

ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

Global Threat Assessment

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

**The Middle East: Between COVID-19, Conflicts, Jihadist Threat
and Public Discontent**

Perpetrating Militant Jihadist Ideological Narratives

Extreme Right in the West: In a Transition?



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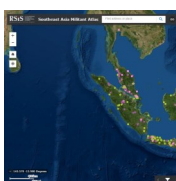
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SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via <https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd>

Global Threat Assessment 2022

Overview

When the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, the potential destabilising impact of this development was concerning. Central Asians, for instance, worried about “what precedent might be set if the Taliban successfully builds an Islamic Emirate on the borders of secular Muslim majority Central Asia”.¹ A Taliban-run Afghanistan again becoming a safe haven for terror groups to “regenerate formidable external attack capabilities” was another worry. One year on, however, such scenarios have yet to be actualised.² Certainly, the Taliban’s assurances that it “would not allow any terrorist group” to use Afghanistan to “launch attacks against others”³ rang ominously hollow, with the killing of Al-Qaeda (AQ) chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in a US drone strike in Kabul in August. Zawahiri had been residing in a house supposedly under the Taliban’s control.⁴ That said, a Taliban-run Afghanistan did not – as yet – pose a major threat to regional and global security, for three main reasons.

First, the Taliban in 2022 continued to face a significant domestic challenge from the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK). The latter’s “attacks and propaganda material” continued to be “aimed at ideologically de-legitimising” the Taliban – with ISK portraying itself as an “alternative jihadist group to a plethora of South and Central Asian jihadists still residing in Afghanistan”.⁵ Hence, the Taliban has had to focus on “anti-ISK military operations” aimed at “not letting ISK grow big enough” to potentially threaten its rule.⁶

Second, the killing of Zawahiri, “a largely uninspiring leader of a weakened outfit”, raised further “questions about the future of Al-Qaeda central” in the “global terror landscape”.⁷ That said, although AQ “can no longer be regarded as the vanguard of global jihadism”,⁸ it was still able to reconstitute somewhat and “secure territorial footholds in different conflict arenas” in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.⁹ At any rate, it seems clear that AQ, “which operates potently through its affiliates in Africa”, would find it difficult to preserve “a foothold in the Af-Pak region”, not least because of continued US counter terrorist operations against it.¹⁰ One caveat is that AQ is likely to retain “an inspiring impact” on its affiliates worldwide¹¹ – a view supported by a recent US intelligence assessment.¹²

Third, it is worth noting that ISK thus far appears to be operationally constrained. To be sure, repeated ISK “references to Central Asia as a target in its propaganda and attempted attacks” have been “a source of concern” across that region.¹³ That said, recent Western intelligence analyses suggest that ISK “has grown little over the past six months”, and appears unable “to assert control over any territory”, while its efforts “have been limited to Central Asia and attacks against countries such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan”.¹⁴

Particularly notable in 2022 were indications that, following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China would “become the jihadists’ next big target”.¹⁵ Given the trend of recent ISK attacks and its anti-China propaganda, it has become increasingly clear that “Chinese interests” are “now at the receiving end of attacks by militants”.¹⁶

The Middle East, meanwhile, remained “a zone of frenemies, rivalries and conflicts”.¹⁷ The long-running Israeli-Palestinian dispute remained fraught, while the danger of the Israel-Iran rivalry degenerating into a “full-blown confrontation remained high”. At the same time, the “fundamental ideological and geopolitical differences” between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran simply cannot be “expected to subside easily and substantially”.¹⁸

In 2022, the Southeast Asian threat picture was on the whole generally positive, as militant groups were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which “placed significant limits on travel and mass gatherings and weakened extremist funding bases”.¹⁹ In Indonesia, effective counter terrorism (CT) efforts largely “decimated various pro-IS networks operationally”, while repeated

clampdowns on social media platforms weakened their online presence as well.²⁰ Similarly, Malaysia continued to experience fewer terrorism-related arrests in 2022, possibly because lockdown measures in response to the pandemic and border closures greatly reduced the movement of people in and out of the country and “hampered terrorist activity”.²¹ The adverse socioeconomic effects of the pandemic also focused public attention on practical bread-and-butter issues rather than esoteric extremist ideas.²²

A similar positive trend was noted in the Philippines’ Mindanao region, which has seen a significant number of terrorist surrenders over the past three years, driven by various factors including fatigue, hunger and declining financial support, while leadership decapitation and effective operations by the military have also played their roles.²³ Likewise, in the Thai Deep South, “the level of violence has been on a downward trend” since the start of formal peace talks between Bangkok and Malay-Muslim separatist groups in 2013, and certainly throughout 2022.²⁴

In Southeast Asia, it was the ongoing conflict in Myanmar that remained worrisome. The ongoing insurgency involving the anti-coup movement and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) against Myanmar’s military government worsened across the country.²⁵

Operational Issues and Challenges for Religious and Ethno-Nationalist Militant Groups

Afghanistan as a Hijrah Magnet?

The successful US drone strike on AQ leader Zawahiri in August seemed to affirm Washington’s “over-the-horizon operations” deterrent capability. Presumably, this could “potentially deter the global jihadists from converging on a ‘safe Afghanistan’ under the Taliban”.²⁶ That said, Afghanistan in 2022 remained “a hotbed of multiple terror formations with varying agendas” and has “not become an inhospitable territory for other regional terror groups”, because the Taliban remained focused on “eliciting international recognition, funding and decimating its domestic enemies, rather than “making the country terror free”.²⁷

A geopolitically volatile Taliban-run Afghanistan that thus remains “open for business”²⁸ attracted policy attention in Southeast Asia, where the Taliban’s return raised concerns of a spike in jihadist activity. This was especially given the historical nexus between the Taliban, AQ and regional networks like the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).²⁹ For instance, Malaysian authorities were aware of several online chat groups “who were discussing plans to travel to conflict zones”, including Afghanistan, though there was no evidence of this actually happening.³⁰ In Mindanao, Philippine Islamist militants had a lukewarm response to developments in Afghanistan, including the death of Zawahiri.³¹ More than a year since the fall of Kabul, therefore, there remained “limited evidence” of “Southeast Asian jihadists performing *hijrah* (migration) to the Afghan theatre”.³² Significantly, though, IS pointedly referred to Africa “as a new land of *hijrah* and jihad”.³³

Cross-Border Links

The continuing importance of cross-border links of militant networks was underscored throughout 2022. In Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pledged allegiance to the Afghan Taliban Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada and, from Afghan territory, continued to wage a violent campaign to create a Taliban-like Islamic Emirate across the border in Pakistan itself.³⁴ Meanwhile, Baloch insurgents, operating from Afghan and Iranian territory, continued “to pose a long-term threat to Pakistan’s internal security”.³⁵ Similarly, Central Asian militant groups continued operating in Afghanistan under Taliban protection and guidance.³⁶ In South Asia, members of the Bangladesh-based, AQ-affiliated Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and the IS-linked Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) were arrested in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam.³⁷

Bangladeshi territory has not only been used by Islamist militant groups targeting north-eastern India, but also by ethno-nationalist threat groups targeting Myanmar. The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) had been pushed out of the Rakhine State in western Myanmar by the increasingly potent Arakan Army (AA).³⁸ That said, although ARSA did not carry out any operations

in Myanmar, it remained active across the border in Bangladesh, in especially narcotics smuggling, but also other criminal activities in Rohingya camps and adjacent areas. As the Rohingya crisis continues to worsen, “various new armed groups” with mostly criminal intent are “reportedly surfacing across the border in Bangladesh to exploit the Rohingyas’ grievances and recruit into their ranks” – with the potential to threaten western Myanmar.³⁹

The Mindanao-based Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) also remained a security concern in Sabah in East Malaysia – long a transit point for terrorists, smugglers and kidnappers. Although ASG has not carried out operations in East Malaysia since 2016, its members “still use Sabah as a safe haven and a recruitment point”, and some ASG members have reportedly found odd jobs and have blended in with the local population.⁴⁰

An Evolving Spectrum of Attack Modalities and Targets

Multi-Modal Attacks by Organised Networks Against a Plethora of Targets

In Afghanistan, ISK attacked a plethora of targets, such as Hazara mosques, schools and workplaces. Significantly, it employed a suicide bomber in an attack near the Russian embassy in Kabul. ISK considers both Russia and the US as part of the Jewish-Crusader alliance arrayed against the global Muslim community.⁴¹ Across the border in Pakistan, ISK also employed suicide bombings as a tactic, attacking a Shia Mosque in Peshawar, apart from attacking polio vaccination teams and their police bodyguards, intelligence and security officials, as well as members of the religious minorities in Pakistan. However, these “were low-intensity attacks”, involving small arms.⁴²

In Kashmir, Islamist threat groups continued targeting minorities and migrant workers in the Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley. Tactics-wise, most of these attacks were perpetrated by the new phenomenon of faceless “hybrid militants”: civilians with no known links to militant groups, who were “radicalised online, carry out an attack, usually with a pistol” and then “slip back to their civilian life”.⁴³

As mentioned, Chinese interests in Pakistan were increasingly targeted in 2022. Baloch militants successfully staged a suicide bombing in April outside the University of Karachi’s Confucius Institute in Pakistan. The following month, they attempted another suicide attack, this time against a Chinese envoy, but this was thwarted.⁴⁴ Chinese targets aside, Baloch separatists also attacked “Pakistani security institutions”.⁴⁵

In Indonesia, Islamist threat groups employed a mix of sharp weapons, firearms and explosive materials. Notably, unlike in recent years, the use of explosives and suicide attack tactics in Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)-linked plots was largely absent in 2022. The police remained the primary target of terrorist plots. Other JAD targets included the People’s Representative Council of Indonesia premises in Central Jakarta as well as, rather unusually for JAD, a café and bars frequented by Westerners.⁴⁶

In the Thai Deep South in August, 16 convenience stores and a gas station were targeted. These attack tactics seemed to suggest that Malay-Muslim separatists were targeting the “economic bases of the Thai state”.⁴⁷ In Myanmar, anti-government militias persisted with targeted bombings, knife attacks and shootings. The majority of these attacks were directed against military and police targets as well as individuals or organisations possessing close ties to the current military government. Anti-government militias in 2022 increasingly adopted explosive-rigged civilian drones against military bases, police stations and checkpoints.⁴⁸

The Lone Actor Threat

A recent US intelligence assessment of the threat posed by AQ and ISK from Afghanistan suggested that the threat from such groups is “more likely to take the form of an individual attacker inspired by these groups rather than a networked and hierarchically directed plot”.⁴⁹ The continuing

threat posed by lone actors was also seen in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, while the threat picture in 2022 continued to improve, the biggest concern appeared to stem from “attacks by lone actors or autonomous cells who are inspired, rather than directed, by a particular group’s ideology”.⁵⁰ In Singapore, “the primary threat” likewise still emanated “from individuals self-radicalised through online means”.⁵¹

Role of Women and Youth

The trend in recent years of women and youth assuming significant roles in the various activities of threat networks continued in 2022. In Indonesia in October, the authorities detained a female Islamist militant for brandishing a gun at the gate of the State Palace in Jakarta. Moreover, a female former terrorist offender who had been released in 2021 was found to have relapsed into terrorist activity – “the first case of a female recidivist in the country”.⁵²

The role of youth seemed particularly pronounced. A fifth of the aforementioned hybrid militants in Kashmir were “juveniles”.⁵³ In Bangladesh, an “obscure AQ-centric outfit”, the Jama’atul Ansar fil Hind al Sharquiyah (JAHS), was reportedly involved in the recruitment of local youth for militant training in collaboration with an ethnic separatist group, the Kuki-Chin National Front.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, many Rohingya youth in 2022 were co-opted by ARSA to act as carriers in its transborder drug trade activities.⁵⁵

Youth also appeared to play a prominent role in the wider support base for Malay-Muslim separatist groups in southern Thailand. In May, a Malay-Muslim, civil society-run youth event raised security concerns. More than 10,000 youth dressed in traditional Malay costume gathered at Wasukri Beach in Pattani in a pointed celebration of their ethnic/cultural minority identity. Most disconcertingly for the authorities, however, was the sighting of the flag of the main separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) amongst the crowd, while the youth declared their oath to their “religion, nation and motherland” and commitment to “eliminate all forms of oppression”. Officials speculated if the youth “were linked to the underground separatist group”.⁵⁶

Youth and women were also implicated in the case of the Western extreme right (see below) in 2022. In Slovakia, a teenager launched an attack, while a British official inquiry uncovered the death the year before of a teenage girl who had been radicalised and groomed into “extreme right-wing” ideas. Both cases highlighted “the threat and the extreme vulnerability of some youth being drawn towards extreme right-wing ideologies”.⁵⁷

Role of Ideological Ecosystems

The importance of better understanding the ideological ecosystems propagating and sustaining violent extremist narratives persisted in 2022. Such ecosystems included, amongst other elements, interconnected networks of social media and print *platforms*, strategic influencers or *persons*, as well as certain extremist organisational, educational and religious *places*.⁵⁸

Persons

A significant development in Indonesia were suggestions that chief Indonesian IS ideologue Aman Abdurrahman and extremist Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, influential Islamist extremist leaders for many years, may have “tempered their extremist proclivities” somewhat. In a July video, Ba’asyir appeared to “cast aside years of resistance towards Pancasila as the national ideology”; Abdurrahman, currently on death row for his role in several IS-inspired plots, claimed in a YouTube video in April “that his supporters had disobeyed him by launching JAD-linked attacks between 2016-2018”. This apparent change of stance on the part of both ideologues confused and disillusioned some extremists.⁵⁹

The role of strategic persons in disseminating and sustaining extremist ideology was seen in Singapore as well, where it was revealed that Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad Batubara had contributed to the online radicalisation of several Singaporeans. This included a 17-year-old

teenager detained in January 2020 who, through watching Somad's lectures on YouTube, came to believe he would receive rewards in heaven if he was 'martyred' in a suicide bombing.⁶⁰

Platforms

The year 2022 underscored the continuing strategic role played by social media and other platforms in disseminating and sustaining extremist ideology and support. In Pakistan, the TTP made heavy use of its Urdu-language propaganda magazine *Mujallah Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*,⁶¹ while ISK "expanded the production, reproduction and propagation of propaganda in Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz languages through media platforms such as Al-Azaim Foundation and Xuroson Ovozi."⁶² Likewise, AQ used its Urdu-language magazine, *Nawai Afghan Jihad*, to, inter alia, decry China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and its "alleged complicity in perpetrating violence against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims".⁶³ In Bangladesh, by exploiting social networking platforms, the group Dawlatul Islam-Bengal appeared to be "building a virtual structure in which members are encouraged to carry out subversive activities" towards "establishing the so-called Caliphate".⁶⁴

In Indonesia, the police broke up the Annajiyah Media Centre, "a digital pro-IS propaganda group that targeted the Indonesian audience and encouraged people to take up jihad".⁶⁵ In Malaysia, the continuing importance of messaging platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp for sustaining "online pro-IS communities" was underscored.⁶⁶

Places

2022 also reinforced the important role played by places – physical safe spaces where extremist groups could function relatively freely and engage in training, recruitment and propaganda activities. A July report by the United Nations (UN) in this respect noted that the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) had "rebuilt several strongholds" in Badakhshan, north-east Afghanistan, with "the aim of improving its capabilities for terrorist activities".⁶⁷

In Indonesia, attempts were made by militants to engage with "JAD's branch in Riau to source a location for *i'dad*, or physical training". Moreover, despite assessments of the group's demise, "community support for MIT in Poso, Sulawesi, where its operations have long been concentrated", remained high.⁶⁸ In Mindanao, militants from the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG) remained "supported by relatives and locals" in certain localities in the Lanao region where they were "able to hide among the civilian population" and recruit.⁶⁹

The Evolving Extreme Right Threat⁷⁰

The extreme right can be understood as comprising groups and individuals that espouse "at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy", while the far right can be regarded as referring to the "political manifestation of the extreme right".⁷¹ Certainly, the relatively close nexus between extreme right social movements and far right political entities continued to be a distinct feature of Western, Buddhist and Hindu extreme right movements in 2022.

Western Extreme Right

In 2022, five developments within the Western extreme right appeared notable. First was the "ongoing mainstreaming of far right political movements in various Western countries", which promoted a climate of "perceived intolerance and social tension" that was likely "conducive to violent interpretation".⁷² Second, the "malleability of extreme right narratives" continued to facilitate the absorption of "a variety of ideologies into its fold", rendering precise classification of the extreme right very challenging.⁷³ Third, a "mix of socio-political issues specific to the societies the extreme right groups are based in", together with issues such as "the Ukraine war, climate change and China's growing geopolitical assertiveness", dominated Western extreme right online platforms. Fourth, in 2022, the ongoing war in Ukraine had yet to become the much-feared "magnet for the extreme right to fight, train and gain experience which they could then translate into terrorist

attacks back home”.⁷⁴ Fifth, it was clear that Western extreme right activists were leaning towards Russia and Putin – who was seen as the “champion for the rights of the Christian, non-LGBTQ+ and non-minority people”.⁷⁵

Hindutva Extreme Right

In 2022, Hindutva activists in India “targeted Muslims, their homes, shops and worship places as well as their culture and way of life”.⁷⁶ Such incidents, worryingly, represented “decentralised mob action”, executed not on the directives of “distant leaders but by millions of little people in towns and cities”.⁷⁷ The seemingly spontaneous “violent targeting of Muslims” by mobs influenced by the Hindutva extreme right, appeared to have been enabled by an “extremist ecosystem that radicalises people online, in the media and on the streets”, facilitated somewhat by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government’s indifferent attitude”.⁷⁸

Buddhist Extreme Right

In Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhist extreme right sentiments remained entrenched in the political arena, casting doubt on the prospects for “genuine and sustainable inter-ethnic reconciliation”.⁷⁹ In June, then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa extended the tenure of a national task force chaired by the controversial Buddhist monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, leader of the “Sinhala Buddhist nationalist organisation”, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), which has played a “leading role in anti-Muslim violence and spreading Islamophobia in Sri Lanka in recent years”.⁸⁰ Despite the Rajapaksa government’s collapse in July, the promotion of “Sinhala Buddhist nationalism” appeared to continue pervading Sri Lanka’s major political parties.⁸¹

State Responses? A Mix of ‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ Measures Still the Key

Given the challenging transnational terrorism and extremism landscape in 2022, how should governments and other relevant stakeholders respond? In essence, the 2022 survey reiterates the critical importance of a judicious blend of *hard short-term* and *softer medium- to longer-term* approaches to deal comprehensively with the full spectrum of the terrorism/extremism threat going forward.⁸²

Hard Measures

Legislation

Strong counter terrorist legislation remains a key measure to deal with the evolving terrorism/extremism threat. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, for instance, empowers the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs to designate particular individuals as “terrorists” for activities including “training and radicalising youth” as well as executing and coordinating terror attacks.⁸³ In Indonesia, the 2018 Counter-Terrorism Law, which permits the police to impose more frequent preventive detentions of terror suspects and extends the pre-trial detention period from 120 to 200 days, is said to have strengthened counter terrorist policing in that country.⁸⁴ In Malaysia, the utility of laws like the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 and the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 was reaffirmed, especially in the context of “enabling the police to carry out investigations into complex offences such as terrorism and organised crime”, which mainly involve “large networks and multiple individuals”.⁸⁵ Such laws need to be applied even-handedly though. In India, for instance, it was observed that while the “government was swift in arresting Muslims involved in violence, little action was taken against Hindutva extremists”.⁸⁶

Decapitation Strategy

The 2022 survey suggests that the ‘hard’ tactic of leadership decapitation is a potentially effective measure to neutralise threat groups in some circumstances. The elimination of “charismatic leaders” from both the local “AQ and IS factions” has rendered the “Malaysian terror landscape” leaderless since 2019”.⁸⁷ In Mindanao, the Dawlah Islamiyah Sulu, previously led by Hajan

Sawadjaan, had been the “Philippines’ most active terrorist group” from 2019 to 2020. However, following Sawadjaan’s elimination in 2020, the group has not recovered.⁸⁸ In Bangladesh, the authorities were seeking to capture the AQ-aligned Ansar al Islam (AAI) leader Sayed Mohammad Ziaul Haque. Officials assessed that it “would be challenging” to bring the relatively well-organised AAI “under control” until Haque is caught.⁸⁹

Leadership decapitation seemed less effective in the MENA region though. The “US’ decapitation” of AQ and IS leaders in 2022 did little to “eradicate the jihadist networks’ ideological vigour and operational capability”.⁹⁰ Similarly, in Pakistan, the arrest of Gulzar Imam, the head of the newly formed Baloch Nationalist Army, was assessed as “unlikely to weaken the Baloch insurgency at the strategic level”.⁹¹

Enhancing Operational Capabilities

Implementing effective ‘hard’ measures presupposes a strong national counter terrorist machinery. In 2022, for example, Pakistan gave the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), a lead role in the new CT policy instead of the military, empowering NACTA to “coordinate with provincial Counter Terrorism Departments in implementing the new CT strategy”.⁹² In Indonesia, the “expanded crackdowns on terrorist suspects” aptly demonstrated the police CT force Densus 88’s “improved surveillance and monitoring capabilities”, including in “cyberspace and in detecting propagandists, potential perpetrators and attack plots”.⁹³ In Malaysia, the Eastern Sabah Security Command “beefed up its operations along Malaysia’s eastern maritime borders, particularly off the coast of Sabah”, while the Royal Malaysia Police “reportedly made plans to deploy a commando team” to Sabah’s east coast to “counter maritime threats in the area, particularly from the ASG”.⁹⁴ In an alternative approach, China is increasingly outsourcing physical security by “relying on Chinese contractors from state-owned security firms” to protect Chinese investments in “volatile regions”.⁹⁵

International Collaboration

International collaboration also enhances ‘hard’ CT capacity, and it was notable in 2022 that Pakistan and the US resumed their CT cooperation, with Islamabad assisting the US “by reconstituting its human intelligence resources and keeping its airspace open over Balochistan” for over-the-horizon drone strikes in Afghanistan.⁹⁶ Central Asian governments enhanced CT collaboration with the US as well: in 2022, there were intensified efforts by the United States to “strengthen its ‘overwatch’ capability of Afghanistan from the region”.⁹⁷ In maritime Southeast Asia, the Philippine government sought to enhance its CT capacity by participating in cross-border collaborations, such as with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Contact Group on the Sulu and Celebes Seas, “which aims to develop better responses to a range of maritime crimes in the area”.⁹⁸ The Trilateral Cooperative Agreement between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia has also “enhanced capacity-building to interdict non-conventional maritime threats” in the region.⁹⁹ In October, as part of a new multi-agency national counter terrorism financing strategy, the Singapore government identified the need for “International Partnerships and Cooperation” to help address concerns over the “ease and speed with which cross-border money transfers” occur, given Singapore’s status as a global financial and transport hub in “close proximity to countries vulnerable to terrorist activity”.¹⁰⁰

Prison Systems

The 2022 survey reiterated the importance of adequate resourcing of prison systems for the effective control and rehabilitation of terrorist detainees. In the Bangladeshi context, there was concern that some Islamist militant leaders were trying to manage their networks from jail.¹⁰¹ In Indonesia, the “issue of overcrowded and understaffed prisons” persisted.¹⁰²

Soft Measures

Building Community Resilience to Extremist Ideology

2022 further underscored the importance of complementing the aforementioned ‘hard’ measures by fostering ‘softer’ approaches, including building community resilience to extremist ideology of all stripes. One critical element of building community resilience remains effective counter-narratives.¹⁰³ Another important measure is inclusive dialogue with key groups: in India, while the BJP government clamped down on Islamist mobilisation by banning the Popular Front of India and its affiliates, it was noted that simply “outlawing organisations does not end extremism”, as it only encourages “the formation of new outfits with different names”.¹⁰⁴ Rather, building community resilience to extremist ideas must include pursuing “political processes and inclusive dialogue with marginalised groups”.¹⁰⁵

An inclusive strategy was seen in Malaysia, where the police’s Special Branch “emphasised a whole-of-nation approach” in building community resilience, engaging “members of civil society, such as teachers and community leaders”.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, in Indonesia, one of the pillars of the National Action Plan Against Extremism blueprint enacted in 2021, apart from enhancing whole-of-government coordination in Jakarta, has been fostering community resilience by “ensuring the active involvement of CSOs and local governments”.¹⁰⁷ In Singapore, in April, the case of an Australian national who was convicted of a criminal act judged to have been “religiously aggravated” and motivated by “hostility toward Muslims”, reinforced the need for continued vigilance in fostering community resilience, as issues “around race and religion remain potential fault lines in the Singapore context”, which can readily be “manipulated” by extremists.¹⁰⁸

Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes

The year 2022 also reinforced the continuing relevance of effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for militants and returnees. In Central Asia, Tajikistan repatriated 146 women and children from camps in Syria, while Kyrgyzstan pondered undertaking another repatriation exercise of children from the camps as well. It was acknowledged that the risk of recidivism amongst Central Asian returnees must be managed.¹⁰⁹ In Indonesia, it was observed that “aspects of the state’s deradicalisation and reintegration programmes remain underdeveloped”, suffering from a “lack of adequate evaluation, monitoring and risk assessment tools”, apart from “poor coordination between the state, local agencies and civil society organisations”.¹¹⁰ More positively, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) government created “multisector surrender programmes that provide strong incentives for militants to surrender”, involving financial incentives and vocational training, to induce militants to lay down arms and pledge allegiance to the BARMM government.¹¹¹

Addressing Medium- to Longer-Term Structural Grievances

Finally, it was clear again throughout 2022 that serious engagement with underlying structural grievances remained important to effectively mitigate terrorist and extremist threats, regardless of ideological stripe. India showed the way somewhat; with the improving security situation in the north-east since 2014, the government took two major decisions: the powerful Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 was repealed, while the army withdrew from its counterinsurgency role in several districts of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. These two policy decisions adroitly “addressed a key demand of the people of the Northeast”.¹¹²

Positive signs were also witnessed in Mindanao, the Philippines, where in September the leaders of the two key Muslim separatist organisations, the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, discussed the future of the BARMM, acknowledged “the reconciliatory position” of new Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, and pledged to support “a genuine and inclusive peace not just in the BARMM but also throughout the country”.¹¹³ Likewise, in the Thai Deep South, a key highlight of 2022 was renewed peace talks that “achieved a breakthrough” with negotiations poised to shift “from procedural matters” to “more substantive issues” – including greater inclusiveness of all relevant stakeholders in public discussions, the reduction of violence and, more ambitiously, a political settlement involving “power devolution, democracy and the recognition of the distinct cultural identities of the people of Patani”.¹¹⁴

In general, though, the 2022 survey shows that much remains to be done to address structural grievances across the board. In Pakistan, for example, the ethnonationalist Baloch insurgency – whose “centre of gravity” has shifted from the Baloch tribes to the educated tech- and social media-savvy youth of the urban middle-class – is driven by “political marginalisation and socioeconomic deprivation”, resulting in a “more radical form of Baloch nationalism”.¹¹⁵ In the MENA region, a significant “state-society dichotomy” continued to dominate the geopolitical landscape. In short, all the Middle Eastern states, including Israel, “experienced polarisation between forces of the status quo”, which seek “incremental change as befitting their hold on power”, and “forces of change” seeking “a reformation of their states and societies”.¹¹⁶ In Sri Lanka, it was observed that the “main threat to national security” results from the “ongoing economic crisis”, which has “severely deprived swathes of the population of access to food, health, education and a livelihood”.¹¹⁷

In Southeast Asia, where the overall security situation was generally better, issues remained. For example, frustrations over Mindanao’s lack of development, particularly in Marawi City – still yet to fully recover from the May-October 2017 conflict between the military and jihadist groups – “could still be exploited” by pro-IS threat groups to “fuel recruitment” amongst “aggrieved local communities”.¹¹⁸ In the Thai Deep South, ongoing instances of *wisaman khattakam*, a Thai term meaning death “at the hands of state officials who claim to have acted in the line of duty”, fomented Muslim discontent.¹¹⁹ Deep structural grievances will continue to drive armed conflict in Myanmar, not least in the Rakhine State. While the military regime will likely continue deploying significant firepower to preserve Myanmar’s territorial integrity, the well-armed Arakan Army will remain equally intent on violently “asserting its control in Rakhine State” to create “an autonomous region”.¹²⁰

Going forward, it is likely that as COVID-19-related movement restrictions continue easing in 2023 and cross-border travel intensifies, “this could prompt a surge in terrorist movement and activities, including around Southeast Asia”.¹²¹ Ominously, in December 2022, a suicide bomber reportedly linked to the pro-IS militant group JAD, attacked a police station in the Indonesian city of Bandung, killing a police officer.¹²² It would thus be advisable to take heed of an audiotape released in September by the pro-IS Al-Furqan media, in which IS called on “Muslims in Singapore, along with those in other Asian states, to come forward to join” it.¹²³ As such, continued vigilance would be needed to safeguard societies against the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism, both in Southeast Asia, and further afield.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore

INDONESIA

In 2022, Indonesia recorded one terror attack, a decline from the previous year when six attacks were recorded. The number of plots also declined, with five plots recorded in 2022, compared to eight in 2021. While the recorded attacks and plots decreased, terrorist groups in Indonesia remained active in conducting i'dad, or preparation for waging jihad, as evinced by the confiscation of significant caches of sharp weapons, firearms and explosive materials by the police. The pro-IS Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and Al-Qaeda-linked Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) networks remain the key security threats, while the arrest of militants linked to Darul Islam (DI), a decades-old organisation, points to the possible resurgence of dormant extremist networks.

Trends

Pro-Islamic State Groups

Pro-Islamic State (IS) networks affiliated with Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), or Anshar Daulah, remained significantly weakened in 2022.¹ Effective counter terrorism (CT) policing in recent years has largely decimated various pro-IS networks operationally, while repeated clampdowns on social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications have left their online presence at arguably its lowest ebb.² This follows a general trend across Southeast Asia, where terrorist groups have been in a phase of decline in terms of their activities³ following the onset of COVID-19, which placed significant limits on travel and mass gatherings and weakened extremist funding bases.⁴

Some JAD-linked cells retain a limited capacity to conduct attacks against civilian and government targets, although the successful capture or killing of key leaders and facilitators⁵ has largely crippled the group's ability to effectively coordinate attacks. In this respect, while pro-IS groups largely operate as loose networks of autonomous cells, and without a rigid hierarchical structure, pulling off a successful attack still relies to some extent on the presence of a strong network and leadership for planning, funding and weaponry.⁶

In 2022, online videos surfaced featuring chief Indonesian IS ideologue Aman Abdurrahman and radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. In the videos, widely circulated on social media, both individuals appeared to have tempered their extremist proclivities to some extent. Abdurrahman, who is currently on death row for his role in several IS-inspired attacks, claimed in a video uploaded on Youtube in April that his supporters had disobeyed him by launching JAD-linked attacks between 2016-2018, for which he was blamed.⁷ For his part, former JI leader Ba'asyir, in a video that went viral online in July 2022, appeared to cast aside years of resistance towards Pancasila as the national ideology; he ostensibly indicated that it aligned with Islamic beliefs.⁸ The videos expectedly generated significant discussion among Indonesian pro-IS supporters online, with some questioning the two leaders' motives. Overall, while the videos led to some disillusionment and friction among pro-IS supporters, observers noted that others still have their own justifications for engaging in terrorism.⁹

Indeed, despite the mass arrests and repeated clampdowns online, some pro-IS individuals remain committed to recruitment and the dissemination of IS ideology, evidenced by the continued creation of numerous IS-linked accounts on social media and encrypted messaging applications. Some postings also seemingly sought to encourage supporters to target high-profile individuals. In July 2022, a pro-IS supporter shared postings on social media depicting Indonesian President Jokowi Widodo, digitally altered to seem like he had been beheaded by an IS soldier.¹⁰

In 2022, there was one successful attack and five attack plots involving JAD members in Bandung (West Java), Riau, Bantul (Yogyakarta), Bima (West Nusa Tenggara) and Malang (East Java). A pro-IS independent cell named Halaqah Singa Timur, led by one Abu Jafar, was also dismantled by Detachment 88 (D88) in September 2022. The cell had apparently planned to organise an attack; no further details were provided. One of its members had also forged ties with JAD's branch in Riau to source a location for *i'dad*, or physical training, in preparation for conducting *amaliyah* (operations) in Dumai, Riau.¹¹

Many JAD networks still regard *i'dad* as essential to their cause, although the rationale has evolved over time. While *i'dad* is viewed as imperative for attack preparation, the "rationale has been broadened to include preparation for the final battle at the end-of-time and defence of the nucleus of an Islamic State that supporters hope to establish in Indonesia".¹² In 2022, JAD's network in Yogyakarta conducted regular physical training in three known locations – Mount Merbabu, Mount Andong and Gunung Kidul Beach in Central Java – in addition to engaging in bomb-making activities.¹³ Additionally, three JAD militants were arrested (two of them being recidivists) in Penatoi, Bima, for giving sermons on jihad and *tawhid* in religious discussion sessions.¹⁴

The future of another pro-IS group in Indonesia, the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (East Indonesia Mujahideen, or MIT), however, is less certain. The last remaining member of the group, who was responsible for the killing of a Christian farmer in May 2021, was killed in September 2022 by a joint task force involving the police and the military.¹⁵ However, despite assessments of the group's demise,¹⁶ community support for MIT in Poso, Sulawesi, where its operations have long been concentrated, remains high.¹⁷ In May 2022, D88 arrested 26 suspects, mostly from Poso, who had planned to join MIT.¹⁸

Jemaah Islamiyah

The concerted security raids since mid-2019, which resulted in the arrest and elimination of key JI operatives and bomb-makers, have crippled the group's overall effectiveness. While security agencies did not detect a JI-linked terror plot in 2022, the group remains a threat given its well-organised and strategic nature.¹⁹ In the past two years, and amid the pandemic-related restrictions on their fund-raising and recruitment activities, some members have increasingly turned to extremist-linked charities and other donation channels to fund their operations.

In July 2022, a JI member, who had been a prominent fund-raiser for the group in West Sumatra, was sentenced to six years' imprisonment.²⁰ Along with other JI members, he had set up a foundation, "Yayasan Muslim Bersaudara Sejati", which generated Rp 260 million (US\$17,326) in 2017. During a 2018 charity event to increase awareness of the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, he also raised around Rp 20 million (US\$1,332). Both sets of proceeds were then sent to the JI-linked One Care foundation,²¹ under the guise of providing humanitarian aid in Syria and to the Rohingya community.²²

Some of the money was also used to incentivise JI members to fund the tuition fees of students and JI's *dakwah* (outreach) programme as well as to provide economic assistance to local communities.²³ Another JI leader in Aceh, arrested in August 2022, was discovered to have been the head of JI's Pesantren Communication Forum (Forum Komunikasi Pondok Pesantren, or FKPP) since 2010.²⁴ FKPP plays a crucial role in maintaining JI's networks and recruitment apparatus as well as funding sources.²⁵

Overall, JI has proved resilient and adaptive, including in the provision of social, financial and educational support for members and their families, which ensures the latter remain loyal to the network. Some JI members arrested in 2022 were also revealed to be part of the group's *tholiah* (intelligence) department, which provides legal and other necessary support for members who are arrested or still on the run.²⁶ Many members arrested to date had also participated in JI's physical training called *sasana*,²⁷ and possessed firearms and sharp weapons, underscoring that JI

members continue to partake in core activities such as terrorism fund-raising, recruitment and *i'dad*.

Over the past decade, under Para Wijayanto's leadership, JI has also been embedding itself in socio-religious and political groups as well as state institutions, particularly following the introduction of its *tamkin siyasi* (political consolidation) strategy in 2016. This strategy involves the infiltration of various mainstream institutions, in order to gain popular support for its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state. Related to this, in 2022, two JI members, a civil servant and a member of the Partai Ummat (Ummah Party), were arrested.²⁸

Darul Islam/Negara Islam Indonesia

In March 2022, Indonesian authorities announced the arrest of more than 20 suspected members of Darul Islam (DI), or the Islamic State of Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia, or NII). The arrests – 16 from West Sumatra and another 5 in Banten²⁹ – prompted speculation over the group's possible revival. D88 indicated that DI's West Sumatra branch had planned low-level attacks using machetes, as part of a larger campaign to overthrow the government.³⁰ These cells, however, were too small and disorganised to pose a serious security threat, officials said.³¹ Nonetheless, these developments indicate DI has been conducting physical training or preparing for an attack.³²

While operating today as independent cells across Indonesia, DI branches are still bound by the common dream of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia. In this regard, DI "shares the same ideological space" as other jihadist groups such as JI.³³ Additionally, throughout its history, radicalised members of DI have eventually splintered from the main organisation to join more violent jihadist groups.³⁴ In recent years, members of DI's Bandung branch have joined JAD, while the outfit's Makassar faction has morphed into JAD Makassar. The remnants of the DI Belawan group also became linked to a pro-IS group in Kampar, Riau, in 2016.³⁵

In 2022, a JAD leader in Riau, who is also an NII advisor, planned to conduct physical training in Riau.³⁶ Although the training was likely meant for JAD members, the prospect of closer interaction between JAD and NII networks or personnel needs to be closely monitored. DI in West Sumatra has a sizeable support base of around 1,125 members. Of these, 400 are active, while the rest have pledged allegiance to the group.³⁷ The group also has cells in Jakarta, West Java, Bali and Maluku, and has succeeded in recruiting 77 children under 13 years old.³⁸

Tactics

As in recent years, the preferred attack methods employed in 2022 involved explosives, sharp weapons and firearms. The use of explosive materials in JAD-linked suicide attacks also persisted in 2022. In December, a JAD-linked suicide bomber attacked a police station in Bandung, West Java, killing himself and a police officer. Eleven more people, mostly police officers, were also injured.³⁹ The perpetrator, a skilled bomb-maker, used a pressure cooker bomb similar to one he had previously assembled for Yayat Cahdiyat, a JAD member who was involved in the 2017 Cicendo bombing in Bandung.⁴⁰

Separately, there were also reports of explosive materials in the possession of members of JAD Bima – which were subsequently denied by their family members⁴¹ – as well as an MIT member. A homemade bomb was also found after Madago Raya troops killed the abovementioned MIT member in January 2022.⁴² Of the one attack and five plots recorded in 2022, at least three also involved plans to use sharp weapons in Riau, Malang and Bima. In February 2022, a JAD member in Riau sharpened a screwdriver and planned to stab a police officer. He had also attempted to snatch firearms from a police station in Kampar district, but failed.⁴³

Besides foiling attack plots, the police seized several sharp weapons, including from the houses of arrested terrorist suspects. Additionally, while only one case in 2022 involved a plan to use firearms in Malang,⁴⁴ a large number of ammunitions and firearms were also seized from a network of 26 MIT-linked terrorist suspects arrested in Central Sulawesi in May.⁴⁵ Sharp weapons and

firearms are used not only in attacks but also for *i'dad* and physical training by both pro-IS groups and JI. For example, the MIT Poso network had conducted several iterations of *i'dad* – likely with the seized firearms – in Ampana, Central Sulawesi,⁴⁶ while police found archery weapons in the possession of JI members in Batam, likely also used for physical training.⁴⁷

Targets

Police officials remained the primary target of terrorist plots in 2022, as in previous years. The police have been labelled by militants as the *thogut* (the oppressor), who obstruct the upholding of Islamic law in Indonesia.⁴⁸ In 2022, out of the one attack and five plots detected, three targeted police officers, one targeted the building of the People's Representative Council of Indonesia (DPR) in Central Jakarta,⁴⁹ and another targeted a café and bars patronised by foreigners, including Americans and Australians.⁵⁰

Responses

Counter terrorism policing in Indonesia has improved significantly over the years, aided by the enactment of the 2018 Counter-Terrorism Law. This legislation permits the police to conduct more frequent preventative detentions of terror suspects, and extends the pre-trial detention period from 120 to 200 days.⁵¹ The expanded crackdowns on terrorist suspects that have ensued also demonstrate D88's improved surveillance and monitoring capabilities,⁵² including in cyberspace and in detecting propagandists, potential perpetrators and attack plots.⁵³ In 2022, the police arrested members of the Annajiyah Media Centre, a digital pro-IS propaganda group that targeted the Indonesian audience and encouraged people to take up jihad.⁵⁴ The network consisted of five pro-IS supporters who worked as video editors, translators and administrators of the group's social media accounts.

Between January and March 2022, the police arrested 56 terrorist suspects.⁵⁵ A further 78 terrorist suspects were apprehended from April to December. The arrest figure of 134 (January-December 2022) represented a decline compared to 2021, when a total of 370 individuals were arrested.⁵⁶ Further arrests are expected following the December 7 suicide attack in West Java. In 2022, D88 also continued to target leaders and members of various JAD and JI networks. Key arrests included the leader of JAD Riau as well as JI leaders in Bengkulu and Aceh.

In a March 2022 counter terrorism operation, the police killed Sunardi, a Central Java doctor who held several leadership roles in JI, including as an advisor to the emir (leader).⁵⁷ Sunardi was reportedly known in Sukoharjo Regency among his peers for his charitable work. He was also in charge of the Hilal Ahmar Society Indonesia (HASI), a local charity that delivered medical aid to conflict-affected civilian populations, including in areas controlled by the Al-Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front between 2012 to 2014.⁵⁸ While his death evoked some criticism from Islamic organisations, human rights groups and JI sympathisers, who accused the police of overreach, the furore was significantly lesser in scale compared to the public pressure JI was able to exert on the authorities to investigate the 2016 killing of senior JI member Siyono by D88.⁵⁹

While significant enhancements have been made to Indonesia's CT infrastructure, which has largely neutered militants' capacity to mount lethal attacks, aspects of the state's deradicalisation and reintegration programmes remain underdeveloped.⁶⁰ Both programmes have been hindered by, among other factors, a lack of adequate evaluation, monitoring and risk assessment tools, as well as poor coordination between the state, local agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the implementation of programmes.⁶¹

In-prison deradicalisation programmes also lack structure, coherence and sustainability to cover the imprisonment period of a terrorist inmate. One criticism is that the programme curriculum relies extensively on seminars and discussions on vague topics like patriotism and religious harmony, with little room for interaction.⁶² Moreover, the government's official deradicalisation programme in the prisons is not compulsory for all terrorist inmates, which results in many hardened radical inmates refusing to join the programme.⁶³

The issue of overcrowded and understaffed prisons also persists. By February 2019, almost 300 convicted terrorists were spread out over 100 prison facilities, while a few hundred were awaiting the conclusion of pending investigations or trials.⁶⁴ These pressures have now been exacerbated by the arrests of some 500 terror suspects in 2020 and 2021.⁶⁵ Additionally, many terrorist inmates currently in detention are on short-term sentences of less than five years, meaning such individuals are sometimes released after only minimal in-prison counselling and without sustained post-release monitoring and rehabilitation, because of the authorities' limited capacity due to resource constraints.⁶⁶

As such, the risk of in-prison radicalisation⁶⁷ and recidivism persists. In 2022, there were four cases of ex-terrorist offenders who relapsed into terrorist activity⁶⁸ – one of them a woman who had been released in 2021.⁶⁹ This was the first case of a female recidivist in the country.⁷⁰ Overall, while the terrorist recidivism rate in Indonesia is low, analysts have noted it remains a challenge for the authorities to holistically understand the factors that push individuals to re-engage with terror networks, and to develop the attendant interventions needed to dissuade them.⁷¹

In 2022, the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT), which monitors terrorist activity and conducts both in-prison and post-release deradicalisation programmes, enhanced its post-release economic support programme for released terror offenders.⁷² The initial phase saw the agency launch the *Kawasan Terpadu Nusantara* (Nusantara Integrated Area, or KTN) and *Wadah Akur Rukun Usaha Nurani Gelorakan* (Warung) programmes in Sindoro Mountain, Central Java. KTN focuses on providing economic support and employment for ex-terrorist inmates, with local communities also engaged as contributors.

The programme aims to ensure the successful reintegration of ex-terrorist inmates into society, by equipping them with economic skills and capabilities.⁷³ KTN will subsequently be launched in five provinces: West Java, Central Java, East Java, West Nusa Tenggara and Central Sulawesi.⁷⁴ While the programme is wide-ranging in scope and engages many stakeholders, including local governments, community residents and public institutions,⁷⁵ BNPT still needs to develop adequate assessment tools to gauge the radicalisation level, economic background, and work-skill competencies and interests of released offenders, in order to produce better outcomes.⁷⁶

Outlook

Indonesia witnessed a further decline in terror activities in 2022, even as support of and commitment to both pro-IS terrorist groups and JI persist. Local pro-IS supporters retain the capacity to conduct sporadic and low-level attacks. For its part, JI has transformed into a complex militant organisation with increasingly publicly visible wings. The group still retains a significant capacity to commit violent acts of terror. The re-emergence of DI/Nil networks and supporters on the radar of security agencies adds a further dimension to the threat landscape.

To address Indonesia's various preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) challenges, including the lack of local context in state-initiated deradicalisation initiatives, the National Action Plan Against Extremism (RAN PE) blueprint was enacted in early 2021.⁷⁷ Divided into the three pillars of prevention, law enforcement and cooperation, the RAN PE aims to enhance, inter alia, P/CVE data governance and the efficacy of post-release monitoring.⁷⁸ In 2022, extensive resources were channelled towards improving various in-prison and post-release deradicalisation and prevention programmes under the P/CVE reform blueprint.⁷⁹

However, the effective implementation of specific initiatives has been hampered by various factors. These include the lack of priority given to the action plan by several ministries and local governments,⁸⁰ limited budgets, weak coordination between key stakeholders, and a lack of effective impact assessment tools.⁸¹ Yet, amid the continued challenges posed by jihadist terrorism in Indonesia, the RAN PE still represents a promising blueprint for streamlining P/CVE activities. Greater resources should be invested by the authorities in bringing to fruition key components of

the P/CVE framework, along with ensuring the active involvement of CSOs and local governments to ensure better outcomes.⁸²

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PHILIPPINES

The Philippines has experienced a sharp decline in terrorism- and insurgency-related violence over the past three years. While there was an escalation in terrorist activity from 2017 to 2019, the expanded counter terrorism efforts since the onset of COVID-19 has severely crippled various terrorist groups operating in the restive Mindanao province. This assessment uses three indicators to explain the decline in terrorist activity in 2022: reduction in attacks, increased terrorist surrenders, and continued leadership decapitations.

Introduction

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)'s security operations in recent years have resulted in the territorial retreat of militant groups in the southern Philippines. With extremist networks suffering severe losses, this has also encouraged many group members to surrender and defect from their respective ranks. Localised initiatives have also been created around Muslim-majority Mindanao, to re-educate, rehabilitate and reintegrate former militants as well as address the local grievances militants often exploit.

These efforts have been complemented by the Philippines' participation in cross-border collaborations, such as the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Contact Group on the Sulu and Celebes Seas, which aims to develop better responses to a range of maritime crimes in the area. The Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA) between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia has also enhanced capacity-building to interdict non-conventional maritime threats like kidnap-for-ransom (KFR), seajacking, and the smuggling of humans and illicit items in the area.

While the threat of major violence in Mindanao is currently low, the Manila administration needs to remain vigilant, given the persistence of sporadic clashes in the area. Frustrations over the region's lack of development, particularly in Marawi City, which was partially decimated by the five-month-long battle in 2017 between the military and jihadist groups, could still be exploited by militants to fuel recruitment.⁸³ Newly elected President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr has also yet to articulate a clear counter terrorism policy for Mindanao, with his administration presently focused on other priorities, including managing a domestic economic recovery and the growing US-China contestation playing out in Asia.

Decline in Militancy

Militancy in the conflict-marred southern Philippines has reduced significantly since 2020. Overall, the AFP is fighting a battle on five fronts: in Sulu, Basilan, Lanao, Maguindanao, and the SocSarGen administrative region that includes Cotabato and Sarangani. This section will detail the battlefield progress of government security forces in these five conflict theatres.

The AFP, over the past two years, has almost completely eradicated terrorist networks affiliated with the pro-Islamic State (IS) Abu Sayyaf faction based in Sulu. Otherwise known as the Dawlah

Islamiyah Sulu (DI Sulu), the group, led by the now-deceased Hajan Sawadjaan, had been the Philippines' most active terrorist group in 2019. Notorious for their maritime and coastal KFR tactics, DI Sulu also launched a deadly suicide bombing campaign from 2019 to 2020. However, following Sawadjaan's death in 2020 after an encounter with government troops in Patikul, Sulu,⁸⁴ the group experienced high numbers of militant surrenders⁸⁵ and has not recovered since.

On the island of Basilan, the pro-IS Abu Sayyaf faction (Dawlah Islamiyah Basilan, or DI Basilan) in 2022 engaged in low-level bombings, although with no casualties apart from the perpetrators.⁸⁶ The group's leader, Furuji Indama, was killed in September 2020, and no official leader has since been identified by the group. Several surrenderees, however, had identified Tawakkal Bayali as the leader of DI Basilan.⁸⁷ Tawakkal Bayali has also been identified by the Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) as a designated terrorist affiliated to the Abu Sayyaf, or Dawlah Islamiyah.⁸⁸

In Maguindanao province, the three factions of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) have been severely weakened by the kinetic and non-kinetic operations of security forces. The factions most engaged in launching recent attacks, the BIFF Hassan and Turaife factions (DI Maguindanao), were led by Salahuddin Hassan and Abu Turaife, respectively. Salahuddin had for years been a deputy of Abu Turaife, one of the top leaders of BIFF.

In October 2021, Salahuddin was hunted down and killed, along with his wife, in a raid by government forces in a remote area of Talayan town, Maguindanao.⁸⁹ At the time, authorities described him as the overall emir of Dawlah Islamiyah in the Philippines. On the other hand, the BIFF's Bongus and Karilan factions are operationally dormant. Most of the surrendered militants from the BIFF are from these factions.

In south-west Philippines, the SocSarGen region refers to a collection of territories in southern Mindanao: South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos City. Since 2014, the Ansar Khilafa Philippines (AKP) has been active in this region. However, the group's leader, Mohammad Jaafar Maguid (alias Tokboy), was killed before the commencement of the Marawi Siege in January 2017. Today, the group is led by Zaiden Jade Nilong (alias Abu Fatah), but is relatively inactive.⁹⁰

Finally, the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG) operates in the provinces of Lanao Del Sur and Lanao Del Norte. Abu Zacariah was identified as the leader of the DIMG immediately after the death of its previous leader, Abu Dar, in April 2019. Despite the AFP's focus on Abu Zacariah over the past three years, there has been a lack of actionable intelligence on him sufficient to launch a targeted attack.⁹¹ The AFP did launch a pre-emptive airstrike at a hideout in Lanao on March 2, 2022, intended to clear landmines planted in the area in preparation for a ground offensive.⁹² Abu Zacariah was said to have survived the airstrike, although subsequently the Philippines-based, pro-IS East Asia Knights media channel reported his death on December 5, 2022.⁹¹

According to terrorism expert Rommel Banlaoi, the operational environment in the Lanao region remains complex.⁹³ Terrorists from the DIMG are supported by relatives and locals, and are able to hide among the civilian population.⁹⁴ The group is expected to recruit and radicalise among the locals in the Lanao region.⁹⁵ As such, terrorism in this area, while currently in a lull, could experience a resurgence in future. On June 7, 2022, Filipino government forces also killed a militant identified as Abu Huzaifah, the official spokesperson of the Islamic State in Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao.⁹⁶ According to officials, Huzaifah was a senior ranking militant who was in charge of financial transactions between DI-Philippines and IS Central.

Overall, while jihadist terrorism has declined in Mindanao, and militant groups have suffered territorial and operational losses, the threat cannot be taken for granted, and the authorities still need to continue to restrict the pathways for militant recruitment from amongst the South's local populations.

Managing Terrorist Surrenders

One of the reasons for the decline in terrorist activity in Mindanao has been the increasing number of terrorist surrenders over the past three years. Various reasons have been cited for these surrenders, including fatigue, starvation and declining financial support.⁹⁷ Members of the Abu Sayyaf Group, for example, cited the lack of group leadership after Hajan Sawadjaan died in July 2020, for their laying down of arms. Others shared that hunger and physical hardship from fighting against the AFP had motivated them to surrender.⁹⁸

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) government has also created multisector surrender programmes that provide strong incentives for militants to surrender. Depending on the *barangay*,⁹⁹ various financial incentives are accorded to militants upon surrendering their weapons and pledging allegiance to the BARMM government.¹⁰⁰ Some surrenderees are also provided with vocational training support to facilitate legitimate employment.¹⁰¹

The strategy of encouraging militant surrenders should be expanded, given its effectiveness in eroding the militant strength of the insurgencies. In the case of the Philippines, the significant rate of surrenders from each IS-aligned group based in Mindanao is a good indicator of the state of the insurgents' morale. Arguably, while military defeat can exact a significant physical toll on terrorist networks, the psychological impact can be just as devastating. In this context, surrenders can be the ultimate indicator of psychological defeat. Moreover, surrenders have a social contagion effect,¹⁰² wherein the actions of those within similar social networks influence others. Hence, militants tend to surrender in groups and rarely surrender alone.

At the same time, while the Philippines has a comprehensive programme to convince militants to surrender, questions abound over the fiscal sustainability of the generous financial packages offered. As the country emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic amid a bleak global economic outlook,¹⁰³ it is uncertain if the Philippines government will have the political will to sustain the high levels of investment in such programmes.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, a potential limitation of the vocational training given to ex-militants accrues from them being generally trained and then redirected into the agricultural sector, which is the primary and often sole income source for large swathes of the population. However, the low financial yields from agricultural employment arguably does not adequately address their economic grievances. Moreover, the agricultural sector grants some individuals access to ammonium nitrate, a popular explosive ingredient found in fertilisers. Overall, redirecting surrenderees predominantly to the agricultural sector may mean that at-risk individuals are still motivated and provided a means to potentially return to violence.

Maritime Cooperation

In 2016, the Sulu-Celebes Sea was a hotbed of KFR operations led by the Abu Sayyaf in the Sulu region. In response, maritime law enforcement (MLE) agencies from the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia came together in 2017 to launch the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA), to jointly tackle the ongoing threat of violent non-state maritime activities in the Sulu-Celebes Seas.¹⁰⁵

Although TCA-related operations have been hampered at times due to member countries' sensitivities over sovereignty as well as resource constraints,¹⁰⁶ violent maritime activities have been almost non-existent since 2021. The last known attempted KFR operation occurred in mid-2020. However, the reduction in violent maritime activities cannot be solely attributed to the TCA. Among other variables, the operational decline of DI Sulu, which was the chief perpetrator of KFR and seajacking incidents, is considered the most significant explanation for the decrease in maritime terrorism in the area.¹⁰⁷

However, despite the lull in KFR or seajacking operations in the Sulu-Celebes Seas for the past two years, trilateral naval patrols alone cannot address the threat of maritime terrorism. The fact

remains that the seas are too vast to effectively patrol, and the coasts are too long to safeguard. The archipelagic island chains from Sabah (Malaysia) to Zamboanga (Philippines), and from Sulawesi (Indonesia) to General Santos (Philippines), create opportunities for island hopping by militants to dodge detection.

That non-violent maritime crimes still persist in the area illustrates the potential for a resurgence of KFR operations. Today, the Sulu-Celebes Seas are still a hotbed for human, drug and wildlife smuggling activities. Partly in response to these circumstances, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) convened the biannual Sulu Celebes Contact Group Meeting for MLEs to navigate the complexities of the terrain.¹⁰⁸ In their most recent meeting, MLEs committed to upgrading their hardware to track registered vessels and detect unregistered vessels.

Limited Impact of Extra-Regional Factors

Another factor weighing on the minds of security analysts in the Philippines pertains to the local insurgents' response to recent global pan-Islamist developments, including the Taliban's late 2021 takeover of Afghanistan and the July 2022 assassination of Al-Qaeda's longtime leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In relation to Afghanistan, conspiracy theories have been propagated on IS-affiliated messaging platforms over whether the United States is spreading misinformation or whether the Taliban betrayed Al-Qaeda. Mainly, however, the various insurgencies in Mindanao remain relatively uninfluenced by these international developments. For example, the response among local militants to the death of al-Zawahiri was somewhat muted; only a handful of extremists seemed to discuss the issue dispassionately.¹⁰⁹

In the context of Mindanao, while some elements within the indigenous Muslim population had expressed limited support for the model of strategic patience pursued by the Taliban leading up to its return to power in Afghanistan, such support stopped short of invigorating the insurgent groups in the region in 2022.

The Question of Political Continuity

A major question moving forward is whether the current counter terrorism initiatives introduced by the former Duterte administration, will be continued by the Marcos government.¹¹⁰ Marcos Jr's path to power has not been without controversy. His father, Ferdinand Marcos Sr, the 10th Philippine President, governed the Philippines under martial law for 14 years till 1986, and reportedly authorised the 1968 Jabidah Massacre, among other atrocities against local Muslims in Mindanao.¹¹¹ The Jabidah Massacre was widely known to have triggered the ongoing separatist insurgency in Mindanao.¹¹²

Due to this chequered legacy, chatter among some indigenous Muslim groups in southern Philippines on social media has included assertions that only *kafirs* (disbelievers) and *taghuts* (idol worshippers) support the new president. There is also a noticeable split between the "Balik Islam"¹¹³ Muslims and the indigenous Muslims in Mindanao – with the former supporting Marcos Jr's Presidency. Despite the chatter on social media, however, on September 11, 2022, the leaders of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Nur Misuari, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Ahod Ebrahim, met to discuss the future of the BARMM. Both leaders acknowledged the reconciliatory position of Marcos Jr and committed to "usher a genuine and inclusive peace, not just in the BARMM but also throughout the country".¹¹⁴

Marcos Jr's immediate priority has been to engineer an economic recovery following the pandemic; tackle the soaring inflation that has drastically raised prices of fuel and food; and steer the country in a geopolitical environment clouded by increasingly fraught US-China relations. While counter terrorism has not appeared on the new administration's policy agenda frequently, on September 15, 2022, President Marcos Jr visited the Philippine Army's 6th Infantry Division at Camp Siongco and reaffirmed the government's commitment to maintaining the status quo.¹¹⁵

He explained that, since the government is in transition, there will not be changes to the military's operations. He added that secessionist groups like MNLF and MILF are still learning to govern, and Manila must "give them a chance to learn how to become a government".¹¹⁶ At present, the Marcos administration is unlikely to make radical changes to the AFP's current counter terrorism policies, as they have other more pressing issues to deal with. Despite the occasional chatter on social media among elements in Mindanao against the Marcos regime, it is unlikely that an organised revolt will occur in the foreseeable future.

Outlook

Islamist terrorism is likely to remain muted over the coming year. The sustained high rates of militant surrenders provide a good indicator of how the government's military operations have demoralised insurgents operating in Mindanao. However, despite the extensive counter terrorism operations and various surrender programmes, IS-aligned groups persist across the southern Philippines, "exploiting clan feuds, criminal networks and aggrieved local communities".¹¹⁷ These are potential fault lines that may reinvigorate violent extremism.

Most significant is the hostile operational environment in Lanao. DIMG operatives continue to live among the population. Authorities must not ignore potential efforts by the group to radicalise and recruit locals to its cause. Moreover, the rebuilding efforts in Marawi City have been slow, despite it already being five years since the Marawi Siege. There are efforts to build more permanent shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Marawi.¹¹⁸ However, the spread of misinformation about the prospect of a better life may entice marginalised communities to join DIMG.¹¹⁹

In response, the authorities must continue to improve civil-military relations, particularly in the Lanao region, by rebuilding disrupted communities and rehoming people displaced by the conflict. They must also redouble efforts to persuade more militants to surrender. Additionally, more can be done to engage local *barangay* chiefs and civil society organisations to promote peace and religious moderation. Lastly, the BARMM government should consider diversifying vocational training for surrendered militants, pivoting away from the agricultural sector towards other suitable industries.

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MALAYSIA

Malaysia continued to experience a decline in terrorism-related activity in 2022. The country only had one terrorism-related arrest in both 2021 and 2022. This may be attributed to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the low number of arrests, the threat of terrorism, particularly that of online radicalisation and cross-border maritime activity in East Malaysia, remains a cause for concern. As countries return to normalcy with the waning of the pandemic, the opening up of international borders and increased cross-border movement of individuals has the potential to rekindle terrorist activity within the country and the wider region.

Domestic Threat Environment

Low Number of Arrests

Malaysia has experienced a dip in terrorism-related arrests since 2020. The Malaysian Special Branch Counter-Terrorism Division (MSB E8) made only one terrorism-related arrest in both 2021 and 2022.¹²⁰ One possible reason for this decline is the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown measures in the country and the closure of its borders greatly reduced the movement of people into, out of and within Malaysia. This hampered terrorist activity from the logistical and operational points of view. The pandemic also had adverse social and economic effects on the country, which somewhat shifted the focus of individuals from extremist activity to day-to-day survival issues such as job and food security.

The MSB E8 focuses on thorough investigation and careful assessment of an individual's level of radicalism before making an arrest and charging him/her in court.¹²¹ Upon assessment, the individual is gauged as to whether executive, preventive or rehabilitative action is needed. The MSB E8 has also emphasised a whole-of-nation approach in countering violent extremism (CVE), whereby members of civil society, such as teachers and community leaders, help monitor potential red flags among their students and peers.¹²²

Online Radicalisation

Social media has historically played an important role in the radicalisation to violent extremism, especially among pro-Islamic State (IS) sympathisers in Malaysia. The majority of Malaysians arrested for pro-IS activity between 2014-2019 were either radicalised online or part of online pro-IS communities and had communicated with IS members in conflict zones, including Syria, via social media platforms.¹²³ With pandemic-related lockdown measures contributing to an increase in the potential for online radicalisation globally, the MSB E8 continues to monitor social media for possible extremist and terrorist activity.

Terror Landscape

The terror landscape in Malaysia has primarily been a personality-driven phenomenon.¹²⁴ Malaysia has never had an indigenous pro-Al-Qaeda (AQ) group other than the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), which disbanded in the early 2000s. Pro-IS supporters from the mid-2010s onwards tended to revolve around key personalities in the online sphere, which then developed into decentralised cells on platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp. With the elimination of charismatic leaders from both AQ and IS factions, such as Dr Azahari Husin, Noordin M. Top, Lotfi Ariffin, Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi, Akel Zainal and Dr Mahmud Ahmad, the Malaysian terror landscape has remained leaderless since 2019.

Unless new charismatic leaders who are able to unite their supporters into organised groups appear, the operations of both pro-AQ and pro-IS groups will largely remain underground and fragmented. Nevertheless, the threat is ever-present, with the biggest concern stemming from attacks by lone actors or autonomous cells who are inspired, rather than directed, by a particular group's ideology.

Out of the approximately 120 Malaysians who had emigrated to Iraq and Syria to join IS since 2014, a handful are believed to still be operational in the Middle East.¹²⁵ A July 2022 report released by Singapore's Internal Security Department noted the possibility of a Malaysian IS fighter acting as the deputy of an Afghanistan-based Indonesian IS militant, Saifullah.¹²⁶ Saifullah is believed to be the mastermind behind several pro-IS attacks in Indonesia, the most recent being the March 2021 Makassar Cathedral bombing.¹²⁷

The continued presence of operationally capable Malaysians in conflict zones raises two primary concerns. The first is that of remote direction – individuals based in overseas conflict zones who may direct their supporters to carry out attacks in their home countries. The second is the threat of these seasoned fighters returning to Malaysia and bringing back with them the knowledge and skills relevant to carrying out attacks locally. External foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) are also a cause for concern. A July 2022 United Nations Security Council Report noted that two Algerian

nationals who were members of the IS-affiliated Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria had carried out recruitment activities in Malaysia prior to their arrest in Spain in late 2021.¹²⁸

Another issue of interest was the pre-trial hearings of two Malaysian nationals, Mohammed Nazir Bin Lep and Mohammed Farik Bin Amin, which took place between October 31 and November 4, 2022.¹²⁹ Both men have been detained at Guantánamo Bay since 2006 (alongside former JI leader Hambali) for their roles in the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2003 J.W. Marriott hotel bombing in Jakarta.¹³⁰

Amendment to the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA)

In March 2022, the Malaysian Parliament rejected a motion to extend the period of detention under Subsection 4(5) of SOSMA.¹³¹ Subsection 4(5) states that a police officer with the rank of superintendent or higher may extend the period of detention of a suspect for a maximum of 28 days without trial, for the purpose of investigation.¹³² Home Minister Hamzah Zainuddin noted that the 28-day detention period has been crucial in enabling the police to carry out investigations into complex offences such as terrorism and organised crime, which in most cases involve large networks and multiple individuals.¹³³ However, the decision was later overturned by Parliament in July 2022¹³⁴ and the SOSMA clause was extended for another five years.

IS Returnees

In 2021, the number of Malaysians in Syria believed to be associated with IS was estimated at 56, including 19 men, 12 women, 17 male children and eight female children.¹³⁵ Reports note that 10 women, 12 boys and five girls are currently living in the al-Hol refugee camp, while nine men have been detained at the al-Hasakah prison¹³⁶ and another at a prison in Idlib.¹³⁷ Out of the 56, 16 individuals were repatriated in 2021, followed by another nine in 2022.¹³⁸ Government sources have noted the continued flow of money from Malaysia to the al-Hol camp, which could be a cause for concern given reports of IS' significant recruitment activities there.¹³⁹

The Malaysian government has maintained an open-door policy and is willing to repatriate all citizens from any conflict zone, depending on availability and circumstances.¹⁴⁰ The biggest challenge faced by the MSB E8 has been gaining access to conflict zones such as Syria and retrieving these nationals. Additionally, the Malaysian government does not diplomatically recognise the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who control the al-Hol camp in Syria.¹⁴¹ This poses a diplomatic hurdle with regard to the repatriation process. Furthermore, the reluctance of some individuals to be repatriated has made the process even more difficult.¹⁴² While some have expressed willingness to return to Malaysia and have cooperated with the authorities, others have shunned the call by the government for fear of having to undergo detention back home.

Upon their return, returnees are arrested and detained by the MSB E8 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA).¹⁴³ Due to the absence of a legal framework to deal with women and child returnees, they would also be detained under POTA for evaluation purposes.

Overall, despite the abovementioned challenges, efforts at repatriation should be sustained to prevent Malaysians, particularly children, from becoming radicalised in displaced persons camps and slipping back into the country without the knowledge of the security apparatus.

Maritime Security

In line with international measures to ease lockdown restrictions, Malaysia reopened its borders on April 1, 2022. Accordingly, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) beefed up its operations along Malaysia's eastern maritime borders, particularly off the coast of Sabah.¹⁴⁴ Sabah has long been a transit point for terrorists, smugglers and kidnappers. The last known kidnapping of ship crew in Sabah occurred on January 17, 2020, off the waters of Lahad Datu.¹⁴⁵

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) remains a security concern in East Malaysia, although it has not carried out an operation in the country since 2016. However, its members still use Sabah as a safe haven and a recruitment point. Some members of ASG have reportedly found employment doing odd jobs and have embedded themselves within the local population.¹⁴⁶ In May 2022, an ASG member and former associate of ASG leader Radullan Sahiron by the name of Omar Harun was arrested in Manila with a Malaysian passport.¹⁴⁷ In September 2022, it was reported that an ASG cell that had operated in Sabah's Beaufort district for the last 10 years was dismantled by security forces.¹⁴⁸ Militant activity in Sabah seems to be shifting from coastal areas in the East, such as Tawau, Kunak and Sandakan, toward the interior and western regions such as Keningau and Beaufort. ESSCOM continues to maintain a list of wanted persons linked to ASG.¹⁴⁹

Responses

The Malaysian authorities remain committed to preventing terrorist-related activity in the country and preparing the public for the possibility of an attack. In February 2022, the Royal Malaysia Police reportedly made plans to deploy a commando team from Unit Tindakhas (UTK, or the Special Actions Unit) to Sabah's east coast to counter maritime threats in the area, particularly from the ASG.¹⁵⁰

In April 2022, the MSB E8 also set up a special unit to monitor social media platforms and prevent youths from getting involved in extremist groups.¹⁵¹ In the same month, the head of MSB E8, Deputy Commissioner of Police Normah Ishak, disclosed that preventive action had been taken in 2022 against two individuals in their 20s for alleged involvement in online extremist activities.¹⁵²

In May 2022, ESSCOM announced the launch of Operasi Gasak Laut, an operation to demolish illegal structures such as huts and houses along the coasts of Sabah.¹⁵³ The main purpose of the operation was to prevent these structures from being used by cross-border criminals for illicit activities or as stopover points. As part of Op Gasak Laut, 55 irregular migrants from Indonesia and the Philippines were also detained.¹⁵⁴ A longer-term security measure is the imposition of curfews in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZone),¹⁵⁵ which involves seven districts and aims to prevent terrorists from encroaching on the area.

In June 2022, a joint operation called Operasi Maritim Khas Selatan Tawau was launched to comb the southern Tawau region in Sabah for possible 'rat trails', which are unmonitored entry points often used by smugglers, cross-border criminals, migrants and terrorists.¹⁵⁶ The operation involved security officers and personnel from the Marine Police, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Joint Task Force 2, the Tawau Police, the Enforcement Division of the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry, and the Sabah Ports and Harbour Department.¹⁵⁷ Encompassing both air and maritime surveillance, the exercise was aimed at tightening maritime borders in order to prevent foreign elements, including terrorists, from entering the country.¹⁵⁸

The military's presence in East Malaysia will further increase with the building of a new military base in Lahad Datu.¹⁵⁹ The base will consist of a new army brigade with an infantry battalion. This is part of ongoing efforts to enhance the army's capability and readiness in dealing with current threats. At present, there are over 8,000 members of the Malaysian Armed Forces stationed in Sabah, alongside more than 1,000 members of the Royal Malaysian Air Force equipped with Hawk fighter aircraft, EC725 helicopter units and a C130 unit.¹⁶⁰

Outlook

The current terrorism threat in Malaysia is classified as 'possible', whereby credible intelligence indicates that while Malaysia may be a potential target of a terrorist attack, there is limited intention and capability on the part of terror groups to conduct an attack.¹⁶¹ The threat level has been lowered from 'probable' in 2014-2019, when IS activity was at its height.

One significant cause for concern to the Malaysian security apparatus is the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK), IS' affiliate in the Af-Pak region. Malaysian authorities have noted there

are currently no signs of Malaysians travelling to conflict zones such as Afghanistan to partake in militant activity.¹⁶² However, given the significance of the historical Khorasan region¹⁶³ in jihadist narratives, if ISK declares a Caliphate in Afghanistan, there may be renewed attempts by Malaysians to travel to the country to join the group, as was seen in 2014 when more than 120 Malaysians travelled to join IS in Iraq and Syria.

IS' narrative of the Islamic Caliphate remains very relevant and is one of the main motivating factors for Malaysians joining IS.¹⁶⁴ The presence of remnants of Malaysian IS fighters in the Middle East may further exacerbate this threat. The Defence Intelligence Staff Division had previously identified several online chat groups involving Malaysians who were discussing plans to travel to conflict zones in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and southern Philippines.¹⁶⁵

Though the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan since August 2021 has had minimal impact on the Malaysian threat picture, the re-emergence of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia bears cognisance. JI continues to run *pesantrens* (religious boarding schools) all over Indonesia, and these institutions have attracted Malaysians in the past. Attention needs to be paid to returning students who might seek to share and spread the JI ideology, which is also associated with AQ.

As the pandemic wanes and countries return to normalcy with the easing of border restrictions, the movement of individuals into and out of the country has the potential to rekindle terrorist activity in Malaysia and the wider region. Containing the terrorist threat within the country and the region is a collective effort which warrants continued cooperation with the regional and international community.

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MYANMAR

Myanmar's security situation worsened in 2022 amid the ongoing nationwide insurgency following the February 2021 military coup. The long-standing ethnic conflicts in various regions of the country also persisted, particularly in the Rakhine State, where fighting resumed after two years of an unofficial ceasefire between the military and the Arakan Army rebels. Although the armed actors within the anti-coup movement continued their operations with increased sophistication, the military consolidated its forces within major urban centres. Beyond these areas, the military intensified its counterinsurgency operations with increased use of airpower. Overall, with all parties involved unwilling to cede ground, the conflict is expected to further escalate in 2023.

Trends

The ongoing insurgency involving the anti-coup movement and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) against Myanmar's military government has worsened across the country since the February 2021 coup.¹⁶⁶ The ongoing conflict has been marked by regular occurrences of assassinations and bombings against civilian targets, carried out by all sides,¹⁶⁷ as well as gunfights outside of major urban centres. Three key trends emerged in 2022.

First, the increased activity and organisation of the National Unity Government (NUG)-affiliated People Defence Force (PDF) and Local Defence Force (LDF) anti-government militias outside urban areas. Second, the consolidation of military forces and pro-government actors within major urban centres, coupled with the increased use of remote anti-insurgent tactics in outer regions.

Third, the continued insurgent conflict between EAOs and the military within traditional ethnic conflict zones such as Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon and Shan states.

In Rakhine State and southern Chin State, the armed conflict between the ethno-nationalist Arakan Army (AA) rebels, which retains its goal of creating an autonomous region in the area, and the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) has continued to escalate. Heavy fighting was also reported throughout the conflict zones, involving air strikes, artillery shelling and other tactics in multiple townships – leading to a mounting humanitarian crisis.

The long-drawn conflict is presently at a stalemate, with all parties involved unwilling to cede ground and trading mutual accusations of terrorism and atrocities. It is likely to escalate in 2023, with the supposed end of the military's declared State of Emergency¹⁶⁸ and the anticipated holding of national polls to elect a new government.¹⁶⁹

Conflict within Rakhine State and Southern Chin State

2022 saw the escalation of armed conflict between the ethno-nationalist AA rebels and the Myanmar military in western Myanmar. Particularly, intense fighting was reported in Ponnagayun, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Maungdaw townships in Rakhine, and Paletwa township in southern Chin State,¹⁷⁰ resulting in further civilian casualties, destruction of properties and displacement.¹⁷¹

Myanmar's military also carried out a sustained air assault against the AA in northern Rakhine State along the border with Bangladesh. During the peak of these operations in August-September 2022, the military repeatedly violated Bangladeshi airspace, creating panic in Bangladeshi territory and prompting diplomatic condemnation from their western neighbour.¹⁷² Bangladesh has sheltered 1.2 million Rohingyas from Rakhine State, of whom at least 700,000 originate from the influx in 2017 alone.

AA-MAF Conflict as of End-2022

The clashes in western Myanmar were deleterious for the military, which has lost nearly 40 of its soldiers since August 2022. Hundreds more have been injured.¹⁷³ While verified reports on AA's casualties are scant, local observers believe that the group's losses are substantially smaller than that of the military. There were some civilian casualties as well, but no confirmed data are presently available. At least 17,400 residents have been displaced since the August resumption of clashes, which brings the number of people displaced by the current AA-MAF conflict to 91,000.¹⁷⁴ This is in addition to the 137,000 mostly Rohingya Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) displaced during the 2012 inter-communal conflict.¹⁷⁵ Key roads and waterways remain blocked in northern Rakhine, restricting the movement of civilians and preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching people in need.¹⁷⁶

Unlike previous rounds of fighting in Rakhine State, which could be viewed as a localised internal conflict, the renewed violence is taking place amid the nationwide insurgency triggered by the 2021 coup, and its consequences are spreading far beyond the state's borders.¹⁷⁷ The escalation comes two years after both parties observed an unofficial ceasefire, leaving the country's western region relatively quiescent, while most of the country still saw clashes between the military and the pro-democracy forces. The escalation was not a surprise, partly because of the AA's geographic expansion and consolidation of its power in northern Rakhine State; both key factors that made the military wary of allowing AA to amass a power base. The AA has emerged as one of the most powerful ethnic armed organisations in recent years, and now claims to have 30,000 fighters.¹⁷⁸

De-escalation and Re-escalation

The AA has allegedly used the relative peace of the 2020 ceasefire to build up its administrative capabilities and gain more control of Rakhine State, by steadily wresting administrative control of

areas from the junta. The group has also more recently greatly increased its control over the Rakhine State's administration.¹⁷⁹

There were some early signs of tensions between the AA and the Tatmadaw in February 2022. Then, both sides appeared keen to de-escalate, with the regime releasing several dozen AA-linked detainees on February 12, and AA in turn sending a delegation to the regime's Union Day ceremony. But the growing power of AA in Rakhine and its open support for the National Unity Government (NUG), as well as their expanding ties with the anti-junta national resistance movement, caused concern within the MAF.

Tensions exploded into the open on July 4, when the junta launched an air strike on an AA base in the Karen National Union (KNU)-controlled territory in south-eastern Kayah State. At least six AA soldiers died in the assault and many others were injured, while a garment factory and a medical clinic were also destroyed.¹⁸⁰ Twelve days later, the AA retaliated, attacking junta forces in northern Rakhine's Maungdaw township, killing at least four soldiers, injuring many others, and taking at least 14 troops captive. Subsequently, a series of armed clashes broke out across Rakhine,¹⁸¹ and in the city of Paletwa and elsewhere in Chin State.¹⁸²

The informal ceasefire between the MAF and the AA rebels, in place since November 2020, collapsed on August 31, 2022, after AA carried out a raid on a Border Guard Police outpost on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in Maungdaw township, killing at least 19 officers. This was followed by a series of incidents in September. Early in the month, AA rebels attacked a military camp, military convoy and a government office. Nearly 20 soldiers were killed in the attacks and at least two military vehicles were destroyed. The military, for its part, carried out attacks on AA positions with two helicopter gunships, with fire landing in Bangladesh. In southern Chin State, after the AA claimed in late August to have killed 10 soldiers, clashes were reported in Paletwa on September 1.¹⁸³

The escalation of the armed conflict in western Myanmar since 2022 will likely persist in the near term, as both sides continue to militarise the conflict, affecting civilians. While the MAF focuses on keeping Myanmar's territorial integrity, the AA remains fixed on asserting its control in Rakhine State, to implement its goal of creating an autonomous region.¹⁸⁴ Amid the crisis, the propagation of anti-Rohingya hate speech by some Rakhine right-wing parties is also allegedly being backed the military to get popular support.¹⁸⁵

Rohingya Refugees and the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army

Across the border in Bangladesh, there are well-founded fears of a new Rohingya exodus into the country, despite Dhaka claiming it can no longer bear the existing burden.¹⁸⁶ Undoubtedly, the conflict has further narrowed the prospect of the long-overdue repatriation of the 1.2 million Rohingya in refugee camps located in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char Island in Bangladesh. First, Rohingya townships in the Rakhine State have turned into a battleground between the AA and MAF. Second, amid desperate conditions, many Rohingya youth are becoming carriers for the burgeoning transborder drug trade, which is largely controlled by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Rohingya insurgent group. Having been pushed out of Rakhine State by the AA, and amid clampdowns on its operations in Bangladesh, ARSA's military capability has further dwindled. However, ARSA remains involved in the narcotics trade within the Rohingya camps and border areas.

The residual capacity of the group remains significant, however. In 2022, ARSA did not carry out any operation in Myanmar, although the group was active across the border in Bangladesh and was involved in extortion, kidnapping for ransom, robbery and other criminal activities in the camp and adjacent areas, in addition to narcotics smuggling, which is its key source of fund-raising. Meanwhile, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) has claimed to have clashed with the AA in northern Rakhine State, resulting in some RSO fighters being killed. The claim, however, could not be verified. As the Rohingya crisis snowballs, various new armed groups with mostly criminal

intentions are reportedly surfacing across the border in Bangladesh to exploit the Rohingya's grievances and recruit into their ranks.¹⁸⁷

Political Violence Beyond Rakhine State

Since late 2021, the anti-coup movement has adopted a nationwide strategy of regular bombings and assassinations, carried out by localised PDF/LDF cells¹⁸⁸ – what the NUG has termed an ongoing “defensive war” against the military.¹⁸⁹ PDF cells for the most part declare their allegiance to the NUG, while LDF cells typically refrain from doing likewise, despite their shared conflict against the military government. At the same time, the insurgent conflict between the military and EAOs has continued despite the government's attempts at establishing a ceasefire.¹⁹⁰

In 2022, the security situation continued to escalate, particularly outside the major cities of Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw. The anti-coup movement and the military-led government increasingly relied on tactics that led to unintended and ‘grey-area’ collateral, either in the form of bystanders caught in the crossfire, or purposeful killings of questionable wartime targets – such as government workers. Both sides continued to accuse each other of conducting terror attacks, while attempting to legitimise their own actions.

Increased Sophistication of Anti-Coup Insurgents

Tactics employed by PDF/LDF cells in 2022 remained largely unchanged compared to those employed in mid- to late 2021, and consisted of targeted bombings, stabbings and shootings. According to Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data, there were at least 4,457 such attacks carried out by PDF/LDF cells between January and September 2022, the majority directed against military and police targets, as well as individuals or organisations possessing close ties to the current regime.¹⁹¹ These attacks have occurred nationwide; however, following harsh crackdowns and increased domestic intelligence operations focused on major urban centres in the middle of 2022,¹⁹² the frequency of attacks in these cities dropped significantly. Between June and September, only 301 attacks occurred in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyitaw, compared to 559 between January and May.¹⁹³ The Sagaing and Magway regions saw the highest frequency of attacks throughout 2022 – a notable development given they are not historical conflict zones in Myanmar.¹⁹⁴

One noteworthy trend is the increased adoption of drones by PDF/LDFs, as part of bombing attacks carried out against otherwise inaccessible targets. This generally involves rigging civilian drones to deliver explosives, which are then used to attack military bases, police stations, and checkpoints.¹⁹⁵ This tactic has been increasingly adopted by PDF/LDFs operating outside major urban centres, particularly in the Sagaing region.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, a raid on June 30 of a PDF/LDF training camp in Yangon's Launglon township resulted in the seizure of explosives and drones, indicating the possibility that PDF/LDFs in major urban centres are also training in and obtaining drones for their activities.

In terms of organisation, there exists a marked difference between PDF/LDFs located within major urban centres and those located in rural areas – particularly following the mid-2022 urban crackdown by the military. While the NUG has established certain bodies alongside major PDF/LDF groups as points of command, such as the Yangon Central Command,¹⁹⁷ most urban PDF/LDF cells are forced out of necessity to operate as small, independent groups, as intelligence and arrest operations by the military government have proven effective within major cities. Meanwhile, outside major urban centres, the increasing adoption of scorched earth tactics by the military¹⁹⁸ has increasingly pushed PDF/LDF personnel out of villages and into the wilderness.

Reports indicate that many of these personnel have gathered in training and operational camps hidden within jungles or on hilly terrain, forming groups that range from a few dozen to several thousand personnel.¹⁹⁹ While often larger than urban PDF/LDF cells, these rural cells are largely focused on conducting localised operations, only working alongside other PDF/LDF groups or EAOs in the same area.²⁰⁰

Targeting of PDF/LDF Attacks

The attacks have mostly targeted security personnel as well as military checkpoints and bases, often resulting in significant casualties.²⁰¹ However, a portion of the attacks targeted government offices and infrastructure, as well as businesses suspected to be affiliated with the regime, at times resulting in civilian casualties.

Regime-appointed ward administrators and officials were common targets for such attacks, particularly those suspected of collaborating with the military. Following an attack of this nature on September 6 in Shwe Pyi Thar township, a spokesperson from the Yangon Urban Guerrilla Army, one of the PDF/LDFs involved, released a statement indicating the killing of government staff was intentional, and that administration offices would be targeted due to their status as “the main pillars, driving forces and mechanism” of the regime.²⁰² PDF/LDFs also continued to issue further threats to other administrators.²⁰³

Banks affiliated with the regime were also targeted by PDF/LDF attacks in 2022. These included bank branches deemed to have carried out actions against the anti-coup movement, such as freezing the accounts of dissidents.²⁰⁴ Infrastructure and related buildings have also been targeted by PDF/LDF attacks, including bombings targeting electricity offices²⁰⁵ and communications towers.²⁰⁶ Lastly, PDF/LDFs have also continued to carry out assassinations of *dalans* — civilian informants accused of cooperating with the military.²⁰⁷

Consolidation of Military Presence in Cities

In mid-2022, the military announced that it was focusing its security efforts within major urban centres.²⁰⁸ This followed indications that the military was stretched thin across the country, having to deal with the conflict against the PDF/LDFs and EAOs on multiple fronts.²⁰⁹ Security presence within the major urban centres was increased, as were mass arrest operations, to root out PDF/LDF cells located in these cities.²¹⁰

At the same time, the consolidation of security forces within these cities has resulted in the regime reportedly weakening its hold over rural areas and smaller urban centres throughout the country.²¹¹ Likely in reaction to this shift in the strategic landscape, the military has relied increasingly on remote tactics such as conducting air strikes²¹² as well as deploying attack helicopters against PDF/LDF strongholds.²¹³ This has resulted in significant collateral damage and exacerbated the refugee crisis,²¹⁴ while also driving PDF/LDF personnel from their home villages into hidden camps in the jungles.

One particularly noteworthy development in 2022 was the formation of a pro-military civilian group known as the “Thwe Thout”, which conducted attacks against PDF/LDFs using the same tactics as the latter.²¹⁵ The group operates largely within urban centres, and has successfully carried out numerous assassinations of PDF/LDF personnel.²¹⁶ There is no concrete indication so far that the “Thwe Thout” is being funded or directed by the regime. Regardless, the formation of an extra-governmental militia to combat the anti-coup movement marks an escalation in the conflict. PDF/LDFs have retaliated by conducting their own assassinations of “Thwe Thout” personnel, resulting in increasing attacks targeting non-uniformed personnel on both sides.²¹⁷

Continuation of Conflict in Traditional Ethnic Conflict Zones

High-intensity conflict in traditional ethnic conflict zones apart from Rakhine State also continued throughout 2022, particularly between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the military.²¹⁸ The EAOs have conducted regular opportunistic attacks to reinforce their local presence in lieu of the military’s consolidation within major cities.²¹⁹ There were also reports of EAOs collaborating with local PDF/LDF cells, particularly in providing training²²⁰ as well as heavy weaponry.²²¹ However, at this juncture, there is no indication that any of the EAOs have fully allied themselves with the NUG, nor adopted PDF/LDF cells into their operations and command structure.

Outlook

Myanmar's security situation is dominated by the multi-faceted stalemate between the military, anti-coup insurgents and the EAOs – particularly the AA. With all sides seemingly not backing down from their entrenched positions, the conflict continues to be riven by regular incidents of civilians being caught in the crossfire, or being themselves targeted under various justifications. For Rohingya communities in western Myanmar, the security threat resulting from the escalating crisis is likely to lead to a further exodus of refugees, particularly into Bangladesh. With anti-Rohingya hate speech on the rise in Rakhine State, criminal groups exploiting Rohingya grievances, as well as diminishing international aid and overstretched policing for Rohingyas in Bangladesh, the situation in the Myanmar-Bangladesh border areas is likely to deteriorate.

The end of the nationwide State of Emergency and the upcoming 2023 General Election are unlikely to de-escalate the situation, given the military's entrenched position and the general perception by the anti-coup movement that any such election held in the current climate would be fraudulent.²²²

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THAILAND

In 2022, violence in Thailand's conflict-ridden Deep South remained relatively low, with the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front, or BRN) separatist group mostly targeting government forces. As the global pandemic eased, renewed peace talks between BRN insurgents and Thai government dialogue partners produced a breakthrough, as both sides endorsed a framework for discussions on three key issues: violence reduction, public consultation, and a political solution to the conflict. This agreement, while signed by independent observers, has however not been ratified by the two conflict parties. The Thai government has thus far refused BRN's request to ink the agreement, as Bangkok fears this might be used to enhance the latter's legitimacy, which could in turn trigger unwanted international intervention. Separately, a 40-day Ramadan Peace Initiative, a significant progress marker in the ongoing dialogue, was marred by a mid-April attack by insurgents from an excluded group. The atmosphere around the peace talks was further clouded in August 2022 by coordinated arson and bomb attacks on 16 convenience stores and a gas station across the restive southernmost provinces. Going forward, the prospect of a conflict resolution will be closely linked to the outcome of the 2023 General Election.

State of the Violence

2022 marked the 19th year since the resurgence of the armed insurgency in Thailand's predominantly Malay-Muslim South. This region, historically known as Patani,²²³ has a long history of resistance dating back two centuries. Since its annexation by Thailand in 1909 as part of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty, successive governments have pursued an assimilation policy, which has provoked local resistance.²²⁴ While the level of violence in the Deep South waxed and waned for several ensuing decades, the 2004 re-escalation marked the deadliest phase of this long-drawn separatist conflict. According to the Deep South Watch (DSW), there have been more than 21,700

violent incidents since 2004, with some 7,400 people killed and 13,700 others injured (as of September 2022).²²⁵

The level of violence has been on a downward trend since the launch of a formal peace process in 2013, in which the BRN and MARA Patani,²²⁶ an umbrella organisation of separatists mainly based in Malaysia, have variously represented the Thai government's dialogue partners. From January to September 2022, there were 387 violent incidents recorded, leaving 88 dead and 142 injured.²²⁷ This was on par with the previous year, during which 481 violent incidents occurred, leaving 113 dead and 190 injured.²²⁸ Casualty rates have remained relatively low and insurgents have mostly targeted security forces, in stark contrast to the pre-negotiation period.

The most destructive incident since the onset of COVID-19 took place on the night of August 16, 2022, during which suspected insurgents staged coordinated bomb and arson attacks across the three southernmost provinces.²²⁹ The attacks damaged 16 7-Eleven and Mini Big C convenience stores and a gas station, killing one individual.²³⁰ It was estimated that, in Yala province alone, the damage amounted to about 100 million Baht (approximately SG\$3,730,000).²³¹ While no group claimed responsibility for the attacks, they were characteristic of the tactics employed by the BRN in previous military operations that had targeted perceived "economic bases of the Thai state".²³²

The BRN appears unwilling to partner with MARA Patani in the ongoing peace process. It perceives other liberation movements under this umbrella as "opportunists" who have played little, if any, role in the armed struggle. Having been sidelined from the peace talks, the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), one of the oldest secessionist movements and a member of MARA Patani, staged an attack in April 2022, with its leader claiming responsibility.²³³

Since November 2021, Kasturi Mahkota, PULO's leader, has repeatedly uploaded posts on his Facebook pages to compliment the operations of the group's fighters in the Deep South.²³⁴ When the Thai government and the BRN agreed on the Ramadan Peace Initiative in late March 2022, the PULO acted as a spoiler by planting bombs in Pattani's Sai Buri district on April 15, killing a civilian and wounding three police officers. Police found a flyer with the label "G5 Patani Royal Army" at the bomb site.²³⁵ On July 8, security forces killed two and arrested eight members of the PULO G5, a militant faction of the group, in Yala's Raman district. A Yala court subsequently issued an arrest warrant for Kasturi on charges of insurrection.²³⁶

The killing of suspected insurgents by security forces has also occasionally occurred in recent years. Most of these cases are categorised as *wisaman khattakam*, a Thai term referring to death under state custody, or at the hands of state officials who claim to have acted in the line of duty.²³⁷ From January to September 2022, 13 cases of *wisaman khattakam* were reported, compared to 19 cases in 2021.²³⁸ The mysterious death of a BRN member, Yahri Dueloh, aka Zahri Bin Abdullah, in northern Malaysia on September 27, 2022, came as a shock to the movement. The BRN publicly alleged Zahri had been kidnapped and killed, adding this incident "greatly eroded" the group's trust in the peace process.²³⁹ Civil society groups have criticised the torture and killings of suspected militants, which they claim widens the trust gap between the state and the local population and hinders progress in the peace dialogue.

On May 4, a youth event titled "Perhimpunan Melayu Raya 2022" (The 2022 Assembly of Melayu Raya) raised security concerns after a BRN flag was captured on camera during the mass gathering. Organised by the Civil Society Assembly for Peace (CAP) – an umbrella organisation of 27 civil society groups in the Deep South that represent several nationalist Malay-Muslim groups – more than 10,000 youths garbed in traditional Malay dress gathered at Wasukri Beach in Pattani's Sai Buri district in a display of their ethnic and cultural identity.

More controversial, however, was the sighting of the BRN flag – a crescent moon and a star against a green, red and white background – among the large crowd, which raised concerns over whether the youths were linked to the underground separatist group. The youths also took a public oath, expressing commitment to their "religion, nation and motherland" and to "eliminate all forms of oppression".²⁴⁰ Some in the security forces believed that the BRN was behind the mobilisation of

Malay-Muslim youths in this event.²⁴¹ The event organisers have since been summoned by the military for questioning and now face legal action.²⁴² This event was a test case to gauge the extent to which the Thai state would be able or willing to listen to opinions that differ from theirs, if a public consultation is held in the future as part of the peace process.

State of the Peace Negotiations

The dynamic of the conflict in the Deep South has significantly changed since the commencement of a Kuala Lumpur-facilitated formal peace process between the BRN and the Thai government under former premier Yingluck Shinawatra in 2013. It represented the first time that the Thai state had held formal and officially announced dialogue with a separatist group, and also prompted the BRN to engage more with the public through mainstream and social media, notably via YouTube.²⁴³

When General Prayut Chan-ocha, the then Thai army chief, seized power through a coup d'état in 2014 and assumed the prime ministership, the BRN refused to take part in the military-led peace process. After five years of military rule, however, a general election was held in March 2019 in Thailand, which marked another turning point in the peace dialogue. The BRN decided to return to the Kuala Lumpur-facilitated dialogue track.

At the national level, Prayut, having won a second term, subsequently appointed General Wanlop Rugsanaoh, a former head of the National Security Council, to lead the Thai peace dialogue panel. The BRN also appointed a new team led by Anas Abdulrahman (aka Hipni Mareh), a former head of the BRN's political wing. The BRN's return to the dialogue table was chiefly a result of the backchannel talks between the Thai government and the BRN in 2018-19, known as the 'Berlin Initiative', and facilitated by a Europe-based non-governmental organisation.²⁴⁴

The new dialogue team led by Gen Wanlop is relatively bolder but remains paralysed by fears of the potential internationalisation of the conflict. Ahead of the January 2020 peace talks, the Thai dialogue panel had softened its stance by allowing national and international observers to attend the dialogue "in their personal capacity". The BRN had long called for the involvement of independent observers in the peace dialogue to enhance the credibility of the process. However, the Thai state had been extremely cautious about involving international organisations. The peace talks were then delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as in-person formal meetings were suspended due to the imposition of international travel restrictions.

As these restrictions eased in early 2022, the renewed peace talks, held between March 31 and April 1, achieved a breakthrough as both sides endorsed the General Principles of the Peace Dialogue Process, outlining three substantive matters to be discussed: 1) reduction of violence, 2) public consultation, and 3) political solution.²⁴⁵ This was a significant development as it indicated that the peace talks were about to shift from procedural matters and confidence-building measures to more substantive issues. This agreement also indicated that the upcoming process would be inclusive and involve other stakeholders, apart from the two dialogue parties.

The 40-day 'Peaceful Ramadan Initiative', set to last from April 3 to May 14, was the first test of the latest round of peace talks, and was a relative success. According to the Thai military, there was only one security-related incident during this period, for which the PULO claimed responsibility²⁴⁶ – the attack appeared to be an attempt to make itself heard and increase its bargaining power (as discussed above). Compared to a similar initiative launched during Ramadan in 2013, there was significant buy-in from the military wings of both sides this time around.

The presence of Deng Awaeji, a senior leader of the BRN's military wing, during the second round of talks from March 31 to April 1 demonstrated internal unity among the insurgents. Nevertheless, some observers criticised the Ramadan Peace Initiative, arguing that there was no independent monitoring mechanism available to assess the scale of violent incidents and other military operations during such periods. After the truce expired on May 14, the BRN resumed its military

operations, with the first major attack targeting a marine police station in Narathiwat's Tak Bai district, wounding one police officer and two defence volunteers.²⁴⁷

Negotiations on violence reduction and public consultation proceeded in the fifth round of talks in early August, with the BRN calling for Bangkok to sign the agreed Terms of Reference and grant immunity to its representatives,²⁴⁸ some of whom have outstanding arrest warrants and could be rounded up if found entering Thailand. Both sides offered their respective proposals for the second phase of the commitment to violence reduction and public consultation. Bangkok proposed a "reduction of violence" that would last 108 days and cover Buddhist Lent, while the BRN offered a four-month ceasefire with a joint monitoring mechanism on the condition that the chief of the Thai peace dialogue panel sign the agreed Terms of Reference.²⁴⁹

The August 16-17 attacks, however, have seriously compromised the atmosphere for peace talks. A BRN source told this author that the operation signalled the group's frustration over the Thai government's perceived lack of "seriousness and sincerity".²⁵⁰ In the August 2022 issue of *Surat*, the BRN's monthly newsletter, the movement questioned the Thai government's genuine will to pursue the peace talks, given the latter's refusal to ink the General Principles and other future documents, or to give immunity to the BRN's chosen representatives – issues over which the two sides have yet to find a solution.²⁵¹

Despite the BRN's frustrations, it remains committed to peace talks with the Thai government. In late October, Nikmatullah, spokesperson of the BRN's dialogue team, publicly revealed the contents of the two key agreed documents to date – the Berlin Initiative and the General Principles of the Peace Dialogue Process. He also stressed the need for self-governance as a political solution, which would include power devolution, democracy and recognition of the distinct cultural identities of the people of Patani.²⁵² Notably, there was no mention of independence in his statement.

The annual military reshuffle, which took effect on October 1, brought about a change in the leadership of the Fourth Army (in charge of the southernmost provinces), posing a new challenge to the peace talks. Lieutenant General Santi Sakuntanak, who replaced Lt Gen Kriangkrai Srirak as the Fourth Army Region's commander, had risen through the service ranks in this region, and is thus no stranger to the conflict zone. Yet his views on the peace talks remain unclear. Lt Gen Thira Daewa, the Fourth Army Corps commander who served as the army's representative on the peace dialogue panel, also retired. Under the leadership of Lt Gen Kriangkrai and Lt Gen Thira, the Fourth Army and the Thai peace dialogue panel sang the same tune, which had not been the case previously. With this latest change in leadership, both sides will have to fine-tune their strategies once again.

Outlook

There are at least three factors that could affect the trajectory and progress of the peace process and the Deep South conflict in the near future. First, the biggest hurdle to the advancement of the peace talks is the fear held by the Thai state over the internationalisation of the southern conflict. The Thai government has thus far refused to sign any agreed documents for fear that it would constitute a legal endorsement of the existence of an "organised armed group" – one of the key criteria for a situation to be classified as a "non-international armed conflict", according to International Humanitarian Law.

Bangkok fears such a condition could give the United Nations and other international bodies a justification to intervene, and if the issue becomes internationalised, then secession could be on the cards. However, similar peace processes in separatist conflicts in neighbouring countries, such as Mindanao in the Philippines and Aceh in Indonesia, show that the involvement of external third parties does not necessarily lead to secession. Hence, Bangkok, needs to be assured about its largely unfounded concerns over the possible outcomes of involving other parties in the peace process.

Second, there are ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ within both the Thai state and the BRN, and internal disagreements could derail the peace process. On the Thai side, some hawkish military commanders are sceptical of the approach taken by the peace dialogue panel, which they see as being too soft on the BRN. Following the August 16-17 attacks, the dialogue team faced an uphill task in convincing the military to continue to take a lenient and reconciliatory approach towards the BRN.²⁵³

In the same vein, the BRN’s military wing and its peace negotiators do not always sing the same tune, and the former does not necessarily inform, let alone consult, the latter when it comes to military operations. A high-level source inside the Thai peace dialogue panel revealed that a BRN representative had said, “the [August] attack was unrelated to the dialogue table”, implying the military wing may have acted on its own.²⁵⁴ While Deng’s presence in the peace talks suggests that the current BRN dialogue team may have some buy-in from its armed wing, the movement may not always be aligned or unified strategically.

Third, the upcoming national elections, expected by May 2023, could be a watershed for the conflict in southern Thailand. The military’s domination of Thai politics continues to pose a challenge for peace-building. It remains doubtful if the Prayut government is willing to make any genuine concessions. A change of leadership at the national level is likely to have a significant bearing on the trajectory of the peace process. If the anti-military camp, represented by the Pheu Thai Party, Move Forward Party and Prachachat Party, manages to win and form a coalition government, this may offer more hope for a policy shift.²⁵⁵

Other pro-establishment parties will likely opt for maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, the 2017 Constitution currently in force in Thailand makes it extremely hard for the anti-military camp to take power. It is nearly impossible for other political parties to compete with the military-dominated Palang Pracharath Party or other new pro-establishment parties in forming the government, as the latter are most likely to have the solid backing of the 250-member Senate in the appointment of a new prime minister.²⁵⁶ Over the long term, the success of the peace dialogue will be inextricably linked to the direction of national politics and the broader democratisation process in Thailand.

About the Author

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SINGAPORE

Similar to the past few years, the threat from terrorist groups was assessed to be “high”²⁵⁷ by the Internal Security Department (ISD) of Singapore in 2022. While Islamist extremism continues to be of primary concern, various developments which may impact Singapore’s racial and religious relations bear watching, given their potential to lead to exclusivist and extremist outlooks among some community segments.

Threat from Islamist Extremism

The threat from Islamist extremism and terrorism was again assessed to be high in 2022 by Singapore’s ISD – both from organised groups based overseas and self-radicalised lone actors based in Singapore. Transnational terror networks such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ), and regional outfits such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), remain resilient, demonstrating tenacity and adaptability in the face of organisational and operational setbacks. While a cause for

concern, the ability of these groups to operate and recruit in Singapore or plot attacks in the country has been limited. Cases of self-radicalisation, however, continued to be picked up by local authorities in 2022.

The internet continues to play a pivotal role in sustaining the momentum of the global jihadist movement. This ‘cyber jihad’, waged on a borderless virtual battlefield, is a potential security minefield in a highly digitally connected society like Singapore. Developments in the region and further abroad may reverberate closer to home as well. The Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, for instance, has stirred lingering concerns of a resurgence in jihadist activity in Southeast Asia. This is especially given the historical nexus between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and regional networks like JI.²⁵⁸ More than a year on, however, there is limited evidence of collaboration between the abovementioned terrorist groups, or of Southeast Asian jihadists performing *hijrah* (migration) to the Afghan theatre.

Self-Radicalised Individuals

In Singapore, the primary threat still emanates from individuals self-radicalised through online means. Since 2015, 45 self-radicalised individuals (33 locals and 12 foreigners) have been dealt with under the Internal Security Act (ISA).²⁵⁹ While figures have declined slightly in recent years – from a high of 17 cases in 2016 to a single case each in 2021 and 2022²⁶⁰ – cases of self-radicalisation persist.

In April 2022, the authorities announced the detention of 29-year-old Singaporean Radjev Lal s/o Madan Lal under the ISA, after he made preparations to travel to overseas conflict zones to take up arms.²⁶¹ Radjev had reportedly been radicalised by the online sermons of foreign radical preachers such as Imran Hosein, Anwar Al-Awlaki and Musa Cerantonio over the past decade.²⁶² Imran’s eschatological teachings, centred on the prophesied Black Flag Army (BFA) and tied to a call for violent action, held a particular resonance with Radjev, who also had a keen interest in conspiracy theories. He believed that it was his religious obligation to fight alongside the BFA against the “enemies of Islam”.²⁶³

Although he did not have specific plans at the time of his arrest, Radjev expressed his willingness to conduct an attack in Singapore, or against Singaporean interests overseas, if instructed by the BFA or Imran Hosein.²⁶⁴ Radjev’s case highlights the potent relationship between the internet (especially social media) and processes of (self)radicalisation and mobilisation, and underscores the vulnerability of some Singaporeans to extremist rhetoric propagated by religious preachers or ideologues, particularly in the online space.²⁶⁵

In line with its proactive stance on discouraging the propagation of radical ideas, Singapore barred Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad Batubara from entering the country in May 2022, along with six others who travelled with him, on the grounds of his radical leanings. The seven individuals were denied entry and sent back to Batam, Indonesia.²⁶⁶ Following the incident, Somad and his supporters took to social media to lambast Singapore; the online vitriol levelled at Singapore included accusations of Islamophobia, threats of retaliation, calls for cyberattacks against the authorities and irredentist claims on the island.²⁶⁷ Some of Somad’s followers also protested his deportation outside Singapore’s embassy in Jakarta and consulate-general in Medan.²⁶⁸

However, the Singapore government upheld its decision, explaining that Somad was known to preach “extremist and segregationist” teachings that were “unacceptable in Singapore’s multi-racial and multi-religious society”,²⁶⁹ such as referring to non-Muslims as *kafirs* (infidels) and endorsing suicide bombings as legitimate in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict.²⁷⁰ More tellingly, it was revealed that Somad’s online sermons had contributed to the radicalisation of several Singaporeans previously investigated by the ISD. One such individual was a 17-year-old teenager detained in January 2020 who, through watching Somad’s lectures on YouTube, came to believe he would receive rewards in heaven if he was ‘martyred’ in a suicide bombing.²⁷¹

Terrorism Financing

Singapore has only seen a handful of terrorism financing cases in the past few years. While there were no new cases of terrorism financing reported in 2022, a sentencing was meted out in February²⁷² to a Bangladeshi national, Ahmed Faysal, under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act.²⁷³ Ahmed was sentenced to 32 months in jail after pleading guilty to five charges. Between February and October 2020, Ahmed made 15 fund transfers totalling S\$892 to two online fund-raising campaigns, despite being aware these monies could, either entirely or partially, benefit Syria-based terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).²⁷⁴

The former construction worker became radicalised in 2018 when he learnt about jihad and the Syrian civil war via Facebook.²⁷⁵ Initially a supporter of IS, Ahmed created multiple Facebook accounts and pages to spread his pro-jihadist views, and even considered going to Syria to help IS overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime and establish an Islamic caliphate there. However, in 2019, he became disillusioned with IS and switched his allegiance to HTS.²⁷⁶ Around the same time, Ahmed started following one Dr Shajul Islam on Facebook, who purportedly worked at a hospital in Idlib run by an organisation called Medical Aid Syria.²⁷⁷ The doctor was vocal in his support of HTS on social media and would livestream videos on Facebook to appeal for donations to the hospital, which allegedly treated injured HTS militants.²⁷⁸ Influenced by Dr Shajul, Ahmed sent money to Medical Aid Syria as well as to the Ramadan 2020 Emergency Homes for Syria campaign run by the British-registered charity One Nation.²⁷⁹

In October, the Singapore Government unveiled a multi-agency strategy to combat terrorism financing.²⁸⁰ The National Strategy for Countering the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) incorporates five main points: i) Coordinated and Comprehensive Risk Identification; ii) Strong Legal and Sanctions Framework; iii) Robust Regulatory Regime; iv) Decisive Enforcement Actions; and v) International Partnerships and Cooperation.²⁸¹ In announcing this strategy, concerns over the ease and speed with which cross-border money transfers via payment service providers and banks are made were highlighted. The authorities also noted Singapore's status as a global financial and transport hub, in close proximity to countries vulnerable to terrorist activity.²⁸²

Responses

Singapore continues to place great importance on maintaining inter-communal harmony and social cohesion, in order to deny space for divisive and extremist ideologies to take root in society.²⁸³ The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and other community-based organisations have carried on with their efforts to deradicalise individuals detained under the ISA and to promote religious moderation in the community. Some of the RRG's outreach activities, which had shifted online during the pandemic, have since seen a return to physical sessions.²⁸⁴

Since 2016, the SGSecure movement has also mobilised the community in efforts to counter terrorism. The SGSecure Roadshows, which were put on hold in early 2020 due to COVID-19, also resumed in July 2022.²⁸⁵ In addition to learning about the terrorism threat, participants are taught emergency preparedness skills, and given the opportunity to participate in simulated attack scenarios. More than 100,000 people have joined the SGSecure Responders Network since its launch two years ago, and can be mobilised during emergencies.²⁸⁶

Meanwhile, Singapore's Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) has enhanced security measures at checkpoints, including through the introduction of the Advance Passenger Screening – meant to assess the risk of foreign visitor pre-arrivals – and the New Clearance Concept (NCC), which will make the movement of people and cargo seamless, while also improving security through the leveraging of advance arrival information and data analytics.²⁸⁷

Outlook

While at present there are no specific or credible terrorist threats to Singapore, there is still a need to stay alert to potential threats on the horizon. As COVID-19-related movement restrictions ease and cross-border travel resumes, this could prompt a surge in terrorist movement and activities,

including around Southeast Asia. Singapore continues to feature in the propaganda of Islamist terror groups such as the Islamic State (IS), and remains a high-value target for both terrorist organisations and self-radicalised lone actors. In an audiotape released by IS' Al-Furqan media in September 2022, for instance, group spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir called on Muslims in Singapore, along with those in other Asian states, to come forward to join IS.²⁸⁸ As such, the authorities will need to continue to take a proactive stance against those seeking to recruit and radicalise individuals for the purpose of committing terrorist acts, or to foment ethnic or religious divisions in the community.

Issues around race and religion remain potential fault lines in the Singapore context, which can be manipulated by radicals of any creed. In April 2022, an Australian national, Andrew Gosling, was sentenced to five and a half years in jail, after he flung a bottle from his condominium toward a group of Malay Muslims gathered at a barbeque area below, killing an elderly Muslim man. Prosecutors described Gosling's actions as demonstrating hostility toward Muslims and being religiously aggravated.²⁸⁹ A month later, a then senior polytechnic lecturer was also charged with wounding religious feelings and making comments prejudicial to maintaining religious harmony. He had made racist remarks to a Singaporean male of Indian ethnicity, who is part of a mixed-race couple. The latter's girlfriend, who is partially Chinese, recorded the confrontation, with the video later going viral online.²⁹⁰ While these are isolated and one-off incidents that are not part of a wider domestic trend, they highlight the importance of maintaining tolerance and harmony in Singapore's society, given a global climate currently challenged by religious extremism and violence.

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⁴ V. Arianti and Unaesah Rahmah, "Annual Threat Assessment: Indonesia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2022), pp. 11-20, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTTA-January-2022.pdf>.

⁵ IPAC, "The Decline of ISIS in Indonesia and the Emergence of New Cells."

⁶ Most plots and attacks executed by JAD consist of cells of members skilled in making bombs, funding and coordinating personnel. Prominent examples include the 2018 Surabaya bombings, which involved coordination between three families; and the Makassar Cathedral bombing of 2021, which was primarily planned by a husband-wife duo, with support from their family network.

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⁸ "Abu Bakar Ba'asyir Akui Pancasila: Dasarnya Tauhid," *CNN Indonesia*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220803061930-12-829512/abu-bakar-baasyir-akui-pancasila-dasarnya-tauhid>.

⁹ Based on ICPVTR's monitoring of pro-IS social media channels and groups. For the videos, see "Terbaru!! Aman Abdurrahman Larang Jihad dan Amaliyah," *Cek Ombak Channel*, YouTube video, April 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8OYFtFFNNA>; and "Terbaru!! Ustad Abu Bakar Ba'asyir: Pancasila Tidak Syirik," *Cek Ombak Channel*, YouTube video, April 14, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3fd-kIO_c0.

¹⁰ Based on ICPVTR's monitoring of pro-IS social media channels and groups, similar depictions on social media accounts of beheadings, which have long been a signature and key feature of IS propaganda, also targeted two

prominent Indonesian politicians. Namely, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister of Maritime and Investment Affairs of Indonesia, and Megawati Sukarnoputri, the Chairperson of the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI-P), both of whom are close to Jokowi. Beheading videos aim to terrorise and intimidate particular audiences, while at the same time strengthening IS' image as a strong protector of the Muslims.

¹¹ IPAC, "The Decline of ISIS in Indonesia and the Emergence of New Cells."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Tria Dianti, "Polisi Tangkap Lima Terduga Anggota JAD dan JI," *Benar News*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/ji-jad-militer-02102022124637.html>.

¹⁴ Penatoi was among the first strongholds in Indonesia for IS, with hundreds of people, including children, pledging allegiance to the group in July 2014. In total, 70 individuals from Penatoi have been arrested under terrorism charges since 2010. Of the estimated 1,500 households in the area, almost 90% come from the same family, highlighting the family connection in local extremist networks. See Ahmad Viki, "70 Warga Penatoi Bima Ditangkap Terkait Kasus Terorisme Sejak 2010," *Detik News*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.detik.com/bali/nusra/d-6146159/70-warga-penatoi-bima-ditangkap-terkait-kasus-terorisme-sejak-2010>.

¹⁵ "Indonesian Police Kill Militant Suspected in Farmer's Death," *VoA*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/indonesian-police-kill-militant-suspected-in-farmers-deaths/6771281.html>.

¹⁶ "Polisi Nyatakan Mujahidin Indonesia Timur Telah Habis Dengan Tewasnya Anggota Terakhir," *Benar News*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/anggota-terakhir-mit-tewas-09302022123227.html>.

¹⁷ The MIT insurgency is rooted in a deadly Muslim-Christian conflict from 1998-2001 in Indonesia's Sulawesi province. The group, however, retains significant community support in its former stronghold of Poso, amid long-standing grievances over issues such as land rights.

¹⁸ Investigations revealed some had pledged loyalty to IS via the instant messaging platform, WhatsApp. Many had also provided logistical and weaponry assistance to MIT's members in Biru, Central Sulawesi. "Densus 88 Antiteror Polri Tangkap 24 Terduga Teroris MIT, Ini Perannya," *Liputan 6*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4964545/densus-88-antiteror-polri-tangkap-24-terduga-teroris-mit-ini-perannya>; and Keisyah Aprilia and Dandy Koswaraputra, "Polisi Tangkap Lagi 2 Terduga Anggota ISIS Pendukung MIT, Total 26 Ditahan," *Benar News*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/isis-mujahidin-indonesia-timur-05182022161118.html>.

¹⁹ Amy Chew, "Terror Group Jemaah Islamiyah Wants to 'Take Over' Indonesia by Infiltrating State Institutions, With Aim of Creating Caliphate," *South China Morning Post*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3162494/terror-group-jemaah-islamiyah-wants-take-over-indonesia>.

²⁰ Andi Saputra, "Penggalang Dana Teroris Modus Kotak Amal di Sumbar Dibui 6 Tahun," *Detik News*, June 8, 2022, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6116260/penggalang-dana-teroris-modus-kotak-amal-di-sumbar-dibui-6-tahun>.

²¹ One Care is a JI-linked active humanitarian group that operates along the same lines as HASI. It has managed to attract public support, including from wealthy donors and politicians, due to its humanitarian programmes. Both groups have denied their affiliation to JI. See Bilveer Singh, "Jemaah Islamiyah: Still Southeast Asia's Greatest Terrorist Threat," *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/jemaah-islamiyah-still-southeast-asias-greatest-terrorist-threat/>; and "Yayasan One Care Bantah Terlibat Danai Kelompok Teroris JI," *Detik News*, December 19, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5302139/yayasan-one-care-bantah-terlibat-danai-kelompok-teroris-ji>.

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²³ Verdict of Nasril alias Kutin alias Datin bin Basri, East Jakarta District Court, 2021, No. 1023/Pid.Sus/2021/PN Jkt. Tim.

²⁴ Anugrah Andriansyah, "Koordinator Jaringan JI Aceh Ditangkap, Pengamat: Mereka Ubah Pola Gerakan," *VoA Indonesia*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/koordinator-jaringan-ji-aceh-ditangkap-pengamat-mereka-ubah-pola-gerakan/6686541.html>.

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²⁶ "Densus 88 Tangkap 4 Teroris di Tangerang Jaringan Jamaah Islamiyah," *Detik News*, March 15, 2022 <https://20.detik.com/detikflash/20220315-220315146/densus-88-tangkap-4-teroris-di-tangerang-jaringan-jamaah-islamiyah>. The *tholiah* department was also responsible for securing JI's assets and monitoring the movements of D88. See Abdul Mughis, "Jalan Sunyi Eks Intelijen JI," *RuangObrol.id*, October 2, 2022, <https://ruangobrol.id/2022/09/13/interview/jalan-sunyi-eks-intelijen-ji/>.

²⁷ This physical training includes martial arts, resistance exercises (swimming, running, sit-ups, pull-ups and push-ups), knife throwing, gun assembly and shooting. See Verdict of Ahmad Hafidz alias Memet alias Rahmat alias Angga Bin Andi, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 46/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt. Tim.

²⁸ While only around 30 civil servants have been charged with terrorism offences over the past decade, some were entrenched in influential positions, reflecting JI's calculated strategy to recruit from within government ranks

as part of its bid to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. See Tria Dianti, "Indonesia: Militant Group Behind Bali Bombings Tries to Infiltrate Govt Institutions," *Benar News*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/militants-infiltrate-indonesia-govt-organizations-11172021125251.html>.

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³⁹ The JAD-linked attacker, Agus Sujatno, was a convicted bomb-maker who had been released from prison in 2021 after serving a four-year sentence. He entered the Astana Anyar police station on a motorcycle and detonated one of two bombs during a morning assembly session. The other explosive was defused. See Arlina Arshad, "Indonesia Police Station Blast Kills 2 in Suspected Suicide Attack," *The Straits Times*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-investigating-explosion-at-bandung-police-station-report>.

⁴⁰ Mohammad Hatta Muarabagja, "5 Fakta Bom Bunuh Diri di Polsek Astanaanyar: Bom Panci hingga Pelaku Jaga Rakit Bom," *Tempo*, December 9, 2022, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1666198/5-fakta-bom-bunuh-diri-di-polsek-astanaanyar-bom-panci-hingga-pelaku-jaga-rakit-bom>. Other suicide attacks in the country have also used pressure cooker bombs, including the Makassar Cathedral bombing (2021), the Sukoharjo suicide attack (2019) and the Kampung Melayu bombing (2017), see Azhar Bagas Ramadhan, "Daftar Serangan Teror Bom Panci di RI, Terbaru di Polsek Astana Anyar," *Detik News*, December 8, 2022, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6450034/daftar-serangan-teror-bom-panci-di-ri-terbaru-di-polsek-astana-anyar/>.

⁴¹ Ahmad Viki, "Sita Bahan Peledak, Polisi Dalam Jaringan 3 Terduga Teroris Bima," *Detik News*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.detik.com/bali/nusra/d-6137390/sita-bahan-peledak-polisi-dalam-jaringan-3-terduga-teroris-bima>.

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⁴³ The preference for sharp weapons or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in attacks, indicates low technical ability and limited access to lethal weapons among Indonesian militants, probably due to extensive CT operations. Sharp weapons like screwdrivers, machetes and knives are also easily accessible, and purchasing such everyday items would likely fly under the radar of the security apparatus. See "Anggota JAD Hendak Serang Polsek Kampar Riau Ditangkap," *CNN Indonesia*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220213233845-12-758688/anggota-jad-hendak-serang-polsek-kampar-riau-ditangkap>.

⁴⁴ Rahel Narda Chaterine, "Densus 88: Mahasiswa Tersangka Teroris di Malang Rencanakan Serangan ke Kantor Polisi dengan Senjata Api," *Kompas*, May 25, 2022, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/05/25/12072251/densus-88-mahasiswa-tersangka-teroris-di-malang-rencanakan-serangan-ke>.

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⁵⁰ Although cafés and bars are an uncommon target for JAD attacks, analysts argue that such venues are considered by some jihadists as locations for sinful acts. Dianti, "Polisi Tangkap Lima Terduga Anggota JAD dan JI."

⁵¹ The law has extended the scope of prosecutable terror offences to encompass individuals who are affiliated to terrorist groups or perform non-violent roles such as propagandists. See Alif Satria, "Two Decades of Counterterrorism in Indonesia: Successful Developments and Future Challenges," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol. 14, No. 5 (September 2022), pp. 7-16, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/CTTA-September-2022.pdf>.

⁵² Satria, "Two Decades of Counterterrorism in Indonesia: Successful Developments and Future Challenges"; and Sidney Jones, "Terrorism and Extremism in Indonesia and the Southeast Asian Region," *Southeast Asian Affairs* Vol. 2022, pp. 162-174, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/855269>.

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- ²²³ It should be noted that the historical sultanate is spelled as “Patani” with one “t”, while “Pattani” with a double “t” refers to a province under the current administrative system in Thailand.
- ²²⁴ The independent sultanate of Patani became a tributary state of Siam (Thailand’s former name) after its defeat in the war of 1785-86. At the turn of the 20th century, Patani was incorporated into the Siamese administrative system as Bangkok consolidated its power amid the growing threat of European colonialism. In 1909, Siam and Great Britain, which controlled the Malay Peninsula at the time, signed the Anglo-Siamese Treaty, leading to the complete incorporation of the Patani sultanate into Siam. Some Malay Muslims, however, perceive this transition as “colonisation”.
- ²²⁵ Deep South Watch, “Summary of Incidents in Southern Thailand, October 2022,” *Facebook*, November 7, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/deepsouthwatch/posts/pfbid02QhTetmDLrfNrbGkKJ7YMKotDmXg3RgsgD5Ad9RpkZ7ahTSbd4UFpuTVTurQ6fRwWl>.
- ²²⁶ MARA Patani stands for Majlis Syura Patani (Patani Consultative Council), an umbrella organisation comprising four liberation movements – Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Patani Islamic Liberation Front, or BIPP), Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement, or GMIP), and a few BRN members. The latter’s engagement in MARA Patani has not been endorsed by the BRN’s leadership.
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- ²²⁸ Deep South Watch, “Southern Border/Patani 2004-2021: Stepping Into the 19th Year – Where Will Peace Go in 2022?” *Facebook*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/deepsouthwatch/posts/pfbid02PCCe2qBR66zmZYLFMNiooBfsDd1UVfNj2oHagHW9tywrhdxKzmQk4TKpwy8Zq8jl>.
- ²²⁹ In a bid to demonstrate its humanitarian credentials and raise its international profile, the BRN declared a cessation of hostilities in April 2020, following a plea from the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres for a global ceasefire in light of the worsening COVID-19 situation. This unilateral ceasefire was broken less than a month later, although there were no major or destructive attacks during the pandemic.
- ²³⁰ “Sarup Buem - Phao Ran Saduak Sue - Pamnam Man 17 Chut Chep 3 [Summary of Bomb and Arson Attacks on Convenience Stores and Gas Station, 17 Locations and Three Injured],” *Isra News Agency*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.isranews.org/article/south-news/scoop/111276-bomboil.html>.

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- ²³³ Faced with questions over its relevance in the armed insurgency, the PULO has tried to resurrect its armed wing for several years now. Interview with a senior PULO member, December 15, 2016.
- ²³⁴ For an example of his Facebook posts, see Kasturi Mahkota, “Internal Report,” *Facebook*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/kasturi.mahkota/posts/pfbid03444VD9Fjqce3DhusZrHP1ggApDzceTuBDnMUoHQVK3RutQGji1yoEk2gscGD51gql>.
- ²³⁵ Kasturi publicly claimed responsibility for the attacks, saying the “incidents were carried out by one of our five PULO operation units. It is to say that the Thai peace dialogue panel must negotiate with all groups. Patani doesn’t belong only to the BRN.” See Mariyam Ahmad, “Sidelined in Peace Talks, PULO Rebels Claim Responsibility for Deep South Bombing,” *Benar News*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/pulo-rebels-attack-04152022154055.html>.
- ²³⁶ Mariyam Ahmad, “San Ok Maichap ‘Kasturi Mahkota’ Kaennam Phu Lo [Court Issued Arrest Warrant for PULO Leader, Kasturi Mahkota],” *Benar News*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.benarnews.org/thai/news/th-arrest-warrant-pulo-kasturi-mahkota-08052022162809.html>.
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- ²⁴¹ Personal communication with a Deep South-based senior military officer, June 9, 2022.
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- ²⁴³ For a detailed discussion on the peace dialogue in southern Thailand, see 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*, eds. Michael J. Montesano, Terence Chong, and Mark Heng (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), pp. 148–153.
- ²⁴⁴ The Berlin Initiative explored mutually agreed upon ways to bring the BRN back to the negotiating table, which was undertaken separately from the KL-facilitated track. It laid out a framework for the peace dialogue between the Thai government and the BRN, such as the number of representatives, involvement of other stakeholders and public communications. In the BRN’s view, it set out the rules for mediation and facilitation by a third party in an equal, safe and dignified manner. This initiative was initially kept confidential, but the BRN publicly revealed it on October 30, 2022, in an apparent attempt to show that the movement has, in recent years, been the Thai government’s key dialogue partner in the formal peace process. The move came about two weeks after MARA Patani held its fourth General Assembly in Malaysia, pledging to strengthen unity and cooperation within the various Patani separatist movements. See Jabatan Penerangan BRN, “Inisiatif Berlin – Penjelasan Rasmi,” YouTube video, October 30, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbMDwb1UqWk>; “Somocho Phoei Kham Yuenyan ‘Khwam Riroem Boelin’ Pen Khwam Hen Phong Ruam Kap BRN [NSC Confirms It Agreed With BRN on ‘Berlin initiative’],” *Prachatai*, November 2, 2022, <https://prachatai.com/journal/2022/11/101247>; Public statement by Abu Hafez Al-Hakim, MARA Patani’s spokesperson, October 20, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10217137647953662&set=pcb.10217137648193668>.
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²⁵⁰ Personal communication with a BRN member close to the group's dialogue panel, August 17, 2022.

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²⁵³ Personal communication with a source close to the Thai peace dialogue panel, August 31, 2022.

²⁵⁴ Personal communication with a high-level representative on the Thai peace dialogue panel, September 15, 2022.

²⁵⁵ These parties have campaigned on a progressive policy platform with regard to the Deep South, and are receptive to power devolution. They may be less fearful of international intervention and can thus create an atmosphere conducive to genuine dialogue on political solutions to the conflict, including some form of decentralisation or autonomy.

²⁵⁶ The 2017 Constitution, drafted by a military-appointed committee, allows senators to vote alongside the 500 members of the Lower House to appoint a prime minister within the first five years after the formation of the first parliament, in accordance with this charter.

²⁵⁷ Internal Security Department, *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2022* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022), p. 1, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2022.pdf>.

²⁵⁸ Ministry of Home Affairs, *20th Anniversary of ISD's Operations Against Jemaah Islamiyah in Singapore* (Singapore, MHA, 2021), <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/20th-anniversary-of-isd-operations-against-ji-in-singapore.pdf>.

²⁵⁹ Internal Security Department, *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2022*, p. 6.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

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²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

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²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² Ahmed Faysal was arrested under the ISA in November 2020 and charged in court in December 2021.

²⁷³ Internal Security Department, *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2022*, p. 7.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ Low Youjin, "Former Construction Worker Jailed for More Than 2 Years After Donating Money to Support Terrorism in Syria," *TODAY*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/former-construction-worker-jailed-more-2-years-after-donating-money-support-terrorism-syria-1822796>.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* One Nation had previously been investigated by the United Kingdom's Charity Commission over concerns regarding its financial controls and management, trustee decision-making, and due diligence in relationships with other individuals and organisations. For more on One Nation, see Charity Commission for England and Wales, *Decision: One Nation*, March 8, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-one-nation/one-nation>.

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²⁸⁵ “Internal Security Department, *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2022*, p. 12.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁸⁸ “ISIS Spokesman Abu Umar al-Muhajir Calls on Muslims Around the World to Join the Organization’s Ranks and Criticizes Other Islamist Organizations,” *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, September 18, 2022, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/isis-spokesman-abu-umar-al-muhajir-calls-on-muslims-around-the-world-to-join-the-organizations-ranks-and-criticizes-other-islamist-organizations/>.

²⁸⁹ Shaffiq Alkhatib, “Condo Killer Litter: Man Who Threw Bottle That Fatally Struck Grandfather Jailed 5 Years and 6 Months,” *The Straits Times*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/condo-killer-litter-aussie-who-threw-bottle-that-fatally-struck-grandfather-of-nine-jailed-5-years-and-6-months>.

²⁹⁰ Wong Shiying, “Former Ngee Ann Poly Lecturer Charged With Making Racist Remarks, Insensitive Comments on Religion,” *The Straits Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/former-ngee-ann-poly-lecturer-charged-with-making-racist-remarks-insensitive-comments-on-religion>.

SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

AFGHANISTAN

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

Afghanistan's transition from a conflict-affected state to one that experiences post-conflict governance challenges has somewhat been stalled. Under the Taliban, which assumed power in August 2021, the country continues to witness regular structural as well as terrorist violence, orchestrated not only by the former insurgents against their opponents, but also by groups like the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), predominantly against their bête noire, the Taliban, and also the Hazara Shia community. Desperate for international legitimacy, the Taliban's self-styled Islamic Emirate is itself divided between the moderate and hardline factions and has not severed its ties with Al-Qaeda (AQ). The Taliban's claim of domination over Afghanistan is being constantly challenged by the resistance groups owing their allegiance to the deposed civilian government. All these factors hamper the Taliban's attempts to rule by establishing a governance architecture in the country, which arguably is the foremost requirement to ensure a terror-free Afghanistan.

Trends

Intra-Taliban Fissures

The Taliban-led insurgency was divided into moderate and hardline camps long before it came to power.¹ The same split has not only been reinforced but exacerbated further ever since. The hardline faction headed by elements representing the Haqqani Network (HQN) continues to hold. Sirajuddin Haqqani, Anas Haqaani and Khalil ul Rahman Haqqani have stalled attempts by the moderate faction, comprising the likes of Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, to make the Islamic Emirate more acceptable to the international community. The hardline faction's influence has been backed by the Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada and his inner circle, who have been directly responsible for the closure of girls' schools.² This leaves the frustrated moderate faction to occasionally air their divergent views, but with very little influence on the policy decisions by the Islamic Emirate.

Differences also persist over who deserves credit for the Taliban's 'victory' and other facets of policy formulation; these have been so acute that physical fights between moderates and hardliners have occasionally broken out. For instance, alterations over cabinet formation led to physical brawls between supporters of Khalil Haqqani and Mullah Baradar during a meeting at Kabul's Presidential Palace in September 2021, leaving the latter injured.³ The Islamic Emirate's interim cabinet has four key ministries, including that of interior and refugee affairs, assigned to the HQN, alongside the position of Prime Minister to Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, previously chief of the Quetta Shura.

The Islamic Emirate has tried hard to keep such differences away from the media's eye, with great success. However, contradictory policy announcements such as the one on girls' education when schools were opened briefly and then shut; frequent retraction of decisions; and failure of the Islamic Emirate to not use violence against the persons associated with the previous civilian regime despite periodic assurances, suggest that the Taliban continue to speak in multiple voices.

Rampant Human Rights Violations

The Islamic Emirate has implemented a twin-objective strategy, which continues to result in gross human rights violations in the country. First, it has implemented a self-styled, *shariah*-based governance system, which mostly runs contrary to the spirit of democracy and freedom that prevailed during the 20 years of civilian rule in Kabul. The minorities, women and girls have been most affected by this policy, so too government workers, officials and security forces belonging to the disbanded Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), and those who worked for the foreign forces. Following Kabul's takeover, the Taliban fighters have tried to track down former ANDSF personnel and government officials and persecute them. Although the Taliban announced a general amnesty scheme for such people, its implementation has been sketchy. Reports suggest that those who responded to the amnesty call were extrajudicially killed once they came overground.⁴

Women and girls have been deprived of their rights to education and work under the *shariah* regime. Educational institutions were shut, briefly reopened and then shut again by the Taliban, who justified their actions by pointing to the absence of separate sitting places for boys and girls. Excluding professions such as nurses and municipal workers, women have largely been barred from pursuing any job. Protests by women have been violently put down. A series of regressive measures have put restrictions on women from venturing out of their homes without male chaperons.⁵

Second, the Islamic Emirate is desperate to avoid any negative publicity, which may affect its standing internationally and consequently have a bearing on the prospects of its recognition by individual countries. After it came to power, a diktat on media personnel was issued, banning them from reporting anything negative on the Taliban rule and requiring them to get approval for their reports before publication. This sanitisation of media reportage has brought social media broadcasters and TV journalists under its purview. A broad range of allegations of 'promotion of western culture', 'insulting verses of the Quran' and 'promoting the opposition' have been made against several media persons to justify their detention and even physical abuse by the Taliban.

Anti-Taliban Resistance Gains Ground in the North

The Taliban used hundreds of fighters to crush an armed opposition to the Taliban that started in the Panjshir valley after August 2021. Leaders of the group, which calls itself the National Resistance Front (NRF), fled to neighbouring countries. However, since then, the NRF under Ahmad Massoud, son of the legendary commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, has been able to disperse itself into several northern provinces and continue organising attacks on the elements associated with the Islamic Emirate. Two contradictory narratives exist with regard to the NRF's success. The NRF frequently takes to social media to claim victory in smaller battles, whereas the Taliban dismisses it as a fringe and uninfluential motley of fighters.

However, the fact that the NRF has increasingly posed challenges to the Taliban's attempts to dominate the country is evident from the latter's August 2022 decision to appoint senior Taliban military commander and Deputy Minister of Defence Abdul Qayum Zakir in charge of the efforts to counter the NRF in the Andarab and Panjshir valleys.⁶ Ethnic differences within the Pashtun-dominated Taliban are hampering its anti-NRF efforts too. According to reports, in Panjshir, where the NRF is retaking territory, local Tajik Taliban forces appear to be increasingly unwilling to fight the NRF. A local Tajik Taliban commander defected from the Taliban and joined the NRF in May, while Tajik Taliban units from Badakhshan reportedly refused to continue fighting the NRF in Panjshir in July.⁷

The NRF's success and the spread of anti-Taliban sentiments have led to the birth of at least 22 resistance groups, including the Yasin Zia-led Afghanistan Freedom Front, which continues to wage disparate fights, gain and hold territory in nearly a dozen provinces in northern Afghanistan. The challenge for these groups, however, is to establish unity and present themselves as a cohesive opposition to the Taliban and to gain international support, which is absent at the moment.

ISK's Operational Ascendancy

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the ISK has emerged as the most violent terrorist group in Afghanistan. The group has been rapidly gaining power in some parts of the country, including the northern provinces of Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and Mazar-e-Sharif, where the terror group was less active. Among its targets have been the Taliban leaders and supporters and the minority Hazara communities. In a report released in early September 2022, Human Rights Watch listed 13 ISK attacks targeting Hazara mosques, schools and workplaces across the country, killing more than 700 people since August 2021.⁸

On September 5, an ISK suicide bomber blew himself up near the Russian embassy in Kabul, killing two Russian embassy staff and at least six other people. This is a significant operational achievement by the group, which considers both Russia and the US as part of the “Jews, the crusaders, [and] their allies” group pitted against the “Muslims and the mujahideen”.⁹ At the same time, the ISK continues to establish that it is no longer a terror formation seeking random targets for fame, but is now capable of identifying particular hard targets and executing precision attacks against them.

The objective of the group has been to project itself as the only surviving anti-West, transnational entity and to recruit heavily among the Taliban rejectionist constituencies. The group has been underlining its ‘melting pot of sorts’ status for cadres belonging to various ethnic backgrounds. Its recent publicity materials have shown Uyghur, Baloch and Uzbek cadres participating in terror attacks and suicide bombings.¹⁰ At the same time, it is also trying to shed the tag of being an Afghan-centric group by carrying out attacks in Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In March, the deadly suicide bombing of a Shiite Mosque in Peshawar killed more than 60 worshippers.¹¹ In April and May 2022, ISK claimed to have carried out rocket attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghan soil. Although both countries have denied that the rockets reached their territories, the United Nations Security Council fears that “the risk of similar attacks remains”.¹²

Setback to Al-Qaeda, and Yet Safe Haven for Other Terror Outfits

On August 2, Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike in Kabul. The house in Kabul’s Sherpur locality where Zawahiri was staying had reportedly been taken over by the Taliban in August 2021.¹³ The killing of a largely uninspiring leader of a weakened outfit nevertheless raised questions about the future of Al-Qaeda Central in the Af-Pak region; the future of its relationship with the Taliban; and the relevance of the outfit in a global terror landscape dominated by a weakened yet still potent Islamic State. Even months after al-Zawahiri’s killing, Al-Qaeda has yet to name a new chief, which possibly points at a succession crisis. Some counter terror experts have identified Saif al-Adel and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi as potential successors to Zawahiri.¹⁴ Notwithstanding who replaces al-Zawahiri, it is almost certain that Al-Qaeda, which operates potentially through its affiliates in Africa, would find it challenging to maintain a foothold in the Af-Pak region. Al-Zawahiri’s killing, a result of continued US counter terrorism focus on the group, could constrain it to lie low further, even at the cost of becoming functionally extinct in the region.

Al-Zawahiri’s killing also highlighted the Taliban’s fragile commitment to not allow Afghan soil to be used by international terrorist groups against the US and its allies. Quite predictably, the Taliban, after a delay of few days, responded by feigning ignorance about al-Zawahiri’s presence, and also by protesting against the violation of the country’s sovereignty by the US.¹⁵

Reports by the UN continue to highlight that the ties between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have largely remained intact.¹⁶ Although Al-Qaeda may not be operationally active within Afghanistan, its presence under safety provided by the Islamic Emirate is bound to have an inspiring impact on its affiliates worldwide. The Taliban are clearly adopting a clever policy on such groups, which were part of its network previously. It is willing to restrict groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) to placate China; it has facilitated negotiations between the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Pakistan; it remains ambivalent with regard to Kashmir-centric groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba

(LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM); and is apparently using the presence of groups like Al-Qaeda to gain leverage in its bargaining with the US and the international community. The Taliban remains a hotbed of multiple terror formations with varying agendas.

Response

Responses to terrorism within Afghanistan and terror threats emanating from Afghan soil are visible at three levels – from the Taliban, from the US and the international community: and from regional powers.

The Islamic Emirate envisages challenges to its project of dominating Afghanistan from two primary sources – the resistance groups like the NRF and the ISK. Therefore, the bulk of its military capabilities have been employed against these two. As mentioned, it has prioritised its operations against the NRF by appointing a new commander. It is relatively confident that the absence of any international backing and the lack of unity will remain weaknesses for resistance groups such as NRF. Hence, a sustained operation would eventually overwhelm them.

Regarding its approach towards ISK, however, two trends are visible. First, the Taliban are apprehensive of ISK's growing influence among the anti-Taliban disenchanted groups. Sections within the TIP, for instance, could potentially switch their alliance to ISK.¹⁷ Recent ISK attacks have occurred in the country's northern parts, including Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and Mazar Sharif, where the terror group was less active before the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. Hence, the Taliban's anti-ISK military operations seemingly have a single-point agenda of not letting ISK grow big enough to potentially threaten the Islamic Emirate. The UN political mission in Afghanistan in January reported extrajudicial killings of at least 50 individuals suspected of affiliation with ISK. Such operations also help the Taliban to showcase its commitment to contain terror to the international community. Hence, any inability to limit ISK attacks pertains mostly to the question of capacity of the Taliban.

Second, it also amounts to the question of willingness, that is, to what extent the Taliban wishes to limit ISK. Although the Taliban insists that its government has taken all necessary measures to protect the Hazara community and any report to the contrary does not reflect the reality on the ground, it could also possibly be allowing ISK to have a free rein in the latter's anti-minority attacks. In early 2022, a report by the Taliban Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council suggested that there is "scope for the Taliban overlooking or seeking advantage from ISK attacks that were not directly against Taliban interests, especially those targeting minorities".¹⁸ This brings to light an extremely dangerous trend regarding the sincerity of the Islamic Emirate to pursue a selective approach to terror.

The US departure from Afghanistan has marked a noticeable change in its approach towards the latter. The US remains committed to contain terror that potentially threatens its own interests. Al-Zawahiri's killing in August, therefore, is important for two reasons. First, it makes any plan of Al-Qaeda's to re-emerge potentially in the Af-Pak region more difficult. This means that Al-Qaeda, for the time being, will have to remain satisfied with the steady gains of its affiliates in Africa and its marginal presence in parts of Asia. Second, the drone strike, in line with the US promise to carry out over-the-horizon operations after its departure from Afghanistan, would potentially deter global jihadists from converging on a 'safe Afghanistan' under the Taliban. The US has promised to repeat such strikes in the future as well.

However, the US approach remains problematic, as it does not attach much seriousness to the Taliban's linkages with other regional terror formations. While ruling out any support for the NRF, the US has provided enough indications that it views the Taliban as a partner in counter terrorism.¹⁹ Such a selective approach would embolden the Taliban to continue maintaining its strategic linkages with groups like the TTP, LeT, JeM and others.

In the past months, there has been some sort of convergence in views among regional countries regarding the terror threat posed by Afghanistan under the Taliban. Statements made by

Pakistan,²⁰ Iran²¹ and India²² at the UN have pointed to this fact. Even China reportedly appears concerned with the Taliban's lack of commitment to act decisively against the TIP and has halted its plan for economic investment.²³ However, in the absence of unity of purpose and an action plan, such statements by these countries have merely fleeting relevance and are unlikely to put much pressure on the Taliban.

Outlook

ISK thrives in Afghanistan due to a lack of both capacity and intent on the part of the Taliban, which remains opposed to any international assistance to deal with the group. While al-Zawahiri's killing is a setback for Al-Qaeda, it cannot be construed as a death blow to the group. In addition, in 2022, Afghanistan has not become an inhospitable territory for other regional terror groups. Afghanistan is still home to a plethora of regional and transnational jihadist groups. The Taliban are likely to spend much of its energy in eliciting international recognition and funding and decimating the NRF, and not so much on making the country terror free. Neither of its twin objectives are likely to succeed in the short to medium term. The sum of all this unveils a spectre of chaos in the country, with potential repercussions for regional as well as global stability. The international community should realise that neither its policies of detachment nor overwhelming reliance on over-the-horizon drone operations can provide a solution to the Afghan problem. Establishment of a broad-based inclusive government and continued international assistance based on accountability and transparency can offer a more viable solution to the country's problems.

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BANGLADESH

Though there was no terrorist attack witnessed in Bangladesh in 2022, the overall threat from Al-Qaeda (AQ)-centric groups has increased. During the year, Ansar al Islam (AAI), the Bangladeshi branch of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), accelerated its recruitment both online and offline, along with receiving funding from Bangladeshi diaspora members in the UK and Australia. Throughout the year, Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies arrested at least 70 militant suspects, mostly from AAI. A new AQ-centric group, the Jama'atul Ansar fil Hind al Sharqiyyah (JAHS), was also involved in a recruitment campaign and the setting up of training camps near the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar tri-border area. JAHS allegedly received shelter and training from a lesser-known ethno-separatist group, the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF). At least 26 JAHS suspects were arrested in 2022.²⁴ Meanwhile, the followers of the Islamic State (IS)-Bengal continued their recruitment and training activities through virtual cells. Much of IS-centric propaganda in Bangladesh has moved to the deep web to avoid surveillance. There has been increased propaganda and recruitment activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The security situation in the Rohingya refugee camps remained precarious with Rohingya armed groups fighting for dominance. Ahead of the country's parliamentary elections in 2023, Bangladesh is more likely to muddle through with its internal security amid multiple challenges.

Trends

Al-Qaeda (AQ)-Centric Threats

Developments in 2022 indicated a heightened threat from Al-Qaeda (AQ)-centric threat groups. While the existing AQ-centric groups with varying degrees of capabilities remained active, a new group has also emerged. The upsurge in AQ-centric threats in Bangladesh is partly influenced by broader changes in the global jihadist movement, in particular, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has energised AQ followers in the country.²⁵ Though the death of AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had a rather limited impact on their activities, there have been efforts to translate and disseminate his writings and speeches, in which he gave directions to the group's followers.

The key local AQ-linked jihadist group, Ansar al Islam (AAI), and other pro-AQ platforms continued to exploit contemporary global, regional and local issues for their offline and online recruitment campaigns. Political developments in India, in particular, had an impact on the extremist narrative of AQ-centric groups in 2022. The themes which recurrently featured in their propaganda included the Indian ruling party's then spokesperson Nupur Sharma's offensive remarks against Prophet Muhammad, the hijab ban for Muslim girls in schools and colleges in the state of Karnataka as well as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's September 2022 trip to Delhi.

AAI has also tried to gain organisational strength through its regional linkages with other AQ-centric groups in India. The arrest of AAI militants in West Bengal and northeast India is a case in point. Another AQ-centric group, the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), also has strong linkages in India.²⁶ The escalation of AQ-centric threats was evidenced by two key developments: a) the emergence of a new operational outfit, the Jama'atul Ansar fil Hind al Sharquiyah (JAHS); and b) AAI's funding by the Bangladeshi diaspora in the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia.

Jama'atul Ansar fil Hind al Sharquiyah (JAHS)

In October 2022, Bangladeshi authorities busted JAHS, an obscure AQ-centric outfit,²⁷ which was recruiting local youth. It had provided them with militant training²⁸ in southern Bangladesh and sent them to remote areas in the south-eastern part of the country for advanced training in guerrilla warfare in collaboration with an ethnic separatist group, the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF).²⁹ As per the KNF-JHAS 2021 deal, KNF was providing shelter, training and other support to JAHS militants. In return, JAHS paid KNF Tk 300,000 (US\$ 3,000) per month and the expenditure for food. While JAHS and KNF are ideologically different, the alleged personal connection between the key leaders is a possible reason for their collaboration.³⁰

Bangladeshi authorities had uncovered JAHS' existence while searching for some radicalised youths from Cumilla district. In early October, Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) claimed that more than 50 youth were missing from different parts of the country.³¹ They were apparently convinced to perform *hijrah* (migration) by leaving their homes and moving to a remote location for jihadist training. On October 10, the joint forces launched a crackdown to nab the terrorists hiding in the hills. On October 20, the RAB arrested 10 people, including seven JAHS members from different areas in Bandarban and Rangamati districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). At least three KNF militants were also arrested in this connection. A large cache of firearms and ammunition was recovered from their possession.³² The group was reportedly trying to procure weapons including AK-47, AK-22 and AK-32.³³

Leaders of three banned jihadist groups, AAI, JMB and Harkatul Jihad had formed the JAHS in 2017.³⁴ In their operations against the group, Bangladeshi authorities had recovered a 500-page document which pointed to the group having a long-term plan to capture state power in Bangladesh. To attain this goal, the JAHS had been following a multi-level recruitment strategy that encourages existing members to recruit new members. The group had also planned to use criminal networks for procuring weapons and had plans to send its members to places such as Afghanistan and Syria.³⁵

The organisational structure of JAHS is not yet clear, although the group reportedly has at least six council, or Shura, members.³⁶ However, intelligence officials said senior jailed militant leaders have been placed at the top of JAHS, possibly due to their influence over AQ followers in Bangladesh, while middle-level leaders are apparently running the group while in hiding. Aside from organisational activities, JAHS has been recruiting new members, managing YouTube channels, campaigning on Facebook, collecting funds, conducting *da'wah* activities, training and giving *bayat* (pledge of allegiance possibly to their jailed leaders).³⁷

AAI's Leadership and Diaspora Funding

Among the AQ-centric Bangladeshi outfits, the members of AAI are comparatively more organised, despite the fact that its main leader Sayed Mohammad Ziaul Haque is on the run. According to law enforcement agencies, it would be challenging to bring AAI under control until Haque is caught.³⁸ In the meantime, the AAI continues to operate and pose a security problem to Bangladesh. In February, Bangladeshi authorities arrested an AAI operative from Chittagong for plotting a terrorist attack against a book fair venue.³⁹

AAI's continued operations have been facilitated by its funding stream from abroad. AAI has reportedly received about Tk 15,000,000 (US\$150,000) since 2019 from Bangladeshis based in the UK and Australia for its operational activities. Its sympathisers, many of whom are non-resident Bangladeshis, have sent money through *hundi*, a cross-border money transfer method that bypasses the legal banking system.⁴⁰ In September, authorities arrested two suspected coordinators of such activities who received and distributed the money, sent via *hundi*, among the members as per the AAI leadership's directives.⁴¹ While militancy in Bangladesh was funded in the past through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from different Middle Eastern countries and the UK, current militancy is being funded through personal efforts as NGOs have been brought under strict surveillance. Meanwhile, AAI has reportedly been sending its members abroad to collect funds to increase its organisational strength and avoid arrests.⁴² In November, AAI snatched two of its members from the premises of a lower court in Dhaka.⁴³ Both are death row convicts involved in the 2015 targeted killing of a secular publisher. The incident was evidence of AAI's capability to exploit the security gaps.

Lower Threat Posed by JMB and HuJI-B

Aside from the AAI and the recently known JAHS, the other two AQ-centric militant outfits which pose an albeit lower level of threat in Bangladesh are the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkatul Jihad al Islami–Bangladesh (HuJI-B). While JMB and HuJI-B carried out some of the major attacks in Bangladesh until 2005, both groups were weakened by continued law enforcement actions in the country and the imprisonment of several leaders. JMB's top leader Salahuddin Salehin, who is possibly hiding in India, continues to try to organise the outfit. Other top JMB leaders, many of whom have been arrested, are trying to manage the organisation from jail. While there have been occasional reports of robberies by JMB militants,⁴⁴ the group is reportedly more active in India. On its part, the HuJI-B has long been trying to revive its network, but with limited success. In May, Bangladeshi authorities arrested Mufti Abdul Hai, a former emir and founding member of HuJI-B, who went into hiding after the banned outfit's involvement in various attacks came to light in 2006.⁴⁵

IS-Centric Threats

The capability of Dawlatul Islam-Bengal, also known as the Neo-JMB, has significantly reduced due to continued surveillance and counter terrorism responses.⁴⁶ However, the group's online recruitment campaign has continued. A Bangladeshi expatriate Mahadi Hasan heads the group, while Abu Ahsan Habib is his deputy.⁴⁷ Both are believed to be based in Turkey or Syria, and in contact with the group's Bangladeshi members.⁴⁸ In his attempts to activate IS followers in Bangladesh, Mahadi has started teaching some selective religious courses with the aim to turn new recruits into bomb-makers and attackers.⁴⁹

Since 2018, IS' Bangladeshi followers have also created virtual cells and used secure apps to avoid detection. In line with its current narrative of the "War of Attrition",⁵⁰ IS' allies and supporters have been urged to carry out attacks in their respective locations. A section of Bangladeshi IS ideologues and sympathisers have created several online cells or modules in response to this call. According to Bangladeshi security institutions, by collecting members or creating followers on social networking platforms, Dawlatul Islam-Bengal is building a virtual structure in which members are encouraged to carry out subversive activities within the country for the purpose of establishing the so-called Caliphate. Their members manage internal communications using encrypted social media apps such as Hup and TamTam.⁵¹ Law enforcement agencies have targeted these pro-IS virtual cells, who were last known to have carried out six bomb attacks targeting police in different parts of Dhaka and Khulna in 2019.⁵²

Hizb ut-Tahrir-Wilayah Bangladesh

Hizb ut-Tahrir-Wilayah Bangladesh (HT-WB) was active throughout 2022 in its propaganda and recruitment activities both online and offline. The group issued many press releases from its official website, mostly covering various economic issues such as power and fuel shortages and price hikes in Bangladesh. The group also criticised the Bangladesh government for its national-level mourning of Queen Elizabeth II and portrayed Bangladesh as being subservient to its former colonial masters. The group has further criticised the state's continued restraint in reaction to Myanmar's incursions into Bangladeshi territory, amid ongoing border clashes between the Myanmar army and rebel forces. It has claimed that the government has failed to protect the sovereignty of the Muslim *ummah*.

Beyond the online domain, the offline activities of HT-WB were also significant. Other than brandishing its anti-state posters in various parts of Bangladesh,⁵³ it has also arranged processions in front of mosques on various contemporary issues and tried to attract new members. The group reportedly carried out a massive publicity campaign in Dhaka in March, particularly on university campuses, ahead of its online conference.⁵⁴

Rohingya Armed Groups

There was further deterioration of security in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar in 2022. Since the 2017 influx of more than 700,000 Rohingyas from Myanmar, criminal activities such as murders, rapes, abductions, shootings, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling and other violence have been on the rise.⁵⁵ Since June, at least 15 Rohingyas, mostly camp volunteers, have been killed in these camps.⁵⁶ Rohingya armed groups have targeted volunteers and camp leaders due to their support of Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies. Though there are several dozen Rohingya armed groups, the majority of the violent acts were attributed to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).⁵⁷ In January, Bangladeshi authorities arrested a brother of ARSA 'commander-in-chief' Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi from Rohingya Camp-6 in Ukhia of Cox's Bazar District.⁵⁸

Rising Violence in Chittagong Hill Tracts

There was an uptick in clashes between ethnic armed groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a region in south-east Bangladesh comprising three hill districts – Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. At least 13 incidents in these areas have left 11 insurgents and four civilians dead.⁵⁹ In a separate incident, one Bangladeshi military member was killed during a clearance operation. The CHT region has witnessed decades of separatist insurgency, led by the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) and its armed wing Shanti Bahini. While the 1997 peace accord between the Bangladesh government and the PCJSS ended the decades-long insurgency, grievances and inter-ethnic tensions remain. Due to its remote, hilly terrain, the area has been used as a drug route alongside terrorist activities. It has proven difficult for CHT district police alone to maintain law and order in the area. At present, there are at least six ethnic armed groups⁶⁰ of various sizes and capabilities fighting for dominance in the CHT; most emerged after the 1997 peace accord. Bangladesh's Home Minister has claimed that different groups in the CHT, including

KNF, PCJSS and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), were trying to destabilise the situation along the borders.⁶¹

Outlook

The emerging threat picture in Bangladesh is challenging. The AQ-centric groups have more access to finances, manpower and training as well as arms and explosives; therefore, the possibility of attacks ahead of the country's upcoming general election cannot be ruled out. Terrorist recruitment requires continuous monitoring. Moving forward, Bangladesh needs to be more proactive in its response to the current and emerging threats. In addition to continued surveillance, the authorities may consider reviewing investigative, prosecutorial and correctional capabilities, such as the activities of bailed suspects⁶² and radicalisation in prisons, as factors which may reverse Bangladesh's achievements in counter terrorism.⁶³ Moreover, Bangladesh needs to re-evaluate its existing preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives and identify areas for further improvement. Finally, Bangladesh should take steps against terrorism financing and continue to work closely with relevant partners.

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INDIA

In 2022, India witnessed a significant decline in terrorism-related incidents. According to the Institute for Conflict Management (ICM), India witnessed 1,135 terrorism-related incidents up to September, compared to 1,724 such incidents in all of 2021. This is the lowest number of terrorist attacks recorded in India in a year since 2000.⁶⁴ However, the decline in terrorist incidents does not fully capture the spread of extremism and hate speech in India. Violence targeting the other, whether in the form of verbal threats and incitement or physical attacks, saw Hindutva and Islamist extremists crossing new red lines in 2022. While Hindutva supporters openly called for the extermination of the Muslim community, Muslim men beheaded a Hindu and shot dead another for supporting offensive comments made by officials of the ruling Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 2022, global jihadist groups stepped up their anti-India propaganda and expanded their network in India's North-East. They also moved closer to carrying out major attacks in the communally sensitive city of Coimbatore. However, it was Indian Islamist organisations like the Popular Front of India (PFI) that gained the most in terms of recruits. In the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), militants continued to target Hindus and non-Kashmiris, and 'hybrid militancy' emerged as a major security challenge. At the same time, Sikh separatism, which was neutralised in the mid-1990s, revitalised again while the Maoist insurgency continued to decline during the year.

Trends

Hindutva Violence

Hindutva activists targeted Muslims, their homes, shops and worship places as well as their culture and way of life. While there were no major bomb blasts targeting Muslims during 2022, there were countless instances of everyday violence. Instances of Muslims being beaten or lynched to death for innocuous activities such as selling their wares near temples, travelling with a Hindu woman or transporting cattle occurred regularly.⁶⁵ Such incidents have become "decentralised mob action", carried out not necessarily on the orders of distant leaders "but by millions of little people in towns

and cities”.⁶⁶ Indeed, violent targeting of Muslims has been enabled by an extremist ecosystem that radicalises people online, in the media and on the streets, and which is being ignored amid the BJP government’s indifferent attitude.⁶⁷

In different parts of India, Hindutva operatives incited crowds to exterminate Muslims. For example, the head priest of a Hindu temple openly called for the genocide of Muslims in December 2021 in Ghaziabad.⁶⁸ Later, he abused Prophet Muhammad in a video that was uploaded on social media in June 2022.⁶⁹ In September 2022, during a speech at an event in Aligarh, he said that madrassas “should be blown to bits with gunpowder” and their residents be dispatched to “detention camps” as in China. He also called for the demolition of the Aligarh Muslim University “using bombs”.⁷⁰ Others have threatened mass sexual violence against Muslim women.⁷¹

Violence against Muslims took various forms. Hindutva activists sought to undermine their culture, dress code etc. In the southern state of Karnataka, hijab-wearing students were barred from entering a government-run pre-university college in late December 2021. The issue quickly snowballed into violent clashes between Hindutva and Islamist activists, culminating in the BJP state government in Karnataka banning the hijab in colleges and the High Court upholding the government ban.

Across India, Hindutva mobs destroyed Muslim-owned properties, and civic authorities backed by police officials in several BJP-ruled states used bulldozers to demolish Muslim homes, shops and mosques as punishment for their participation in protests or on the grounds that they were illegal constructions. Indeed, the bulldozer emerged as an important weapon of state-backed violence against Muslims and their properties.

In May and June, things took a violent turn when the BJP spokespersons Nupur Sharma and Naveen Jindal made derogatory comments about the Prophet on national television and on Twitter, respectively. The controversy over their comments again brought to the fore the growing conflict between ‘trads’ and ‘raitas’ in the Hindutva ecosystem. ‘Trads’, or traditionalists, are Hindutva hardliners. They are contemptuous, even fiercely critical, of the ‘raitas’, whom they believe are ‘too liberal’ or ‘soft’ on Muslims.⁷² When the BJP, under diplomatic pressure from Muslim countries, suspended Sharma and expelled Jindal from the party, the ‘trads’ turned on the party, accusing it of bowing to pressure from the Muslim world.⁷³ The BJP government sought to distance itself from Sharma’s comments by describing them as the views of “fringe elements”.⁷⁴

Jihadist Militancy

The hijab row and Sharma’s remarks on the Prophet emerged as major triggers of Islamist radicalism in the country. Hindutva and Islamist activists engaged in massive mobilisation and counter-mobilisation of students during the hijab row. Like agitation over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which boosted the network of the PFI in India’s north-eastern state of Assam in 2019-20, protests relating to the hijab ban boosted the PFI and its affiliate, the Campus Front of India, in the southern states of Karnataka and Kerala in 2022.⁷⁵

Sharma’s remarks on the Prophet, deemed blasphemous by Muslims, triggered a firestorm of protests in India and abroad⁷⁶ and triggered Islamist militancy in the country. For instance, a chemist was stabbed to death in Amravati in Maharashtra and a Hindu tailor was beheaded in Rajasthan for expressing support for Sharma on social media.⁷⁷ The beheading was filmed by the killers and posted online, where it went viral. This was violence not just to avenge insults to the Prophet, but was seen as aimed at spreading fear among a larger online audience.⁷⁸

Muslim clerics offered rewards for Sharma’s beheading, and warned they would gouge out the eyes and chop off the hands and tongue of anyone who insulted the Prophet.⁷⁹ However, they did not lead the anti-blasphemy violence. The “blasphemy killers” were not educated in *madrassas* and did not have associations with jihadists. While they had links with the Dawat-e-Islami, a Bareilvi Muslim organisation, and watched its Madani channel on YouTube, it was not religion so much as

India's "fraught communal" relations that seems to have driven them to murder Sharma's supporters.⁸⁰

Global jihadist groups sought to capitalise on the mounting Indian Muslim ire over the hijab ban and Sharma's offensive comments. They targeted India in their propaganda publications. The hijab ban in India laid bare the "mirage of the pagan Hindu democracy", according to Al-Qaeda's then chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in a video released in April 2022. He called on Indian Muslims to fight the assault on Islam "intellectually using the media and [with] weapons on the battlefield".⁸¹

Soon after mass protests over Sharma's comments erupted, Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) threatened suicide attacks to "fight for the dignity of the Prophet". In one of its publications, AQIS said, "We should kill those who affront our Prophet and we should bind explosives with our bodies and the bodies of our children to blow away the ranks of those who dare to dishonour our Prophet", adding that "saffron [Hindutva] terrorists should now await their end in Delhi and Bombay and in [the states of Uttar Pradesh] UP and Gujarat".⁸² The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) also sought to capitalise on the anger of Indian Muslims. In addition to urging them to join the ranks of its local affiliate, the Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP), it carried out a "revenge" gun-and-bomb attack on a Sikh *gurdwara* in Kabul, Afghanistan, on June 20.⁸³

Jihadist propaganda inciting Indian Muslims to carry out attacks appears to be working. An Indian Muslim with suspected links to IS carried out a car bomb attack near a Hindu temple in Coimbatore on October 22, a day before Deepavali (or Diwali). But, other than the assailant, there were no fatalities in the attack.⁸⁴ At the operational level, in 2022, global jihadists continued to be less successful than the PFI and CFI in drawing recruits from among alienated Muslims country-wide. However, the Bangladesh-based, Al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and the IS-linked Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) made inroads in the north-eastern state of Assam. Scores of ABT and JMB functionaries were apprehended in Assam in 2022. Indian security officials said that while ABT activists were engaged in indoctrination, there were as yet no signs of them providing arms training.⁸⁵ Detained ABT functionaries apparently revealed "an extensive network of terror outfits across different regions of the country". They reportedly had access to advanced military-grade communication apps.⁸⁶

Militancy in Kashmir

If south Kashmir was the nerve centre of the militancy over the past decade, Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), emerged as the focus of militant attacks in 2022.⁸⁷ The post-2019 trend of militants targeting civilians continued in 2022. Attacks on minorities in the Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley, that is, Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) and 'outsiders' or non-Kashmiri migrant workers, which began in 2021, intensified in 2022.⁸⁸

Most of these attacks were carried out by 'hybrid militants', a term that Indian security forces are using to describe the 'new militants' active in Kashmir since 2019. Unlike militants of the 2014-2019 period, who flaunted their identity on social media by uploading photographs and videos of themselves undergoing arms training, 'hybrid militants' are 'faceless'. They are civilians who lead a routine life, and have no prior record or known links to militant outfits. They are radicalised online, carry out an attack, usually with a pistol rather than an AK-47 assault rifle, and then slip back to their civilian life. Around 70 percent of the roughly 55 assassinations of mostly civilians, minorities and unarmed police personnel over the past two years were reportedly carried out by 'hybrid militants'. A fifth of them were juveniles. Among the reasons for the success of the Indian security forces in eliminating a large number of militants in the 2014-19 period was the fact that the militants' identity was known. Hybrid militants, in contrast, are harder to identify and have become a challenge to the security forces.⁸⁹

Sikh Militancy

Sikh anger with the rising tide of Hindutva extremism is said to have increased over the past couple of years, especially in the context of the aggressive Hindutva campaign during the farmers' protests

of 2020-2021, which labelled Sikhs, who formed the bulk of the protesters, as ‘terrorists’, ‘anti-national’ and ‘Khalistanis’, that is, extremist Sikhs who want an independent state of Khalistan. At the start of 2022, amid state assembly elections in Punjab, Prime Minister Narendra Modi alleged a threat to his life, prompting Hindutva trolls to call for a “repeat of 1984” (when thousands of Sikhs were massacred) and a “genocide of Sikhs”.⁹⁰ Radicals among the Sikh diaspora exploited the growing anger and insecurity among Sikhs in India. They repeatedly raised the demand for Khalistan. The US-based Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) organisation, which was banned in India in 2019, held referendums on Khalistan among Sikh diaspora communities abroad.⁹¹ In India, the SFJ stepped up its campaign for Khalistan by carrying out a rocket-propelled grenade attack at the Punjab police’s intelligence headquarters in Mohali on May 9.⁹²

Prior to this attack, the SFJ had planted Khalistan flags in Punjab and neighbouring states, highlighting that the territory of the ‘Khalistan’ state it demands extends beyond the borders of Punjab to include Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, which were part of Punjab till 1966. The SFJ issued a statement on April 15 stating that “Haryana *banega* Khalistan” (Haryana will become Khalistan), and released a map of ‘Khalistan’ later that month which included the state of Haryana.⁹³ It also put up Khalistan flags on the main gates and walls of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly premises.⁹⁴

The SFJ also issued statements calling on Sikh soldiers in the Indian Army to stop defending the Indian borders, to desert the army and to liberate Punjab from “Indian occupation”.⁹⁵ During the year, security forces busted several terrorist cells and captured sizeable consignments of weapons, drugs and fake Indian currency notes in Punjab. In addition to drug smugglers and couriers, drones were used to transport weapons from Pakistan across the international border into Punjab.⁹⁶

Notwithstanding the increased activity of Sikh separatists on Indian soil in 2022, support for Khalistan among Sikhs in India remains limited. Those who are directing the campaign for Khalistan from foreign countries have apparently failed “to mobilize support for the movement beyond the criminal fraternity” in India.⁹⁷

Maoist Insurgency

The declining trend in operational capacity and influence of the outlawed Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) continued in 2022. The number of Maoist attacks during the year fell; terrorism-related incidents linked to the Maoists decreased from 676 in 2021 to 458 in the first nine months of 2022.⁹⁸ The March-June period, which is generally the time of heightened Maoists offensives, was relatively peaceful in 2022.⁹⁹ The Maoists also failed to carry out any major attacks in 2022. The number of districts under their control and those hit by Maoist violence declined too.¹⁰⁰

The Maoists also suffered organisational setbacks and arrests of its leaders in 2022. In September, they lost their headquarters Budha Pahar in the jungles along the Jharkhand-Chhattisgarh border. Budha Pahar had been their stronghold for over three decades and its loss was a significant blow to the capacity of the Maoists.¹⁰¹ The operations that culminated in the fall of Budha Pahar also resulted in the arrest and surrender of hundreds of Maoists, indicating a CPI-Maoist retreat across the country.¹⁰²

Response

In 2022, the Indian government persisted with its law-and-order approach to deal with violent extremism in the country. Under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the Ministry of Home Affairs designated individuals as terrorists for activities such as training and radicalising youth, carrying out and coordinating terror attacks, infiltrating terrorists, and smuggling narcotics and weapons into India. Those designated as terrorists in 2022 were all involved in the conflict in J&K, and many were based in Pakistan.¹⁰³

The government also cracked down on the PFI. After a week of raids on the PFI's offices across 15 states and the arrest of hundreds of its leaders and activists, on September 28, 2022, the government banned the PFI and eight of its affiliates, including the CFI, under the UAPA for a period of five years. In its ban notification, the ministry said that some PFI founding members were leaders of the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), and that the PFI has ties with "global terrorist groups" like IS and JMB. The notification cited several "violent and subversive acts" carried out by the PFI, including chopping off the hands of a college professor in Kerala and the "cold blooded killings of persons associated with organisations espousing other faiths".¹⁰⁴

As in previous years, the government arrested hundreds of people on charges filed under the UAPA in 2022. Many were critics of the government and Muslims.¹⁰⁵ While the government was swift in arresting Muslims involved in violence, little action was taken against Hindutva extremists. Those who killed Sharma's supporters were taken into custody immediately, but Sharma was only suspended from the party. Although Narsinghanand was arrested weeks after his incendiary speech at Haridwar, he was soon released on bail and continued to make inflammatory speeches.¹⁰⁶

In Kashmir, security forces kept up the pressure on militants through tight border control to prevent the infiltration of terrorists into India, along with sustained counterinsurgency operations and encounters. "Punitive action" was taken on Over Ground Workers and terrorist sympathisers.¹⁰⁷ Security agencies carried out raids to dismantle the *hawala* and narcotics networks that finance terrorist activity.¹⁰⁸

However, political measures to address the Kashmir conflict made little progress in 2022. J&K remains without an elected government. However, with the process of delimitation of electoral boundaries complete and the final electoral rolls due to be announced soon, the prospect of assembly elections in J&K in early 2023 brightened late in the year.¹⁰⁹

In India's once-insurgency-wracked North-East, where the "security situation" has "improved substantially since 2014",¹¹⁰ the government took two major decisions in 2022. One was the revocation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, from several districts of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur, and the other was the withdrawal of the Indian Army from a counterinsurgency role in the region.¹¹¹ The Indian Army and the AFSPA were key components of India's counterinsurgency operations in the North-East, and while they were instrumental in quelling the insurgency, they were also lightning rods for anti-India mobilisation in the region. The two decisions addressed a key demand of the people of the North-East and signalled a shift in the approach on the part of the Indian state to the improving situation there.

At the diplomatic level, the government continued to pressure Pakistan to halt support for anti-India terrorist groups. US-India proposals to get the United Nations to designate LeT's Sajid Mir and Shahid Mahmood, and JeM's deputy chief Abdul Rauf Azhar, as globally-designated terrorists failed to make headway.¹¹² At the bilateral level, it could not get the Canadian government to prevent the SFJ from holding the Khalistan referendum.

Outlook

Although the number of terrorism-related incidents fell in India in 2022, there is little reason for complacency. With regard to the Maoists, their retreat across the country could be a tactical one; they seem to have shifted their base to the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh zone.¹¹³ Religious extremism is surging with Hindutva extremism, and its Islamist and Sikh counterparts are feeding off each other. The Coimbatore car bomb attack near a temple ahead of a Hindu festival indicates that Islamist militants are looking to incite major communal violence in the country.

While the BJP government clamped down on Islamist mobilisation by banning the PFI and its affiliates, this is unlikely to end Islamist activism in the country for several reasons. Past experience with banning the CPI-Maoist and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological fount

of the Hindutva ideology, shows that outlawing organisations does not end extremism.¹¹⁴ It empowers the police to arrest activists but otherwise only serves to push the group and its activities underground, and could lead to the formation of new outfits with different names. This was the case with the ban on SIMI in 2001, which led to the emergence of the Indian Mujahideen and PFI.¹¹⁵ India's fight against extremism requires the government to tackle all forms of extremism, whether Islamist, Sikh, Hindutva or left-wing. The use of force alone will not curb extremism. It needs to pursue political processes and inclusive dialogue with marginalised groups.

About the Author

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PAKISTAN

In 2022, Pakistan's security situation in the north-western and south-western regions deteriorated against the backdrop of the Taliban's return to power. The revival of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan had a rejuvenating impact on Pakistani jihadist groups, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province brought out large-scale peace rallies against surging terrorist incidents. Pakistan's efforts to re-initiate the stalled peace talks with TTP resulted in a ceasefire in June, but the negotiations collapsed again in July following Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri's killing in Kabul. Meanwhile, the ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan has become strategically more resilient, operationally sophisticated and tactically more brutal. After four years, Pakistan was removed from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)'s increased monitoring list in October after successfully implementing two action plans. At the same time, Pakistan and the US have resumed their counter terrorism (CT) cooperation in Afghanistan, resulting in deteriorating Pakistan-Taliban relations. Political instability, a volatile neighbourhood with porous borders, botched peace talks, lack of political ownership and funding as well as inconsistency in implementing counter terrorism policies, have compromised Pakistan's counter terrorism gains. Hence, terrorism is likely to persist and intensify further in Pakistan in the coming years.

Trends

Terrorism has surged by 51 percent in Pakistan since the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan.¹¹⁶ Between August 2021 and 2022, as many as 433 people, mostly security personnel, lost their lives and 733 others were wounded in 250 terrorist attacks. In comparison, 165 attacks claimed 294 lives and caused 596 injuries over the same period in 2020-2021.¹¹⁷ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the most volatile area with 156 recorded attacks and 286 killings, while Balochistan was the second most-affected region in Pakistan with 79 violent incidents and 127 fatalities.¹¹⁸

Pakistan is still grappling with the aftermath of the US withdrawal from and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. The emerging threat picture has left the country reeling from terrorism in its north-western and south-western peripheries.¹¹⁹ The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan not only had a rejuvenating effect on TTP and its affiliated groups,¹²⁰ but also provided greater operational freedom to Baloch separatists to intensify their attacks.¹²¹ Pakistan's political instability, lack of funding and political will as well as the emergence of more immediate new challenges, such as devastating monsoon floods in August, have diverted meagre resources and attention away from terrorism, which has undermined past security gains. Currently, Pakistan lacks a coherent counter terrorism strategy, and its proactive approach has been replaced with reactive firefighting, that is, it responds to security lapses rather than being proactive in its counter terrorism posture.

Jihadist Threat

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

In the past two years, TTP has grown stronger by virtue of factional reunifications; the August 2021 jailbreaks which freed thousands of its members;¹²² and its long-standing alliance with the Taliban's de facto regime.¹²³ TTP pledges its oath of allegiance to the Taliban Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, and is waging a violent campaign in Pakistan from its Afghan hideouts to create a Taliban-like Islamic Emirate.¹²⁴ TTP has close ethnic, political and ideological linkages with the Taliban; both fought side-by-side against the US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

Presently, TTP is headquartered in Afghanistan's Kunar province and numbers between 4,000 to 5,000 militants.¹²⁵ The mergers of various Pakistani militant factions into TTP, which started in 2020, continued in 2022 as well. All the mergers in 2022 came from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, increasing TTP's operational and organisational strength.¹²⁶

After several rounds of back-end talks, TTP announced an indefinite ceasefire in June as a confidence-building measure to formally kickstart the negotiation process with Pakistani authorities (more in the Response section).¹²⁷ Despite the ceasefire announcement, some TTP factions continued their attacks, which the group did not claim. As the peace talks were derailed in July following Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri's killing in Kabul, TTP resumed its attacks under the pretext of "retaliatory/defensive attacks".¹²⁸ TTP has leveraged the truce to strengthen its network in Pakistan, enabling it to mount terrorist attacks more consistently and with greater ferocity.¹²⁹

In August, TTP lost four commanders in different parts of Afghanistan. The group's deputy emir, Abdul Wali, and two other commanders, Mufti Hassan and Hafiz Dawlat Khan, were killed in an improvised explosive device attack in eastern Paktika province while travelling to Birmal district for a meeting with the Taliban.¹³⁰ Mukaram Khorasani has succeeded Wali as the new head of TTP's Mohmand faction. Similarly, TTP's intelligence chief Uqabi Bajauri was eliminated in a landmine blast in Kunar province.¹³¹ The recent killings have dented TTP only tactically, and it is assessed that the group will recover from the leadership decapitations as it has done in the past.

TTP has evolved significantly as a jihadist group since its inception. After peaking in 2013, it witnessed a near extinction due to leadership disputes and decapitations and factional fighting. Then it rose again through mergers and reunification under Nur Wali.¹³² Today, TTP is politically astute, operationally street-smart, and strategically focused on creating inroads for itself in Pakistan by exploiting Pashtun ethnic grievances and combining them with its jihadist narrative.¹³³ TTP articulates these views through its Urdu-language propaganda magazine *Mujallah Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*, audio and video statements, and social media infographics. From the safety of the shelter provided to it by the Taliban, TTP will continue to evolve into a more lethal group, posing a long-term threat to Pakistan.¹³⁴

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

AQIS is primarily active in Afghanistan with 300 to 350 members under the command of its chief Osama Mahmood and his deputy Atif Yahya Ghor. ¹³⁵ In the August-September issue of its flagship magazine *Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind*, AQIS indirectly acknowledged al-Zawahiri's killing. The magazine criticised alleged Pakistani cooperation which enabled US drones to kill al-Zawahiri in Kabul.¹³⁶ AQIS maintained that by helping the US through intelligence cooperation, "Pakistan secured loans from the International Monetary Fund and F-16 fighter aircrafts spare parts for maintenance".¹³⁷

In the magazine, AQIS also condoned TTP's violent campaign in Pakistan for the creation of a self-styled Islamic Emirate, seemingly an indirect strategy of avenging al-Zawahiri's killing and part of the group's localisation strategy.¹³⁸ AQIS has been equally critical of Pakistan's Deobandi scholars for not supporting the Taliban's de facto regime in Afghanistan and TTP in Pakistan.¹³⁹ It is important to mention that the October issue of TTP's *Mujallah Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* also focused on the US-Pakistan counter terrorism cooperation in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, the fifth

episode of TTP Umar Media's podcast series *Pasoon* also discussed evolving US-Pakistan relations.¹⁴¹ TTP's and AQIS' critique of US-Pakistan ties is consistent with the Taliban's official position.¹⁴² Hence, a TTP-AQIS nexus for reprisal attacks in Pakistan for alleged intelligence support to the US for al-Zawahiri's killing cannot be ruled out.

Tense Pakistan-Taliban Relations

Though tensions were already there, Pakistan-Taliban ties substantially deteriorated in 2022.¹⁴³ The Taliban's reluctance to act against TTP contrary to Pakistani expectations and calling it Islamabad's internal matter, and the latter's decision not to recognise the former's de facto regime strained ties in 2022.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Taliban's allegations against Pakistan for providing airspace to the US drones that killed al-Zawahiri and its harsh reaction to Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's UN speech, where he raised concerns against the residual threat of transnational terrorism in Afghanistan, further dented the relationship.¹⁴⁵

Other factors impacting Pakistan-Taliban ties included the latter's willingness to forge a working relationship with India¹⁴⁶ and the former's resuscitated CT cooperation with the US. Likewise, the Taliban's violent opposition to Islamabad's fencing of the Pakistan-Afghan border, often leading to border skirmishes, also strained the ties.¹⁴⁷ It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Pakistan-Taliban tensions negatively impacted Pakistan's internal security situation. Amid tensions with Islamabad, the de facto Taliban regime had looked the other way when TTP targeted Pakistani security personnel from its Afghan hideouts.¹⁴⁸

Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)

Though the Islamic State (IS) has declared a separate *Wilayah* (governorate) for Pakistan, that is, the Islamic State of Pakistan (ISP), the group includes Khyber Pakhtunkhwa under its Khorasan Wilayah.¹⁴⁹ Hence, ISK claims most of the attacks carried out in the Pakistan-Afghan border region. The group is mostly active in Afghanistan and, since the signing of the Doha Agreement 2020 between the US and the Taliban, ISK has positioned itself for a long war against the latter (for details see the Afghanistan report in this volume).¹⁵⁰ ISK's attacks and propaganda materials are aimed at ideologically delegitimising the Taliban's assertion of creating a *shariah* state and undermining its claim of restoring peace in Afghanistan.¹⁵¹ In doing so, ISK is portraying itself as an alternative jihadist group to a plethora of South and Central Asian jihadists still residing in Afghanistan.¹⁵²

In March, ISK hit a Shia Mosque in Peshawar with a suicide attack, killing 56 worshippers. This was 2022's most devastating attack in Pakistan.¹⁵³ ISK has sporadically also targeted polio vaccination teams and their police bodyguards,¹⁵⁴ intelligence and security officials as well as members of the religious minorities in Pakistan.¹⁵⁵ These were low-intensity attacks, mostly involving pistol shots, pointing to the group's weak footprint and operational inferiority in Pakistan. Pakistani security institutions also arrested some ISK operatives in different parts of the country throughout the year.¹⁵⁶

Baloch Ethno-Separatist Insurgency

The Baloch insurgency has become tactically more lethal and operationally more agile since the US exit from Afghanistan.¹⁵⁷ Pakistan had expected it to weaken by virtue of losing its sanctuaries in Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power. However, the Baloch insurgency's centre of gravity has shifted from the Baloch tribes to the educated youth of the urban middle class, who are tech-savvy and exposed to social media.¹⁵⁸ Growing urbanisation in Balochistan and greater internet penetration have bridged the distances between local Baloch youth and the diaspora living in Europe and the Middle East. The open exchange of views about their political marginalisation and socioeconomic deprivation, further exacerbated by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, has created a more radical form of Baloch nationalism.¹⁵⁹

The new generation of Baloch insurgents carry neither the baggage of tribal affiliations nor the burden of obedience to Baloch tribal elders. They are unapologetic and adamant in their demand for separatism, and are willing to go to any extent to actualise this goal.¹⁶⁰ A case in point is the adoption of suicide terrorism by Baloch separatist groups since 2018. In April 2022, this trend took a new violent turn when a female Baloch insurgent, Shari Baloch, carried out a suicide attack against Karachi University's Confucian Institute.¹⁶¹

Alarming, in 2022, the Baloch separatists were more daring and audacious in their attacks. For instance, in January, the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)'s militants stormed a security check-post in Kech district near the Iran border and killed 10 security personnel.¹⁶² This was one of the deadliest attacks against Pakistani troops in Balochistan in recent years. Subsequently, BLA's suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade, targeted the Frontier Corps (FC)'s headquarters in near-simultaneous gun-and-bomb attacks in Noshki and Panjgur districts.¹⁶³ The attacks came ahead of then Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China to participate in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The BLA militants also livestreamed the attacks on different social media platforms. At least seven FC personnel lost their lives in the attacks, while 13 separatists were also killed. In one of the attacks, BLA insurgents first breached the FC Headquarters' external perimeter with a vehicle-borne suicide bombing.¹⁶⁴ Later, the BLA gunmen entered the headquarters' premises, shooting FC soldiers at point blank and resulting in protracted gunbattles.

The above highlights that Baloch ethno-separatism is no longer a low-intensity insurgency which only hits power pylons, gas pipelines and railway tracks.¹⁶⁵ Rather, the Baloch separatists are hitting their targets more aggressively through suicide bombings as well as taking the Pakistani security institutions head on by entering their headquarters and storming their check-posts.¹⁶⁶ In the absence of a genuine political process and dialogue, the Baloch insurgency is stalemated on the battlefield, as either side is not in a position to impose a military solution over the other. However, if the insurgency's deadlock lingers on sans a political process, it will assume a more brutal form to the detriment of Pakistan's internal security.

Response

Pakistan's on-off negotiations with TTP, which ended in November 2021 when the terror group unilaterally ended a one-month ceasefire, resumed in May 2022.¹⁶⁷ In June, TTP announced an indefinite ceasefire as a confidence-building measure to kickstart the formal peace process which was endorsed by the parliament in July. A steering committee of the parliament was also formed to oversee the peace talks. The talks were held at three levels: a) between the military and TTP;¹⁶⁸ b) tribal jirgas (an assembly of tribal elders) from the ex-FATA region and Malakand Division and TTP;¹⁶⁹ and c) political leadership and TTP. However, after al-Zawahiri's killing, the peace talks were discontinued.

Presently, the peace process and the June ceasefire are suspended as both sides have resumed kinetic activities.¹⁷⁰ However, it is important to mention that neither TTP nor Pakistan has announced a formal end to the ceasefire or peace talks. Pakistan's deteriorating relations with the Taliban, renewed CT cooperation with the US in Afghanistan and TTP leaders' decapitations were the major contributing factors to the peace talks' suspension.

Before the peace process was stalled, the Pakistan-TTP negotiations had hit a dead end.¹⁷¹ As a last-ditch effort, Pakistan sent an eight-member *ulema* delegation under the influential Deobandi scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani, revered by the TTP and the Taliban regime, to soften TTP's hard stance without much avail.¹⁷²

Pakistan's rushed peace talks with the TTP at the de facto Taliban regime's insistence and to stem the flow of rising terrorist attacks have been opposed by the local communities,¹⁷³ who dreaded the return of TTP militants in their midst.¹⁷⁴ The floundering peace process has resulted in three major setbacks for Pakistan's internal security. First, it compromised the hard-won civil-military consensus to fight violent extremism and the security gains achieved through kinetic operations between 2015 and 2021. Second, negotiations from a weak position by the Pakistani state, to an

extent, have legitimised TTP's extremist narrative and inadvertently acknowledged the group as a stakeholder in the system.¹⁷⁵ TTP's sanctuaries in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime's reluctance to take any action against the former as well as growing attacks have considerably weakened Pakistan's position to prevail over the two groups on the battlefield or at the negotiations table. Third, the negotiations paved the way for the return of some TTP militants as a confidence-building measure.¹⁷⁶ While these militants were allowed to return to their native areas on the condition that they will not engage in violence, they violated the terms of the deal and facilitated the resurrection of TTP's networks in Swat and other areas of the ex-FATA region.¹⁷⁷

In 2022, Pakistan achieved a significant victory against Baloch separatists when Gulzar Imam, the head of a newly formed group, the Baloch Nationalist Army, was arrested in Turkey where he landed from Iran.¹⁷⁸ Imam was relocated to Islamabad and the leads gained from his investigation enabled Pakistani security institutions to disrupt Baloch separatists' networks in Balochistan's Mekran coastal belt. Gulzar was also responsible for Baloch groups' financial operations, that is, he collected and dispersed funds from his hideout in Iran. However, his arrest is unlikely to weaken the Baloch insurgency at the strategic level.¹⁷⁹ It is important to mention his arrest remains unacknowledged by both the Pakistani security institutions and Baloch separatist groups. However, in private conversations, both sides confirmed his arrest.¹⁸⁰

After falling out over the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan and the US resumed their CT cooperation in 2022 against the residual threat of transnational terrorism.¹⁸¹ Pakistan assisted the US by reconstituting its human intelligence resources and keeping its airspace open over Balochistan¹⁸² for over-the-horizon CT strikes in Afghanistan.¹⁸³ In return, the US provided spare parts worth US\$450 million for the maintenance of the F-16 fighter aircrafts and diplomatic assistance in clinching a financial bailout package from the International Monetary Fund.¹⁸⁴

Following the resurgence of terrorism in Malakand Division, resulting in protests by the local community against the return of the militants and militancy, Pakistan's National Security Committee (NSC) in October decided to revitalise the country's CT apparatus. After the considerable decline in terrorism in Malakand Division in previous years, the military had withdrawn from the area and handed over security responsibilities to the local police.

In this regard, the NSC approved the reconstitution of the Apex Committees, which were formed after the 2014 Peshawar school massacre for better institutional coordination and coordination in implementing the country's CT strategies.¹⁸⁵ Likewise, it also gave the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), Pakistan's central CT agency, a lead role in the new CT policy instead of the military. NACTA will thus coordinate with provincial Counter Terrorism Departments in implementing the new CT strategy. The NSC also decided to further strengthen the CT infrastructure at the federal and provincial levels, and to equip law enforcement agencies with modern technology and training to cope with the ever-changing and shape-shifting threat of terrorism.¹⁸⁶

In October, Pakistan was removed from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)'s enhanced monitoring list for successfully implementing two action plans.¹⁸⁷ Since 2008, Pakistan has been placed on FATF's grey list three times: 2008-2010, 2012-2015 and 2018-2022. Hence, Pakistan needs to continue to further enhance its countering terrorism financing regime to ensure full compliance with the FATF action plans.¹⁸⁸

Outlook

Terrorism in Pakistan is likely to persist and intensify further for the foreseeable future with no respite in sight. Both TTP and Baloch insurgents from their respective hideouts in Afghanistan and Iran will continue to pose a long-term threat to Pakistan's internal security. The revival of the Taliban's so-called Islamic Emirate will continue to inspire the next generation of Pakistani jihadists. The more the US-Pakistan CT cooperation intensifies, the more the Pakistan-Taliban ties will plummet to the detriment of the country's security. Pakistan's political instability and resource

scarcity, amid new challenges like the devastating monsoon floods and environmental changes, will also hinder the central government's efforts to stem the ever-present tide of terrorism.

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SRI LANKA

Amidst an unprecedented economic, political and social crisis, Sri Lanka faced an increasing threat from sociopolitical violence in 2022. From March 2022, mass protests mobilised against the then Gotabaya Rajapaksa government. While the majority of these protests were peaceful, there were instances when skirmishes turned violent. Increased crime incidents and shootouts indicated a weakening law and order situation. In 2022, the threat of religious extremism and inter-ethnic conflict was low, although there remains considerable propensity for the re-emergence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist politics as the economic crisis worsens. The new Ranil Wickremesinghe-led government's response to the mass protests and episodic violence was largely through the mobilisation of armed forces and various laws. His government has also sought public legitimacy through a series of political and economic reforms.

Trends

Protests and Mass Civil Unrest

Increasing social unrest was a developing trend in 2022. Widespread mass street protests were mobilised to demand relief from livelihood challenges caused by the country's protracted economic crisis, for system change (involving greater accountability and transparency of government) and for the prior Rajapaksa-led government to resign from power.¹⁸⁹ A notable characteristic of these protests was the prominent role assumed by youth activists. This is significant as Sri Lanka has a history of youth uprisings in the context of Tamil militancy (the civil war that lasted for three decades till 2009) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgencies in 1971 and 1988-89.¹⁹⁰ In these instances, too, youth aspirations for social mobility were restricted by perceptions of the curtailment by the then administrations of their political and socio-economic rights. Nevertheless, while youth groups have been more visible in protest sites such as GotaGoGama at Galle Face Green and on social media, this does not discount the cross-society composition of the 2022 mass protests.¹⁹¹

While the mass protests were in large part peaceful and called for political and economic reforms to address the current crisis and prevent future socioeconomic crises, the protest movement evolved over time. Angry mobs, infuriated by the May 9 attacks by pro-government supporters on the main protest site at the Galle Face, hours later torched and attacked around 200-plus properties of ruling party politicians and political loyalists in various locations around the country. A Member of Parliament was among eight individuals killed that day,¹⁹² with several others hospitalised due to this violence and the reactionary attacks in response. The latter violence was attributed by some political commentators to far left political parties, such as the JVP and the Frontline Socialist Party (and their radical student wings).¹⁹³

Subsequent to the May 9 Galle Face attacks by pro-government protesters, the role of student groups and trade unions in the protest movement increased, and included members of the Inter University Student's Federation (IUSF), more popularly known as "Anthare", the country's largest student-led organisation.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, trade unions in Sri Lanka have over the years featured prominently in protests and strikes, demanding better workers' rights and labour laws. In 2022,

over 2,000 trade unions carried out an all-island general strike on May 6, following a one-day strike on April 29.¹⁹⁵

The changing composition of the protest movement was partly a result of the withdrawal of many middle-class protesters from demonstrations, following the May 2022 resignation of then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the appointment of Ranil Wickremesinghe on May 12. Wickremesinghe was considered by sections of the economically liberal middle class as a leading actor in Sri Lanka's liberal democratic political camp, which made it easier for them to back the new government's call for 'stability'.

The civil unrest peaked in early July amid chronic restrictions placed on access to food supplies, employment, education and health services, as the economic crisis deteriorated. Tens of thousands of protesters stormed key government buildings on July 9: the Presidential Secretariat, the official residence of the President, and the official residence of the Prime Minister (Temple Trees). A group of protesters also torched then Prime Minister Wickremasinghe's private residence on the same night of July 9.

Rajapaksa resigned following the July protests, with Wickremasinghe succeeding him as President.¹⁹⁶ Other instances of sporadic violence were also observed during this period, targeting the political elite as well as looting and other criminal activities.¹⁹⁷

Communal Tensions and Violent Extremism

The propensity for ethno-religious violence, which was higher in the 2018-2021 period, following the anti-Muslim riots in 2018 and 2019, the 2019 Easter Sunday terror attacks and the divisive Sinhala nationalist politics of the Rajapaksa government, subsided in 2022. In this respect, another notable feature of the 2022 mass protests was the coming together of large groups of Sri Lankans from different ethnic and religious groups to speak against the economic challenges they faced. These protesters rejected not only the economic decisions made by the previous Gotabaya Rajapaksa government, which directly led to the current crisis (such as its fertiliser policy and tax cuts), but also, to some extent, the political elite's embrace of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka since its independence.¹⁹⁸

Nevertheless, as the economic crisis shows little signs of abating, there is still room for divisive nationalism to be mobilised by some political movements to hold power. In fact, some political commentators point out that the mass protests were largely driven by economic issues, and that as basic essentials such as electricity, fuel and cooking gas are made more readily accessible in time, the largely middle-class movement would lose momentum.¹⁹⁹ Such assessments have been reinforced by the sustained and intensive crackdowns initiated by current President Wickremasinghe on any emerging anti-government protests in the past few months.²⁰⁰

Scepticism of genuine and sustainable inter-ethnic reconciliation in Sri Lanka is driven in part by the overwhelming mandate given by the country's Sinhala Buddhist majority voters to the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government in the national elections of 2019 and 2020. This is despite the accusations that have dogged the previous Rajapaksa regime (2005-2015) of alleged war crimes and human rights violations against minority groups and dissidents.²⁰¹

In October 2021, then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was again accused of pandering to Sinhala chauvinistic elements among the electorate following his decision to appoint Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, a controversial right-wing Buddhist monk, to chair a 13-member national task force title "One Country, One Law".²⁰² The task force headed by Gnanasara, who also heads the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist organisation, the Bodu Bala Sena or BBS, which played a leading role in anti-Muslim violence and spreading Islamophobia in Sri Lanka in recent years, signalled the government's acceptance of its exclusivist agenda.

In June 2022, Rajapaksa extended the tenure of this task force.²⁰³ The task force submitted a report with 43 recommendations to the then President.²⁰⁴ Its agenda is considered by political

commentators to be part of state-sanctioned attempts to promote Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, also evident in other policies in recent years, such as the dropping of the national anthem being sung in Tamil during the 2020 Independence Day celebrations, mandating the cremation of COVID-19-affected casualties in violation of Islamic burial rites, and the Cabinet clearing a proposal for banning the burqa (Muslim face veil).²⁰⁵

Despite the Rajapaksa government's collapse in July 2022, analysts observed the promotion of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism still pervades the country's major political parties, which continue to reject international calls for investigations into alleged violations committed against minority Tamils during the country's decades-long civil war.²⁰⁶ In response to an October 2022 United Nations Human Rights Council resolution on promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka, the present Wickremasinghe government insisted it will instead facilitate a domestic mechanism to probe alleged human rights abuses as well as the government's financial mismanagement that contributed to the current national crisis.²⁰⁷

Meanwhile, while the threat to national security from minority ethno-religious extremism was relatively low in 2022, there were some signs that security threats from these quarters cannot be completely dismissed. On May 15, 2022, Indian intelligence sources reported that ex-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) cadres were planning to regroup in India. These reports claimed that attacks were being planned by these individuals to mark Mullivaikkal Day, observed by some Sri Lankan Tamils to remember those who perished in the final stages of the country's brutal civil war, and to avenge the killing of the LTTE's leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran and other key fighters.²⁰⁸

However, the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence called the report "baseless". Some Tamil political leaders in Sri Lanka also characterised the reports as "disturbing" in a context where ethnic relations in the country have generally been improving.²⁰⁹ In March 2021, the Indian Coast Guard had also intercepted a boat in Indian territorial waters, in which six Sri Lankan nationals, including one reportedly involved in LTTE activities in India and abroad, were found on board. Amid ongoing investigations, it was revealed in August 2022 that the boat had contained a large quantity of narcotic drugs, five AK-47 rifles and 1,000 9mm ammunition.²¹⁰

Meanwhile, the 2019 Easter Attack investigations, which have been ongoing since July 2021, have yet to be concluded. In February 2022, former Criminal Investigation Department director and retired Senior Superintendent of Police Shani Abeysekera filed a Fundamental Rights petition with the Supreme Court, seeking an order to prevent his arrest and detention under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The order, he claimed, was based on a false and anonymous petition alleging that he had been derelict in his duties during investigations into the terrorist organisation, the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ) and its leader Zaharan Hashim, the suspected ringleader of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings.²¹¹

Responses

The state's response to the widespread social and economic upheaval in 2022 was mainly one of ensuring law and order by mobilising the country's security forces under the pretext of re-establishing political and social stability. Such stability and order would assist the government to implement stringent macroeconomic reforms that are preconditions to securing an IMF Extended Fund Facility.²¹² Security forces cracked down on protesters using water cannons, tear gas and baton charges. Some notable incidents included police officials firing live rounds at protesters in Rambukkana in April 2022, resulting in one casualty;²¹³ the military opening fire in June 2022 to control rioting at a fuel station in Visuvamadu, a town in the Northern Province;²¹⁴ the armed forces raiding the popular protest site "GotaGoGama" on July 22;²¹⁵ and the police firing tear gas and water cannons to disperse hundreds of protesters in the capital of Colombo on September 24.²¹⁶

As the economic situation worsened, in the second half of 2022, there were increasing reports of clashes between frustrated citizens and police and military personnel deployed to manage the limited distribution of fuel supplies at various stations across the island.²¹⁷ In addition, the state imposed social media bans and declared a state of emergency and curfews, to prevent mass

gatherings.²¹⁸ On May 11, following days of mass social unrest, the military was ordered to shoot on sight anyone looting public property or causing potential harm to life; on July 22, the military was instructed by the political leadership to “do whatever it takes” to maintain political stability and order after protesters stormed the prime minister’s office located in a highly secure state building.²¹⁹ There were no reported casualties directly related to this mandate to maintain law and order.

The Sri Lankan authorities mainly used the country’s Penal Code and the Public Property Act to arrest protesters in the context of the 2022 mass protests. Laws such as the Public Security Ordinance and the controversial PTA were also used to arrest and detain protesters, trade unionists and other civil society activists. On September 24, 2022, the government passed a gazette declaring key government building locations in Colombo as high security zones (HSZs). This move bans any popular protests in these areas.²²⁰ Following popular opposition to the move, including the gazette being deemed “illegal” by the Bar Association of Sri Lanka, it was revoked on October 1. On October 5, 2022, the Sri Lankan Cabinet tabled the “Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill”. This draft law has been critiqued by human rights advocates for authorising arbitrary detention (without judicial review) and torture in military-run rehabilitation centres.²²¹ In early 2022, the government was forced to respond to calls to reform or repeal the PTA, after coming under pressure from sections of the international community. In a March statement, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had observed that several individuals were subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances under the PTA.²²² The European Union also emphasised Sri Lanka’s need to reform and/or repeal the PTA to maintain access to its generalised system of preferences (GSP Plus), a favourable trade scheme accorded to developing nations if they improve their human rights record.²²³

Proposed amendments to the PTA, such as introducing the right to apply for bail after 12 months of detention without trial and added provisions relating to supervision for complaints of torture, were approved by the Sri Lankan Cabinet in January 2022 and the Bill was passed in Parliament in March 2022. However, these amendments were critiqued by some quarters as superficial in nature and not addressing the core alleged human rights violations associated with the PTA and the practical challenges in its implementation.²²⁴ A recent report by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) had emphasised the dangers of the government’s continued use of the PTA, the state’s drift towards militarisation and the need to seriously commit to transitional justice mechanisms and confidence-building measures in the aftermath of the country’s protracted ethnic conflict.²²⁵

On October 21, 2022, parliament passed an amendment to the Constitution, which claims to progressively empower independent commissions in parliament and cut down presidential powers which were expanded significantly during the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government in 2020. The move is seen as an effort by the current government to get popular buy-in for its rule, through enacting reforms demanded for by the protesters. However, critics have argued that these reforms fall short of protesters’ demands for greater accountability and checks and balances on power.²²⁶

Outlook

The threat outlook for Sri Lanka in 2023 is volatile and unpredictable. The main threat to national security comes from the ongoing economic crisis, which has severely deprived swathes of the population of access to food, health, education and a livelihood. Social unrest and anti-government demonstrations in response to these harsh economic conditions have resulted in state crackdowns on protesters, protest sites and journalists reporting these incidents, through legal measures and force. Tensions also escalated on certain occasions, with angry mobs and riots damaging politicians’ official and personal properties.

While the threat of religious extremism and inter-ethnic conflict is currently low, there remains considerable room for elements in the political establishment to again pursue a Sinhala Buddhist nationalist political agenda to gain power as the economic crisis worsens, in order to deflect blame from the structural causes of the current crisis, such as the militarisation of governance, systemic

corruption and prevalence of dynastic politics. Post-conflict reconciliation and transitional justice measures implemented by successive governments over the decades under the leadership of the main political parties have lacked strong political will and are instead aimed at temporarily appeasing international pressure on this front, while also balancing the demands of various domestic interest groups.

The risk of authoritarian politics and emergency rule becoming the new normal are added threats to the evolving security landscape in Sri Lanka. The government's response to the 2022 mass protests during the economic crisis involved the use of controversial laws such as the PTA to arbitrarily arrest and detain protesters as well as the mobilisation of police and armed forces to crack down on the protest movement. As the economic crisis likely worsens in the near term, and in the context of global geopolitical instabilities and energy shortages, the security threat landscape in Sri Lanka looks increasingly volatile and unstable.

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Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

As in the previous three years, Central Asia was free from domestic terrorist attacks in 2022. Nevertheless, the region's security faced major instability with large-scale violence – for a variety of reasons – in all of the region's countries except Turkmenistan. At the same time, concerns persisted over the potential for militant activities involving the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISK) in Afghanistan to spill over into the region, even as Central Asian militants on the ground have, for the most part, stayed loyal to the Taliban. Likewise, in Syria, most Central Asians continued to fight alongside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), though their focus remains regional. Similar to recent years, there was also some evidence of additional radicalisation, recruitment and fund-raising both within the region and amongst diaspora communities.

Mass Unrest

The widespread instability witnessed in Central Asia over the past year was not in fact terrorism, but rather a wave of mass unrest across the region. While each instance had its own drivers and causes, the net result was a tumultuous year for Central Asia, even as terrorist threats appeared to be focused elsewhere.

2022 started with an unexpected set of clashes in Kazakhstan, where localised demonstrations in the city of Zhanaozen over a steep rise in fuel prices in early January escalated into mass riots across several cities, including the largest one, Almaty. The skirmishes led to the deaths of some 230 people, including 19 members of the security forces.¹ Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev described the unrest as a “well-organised and prepared act”, suggesting – without any presented evidence at the time – that the perpetrators also included “foreign militants from Central Asia and Afghanistan as well as the Middle East”.²

In order to restore stability, and reflecting a loss of confidence in his own security forces, President Tokayev was compelled to call upon the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), to deploy just over 2,000 troops to help relieve local forces by guarding critical national infrastructure.³ Kazakh officials suggested that up to 20,000 people arrived in the country to participate in the riots, while police seized more than 2,000 illegal weapons from rioters.⁴ These statements were, however, disputed by various analysts.⁵

The more likely cause of the violence appears to have been a mix of internal political disputes, alongside deep-seated public anger over widespread grievances such as corruption, nepotism and growing economic inequality. President Tokayev appeared to acknowledge much of this in reforms he pushed through subsequently,⁶ while the arrests of senior figures linked to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev highlighted the fissures exposed by the in-fighting behind some of the violence.⁷ Tensions linger on in the country through reports of alleged mistreatment of some of those detained during the trouble.⁸

These events were followed in mid-May by an outbreak of violence in the majority ethnic Pamiri Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in Tajikistan, on the country's border with Afghanistan. On May 14, hundreds of local residents demonstrated in the region's capital of Khorog, where the situation had been tense since November 2021, when police fatally injured a local man wanted on charges of kidnapping.⁹ Protesters demanded the resignation of top provincial authorities over their alleged failure to investigate the local man's death.

After authorities refused these requests, a large group of local youth marched towards the provincial administration and clashed with security forces, who retaliated by using rubber bullets and tear gas.¹⁰ The Tajik Interior Ministry stated that a group of 200 young supporters of Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, an alleged local criminal who was subsequently killed, conducted an armed assault using guns and firebombs on the ministry's provincial headquarters.¹¹ The riots and clashes left 29 perpetrators and one police officer dead.¹²

President Emomali Rahmon later stated that it was a pre-planned event through which “internal and external stakeholders sought to destabilise the situation”, accusing his long-standing *bête noire*, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), of running the armed attacks and spending nearly US\$2.5 million to finance the perpetrators.¹³ The IRPT, which is banned in Tajikistan and Russia as an extremist and terrorist organisation, has denied these allegations.¹⁴ Most non-government observers, while acknowledging the possible role of influential, informal local powerbrokers in the outbreak of violence, have also highlighted low living standards, youth unemployment, rising food prices and bad central government-community relations as underlying causes.¹⁵ The violence also pulls on a long-standing tension between Pamiri communities and the rest of the country, one of many drivers of the brutal civil war that ravaged the country in the 1990s.

Soon after the violence in GBAO, in Nukus, the capital city of Uzbekistan's autonomous Karakalpakstan republic, large-scale protests erupted in response to proposed constitutional amendments that would limit the region's right to secede. The leader of the protests, Dauletmurat Tazhimuratov, a blogger from Nukus, was detained and released promptly.¹⁶ However, crowds of people assembled in the city centre announced Tazhimuratov as the new head of the autonomous republic, while demanding the resignation of its actual head, who came to meet and negotiate with the protesters at the scene. When protesters attempted to enter and seize the parliament building, they clashed with the National Guard, leading to violence and deaths. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev responded by revoking the proposed changes, while deploying security forces and declaring a state of emergency.

The clashes led to the reported deaths of 18 and 243 injuries.¹⁷ Tazhimuratov was arrested by the police and criminal cases have been opened against him and his accomplices.¹⁸ Some of his supporters insisted that he never promoted secession, but found himself used by separatists in their propaganda.¹⁹ Local authorities in Nukus have pointed to external responsibility without revealing any further details.²⁰ Nevertheless, in his speech on August 26, President Mirziyoyev underlined unemployment, rising prices, unsatisfactory road conditions, shortage of potable water and disruptions in electricity supply as contributing to public discontent, which local authorities had failed to address effectively despite increased investment by the central government. He also announced additional economic support for the region.²¹

Clashes at the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border

On September 14, a new round of armed clashes ignited between border guards at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border close to Kyrgyzstan's Batken province, where periodic provocations and clashes have taken place over the past decade.²² Violence this time around appeared to have erupted due to clashes in the Tajik exclave of Vorukh, which sits entirely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan. The violence rapidly escalated with three-day long clashes involving tanks and armoured personnel carriers, which left 63 dead (including 13 civilians), 144 injured and more than 140,000 evacuated in Kyrgyzstan, and 41 dead and dozens injured in Tajikistan.²³ Predictably, both parties blamed each other for the clashes.

Understanding responsibility and blame, however, seems particularly confusing at this time, especially as both leaders were sitting together in Uzbekistan at a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit when the clashes took place. Whatever the case, one of the most striking aspects of these clashes was Kyrgyzstan's top security official's insistence that they had proof that “terrorist

mercenaries” fought on the side of Tajikistan forces, and officials in Kabul recognised their citizens.²⁴ No more information was provided, and the Tajik side has rejected the claim as propaganda. While both sides have since agreed to demilitarise conflict areas along the border, the clashes highlighted the fragility of border relations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with the bout of violence a repeat of events in 2021, though with a higher casualty count.²⁵

More broadly, while local political in-fighting might have fuelled much of the violence and instability witnessed in the region, these are also feeding off a widespread sense of public discontent. This in turn highlights a major issue that authorities across the region are clearly struggling to handle, one which poses a potential danger in the future.

Militant Groups in Afghanistan and Syria

The Taliban’s violent takeover of Kabul in August 2021 continued to cast uncertainty on Afghanistan from a Central Asian perspective. While all of the region’s countries that share a border with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan share a concern about the overspill of violence, they have – with the notable exception of Tajikistan – chosen to embrace the Taliban authorities in an attempt to bring stability to Afghanistan.

In seeking international recognition, the Taliban have repeatedly insisted that Afghanistan under their rule will be a responsible state that would not allow any terrorist group to use their territory to launch attacks against others. However, these claims are belied by action on the ground (like the revelation that slain Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was resident in Kabul) as well as the ISK’s repeated references to Central Asia as a target in its propaganda and attempted attacks. This is a source of concern across Central Asia.

On October 19, Ramazon Rahimov, Tajikistan’s Minister of Interior, claimed that the Taliban had issued Afghan passports to more than 3,000 members of terrorist groups, including some Central Asians.²⁶ He did not provide any details to substantiate his claim.²⁷ Another top Tajik general assessed the situation in the north-eastern Afghan provinces that share common borders with Tajikistan – especially in Badakhshan, Takhar and Balkh – to be “complicated and tense”.²⁸

He noted that it might further deteriorate in the near term as Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State (IS) and other terror groups continue to operate about 40 training camps and bases, with large numbers of light and heavy weapons, military hardware and even drones obtained as trophies from the toppled Afghan forces. He also revealed there were about 5,000 militants originating from former Soviet countries in the ranks of groups affiliated to AQ, the Taliban and IS in Afghanistan, without breaking down the figure by each group.

Currently, four Central Asian militant units, namely the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU or IJG), the Afghanistan wing of Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB), the Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), are known to operate in Afghanistan under the protection and guidance of the Taliban. Since the Taliban prohibited foreign terrorist groups under its control from active online visibility in 2020, production and propagation of extremist propaganda in the online public domain by such groups has shrunk. The latest updates on these groups mostly come from official reports filtered through the United Nations (UN).

According to UN reporting, the Taliban takeover has granted these Central Asian groups greater freedom of movement inside Afghanistan, with several key terrorist figures recently showing up openly in Kabul.²⁹ IJU, led by Ilimbek Mamatov, a Kyrgyz national who is also known as Khamidulla, and the group’s second-in-command, Amsattor Atabaev from Tajikistan, is active primarily in the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan and Kunduz. IJU reportedly has the strongest military preparedness among Central Asian groups fighting in Afghanistan.

KIB's Afghan wing, led by Dilshod Dekhanov, a Tajik national who is also known as Jumaboi, operates mainly in Badghis province.³⁰ The group has reportedly boosted its fighting force by recruiting several local Afghans. In September, Mamatov and Dekhanov visited Kabul on separate occasions, asking for the Taliban's approval and assistance to unify Central Asian groups under their respective leadership. Taliban officials denied this request, pushing instead to make the groups part of the newly developed Taliban army. While the exact reasons and the pretext given by the two leaders for the proposed unification were unclear, they were competing to consolidate control over some Central Asian militant groups. It might also show the Taliban's willingness to increase the size of its armed forces.

Jamaat Ansarullah, led by Sajod (the son of Amriddin Tabarov, alias Domullo Amriddin, the group's notorious founding leader from Tajikistan who was killed in 2016 in Afghanistan), retains close ties with the Taliban and AQ. The group is also known in Afghanistan as the "Tajik Taliban", as it unites about 300 militants in its ranks, predominantly Tajik nationals and some Afghan Tajiks. Since September 2021, Jamaat Ansarullah has assisted the Taliban force in administering some districts in Badakhshan and Kunduz, and in guarding sections of the common border with Tajikistan.³¹

In July, reports emerged that the leader of the group, Mohammed Sharipov, also known as Mehdi Arsalan, had broken away from Jamaat Ansarullah to create a new group called Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT). However, since this declaration, there has been little change in the militants' activities. The group appears to continue to operate alongside the Taliban in the north of Afghanistan, and the logic of re-naming itself seems unclear. It bears attention, however, as it could ultimately develop into a wider split from the Taliban, particularly given the tensions that have been visible between the Taliban and their Central Asian origin or ethnic cadres over the past year.³²

ISK Boosts Propaganda Threats Against Central Asia

This tension was something noticed by the Islamic State's branch in Afghanistan, with the ISK throughout 2022 intensifying its propaganda campaigns against Central Asian governments. Though the group's capability remains debatable, their interest in Central Asia is strong, and they made three failed attempts to target the region with rockets fired across the border in 2022. Reports on the first case appeared on April 19 when ISK and its networks claimed to have hit a military camp in the southern Uzbek city of Termiz.³³ Authorities in Uzbekistan denied the claim, though large deployments of the Uzbek military were seen in the region. The Taliban later confirmed, without providing evidence, that ISK members had fired rockets from inside Afghanistan towards Uzbekistan, but they did not reach the Uzbek border and the perpetrators were captured.

On May 7, more rockets were launched from Afghanistan's Takhar province into the neighbouring Panj district in Tajikistan. ISK claimed responsibility for the incident, which Tajik authorities dismissed as "bullets [that] accidentally ended up on the territory of Tajikistan" after a shootout between Taliban and ISK forces near the shared border.³⁴ Later on July 7, five dud rockets fired from Afghanistan landed in Uzbekistan's border town of Termez, causing no injuries but slightly damaging four houses and a football stadium.³⁵ Soon after, the Taliban announced the killing of three and the arrest of four ISK militants in Kunduz, whom it suspected of conducting the last two rocket attacks.³⁶

Although these attacks were an operational failure for ISK, they generated attention and served as a morale booster for the group, while undermining the credibility of the Taliban. ISK had also expanded the production, reproduction and propagation of propaganda in Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz languages through its media teams, such as Al-Azaim Foundation and Xuroson Ovozi.³⁷ Yet this noise has not resulted in an increased threat, with some analysts suggesting the terrorist group might be in decline.³⁸

In this respect, and notwithstanding all the attention directed towards Central Asia in their publications, ISK has yet to hit any targets (outside the failed cross-border rocket attacks and a very lightly sourced report of an attempt to target the Turkmenistan Embassy in Kabul in late August 2021).³⁹ The attack on the Russian Embassy by ISK in September, however, also highlighted the group's ability to strike its desired targets.⁴⁰ The recent revelations that the shooter in an ISK-claimed attack at a shrine in Shiraz, Iran, was a Tajik national also underscored how ISK's Central Asian cadres are regionally mobile.⁴¹ All this raises further questions as to why the group has not yet followed through on its Central Asian rhetoric.

HTS-Linked Groups and Individuals

In Syria, AQ-linked Central Asian combat units, such as Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and KIB's central core, have remained active primarily in north-western Idlib province. As in previous years, both KTJ and KIB are part of the jihadist alliance under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), itself an evolution of AQ's former representative on the Syrian battlefield. KTJ, led by Ilmurad Hikmatov (alias Abdul Aziz) and his deputy Akhliddin Novkatiy (Navqotiy), is assessed to have been relatively weakened by the quarrel that broke out between Hikmatov and former KTJ leader and key ideologue, Abu Saloh, after the latter's defection to Jabhat Ansar al-Din (JAD) in June 2020.⁴²

On September 11, Russia's Defence Ministry reported that its air forces had killed Abu Saloh, whose real name was Sirajuddin Mukhtarov, along with several top HTS members in an airstrike in Syria.⁴³ If confirmed, his removal would be a major blow to the group, which has been accused by the US State Department of being linked to both the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek and the 2017 Metro attack in St Petersburg.⁴⁴ The group's future trajectory remains unclear, even with the emergence of Navqotiy as its chief ideologue.⁴⁵ His recent propaganda narratives have centred on the importance and legitimacy of conducting armed jihad in Syria.

KIB is led by Ramazan Nurmanov, a Tajik national whose father was reportedly a veteran jihadist militant who gained fighting experience in Afghanistan and Syria. KIB has kept its 2016 public pledge of allegiance to the Taliban, possibly facilitated by the key group leaders' fighting background and networking in Afghanistan. Currently, KIB has a force strength of 110 fighters who operate mainly in north-western Latakia province. Online videos and photos released by KIB and KTJ indicate that both groups have played an active role in HTS-led operations against the Syrian Armed Forces and rival terrorist groups in Idlib and Latakia, and lately against the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) in Afrin in October.

Besides the two groups, there are some notorious individuals, such as Farrukh Fayzimatov, who are affiliated to HTS. As discussed in the 2021 annual report, Fayzimatov is an Idlib-based Tajik militant who goes by the *nom de guerre* Faruq Shami, and who allegedly had links to the perpetrator of the October 2020 Paris attack on the schoolteacher Samuel Paty. While presenting himself as an "independent blogger-reporter", Fayzimatov in 2022 continued to produce and circulate videos in the online domain, including blogging sites, YouTube and Twitter. However, unlike in the past, recent materials did not contain words like "jihad" or scenes of fighting and training.⁴⁶

Although both KTJ and KIB have confined their operational activities within Syria, they have increased online efforts to reach out to potential sympathisers, including various diaspora communities. Throughout the year, officials in both Central Asia and Russia reported arrests of suspected members or supporters of regional groups (KTJ and KIB in particular). It is difficult, however, to appreciate the nature of these links in some cases due to the paucity of publicly available information. For example, in late August, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed to have detained a Central Asian whom they stated had been radicalised in Turkey to travel to India via Moscow. The individual had planned to launch a punitive attack on IS' behalf in response to alleged inflammatory comments made

on Indian television by Nupur Sharma, a former spokesperson for India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).⁴⁷ Since then, nothing more has been heard about the case.

Responses

There were no major changes in the region's responses to terrorist threats in 2022, with most authorities continuing existing policies. The biggest source of radicalisation appears to be the experience of labour migration in Russia, which continues to account for the largest portion of radicalised individuals of Central Asian origin. In the first half of the year, Uzbekistan repatriated 59 nationals who were detained abroad, including in Russia, for their alleged links to militant groups.⁴⁸ Over the same period, the country disrupted several online (particularly on Telegram) recruitment and fund-raising cells linked to groups such as IS and KTJ, leading to the detention of 250 radical suspects.⁴⁹

At the same time, events in Afghanistan continued to pose a major concern for security forces across the region, as highlighted above. In response, all of the region's countries – except Tajikistan – have chosen to embrace and work closely with the Taliban authorities on the assumption that this offers the best hope for stability. And even in Tajikistan, the government has chosen to resume some border trading, suggesting they see a path of engagement as a possibility on specific issues.

The path of engagement has also faced issues – the repeated (if failed) ISK cross-border strikes into Uzbekistan caused major frictions between Kabul and Tashkent. Some in the region worry about what precedent might be set if the Taliban successfully builds an Islamic Emirate on the borders of secular Muslim-majority Central Asia. Local observers point to growing levels of public, outward religious expression, alongside larger societal tensions illustrated by the mass unrest highlighted at the beginning of this article.

There has been a growing volume of discussion by external partners about supporting counter terrorism efforts in the region, with a particular focus on Afghanistan. This has included a growing volume of visits and attention by the United States (US) to strengthen its 'overwatch' capability of Afghanistan from the region. In the case of Tajikistan, it is notable the degree to which the government attracted considerable external support from competing powers. The country received and hosted an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) support from Iran, China and the US, while the Russian military base there has remained, though the number of soldiers present has been depleted following their re-deployment to Ukraine. This broader pattern of activity is worth keeping in view given its potential to become a focus for great power tensions and conflict.

Beyond this, the Tajik government repatriated another 146 women and children from camps in Syria.⁵⁰ While exact numbers of Central Asians left in the camps in Syria remain unclear, it appears that Kyrgyzstan might undertake another repatriation exercise of children from the camps soon.⁵¹ There have currently been no reports of recidivism amongst the Central Asians who have returned, though it is unclear exactly what has happened in all cases.⁵²

Finally, it is hard to gauge the practical impact of the decision by the US State Department to add KTJ to its list of proscribed terrorist organisations.⁵³ However, it was notable that they chose to highlight the group's responsibility for the 2017 St Petersburg attack and the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek. The 2016 attack, for example, had previously been linked to Uyghur networks with links to Syria, though it is possible these might have had links to KTJ as well. Washington's decision to specifically highlight the attacks on China and Russia came as relations between Washington, Beijing and Moscow continued to become more tense, suggesting a possible attempt by the US government to highlight possible counter terrorism cooperation with their otherwise adversaries. This might be an attempt by the Biden administration to counter the damage done by the previous Trump administration's decision to de-list the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁵⁴

Outlook

In sum, Central Asia continues to have many strands of radicalisation threatening regional security, despite the absence of attacks at home. This might be due to a highly effective local security apparatus, or a threat which has yet to materialise. Certainly, events in Afghanistan remain a concern on several fronts, and the instability seen across the region since the beginning of the year suggests high levels of disenfranchisement from which extremist groups might be able to profit, unless the authorities develop more effective mechanisms to address the socioeconomic and other grievances fuelling these tensions. This, atop the continuing war in Ukraine which is resonating across the former Soviet space, suggests a bumpy year ahead for Central Asia.

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China

In 2022, despite ongoing concerns about Xinjiang's stability, the terrorist threat from within China's borders was substantively diminished as a result of the authorities' security and re-education actions. On the other hand, the terrorism threat from neighbouring regions such as South Asia and Africa persisted, which placed Chinese interests and personnel abroad at the crosshairs of security concerns in these host countries. Ahead of his third term, Chinese President Xi Jinping's July 2022 visit to Xinjiang was widely believed to be a move designed to showcase the nation's unity on the Xinjiang issue, and to affirm the government's success in cracking down on domestic sources of terrorism.¹

Trends

The external security threat arising from terrorism to China has evolved since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021. Following reports in 2022 that the Taliban had moved Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) militants from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province to Central Afghanistan upon China's request, in July 2022, a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report maintained that some TIP elements moved back to Badakhshan, only to rebuild several hideouts there.² Reportedly, the group has managed to expand its area of operations and purchase weapons from the black market to boost its operational capabilities. Moreover, exploiting TIP's anger towards the Taliban, a delegation of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) members reportedly met with Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. Per UN reporting, 50 Uyghur fighters from TIP defected to ISK after the meeting. This was evident during the bombing of a Shia mosque in northern Kunduz province where the suicide bomber Muhammad al-Uyghuri carried out the attack. Qari Faruq, the TIP operational commander in Badakhshan, had reportedly also been approached by the ISK leader to join their group, but declined. ISK appears to have been successful in recruiting new militants through monetary incentives.

Al-Qaeda, TIP and ISK's Anti-China Narratives

An anti-China narrative revolving around the Uyghur community's grievances has become commonplace in jihadist propaganda in recent years, as evidenced by the criticism of Beijing in Al-Qaeda, TIP and ISK's propaganda publications. Through Al-Qaeda's Urdu-language magazine, *Nawai Afghan Jihad*, the militant group has focused on China's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province,³ Pakistan-China relations and China's alleged complicity in perpetrating violence against Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims.⁴ In the past, TIP has leveraged its ties to Al-Qaeda to call for leading jihadist figures, including the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders, to pledge more public support for Uyghur separatism and to be more vocal about China's domestic security clampdown on Muslims.

Likewise, ISK's narratives have not only criticised Beijing's growing ties with the Taliban, but also its policies in Xinjiang. For instance, in its newsletter editorial (*al-Naba*), IS accused China of using "the method of investment" to "strengthen its ties with tyrannical governments", and urged Muslims "to wage war against the idolators of China everywhere" by killing and abducting Chinese nationals and workers as well as attacking Beijing's economic interests and investments.⁵ In one other publication, the pro-Islamic State (IS) al-Battar Media framed the success of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as being hinged on the expulsion of Muslims. It further expressed support for Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang by stating that IS "declared war on China in direct backing and support for Uighur Muslims", and that the war it was waging was directed at "the interests of the Communist state".⁶

Threats to Chinese Interests from Militant Groups in South Asia and Africa

Over a year since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, the jihadist landscape in South Asia remains fraught with uncertainty. Compared to militant groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the likelihood of direct TIP attacks against Beijing's interests is relatively low at this juncture. However, the lack of clarity about the Taliban's ability and willingness to work with Beijing to stem the threat of the TIP remains a concern for China. TIP's operational strength is estimated to be around 300-450, and its main leader, Abdul Haq al Turkistani, is believed to be alive. A May 2022 video footage released by the TIP featured Abdul Haq, as well as Abdulsalam al Turkistani, a senior TIP religious official and propagandist, celebrating the Eid al-Fitr in Afghanistan, a Muslim festival marking the end of Ramadan.⁷

TTP and BLA have claimed responsibility for attacks against Chinese projects and institutions in Pakistan on multiple occasions. BLA militants claimed responsibility for the most recent suicide attack carried out on April 26, 2022 outside the University of Karachi's Confucius Institute. The attack killed 3 Chinese nationals and a Pakistani national.⁸ In May, Pakistani authorities foiled a suicide attack by a member of the BLA against a Chinese envoy.⁹ The strategic choice of target for the July 14, 2021 bomb attack – a bus carrying Chinese workers in Dasu in Upper Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province – appeared to point to a convergence between TTP and TIP. The bus was headed to the construction site of the Dasu hydropower project.¹⁰ Apart from old actors, newer actors have also emerged as threats to Chinese interests. In early October 2022, a Chinese couple holding Pakistani passports were killed in Karachi after an armed attacker opened fire inside a dental clinic. A little-known Sindhu militant group claimed responsibility for the attack. It is not known if the victims were targeted for their ethnicity.¹¹

TIP Presence in Afghanistan

Increased threats to Chinese interests could occur due to a number of factors. First, the relocation of the TIP in the north could well provide a permissive environment for the group to regroup, rebuild and regain strength. TIP militants were moved from Afghanistan's Badakhshan province to Central Afghanistan in 2022. Earlier in 2022, a UNSC report indicated that TIP "is seeking to embed itself in Afghanistan through various means, including marriage and fraudulently obtaining local identity documents, and to portray its members as Afghan residents". In July 2022, a report by the UNSC maintained that TIP has rebuilt several strongholds in Badakhshan, north-east Afghanistan, and "expanded its area of operations and covertly purchased weapons, with the aim of improving its capabilities for terrorist activities".

Second, the TIP, made up of ethnic Uyghurs, could also be actively recruited by ISK in Afghanistan, as ISK courts militants from other terror outfits, disaffected Taliban fighters and disenfranchised local ethnic minorities to realise its vision of building a so-called caliphate in the Khorasan region.¹² Despite TIP's close ties with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, hardliners from the TIP could also defect to ISK given restraints from the Taliban on the TIP, and the ISK's more explicitly anti-Taliban, anti-China stance.

TIP's Alliances with Other Militant Groups in Afghanistan

Third, the TIP's lack of capability to carry out attacks may also be mitigated by the growing operational linkages forged between the TIP and other militant outfits. A July 2022 UNSC report indicated that members of the TTP and the Al-Qaeda affiliate group Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) had established ties with each other. The JA, led by Tajik national Mahdi Arsalon, has reportedly received military assistance from the Taliban in the form of military vehicles, weaponry and equipment to the JA. This could inadvertently provide an indirect boost to the TIP's operations given their operational linkages. The report also claimed that the TIP was "augmenting its military training on the manufacture and use of improvised explosive devices, focusing on morale and planning to carry out terrorist attacks against Chinese interests in the region when the time is right".¹³

Fourth, the increased threat to Chinese interests could also occur as anti-China grievances intensify with the influx of Chinese capital in Afghanistan. This can be seen in the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI connecting China to Gwadar port on the Indian Ocean. Located in Balochistan, home to separatist insurgencies, a convergence of anti-China grievances among the militant groups there could lead to greater instability in the region. Moreover, radicalisation by disenfranchised Balochs could also occur. The Balochs have long been campaigning against exploitation by the federal government in Pakistan, claiming that many of the benefits of economic development go to the other provinces at the expense of the local Baloch communities. With growing economic ties between China and Pakistan, this could see China being pulled further into the conflict between the Balochs and the local government and at risk of further attacks by the militants. Ethnic Uyghurs and the Uzbek and Tajik militants in northern Afghanistan would be united by their Turkic descent, and any decision to deport/expel ethnic Uyghurs might be perceived in the same light as the Taliban's mistreatment of ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan.

Transnationalisation of TIP Fighters from Syria to Afghanistan

Fifth, any convergence of activity between TIP elements in Syria and TIP in Afghanistan could be destabilising for the region and pose a greater threat to Chinese interests – given the TIP's explicitly anti-China agenda. Apart from the failure of the Taliban to abide by its promise to continue restraining the group's activities in the long term, TIP's presence in Afghanistan could be augmented by an inward flow of TIP fighters from Syria. Numerous credible sources and reports accuse Turkey of facilitating TIP jihadists into Syria's Idlib province. Currently, the UN estimates that the contingent of Uyghur fighters in Idlib remains closely allied with the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and numbers around 1,000 to 2,000 fighters.

In the past, TIP fought as part of the Taliban-Al-Qaeda axis in Afghanistan and Syria, treating these two battlefields as interchangeable, coequal parts of the same overall jihadist conflict. Its main goals are to establish an independent East Turkestan state replacing Xinjiang. While isolated incidents, the recent shift in the modus operandi of some TIP elements in Syria could also point to the likelihood of two probabilities: an apparent emboldening of the group towards a more hardline brand of Islamist extremism or desperation on the part of some of these individuals. According to a Turkish media source, in August 2022, TIP fighters entered some homes of the residents of a local Druze village in Idlib Province and attacked their owners. The source also stated that in another incident, a TIP-affiliated fighter entered a mosque before Friday prayers and accused the worshippers of being infidels.¹⁴

Al-Shabaab: An Anti-China Force to be Reckoned With in North Africa

Finally, Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab has emerged as the leading anti-China force in North Africa. In 2019, suspected Al-Shabaab militants opened fire on Chinese construction facilities, and in 2020, the group reportedly attempted multiple attacks on Chinese commercial assets in Kenya. Similarly, in January 2022, the group also targeted a China Communications Construction Company worksite in Kenya, and killed a Chinese national in a March 2022 attack on a highway construction site near Majengo in Kenya's Lamu County.¹⁵

In the past, Al-Shabaab militants targeted the Lamu port as a reaction to Kenya's state-led government initiative and counter terrorism operations, and due to its use as a military facility by the Kenya Defence Forces and the US military. However, China has displaced the US as the new target. This is in particular as the Kenya National Highway Authority and the China Communications Construction Company commenced operations in May 2021, after signing a \$166m deal to construct a 453km road in the Lamu Port South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor.¹⁶

Response and Outlook

It has been speculated that China would displace the US to become the jihadists' next big target following the latter's withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Given recent attacks and ISK's anti-China propaganda, it has become increasingly apparent that Chinese interests and projects are now at the receiving end of attacks by militants. A further increase in economic footprint via the BRI in the region will increase the threat to Beijing's interests. This is particularly in unstable and volatile regions in South Asia and Africa.

China-Pakistan relations remain the 'soft underbelly' of the Pakistan government. Militants in South Asia have capitalised on this aspect by launching their attacks on Chinese targets in their struggles for recognition. In addition to the geographical proximity between the region and China, and South Asian jihadists' familiarity with Chinese policies and influence in the region, the narratives against China by South Asian jihadists are becoming increasingly nuanced, which suggests intensifying opposition against perceived Chinese transgressions. In response, Pakistan and China have stepped up counter terror operations to safeguard Chinese projects. In the case of Africa, China is increasingly relying on Chinese contractors from state-owned security firms – Beijing DeWe Security Service, Huaxin Zhong An Security Group, Overseas Security Guardians and China Security Technology Group, to name a few – to provide security presence on the ground and to protect Chinese investments in these volatile regions.

China's global geopolitical and geoeconomics footprint is likely to increase over the next decade, which will draw greater scrutiny from both the local population and the jihadists in the host countries. Any negative externalities arising from China's expanding global presence will likely be exploited by militant groups to create and purvey their anti-China narratives and to consequently pushback on the Chinese presence by launching further attacks. Whilst navigating the complex and unfamiliar local terrain, there will be fundamental questions raised about the nature and extent of Chinese actors' involvement in these host countries.

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The Middle East: A Region of Serious Problems and Dilemmas

Though no major war was witnessed in the Middle East in 2022, the underlying factors of insecurity and instability persisted. The region fluctuated between stability and volatility on account of inter-state and state-society tensions and conflicts. Non-state violent actors like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) continued to grow in the region's conflict zones and ungoverned spaces, despite their leaders' decapitation in Syria and Afghanistan. At the same time, the Iran-Israel tensions lingered and were at risk of morphing into a full-blown crisis. Likewise, the Iran-Saudi relations showed possible signs of rapprochement, but a breakthrough looked distant. The anti-hijab protests in Iran looked threatening for the clerical regime. In sum, a discomforting calm loomed over the Middle East throughout the year amid several push and pull factors, which can keep the region an area of serious concern in world politics.

Trends

The Middle East was disconcertingly eventful in 2022. Although there was no major war, religious radicalism, localised tensions and conflicts, national struggles between the status quo and anti-status quo forces, and geopolitical polarisation with low-profile outside power interventionism continued to feature in the regional landscape. The region's traditional reputation as a volatile and differentiated arena in world politics saw little improvement, and its developments were considerably overshadowed by the Ukrainian crisis and other pressing global issues such as climate change, inflation, the COVID-19 pandemic, food shortages and supply problems.

Of the several factors that influenced the region's capricious terrain, three stood out as the most prevalent – violent extremism; inter-state rivalries and hostilities; and national upheavals. These were all interspersed with major powers' interventionist activism in pursuit of conflicting interests.

Violent Extremism

Extremist groups that believe in the use of violence to achieve their ideological and notional objectives to alter national and regional orders continued to haunt many parts of the Middle East. Prominent among them were Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) and their networks of affiliates. Both groups thrived in the conflict and marginal zones within the core and greater Middle East – including Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. The United States (US)' decapitation of the groups' leaders – most importantly Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi in 2022 – did little to eradicate the jihadist networks' ideological vigour and operational capability. While Saif al-Adel, an Egyptian militant and Al-Qaeda veteran, was in line to succeed al-Zawahiri, IS announced Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as its new leader on March 10. Although unrelated to the slain al-Qurayshi, little is known about him and his strategic priorities at this stage.¹ Nonetheless, as franchised entities, Al-Qaeda and IS managed to hit targets and cause serious security concerns across the region.

The United Nations (UN)'s reports, confirming US intelligence findings, indicated that while Al-Qaeda and IS were deprived of the capacity to execute high-profile terrorist attacks similar to 9/11, they still used opportunities not only to reconstitute and regain composure, but also to secure territorial footholds in different conflict arenas.² The reports validated an earlier assertion by Anthony Cordesman in relation to IS that "The U.S. may have helped to break up the IS proto-state or 'caliphate'... But scarcely defeated it". He claimed that IS remains cohesive, with substantial funding to exploit opportunities in Iraq and Syria and beyond.³

The same was true about Al-Qaeda. The US and allied retreat in defeat and the return to power of the extremist Taliban regime in Afghanistan proved rejuvenating for both groups. The Taliban's camaraderie with Al-Qaeda remained intact. Despite the former's public denial, Afghanistan was

left open to Al-Qaeda's main figures and operatives to strengthen their operational cells in Kabul and several other provinces. According to the UN report, Al-Qaeda is active in at least 15 Afghan provinces. The US drone killing of al-Zawahiri in the Afghan capital on July 31, 2022 provided clear evidence of that. Concurrently, the Sunni ethnic Pashtun Taliban hardened their exclusionary, misogynistic and discriminatory theocratic rule, with a sense of ethnic, tribal Pashtun supremacy. They savagely targeted women and the Shia ethnic Hazaras and Tajiks, especially their Panjshiri branch.

However, they failed to stunt the activities of their rival Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) or, for that matter, the National Resistance Front (NRF). ISK expanded its operations in the country with the same approach that the core IS has pursued in Iraq and Syria – that is, to whip up Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. However, the NRF, standing for a free, inclusive and democratic Afghanistan, with progressive Islam as its religion, enlarged its armed opposition to the Taliban and ISK, operating in several northern and north-eastern parts of Afghanistan.

Sharing common Salafist-Wahhabi⁴ ideological and notional goals, though pursuing different timetables to achieve them, Al-Qaeda and IS operations complemented one another. They struck many targets in the Levant, Yemen, Egypt and Libya. For example, in January 2022, a sizeable contingent of IS fighters executed a major attack on a prison in north-eastern Syria, where suspected extremists were being held, sparking a major battle with the US-backed Kurdish opposition that continued for more than 24 hours and left dozens dead.⁵ Although the latter prevailed, it clearly demonstrated the strength of the network's operational capability. In the same month, IS gunmen "stormed an army barrack north of Baghdad in a pre-dawn raid, killing 11 soldiers before escaping".⁶ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) managed to hold on to its captured territory in southern and eastern Yemen with a capacity to defend its turf. In a June 2022 attack, AQAP militants killed 10 Yemeni soldiers.⁷ Although both Al-Qaeda and IS affiliates remained largely squeezed out of Tunisia and Libya, the latter still provided fertile ground for their resurgence, given the country's extreme fragility. The Islamic Republic of Iran was not immune either. Tehran blamed IS for the latest attack on the Cheragh Mosque – a holy Shia shrine in Shiraz – in early October, which killed 15 and injured 40 others. It vowed to avenge the attack at all costs.⁸

Inter-State Tensions and Disputes

The Middle East maintained its reputation as a zone of frenemies, rivalries and conflicts. In addition to the traditional Israeli-Palestinian dispute, which has resulted in many deadly confrontations over the years (the latest being in August 2022), the danger of Israeli-Iranian hostilities morphing into a full-blown confrontation remained high. Despite the resumption of dialogue between Tehran and Riyadh through Iraqi mediation, the two sides still harboured fundamental ideological and geopolitical differences that could not be expected to subside easily and substantially. They stayed locked in proxy conflicts in several regional conflict zones – Yemen, Syria and Lebanon – and have lacked any formal relations since Riyadh broke all ties in January 2016. Subsequently, the Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), slammed the Iranian Islamic regime's extremism and said that he was working on taking the battle to Iran.⁹

However, Tehran and Riyadh showed an inclination towards a possible rapprochement. The two rivals held meetings in Baghdad through the Iraqi government's mediation, though without any major breakthroughs. While the sectarian rivalry, based on Tehran championing the cause of Shia Islam and Saudi Arabia claiming the leadership of Sunni Islam, somewhat subsided, conflicting geopolitical and security interests persisted. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners, except Qatar, continued to view Iran as a major threat, with deep concerns about Iran's nuclear programme and potential to acquire military nuclear capability. They also maintained, along with Israel and several Western allies, most importantly the US, their denunciation of the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. Meanwhile, in line with the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s and Bahrain's normalisation of relations with Israel, Riyadh kept nurturing informal links with the Jewish state in an anti-Iranian united front, prompting Tehran in October to warn Saudi Arabia over its "reliance" on Israel.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the US and Iran remained at loggerheads. President Joe Biden sought to see a revival of the July 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear agreement, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which his impulsive predecessor, Donald Trump, had pulled out in 2018, while denouncing Iran as a regional menace.¹¹ Yet, he not only remained totally committed to the US-Israel strategic partnership, but also tried to shore up America's declining relations with the GCC, most importantly Saudi Arabia, since assuming power.

Iran, on the other hand, showed no urgency in the JCPOA's resurrection in any form, except on its own terms. While resuming negotiations directly with five other signatories to the deal (Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China) and indirectly with the US in Geneva, the newly elected hardline President Ebrahim Raisi – an intimate ally of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – moved ahead with Iran's uranium enrichment to 60 percent purity. Concurrently, to counter US pressure, Tehran took its relations to a higher level with Russia and China. It maintained its close coordination with Moscow in saving Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and reportedly provided Russia with drones and missiles to target civilian and infrastructural sites in Ukraine to maximum effect.¹² It also actively pursued the implementation of the 25-year Cooperation Programme, or Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which it signed with China on March 27, 2021.¹³

Simultaneously, the Biden administration's Middle East policy seemed to be in tatters. Riyadh took issue with the US over its criticism of MBS for the gruesome killing of Saudi dissident and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents in Istanbul in 2018. In the October 5 OPEC-plus meeting, it joined forces with Putin's Russia to reduce OPEC's oil production by 2 million barrels a day, to Washington's dismay. Washington desperately wanted to isolate Moscow and curtail its ability to fund its aggression in Ukraine as well as secure a reduction in energy prices just before the US mid-term elections, which Trump's Republican supporters were poised to win.¹⁴

Biden vowed to retaliate, including halting the sale of American arms to Saudi Arabia, despite the US being a traditional security provider to the Kingdom.¹⁵ Riyadh rejected Washington's retaliatory posture, claiming its decision was made purely on a market basis, and derided outside interference in the conduct of its affairs.¹⁶

At the same time, Washington could not confidently count on another oil-rich Arab GCC ally, the UAE, to assuage its concerns. In October, UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan visited Vladimir Putin, who praised expanding relations between the two sides.¹⁷ A rift in US ties with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi relations could only be music to the ears of not only Moscow and Beijing, but also the ruling clerics in Iran. All this indicated that there was a sense of camaraderie shaping up between autocratic, theocratic and authoritarian regimes, replacing the traditional *Pax Americana* in the region.

As the Vienna talks between Iran and other signatories to the July 2015 nuclear agreement dragged on with little prospect of a settlement, Israel was also on edge. It persisted in its opposition to Iran's nuclear programme, repeating its vow never to allow the country to rival it as a nuclear power. The two sides have been bitter enemies since the advent of the Iranian Islamic regime over 43 years ago. Israel has treated Iran as an existential threat that has sought to encircle the Jewish state.

Both states have been locked in a shadowy war. Israel has targeted Iranian forces and those of Iran's allies, Hezbollah and Assad's regime, in Syria and Lebanon as well as Iran's nuclear scientists and facilities (through cyber-attacks) and tankers.¹⁸ Iran has hit Israeli or Israeli-related assets, including ships, wherever possible, along with backing Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas as formidable resistance forces to Israel.

With the right-wing former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu returning to power as the head of a coalition that won the November 2022 election and included the racist and anti-Arab Religious Zionism Party, the battle lines with Iran were set to sharpen. Denouncing the JCPOA as the "worst deal of the century", Netanyahu has persistently campaigned against Washington resurrecting the deal in any form and threatened to act unilaterally to demolish Iran's capacity to produce nuclear

bombs. He is dedicated to the goal of making sure that Israel is the only nuclear power in the region, and has urged the international community to stand up to what one of his predecessors, Neftali Bennet, called “a regime of brutal hangmen [who] must never be allowed to have weapons of mass destruction”.¹⁹

An Israel-Iran war, intentional or unintentional, would be disastrous for the two protagonists, the region and beyond. Despite a desire by President Biden to avoid America’s involvement in such a war, in the event of it does happen, Washington would find it obligatory to support the Jewish state under the US-Israel Strategic Partnership deal. Russia and China can be expected to make a common anti-US cause with Iran as their close strategic friend.

Indeed, there are many other inter-state tensions and disputes that have the potential to lead to major flare-ups in the region, for example, between Egypt and Turkey over Libya, or Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara, or Egypt and Sudan over the Nile waters. However, the chances of any of them developing into a major confrontation appear slim for the foreseeable future. Yet the same cannot be said about another round of mostly localised Israeli-Hamas confrontations in the future.

National Upheavals

Another issue that dominated the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape was the state-society dichotomy. All the states, including Israel, experienced polarisation between forces of the status quo, who support incremental change as befitting their hold on power, and forces of change, who a reformation of their states and societies. The resultant popular political uprisings, or ‘Arab Spring’, that emerged in the early part of the last decade continued to haunt the constituent states – from Iran and Iraq to Egypt, Sudan and Algeria – as another major factor of instability. Regarding Iran, the rift between its Islamic regime and society had never been deeper and wider.

The Iranian women’s anti-hijab protests over the death of the young Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in the custody of the morality police spread into nationwide unrest against the Islamic regime.²⁰ It commenced in mid-July and continued unabated despite the regime’s harsh crackdown on it. It was reminiscent of the public uprisings that evolved into the revolution of 1978-79, toppling the Shah’s pro-Western monarchy and installing Khomeini’s Shia Islamic order with an anti-US and anti-Israeli posture and a call for the export of the revolution to the predominantly Sunni region.

The unrest that started with Amini’s death posed the most serious threat to the regime’s legitimacy. The events in Iran were potentially comforting to the country’s regional and Western adversaries, though at the regional level Saudi Arabia and its allies were also on their guard against any possible impact on their own countries in a revival of the Arab Spring. The Iranian regime possessed the necessary instruments of state power to suppress the unrest and appeared determined to do so. At the same time, the protesters, representing an accumulative grief resulting from poor governance, declining social and economic conditions, widespread corruption, theocratic impositions, and costly involvement in the Levant and Yemen as well as harsh US sanctions and the pandemic’s savagery, appeared equally resolved to maintain their rage. The confrontations took a heavy toll, with hundreds of protesters and dozens of security forces members killed and injured. The regime also arrested thousands and put them on trial. It was clear that if the regime was to fail to address the public grievances structurally and lose control of the situation, an unravelling of the oil-rich and strategically important Iran could have unpredictable consequences in an already volatile region.

Outlook

2022 was marked in the Middle East by the underlying factors of instability and insecurity and, for that matter, unpredictability. Violent religious extremism, inter-state and state-society tensions and conflicts, along with conflicting major power involvement, left the region vulnerable to fluctuating between relative stability and acute volatility. While some of the very variables that had made it historically both a resourceful and troubled arena of geostrategic significance remained in place,

there were other developments that pointed towards an inflammatory direction in the context of a very disturbed and polarised world.

About the Author

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Perpetrating Militant Jihadist Ideological Narratives

In 2022, the competition between the two leading transglobal Islamist jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), intensified, especially after the AQ-linked Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. However, while they confronted each other on the Afghan battlefield, their propaganda narratives took cues from the same ideological playbook. This was evident in their continued radical interpretations of the Islamic concepts of jihad, hijrah and bai'ah, with the aim to imprint their global and local presence and to recruit followers and sympathisers. IS, in particular, has leveraged organisational and global developments to continually put forward its interpretations of the three concepts in pursuit of its militant agenda. These developments were the deaths of its last two leaders in February and October, and the increased tempo of IS militancy in Africa as the next jihadist frontier. On its part, AQ's ideological propaganda has not deviated from its past iterations, but appears somewhat muted and localised in comparison to IS' transnational nature. In another development relevant to jihadist ideology, the Russian war against Ukraine in February evoked early concerns of a jihadist-far right axis. While such concerns proved unwarranted, the war nevertheless raised two arguments by Islamists on whether it a jihad to be imposed on Muslims. These arguments have been instructive in the study of religious justifications for a militant jihad.

IS and AQ – Sustained by Ideological Narratives

In 2022, the rivalry between the two leading transglobal Islamist jihadist groups, Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), intensified, especially after the AQ-linked Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.¹ IS and AQ have competed against each other in pursuing global expansion with an eye to becoming the most dominant terrorist organisation by capitalising on Muslim communities' political, religious and economic grievances worldwide. IS and AQ have also sought to exploit local grievances in order to gain the allegiance of aggrieved communities, with their affiliates engaging in violence and terrorism.² They operate in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and the Sahel, fighting for resources and recruits and often clashing militarily.

Only IS had managed to establish an erstwhile proto-state in Iraq and Syria with a powerful military and a civil administration, although that collapsed in 2019. At its peak, IS' online propaganda also proved more effective in terms of recruitment than that of AQ.³ Still, moving beyond Iraq and Syria into Southeast Asia, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa has not been easy for IS, despite the potency of its radical narratives among segments of Western Muslims at its peak between 2014-18.

As for AQ, its efforts to lead a unified global movement, which it had arguably previously achieved (in the immediate post-9/11 years until the emergence of IS), have been restrained in recent years. AQ can no longer be regarded as the vanguard of global jihadism. The end of the Soviet-Afghan War marked the redundancy of *dakwah wal jihad* (preaching and jihad), an AQ slogan coined during the aforesaid war that was a clarion call for jihad. Currently, AQ leaders inspire the group's affiliates with their strategic vision while avoiding direct tactical supervision – allowing them to focus on local issues in their respective areas of operation.⁴

Although leadership decapitations in 2022 have significantly reduced both groups' organisational coherence and effectiveness, IS, AQ and their affiliates have survived and still persist in various parts of the world, posing varying degrees of threat. This article focuses on how IS and AQ perpetuate their respective propaganda narratives in response to certain developments affecting their organisations.

Separately, the article also looks at Islamist arguments in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a jihad or otherwise, as well as militant jihadist groups' reactions to the war.

IS and AQ Jihadist Ideologies, Narratives and Propaganda

IS and AQ have presented their ideology as a system of critical religious beliefs interpreted from religious texts which contain opinions of people and situations. The ideology consists of interconnected and interdependent ideas, presented to the audience as if it were what God wants.⁵ When adopted, it justifies their violent actions.

The narrated ideology is disseminated through propaganda on social media to self-radicalise others into believing that establishing a rightful caliphate through militant jihad is a religious duty. The ideological narratives centre mainly on issues such as *tawhid* (Oneness of Allah), *manhaj* (methodology), *hijrah* (emigration), jihad and *jama'ah* (unity of the Islamic community under the rule of a caliph). The ideology reinforces one consistent message – that Muslims must live under the authority of a caliph who implements *shariah* (Islamic law) in order to succeed in this world and the Hereafter. The combination of ideology, narratives, and propaganda forms the lifeblood of IS and AQ, enabling them to remain resilient and adaptable.⁶

Other than telling stories, the narratives also serve as conduits to instil violent radical ideas in the target audience. Communicating with vulnerable individuals in a narrative format allows them to be radicalised without meeting face-to-face and helps scattered sympathetic groups to establish a shared understanding of their past, present and future.

***Baqiya wa Tatamadad* – Mission of IS' Ideological Narratives**

To stem the threat to IS' relevance and dominance within the global jihadist movement, the group uses the oft-repeated slogan of *baqiya wa tatamadad*. It presents narratives of determination, resilience and supremacy to compensate for the collapse of its territorial caliphate in 2019. The slogan helps IS persist in reinforcing its presence and ensuring its survival. It demonstrates IS' resilience in reviving and rebuilding its capabilities. At the same time, it emphasises IS' unity and resolve to remain in business (*baqiya*). By answering the call, IS affiliates in Syria, Iraq, Africa, Afghanistan and East Asia carry out operations to portray IS' expansion efforts and continued activity.⁷

To some extent, the territorial defeat and demise of the self-styled caliphate in the Levant affected IS' credibility. Nevertheless, IS' rhetorical influence and its affiliates in other regions, such as Afghanistan (ISK), West Africa (ISWAP), and East and Southeast Asia, make up for the loss. The slogan appeals to those in localities where rebellion and militancy persist because the central government is weak and unable to resolve local grievances.⁸

IS Call for Hijrah to Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is now home to several branches of IS, where the group marches on to establish a strong base of operations in the theatre.⁹ In a series of propaganda messages over the past year, IS highlighted its 'success' in the region by publishing videos, images and articles about its activities in Africa. IS has referred to Africa as a new land of *hijrah* and jihad through its propaganda messaging. Images of IS activities such as preaching and distributing the *zakat* (almsgiving) represent an attempt to portray the group as having successfully established a legitimate 'Islamic state' and rule by *shariah*, reigniting the categorisation of the world into *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war).¹⁰

For example, in June 2022, ISWAP released a 39-minute video in a local language (possibly Swahili), detailing IS activities in north-eastern Nigeria.¹¹ The video, titled "A Book that Guides and a Sword that

Grants Victory”, documented attacks against the Nigerian army, sermons to locals and distributions of *zakat* (almsgiving). This propaganda messaging put forth the narrative that IS has successfully established a legitimate ‘Islamic state’ as well as *shariah* law in Africa. It was also an attempt by IS to ‘recreate’ its dichotomy of *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-Harb* (abode of war), where ‘true’ Muslims are described as those who live in the former and infidels those who live in the latter, thus allowing IS to conduct acts of terror against Muslims and non-Muslims alike, depending on where they live.

In the same month, IS’ weekly *al-Naba* newsletter (Issue 343, 16 June 2022) published an op-ed titled “Africa: Land of Hijra (migration) and Jihad”.¹² The article praised IS for its growing success in battlefield gains against the ‘infidel’ forces and its implementation of *shariah* over its controlled territories. The article also mentioned that Africa is “what al-Sham (the Levant) used to be yesterday”, before concluding with a call for Muslims to perform *hijrah* to the region.

Promotion of Bai’ah to IS’ So-Called Caliphs

IS has continued to suffer leadership decapitation over the years, but the remnant of IS’ leadership has persevered in projecting the group’s undeterred presence and following through on online propaganda such as public *bai’ah* (swearing of allegiance) to each new caliph.

The release of an official IS audio message confirming the death of IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi on March 10, 2022, also contained the announcement that the group’s Shura Council had appointed a successor and new caliph, Abu al-Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, in an attempt to validate that IS’ organisational structure was still intact. The audio used verse 23 of the Surah *Al-Ahzāb* (the Parties) as the title of its audio message to promote the appointment of the new caliph:

*“Among the believers are men who have proven true to what they pledged to Allah. Some of them have fulfilled their pledge with their lives, others are waiting their turn. They have never changed their commitment in the least.” (Quran, 33:23)*¹³

The verse drove home the point that the preceding caliph had stayed the course until death, and the swearing of allegiance (*bai’ah*) to the new caliph after the release of the audio message showed nothing was amiss.¹⁴

Following the message, from March 11-12, 2022, IS affiliates began sharing photos of their fighters giving *bai’ah* to Abu Hasan al-Qurayshi. These affiliates or *wilayat* (provinces) included Iraq, Syria, Sinai (Egypt), Libya, West Africa, Central Africa, Somalia, East Asia (Philippines), Yemen, Khorasan (Afghanistan), Pakistan and India. Some also released a series of videos titled “The Jihad of the Believers Goes On”. In March, a total of nine episodes were produced by IS Sham (Syria), West Africa, Iraq, Somalia, Khorasan, Pakistan, India, Libya and Sinai, reaffirming their allegiance to the new caliph and avowing that they would avenge the deaths of the former leader and spokesman.

Similarly, when Abu Hasan al-Qurayshi died in October, IS made a belated acknowledgement of his death on November 30, 2022,¹⁵ but photos of *bai’ah* ceremonies to the new caliph, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi, quickly began circulating publicly. In glorifying the new leader, IS spokesman al-Muhajir said, “He is one of the veteran warriors and one of the loyal sons of the Islamic State”.¹⁶

Unchanging AQ Narrative

Following the success of AQ’s ally, the Taliban, in returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, there were some expectations that AQ’s ideological narratives would be further boosted in 2022 in terms of imagination and scale. However, this did not appear to be the case, as AQ’s propaganda machine did not crank up much beyond revelling in the Taliban’s success as a victorious jihad against

Islam's perceived enemies and highlighting it as something worthy of emulation by other followers. On February 19, 2022, AQ's official media arm, Al-Sahab Foundation, released the sixth issue of its *One Ummah* magazine, titled "Verily God has Promised Us with Victory, and Bush with Destruction. We Shall See Which of the Promise Is True!". This title was taken from a quote by the Taliban's co-founder and first leader, Mullah Omar (aka Muhammad Omar Mujahid), whom the magazine called *Amirul Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). In its editorial, the *One Ummah* magazine congratulated the leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Afghan people, the Mujahideen and the Muslim *ummah* in general, for "the expulsion of the Crusader soldiers from the land of Afghanistan, and the complete cleansing of the Afghan Muslim soil from the filth of the Crusaders". The victory in Afghanistan, according to the magazine, was the fulfilment of God's divine promise of victory for the jihad waged by the *ummah*.

It is possible that AQ's lack of ideological dynamism can be attributed to its rudderless situation in 2022, with the death of its long-time leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July, notwithstanding criticism of his less-than-charismatic leadership.

The War in Ukraine – Arguments For and Against Jihad

In the past, Islamist terrorist groups used historical narratives to reframe world events as divine manifestations by building a social construction of the present. Other than crafting narratives and propaganda to support the ideology they embrace, they usually associate the events with Islamic eschatology while using apocalyptic language. However, their recent narratives have been more pragmatic, as is evident in discussions on the Ukraine war.

There are two contrasting views as to whether the Ukraine war constitutes a jihad in which Muslims are encouraged to partake, as was the case made by AQ when the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The first considers the Russian invasion of Ukraine illegal and unlawful in Islam because the Russian government had, in the past, invaded and occupied Muslim-majority Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan during the Russian Empire, also known as Imperial Russia (1721-1917), and the Soviet Union era. According to this argument, Ukraine has the right to defend its territory, even if it means sacrificing lives.

The second supports Russia and equates the Putin government with the non-Muslim Najashi government of historical Habshah, which defended Prophet Muhammad's companions who migrated there during the Prophet's time. According to this view, Muslims must support the Russian government in the war because the Putin government is fair and Muslim-friendly. Those in the Russian armed forces are hence discharging a praiseworthy duty and a legitimate jihad. Not surprisingly, this view is expressed by scholars affiliated with religious institutions under the Russian government, such as Talgat Tadzhuiddin, Head of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia and Grand Mufti of Russia; Salakh Mezhiev, Mufti of Chechnya; and Kamil Samigullin, Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan and Mufti of Tatarstan.¹⁷

There were three observable reactions from militant groups regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. The first supported Russia's war against Ukraine and permitted Muslims to fight under the Russian army. Ramzan Kadyrov, currently the President of the Republic of Chechnya, belongs to this group.¹⁸ His militia, known as the Kadyrovites, was established by his father Akhmad Kadyrov during the two Chechen wars against Russia. However, under Ramzan's rule, the militia was absorbed into Russia's security and armed forces to help maintain security in the Chechen region.¹⁹

The second emerged from Muslim militant groups in Ukraine and the surrounding areas, with ethnic Chechens, Tatars and others taking the side of the Ukrainian army. They perceive Russia as an oppressive power and its military operations as an invasion. However, they have refused to accuse

Kadyrov and his militia or members of Islamic bodies who issued a *fatwa* justifying Muslims' support of and participation in the Russian military action against Ukraine, as apostates.²⁰

The third arose from the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, which is close to AQ and Jund al-Sham, and includes many Chechen fighters hostile to Ramzan's militia. While not involved in the war, they have accused Muslims who support Russia of being traitors and apostates. To them, based on past experience, Russia is a power that is hostile to Islam. However, their stance on fighting alongside the Ukrainian army is as yet unknown.²¹

Thus far, the two main jihadist groups – AQ and IS – have been united against Russia. When the war began, both groups opportunistically encouraged their members and sympathisers to take advantage of the conflict, such as gaining access to weapons to use against their traditional enemies, that is, Western countries.²² Since then, reports have recently emerged that fighters affiliated with AQ in Syria have started to travel to Ukraine to join the fight against the Russian army. These are primarily composed of battle-hardened Chechens and other Central Asian ethnic groups in Syria.²³

Conclusion

While reports of AQ fighters emigrating to Ukraine are of concern, the projection of the Russia-Ukraine war as a jihad incumbent on Islamist militants remains limited as of now. With the protraction of the war into 2023, the situation bears close monitoring, particularly among the Islamist terrorist following in the former Soviet republics and Central Asian countries, who may be looking for their next jihad battleground.

Notwithstanding leadership decapitations affecting both IS and AQ, their respective core ideological narratives have been sustained at the centre and the periphery. Hence, we can expect the competition between IS and AQ to continue in the foreseeable future. The threat they pose to the regional and global security landscape will endure as long as they can narrate and disseminate their ideology unchallenged through social media and other offline means. For counter-narratives to be effective and robust, greater resources must be made available, both online and offline. Since counter-narratives are time- and resource-intensive, they require dedicated commitment from all stakeholders, in the government and in society, to be successful.

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Extreme Right in the West: In a Transition?

The violent edge of the extreme right in the West, in attack terms, has continued to be on a downward trend as in the past few years. There were no large-scale extreme right-wing attacks in Europe, North America or Australasia in 2022 – with isolated lone actors being the only ones responsible for casualties in advance of the ideology. At the same time, there were numerous arrests in a growing range of locations, and the underlying mobilising narratives of anti-establishmentarianism, anti-immigration, anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer + (LGBTQ+), racist and white supremacist sentiment continuing to galvanise groups and individuals across the West.

Trends

Notwithstanding the continued reduction in violence in the West observed in 2022, three elements of the extreme right remain of concern. First is the ongoing mainstreaming of far right political movements in various Western countries.¹ The extent of mainstreaming varies considerably from country to country. In the United States (US), France and Italy, the far right has made notable inroads into the body politic. In others, such as Australia and New Zealand, far right politicians and parties continue to remain on the political fringes.² While the increase in mainstreaming of the far right could explain lowered extreme right violence overall (though it is far from clear that the violent edges actually see themselves as part of the far right mainstream), it certainly implies greater social and security challenges down the road.

The second development of concern is the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has affected the extreme right globally in unexpected ways. Contrary to preliminary expectations, there have been very few known direct mobilisations by the extreme right to travel to and participate in the Ukraine conflict. As observed, the conflict in Ukraine has not so far evolved to be the extreme right's equivalent of the Islamic State's (IS) campaign in Iraq and Syria between 2014-2019 – acting as a magnet for the extreme right to fight, train and gain experience which they could then translate into terrorist attacks back home.

The groups that used to be of major concern – most notably the Azov Battalion militia outfit – are now part of the force that the West is supporting against the Russian invasion. In fact, the more prominent narratives amongst extreme right groups in Western states are that Russia and President Vladimir Putin are the true defenders of Western culture and have a common enemy – namely, the Western liberals.³ Whatever the case, the actual nature of the extreme right terrorist threat that might surface from Ukraine has yet to emerge.

The final major trend is the continuing diffusion of the extreme right threat, both in narrative and physical terms. The US continued to see large-scale mass shootings, some inspired by extreme right-wing narratives. The high-profile October attack on Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband at home in San Francisco also involved an individual motivated by a complex mix of conspiracy-fuelled ideas.⁴ In Europe, the profile and locations of plots and attacks broadened. An attack outside an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava, Slovakia on October 12, 2022 by a teenager who subsequently killed himself, was linked by inspiration to numerous earlier extreme right-wing attacks.⁵ In Germany, authorities arrested a 74-year-old woman who was accused of being the instigator behind a plot disrupted earlier in the year to murder the country's health minister.⁶ In Iceland, police arrested four individuals in what they described as a far right-wing attack plot on the authorities.⁷ In the United Kingdom (UK), a 66-year-old, anti-immigration activist launched a firebomb attack on a migration centre before killing himself.⁸ There was little evidence that any of these incidents came from a centrally controlled and directed network.

At the same time, the malleability of extreme right narratives continues to allow it to expand its narrative footprint by absorbing a variety of ideologies into its fold.⁹ This flexibility in turn allows for an ever-expanding range of adherents to be categorised as being of the extreme right (even though they may be ideologically inconsistent), and continues to make classifying and defining the extreme right a highly challenging task.

Extreme Right in the Late-COVID World

2022 saw a sharp loosening of restrictive COVID-19-related mandates around the world. The preceding two years had seen unprecedented lockdowns and vaccination-differentiated measures, which were unpopular with large parts of the general public in the West and provided fodder for extreme right ideologies.¹⁰ From their perspective, the aggressive pandemic-related measures were seen as authoritarian and intrusive, highlighting the overbearing state which they sought to fight back against. At the same time, lockdowns provided individuals on the extreme right (as well as other ideologies) with more time on the internet to propagate COVID-19-related conspiratorial narratives. While such themes are still prevalent in extreme right channels, a few conspiratorial narratives suggest that Western governments have given up on using COVID-19 to control them, interpreting the relaxed COVID-19 mandates as a victory for their movements.¹¹

A broad scan of social media channels on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and Gab, suggested that COVID-19 no longer constitutes a focus of most messages and posts. Instead, there was a mix of socio-political issues specific to the societies that the extreme right groups are based in, along with commentaries on international issues and topics such as the Ukraine war, climate change and China's growing geopolitical assertiveness. In other words, it is not clear that COVID-19 has left a lasting imprint on the extreme right-wing in narrative terms.

There continued, however, to be some interest in the topic on some parts of the violent edge. In April, authorities in the western German state of Rhineland-Palatinate arrested a group of four which they claimed had been planning a widespread campaign that included abducting the health minister.¹² The group called itself the Vereinte Patrioten (United Patriots) and was linked to the Reichsbürger movement in Germany, which follows the same ideology as the Sovereign Citizen movement in other parts of the West.¹³ They were also identified as prominent anti-COVID-19 activists.¹⁴

On the less violent edge, a protest by Canadian truckers at the beginning of 2022 about COVID-19 restrictions escalated into a wider protest,¹⁵ and led to imitators in Australia,¹⁶ New Zealand,¹⁷ France¹⁸ and the Netherlands.¹⁹ These protests became entrepôts of disaffection with some clear extreme right-wing ideas being brought into the mix. However, it is important to note that the extreme right – while it may have sought to take advantage of the protests – did not appear to be the instigator. These convoys did not lead to any terrorist violence, but they highlighted the depth of anger and frustration that was generated during the pandemic, suggesting a wellspring of anger which may re-emerge. The concern is this might find a home amongst the extreme right-wing groups that also gathered around the protests.

Decline in Violence but Mainstreaming of the Far and Extreme Right in the West

Of continuing concern is the persistent mainstreaming of the far right in major western democracies. Though related, this is of course different from the *violent* extreme right that forms the focus of the other parts of this assessment. It is worth observing, however, as it creates an environment in which intolerant ideas can be misinterpreted and hostility towards minority communities can be encouraged. The electoral victory in Italy of the hard-right candidate Giorgia Meloni,²⁰ Sweden's minority government's dependence on the Swedish Democrats (a far right party) to back the government,²¹ and the growing normalisation of former President Donald Trump's wing of the Republican Party as the mainstream in the US, all show how political parties which use narratives that appeal to the far right can gain power.

The exact link between these parties and the violent extreme right is not clear; in fact, some online discussions appear to broadly frame these parties as not being truly committed to the cause of the extreme right.²² Yet the climate of perceived intolerance and social tension that such mainstream parties foster creates an environment conducive to violent interpretation and a polarised discourse where people can believe violence is the only option left to them.

For example, violent opposition to anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter continued in 2022. In February 2022, white supremacist Benjamin Smith shot at protesters for racial justice. His internet activity suggested he was anti-Semitic, racist and misogynistic.²³ In addition to racism and anti-immigration sentiments, some extreme right attacks have also been partly motivated by eco-fascism – a narrative which is a combination of the extreme right trying to tap into the wider conversation about environmentalism and also an appeal to the ‘blood and soil’ narratives which have long motivated extreme right-wing groups. In the May 2022 mass shooting incident in Buffalo, New York which claimed the lives of 10 black people, in addition to the Great Replacement conspiracy theory,²⁴ eco-fascist sentiments also appeared to have been one of the key motivating factors for the shooter.²⁵

This broad diffusion of the far right and extreme violent right, and the confusion to some degree of the line between them, has continued to spill over into the threat picture in other ways. The Mixed Unstable or Unclear (MUU) category of the threat continues to grow – in some cases showing suggestion of some link to the extreme right (often adjacent to other ideologies). Data gathered by the UK’s Prevent programme from recent years (as recent as 2021) suggest the MUU account for around half of all reported cases.²⁶

It is notable that MUU referred cases are also amongst the smallest number to subsequently get adopted as Channel²⁷ (a UK programme which seeks to engage individual cases to help steer them off radicalisation) interventions. This suggests a level of over-referring that highlights how unclear and confusing the terrorist threat is perceived to have become. In the same basket of concerns, the continuing growth in numbers of the very young, those on the autism spectrum, and the mentally ill appearing amongst the case load on the extreme right (as well as other ideologies) also highlights how the highly malleable, intensively online and angry extreme right-wing narratives are able to stir up an ever more confusing mix of potential threats.²⁸

Ukraine War Not a Major Turning Point for the Extreme Right

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was an important event in international politics in 2022, which had a direct relevance to the extreme right in the West. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the local extreme right of Ukraine – primarily the Azov Regiment (pro-Ukrainian ultranationalists) – had attracted a number of extreme right-wing activists from across the West to join it.²⁹ There were also some who had gone to fight on the Russian side (with some countries, like Italy, finding people fighting on both sides). After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February, the conflict drew some extreme right fighters, especially from neighbouring countries, to join hands with the Ukrainian side.³⁰ The number of fighters making their way to Ukraine to fight has been small due to the Ukrainian government’s vetting processes.³¹ While exact numbers are not available, the Counter Extremism Project puts the number of foreign fighters who joined both sides to range between “several hundreds to a few thousands”.³² The number of fighters who travelled to fight for Russia is estimated to be less than those who went to fight on the side of Ukraine.

Among those attracted to fight for Ukraine, it is unclear how many actually hold extreme right-wing ideas or are linked to such groups. While some cases do exist, the high mainstream support of the conflict by the West has inspired people to travel to Ukraine to simply fight the Russian “aggression”.³³ This kind of narrative has meant the lens through which the conflict is seen is much wider than the extreme right-wing connection prevalent prior to the Russian invasion.

Overall, the current sense is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not mobilised the extreme right to the extent expected, though it has influenced Western extreme right narratives. As the war progressed, it increasingly became apparent from extreme right platforms’ discourse that they

were leaning in support of Russia and Putin.³⁴ This posture stemmed from seeing Putin as the champion for the rights of the Christian, non-LGBTQ+ and non-minority people; unlike the democratically elected governments of the West, which, in the eyes of the extreme right, are corrupt and actively support the growth of communities undermining the white, Christian populace. This has created an interesting rift between the extreme right and the mainstream party-political far right in a number of contexts. While Russia and Putin are still generally viewed favourably by the extreme right in the West, recent Pew polls suggest marked drops in support for Russia and its leader from among European right-wing populists.³⁵

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine is worth continuing to observe for a number of reasons. The fact that some individuals associated with the extreme right have gone to fight there is of high concern – their training, experience and access to weapons will make them potentially far more lethal should they return home with dangerous intent. At the same time, the vast volumes of weapons flowing into Ukraine present a huge opportunity for criminal and terrorist networks. Prior to the Russian invasion, in 2016, Ukrainian authorities detained a Frenchman at their border with Poland with a truckload of weapons he had purchased and was reportedly planning on using as part of a terror campaign in France.³⁶

So far, weapons associated with the conflict have not appeared in any plots, but Europol leaders have highlighted it as a potential concern.³⁷ At the same time, Russian authorities have also been keen to highlight the problem, illustrating another way in which the conflict in Ukraine might become intertwined with Europe's terrorist threat – through Russian disinformation or active support for extreme right-wing groups in Europe as part of an effort to destabilise the continent.³⁸

Diffused Nature of Threat in Europe

A final point concerns the continuing diffusion of the threat in Europe. While the volume of attacks is down, the variety of disruptions (both in terms of offender profiles and locations), their growing cellular organisation and the increasing appearance of new technologies like 3D printers³⁹ amongst their belongings, highlight a problem which is going to be ever harder to manage. 3D printers have now become so common in terror arrests that Europol has held conferences to explore learning from different cases on how to manage the threat.⁴⁰ Cases of 3D printers being used by extreme right-wing networks in 2022 were found in places as diverse as Slovakia⁴¹ and Iceland.⁴² In the UK, two separate trials linked to the extreme right involving 3D printers concluded in 2022.⁴³

Slovakia also saw a teenager launch an extreme right-wing attack, while an inquest in the UK revealed the death earlier in the year of a teenage girl who had been radicalised and groomed into extreme right-wing ideas.⁴⁴ In both cases, the teenagers killed themselves, highlighting both the threat and the extreme vulnerability of some youth being drawn towards extreme right-wing ideologies. At the other end of the scale, a cell of middle-aged men disrupted in Germany was reportedly being directed by a 75-year-old teacher; a 66-year-old pensioner was responsible for an attack on a migration centre in the UK; while French authorities arrested a group of four aged between 45-53 in Mulhouse near Strasbourg with an “alarming” volume of weaponry and reported plans to ‘hunt Jews’.⁴⁵ A July report by the UK's Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee (which provides oversight of the intelligence community) on the extreme right-wing threat in the country observed that while there seemed to be a growing radicalisation amongst youth on the extreme right, the previous three attacks on record had been done by older men (a roster now increased to four with the Dover migrant centre attacker).⁴⁶ The point is that the extreme right threat in the European context, in particular, has become increasingly diffused in both profile, targeting and nature.

Outlook

The outlook for the extreme right-wing in the West remains unclear, though the underlying trends point to lurking dangers with a possible transition to a late COVID-19-phase in which the war in Ukraine and the further mainstreaming of the far right in Western democracies play more important

roles as narrative generators. While violence is down, it remains hazy as to the exact reasons for this trend. The downward trend suggests a pattern that appears in some temporary abeyance, but the continuing arrests, the vast array of perpetrator profiles and the unceasing inspiration that attackers appear to draw from one another, also suggest that the problem will persist. The interplay between mainstream parties and this extreme edge remains unclear; doubtless, the increasingly polarised public space is continuing to play a significant role in exacerbating problems.

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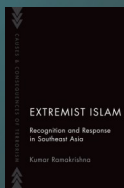
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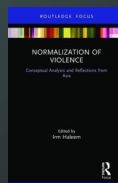


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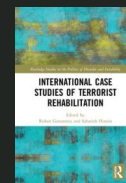
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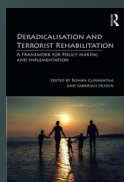
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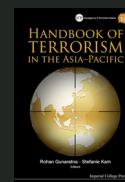
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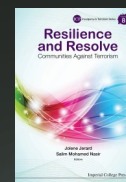
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