track," *International Crisis Group*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b159-getting-afghanistan-peace->

[process-back-track](#); Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs, "The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan," *Center for American Progress*, July 29, 2019,

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/07/29/472611/case-new-u-s-relationship-afghanistan/>.

<sup>291</sup> "Ghani Proposes 7-Point Peace Plan," *Tolo News*, October 27, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-proposes-7-point->

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<sup>292</sup> "Afghan Peace Deal: Trump Says Taliban Talks Are Dead," *BBC News*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49642655>.

<sup>293</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Trump Suggests Peace Talks With Afghan Taliban Back on Track," *Voice of America*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/trump-suggests-peace-talks-afghan-taliban-back-track>.

demanding little of the Taliban, it is expected that the negotiations this time might not produce very lenient outcomes for the insurgent group. That being said, the fact that the Taliban could get the US to negotiate with it after years of resistance is a big victory in itself. Moreover, with a deal in place, it will be plausible to expect that the international legitimacy conferred upon the Taliban will only embed it in the political mainstream of Afghanistan, coaxing it to behave as a responsible actor.

The domestic dynamics in Afghanistan continue to be discouraging news. The persisting inter-ethnic discontent is exacerbated by a fractious political leadership, which as the recently held Presidential election has shown, is full of mistrust for each other. The previous intra-Afghan dialogues too have demonstrated that the different stakeholders are eager to get a seat at the negotiation table simply because they do not want to be left out of the process. It is quite unlikely that these differently motivated actors will converge on substantial issues, making the intra-Afghan dialogue(s) a long-drawn process. Similarly, the Afghan economy has shown little improvement while people's faith in the institutions continues to deteriorate. Added to this, the presence of other spoilers, including the ISK and AQIS, might adversely affect the possibility of restoring peace in Afghanistan even after the US-Taliban deal.

## BANGLADESH

*In 2019, Bangladesh's threat landscape was marked by the continued relevance of Islamic State (IS)'s extremist ideology and renewed efforts by Al-Qaeda (AQ) centric Bangladeshi militant groups to relaunch their operations in the country. IS claimed at least three terrorist attacks in the country, alongside its efforts to recruit followers online. The AQ-centric Bangladeshi militant groups in 2019 also tried*

*to restore old networks, fuel fresh recruitment and inspire lone-wolf attacks. In addition, AQ-centric groups have adopted the Ghazwatul Hind narrative, a jihadist idea that draws on a prophetic discourse and refers to the final battle of the Indian Subcontinent, to justify their activities. While the Bangladeshi authorities have been able to detect and disrupt several terrorist plots, the continuing radicalisation of segments of the community and prevention of lone-wolf attacks will be the key challenges in 2020.*

## Resonance of IS Ideology

Despite numerous law-enforcement operations since 2016, IS' ideology continues to resonate with the new generation of Bangladeshi militants. This was evidenced by three IS-claimed terrorist incidents in the country.

### Targeting the police

On April 29, two traffic police constables and one community police personnel were injured in a bomb-blast in Gulistan, in the vicinity of the presidential palace compound.<sup>294</sup> Similarly, on May 26, two people including a female police officer were injured in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast near a police vehicle in Dhaka.<sup>295</sup> Then, a terror attack was foiled when authorities recovered and deactivated some powerful IEDs planted outside two police check-posts in Dhaka on July 23.<sup>296</sup> Several butane gas canisters were also placed with the IEDs to amplify the effects of the blast. In another IED attack, two policemen were injured in Dhaka on August 31.<sup>297</sup> These incidents in Bangladesh came at a time when the IS, having lost most of its territories in Syria and Iraq, has made calls to its followers to conduct attacks globally in a move to prove its continued relevance.

IS' current strategy in Bangladesh is to target the police and promote lone-wolf attacks,

<sup>294</sup> "Cops among 3 hurt in crude bomb blast in Gulistan," *The Daily Star*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/cops-among-3-hurt-crude-bomb-blast-gulistan-1736608>.

<sup>295</sup> "It was a powerful explosive," *The Daily Star*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/dhaka-metropolitan-police-says-it-was-powerful-explosive-1749769>.

<sup>296</sup> "2 bombs recovered at Farmgate, Paltan," *The Daily Star*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/bomb-object-found-near-khamarbari-dhaka-1776220>.

<sup>297</sup> Aminul Islam Babu, "Two cops injured in bomb blast at Science Lab," *The Dhaka Tribune*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/08/31/2-policemen-injured-in-blast-at-science-lab>.

particularly in the capital, Dhaka.<sup>298</sup> Attacking the police in Bangladesh serves three purposes. First, by attacking the police, IS generates publicity and sends the message that it can target an entity of the state which it sees as “apostate.” Second, by targeting the police, it aims to demoralise “the enemy” that has been spearheading the fight against the group in Bangladesh. Third, the attacks are aimed at creating panic and chaos within the population. IS followers in Bangladesh believe that the terror group is fighting physically, ideologically, and psychologically.<sup>299</sup> The August 2019 investigation by the Bangladeshi authorities of a pro-IS lone-wolf cell highlights this trend. According to the investigators, the pro-IS lone-wolf cells are generally leaderless but have an independent capability to plan operations as opposed to the sleeper cells as in the case of Neo-Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).<sup>300</sup>

On August 9, a day after Bangladeshi authorities arrested five local self-radicalised pro-IS youth in Dhaka, IS’ Amaq news agency issued a video in Bengali that claimed the group’s fight to establish its “Caliphate” was not over.<sup>301</sup> The video also urged IS’ Bangladeshi supporters to target the “near enemy,” specifically political leaders, parliamentarians and members of the security and law enforcement agencies and non-Muslims.<sup>302</sup> Such propaganda has resonated with some local militants, as seen in a recent incident where a detained IS militant facing criminal charges, entered a court wearing a cap emblazoned with the IS’ insignia.<sup>303</sup>

<sup>298</sup> Arifur Rahman Rabbi, “5 members of New JMB’s wolf pack arrested in Dhaka,” *Dhaka Tribune*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2019/08/09/5-suspected-new-jmb-members-held-in-dhaka>.

<sup>299</sup> “The three types of fight of the Islamic State,” *IS Bengali Telegram channel*, July 8, 2019.

<sup>300</sup> Sahadat Hossain Parash, “Wolf packer shadasyader devise e boma toirir manual,” (Bomb making manual in the device of the wolf pack members), *Samakal*, August 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2L284PB>.

<sup>301</sup> “5 militants held in Dhaka,” *The Daily Star*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/5-militants-held-dhaka-1784137>.

<sup>302</sup> Amaq News Agency, “The Best Outcome is for Pious,” *Telegram*, August 9, 2019.

## IS Online Narratives

The recent developments involving IS in Bangladesh constitute a worrying trend, especially due to the group’s ability to recruit both from existing terrorist groups and radical youth. Extremist narratives in online social media platforms are believed to be boosting recruitment. According to Bangladesh’s Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit, 82 percent of the operatives arrested were recruited online. Though there has been a significant decline in the propaganda materials in Bengali, the existing materials available in the cyber domain are substantial; they are frequently read, referred to and shared by the group’s followers.<sup>304</sup>

The police has largely been effective in weakening the organisational structure of IS since the 2016 Holey Artisan Café attack. Notwithstanding this, the IS-claimed attacks recorded in 2019 may indicate an IS revival in Bangladesh.<sup>305</sup> On 3 November 2019, a video was released featuring IS supporters in Bangladesh pledging allegiance to IS’ new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi.<sup>306</sup>

## AQ-centric Groups: Narratives, Tactics and Revival Attempts

In 2019, pro-AQ Bangladeshi militant groups tried to revive their old network which comprises Ansar al Islam (AAI), Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and the Harkatul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). These pro-AQ groups exploited the developments taking place in the region to construct the narrative of Muslim victimhood

<sup>303</sup> “IS Cap of Militant: Prisons, cops trade blame,” *The Daily Star*, December 1, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/dhaka-attack-verdict-cap-militant-prisons-police-trade-blame-1834078>.

<sup>304</sup> Iftekhharul Bashar, “Islamic State Ideology Continues to Resonate in Bangladesh,” *Middle East Institute*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-ideology-continues-resonate-bangladesh>.

<sup>305</sup> “IS claims responsibility of bomb attacks near Dhaka police checkpoints,” *Prothom Alo*, July 26, 2019, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/199483/IS-claims-responsibility-of-%E2%80%98bomb-attacks%E2%80%99-near>.

<sup>306</sup> “IS in Bangladesh pledge allegiance to new leader,” *The Independent*, November 4, 2019, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/222321>.



in order to increase its following. In their propaganda, the militant groups highlight the rise of Hindutva in India and Buddhist extremism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka and attacks on Muslim minorities.

### *Ghazwatul Hind Narrative*

The AQ network in Bangladesh has been exploiting the prophetic narrative of Ghazwatul Hind for its revival. For instance, on April 13, 2019, one of AQ's media production houses "Ummah Network" uploaded a YouTube video by its Bengali ideologue, Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani. The 25-minute video entitled "Ghazwa-e-Hind is knocking your door" has been viewed at least 166,359 times and received 2,035 comments to date. The video claimed that the ongoing situation in India signals that the time for "Ghazwa-e-Hind" has come.<sup>307</sup>

Ghazwatul Hind is an Islamic eschatological end of times narrative that refers to one of the final battles that will occur in *Al-Hind* (in the Indian subcontinent) in jihadist propaganda.<sup>308</sup> The concept of Ghazwatul Hind is based on three hadiths (Prophetic Sayings) which refer to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>309</sup> Since the Pulwama attack in Indian-administered Kashmir and the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, the Ghazwatul Hind concept has been used frequently by the AQ-linked Bangladeshi militant groups.

### *Lone-wolf tactics*

Though AQ-centric groups in Bangladesh have been maintaining a low-profile and emphasising what it calls i'dad (preparation), in 2019, they have taken a more offensive posture by encouraging lone-wolf attacks. In

March 2019, AQ's Balakot Media published an online magazine entitled "The Lone Wolf". The 28-page publication advanced AQ's agenda by inspiring Muslims to enjoin in jihad. It asserted that today, Muslims all over the world, including in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Kashmir, Arakan, Chechnya and China, are living in the worst of times because of the Muslim community's reluctance to wage "jihad." The magazine's target audience includes those who do not have an opportunity to join a jihadist group yet seek to carry out terrorist attacks at home.<sup>310</sup>

### **Revival Attempts**

#### *HUJI-B*

HUJI-B, the oldest Bangladeshi militant group, also focused on reviving its activities by assisting the families of its deceased or detained members and renewing its recruitment campaign. The group aims to restore its old network and establish a Taliban-style rule in Bangladesh.

HUJI-B is believed to have been collecting funds inside and outside Bangladesh through bank robberies and extortion. For instance, in March 2019, Bangladesh police arrested 14 suspected robbers, including two HuJI-B militants, from Dhaka. They were involved in at least nine robberies, from which they collected around Tk 50,000,000 (US\$ 600,000) for HUJI-B.<sup>311</sup>

In October, Bangladeshi authorities arrested a top HUJI-B leader Atikullah aka Julfiqar<sup>312</sup> along with his two accomplices.<sup>313</sup> These militants were trying to revive the group by contacting the absconded and detained HuJI-

<sup>307</sup> "Ghazwa-e-Hinder bhavishatbani - kora narche apnar duare, (The Prophecy of Ghazwatul Hind is knocking your door), Shaikh Tamim Al Adnani," Youtube, April 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xi1bd3FqVds>.

<sup>308</sup> Ghazwatul Hind is an Arabic term. It is also known as Ghazwa-e-Hind in Urdu/Persian.

<sup>309</sup> Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent>; Ghazwa is an Arabic word that means battle, and *Al-Hind* generally denotes the Indian Subcontinent/South Asian region, which roughly encompasses Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka,

Maldives and, to some extent, the Rakhine state of western Myanmar (historically known as Arakan).

<sup>310</sup> "Lone Wolf Magazine," *Balakot Media*, March 2019.

<sup>311</sup> "2 Huji militants among 14 robbers held in Dhaka," *The Daily Star*, March 4 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/14-robbers-including-2-huji-militants-held-1710328>.

<sup>312</sup> Julfiqar had travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan and he was HUJI-B's central committee's organising secretary in 1996. He fled the country in 2006 during an anti-militancy crackdown following JMB's bomb attacks in 2005.

<sup>313</sup> "3 Huji leaders detained in city," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.bssnews.net/?p=281521>.

B members across the country. During interrogations, the arrested individuals admitted that they were involved in HUJI-B and were trying to reorganise the outfit.<sup>314</sup>

### *Ansar al Islam*

Ansar al Islam (AAI) officially represents AQ in Bangladesh. Though AAI has not carried out any attack since 2015, its cells are active both online and offline. On October 10, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police arrested a four-member cell of AAI in the capital. The cell was led by a Bangladeshi undergraduate student in South Korea. According to the investigators, the cell was in touch with both AAI as well as the pro-IS faction of JMB (Neo-JMB) with a view to merge these two organisations.<sup>315</sup> The cell initially started as a Facebook group and was eventually able to establish contact with the key leaders of AAI. The cell initially underwent training in the remote areas of Sundabans (mangrove forest in the south-west Bangladesh) and later moved to Bandarabans (hill district near Myanmar-Bangladesh border) where they ran a terrorist training camp under cover of a coffee-shop. The group was possibly aiming to hit critical infrastructure.<sup>316</sup>

### *JMB*

The revival of JMB became a priority for AQ when the group was divided on the question of IS. As a breakaway faction of JMB pledged its allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2015, AQ was at risk of losing a key partner in Bangladesh. At present, the old and original JMB is led by Salahuddin Salehin who was freed by JMB members from a prison van in Bangladesh 2012.

Salehin is at large and believed to be hiding in India. Old JMB has been able to expand itself in India particularly in West Bengal.<sup>317</sup> In July 2019, India's State Minister for Home Affairs G. Kishan Reddy accused JMB of using some madrassas (religious schools) in West Bengal for radicalisation and recruitment activities.<sup>318</sup>

Both of JMB's pro-AQ and pro-IS factions appear to be gaining traction in West Bengal. The ethno-linguistic space of Bengal consists of independent Bangladesh in the east and the Indian state of West Bengal in the west. This border is long, porous and poorly managed, resulting in trans-border crime and the cross-border movement of terrorists. In several cases, JMB has used cross-border marriages to find shelter in West Bengal. Beyond West Bengal, the JMB has reportedly spread its network in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. The group has set up set up 20-22 hideouts in Bangalore and tried to spread its bases in South India.<sup>319</sup>

## Responses

Bangladeshi authorities continued to foil terror plots and arrested suspected militants. It has also banned a radical Islamist group reportedly for posing threat to public security.<sup>320</sup> In addition, a police-led community engagement programme was launched to create social awareness to prevent violent extremism. Despite a more comprehensive response to extremism and terrorism, there are critical gaps that need to be addressed.

Despite frequent arrests of suspected militants, many of the arrested secure bails

<sup>314</sup> "Huji was being reorganised," *The Daily Star*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/huji-was-being-reorganised-1808518>.

<sup>315</sup> Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "CTTC: Ansar al-Islam planning to merge with New JMB," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2019/10/11/4-suspected-ansar-al-islam-members-held-in-dhaka>.

<sup>316</sup> "Ansar al Islam o nabbo jmb ke aak korte cheyechilo Shaheen Alam [Shaheen Alam wanted to merge Ansar al Islam and the Neo-JMB]," *Bangla Tribune*, October 11, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YaKdSz>.

<sup>317</sup> "Four from JMB splinter held," *The Telegraph*, June 26, 2019,

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/four-from-jmb-splinter-held/cid/1693176>.

<sup>318</sup> "Terrorist Group Using Some Madrasas In Bengal For Radicalisation: Centre," *NDTV*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/terrorist-group-using-some-madrasas-in-bengal-for-radicalisation-centre-2063054>.

<sup>319</sup> "Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh trying to spread across India: NIA chief," *The Hindu*, October 14, 2019.

<sup>320</sup> "Bangladesh outlaws radical Islamist group Allahr Dal," *bdnews24.com*, November 6, 2019, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2019/11/06/bangladesh-outlaws-radical-islamist-group-allahr-dal>.

and are believed to have rejoined their outfits. According to Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), 300 out of 512 individuals arrested under terrorism charges since the Holey Artisan Café attack in 2016 were released on bail.<sup>321</sup> This indicates the inability of the law enforcement agencies to investigate and follow through on ensuring long-term punishment of the terrorists through the court of law. There are, however, exceptions, such as in the case of the Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal which on 27 November 2019, sentenced the Dhaka Seven militants to death for their involvement in 2016's Holey Artisan attack that left 22 people, including 17 foreigners, dead.<sup>322</sup>

Bangladesh has also strengthened its law-enforcement responses to address terrorism. In November 2019, the Bangladesh government issued a gazette notification that enables the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) to have country-wide jurisdiction for investigation. ATU, a police unit established in 2017, will now be able to engage in a broad range of activities encompassing prevention of and response to terrorism.<sup>323</sup> Although there has been a dedicated Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC Unit) for the Dhaka metropolitan area since 2015, there has been a lack of a dedicated unit with a mandate to carry out investigations throughout the country especially outside the Dhaka metropolitan area. A functional ATU is indeed a promising change in Bangladesh, however, it remains to be seen how effectively the new unit performs.

## Outlook

Though Bangladesh improved on its ranking in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2019 rankings,<sup>324</sup> developments in 2019 show that terrorist groups in Bangladesh are regenerating by exploiting various local and global issues. Despite being operationally defeated in Syria and Iraq, the IS ideology

remains a potent threat to Bangladesh. While IS cells have mostly carried out hit and run attacks on the law enforcement agencies in 2019, lone-wolf attacks by the group cannot be discounted. The revival attempts by AQ-linked groups in Bangladesh is also a trend that is likely to continue in spite of the Bangladeshi authorities' general success in detecting and foiling such attempts. To further improve Bangladesh's progress in reducing the threat of terrorism, a comprehensive Counter Violent Extremism strategy is worth developing by the authorities. Finally, much of the future dynamics of radicalisation in Bangladesh will be influenced by the religious-political currents in its immediate neighbours—India and Myanmar—where Hindutva and Buddhist extremism is gaining traction and possibly generating opportunities to be exploited by Islamist militant groups.

## INDIA

*In 2019, the Indian government's decision to revoke Article 370 that ended Kashmir's autonomous status, the passage of the controversial Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), growing influence of Hindu extremist groups and the Islamic State (IS)'s announcement to create a Wilayah in India punctuated the country's threat landscape. At the same time, the weakening of the Naxal insurgency and Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s struggles to make a mark in the Indian theatre through its South Asian affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), continued. This assessment argues that the decision to unilaterally revoke Article 370 can potentially re-ignite the Kashmir insurgency, if the government does not take remedial steps. This may also give AQ and IS an opening to exploit local grievances, increase terrorist recruitment and potentially change the character of the Kashmir insurgency from a nationalist-separatist to a jihadist one.*

<sup>321</sup> Arifur Rahman Rabbi and Ahmed Alam, "With 300 militants out on bail, is Bangladesh safe?" *Dhaka Tribune*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/militancy/2019/06/04/with-300-militants-out-on-bail-is-bangladesh-safe>.

<sup>322</sup> "Holey Artisan Café attack: 7 militants get death, one acquitted," *The Daily Star*, November 27, 2019,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/city/dhaka-cafe-attack-case-verdict-set-to-deliver-1832509>.

<sup>323</sup> Shariful Islam, "Anti-Terror Unit empowered to probe cases," *The Daily Star*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/anti-terror-unit-empowered-probe-cases-1830328>.

<sup>324</sup> "Bangladesh improves 6 notches," *The Independent*, November 30, 2019, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/225825>.

## Kashmir

This year, attacks and skirmishes between Pakistan-supported Kashmiri militants and local militant groups affiliated with AQ and IS characterised the Kashmiri threat landscape. The Pulwama attack targeting a military convoy by Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM) in March pushed India and Pakistan to the edge of war. However, despite Indian aerial incursions targeting alleged JeM training centres in Balakot and subsequent aerial dogfights, timely mediation by the United States (US), Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) de-escalated the tensions.<sup>325</sup>

Anticipating a deteriorating security situation in Kashmir, the Indian government took drastic steps in Kashmir in 2019. On August 5, the Indian government, as part of its election promise, abrogated Article 370 which ensured Kashmir's autonomous status and barred non-Kashmiris from buying land or doing business in the region.<sup>326</sup> Subsequently, on October 31, the region was bifurcated into two union territories: Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

Following the abrogation of Article 370, a curfew was imposed along with the suspension of the Internet and telecommunications and a blackout of media. Reports of mass arrests were also widespread.<sup>327</sup> According to the Indian government, these measures were taken to pre-empt mass protests and insurgents'

efforts to exploit the situation in Kashmir.<sup>328</sup> As many as 4,000 people and 170 Kashmiri politicians, including pro-Indian figures, have been detained since August 5.<sup>329</sup>

Yet, a number of protests have been reported in Kashmir including one massive protest where thousands took part despite the heavy clampdown.<sup>330</sup> Such protests have often escalated into violence in the past and helped feed insurgent groups with recruits.<sup>331</sup> Many Kashmiris also believe that the Indian government is trying to dilute the Kashmiri Muslim population by encouraging Hindu businessmen to purchase property and live in the valley. Such perceptions have become a source of anxiety and radicalisation in some Kashmiri quarters.

The volatility in Kashmir provides extremists with the much-needed space to exploit the situation to fuel fresh recruitment, gain legitimacy for their narratives and discredit the pro-India politicians. Moreover, the arrests of mainstream politicians will dramatically weaken the pro-India political forces in Kashmir.<sup>332</sup> This will provide increased legitimacy to the pro-Independence / pro-Pakistan / pro-jihadist groups as well. AQIS has also tried to exploit the unrest in Kashmir to increase its footprint. IS has so far given no statement on Kashmir since the abrogation of Article 370.

Sporadic attacks on non-Kashmiri labourers and truck drivers have also been reported in different parts of Kashmir. More than 10

<sup>325</sup> "Kashmir attack: Tracing the path that led to Pulwama," *BBC News*, May 01, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47302467>.

<sup>326</sup> "Article 370: What happened with Kashmir and why it matters," *BBC News*, August 06, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49234708>.

<sup>327</sup> Pheroze L. Vincent, "Grim report from Kashmir," *Telegraph India*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/grim-report-from-kashmir/cid/1715947>.

<sup>328</sup> Saeed Shah, "Pakistan's New Plight in Kashmir: What to Do About the Jihadists," *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pakistans-new-plight-in-kashmir-what-to-do-about-the-jihadists-11565523414>.

<sup>329</sup> "India arrests former Kashmir chief minister," *Channel News Asia*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/india-arrests-former-kashmir-chief-minister-11913618>.

<sup>330</sup> While Indian sources have not provided a clear number, some have indicated that there have been more than 700 protests. For details see: "Protests mount in Indian Kashmir clampdown," *Channel News Asia*, September 15, 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/protests-mount-in-indian-kashmir-clampdown-11907896>.

<sup>331</sup> Joanna Slater and Ishfaq Naseem, "2018 is the deadliest year in a decade in Kashmir. Next year could be worse," *Washington Post*, December 23, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/2018-is-the-deadliest-year-in-a-decade-in-kashmir-next-year-could-be-worse/2018/12/22/493ff2e4-03bb-11e9-958c-0a601226ff6b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/2018-is-the-deadliest-year-in-a-decade-in-kashmir-next-year-could-be-worse/2018/12/22/493ff2e4-03bb-11e9-958c-0a601226ff6b_story.html).

<sup>332</sup> "House arrest of Kashmiri leaders not beyond 18 months, they have movies, gym: Jitendra Singh," *India Today*, September 22, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jitendra-singh-kashmir-leaders-house-arrest-for-18-months-1601934-2019-09-22>.



labourers from West Bengal have been gunned down in these attacks.<sup>333</sup> Given the larger fear of the Kashmiri population being taken over by non-Kashmiris, it is likely that such terrorist attacks against outsiders will continue in the future.

### Global Jihadist Threat

In 2019, both AQ and IS tried to increase their footprints. A number of terrorist plots and bombing threats planned by IS were thwarted.<sup>334</sup> For instance, Indian police neutralised two IS-inspired cells in December 2018 and January 2019. These cells were planning to use homemade weapons against security installations in Bihar and poison people in Maharashtra respectively.<sup>335</sup>

The uptick in IS activities indicate that the terror group is still interested in India despite its failure to make a mark in the Indian threat landscape. The IS announcement in May 2019 to declare Wilayah al-Hind (Indian province) further substantiates this.<sup>336</sup> However, IS has been trying to conduct operations across India without much success. As of November 2019, the Indian branch of IS had not yet pledged allegiance to the new leader of the group, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi.<sup>337</sup> In the future, given the above mentioned situation in Kashmir, it

is likely that the group will try to expand its reach if it can possibly finance more operations in Kashmir.

Likewise, AQIS has also attempted to increase its footprint in India. After the elimination of AQIS-affiliated Ansar Ghazwat ul Hind (AGH) chief Zakir Musa, Hamid Lehari was appointed as his successor.<sup>338</sup> In succeeding months, however, AQIS faced two massive blows when its chief, Asim Umar, (based in Afghanistan)<sup>339</sup> and AGH's leader, Hamid Lehari (based in India),<sup>340</sup> were both killed in October 2019 by a joint US-Afghan raid and Indian forces, respectively. The killing of Asim Umar may not affect the AQIS operations in Kashmir or other parts of India due to the strong organisational structure of AQIS. This was manifested in the October 30<sup>th</sup> statement of AGH which announced a new leader, Ghazi Khalid Ibrahim.<sup>341</sup>

In October, AQIS released a 20-minute video of its spokesperson, Usama Mahmood, on the abrogation of Article 370, blaming India, Pakistan and the United Nations (UN) for oppressing the Kashmiris.<sup>342</sup> He called for attacks on Indian soldiers anywhere in India to avenge the atrocities against Kashmiris.<sup>343</sup> Moreover, in November 2019, AGH also released a document condemning the Babri

<sup>333</sup> Adil Akhzer and Sweetie Kumar, "J&K: Five workers from Bengal killed in south Kashmir terror attack," *The Indian Express*, October 30, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/five-workers-from-bengal-killed-in-south-kashmir-terror-attack-eu-delegation-visit-article-370-6093568/>.

<sup>334</sup> Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "The Islamic State in India: Upgrading Capabilities?" *Middle East Institute*, February 05, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-india-upgrading-capabilities>.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Fayaz Bukhari and Alsadir Patel, "Islamic State claims province in India for first time after clash in Kashmir," *Reuters*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-islamic-state/islamic-state-claims-province-in-india-for-first-time-after-clash-in-kashmir-idUSKCN1SH08J>.

<sup>337</sup> Digital Communication with Aaron Zelin as of November 10, 2019. Aaron Zelin maintains the website Jihadology is closely following conversation on the issue of IS affiliates pledging allegiance to the new leader.

<sup>338</sup> Thomas Jocelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda eulogizes Zakir Musa, as his successor is named," *Long War Journal*, June 07, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/06/analysis-al-qaeda-eulogizes-zakir-musa-as-his-successor-is-named.php>.

[analysis-al-qaeda-eulogizes-zakir-musa-as-his-successor-is-named.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/06/analysis-al-qaeda-eulogizes-zakir-musa-as-his-successor-is-named.php).

<sup>339</sup> "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia chief killed in Afghanistan," *BBC News*, October 08, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>.

<sup>340</sup> "J-K: 3 militants associated with Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind group killed in Awantipora encounter," *Economic Times*, October 23, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/j-k-zakir-musas-successor-hamid-lehari-killed-in-awantipora-encounter/vedioshow/71716043.cms>.

<sup>341</sup> "AGH confirms death of leader, announces replacement and new deputies," *Site Intel Group*, October 29, 2019, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/agh-confirms-death-of-leader-announces-replacement-and-new-deputies.html>.

<sup>342</sup> "AQIS spokesman urges regional Muslims support jihad in Kashmir, attack Indian government and military personnel," *Site Intel Group*, October 12, 2019, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aqis-spokesman-urges-regional-muslims-support-jihad-in-kashmir-attack-indian-government-and-military-personnel.html>.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

Masjid verdict (which went against the interest of the Muslim community) and stepped up its calls for attacks.<sup>344</sup>

Thus far, global jihadist groups have failed in their efforts to increase their operational presence in Kashmir. Also, the efforts of global jihadist groups to grow in Kashmir have often resulted in intra-jihadist fights and clashes such as between AGH and the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).<sup>345</sup> As such, while Jihadist groups will try to shape narratives, they are still limited operationally in Kashmir and in the rest of India.

### Naxalism

For the last ten years, the Naxalites have continuously faced a steep decline in their violent activities with less than 100 attacks in 2019 as opposed to more than 1,000 during the peak of Naxalite violence in 2010.<sup>346</sup> Moreover, over the last few years, more than 1,200 Naxal cadres have surrendered to the police, further weakening the group.<sup>347</sup>

The following four factors have contributed to the weakening of the Naxal insurgency over the years. First, the ageing leadership: more than eight of the top 17 leaders are above the age of 60 and facing health issues.<sup>348</sup> Second, the group is witnessing serious infighting with different factions vying for control.<sup>349</sup> Third, corruption: top Naxal leaders have embezzled organisational funds and used them for their children's

studies in expensive educational institutions.<sup>350</sup>

Finally, females who joined the Naxal insurgency to attain agency in fighting and gain rights have been relegated to domestic duties and faced sexual harassment, raising questions on the sincerity of the struggle.<sup>351</sup> In conjunction with the government response, the overall result has led to a tottering Naxalite movement that can possibly be completely decimated, if its weaknesses are exacerbated.

### Hindu Extremism

Under growing Hindutva influence, mob lynching of Muslims and other minorities in India has become common place. The underlying motives and reasons for lynching members of the minority communities have also changed. Since 2014, around 70 incidents of mob lynching were motivated by claims that victims were involved in transporting or smuggling beef (cow meat).<sup>352</sup>

However, in June 2019, about six killings involving violent mobs were carried out where the victims were forced to chant the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' (Victory to Lord Rama).<sup>353</sup> This slogan is a common religious phrase that is used during Hindu festivals across India. The fact that it has been used in the lynching of some Muslims across the country indicates that some Hindu extremist groups have begun to adopt and assert a

<sup>344</sup> "AGH Threatens Revenge for Indian Ruling on Babri Mosque Site, Urges Indian Muslims to Act," *Site Intelligence*, November 18, 2019, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/agh-threatens-revenge-for-indian-ruling-on-babri-mosque-site-urges-indian-muslims-to-act.html>.

<sup>345</sup> Jehangir Ali, "Can Militancy in Kashmir Survive Without Pakistan's Support?" *The Quint*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/kashmir-militancy-pakistani-militancy-clash-al-qaeda-chief-al-zawahiri>; This inter group fighting was so severe that Syed Salahudin, the head of the United Jihad Council (UJC), an umbrella group of Jihadist groups which heads the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) in Kashmir released a message trying to pacify the situation. Other actors like Hamid Lelhari, ex-head of AGH and Riyaz Nakoo, spokesperson for HM also released messages to address the conflict.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Niranjana Sahoo, "Half a century of India's Maoist insurgency: An appraisal of state response," *ORF*

*Special Report*, June 13, 2019, [https://www.orfonline.org/research/half-a-century-of-indias-maoist-insurgency-an-appraisal-of-state-response-51933/#\\_edn106](https://www.orfonline.org/research/half-a-century-of-indias-maoist-insurgency-an-appraisal-of-state-response-51933/#_edn106).

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Lea Henry, "Imagined Wounds the False Grievance behind India's Maoist Movement," *IPCS Report*, January 2018, [http://ipcs.org/issue\\_briefs/issue\\_brief\\_pdf/imagined%20wounds\\_ilhenry\\_january2018\\_ipcs.pdf](http://ipcs.org/issue_briefs/issue_brief_pdf/imagined%20wounds_ilhenry_january2018_ipcs.pdf).

<sup>351</sup> Swathi Parashar and Janet Andrew, "(En)Gendering the Maoist Insurgency in India: Between Rhetoric and Reality," *Post-Colonial Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (2017), pp. 445 – 462.

<sup>352</sup> "India struggles with religious lynchings," *DW*, August 08, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-struggles-with-religious-lynchings/a-49950223>.

<sup>353</sup> "Jai Shri Ram: The Hindu chant that became a murder cry," *BBC News*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48882053>.

predatory religious identity. Hate Crimes Watch, an institution set up to monitor such incidents, has documented 24 such lynchings in 2019 with the above-mentioned slogan becoming a staple.<sup>354</sup>

In a move which some have indicated to be pandering to extremist Hindu sentiments, the BJP government also updated the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which would exclude all illegal immigrants who have settled in Assam from 1971.<sup>355</sup> The NRC exacerbated many tensions based on local nuances such as linguistic divides and dislike of all illegal immigrants regardless of their religion in North East India where it was mostly applicable, leading to protests in four states, namely Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh in October 2019.<sup>356</sup> This has also provided a reason for some of the North East insurgencies such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to recruit people.<sup>357</sup> Recent announcements about implementing this register across the whole of India has raised concerns regarding the plight of minorities and economically backward citizens.<sup>358</sup>

Subsequent to this on December 11, the government passed the Citizenship

Amendment Act (CAA) which offers citizenship to persecuted religious minorities, from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh who have been in India before December 2014, except Muslims.<sup>359</sup> Many observers view the passage of CAA as a precursor to a nationwide implementation of NRC; the latter has triggered largescale protests.<sup>360</sup> Both CAA and NRC, which make religion as a basis of citizenship, run contrary to the secular spirit of the Indian constitution. Some see these steps as BJP's effort to change the foundational character of the Indian polity from a secular to a Hindu state.

Another recent trend has been of Hindu extremists targeting Christian institutions and individuals for proselytising their faith and allegedly converting Hindus to Christianity. This trend was witnessed in Mumbai and Tamil Nadu - where Catholic schools were attacked - and in Orissa where a man was beheaded.<sup>361</sup> The Orissa case is also worrying because it was a zone of intense communal tensions between Hindus and Christians in 2008. Such targeted killings could end up reinvigorating old enmities.<sup>362</sup>

Such communal attacks against Christians underscore the 'Majoritarian Insecurity' of the

<sup>354</sup> "India struggles with religious lynchings," *DW*, August 08, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-struggles-with-religious-lynchings/a-49950223>.

<sup>355</sup> Mukul Kesavan, "The greatest threat to Indian democracy today," *The Telegraph*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/nrc-and-the-citizenship-bill-are-the-greatest-threat-to-indian-democracy-today/cid/1695315>.

<sup>356</sup> Rajeev Bhattacharya, "India's Northeast Erupts in Protest Against Plan to Amend Citizenship Laws," *The Diplomat*, October 07, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/indias-northeast-erupts-in-protest-against-plan-to-amend-citizenship-laws/>.

<sup>357</sup> Bikash Singh, "Cops keep eye on militant outfits wooing youth in Assam," *Economic Times*, January 10, 2019.

<sup>358</sup> Arunabh Saika, "Why Amit Shah's promise to extend a pan-India NRC to Assam will not be easy," *Scroll*, November 23, 2019, <https://scroll.in/article/944460/why-amit-shahs-promise-to-extend-a-pan-india-nrc-to-assam-will-not-be-easy>

<sup>359</sup> The NRC requires documents pre-dating 1971 such as birth certificates. Most ordinary folks in India would not be able to prove their ancestry/citizenship, given the poor record keeping and documentation system in India. Thus, it is feared that a sizeable number of people, particularly Muslims, would lose their citizenship but those belonging to the religions mentioned in the CAA

would regain their citizenship. For more on this see the following:

Markandey Katju and Dhruthi Kapadia, "Why the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill Is Unconstitutional," *The Wire*, December 13, 2019, <https://thewire.in/law/citizenship-amendment-bill-unconstitutional>.

<sup>360</sup> "Assam: Death toll rises to 5 in protests against citizenship act," *Times of India*, December 15, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/news/assam-death-toll-rises-to-5-in-protests-against-citizenship-act/videoshow/72666788.cms>.

<sup>361</sup> Sadhya Nair, "Mumbai: School attacked over conversion claims," *Times of India*, April 23, 2019, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69032095.cms?from=mdr&utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69032095.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst;); "Bishops' Council condemns attack on school," *The Hindu*, April 01, 2019,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/bishop-council-condemns-attack-on-school/article26703614.ece>; "Orissa, a Christian beheaded for his faith," *Asia Net*, February 20, 2019, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Orissa-a-Christian-beheaded-for-his-faith-46300.html>.

<sup>362</sup> Gethin Chamberlain, "Convert or we will kill you, Hindu lynch mobs tell fleeing Christians," *The Guardian*, October 09, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/19/orissa-violence-india-christianity-hinduism>.

Hindu extremist groups i.e. majority communities feeling insecure about the growth of minority communities. This phenomenon can be amplified by politicians for their own benefit which results in the growth of a predatory identity of the majority group that potentially encourages violence.<sup>363</sup> Accounts of rapidly growing Christian populations in Orissa (whose growth was estimated at 478 percent over 50 years as opposed to the state average of 139 percent) have added to this fear.<sup>364</sup> Moreover, actions conducted by Christian missionaries such as anti-Hindu slurs and insulting Hindu leaders have led to increased hatred of Christian communities.<sup>365</sup>

The Hindutva influence has had a regional impact as it has spilled over to Nepal and Sri Lanka where some Hindu groups have imitated their Indian Hindu extremist counterparts. For instance, Nepal has witnessed persecution of minority communities such as Christians and Muslims for allegedly attempting to proselytise Christianity and Islam to Hindus.<sup>366</sup> Likewise, Sri Lanka has witnessed the emergence of a Hindu outfit, the 'Siva Sena'.<sup>367</sup> This group, while locally formed, is inspired by some Indian Hindu groups such as the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra as well as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal.<sup>368</sup>

<sup>363</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>364</sup> "Population of Christians grew by 478 % in Odisha in 50 years," *The Hindu*, August 30, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/population-of-christians-grew-by-478-in-odisha-in-50-years/article7595024.ece>.

<sup>365</sup> "Neither yoga nor yogi can save you, only Jesus can: Christian pastor rants in front of Adiyogi statue, video goes viral," *OpIndia*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.opindia.com/2019/05/neither-yoga-nor-yogi-can-save-you-only-jesus-can-christian-pastor-rants-in-front-of-adiyogi-statue-video-goes-viral/>; Poornima Murali, "Tamil Nadu Evangelist Mohan C Lazarus Booked in 3 Separate Cases for Remarks Insulting Hindu Gods," *News 18*, October 05, 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/tamil-nadu-evangelist-mohan-c-lazarus-booked-in-3-separate-cases-for-remarks-insulting-hindu-gods-1897767.html>.

<sup>366</sup> "Nepal: Arrest Of Christians Prompts Religious Freedom Worry," *Eurasia Review*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/29042019-nepal-arrest-of-christians-prompts-religious-freedom-worry/>.

<sup>367</sup> Lakmal Harichandra, "Siva Senai's Anti-Muslim Tirade – Buddhists & Hindus Should Be Careful,"

This learning and exchange between right-wing Hindu groups in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka is not a phenomenon unique to South Asia. Australian right-wing parties have sent out representatives to the US to seek directives on furthering propaganda that is right-wing in nature.<sup>369</sup> In a more extreme form, the New Zealand mosque attacker was inspired by other right-wing propaganda across the world and helped influence attacks on mosques in places like Norway.<sup>370</sup> If uncontained, Hindu right-wing extremism has the potential to reach other countries as well apart from India, causing communal tensions, if not security issues.

## Responses

Between January and July 2019, the Indian security forces neutralised more than 120 terrorists in Kashmir.<sup>371</sup> The government has also dispatched teams of researchers and ministers to assess the prevailing situation in the area. To arrest further deterioration of the situation, it is paramount for the responsible parties to provide recommendations to defuse tensions and implement them without much delay. The government should also consider conducting investigations into the various allegations of human rights abuses

*Colombo Telegraph*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/siva-senais-anti-muslim-tirade-buddhists-hindus-should-be-careful/>.

<sup>368</sup> D. P. Satish, "Siva Senai in Sri Lanka Gets Shiv Sena Support, Colombo Worried," *India Today*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/siva-senai-in-sri-lanka-gets-shiva-sena-support-colombo-worried-1301366.html>.

<sup>369</sup> Paul Karp, "One Nation's James Ashby filmed seeking \$20m from NRA to weaken Australia's gun laws," *Guardian*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/26/one-nations-james-ashby-filmed-lobbying-for-20m-in-nra-donations-to-weaken-australias-gun-laws>.

<sup>370</sup> Jason Burke, "Norway mosque attack suspect inspired by Christchurch and El Paso shootings," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/norway-mosque-attack-suspect-may-have-been-inspired-by-christchurch-and-el-paso-shootings>.

<sup>371</sup> "India deploys 10,000 troops in insurgency-hit Kashmir," *The Straits Times*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/india-deploys-10000-troops-in-insurgency-hit-kashmir>.



by security forces in the region.<sup>372</sup> All of these can help placate the Kashmiri populace and prevent a rising insurgency in the future.

Without addressing economic woes however, the government cannot win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiris. A case in point is the Jammu and Kashmir Block Development Council elections where the BJP only secured 81 out of more than 300 seats,<sup>373</sup> despite all political parties boycotting the elections with only independents contesting.<sup>374</sup> The success of independent candidates, not only in Muslim-dominated Kashmir but also in Hindu-dominated Jammu and Buddhist-dominated Leh, demonstrated local alienation from the current central government and its regional representatives.<sup>375</sup>

The Indian government has been able to neutralise Pakistan's support to Kashmiri militant groups. Pakistan's poor economic conditions and pressure by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) which has warned to blacklist the country if its performance against counter-terrorism financing and money laundering does not improve.<sup>376</sup> As such, while the prevailing situation may embolden militants to try conduct operations; impediments to the flow of weapons, finances and recruits from Pakistan present a major operational challenge for Kashmiri insurgent groups.

In 2019, the government also neutralised several modules of AQIS and IS across India. The decapitation of militant leaders such as Zakir Musa and Hamid Lelhari as well as Ishfaq Sufi of IS further weakened the global

militants' footprint in India. The government has also set up research cells to work on different jihadist groups and radicalisation. For instance, authorities in Kerala have claimed that as of June 2019, they deradicalised up to 3,000 people who were sympathetic to the IS in over 21 centres.<sup>377</sup>

Similarly, in dealing with the Naxalite threat, the government has adopted a multi-pronged approach together with measures taken by the respective local governments. In terms of a kinetic approach, the government has worked to increase the capacity of the counter-insurgency forces in states like Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and others. The state governments also introduced development interventions in Naxal-hit areas such as building roads, increasing state connectivity and providing more avenues for education and employment. As such, these have also weakened the Naxal grip in these areas.<sup>378</sup> Moreover, state governments such as Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh have introduced rehabilitation schemes for Naxalites whereby they reintegrate insurgents into society after training them for other vocational services.<sup>379</sup>

The threat of Hindu extremism has not been tackled adequately in the year 2019. For instance, mob lynching incidents were left out of the National Crime Records Bureau's 2017 report on crime (which was released in 2019) on the pretext of the data being unreliable despite multiple trackers present to record such data.<sup>380</sup> In any case, state governments of Manipur, Assam and West Bengal have introduced new legislations on mob lynching

<sup>372</sup> "Electric shocks, beatings: Kashmiris allege abuse by India army," *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2019,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/shocks-beatings-kashmiris-allege-abuse-india-army-190910114145774.html>.

<sup>373</sup> The BDC is not to be confused with the assembly elections. This election witnessed elected heads of villages voting for political representatives.

<sup>374</sup> Aakash Hassan, "More than 98% Voting Recorded in Jammu and Kashmir's First Block Development Council Polls," *News 18*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/more-than-98-voting-recorded-in-jammu-and-kashmir-s-first-block-development-council-polls-2361597.html>.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Dipanjan Roy Choudhury, "FATF warns Pakistan of blacklisting if terror funding not controlled by Feb 20," *Economic Times*, October 21, 2019,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/fatf-retains-pakistan-in-grey-list-warns-of-action/articleshow/71647632.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>377</sup> The definition and procedure adopted by the Kerala government is not known and, thus, it is not possible to gauge the numbers accurately.

<sup>378</sup> Prabash K Dutta, "Are Naxals Amit Shah's next target?" *India Today*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/are-naxals-amit-shah-s-next-target-1592135-2019-08-27>.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> M.P. Nathaniel, "Legislation against mob lynching must be accompanied by effective policing," *Indian Express*, October 24, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-law-isnt-enough-ncrb-data-mob-lynching-6084672/>.

incidents. However, enforcement of such legislation is still poor.<sup>381</sup>

## Outlook

The revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir and the Indian government's heavy-handed handling of the situation will likely revive the insurgency. This will also allow IS and AQ to exploit the situation in order to increase their footprint in Indian Kashmir. A resurgent militant landscape in Kashmir will only lead to increased Hindu extremism across India which, coupled with a number of other developments such as clashes between Hindus and Christians, will also strengthen Hindu extremists. The reduction in Naxalite violence is a positive development which has the potential to drastically reduce India's overall casualty rates. To further improve the country's security, the government will need to adopt a holistic response to the threat from the Kashmiri insurgency movement and better manage majority-minority relations and concerns, so that different communities do not fall prey to damaging communal rhetoric purveyed by extremist elements of all ilk.

## PAKISTAN

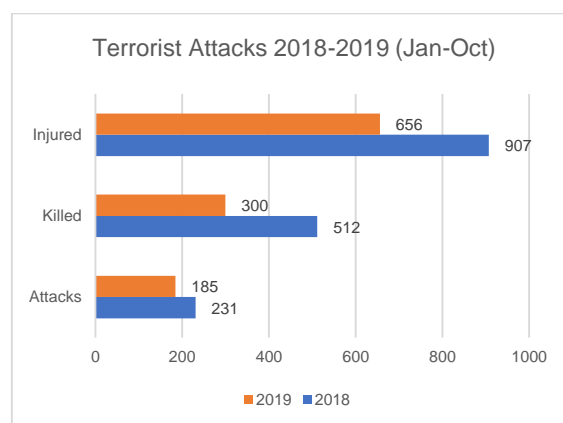
*In 2019, the downward trajectory of terrorist incidents in Pakistan continued. Yet, the threat seems to be gradually reconstituting in the absence of a judicious implementation of counter-extremism measures concomitant with counter-terrorism measures. Despite being organisationally uprooted from Pakistan and operationally weakened, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and its associated groups are the most dangerous threat groups to the country's internal security. Meanwhile, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) has emerged as a future threat to the country, particularly capable of targeting Pakistan's fragile sectarian fault lines. The Islamic State's declaration of a wilayah (province) in Pakistan in 2019 underscores the global terror group's interest in the country. On the other hand, the Baloch separatist groups remain weak but resilient as demonstrated in their sporadic hit-and-run operations in*

*Balochistan. Pakistan's response to the twin threats of extremism and terrorism is comprehensive but implementation remains a challenge. In 2020, Pakistan will have to significantly improve its performance on Countering Terrorism Financing (CTF) to avoid the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)'s blacklist. At the same time, the mainstreaming of former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and participatory development in Balochistan are essential in addition to counter-terrorism operations to overcome persistent threats in these two regions.*

## Declining Terrorism, Reconstituting and Reviving

As many as 185 terrorist attacks were witnessed in Pakistan in the first ten months of 2019 compared to 231 attacks for the same period last year, registering a decrease of 20 percent.<sup>382</sup> Similarly, killings in these attacks declined from 512 in 2018 to 300 this year, showing a decline of 41 percent (See Chart 1).<sup>383</sup> The majority of these attacks were carried out by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associated groups in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provinces.

Chart 1: Comparison of terrorist attacks and casualties in Pakistan 2018-2019 (Jan-Oct)<sup>384</sup>



Terrorist attacks have steadily declined in Pakistan due to implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), a 20-point counter-terrorism and extremism roadmap,

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Data compiled from Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies' monthly security reports of 2018 and 2019

available under the press release section at <https://www.pakpips.com>.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

and conduct of military operations, Zarb-e-Azb (Sword of the Prophet) and Radd-ul-Fasad (Elimination of discord).<sup>385</sup> Since the 2014 Army Public School (APS) attack in Peshawar, Pakistan has indiscriminately targeted various militant groups.<sup>386</sup> The organisational infrastructure of different militant groups has been dismantled and their operational presence minimised to a few pockets of lone-wolf supporters and sympathisers.<sup>387</sup>

The geographical spread of militant violence in Pakistan has moved from the former FATA - now merged with KP - to southwestern Balochistan province.<sup>388</sup> TTP and its associated groups, the Baloch separatists and the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) have spearheaded these attacks.<sup>389</sup> Resource-rich Balochistan's geostrategic location and the commencement of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor project (CPEC) - the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - make Balochistan a prime target of these militant groups.<sup>390</sup> The groups have earned publicity and money by targeting Chinese nationals and projects.<sup>391</sup> Also, having a foothold in Balochistan allows them to move back and forth between the Middle Eastern conflict zones and Afghanistan through Iran.

<sup>385</sup> "Pakistan's achievements in War on Terror but at what cost: A Special Review of the current decade," *Pak Institute for Peace Studies*, March-April 2019, pp.7-8, <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Pakistan-s-achievements-in-war-on-terror-but-at-what-cost-a-special-review-of-the-current-decade.pdf>.

<sup>386</sup> Sameer Lalwani, "Actually, Pakistan Is Winning Its War on Terror," *Foreign Policy*, December 10, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/10/actually-pakistan-is-winning-its-war-on-terror/>.

<sup>387</sup> "Militant attacks declined by 45pc in 2018," *Dawn*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1454729>.

<sup>388</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, "Balochistan looks ready to blow, and when it does, it likely will spill over," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/09/balochistan-looks-ready-to-blow-and-when-it-does-it-likely-will-spill-over/>.

<sup>389</sup> Roohan Ahmed, "Daesh looks to gain foothold in Balochistan under ex-Karachi cop," *Samaa Tv*, September 18, 2019, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/09/daesh-looks-to-gain-foothold-in-balochistan-under-ex-karachi-cop/>.

<sup>390</sup> Muhammad Akbar Notezai, "Will Balochistan Blow Up China's Belt and Road?" *Foreign Policy*,

Notwithstanding the steady decline in militant violence, Pakistan's gains against terrorism are fragile in the absence of a comprehensive counter-extremism response.<sup>392</sup> The attacks in 2019 were spread throughout Pakistan indicating that the geographical reach of various anti-Pakistan militant groups is still intact.<sup>393</sup> In a way, these threat groups seem to be reconstituting and reviving. For instance, in Karachi after a lengthy lull in violence, terrorism has reared its head.<sup>394</sup> Likewise, TTP and its splinter groups have started distributing threatening pamphlets in different areas of ex-FATA.<sup>395</sup> This is alarming and underscores the need to enhance the Intelligence Based Operations (IBOs) to neutralise the re-emergence of these groups. In fact, the central focus of operation of Radd-ul-Fasad was to eliminate the residual threat of terrorism in Pakistan.<sup>396</sup> Given that, reconstitution of the threat groups in Karachi and former FATA indicates gaps in implementation of Radd-ul-Fasad.<sup>397</sup>

## Group-centric Threats

### Local Militant Groups

Notwithstanding numerous organisational and operational setbacks, TTP, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb-ul-Ahrar (HuA) continue to pose the largest internal security

May 30, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/30/will-balochistan-blow-up-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Muhammad Ishtiaq and Noor Zahid, "Analysts: Success of Pakistan's New Counterterrorism Policy Hinges on Implementation," *Voice of America*, September 11, 2017,

<https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/analysts-success-pakistans-new-counterterrorism-policy-hinges-implementation>.

<sup>393</sup> Amy Kazmin and Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan's terror threat explained," *Financial Times*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/06102062-3416-11e9-bd3a-8b2a211d90d5>.

<sup>394</sup> Zia Ur Rehman, "Is sectarian violence returning to Karachi?" *The News*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/429989-is-sectarian-violence-returning-to-karachi>.

<sup>395</sup> Dilawar Wazir, "Pamphlet warns police to leave S. Waziristan in three days," *Dawn*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1477791/pamphlet-warns-police-to-leave-s-waziristan-in-three-days>.

<sup>396</sup> Najam Sethi, "Radd-ul-Fasad," *The Friday Times*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/radd-ul-fasaad/>.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

threat to Pakistan.<sup>398</sup> Hit-and-run operations and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) attacks by these militant groups in former FATA and Balochistan targeting the security forces, religious minorities, and development projects have continued.

TTP and its associated groups accounted for the highest number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2019.<sup>399</sup> Since Mufti Nur Wali Mehsud became the head of TTP, the group has overcome internal rifts and factional fighting has stopped.<sup>400</sup> Moreover, TTP operatives have shown some form of presence in their erstwhile strongholds in ex-FATA. For instance, in North and South Waziristan, TTP issued warnings to locals against polio vaccination, playing music and other “un-Islamic” practices.<sup>401</sup> Though the state’s counter-narrative of Paigham-e-Pakistan clearly maintains that violence in the name of Islam is prohibited in Pakistan, TTP still enjoys a semblance of legitimacy among its constituents in Pakistan due to the non-implementation of the counter-narrative.<sup>402</sup>

Meanwhile, Baloch separatist groups have continued their operations in Balochistan from Iran and Afghanistan. This year, two of the three most devastating attacks - the Pearl Continental (PC) hotel attack in Gawadar and assault on a passenger bus carrying Punjabi laborers on the Makran coastal highway - were carried out by Baloch separatist groups.<sup>403</sup> Baloch separatists have

maintained their operational strength and adopted suicide bombings as a new tactic in the last few years.

The CPEC projects have further added to Baloch’s sense of alienation and provided them with new targets in the province.<sup>404</sup> The absence of participatory development, inconsistent engagements with the Baloch masses to win their hearts and minds and a high-handed political approach from the centre have hindered improvements in the socio-economic sphere in the province; thus acting as the motivation for ground support for Baloch militancy.<sup>405</sup>

### *Global Militant Groups*

The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) has emerged as a long-term security threat to Pakistan’s internal security. After losing Baghouz in Syria in March 2019, IS devolved its Khorasan wilayah (province) by declaring two new wilayat (provinces) in India and Pakistan.<sup>406</sup> Daud Mehsud, a former TTP commander from Karachi, has been appointed as the first emir of the Islamic State of Pakistan (ISP).<sup>407</sup> The ISP’s footprint in Pakistan is primarily concentrated in Balochistan. It has strong alliances with anti-Shia Sunni militant groups such as Jandullah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ)<sup>408</sup>; the group

<sup>398</sup> Mubasher Bukhari, “Militant bomb near Sufi shrine kills 10 in Pakistan’s Lahore,” *Reuters*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-blast/militant-bomb-near-sufi-shrine-kills-10-in-pakistan-lahore-idUSKCN1SE0C2>.

<sup>399</sup> Data compiled from Pak Institute for Peace Studies’ monthly security reports of 2018 and 2019 available at <https://www.pakpips.com>.

<sup>400</sup> Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, “Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban’s Foundation: TTP’s Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 11, (December 2018), pp. 21-25,

<https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/12/CTC-SENTINEL-122018.pdf>.

<sup>401</sup> Pazir Gul, “TTP warns against playing music, women going out alone in Miramshah,” *Dawn*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1497395>.

<sup>402</sup> Khuram Iqbal et al., “Critical evaluation of Pakistan’s counter-narrative efforts,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, (2019), pp. 147-163.

<sup>403</sup> Asad Hashim, “Gunmen attack hotel in Pakistan’s Gwadar, kill five people,” *Al-Jazeera*,

May 12, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/gunmen-attack-hotel-pakistan-port-city-gwadar-190511134034253.html>; Syed Ali Shah, “14 offloaded from passenger bus, shot dead on Makran Coastal Highway,” *Dawn*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1476893>.

<sup>404</sup> Khuram Hussain, “Balochistan cabinet shocked by CPEC presentation,” *Dawn*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1450773>.

<sup>405</sup> J. Weston Phippen, “What’s Happening in Pakistan’s Most Complicated Region?” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/08/balochistan-quetta/495689/>.

<sup>406</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Islamic State Announces Pakistan Province,” *Voice of America*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-announces-pakistan-province>.

<sup>407</sup> Farhan Zahid, “Daud Mehsud—Islamic State Names First Emir of Wilayat-e-Pakistan,” *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 10, Issue 10, (October 2019), pp. 5-7.

<sup>408</sup> Roohan Ahmed, “Daesh looks to gain foothold in Balochistan under ex-Karachi cop.”



targets Sufi Muslim practices and the Shia community.<sup>409</sup>

While ISP has a minimal footprint with low-grade capabilities in Pakistan<sup>410</sup>, its narrative of the Caliphate resonates with the younger generation of militants in the country.<sup>411</sup> This narrative provides a sense of purpose and identity to the youth suffering from an identity crisis.<sup>412</sup> Moreover, the youth driven by a sense of guilt get a chance for atonement and repentance by serving the so-called Caliphate.<sup>413</sup>

This narrative is equally alluring for young female radicals in Pakistan who have assumed more primary roles, from being nurturers of future jihadist generations, propagandists, recruiters and fund collectors, to combat and leadership roles.<sup>414</sup> Naureen Laghari, a would-be-suicide bomber from Hyderabad's Liaqut Medical College (LMC), is a case in point.<sup>415</sup>

The social media presence of IS radicals also gives them an advantage over other militant groups in Pakistan. The group spots and recruits most of its supporters and sympathisers through social media platforms.<sup>416</sup>

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda (AQ) based in Afghanistan has few subscribers in Pakistan among the younger generation of militants. However, the older generation of militants such as the Haqqani Network and Harkatul Jihad Al-Islami (HuJI), among others, are still loyal and respectful to AQ.<sup>417</sup> Likewise, AQ's South Asian affiliate Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) suffered a major setback in 2019 due to the killing of its chief Maulana Asim Umar. He was eliminated in a joint US-Afghan forces' raid in southern Afghanistan.<sup>418</sup> AQIS has operationally failed to take-off in Pakistan's complex and competitive militant landscape.<sup>419</sup> In the initial years, it carried out a few terrorist attacks, but it has lost its manpower to ISK since. AQIS' approach of de-emphasising violence and lending support to local causes such as helping the Afghan Taliban fight the US forces in Afghanistan and supporting the pro-Shariah jihadist elements in Kashmir, e.g. Ansar Ghazwatul Hind, have undermined its credentials.<sup>420</sup> In Pakistan, AQIS appears a paper tiger confined to issuing propaganda statements on the internet.

#### *Group-Centric to Socially-Driven Radicalisation*

Another concerning trend in 2019 in Pakistan has been various incidents of socially-driven

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Adnan Aamir, "The uncertain fate of Islamic State in Pakistan," *The Interpreter*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/uncertain-fate-islamic-state-pakistan>.

<sup>411</sup> Tariq Pervez, "The Islamic State in Pakistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB213-The-Islamic-State-In-Pakistan.pdf>.

<sup>412</sup> Kamran Ahmed, "Why do some young people become jihadis? Psychiatry offers answers," *Guardian*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/26/jihadis-muslims-radicalisation-manchester>.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Imtiaz Gul, "Women's Role in Recruitment for ISIS/Islamist Networks in Pakistan," *International Annals of Criminology*, Vol. 56, Special Issue 1-2, (November 2018), pp. 79-92, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-annals-of-criminology/article/womens-role-in-recruitment-for-isisislamist-networks-in-pakistan/BA46806712FF1C41720066A66E89CE64/core-reader>.

<sup>415</sup> Huma Yusuf, "How Pakistan's identity crisis gives rise to female radicalisation: Dawn columnist," *The Straits Times*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/how>

[pakistan's-identity-crisis-gives-rise-to-female-radicalisation-dawn-columnist](https://www.dawn.com/news/1351302/tech-terror-using-messenger-app-communicate/).

<sup>416</sup> Riaz Ahmed, "Islamic State using messenger app to avoid detection in Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, March 10, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1351302/tech-terror-using-messenger-app-communicate/>.

<sup>417</sup> Colin P. Clarke and Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is Ready to Attack You Again," *Foreign Policy*, September 4, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/04/al-qaeda-is-ready-to-attack-you-again/>.

<sup>418</sup> "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia chief killed in Afghanistan," *BBC News*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>.

<sup>419</sup> Alastair Reed, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: A New Frontline in the Global Jihadist Movement?" *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, March 2015, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ICCT-Reed-Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-May2016.pdf>.

<sup>420</sup> "AL-QAEDA IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia," *The Soufan Centre*, January 2019, p.12, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Al-Qaeda-in-the-Indian-Subcontinent-AQIS.pdf>.

radicalisation which different extremist and terrorist groups had spearheaded in the past.<sup>421</sup> Socially-driven radicalisation refers to acts of vigilante justice and violence by self-radicalised individuals. This is not to suggest that extremist and terrorist groups are not radicalising the society, but self-radicalisation through social media has added another layer of complexity to Pakistan's volatile militant landscape. There is a reverse causal relationship between extremism and terrorism in Pakistan i.e. extremism feeds into terrorism and the former causes the latter.<sup>422</sup> Since the 1980s, the overwhelming presence of different militant groups in Pakistan had radicalised the society and now as these groups have been weakened and uprooted from the country, socially-driven radical trends are assuming a life of their own.

Socially-driven radicalism is qualitatively different from other trends of radicalisation in Pakistan as it involves mainstream groups and individuals. 80 percent of Pakistan's Muslim population is Sunni. Of this, 50 percent are Barelvis and 15 percent are Deobandis.<sup>423</sup> Both Sunni denominations are sub-sects of the Hanafi school of thought. In this light, the politicisation of the Barelvi identity along narrow sectarian lines by Tehrik Labaik Pakistan (TLP), an extremist group, framing its ideological narrative against Deobandis and the heterodox Ahmadiyya community has become very alarming.<sup>424</sup> Growing schisms between these two religious groups are dangerous as both are mainstream and exist at all levels of society.

<sup>421</sup> Saira Bano Orakzai, "Pakistan's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): Reframing the Policy Framework for Peacebuilding and Development Strategies," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 42, Issue 8, (August 2017), pp. 755-770.

<sup>422</sup> Abdul Basit, "Countering violent extremism: what can Pakistan learn from Singapore's experience?" *International Cases of Terrorist Rehabilitation*, Rohan Gunaratna and Sabariah Hussin (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2018), pp-6-28.

<sup>423</sup> "Population by religion," Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, available at <http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/POPULATION%20BY%20RELIGION.pdf>.

<sup>424</sup> Nadeem F. Paracha, "The Rise of the Militant Barelvi," *Dawn*, September 9, 2018, [https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=09\\_09\\_2018\\_528\\_001](https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=09_09_2018_528_001).

## Responses

### *Military Operations*

Military operations have been instrumental in downgrading the terrorist threat in Pakistan.<sup>425</sup> However, as normalcy returns to Pakistan, the ongoing nation-wide operation Radd-ul-Fasad aimed at eliminating the residual threat of terrorism needs urgent re-evaluation. Despite the operations, the residual threat has persisted while the old threat groups seem to be reconstituting and reviving themselves gradually in former-FATA and Balochistan. Improving and enhancing intelligence to neutralise the revival with timely and actionable input is particularly critical.<sup>426</sup>

At the same time, the focus of these operations should be revised from an enemy-centric to a people-centric approach.<sup>427</sup> Equally important is the transparency of counter-terrorism strategies in the eyes of the public. It underscores the legitimacy of the state and erodes that of militant groups. The absence of transparency raises questions related to the upholding of the rule of law, human rights abuses and disproportionate use of violence in counter-terrorism operations, thus adding to the radicals' tools to agitate their sympathisers against the state.

### *Military Courts*

Military courts that were created to expedite the cases of arrested militants in Pakistan in 2015 ceased to function in early 2019.<sup>428</sup> The slow pace of the Anti-terrorism Courts (ATCs)

<sup>425</sup> Hannah Johnsrud and Frederick W. Kagan "Pakistan's Counter-Militant Offensive: Operation Raddul Fasaad," *Critical Threats*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/pakistans-counter-militant-offensive-operation-raddul-fasaad>.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

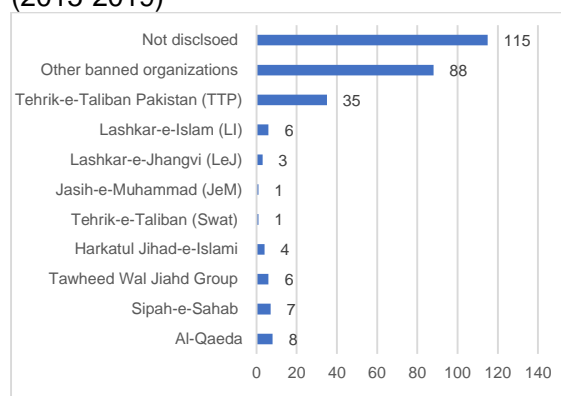
<sup>427</sup> Allison Peters and Jhanara Saeed, "Promoting Inclusive Policy Frameworks for Countering Violent extremism Bridging Theory and Practice: A Pakistani Policewomen Case Study," *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, December 2017, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Pakistan-CVE-Case-Study.pdf>.

<sup>428</sup> "Military courts cease to function as tenure ends," *Express Tribune*, April 1, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1941181/1-military-courts-cease-function-tenure-ends/>.

in Pakistan and the high acquittal rate of militants eroded faith in deterrence against the use of violence.<sup>429</sup> To punish arrested militants according to the nature of their offences, and to resurrect the fear of punishment, 11 military courts were set up across Pakistan.<sup>430</sup>

In a span of four years, the military courts have decided on 717 cases, issuing convictions in 641 cases of which 296 were death penalties and 296 life sentences (See *Chart 2*).<sup>431</sup>

Chart 2: Decision Given by Military Courts (2015-2019)



### Countering Terrorist Finances (CTF)

In 2019, Pakistan registered 228 Terrorist Financing (TF) cases and convicted 58 individuals on charges of TF and Money Laundering (ML). However, this tally is not consistent with the country's overall level of TF risk.<sup>432</sup> Pakistan has also proscribed 66 organisations and 7,600 individuals under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1373.<sup>433</sup>

Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) has set up a Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU) for receiving, analysing and disseminating statutory regulations and other reports related to TF/ML and predicate offences.<sup>434</sup> Similarly, Counter Terrorism Finance Units (CTFUs) have been established in Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs) of the provinces to investigate TF risks as a core, not ancillary, task. FMU also carries out asset-tracing and temporary freezing of accounts along with detection and investigation of financial crimes.<sup>435</sup>

Though Pakistan has adopted a multi-agency approach to CTF/ML, serious operational coordination and inter-agency cooperation gaps still persist, including implementation of the National AML/CFT Strategy 2018.<sup>436</sup> Various government agencies working on TF/ML in Pakistan operate in isolation and their objectives are inconsistent with existing and evolving national and global ML/TF risks.<sup>437</sup>

### Border Fencing with Iran and Afghanistan

As most of the anti-Pakistan militant groups—jihadist outfits and the Baloch separatists—operate in and out of Iran and Afghanistan, Pakistan started fencing its border with both countries. Pakistan shares a 2,640-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan (1,200 kilometers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the rest with Balochistan) and a 959-kilometer border with Iran.

The border fencing with Afghanistan started in mid-2017. At the same time, hundreds of new outposts and forts are being constructed for security and surveillance.<sup>438</sup> Work on as

<sup>429</sup> Huma Yusuf, "Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Courts," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, (March 2010), pp. 22-25,

<https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss3-art7.pdf>.

<sup>430</sup> Asad Hashim, "Army courts to try Pakistan terror suspects," *Al-Jazeera*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/01/army-courts-try-pakistan-terror-suspects-2015110173646526791.html>.

<sup>431</sup> "Military Courts," *Centre for Research and Security Studies*, 2017, <https://crss.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/The-Nap-Tracker-Second-Year-Military-Courts.pdf>.

<sup>432</sup> "Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures: Pakistan Mutual Evaluation

Report," *Asia Pacific Group*, October 2019, pp.7-8, <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/mutualevaluations/documents/mer-pakistan-2019.html>.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Shahbaz Rana, "Pakistan's FATF compliance poor: APG report," *Express Tribune*, October 7, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2073728/2-pakistans-fatf-compliance-poor-apg-report/>.

<sup>437</sup> Anwar Iqbal, "US sees gaps in Pakistan's fight against terror funding," *Dawn*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1514558>.

<sup>438</sup> "Pak-Afghan border fencing to be completed by end of 2019: DG ISPR," *Express Tribune*,

many as 233 out of 843 forts has also been completed. This fencing will be completed in 2020 and has cost US \$ 550 million.<sup>439</sup> Afghanistan does not recognise the international border with Pakistan and the fencing has sometimes led to skirmishes with the Afghan security forces.<sup>440</sup>

Likewise, Pakistan is fencing its border with Iran; this decision was taken in February this year, after an attack originating from Balochistan killed 27 personnel of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).<sup>441</sup> Time and again, Iran-Pakistan tensions have mounted due to attacks by militants operating on both sides of the border. Some factions of Baloch separatists are based in Iran, while some anti-Iran Sunni extremist groups operate out of Balochistan.<sup>442</sup>

## Outlook

In 2020, Pakistan's immediate challenge would be to avoid FATF's blacklisting by improving implementation of its CTF strategies. The rising trend of socially-driven extremism, despite considerable decline in terrorist incidents, requires revisiting the existing Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) policies and enhancing their scope from a security-centric to a peace-oriented approach, involving winning the hearts and minds of communities in conflict-hit areas. The non-kinetic aspects of the NAP such as madrassa (religious schools) reform, revising the education curriculum, among others, remain a work in progress. Finally, given Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan and close involvement in ongoing negotiations as a facilitator, the outcomes of the US-Taliban talks, intra-Afghan dialogue and the presidential elections will directly affect Pakistan's internal security.

December 15, 2019,

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1867668/1-pak-afghan-border-fencing-completed-end-2019-dg-ispr/>.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Border Fencing to Be Completed by 2020, Pakistan Says."

<sup>441</sup> "Pakistan to fence border after terrorist attack in Iran: Army," *Press Tv*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/detail/2019/02/25/589486/iran-pakistan-border-fence-terrorists>.

<sup>442</sup> "Pakistan to fence 950km of border with Iran," *Gulf News*, February 23, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-to-fence-950km-of-border-with-iran-1.62257071>.

## SRI LANKA

*Sri Lanka faced a security crisis in 2019, after a series of coordinated suicide attacks ripped through parts of the country on April 21, Easter Sunday. The deadliest single day of violence in the country, saw more than 250 people killed and several hundreds more injured. Almost 50 foreign nationals, mainly from China, India, the U.S., and Britain also perished. Sri Lanka's tourism industry, a lifeblood of the country's stagnating economy, was crippled by the attacks.<sup>443</sup> The aftermath saw religious and ethnic tensions reignited, as the government struggled to formulate an adequate response. Mainstream Muslims have been subjected to heightened suspicions and persecution by sections of the country's Sinhala Buddhist majority. Tensions involving the Tamil community have also contributed to an atmosphere of mistrust. Escalating sectarian fissures play into the hands of extremists on all sides, both locally and at a transnational level. Policymakers need to carefully manage the politico-religious climate to prevent its exploitation by radical groups.*

## Easter Attacks

Nine suicide bombers struck three churches, two Catholic and one Protestant, as well as three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, in one of the worst terrorist attacks anywhere since 9/11.<sup>444</sup> The Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, although the government has blamed local jihadist groups. Three organisations, the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), and Willayath-As-Seylani (WAS), were subsequently banned under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.<sup>445</sup> They were described as self-radicalised Salafi-jihadist networks, who drew inspiration and modest support from IS.

<sup>443</sup> "Easter Bombings Damaged Sri Lanka's Economy Beyond Tourism," *The Diplomat*, July 31 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/easter-bombings-damaged-sri-lanka-economy-beyond-tourism/>.

<sup>444</sup> "Sri Lanka Attacks: What we know about the Easter Bombings," *BBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48010697>.

<sup>445</sup> "Sri Lanka Struggles to Solve the Islamic State-Local Network Puzzle," *The James Town Foundation*, September 10, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/sri-lanka-struggles-to-solve-the-islamic-state-local-network-puzzle/>.



Following IS' claim of responsibility for the Easter attack through its Amaq news agency on April 23, a video was released by the IS-affiliated Al-Ghuraba media, allegedly featuring the suicide bombers. Except for Zahran Hashim, the alleged mastermind, the other bombers had their faces covered.<sup>446</sup> Messages in Arabic and Tamil were visible in the video, while a caption read "O Crusaders, this bloody day (21-04) is our reward to you".<sup>447</sup> The SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors jihadi networks worldwide, said the bombings were widely celebrated by IS supporters online, with one supporter releasing photographs of three of the attackers standing with raised fingers against an IS flag, labelling them as "commandoes."<sup>448</sup>

There was a sense of shock and awe in the country and around the world over the unprecedented targeting of Christian worshippers and tourists in the Easter attacks. Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation of 22 million, comprising a Buddhist Sinhalese majority (70 percent) and sizeable minority communities of Hindus (mostly Tamils, 12 percent) and Muslims (10 percent). There are also 1.6 million Christians. The country previously suffered acutely from terrorism during the civil war, until the military defeated the Tamil Tiger separatists in 2009. Prior to the Easter attacks, there had been no history of violence between the Muslim and Christian communities.

In a statement issued on Telegram, IS said it targeted Christians as well as citizens of countries involved in the international coalition opposing it. For IS, the Easter attack was a significant fillip as it attempted to reset the narrative about its decline.<sup>449</sup> Such high-profile attacks served the group by keeping it in the headlines.<sup>450</sup> They also improved morale among IS' supporters, sympathisers and fighters, by displaying the group's capability to launch spectacular attacks. Moreover, such attacks demonstrated that IS can form tactical alliances with low-profile local Islamist groups, such as the NTJ in Sri Lanka.<sup>451 452</sup>

## The Cell

### Family Networks

Some of the Easter bombers hailed from two local Muslim families.<sup>453</sup> Others were well-educated, having studied in Australia and the United Kingdom. For example, Ilham Ahmed Ibrahim, belonged to a wealthy family of spice traders, who were prominent members of the business community in the capital, Colombo. He was one of two bombers who targeted the luxury Shangri-La Hotel.<sup>454</sup> His brother, Inshaf Ahmed Ibrahim, hit another hotel. Investigators believed their family's wealth possibly financed the entire plot.

The involvement of family cells in the Easter bombings points to IS' growing exploitation of kinship ties characterised by trust, confidence and secrecy. In its post-caliphate phase, the group has also targeted countries considered as soft targets - those without a

<sup>446</sup> "IS Video Throws Spotlight on Suspected Ringleader of Sri Lanka bombings," *Reuters*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts-claim/islamic-state-video-throws-spotlight-on-suspected-ringleader-of-sri-lanka-bombings-idUSKCN1S01AN>.

<sup>447</sup> "Second team of NTJ terrorists ready for bombing, Indian officials tell Sri Lanka," *Hindustan Times*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/second-team-of-ntj-terrorists-ready-for-bombing-indian-officials-tell-sri-lanka/story-uFrIUa8G8H34JcuZMdDVYI.html>.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, "Terrorism On The Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter Attacks 2019 in Sri Lanka," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, Issue 5, (May-June 2019), pp. 1-10, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorism-teardrop-island-understanding-easter-2019-attacks-sri-lanka/>.

<sup>450</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "What the Islamic State's Organisational Restructuring Tells Us?" *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, June 3 2019, <https://icct.nl/publication/what-does-the-islamic-states-organisational-restructuring-tell-us/>.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> NTJ came into the limelight in late 2018, when one of its leaders, Abdul Razak was arrested for inciting communal tensions. While its hardline rhetoric raised concerns, the group was not deemed a major threat by the authorities to be banned prior to the Easter attacks. A majority of the group's members were in their twenties.

<sup>453</sup> "Islamic State sneaks into Asia through family terror cells," *Asia Nikkei*, May 21 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Islamic-State-sneaks-into-Asia-through-family-terror-cells>.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

recent history of radical Islamic terrorism and thus not on the lookout for it.<sup>455</sup> Ideologically, IS' call for its supporters to live as "true Muslims" and establish a pure "Islamic environment" in the form of a caliphate, also continues to attract Asian followers, including both rich and poor families.<sup>456</sup>

### *The Mastermind*

Zahran Hashim was previously a well-known and controversial figure in his native town of Kattankudy in the eastern Batticaloa district. A charismatic preacher, he attracted several thousand followers online through various social media sites, including YouTube and Facebook, where he posted incendiary sermons. But Zahran was also a rebel and outsider. NTJ, a religious organisation he initially founded, subsequently cut ties with him due to his aggressive behaviour and rhetoric.<sup>457</sup>

For reasons that remain unclear, his beliefs started to become more extreme in 2016, and he grew increasingly supportive of global jihad and suicide bombings. In March 2017, Zahran was fingered as the chief instigator in a violent clash between a group of radical Islamists and mainstream Sufi Muslims in Kattankudy. The police sought his arrest following these clashes. Having gone into hiding, Zahran continued to evade the authorities over the next two years, alternating between several safe houses located in remote areas around the country. He also travelled overseas, primarily to India, where unconfirmed reports say he established contact with veteran IS fighters.<sup>458</sup>

<sup>455</sup> "Sri Lanka Attack is the wave of the future," *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/23/sri-lanka-attack-is-the-wave-of-the-future-isis-terrorism-returnees/>.

<sup>456</sup> "Islamic State sneaks into Asia through family terror cells," *Asia Nikkei*.

<sup>457</sup> "After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence," *International Crisis Group*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/302-after-sri-lankas-easter-bombings-reducing-risks-future-violence>.

<sup>458</sup> "We Knew What Was Coming: Sri Lanka Sees ISIS' Hand in Attacks," *New York Times*, May 3 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/03/world/asia/sri-lanka-attacks-isis.html>.

### *IS Links*

Prior to the Easter attacks, radical Islamists in Sri Lanka aspired to migrate (*hijrah*) to Syria or surrounding conflict theatres where IS had a presence.<sup>459</sup> Following a major outbreak of anti-Muslim riots in the town of Digana in early 2018, Zahran and his associates began to agitate for a sophisticated and targeted domestic terrorist attack, sources said.<sup>460</sup> Disagreements with other NTJ leaders over the pursuit of a more radical agenda led to them forming a splinter cell later that year.

This cell, Willayath-As-Seylani (WAS), comprised members of NTJ and another local jihadist group, Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI).<sup>461</sup> Some analysts believe it to be IS' official branch in Sri Lanka, although information about the group is sparse, and government officials have repeatedly cast doubts on the authenticity of its links to IS.<sup>462</sup> In the months leading up to the Easter attacks, Zahran and his associates were linked to several small-scale incidents, including the killing of two police officers in the town of Vavunativu and vandalising of scared Buddhist statues in Mawanella.<sup>463</sup>

Sri Lankan investigators have maintained there is no proof of the Easter attackers receiving training in Syria or communicating directly with IS. They believed the bombers were "inspired by the IS brand, eager for the high profile that affiliation with IS would confer, and supported by several people outside Sri Lanka suspected of previous involvement with IS."<sup>464</sup> Indeed, reports

<sup>459</sup> Author's interviews with local officials in Colombo, August 2019.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> "Sri Lanka Struggles to Solve the Islamic State-Local Network Puzzle," *The James Town Foundation*, September 10, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/sri-lanka-struggles-to-solve-the-islamic-state-local-network-puzzle/>.

<sup>462</sup> "Sri Lanka Investigators: No ISIL link to Easter bombings," *Al-Jazeera*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/sri-lankan-investigator-isil-link-easter-bombings-190724134531830.html>.

<sup>463</sup> "Sri Lanka attacks: Who are National Thowheed Jamath?" *BBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48012694>.

<sup>464</sup> "After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence," *International Crisis Group*, September 27, 2019,

indicated Zahran had shelved initial plans to hit Buddhist targets in favour of an IS-inspired attack on Christians and Western tourists, as it offered greater publicity and shock value.<sup>465</sup>

However, this line of thought may be underestimating the extent of the IS infiltration into the country in recent years. Reports first emerged in 2015 of two Sri Lankan nationals, Sharfaz Nilam, and Thauqeer Thajudeen, joining and fighting for IS in Syria.<sup>466</sup> They were pioneering Sri Lankan jihadists and may have, along with charismatic preachers such as Zahran, inspired hundreds of other individuals towards IS' cause. Nilam subsequently died fighting in Syria. The local connections of several dozen Sri Lankan nationals who travelled to Syria to join IS in 2016 also remain unclear, although it is likely they would have attempted to radicalise their families and friends back home.

## Post Attack Assessment

### *Radicalisation factors*

Although the particular actors can vary, violent extremism - in its Buddhist, Hindu, and now Muslim manifestations - has similar roots in Sri Lanka.<sup>467</sup> In the same way that a series of post-independence Sinhala-Buddhist majority governments systematically initiated discriminatory policies against Tamils over several decades, which provided the necessary conditions for a Tamil ethno-separatist movement to emerge during the country's civil war, the spread of Islamophobia in recent years may have had a similar effect on Sri Lankan Muslims. Since 2012, radical Sinhalese groups have stoked anti-Muslim sentiments

by blaming, among other factors, the spread of the ultra-conservative Wahabbi and Salafi ideologies from the Middle East into some Muslim-majority towns. Buddhist hardliners claim these developments led to the observation of stricter religious practices amongst some local Muslims and planted the seeds for a radical Islamic militant movement to emerge.<sup>468</sup>

A series of anti-Muslim riots perpetrated by radical Buddhist groups in 2018, and four years earlier in 2014, further contributed to Sri Lankan Muslims feeling marginalised. Militants such as Zahran likely exploited such local grievances to radicalise some young Muslim men, adding a new dimension to the country's threat landscape. Regional factors likely also played a role, including growing violence against Muslim communities in nearby countries such as India. Zahran is believed to have travelled frequently to India, and had previously planned to bomb the Indian High Commission in Colombo.<sup>469</sup> Violence and oppression against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is also a source of grievance for some local Muslims, due to close links between Buddhist extremist groups in both countries and given that Sri Lanka had previously refused asylum to a group of Rohingya refugees who attempted to enter the country by boat.<sup>470</sup>

### *Communal Tensions*

Although the small group of IS-inspired militants were fringe actors, Sri Lanka's largely peaceful Muslim community faced significant backlash following the attacks, with radical Sinhalese mobs attacking and destroying hundreds of Muslim properties, including shops and mosques in the North

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/302-after-sri-lankas-easter-bombings-reducing-risks-future-violence>.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> "Sri Lanka Struggles to Solve the Islamic State-Local Network Puzzle," *The James Town Foundation*, September 10, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/sri-lanka-struggles-to-solve-the-islamic-state-local-network-puzzle/>.

<sup>467</sup> Nilay Saiya, "Religious Repression and the Easter Attacks: The Hidden Connection," *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/religious-repression-and-the-easter-attacks-the-hidden-connection/>.

<sup>468</sup> "Wahhabism confronted: Sri Lanka curbs Saudi influence after bombings," *The Straits Times*, July 5,

2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/wahhabism-confronted-sri-lanka-curbs-saudi-influence-after-bombings>.

<sup>469</sup> "Sri Lanka 'bombing mastermind' named as Moulvi Zahran Hashmi," *The Telegraph*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/04/23/sri-lanka-bombing-mastermind-named-moulvi-zahran-hashmi/>.

<sup>470</sup> "Hardline Buddhist monks storm UN safe house in Sri Lanka to attack Rohingya refugees," *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2112971/hardline-buddhist-monks-storm-un-safe-house-sri-lanka>.

Western Province, with the worst violence happening in May.<sup>471</sup> A Muslim man was killed in the clashes. Analysts say the violence was not a spontaneous retaliation for the Easter attacks, but a continuation of a years-long and orchestrated anti-Muslim campaign. In some instances, reports suggest the violence was organised, with attackers being transported from other areas into certain Muslim-occupied villages and towns.<sup>472</sup> There were also widespread reports of Muslims being beaten, and security officials failing to intervene. Mobs were also allowed to run amok on the streets for several hours before curfews were imposed.<sup>473</sup>

The government says it has increased security to control communal tensions. However, some local Muslims perceive the authorities and security forces as being indifferent to violence against them.<sup>474</sup> In recent months, Muslim women wearing traditional Islamic dress were targeted after the government banned face coverings in public following the Easter attacks, citing security reasons.<sup>475</sup> Though the *niqab* and *burka* – which cover most or all of the face and are worn by some Muslim women – were not specifically named, there have been instances where even those wearing head scarves have been harassed. In June, all of Sri Lanka's nine Muslim ministers resigned in protest over the government's failure to ensure the safety of its Muslim citizens.<sup>476</sup>

<sup>471</sup> "Sri Lanka imposes nationwide curfew after mosques attacked," *The Straits Times*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka-town-under-curfew-after-anti-muslim-attacks>.

<sup>472</sup> "Ethnic and Religious Violence Surges in Sri Lanka," *Soufan Group*, May 21, 2019, <http://www.soufangroup.com/intelbrief-ethnic-and-religious-violence-surges-in-sri-lanka/>.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> "Sri Lanka's Muslims demonised after Easter bombings," *DailyFT*, August 14, 2019, <http://www.ft.lk/opinion/Sri-Lanka-s-Muslims--demonised--after-Easter-bombings/14-683869>.

<sup>475</sup> "Sri Lanka's Veil Ban is Fueling Hate," *Foreign Policy*, May 23, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/23/sri-lankas-veil-ban-is-fueling-hate/>.

<sup>476</sup> "Sri Lanka Muslim ministers quit to protest threat to community," *Al-Jazeera*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/sri-lanka-muslim-ministers-quit-protest-threat-community-190603083758991.html>.

<sup>477</sup> "Sri Lanka's Muslims demonised after Easter bombings," *DailyFT*.

Analysts say there has been a normalisation of hate sentiments against Muslims following the Easter attacks, likely instigated by Sinhalese hardliners, including members of the Buddhist clergy.<sup>477</sup> In June, a senior Buddhist monk said Muslims should be stoned. Warakagoda Sri Gnanarathana made the comment after repeating unsubstantiated claims that a Muslim doctor had sterilised thousands of Buddhist women.<sup>478</sup> Another influential senior monk, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, who has been accused of triggering anti-Muslim sentiments in the past, was pardoned by then President Maithripala Sirisena in May 2019. Gnanasara was freed from prison after he had served less than a year of a six-year prison term under contempt of court charges. Two months later, he led public calls for Sinhala Buddhists to take control of the country's parliament in the November 2019 national elections to protect the community, amid heightened sectarian tensions.<sup>479</sup> Observers say such sentiments reflect the Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic majoritarianism that prevails in the country.

Lingering pre-war tensions between Muslims, who consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and Tamil Hindus<sup>480</sup> have also helped drive the emergence of a Hindu nationalist movement in Tamil majority areas in the North and East, which will need to be closely monitored.<sup>481</sup> In 2016, Siva Senai, a Hindu nationalist group,

<sup>478</sup> "Sri Lanka urged to tackle hate propaganda against Muslims," *Al-Jazeera*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/sri-lanka-urged-tackle-hate-propaganda-muslims-190826165119514.html>.

<sup>479</sup> Addressing hundreds of monks and followers at a rally in Kandy in July 2019, Gnanasara lobbied Sri Lanka's 10,000 Buddhist temples to help win votes for political candidates from the Sinhala Buddhist majority, arguing "it's our responsibility because this is a Sinhalese country. We are the historical owners of this country."

<sup>480</sup> Communal violence between Muslims, who consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group in Sri Lanka, and Tamil Hindus was common during Sri Lanka's civil war, which ended in 2009. While violence subsided after the war ended, tensions have persisted.

<sup>481</sup> "Hindu group protests against Muslim teachers wearing abaya," *Al-Jazeera*, July 14, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/hindu-group-protests-muslim-teachers-wearing-abaya-180713125727894.html>.



was formed with the stated purpose of protecting Hindus from perceived "threats" it defines as state support for "Sinhala – Buddhist Colonisation", and alleged attempts by Muslims and Christians of forced conversions of Hindus. The group made headlines in May 2018 for organising protests to oppose Islamic practices observed in the slaughter of cows.<sup>482</sup>

In Sri Lanka, escalating sectarianism could fuel further radicalisation, and may be exploited by extremists on all sides. With each instance of reciprocal violence, "tensions mount among the population and the damage to social cohesion becomes even more challenging to address in the long-term", the Soufan group noted.<sup>483</sup>

## Responses

In August 2019, Sri Lanka officially ended four months of emergency rule. The emergency laws, imposed following the Easter attacks, had given the military and police sweeping powers to arrest and detain suspects without court orders. Temporary curfews and social media blackouts were also imposed as part of comprehensive and sweeping security measures.<sup>484</sup> To date, almost 300 people linked to the attacks have been arrested, with half that number still in remand. Security officials say all those directly responsible for the suicide bombings have either been killed or arrested. Assets exceeding Rs. 6 billion (S\$ 60 million) in value have also been seized, including lands,

buildings, vehicles and other movable properties.<sup>485</sup> A noteworthy fillip was the capture of Noufer Moulavi, a potential successor to Zahran. He was arrested after attempting to re-enter the country in late April.

Aside from the arrests and property seizures, large stashes of weapons and explosives were also recovered following several raids on homes and safe houses linked to radical militants.<sup>486</sup> Information provided by Mohammad Ahmed Milhan, another senior NTJ operative who was extradited from Saudi Arabia and arrested on his return, led in June to the uncovering of a significant arms stockpile in Ollikkulam in Kattankudy. The substantial haul comprised detonators, gelignite sticks, liters of liquid gelignite, T-56 ammunition, and several swords.<sup>487</sup> Police interrogations revealed plans for a second and third wave of attacks, likely targeting Buddhist places of worship – including the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic. Other targets included the Kaluwanchikudy Church and several mosques in Ampara.<sup>488</sup>

There were recriminations over the failure of the government to act on advanced warnings given by its own Muslim community and foreign intelligence agencies of the impending Easter attacks.<sup>489</sup> Senior security officials told a parliamentary panel investigating security lapses that "the attack was avoidable had authorities acted on intelligence provided by India."<sup>490</sup> Observers say a political crisis that pitted then President

<sup>482</sup> "Shiv Senai in Sri Lanka gets Shiv Sena support," *The Island*, October 14, 2016, [http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=153748](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=153748).

<sup>483</sup> "Ethnic and Religious Violence Surges in Sri Lanka," *Soufan Group*, May 21, 2019, <http://www.soufangroup.com/intelbrief-ethnic-and-religious-violence-surges-in-sri-lanka/>.

<sup>484</sup> "Sri Lanka ends emergency rule imposed after Easter bombings," *Al-Jazeera*, August 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/sri-lanka-ends-emergency-rule-imposed-easter-bombings-190823134350525.html>.

<sup>485</sup> "Assets exceeding Rs. 6bn, Rs 134 mn in 100 bank accounts of suspects: Police," *Daily Mirror*, September 5, 2019, [http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking\\_news/Assets-exceeding-Rs-6-bn-Rs-134-mn-in-100-bank-accounts-of-suspects-Police/108-174060](http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Assets-exceeding-Rs-6-bn-Rs-134-mn-in-100-bank-accounts-of-suspects-Police/108-174060).

<sup>486</sup> The Easter bombers were found to have acquired bombmaking capabilities in local training camps in areas such as Nuwara Eliya and

Hambantota. The bombing devices used in the attacks were packed with iron nails, ball bearings and TATP, trademarks of IS-inspired terrorist attacks elsewhere. A brother of Zahran, who blew himself up following police raids on his home in Kattankudy, is suspected of being one of the bomb makers.

<sup>487</sup> "Sri Lanka Struggles to Solve the Islamic State-Local Network Puzzle," *The James Town Foundation*, September 10, 2019,

<https://jamestown.org/program/sri-lanka-struggles-to-solve-the-islamic-state-local-network-puzzle/>.

<sup>488</sup> "Failure of NTJ's second spate of orchestrated attacks," *Daily Mirror*, July 3 2019, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/Failure-of-NTJ%E2%80%99s-second-spate-of-orchestrated-attacks/131-170414>.

<sup>489</sup> "Sri Lanka attacks: Authorities face scrutiny over advance warnings," *BBC News*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48016994>.

<sup>490</sup> "Saudi Arabia extradites five Sri Lankans linked to Easter Sunday attacks," *South China Morning*

Sirisena against his own Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, exacerbated bureaucratic infighting and dysfunction in the months leading up to the attack. Sirisena, who was also the minister of defence and law and order, had denied the allegation. He sacked the intelligence chief, secured the resignation of the defence secretary and suspended the police commander after blaming them for the attacks.

## Outlook

Following its territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, IS has adopted a global expansion strategy, entering new theaters of conflict in Afghanistan and Asia. Like many parts of Asia, Sri Lanka is bedevilled by poor socio-economic conditions, politico-religious discrimination, radicalisation via social media, weak governance as well as inadequate mechanisms for gathering and sharing intelligence.<sup>491</sup> Transnational terrorist groups stand ready to exploit local grievances and gaps in governance. Additionally, the prospect of returning South Asian nationals who traveled to the Middle East to fight for IS, and may have been exposed to the group's methods in bombmaking and coordinating attacks, is also a security concern for Sri Lanka and its neighbours, if these returnees attempt to further the IS cause back home.<sup>492</sup>

While heightened surveillance continues across the country, the existence of lone wolf terrorists or sleeper cells inspired by the Easter attackers cannot be ruled out.<sup>493</sup> On July 30, the country's then army chief, General Mahesh Senanayake told a Parliamentary Select Committee probing the Easter attacks, that Islamist terrorists are still operating around the country and the threat they pose could persist for several more years. He alerted the Committee to the possibility of "low-tech" attacks involving knives and vehicles.

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*Post*, June 15, 2019,  
<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3014630/saudi-arabia-extradites-five-sri-lankans-linked-easter-sunday>.

<sup>491</sup> "SL blast shows Asia is fertile ground for ISIS ideology," *The Straits Times*, May 3, 2019,  
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/sri-lanka-blasts-show-asia-is-fertile-ground-for-isis-ideology>.

<sup>492</sup> "How to Fight ISIS in Sri Lanka," *The American Prospect*, June 5, 2019,  
<https://prospect.org/article/how-fight-isis-sri-lanka>.

Despite such concerns, there have been some signs of progress for Sri Lanka's Muslims in recent months. Muslim ministers who had earlier protested the linking of their entire community with terrorism have been sworn in again as ministers.<sup>494</sup> A Muslim doctor falsely accused of sterilising thousands of Buddhist women against their will has also been released on bail. Muslim traders in the capital Colombo also say their Sinhalese customers are starting to trickle back, though at a slow pace.<sup>495</sup> Going forward, prospects for inter-ethnic and religious harmony will be largely shaped by the policies of the country's new President Gotabaya Rajapakse, who swept to power in November's Presidential Election, in which national security was a key political issue.

Growing clamour for a strongman leader, following the government's poor handling of the Easter attacks, buoyed support for Rajapaksa, the brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa<sup>496</sup>. Gotabaya, who ran on a platform of restoring national security, is a controversial figure, accused of war crimes committed during the 27-year-long conflict between the government and Tamil separatists. He has rejected the allegations. At the same time, he is hailed as a hero by many Sri Lankans for ending the civil war.

Analysts note that during Mahinda Rajapakse's earlier term as president from 2005-2015, Sinhala Buddhist hardliners were emboldened to act with impunity. There are fears that another Rajapaksa presidency could reignite fears of discrimination among minorities and re-invigorate both Sinhala Buddhist and minority extremists. For his part, Sri Lanka's new president has sought to dispel such concerns, vowing to "create a

<sup>493</sup> Meera Srinivasan, "Was the terror plot thicker than the attack?" *The Hindu*, August 19, 2019.

<sup>494</sup> "Sri Lanka's Muslims demonised after Easter bombings," *DailyFT*.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>496</sup> "Struggling Sri Lankans yearn for a strongman to lure back lost tourists," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2019,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/31/sri-lanka-empty-day-resort-with-no-tourists-easter-sunday-terror-attacks>.

safe and secure environment in which all Sri Lankans will be able to live in peace.”<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>497</sup> 'Sri Lanka wartime defence chief launches presidential bid,' *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south->

[asia/sri-lanka-wartime-defense-chief-gotabaya-rajpaksa-launches-presidential-bid](https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka-wartime-defense-chief-gotabaya-rajpaksa-launches-presidential-bid).

# CENTRAL ASIA

## *Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan*

*The five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, face an ongoing terrorist threat from their nationals who have travelled abroad to join groups affiliated to both the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda. In 2019, IS continued to inspire its supporters and sympathisers, including self-radicalised individuals and various home-grown sleeper cells, to mount attacks in and beyond the region. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda affiliated Central Asian groups remain active in Syria and Afghanistan and have strengthened their online presence by diversifying their propaganda tactics. In the Syrian conflict zone, where countries have grappled with myriad challenges, including how to deal with the wives and children of detained or deceased IS fighters seeking to return home, Central Asian states have proactively initiated a series of large-scale repatriations of their citizens.*

### **Increased Threat from Local IS Cells**

Since it was routed from Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State (IS) has enhanced its presence to other parts of the world, including Asia and Africa, by attracting new recruits and exporting its ideology and tactics as it seeks to transition from a pseudo-state to waging a global insurgency on several fronts.<sup>498</sup> In these efforts, IS' core leadership has shifted emphasis towards establishing clandestine

sleeper cells and inspiring attacks in regions where it has not been previously active, including Central Asia.

IS-claimed attacks in Central Asia in recent years have mostly involved self-radicalised individuals and terrorist sleeper cells conducting unsophisticated attacks, such as ramming vehicles into crowds in public spaces and stabbings.<sup>499</sup> In 2019, pro-IS networks in the region demonstrated a growing capacity to execute high-impact attacks, mainly on hard targets such as military installations. On November 6, 2019, a group of masked militants, at least five of whom were armed with automatic rifles, attacked a border outpost in Tajikistan's western Rudaki district, along its border with Uzbekistan.

The attack left at least 17 people dead, including 15 militants, a border guard and a police officer. Subsequent reports indicated a further five security officers were killed. Tajik authorities said an IS cell comprising nine men, 11 women, and 13 children (aged between 4 and 15 years), were involved, including two brothers. Police have thus far detained at least five suspects.<sup>500</sup> Media reports also indicated one of the attackers previously served as a soldier at the outpost, and likely had inside knowledge of the facility and its surroundings. The attackers may have targeted the security checkpoint to seize weapons, in order to stage future

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<sup>498</sup> Parker, Claire, "The Islamic State is far from defeated. Here's what you need to know about its affiliate in Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/08/19/islamic-state-is-far-defeated-heres-what-you-need-know-about-its-affiliate-afghanistan/>.

<sup>499</sup> Before 2018, IS did not claim any attacks in Central Asia, given the region was not a high priority for the group's central leadership. Instead, IS' propaganda efforts in the region were primarily focused on recruiting Central Asian fighters to bolster its ranks in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict theatre, where its networks faced an onslaught from coalition forces. The recent IS-inspired attacks in Central Asia have been confined to Tajikistan.

Socio-economic issues and a fragile security environment in the country have provided fertile ground for extremist groups in their outreach efforts. Hundreds of Tajik nationals are also known to have travelled to join IS in the Middle East theatre.

<sup>500</sup> IS claimed the attack in a video showing six masked fighters pledging allegiance to its new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi. Also see "11 women and 13 children were among attackers on 'Ishqobod' border post, says security official," *ASIA-Plus*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/incidents/20191127/11-women-and-13-children-were-among-attackers-on-ishqobod-border-post-says-security-official>.



attacks on other prominent targets in Tajikistan.<sup>501</sup>

According to reports, several of the perpetrators had also lived in the same neighborhood in the northern city of Istaravshan, which highlights IS' exploitation of kinship and social ties among its followers to instigate them to violence. Instances of kinship-based terrorism have spiked around the world as well as in Tajikistan. Previously in July 2018, individuals from common family and friendship circles, participated in an IS-inspired attack on foreign cyclists in the country's Danghara district.

In May 2019, a group of IS-linked prisoners, armed with knives, also stabbed to death three prison guards and five inmates during a riot at a high-security prison in the Vahdat district of Tajikistan. Other prisoners were taken hostage, while the jail's medical facilities were also fired upon during the melee. Security officials said 24 members of an IS-linked cell were killed and a further 25 arrested in a subsequent reprisal operation, which restored order. IS claimed the attack via its online *Al-Naba* publication, characterising the attackers as "soldiers of the caliphate".<sup>502</sup>

By claiming such attacks, which demonstrate the group's apparent potency in infiltrating high security facilities such as prisons, IS seeks to reap publicity and recruitment advantages. Overall, however, Islamist terrorist groups have a limited foothold within most parts of Central Asia, despite seeking to

increase their ideological and operational presence.<sup>503</sup> Yet as IS struggles to maintain its relevance in the post-caliphate era, it could seek to instigate more attacks on both soft and hard targets in the region.

### Central Asian IS Fighters in Syria and Afghanistan

While Islamist networks have a limited presence domestically, the region is a significant contributor of foreign fighters to the Middle East theatre. Estimates indicate between 2,000-5,000 Central Asians have migrated to join jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq over the last decade, the majority being Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek nationals.<sup>504</sup> Many have since been killed in battle, while some have relocated to other conflict zones, or returned to their home countries. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the authorities arrested two Kyrgyz citizens who attempted to enter the country along its border in the south-western Batken region in May 2019.<sup>505</sup> Both had reportedly participated in armed conflict in Syria. State border guards also found Kalashnikov bullets in their possession during the arrests.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) remains resilient, despite suffering a series of setbacks following intense fighting with the Afghan military, the U.S. led coalition forces, and the Taliban, including in its major stronghold in eastern Nangarhar province.<sup>506</sup> The group's resilience is due partly to its ability to forge alliances with other local and regional militant networks. In this regard,

<sup>501</sup> Citing the confession of a captured militant, the government alleged some of the IS-linked attackers crossed into Tajikistan from Afghanistan prior to the attack, a claim refuted by the Afghan Defense Ministry. Tajikistan has long faced security risks, given its porous border with Afghanistan, from IS and other terror networks who participate in the prolonged Afghan armed conflict. Also see Najibullah, Farangis, and Ahmadi, Mumin. "New Details Link Businessman, Ex-Soldier To Alleged IS Terrorist Attack In Tajikistan," *RFE/RL*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/new-details-link-businessman-ex-soldier-to-alleged-is-terrorist-attack-in-tajikistan/30266964.html>.

<sup>502</sup> "Islamic state claims responsibility for Tajikistani prison riot," *Reuters*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tajikistan-prison-riot-claim/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-for-tajikistani-prison-riot-idUSKCN1TE2VE>.

<sup>503</sup> Since the early 2000s, Central Asian countries designated countering terrorism and extremism as

one of their top security priorities in response to earlier Islamist inspired episodes of violence, and adopted a 'zero-tolerance approach' in their military, security and law-enforcement responses against the threat. These efforts have significantly curbed the infiltration of terrorist groups in the region.

<sup>504</sup> Studies suggest between 80 to 90 percent of the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek nationals who travelled to the Middle East to join IS were radicalised and recruited while working as foreign labourers in Russia. See section on Diaspora Radicalisation by IS.

<sup>505</sup> Dzhumashova, Aida, "Militants who returned from Syria were arrested in Kyrgyzstan," *24.kg*, May 27, 2019, [https://24.kg/proisshestviya/118757\\_vkyrgyzstane\\_zaderjali\\_boevikov\\_vozvrativshisya\\_izsirii/](https://24.kg/proisshestviya/118757_vkyrgyzstane_zaderjali_boevikov_vozvrativshisya_izsirii/).

<sup>506</sup> Seldin, Jeff. "Islamic State Staggers in Afghanistan, but Survives," *VOA*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-staggers-afghanistan-survives>.

reports indicate that Sayvaly Shafiev (a.k.a. Mauaviya or Jalolobod), a Tajik national, has emerged in 2019 as leader of the main Central Asian unit of 200 fighters within the ISK umbrella. Shafiev is also believed to be a member of the ISK executive council, or *shura*, and is known to have recruited other Tajik fighters for ISK as well as taking part in online fundraising activities.<sup>507</sup>

### Diaspora Radicalisation

IS also continues to radicalise and conduct recruitment operations among the Central Asian diaspora migrant communities abroad, including in Russia, where an estimated 5 million Central Asians reside, many as migrant workers, as well as in Turkey and parts of Western Europe. In March 2019, a Swedish court sentenced David Idrisson, a 46-year old Uzbek national who had been living legally in Sweden since 2008, to seven years in prison for plotting to carry out a bomb attack in Stockholm, after being radicalised by IS propaganda on online social networks.<sup>508</sup> Investigations revealed that Idrisson had joined an IS-channel on Telegram and gained access to bomb-making manuals. Another Uzbek, Bakhtiyor Umarov, was also convicted in the same case, of financing IS activities and received a six-month jail sentence, although he was cleared of charges of plotting an attack. Separately on 11 February 2019, a court in Russia also jailed Bakhtiyor Makhmudov and Zafarjon Rakhmatov, both Tajik citizens, for 15 years, for plotting to blow up a train and a shopping mall in Moscow.<sup>509</sup> The cell reportedly operated under the instructions of Tojiddin Nazarov (Abu Osama Noraki), a leader of IS' Tajik unit in Syria.

In comparison to the recent past, however, such incidents are on the decline. Between 2016-2017, there was an unprecedented

surge in terrorist attacks perpetrated by Central Asians across several major cities in Europe, Asia and North America, including Bishkek, Istanbul, Stockholm, Saint Petersburg and New York. These attacks mostly involved self-radicalised diaspora members and Central Asian IS operatives formerly based in Syria. Given that many in the Central Asian diaspora feel a sense of marginalisation, social exclusion, and alienation in their host countries, terrorist groups have exploited these vulnerabilities to radicalise some individuals through their online propaganda.

### Al-Qaeda-linked Central Asian groups in Syria and Afghanistan

Although Central Asian militant groups aligned with Al-Qaeda have not carried out an attack in the region since a suicide car bomb attack on the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan in August 2016, they remain operationally more capable than their IS-linked counterparts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In Syria, two Central Asian units – Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB) – have been fighting under the umbrella of the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).<sup>510</sup> In early 2019, HTS seized control of Idlib, a province located in northwest Syria, in a series of dramatic advances and established the prototype of a caliphate over an estimated three million people. While more recently, HTS has come under severe military pressure from the Assad regime and its ally Russia in Syria, both KTJ and KIB have played a prominent role in defending HTS' positions in Idlib, as well as in provinces such as Hama and Latakia.

KTJ is reported to have up to 500 fighters, comprising mainly ethnic Uzbeks.<sup>511</sup> While part of the HTS jihadist alliance, the group

<sup>507</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," (July 15, 2019), p.15, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2019\\_570.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_570.pdf).

<sup>508</sup> "Swedish court convicts man for plotting to carry out bombing," *Reuters*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sweden-security/swedish-court-convicts-man-for-plotting-to-carry-out-bombing-idUSKCN1QP131>.

<sup>509</sup> "Urojentsy Tadjikistana poluchili po 15 let za podgotovku teraktov v Moskve" ('Natives of

Tajikistan received 15 years each for preparing terrorist attacks in Moscow'), *Sputnik*, February 11, 2019, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/russia/20190211/1028240407/boeviky-igil-podgotovka-moscow.html>.

<sup>510</sup> With up to 15,000 fighters in its ranks, HTS is now the most powerful jihadist coalition in Syria and has perhaps the largest concentration of armed jihadists ever assembled in one place. Like IS, HTS seeks to topple the Syrian regime and establish an Islamic state.

<sup>511</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

publicly renewed its oath of allegiance to Al-Qaeda in January 2019.<sup>512</sup> In anticipation of a possible government offensive into Idlib, HTS has also developed several highly-trained 'commando' units within jihadist factions fighting under its hierarchy, including within KTJ and KIB. For this purpose, it has hired Malhama Tactical, a private jihadist mercenary group currently led by a Russian-born militant, "Ali Shishani".<sup>513</sup>

#### *Leadership Transition in Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ)*

On 12 April 2019, KTJ announced the resignation of its founding leader, Sirojiddin Mukhtarov, a Kyrgyzstan national also known as "Abu Saloh". While the group said in a statement that Abu Saloh had relinquished the position on his own accord to successor "Abdul Aziz", his resignation has left many observers puzzled, given that it is a rare phenomenon amongst jihadist networks. One explanation mooted is Abu Saloh's wish to escape impending surgical airstrikes by Russia on KTJ's sanctuaries in Idlib, as a precursor to his ultimately going into hiding. Abu Saloh has been on Russia's most wanted list of terrorists since the 2017 Saint Petersburg Metro bombing, which he allegedly orchestrated. Despite his resignation, Abu Saloh remains a hard-line supporter of Al-Qaeda and the most influential Central Asian jihadist ideologue, particularly in the online domain. Given that he was largely credited as the mastermind behind several high profile and sophisticated attacks previously attributed to the group, it is unclear how the leadership transition will impact its operational capabilities and priorities going forward.

#### *KTJ's Shifting Propaganda Tactics*

Since December 2018, KTJ's followers have created several Instagram pages, and gradually increased their propaganda activities on social media. This is believed to be the group's first foray onto Instagram - it previously, produced and disseminated audio and video propaganda on its YouTube

channels and blogging site, written in Uzbek. By shifting onto Instagram, KTJ may be attempting to reach out to a more youthful demographic, including teenagers, as it seeks to expand its recruitment operations, particularly given Instagram is the most popular social-media platform among Central Asian youth. KTJ has also shifted much of its propaganda efforts onto encrypted messaging tools, including Telegram, making it more challenging for security agencies monitoring their activities.

#### *Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) - Anti-Kurdish Narrative*

Following the death of its founder, Akmal Dzhurabaev, in 2017, Ubaydullo Muradoluogly, a Tajik national also known as "Abu Yusuf Muhojir", assumed leadership of KIB, another Al-Qaeda affiliated Central Asian group whose main operations are in Syria. The group's military commander, "Said Abu Ayub", has also appeared in a number of online propaganda videos, although very little is known about him. KIB also maintains a division of nearly 50 fighters inside Afghanistan, where it fights alongside the Taliban against Afghan security forces. Both of KIB's Syrian and Afghan branches pledged allegiance to the Taliban, a move likely designed to accord itself more legitimacy to attract more Central Asian recruits.

On 18 October 2019, KIB leader Abu Yusuf Muhojir also released a statement on the group's Telegram channel, praising Turkey's recent operation against Kurdish forces in northern Syria, which he described as liberating Syrian Sunni Muslims from "Kurdish occupation and oppression". The comments represent an apparent shift in stance, given that the group's previous propaganda mainly targeted the Assad regime, Iran and Russia, which have conducted several offensives against jihadist insurgent groups in Syria. In stoking anti-Kurdish sentiments, KIB likely considers the buffer zones created by Turkey, subsequent to its brief incursion into Syria in October 2019, a potential safe haven for the group,

<sup>512</sup> This highlights that militant units within HTS maintain some degree of independence, likely due to ideological affinity or tactical considerations. It also reveals that despite the al Nusra Front, HTS' predecessor, announcing it has cut off ties with Al-

Qaeda, personal and ideological ties between the two groups persist.

<sup>513</sup> Ali Shishani emerged in 2019 as a successor to the group's founding leader, Abu Rofiq (a.k.a. Abu Salman Al-Belarusi), who was killed in Idlib in August.

particularly in the event Idlib falls to the Syrian regime and the HTS alliance collapses.

### *Other AQ-linked groups*

Aside from KIB, other Al-Qaeda-linked Central Asian groups based in Afghanistan, including the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), also operate under the banner of the Taliban and rely on it for sanctuary, protection, training and strategic oversight. In early 2019, Central Asian fighters from KIB, IJU and the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) actively participated in the Taliban's annual spring offensive against government forces. Meanwhile the IMU has splintered, following the Taliban's decision to execute the group's leader in 2015 as punishment for declaring its affiliation to IS, and its fighters are now believed to be dispersed around Afghanistan. The Jamaat Ansarullah, which is headed by Asliddin Davlatov, is reported to have up to 30 militants, mainly comprising Tajiks. On 27 April 2019, Afghan security forces also killed three JA fighters and wounded four others in Badakhshan Province, where the group has its base of operations.<sup>514</sup>

## **Responses**

### *Anti-Terror Operations*

In 2019, Central Asian states have scaled up their responses against terrorist and extremist activities. There have been dozens of arrests of terrorists and several attacks have also been disrupted. In May 2019, prison authorities in Kyrgyzstan revealed that

the number of convictions in the country for terrorism and extremist activities increased five-fold from 100 to 550, while the number of prisoners held in closed correctional facilities went up three times in the past seven years.<sup>515</sup> In Tajikistan, two terrorist plots were disrupted, and 97 terrorist suspects arrested by security forces between January and July 2019.<sup>516</sup>

Governments have also taken steps to counter extremist activity online. In Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) identified and blocked nearly 4,700 websites with extremist content since early 2019, while in July, Uzbek authorities banned over 40 websites, Facebook pages, YouTube and the Telegram channels in the Uzbek language deemed to carry extremist content.<sup>517</sup>

### *Central Asian Approach to IS Returnees*

Since the start of 2019, three Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan – have separately brought back a total of 899 nationals, including 595 Kazakhs, 220 Uzbeks and 84 Tajiks from the Iraqi-Syria conflict zone. Most returnees were women and children. In the case of Tajikistan, the state only repatriated children.<sup>518</sup> Further, the authorities in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have publicly committed to bringing back the remaining groups of 171 Uzbek and 575 Tajik citizens still residing in Syria. However, Turkey's October 2019 offensives in northern Syria against Kurdish-led forces have complicated

<sup>514</sup> "Three Tajik militants of 'Ansarullah' were killed in Afghanistan", *Akhbor*, April 27, 2019, <https://akhbor.com/-p9088-154.htm>.

<sup>515</sup> "Over the past seven years, the number of people convicted of extremism in Kyrgyzstan has increased fivefold - the State Penitentiary Service," *Элем.media*, May 25, 2019, <https://elet.media/ru/obshchestvo/za-sem-let-chislo-osuzhdennykh-za-ekstremizm-v-kyrgyzstane-uvlichilos-v-pyat-raz-gsin/>.

<sup>516</sup> "In Tajikistan, 97 members of terrorist organizations have been detained," *Avesta*, July 23, 2019, <http://avesta.tj/2019/07/23/v-tadzhikistane-zaderzhany-97-chlenov-terroristicheskikh-organizatsij/>.

<sup>517</sup> Ashimov, Aydar, "Kazakhstan blocks thousands of websites with extremist content," *Caravanserai*, August 9, 2019, [http://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2019/0](http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2019/0)

[8/09/feature-01](#); Xuequan, Mu, "Uzbekistan announces list of online extremist resources," *Xinhua*, July 11, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/11/c\\_138215824.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/11/c_138215824.htm).

<sup>518</sup> Abdirasulova, Aziza and Kabak, Dmitry. "Rabota s vozvrashentsami iz Sirii i Iraka: opyt Kazaxstana," ('Work with returnees from Syria and Iraq: Kazakhstan experience'), *Prevention*, <http://prevention.kg/?p=5141>; "UN Secretary General said that in Syria 2 thousand citizens of CIS countries detained in the ranks of ISIS," *ASIA-Plus*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20190808/un-secretary-general-said-that-in-syria-2-thousand-citizens-of-cis-countries-detained-in-the-ranks-of-isis>; "Sixty four children delivered from Baghdad to Tashkent," *Uzdaily*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.uzdaily.com/en/post/52345>.



these plans.<sup>519</sup> Kyrgyz officials have also been in discussions with their Iraqi counterparts to possibly evacuate 55 women and 78 minors.<sup>520</sup> For its part, the Turkmenistan government has previously denied media reports of the presence of 360 Turkmen in the Syria conflict.<sup>521</sup>

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have adopted similar approaches in dealing with their returnee nationals. Each has framed these efforts, mainly involving women and child returnees, as a “humanitarian rescue operation”. In its public messaging, the governments have highlighted the plight of women and children left in limbo in overcrowded makeshift camps and detention facilities in Syria.<sup>522</sup> After being repatriated by the authorities, the returnees were put through a short ‘adaptation’ process, received medical treatment and psychological therapy, legal and material support and religious counselling. They were subsequently reintegrated into their respective communities.

In contrast, repatriated adult males have largely faced immediate arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment. Some women returnees, regarded as a security threat, have also been convicted. For instance, in Kazakhstan, 55 repatriated adult returnees, including 12 women, were sentenced to imprisonment.<sup>523</sup> Although repatriated women were not imprisoned in Uzbekistan, court restrictions have been placed on their freedom of movement for up to five years, depending on their roles and lengths of stay in Syria. In all three countries, the process of re-

socialisation is expected to last for years under close monitoring by local authorities and law enforcement.<sup>524</sup>

## Outlook

Instabilities in the Iraq-Syria and Afghanistan conflict theatres continue to provide conditions which IS and AQ-linked groups can exploit. Central Asian militancy will continue to evolve in tandem with the agendas of IS, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In this regard, it is unlikely that Central Asian militant groups will divert their activities from the core conflict zones to their home countries in the near future.

In their propaganda outreach, Al-Qaeda linked Central Asian groups in Syria have repeatedly called on their supporters and sympathisers to travel to the conflict zone and raise funds for militant activities there. These activities are likely to continue, though on a smaller scale going forward. Further, if a dissolution of HTS’ jihadist alliance materialises, under the overwhelming political and military pressure exerted by Turkey, Syria and Russia, some hard-line factions could also regroup under Al-Qaeda’s global banner and start launching attacks beyond the Syrian conflict zone. It could also trigger a broader movement of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) across Syria and the surrounding regions.

While ISK in Afghanistan has attracted fighters from Central Asia, its activities remain centred on ensuring its survival, following its recent operational setbacks.

<sup>519</sup> Ahmadi, Mumin. “Turkish Assault On Syria Puts Tajik ‘Islamic State’ Women In Peril,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkish-assault-on-syria-puts-tajik-islamic-state-women-in-peril/30216334.html>.

<sup>520</sup> “Pravitelstvo zaplatit shtraf \$400 za kazhdogo rebenka kyrgyzstancv v Irake” (‘The government will pay a fine of USD 400 for each Kyrgyz child in Iraq’), *24.kg*, September 13, 2019, [https://24.kg/vlast/129265\\_pravitelstvo\\_zaplatit\\_shtraf\\_400\\_zakajdogo\\_rebenka\\_kyrgyzstantsev\\_virak\\_e/](https://24.kg/vlast/129265_pravitelstvo_zaplatit_shtraf_400_zakajdogo_rebenka_kyrgyzstantsev_virak_e/).

<sup>521</sup> “IG i Novie Ugrozy Bezopasnosti Postsovetских Gosudarstv” (‘IS and New Security Threats to the Post-Soviet Countries’), *Sputnik-news.uz*, March 9, 2016, <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/analytics/20160309/1965841.html>.

<sup>522</sup> The involvement of women and children in jihadist networks has an inter-generational impact.

Women who adhere to IS ideology may seek to radicalise their children or others. Child recruits ensure a militant group’s long-term operational and ideological viability, given they are the potential fighters and leaders of tomorrow.

<sup>523</sup> Abdirasulova, Aziza and Kabak, Dmitry, “Rabota s vozvrashentsami iz Sirii i Iraka: opyt Kazaxstana,” (‘Work with returnees from Syria and Iraq: Kazakhstan experience’), *Prevention*, <http://prevention.kg/?p=5141>.

<sup>524</sup> Although, in these three countries, public sentiment is welcoming of children, there is some reported scepticism towards women returnees. Stigmatising attitudes towards women may leave them vulnerable to re-radicalisation. As such, the states need to work closely with various local community and religious institutions to enhance reintegration efforts directed at women returnees.

However, with IS Central calling for revenge attacks for the lost caliphate, it could still seek to inspire more attacks in the Central Asian region, involving self-radicalised individuals, family networks and sleeper cells. The recurrent prison uprisings in Tajikistan have also highlighted that radicalisation within the penitentiary system is a growing concern for the authorities. The incidents have put the efficacy of the country's prison security under the spotlight, highlighting the need for effective de-radicalisation programmes in prisons.

Both IS and Al-Qaeda linked groups will likely also continue to attempt to exploit vulnerabilities within the Central Asian diasporas abroad. Central Asian governments will need to develop long-term strategies to address the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment among their diaspora and migrant communities abroad. This should include cross-border collaboration with countries hosting significant Central Asian diasporas. Moreover, with militant groups appearing to expand their outreach efforts online, state responses need to go beyond banning various websites, to incorporate effective counter-narratives against online extremist propaganda.

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# CHINA

## Xinjiang Province

*China scaled up its security presence to respond to the evolving militant threat in the Xinjiang region. At the same time, China decelerated its mass 're-education' campaign of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and transferred the discharged individuals to mandatory employment programmes. After the fall of the Islamic State (IS), Chinese authorities sent a special delegation to Syria to investigate the whereabouts of about 175 pro-IS Uyghur fighters. In 2019, Al-Qaeda-linked Uyghur militant groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) used accounts of Chinese detention of Uyghur Muslims to enhance their anti-Chinese propaganda. In spite of this, TIP has confined its operations largely within Syria and Afghanistan. In Syria, the main priority of TIP and its local battlefield allies has been to preserve their remaining safe havens there. TIP's Afghan faction has directed its attacks on the US-led coalition and Afghan government forces.*

### From 'Re-education' to Compulsory Labour

In 2019, no terrorist attack was reported in China. This was consistent with the overall downward trend in Uyghur-perpetrated violence in Xinjiang for the third consecutive year. The Chinese implementation of 'vocational education and training' programmes appears to have contributed to this downward trend.<sup>525</sup> As part of its 'Strike Hard Campaign' strategy, which was

launched in 2014, China has also widened the scope of the security measures in Xinjiang, such as beefing up the presence of paramilitary troops, technological surveillance and collection of citizens' biometric data.<sup>526</sup>

Shohrat Zakir, the governor of Xinjiang, announced in July that the majority of the Uyghurs and other ethnic Muslim groups held in 'voluntary' training centres had been released and 'reintegrated' into society.<sup>527</sup> The governor also claimed that more than 90 percent of the discharged people had found decent jobs with local industries and manufacturing factories.<sup>528</sup> However, the exact number of those who are still in re-education facilities have not yet been revealed.

International experts and human rights groups have raised concerns about government-arranged transfers from re-education to employment programmes. They maintain that the practice functions as a system of 'forced labour' as most of those released have been mandatorily sent to work at labour-intensive factories under government supervision.<sup>529</sup> The employed workers are required to live in factory dormitories; only allowed to pay brief visits to their families every weekend;<sup>530</sup> and most of their children have been placed in 'child welfare' institutions and boarding schools to

<sup>525</sup> Mimi Lau, "China claims success at this stage of Xinjiang internment camps amid global outcry," *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3023195/china-hails-success-stage-xinjiang-internment-camps-countering>.

<sup>526</sup> Daniel L. Bayman and Israa Saber, "Is China prepared for global terrorism? Xinjiang and beyond," *Brookings Institution*, September 2019, pp. 3-4. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP\\_20190930\\_china\\_counterterrorism\\_byman\\_saber-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FP_20190930_china_counterterrorism_byman_saber-1.pdf).

<sup>527</sup> Since its inauguration in April 2017, the mass re-education campaign has sparked much controversy due to its scale and extra-judicial nature. In August 2018, United Nations (UN) human rights experts estimated that China was holding close to one million local Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities for

'political indoctrination' purposes in it described as a 'massive internment camp' in Xinjiang.

<sup>528</sup> "China: Most people in Xinjiang camps have 'returned to society,'" *Al-Jazeera*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/china-defends-controversial-education-centres-uyghurs-190730053648154.html>.

<sup>529</sup> "Forced Labor, Mass Internment, and Social Control in Xinjiang," *The Congressional-Executive Commission on China*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.cecc.gov/events/hearings/forced-labor-mass-internment-and-social-control-in-xinjiang>.

<sup>530</sup> Chris Buckley and Edward Wong, "Doubt Greets China's Claim That Muslims Have Been Released from Camps," *New York Times*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/world/asia/china-xinjiang.html>.

learn the Chinese language and 'better life habits'.<sup>531</sup>

Chinese officials have denied the use of any form of forced labour. Instead, they have stated that the re-education and employment programmes were launched as part of a wider counter-terrorism policy to address the socio-economic causes of radicalisation in Xinjiang. They believe that these measures have helped to reduce poverty among the Uyghur population by turning them into an industrial workforce.<sup>532</sup>

While it remains to be seen whether or not China succeeds in containing the threat of terrorism in Xinjiang in the long run through its re-education and employment programmes, militant groups have framed the Chinese detentions as oppression and exploited this situation to radicalise and recruit in Xinjiang and among the Uyghur diaspora elsewhere.

## Uyghur Militants in Syria and Afghanistan

### *Uyghur Fighters Split between Al-Qaeda and IS*

Participation in the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq gave a global dimension to Uyghur militancy, once confined to Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to some estimates, up to 5,000 Uyghurs have travelled from Xinjiang to Syria and Iraq to join various jihadist groups since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.<sup>533</sup>

In both Syria and Afghanistan, the Al-Qaeda-linked Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) has been more successful in attracting Uyghur recruits, compared to groups affiliated to IS. The historic ties between TIP's predecessor,

the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan account for the Uyghur militants' pro-AQ bent.<sup>534</sup>

TIP's Syrian division has nearly 1,000 fighters, who with their wives and offspring, make up a community of about 3,500.<sup>535</sup> TIP's military strength in Afghanistan is about 350 fighters.<sup>536</sup> Before losing its Syrian territorial holdings in March 2019, IS in Syria had 175 Uyghur fighters. However, the precise number of Uyghur militants associated with the militant group's local branch in Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), is unknown.

### *TIP in Syria*

In Syria, TIP and its battlefield ally, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have come under intense military pressure exerted by the Syrian government and its Russian ally since early 2019. While fighting alongside HTS since its formation as al Nusra Front, TIP has played key roles in several jihadist battles against the Assad regime. TIP and HTS primarily operate along the Latakia-Idlib-Hama axis. TIP also closely cooperates with Central Asian jihadist groups, including Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB), and the new Al-Qaeda branch, Hurras al-Din (HAD, or 'The Guardians of Religion Organisation'). Jisr Al-Shughour, a town in the northwestern province of Idlib, which is considered a key location along this axis, has been TIP's main stronghold since 2016. Many Uyghur families have settled down in this town and its suburbs after TIP, HTS and HAD seized

<sup>531</sup> "Rights Group Calls for the Release of Uighur Children Detained in Xinjiang," *TIME*, September 16, 2019, <https://time.com/5678136/human-rights-watch-children-xinjiang/>; John Sudworth, "China Muslims: Xinjiang schools used to separate children from families," *BBC News*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48825090>.

<sup>532</sup> Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, "China's Detention Camps for Muslims Turn to Forced Labor," *New York Times*, December 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/16/world/asia/xinjiang-china-forced-labor-camps-uighurs.html?module=inline>.

<sup>533</sup> "China envoy says no accurate figure on Uyghurs fighting in Syria," *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2018,

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2160465/china-envoy-says-no-accurate-figure-uyghurs-fighting>.

<sup>534</sup> TIP was founded by Uyghur militants in Afghanistan in 1997 and seeks to establish an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang and beyond, which it refers to as "East Turkestan."

<sup>535</sup> "China Looks into Fate of 175 Uyghurs Fighting in Syria," *7Dnews*, April 5, 2019, <https://7dnews.com/news/china-looks-into-fate-of-175-uyghurs-fighting-in-syria>.

<sup>536</sup> United Nations, Security Council, "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," (July 15, 2019), pp.15, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2019\\_570.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_570.pdf).



more than 750 houses from local Christian residents and chased them out of the town.<sup>537</sup>

The capture of Jisr Al-Shughour has been one of the Syrian military's high priorities in Idlib. Since May 2019, Syrian forces have intensified their strikes on HTS and TIP in the city of Kabani in Latakia and in the nearby Al-Ghab Plain in Hama. These operations are expected to eventually lead state troops to Jisr Al-Shughour.<sup>538</sup> The fall of this strategic town would enable the Syrian government to take over the major frontline defending the jihadist-held Idlib and deal a severe blow to jihadist groups, including HTS and TIP.

### *TIP in Afghanistan*

TIP's online propaganda materials show that the group's links with the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda are intact in Afghanistan. The group lacks independent funding resources and depends on the support and protection of the Taliban for its survival. In turn, TIP has supplied fighters to the Taliban.<sup>539</sup>

Despite the geographical distance between Syria and Afghanistan, TIP's Syrian division maintains close contact with the group's core in Afghanistan. Important appointments are made with the consent of the TIP leadership in Afghanistan. Observation of the group's online presence indicate that propaganda activities are also coordinated. A United Nations report issued in January 2019 revealed that the group maintains a presence in Taliban-held areas of Badakhshan province, which shares a short border with China.<sup>540</sup>

### *Al-Qaeda's Continued Support for TIP*

In spite of its close battlefield alliance with HTS and the Taliban, TIP maintains its independent branding and online media

presence. TIP's media arm, "Islam Awazi" ('Voice of Islam'), has considerably increased its online extremist materials. The group launched several Telegram channels and a new website where it uploaded all 260 propaganda videos that it has produced since 2008.<sup>541</sup>

Through an intense online propaganda campaign, TIP recently secured Al-Qaeda's reaffirmation of its solidarity with the 'Uyghur jihad' against China. In an online statement released on 4 April 2019, Al-Qaeda's central leadership responded to TIP's earlier appeal for moral support and called on jihadist scholars and financiers to stand with the 'Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang) issue' and raise awareness about their 'plight.' However, it did not call for any operational assistance to TIP or attacks against China.<sup>542</sup>

Al-Qaeda's statement in support of TIP shows that the two groups see each other as strategic partners. By appealing to Al-Qaeda for support, TIP has indirectly re-emphasised its loyalty to Al-Qaeda and has framed its 'struggle' within a wider context of global jihad. For Al-Qaeda, the Uyghur cause is an attempt to gain legitimacy by portraying itself as a 'defender of oppressed Muslims' across the world.

### **Uyghur Illegal Immigrants in Southeast Asia**

From 2014 to 2016, some Southeast Asian countries emerged as transit routes for Uyghurs seeking to flee to Turkey to escape a then deteriorating security situation in Xinjiang. Many were detained while travelling in Southeast Asia on fake passports. These routes were used not only by Uyghurs who sought refuge but also some Uyghur militants who travelled to Syria via Turkey, or decided to join local groups in Southeast Asia. Since

<sup>537</sup> "Syria: At least 750 Christian Houses Illegally Seized in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib," *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, September 23, 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-at-least-750-christian-houses-illegally-seized-in-jisr-al-shughur-idlib/>.

<sup>538</sup> "Syrian Army's main objective in 2020 is Jisr Al-Shughour," *Al-Masdar News*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-armys-main-objective-in-2020-is-jisr-al-shughour/>.

<sup>539</sup> "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council (UNSC)*, January 15, 2019, p.18,

[https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf).

<sup>540</sup> Ibid, p.16.

<sup>541</sup> The figure is based on the author's observation of TIP's Uyghur language blogging sites, [www.muhsinlar.net](http://www.muhsinlar.net) and [www.muhsinlar.com](http://www.muhsinlar.com).

<sup>542</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda declares solidarity with Turkistan Islamic Party in the face of Chinese oppression," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/04/al-qaeda-declares-solidarity-with-turkistan-islamic-party-in-the-face-of-chinese-oppression.php>.

then, Malaysia and Indonesia have arrested a number of Uyghur individuals who joined cells of the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) and IS.

The presence of Uyghur militants in Southeast Asia and their potential ties with local groups were illustrated by the August 2015 attack on the Erawan shrine in Bangkok.<sup>543</sup> For this reason, police cooperation and extradition issues have been high on the agenda in China's relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Although massive cross-border movements of undocumented Uyghurs into Southeast Asia from China have not been observed since 2016, there are an estimated 49 Uyghurs detained in Songkhla and Sa Kaeo provinces in Thailand for unlawful entries. Fearing forceful repatriation to China, detained Uyghurs have made repeated attempts to flee these detention centres.

In February 2019, seven illegal Uyghurs refugees escaped detention at immigration facilities in the north-eastern Thai province of Mukdahan.<sup>544</sup> While the Thai police recaptured them, it has brought a fresh focus on the illegal cross-border movement of Uyghurs into Southeast Asia.

The majority of Uyghurs who have travelled to Southeast Asia in recent years appear to be peaceful asylum seekers. They have used a number of countries in the region, including Malaysia and Thailand, as transit routes to flee China in a bid to reach Turkey, which is home to a large Uyghur diaspora community.<sup>545</sup>

Although Uyghurs have neither been involved in terrorist activities nor joined militant groups in Southeast Asia since 2016, Uyghur, Central Asian and Indonesian militants in Syria appear to have developed some degree of cooperation with each other and HTS in Syria, primarily in the form of joint training and fundraising. For instance, in a video statement released on Twitter in September 2019, "Ali Shishani", the leader of Malhama Tactical, a private jihadist mercenary group, which recently announced it had trained a new batch of TIP fighters, claimed to receive donations from the Indonesian-linked Abu Ahmed Foundation (AAF) and also expressed gratitude to the foundation.<sup>546</sup> This was the second case of AAF-organised fundraising activity for Malhama Tactical since 2018.<sup>547</sup>

Given their ongoing rapprochement with HTS, these well-organised and battle-hardened foreign fighters may seek to develop closer ties in future, by continuing to raise funds for each other; and jointly relocate from the Middle East to other regions such as Southeast Asia, especially if HTS' transnational jihadist alliance collapses.

## Response

### *Anti-Terrorism Measures*

China has responded to the terrorist threat with continued arrests and increased surveillance. A white paper issued by China's State Council Information Office on 18 March 2019 revealed that authorities in Xinjiang had arrested nearly 13,000 terrorists and broken up over 1,500 violent and terrorist gangs

<sup>543</sup> Zachary Abuza, "The Riddle of the Bangkok Bombings," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, Issue 10, (October 2015), pp. 34-36, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-riddle-of-the-bangkok-bombings/>.

<sup>544</sup> "All 7 Uighur escapees recaptured in Mukdahan," *The Bangkok Post*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1630458/all-7-uighur-escapees-recaptured-in-mukdahan>.

<sup>545</sup> "Terrorist Uighurs are refugees: Malaysia DPM," *The Straits Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/terrorist-uighurs-are-refugees-malaysia-dpm>.

<sup>546</sup> AAF is a jihadist fundraising group, which was founded by Tasniem (a.k.a. Ummy Jibi or Aisyah), a widow of the Indonesian fighter of al Nusra Front (HTS' predecessor), who was known as Abu Ahmad al-Indunisy, before he was killed in Syria in

2015. Online propaganda materials published by Malhama Tactical suggest that Tasniem is now based in HTS' stronghold in Idlib.

<sup>547</sup> "Indonesian Jihadi Fundraising Group Abu Ahmed Foundation Gives Bank Account Numbers, Works With Other Jihadi Organizations And Uses Cryptocurrencies," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.memri.org/ittm/subjects/in-depth-threat-analysis>; "Indonesian Fundraising Group Abu Ahmed Foundation Continues To Encourage Supporters To Donate Using Cryptocurrencies," *Middle East Media Research Institute*, November 28, 2018, <http://cjlabs.memri.org/latest-reports/indonesian-fundraising-group-abu-ahmed-foundation-continues-to-encourage-supporters-to-donate-using-cryptocurrencies/>.

since 2014.<sup>548</sup> At the same time, more than 2,000 explosive devices have also been confiscated in the province in the last five years.

Moreover, Beijing has developed a sophisticated surveillance system that enables it to track the movements and locations of Xinjiang residents all times. The central government has also obliged knife manufacturers and dealers in Xinjiang to etch purchasers' identification data onto every blade as QR codes. This is because almost every attack that has taken place in China in recent years involved the use of knives.<sup>549</sup>

#### *Approaches to IS' Uyghur Detainees in Syria*

Following the fall of Baghouz, IS' last holdout in Syria, China has been alert to the potential risks that returning or relocating Uyghur fighters might pose to the country's domestic security as well as overseas interests. As part of pre-emptive responses to such threats, Beijing developed a list of 175 Uyghurs wanted for joining IS in the Middle East and sent its counter-terrorism delegates to Syria in April 2019.<sup>550</sup> The delegation was assigned to work with the Syrian authorities and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to establish the whereabouts of those wanted Uyghurs.<sup>551</sup>

Local people living in SDF-controlled areas in northeast Syria suggested that a 'dozen-strong population' of Chinese Uyghurs, including many children, were being kept at al-Hol refugee camp. Although the Chinese delegation reportedly repatriated three Syria-born children of Uyghur fighters after negotiations with SDF, no other details of follow-up actions have been revealed. It has also been unclear whether or not the remaining Uyghur detainees would be left to be handled by SDF or extradited to China.<sup>552</sup>

#### **Outlook**

Although China currently appears to have contained the terrorist threat internally, the risk of Uyghur militancy will continue to expand outside the mainland, particularly in Syria and Afghanistan. However, due to the increased security in Xinjiang, the ability of TIP to plot and direct large-scale and sophisticated attacks inside China remains limited.

In the event its stronghold in Jisr Al-Shughour falls to the Syrian regime, surviving Uyghur fighters and their dependents will most likely move to the areas controlled by other like-minded jihadist groups in northern Syria. TIP even may consider the buffer zones created by Turkey, subsequent to its brief incursion into Syria in October 2019, a potential safe haven for the group. In the worst case scenario for TIP, Uyghur fighters may choose to relocate to Afghanistan through Iran, or attempt to hide inside Turkey. Only a handful of Uyghur fighters would likely choose to return home.

It remains to be seen whether the ongoing re-education and mandatory employment programmes in Xinjiang can provide long-term advantage for the militant threat scenario. It is key that such programmes do not invite further alienation and resentment among the Uyghur community. If the latter builds up within the community, simmering tensions in Xinjiang from time to time may erupt into violent attacks against both the Chinese government and civilians, with knife attacks as a common tactic.

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<sup>548</sup> "The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang," *Xinhua News*, March 18, 2019, [http://news.cn/english/2019-03/18/c\\_137904166.htm](http://news.cn/english/2019-03/18/c_137904166.htm).

<sup>549</sup> Data compiled by the author based on newspaper reports indicated that, from 2014 to early 2017, there were at least 22 incidents of Uyghur-perpetrated

violence across China. Almost all of those attacks involved tactics of stabbing with knives.

<sup>550</sup> "China Looks into Fate of 175 Uyghurs Fighting in Syria," *7Dnews*, April 5, 2019, <https://7dnews.com/news/china-looks-into-fate-of-175-uyghurs-fighting-in-syria>.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

# ISLAMIC STATE'S NARRATIVES OF RESILIENCE AND ENDURANCE

*At its peak, the self-declared Islamic State (IS) controlled around 88,000 square kilometres of area stretching from western Syria to eastern Iraq where approximately eight to twelve million people lived. IS maintained its slogan of *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) as it gained control and influence over areas outside Iraq and Syria in the form of multiple *wilayat* (provinces) that once amounted to 35.<sup>553</sup> Since then, the terror group has suffered numerous setbacks resulting in shrinking territorial control and arrest of its supporters. Nevertheless, as IS organisationally disintegrated, its narratives of triumph, state-building and governance have shifted and refocused to those that express fortitude, endurance, and resilience. While physically diminished, the influence and reach of its online media network facilitates the ongoing spread of IS narratives.*

## IS in Syria and Iraq after the Fall of Baghouz

IS' loss of its last Syrian stronghold Baghouz on March 23, marked the end of the so-called caliphate.<sup>554</sup> After Baghouz was freed from IS hold, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated the presence of 4,000 to 5,000 IS fighters and operatives in the area.<sup>555</sup> By June 2019, it was reported that

10,000 IS fighters had been held in detention centres in north eastern Syria, with about 2,000 being foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from more than 50 countries while the remaining 8,000 were Iraqis and Syrians.<sup>556</sup>

Despite territorial losses, IS is far from defeated. IS' small-scale attacks, kidnappings and assassinations have continued unabated. As of now, IS in Syria is gradually regaining strength.<sup>557</sup> The terror group still retains the capacity to conduct guerrilla attacks, suicide bombings, and sniper assaults.

Since the Syrian Democratic Force's (SDF) Baghouz offensive in February, as many as 60,000 people, mostly women and children, have moved to the nearby Al-Hawl refugee camp. The SDF estimated that before its offensive, there were 1,500 civilians and 500 fighters remaining.<sup>558</sup> Since then, the refugee camp has evolved into a breeding ground of IS ideology and potential terrorists. With little aid and minimal security, the authorities have no plan prepared to deal with more than 60,000 refugees, including thousands of family members of IS fighters.<sup>559</sup>

Further, fears of an IS resurgence have been raised when Turkey launched an incursion into Kurdish-held territory in northern Syria on

<sup>553</sup> "The Structure of the Khilafah," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, July 7, 2016.

<sup>554</sup> Ben Wedeman and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "ISIS Has Lost Its Final Stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces Says", *CNN*, March 23, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html>.

<sup>555</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Islamic State Still Showing Signs of Life in Syria's Baghuz", *VOA*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/islamic-state-still-showing-signs-life-syrias-baghuz>.

<sup>556</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "Months After the Fall of ISIS, Europe Has Done Little to Take Back Its Fighters", *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/after-caliphate-collapsed-europe-has-done-little-to-take-back-those-who-joined-isis/2019/06/20/4bab9cc2-8bc4-11e9-b6f4->

[033356502dce\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.0a04e0bc712d](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/us/politics/isis-iraq-syria.html?utm_term=.0a04e0bc712d);

<sup>557</sup> Eric Scmitt, Alissa J. Rubin, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "ISIS is regaining strength in Iraq and Syria," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/us/politics/isis-iraq-syria.html>.

<sup>558</sup> Alexandra Ma, "ISIS Fighters Reportedly Used Their Wives and Children as Human Shields Before US-Backed Forces Destroyed the Last Shred of Their Caliphate," *Business Insider*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.sg/isis-fighters-used-wives-children-as-human-shields-in-baghuz-report-2019-3/?r=US&IR=T>.

<sup>559</sup> Eric Scmitt, Alissa J. Rubin and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "ISIS is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/us/politics/isis-iraq-syria.html>.



October 10<sup>560</sup> after the estimated 1,000 American troops in north-eastern Syria were ordered to withdraw.<sup>561</sup> As the Kurds turned their attention from guarding thousands of captive terrorists to repelling the Turkish offensive, hundreds of suspected IS prisoners managed to escape from a camp in Ain Issa in north-eastern Syria. As many as 859 prisoners escaped from the camp, including 50 Indonesian IS fighters along with their families.<sup>562</sup> This puts Southeast Asian nations on high alert as the escapees could be tasked to carry out attacks and “destroy secular governments” in Southeast Asia, should they manage to return.<sup>563</sup>

### Death of Al-Baghdadi

After IS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's killing in a raid by US forces on 27 October 2019, IS appointed Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi as the new spokesperson and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi as the new “Caliph.”<sup>564</sup> Al-Baghdadi had been a symbolic leader; he was put in the public eye so as to be seen as an identifiable figurehead, a “Caliph,” to IS' worldwide supporters. However, Al-Baghdadi's killing has not been a catastrophic blow to IS. The group has continued to claim attacks it conducted in Iraq, Syria and other places. It has, for now, adopted a decentralised command structure, enabling it to continue perpetrating violence.

### IS Resurgence in the Middle East

Dispersed throughout the Middle East and entrenched mostly in rural territory, IS is fighting in small cells or teams estimated to

comprise a dozen fighters. These cells are taking advantage of the porous border between Iraq and Syria. In these areas, security forces are spread thin and responsibilities for public safety are sometimes disputed. Furthermore, rising tensions between Iran and the US in the Gulf, that triggered withdrawal of all non-essential US diplomats from Iraq in May, undermines the US' capability to carry out stabilisation work, therefore impeding anti-IS efforts and unwittingly bolstering the IS threat.<sup>565</sup>

Meanwhile, IS' operations in the northern and western provinces of Iraq continued unhindered. The Iraqi Army and its counterterrorism forces have run multiple campaigns against IS, focusing primarily on the Makhoul mountains where Kirkuk, Nineveh and Salahuddin Provinces converge. There were 139 IS attacks in the provinces of Nineveh, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, Diyala and Anbar, killing 274 people, including civilians, Iraqi security forces and popular mobilisation forces.<sup>566</sup>

IS is estimated to possess more than US\$400 million, hidden either in Iraq and Syria or smuggled into neighbouring countries.<sup>567</sup> As of early 2019, a RAND corporation report maintained that IS has retained the ability to not only raise revenue but also to move money.<sup>568</sup> IS' sources of revenue include oil, extortion, kidnapping and other criminal activities as well as investments in various legitimate businesses such as real estate, fish farming, car dealing and cannabis growing. The terror group has used its financial centres in Syria to hold and

<sup>560</sup> Ali Javanmardi, “The Trump Trap: Troop Withdrawal from Syria Will Fuel ISIS Resurgence,” *The National Interest*, October 30, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/trump-trap-troop-withdrawal-syria-will-fuel-isis-resurgence-92226>.

<sup>561</sup> Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, “Trump Orders Withdrawal of US Troops from Northern Syria,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mar-k-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>.

<sup>562</sup> “Hundreds of ISIL Prisoners Escape Syrian Camp, Kurds Say,” *Al Jazeera*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/hundreds-isil-prisoners-escape-syrian-camp-kurds-191013141044768.html>.

<sup>563</sup> Amy Chew, “Southeast Asia on Alert For ISIS Grand Agenda as Escaped Indonesian Jihadists in Syria Eye the Region,” *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week->

[asia/politics/article/3033658/southeast-asia-alert-isis-grand-agenda-escaped-indonesian](https://asia/politics/article/3033658/southeast-asia-alert-isis-grand-agenda-escaped-indonesian).

<sup>564</sup> “And He Who Fulfills That Which He Has Promised Allah, He (Allah) Will Give Him A Great Reward,” *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, October 31, 2019.

<sup>565</sup> Chloe Cornish and Asser Khattab, “ISIS threat resurfaces in Iraq and Syria,” *Financial Times*, August 9, 2019.

<https://www.ft.com/content/0e28d5c4-b8fe-11e9-8a88-aa6628ac896c>.

<sup>566</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>568</sup> Patrick B. Johnston, Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke, and Howard J. Shatz, “Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate,” *RAND Corporation*, 2019, p. 56, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3046.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3046.html).

move money using both informal financial institutions, and couriers.

### IS' Long War Narrative

At its peak, IS media coverage was dominated by the narrative of expansion and conquests. Propaganda materials such as photographic reports and videos depicting guerrilla operations, battlefield victories, marches of IS fighters as well as excerpts from daily life such as public services, education and implementation of *hudud* (Shariah) laws were regularly produced and released on a daily basis.

#### *War of Attrition*

IS' determination to corral its remaining sympathisers worldwide, recent setbacks notwithstanding, harnesses narratives linked to its assertion that it will continue to remain and expand. In light of recent developments, IS has transformed its propaganda narrative from flaunting its territories to showing the determination to live and take revenge. For instance, IS currently stresses that it will outlive its enemies through a war of attrition. In March 2019, former IS spokesman Abul Hasan Al-Muhajir (deceased) noted in an audio message that "If the Islamic State loses some towns and cities in some of its *wilayat*, Allah grants it conquest in other *wilayat* in imbalanced hit-and-run battles in which they drag the enemy with all that he owns."<sup>569</sup>

Al-Baghdadi reinforced this strategy in his April 2019 video appearance. He asserted that IS' battle is now to bleed the enemy in a long fight; [the *mujahideen*] "have shown their enemies that they are capable of holding the reins of initiative, knowing that the battle today with their enemies is a battle of attrition."<sup>570</sup> In another audio speech released in September 2019, Al-Baghdadi, highlighted the two "Battle of Attrition" campaigns that were launched in June and August, boasting that they were "coordinated

campaigns." He maintained that the plan was made in advance and it "is the first of their kind in modern jihadist history."<sup>571</sup>

Further illustrating IS' commitment to a long war are the photographic reports and statements released by its provincial media arms. These media releases show small-scale attacks, ambushes, bombings, and raids carried out by IS fighters in Iraq, Syria and other theatres such as Libya, Yemen and West Africa where the group has some form of presence.<sup>572</sup>

#### *Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad (Remaining and Expanding)*

The consistent production and dissemination of this operational propaganda, as well as emphasis on publicising IS operations in the Sinai in Egypt, West Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen feeds into the *Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad* narrative. This can be seen in the statements and photographic reports released by IS where names of areas where the group operates in are introduced as *wilayat* such as Central Africa, Somalia and Southeast Asia. To its sympathisers, these *wilayat* serve as proof that IS continues to be relevant.

Prior to its physical defeat, IS had effectively restructured its *wilayat* framework in order to maintain the perception that the so-called caliphate was functioning and its ground presence was intact. In doing so, IS reframed the caliphate as an overarching global state rather than one that was based solely in Iraq and Syria.<sup>573</sup> This effort was observed to take effect in the IS weekly newsletter *Al-Naba* as well as photographic reports and statements released in July 2018. Areas within Syria and Iraq such as Raqqah, Al-Kheir, Furat and Kirkuk that were previously identified separately as *wilayat* were grouped together under two provinces - Wilayah Al-Sham and Wilayah Iraq.<sup>574</sup>

<sup>569</sup> "He Was True to God, So God Was True to Him," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, March 19, 2019.

<sup>570</sup> "In The Hospitality of The *Amirul Mukminin*," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, April 30, 2019.

<sup>571</sup> "And Say, Act," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, September 16, 2019.

<sup>572</sup> Mina Al-Lami, "Where is The Islamic State Group Still Active Around the World?" *BBC Monitoring*, March 27, 2019,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47691006>.

<sup>573</sup> Charlie Winter and Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform," *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/t-he-sri-lanka-bombings-were-a-preview-of-isis-future/588175/>.

<sup>574</sup> "Harvest of the Soldiers," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 140, pg. 2, July 21, 2018.

After 2018, this reframing was amplified when subsequent issues of *Al-Naba* indicated that other outlying affiliates of IS, such as East Asia (comprising the Philippines and Indonesia), Somalia and the Caucasus that previously did not secure the status of province, had been acknowledged as IS *wilayat*.<sup>575</sup> Significantly, IS announced three new *wilayat* in India, Pakistan and Turkey in the spring of 2019. Ultimately, the restructuring and reframing of the *wilayat* strengthened the IS' narrative that it remained alive.

In addition to its *wilayat*, IS' terror campaign - aside from being a promotional tactic - against the West and its allies, local governments, non-Muslims and anti-IS Muslims, helps to demonstrate the group's success in expanding its reach and capabilities. This is evident in the terror attacks that IS-linked cells conducted such as the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, attack in Saudi Arabia, and a border assault in the Congo.<sup>576</sup>

#### *Overcoming Battlefield Defeat through Online Jihad*

Anticipating battlefield defeats, IS had directed its followers towards 'Information Jihad', or 'media jihad', and by extension, 'Online Jihad.' In the last few months of 2019, the terror group has centre-staged this strategic narrative.

In 2016, IS released a 55-page field guide for information warfare in Arabic which showcased how IS' continuous incitement of activism, whether from offline operatives or online activists, had led to propaganda production and dissemination which was as important (sometimes even more important) as militant jihad.<sup>577</sup> In the "Inside the Caliphate 8" video released by IS' Al-Hayat in October 2018, the group urged that when it is impossible for IS supporters to conduct

attacks, they can "support the *khilafah* on the digital front," and "strive patiently in the digital arena."<sup>578</sup>

In addition to propaganda production and dissemination, IS also urges online jihad and activism to include disinformation, exposing the enemy's "lies and weaknesses" and countering counter-narratives, among others. Therefore, to sustain its propaganda and 'information jihad,' IS has come to rely on networks of online supporters and sympathisers. Presently, the group maintains multiple groups and channels on online chat apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, etc. On these platforms, IS proliferates numerous links for every propaganda release to ensure its messages are circulated widely and other online activities against the "enemy" persist.<sup>579</sup>

#### **Outlook**

The fall of Baghouz and elimination of Al-Baghdadi had led some to conclude that IS is as good as defeated. However, the narratives of fortitude, endurance and resilience have reinforced IS' continued presence and survival. IS has embraced the war of attrition and demonstrated the strategy in its propaganda content. Developments on the ground in Iraq, Syria and other parts in the Middle East point to IS' resurgence; its insurgency will grow given that areas previously occupied and controlled by IS are neither stable nor secure.

While the long war narrative is affirmed through propaganda, it can only be sustained by media jihad and online jihad tactics. IS' online activism has seen the emergence of a tier of supporters dedicated to disseminating propaganda on online platforms. The persistence and commitment of these individuals boost their numbers and project their violent jihad aspirations. In turn, they attempt to bring to life the IS assertion that it

<sup>575</sup> Ibid; "Harvest of the Soldiers", *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 142, p. 2, August 3, 2018.

<sup>576</sup> Charlie Winter and Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform," *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/the-sri-lanka-bombings-were-a-preview-of-isis-future/588175/>.

<sup>577</sup> Charlie Winter, "Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare," *ICSR Report*, 2017, [https://icsr.info/wp-](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf)

[content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf).

<sup>578</sup> "Inside the Caliphate 8," *Al-Hayat Media Center*, October 27, 2018.

<sup>579</sup> Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram," *The George Washington University*, June 2019, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-online>.

is indeed *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (remains and expanding).

Essentially, IS is fighting on two fronts; on the ground in the Middle East and other parts of the world, and online, where there is a constant war of information. While the military battle against IS is undoubtedly a top priority, the online and digital front should not be underestimated. Steps taken by governments and intelligence and law enforcement agencies to identify and disrupt terror elements on online/digital media should be strengthened further, given the fast-changing and adaptive nature of these platforms. In this regard, Europol's crackdown on Telegram in November 2019 has disrupted the pro-IS community's dissemination of the terrorists' online propaganda. However, IS has proven to be resilient, resourceful and adaptive, as seen by its swift migration to other social media and encrypted messaging platforms. New Telegram groups and channels also continue to surface.

Going forward, technologies to monitor and detect terrorist and extremist activities should be fully utilised, supplemented by human analysts and relevant experts. There is also a need for both governments and community stakeholders to continue promoting alternative narratives which can undercut jihadist and hate vitriol such as inclusion, pluralism, compassion and humanity. Finally, Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts should also involve de-radicalised IS followers and returnees who could be cautionary voices to de-legitimise those still in the group and ultimately counter and dispel the IS jihadist narrative.

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# DEBUNKING JIHADIST IDEOLOGICAL MISINTERPRETATIONS AND DISTORTIONS

*Although the Islamic State (IS) and its 'Islamic caliphate'<sup>580</sup> have been defeated, IS' narrative of resurrecting the so-called caliphate continues to have an extraordinary appeal among its followers and other like-minded violent jihadists. They stake their effort to establish a caliphate on the claim that it is an integral part of the Islamic faith, specifically, that it is among the requirements of tawhīd (The doctrine of Divine Unity). The other ideological narrative pervading some radical quarters is based on the Ghazwatul Hind narrative (the final apocalyptic war that would be taking place in India). Radical understanding of both the Caliphate and the Ghazwatul Hind is deeply flawed. The caliphate is not a core element in the Islamic creed. Nor is starting a war with India or in the region based on a proper understanding of the relevant hadiths (Prophetic Sayings). Muslims should instead, fix their sights on more crucial areas such as education, economic advancement and political stability.*

## The Context

IS and other violent jihadist groups have long framed the idea of the caliphate within a *tawhīdic* (Doctrine of God's unity) paradigm. They claim that it is an essential part (*lawāzīm*) of the Islamic faith and, therefore, sacrosanct. Such a narrative continues to be the lingua franca among the various jihadist groups, even if they compete with each other.

Another narrative is the prophecy of *Ghazwatul Hind* (the final apocalyptic war

that would be taking place in India). It is exploited in South Asia and gaining traction among some Indonesian jihadist circles. In South Asia, militant groups are using the concept in their radicalisation and recruitment efforts. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)<sup>581</sup> and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)<sup>582</sup>, with well-established ties to Al-Qaeda, have also actively promoted the narrative.

In Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has re-defined the *Ghazwatul Hind*-related hadith to include Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. According to the new narrative, the rewards of waging jihad in Patani in Southern Thailand and Rakhine in Myanmar are equivalent to fighting against the *Dajjal*.<sup>583</sup>

## The Tawhīdic Paradigm

### Sayyid Qutb

A principal proponent of the *tawhīdic* nature of governance was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), an Egyptian Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood activist who was later hanged for plotting to assassinate Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. According to Qutb, the theory of government in Islam is wholly based on *tawhīd*; any other theory would be forbidden and considered *shirk* (idolatry) and *kufr* (unbelief or rejecting the tenets of Islam).<sup>584</sup> In Qutb's view, anyone who does not implement Shariah becomes an unbeliever (non-Muslim), and a government applying laws other than Shariah is guilty of unbelief.

<sup>580</sup> Michael Barak and Abu Muhammad Al Hashemi, "The False Caliphate: ISIS Leadership Crisis," *The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)*, October 31, 2019, [http://www.ict.org.il/Article/2430/ISIS\\_Leadership\\_Crisis#gsc.tab=0](http://www.ict.org.il/Article/2430/ISIS_Leadership_Crisis#gsc.tab=0). Also see Shaykh Muhammad Al-Yaqubi, *Refuting ISIS* (USA: Sacred Knowledge, 2016), pp. 87-90.

<sup>581</sup> Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent>.

<sup>582</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, "Jaish-e-Mohammed: Under the Hood: Who are Jaish-e-Mohammed?", *The Diplomat*, March 13, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/jaish-e-mohammed-under-the-hood/>.

<sup>583</sup> In Islamic eschatology, Dajjal is a false messianic figure who will appear before the end of time. He will be destroyed by *al-Mahdī* (the Messiah).

<sup>584</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Al-'Adālah al-Ijtīmā'īyyah fī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1993), p. 80.

The same ruling also applies to those who support, vote and work for or benefit from such a government.<sup>585</sup>

According to Qutb, with the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, the Muslim world is in a state of *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance and unbelief) where divine sovereignty no longer belongs to Allah. It means that the Muslims' confession or acknowledgement that divinity belongs to Allah could no longer be manifested when they (Muslims) no longer live according to the Shariah ordained by Allah in the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the Prophet's Traditions). According to this framework, one's belief in Allah becomes questionable. Crucially, this is where the line between belief and unbelief is drawn.

Understood as such, the requirement of *tawhīd al-hākimiyyah* (only God has the right to legislate) has a profound political connotation, as Islam is conceived as both a religion and a state. Using the *tawhīd al-hākimiyyah* prism, Qutb viewed the political systems of the world in binary terms where they are either Islamic or *jāhiliyyah*.<sup>586</sup>

#### Islamic State

The same understanding is applied by IS. When the group first declared its establishment of a caliphate in 2014, the concept of *imāmah* (leadership) was argued as a part of the *millah* (path) of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham).<sup>587</sup> IS argued that with the establishment of the 'caliphate', believers could openly disassociate themselves "from the *kuffar* (disbelievers) and *mushrikin* (polytheists)."<sup>588</sup> Although the *imāmah* "includes both political and religious leadership", IS' focus has always been on political leadership ("*imamat al-kubra*") i.e. the Islamic caliphate. According to IS, proper

religious leadership cannot be instituted without first achieving complete political leadership over territories and people. The political power would unite the Muslim *ummah* (nation) when led by a single *imām* (political leader), making "fighting under his banner and empowering him to guard the landmarks of this religion and implement the Shariah (law) of Allah" possible.<sup>589</sup>

IS claims that its essential mission is to revive *tawhīd* concerning '*wala*' (allegiance), '*bara*' (disavowal), *hukm* (ruling), and *tashrī*' (legislation) which in its eyes "Islamic" parties of today have abandoned.<sup>590</sup> The caliphate would serve as the overarching political structure, ensuring Muslims live under the shade of *tawhīd*. This is the paradigm which Qutb, IS and those who share similar views propagate about the caliphate.

#### The Ghazwatul Hind Narrative

Ghazwatul Hind refers to a final apocalyptic war that would be taking place in India. There are three oft-cited hadiths on Ghazwatul Hind which jihadists have used as religious argument to persuade individuals to travel to certain South Asian hotspots with the false hope of achieving the merits associated with it. Jihadists have used such Islamic eschatological narratives as they did before to mobilise foreign fighters in the terror wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In the case of Ghazwatul Hind, there is an increase in the use of the concept by extremists on social media platforms. The narrative has also been translated into several languages such as Urdu, Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, and Indonesian.

The concept is presented as a reaction to the Hindutva phenomenon in South Asia.<sup>591</sup>

<sup>585</sup> H.R.H. Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, *A Thinking Person's Guide to Islam* (London: Turath Publishing, 2018), p. 213.

<sup>586</sup> Sayed Khatab, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002): pp. 151-155. See also, Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Adālah*, 78-80, pp.182-183, *Fi Zhilal Al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003/1423AH), Vol. 2, 1110, Vol. 3, 1194, Vol. 4, 2807, 2548, and *Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1979/1399AH), pp. 51-59.

<sup>587</sup> For more details on *millah* Ibrahim, see Abū Muhammad 'Āsim Al-Maqḍisi, *Millat Ibrāhīm* (n.p.: At-Tibyan Publications, n.d.).

<sup>588</sup> "The Return of Khilafah," *Dabiq*, Issue 1, Ramadan 1435AH (Jun-July 2014), 20. *Wala*' means love, loyalty, and allegiance whereas *bara*' as the opposite of *wala*' means hatred, dissociation, and disavowal.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-24.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., p. 35. Here, *wala*' signifies love, loyalty and allegiance whereas *bara*' is the opposite of *wala*', and in essence, means cutting of the relationship with something or someone.

<sup>591</sup> Hindutva is an ideology seeking to achieve the hegemony of Hindus and the Hindu way of life, which has been circulated in India by some political and religious parties.

Some analysts also relate the increasing application of the Ghazwatul Hind concept by South Asian jihadist networks to the Kashmiri situation. In Kashmir, the Indian authorities' increasingly securitised approach in the volatile territory has reignited local grievances, which fit within jihadist narratives of Muslims being oppressed by non-Muslim forces.

In Indonesia, JI has attempted to bring Ghazwatul Hind closer to home. The group is redefining the term Al-Hind in terms of a geographical entity – that it should also include Southeast Asia – and adherents of religions – both Hindus and Buddhists. It is still a minor discourse within JI and Indonesian jihadi circles. Nevertheless, there is a possibility of it moving to the centre of the Indonesian jihadi discourse if Muslims in Myanmar and Thailand became the targets of large-scale religious cleansing.

## Responses

Judging from the demise of the so-called IS territorial 'caliphate',<sup>592</sup> the prospect of physically reviving the caliphate at the heart of the Muslim world seems remote. IS does not have the support of Muslim scholars, clerics and the vast majority of Muslims worldwide. Further, in the age of modern nation states and rising tribalism, establishing a universal caliphate encompassing diverse peoples of different ethnicities and territories would be extremely challenging. Any attempt by IS to revive the caliphate will also be crushed given its agenda of perpetual war and conflict, including acts of terrorism. However, the ideology of restoring the

caliphate could still gain traction if presented as a *tawhīdīc* requirement of Islam. The narrative could not only mitigate IS' current state of weakness, but also ensure that its political agenda remains sustainable because it is entwined with the essence of belief in the oneness of Allah, i.e. *tawhīd*.

It is crucial, therefore, to underscore that the caliphate is not an integral part of the Islamic faith. This is well-supported on religious grounds as well as by renowned scholars and clerics. First, the Qur'an and the Sunnah,<sup>593</sup> the two most important primary sources of Islamic theology and law, do not specify the establishment of the caliphate as one of the pillars of Islam (the *arkān al-Islām* or The Five Indispensable Pillars of Islam)<sup>594</sup> or articles of faith (the *arkān al-īmān* or The Six Indispensable Pillars of Faith).<sup>595</sup> Neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah stipulates the type of government and state the Muslims should establish. Based on the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid ash-sharī'ah*), the desired system of government in Islam will always be one that involves consensus and ensures justice and equality.<sup>596</sup> The type of government is immaterial as what matters most is the fulfilment of these objectives.

Second, reputable past and present Sunni scholars such as Al-Juwayni (d. 1085)<sup>597</sup> did not view the *imāmah* (leadership) as a fundamental principle of belief ("*laysa min uṣūl al-ī'tiqād*"). He warned of the danger of falling into a severe error over the issue, and the tendency for intolerance and excesses. He added that the *imāmah* is a matter of personal judgement which should not be treated as definitive.<sup>598</sup>

<sup>592</sup> Ben Wedeman and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says," CNN, October 08, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html>.

<sup>593</sup> For a detailed explanation of the ḥadith on *Islām* and *īmān*, see Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wa al-Hikam (The Compendium of Knowledge and Wisdom)* (Al-Qāhirah (Cairo): Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), pp. 33-57.

<sup>594</sup> The word "*Islām*" signifies submission by bearing witness that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, performing the *Ṣalāt* (prayers), paying the *Zakāt* (charity), fasting during the month of *Ramaḍān*, and performing the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to the House of God in Mecca) if one is able to do so. See Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Al-Maqāṣid: Nawawi's Manual of Islam* (USA: Amana Publications, 2002), pp. 7-8.

<sup>595</sup> The word "*īmān*" originally means conviction of the heart to the tenets of Islamic faith comprising the belief in Allah, His angels, His inspired Books, His messengers, the Last day, and in destiny, both good and evil. See, Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam: A Comprehensive Discussion of the Sources, Principles and Practices of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Perkim, n.d.), pp. 119-133.

<sup>596</sup> For more on *maqāṣid* please see Al-Juwayni, *Al-Burhān Fī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (A. A.-A. Ad-Diyab Ed. 1979). Qatar.

<sup>597</sup> He was the teacher of al-Ghazālī, an outstanding theologian of his time and also known as "Imam of the Two Haram".

<sup>598</sup> Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni, *Kitāb al-Irshād Ilā Qawāṭi' al-Adillah Fī Uṣūl al-ī'tiqād* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyyah, 2009/1430AH), 315. See also, Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni, A

Third, when Sunni scholars such as Al-Ash'ari (d. 936)<sup>599</sup> endorsed the caliphate of the first four Imams who succeeded Prophet Muhammad, he did so to reject rival theories of Islamic rule expressed by the Shi'ites, the Kharijites, and other sectarian groups. He said the four caliphs were "the Imams after the Messenger, and their succession is a succession to the God's Messenger... We hold that the four Imams were in a true way, were rightly guided and excellent, so that no one equals them in excellence".<sup>600</sup> He stressed that the caliphate of the four Imams was not meant to serve as an undisputed and only blueprint for a future political system and institution for Muslims.

Fourth, in Islam, there are texts from the Qur'an and the hadith whose meanings are debatable and subject to interpretations depending on changing situations and circumstances. These include those relating to the implementation of Shariah which has been interpreted and extensively debated by applying the legal principles of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to keep abreast with changing times and conditions.<sup>601</sup> The concept of *khilafah* (Caliph) is among issues that are not an indisputable part of *tawhid* as claimed by ideologues such as Qutb or IS jihadists. Some differences of opinions, interpretations and arguments among Sunni Muslim jurists on the caliphate relate to who is legally entitled to hold the office of *khalifah*, the possibility of having more than one caliph, and the functions of the caliph.<sup>602</sup> All these

are not matters associated with the principles of the Islamic faith, but for deriving Islamic ordinances and regulations which are neither fixed nor conclusive.

Fifth, contrary to the binary thinking of Qutb and IS, hundreds of Muslim scholars and intellectuals from over 120 countries, as well as leaders from diverse religious groups and nationalities, gathered for a conference in Marrakesh, Morocco in 2016<sup>603</sup> to reaffirm the principles of the Charter of Medina (622 AD),<sup>604</sup> which inter alia, guaranteed religious freedom for all.<sup>605</sup> The Marrakesh Conference called for the protection of the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries, and to support initiatives to strengthen relations and understanding among religious groups in the Muslim world.<sup>606</sup> The Conference and its Declaration tacitly acknowledged the existence of different political systems, and also rejected and condemned IS' oppression of non-Muslim minorities, and its hatred towards people of other faiths.

Sixth, Muslims should refrain from being focused on the prophecy of Ghazwatul Hind which is based on three hadiths which never specified the exact time and place where the Ghazwatul Hind battle itself will take place and, therefore, are not definitive in its meaning (*ẓanni al-dalālah*). Specifying the time and place, as the jihadists did, is inconsistent with the proper interpretation of the hadiths. Related to this is the scholars of hadith's assessment that the prophecy would

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*Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Beliefs* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2000), p. 225.

<sup>599</sup> He was one of the founders of Sunni *kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology) and also known as "the Imam of the People of the Sunnah".

<sup>600</sup> Quoted in Ann K. S. Lambton, "State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political theory: The Jurists", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.70. The same explanation could also be found in Ibn Abi Al-'Izz Al-Hanafiyy, *Syarh Al-Aqīdah Al-Tahāwīyyah* (Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-Islāmiyy, 1988/1408AH), pp. 471-485.

<sup>601</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International Ltd, 1987), p.15.

<sup>602</sup> The world's top Islamic leaders and scholars rejected Al-Baghdadi's caliphate because it did not emerge from a consensus of Muslim countries, organisations of Islamic scholars and Muslims across the globe. See "The Caliphate" in *Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi*, September 19, 2014,

<http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/>. See also, Fadzli Adam, "The Concept of Khilafah According to Selected Sunni and Shi'i Quranic Commentaries," (PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2001), p.1.

<sup>603</sup> The conference was held from January 25-27, 2016.

<sup>604</sup> The charter is a constitutional contract between the Prophet Muhammad and the people of Medina, which guaranteed the religious liberty of all, regardless of faith.

<sup>605</sup> Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, "Abridgment of The Rights of Religious Minorities in Muslim Majority Communities Its Legal Framework and a Call to Action," *Framework Paper for the Conference*, January 25, 2016, p.11. "Executive Summary of the Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities," *Marrakesh Declaration*, January 27, 2016,

<http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/marrakesh->

<sup>606</sup> "Executive Summary", *Marrakesh Declaration*.



only happen after the coming of *al-Mahdī*,<sup>607</sup> hence, this prophecy is not an immediate Islamic priority. Muslims should instead be concerned with works that could establish them as “the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind”.<sup>608</sup> Islamic scholars and community counsellors should work towards re-directing the efforts of those who are vulnerable to extremist/radical ideology away from the Ghazwatul Hind prophecy.

## Outlook

As IS’ territorial defeat has not diminished its ideological offensive in the Muslim world, it is crucial to continue dismantling the ideological support for extremism, radicalisation and terrorism through robust refutation of jihadist misinterpretations and distortions of Islamic doctrines and practices. In this respect, jihadist claims about the establishment of a caliphate being an unassailable part of the Islamic creed should be thoroughly debunked and exposed as flawed both on religious grounds as well as in the light of present-day realities of modern nation states, and international laws and universal norms emphasising peaceful relations among countries and observance of human rights, including religious freedom. Harking back to past eras to redress grievances or to recover lost glories is akin to holding the future of Islam hostage to the past, when globally, the Muslims’ current reality has transformed significantly. It will certainly not address the many serious social, economic, political and ideological challenges confronting the Muslim world today. And due to the frequent hijackings of Islamic concepts and terminologies by jihadist extremist communities, moderate Muslims must step up their level of literacy when it comes to interacting with their own religious texts and literatures. This will minimise their chances of falling prey to manipulation by the extremists.

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<sup>607</sup> *al-Mahdī*: “the Divinely Guided”, the descendent of the Prophet who will return at the end of time to establish justice. See, Aisha Bewley, *Glossary of*

*Islamic Terms*, (London: TA-HA Publishers, 1998), p. 62.

<sup>608</sup> Al-Qur’an, Āl-‘Imrān 3: 110.

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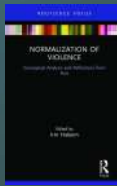
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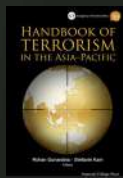
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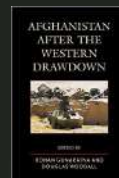
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