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Annual Threat Assessment

Global Threat Forecast

Southeast Asia
Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand

South Asia
Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

China
Xinjiang Province

'Islamic State' after the Fall of Mosul and Raqqa
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EBSCO HOST

Building a Global Network for Security

Global Threat Forecast

Rohan Gunaratna

Introduction

The global terrorism threat has become more decentralised, unpredictable, hard-to-detect and resilient with regenerative capacities. The global jihadist movements, principally the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, have glocalised to exploit indigenous grievances, recruit aspiring jihadists and fight for local and global causes. Overall, both IS and Al-Qaeda have become underground terror networks which will allow them to sustain themselves for longer and perpetrate more violent attacks. With a radical Islamist jihadist ideology, multiple wilayat (provinces), sleeper cells, lone-wolves, online radicalisation and skilful exploitation of modern technologies, the terrorism threat remains challenging despite the successful expulsion of IS from its heartlands in Iraq and Syria in 2017.

Moving forward, in 2018, the terrorist threat will be characterised by attacks mounted by politico-religious, ethnic-political and left/right wing groups. The major risk to the West, the Middle East, Africa and Asia will come from Islamist extremist groups with radicalised segments of migrant and diaspora communities perpetrating attacks in North America, Europe and Australia. Notwithstanding the operational and military setbacks IS and Al-Qaeda have suffered over the years, their affiliates in the global south will continue to mount attacks against military, diplomatic, political and economic targets.

Despite security measures, threat groups will seek to hit aviation, maritime and land transportation targets. In addition, self-radicalised and directed attacks will focus on populated locations for large-scale impact, with suicide attacks as the preferred tactic. The favoured modus operandi of IS-inspired and directed jihadists in the West will be low-end terrorism relying on vehicle-ramming and stabbing as witnessed throughout 2017.

Broadly, the world has witnessed the rise of three generations of global terrorist movements. 'Global Jihad 1.0' emerged after Al-Qaeda attacked the US in September 2001 and captured the imagination of multiple militant groups in Asia, Africa, Middle East and the Caucasus. The second generation, 'Global Jihad 2.0', emerged after al-Baghdadi declared a 'caliphate' and announced the formation of the 'Islamic State' (IS) on 29 June 2014. The third generation, 'Global Jihad 3.0', represents the global expansion of IS outside Iraq and Syria. IS now relies on its wilayat as its operational bases in the Middle East, Africa, Caucasus and Asia. IS and its affiliates control territorial space in varying degrees in countries with active conflict zones, and maintain a presence in cyber space. The group's strength also lies in affiliated and linked groups, networks, cells and dedicated jihadists who are willing to fight and die for IS.

The Shifting Terrorism Threat in 2018

In 2018, three trends are likely to define the global terrorism landscape. First, IS is transforming itself from a 'caliphate'-building entity to a global terrorist movement. In order to compensate for battlefield and territorial losses, IS is reinventing itself and seeking to expand globally in both the cyber and physical space. Despite defeats in Iraq and Syria, IS has been successful in directing or inspiring attacks in different countries throughout 2017 as seen in the Quetta, Pakistan church attack in December that killed 9 people, and the truck attack in New York City in October that killed 8.

Second, IS is decentralising, shifting its centre of gravity from Iraq and Syria to its multiple wilayat and divisions in different countries. They include Libya (Barqa, Fezzan and Tripoli), Egypt (Sinai), Yemen, Algeria (Al-Jazair), Nigeria (Gharb Iriqiyyah), Afghanistan/Pakistan (Khorasan), Russian Caucasus (Qawqaz) and the East Asia Division (mainly Philippines). IS' foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in these wilayat will use the hubs as bases to conduct attacks. In some of these wilayat, especially in Syria and the Af-Pak region, IS will face stiff competition from Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

Third, Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria will capitalise on the vacuum left by IS and exploit the fragile and unstable situation in post-IS Syria. Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS) known as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (JFS) has created a coalition - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - and an 'army' referred to as Jaish al-Sham. HTS is headed by the former AQS commander Abu Mohammed Al-Julani, and has at least 20,000 fighters.[1] The coalition forces are likely to focus on HTS, leading it to splinter into constituents including Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), the Ansar Al-Din Front, Jaysh Al-Sunna, Liwa Al-Haqq, and the Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki Movement. In light of IS' fall in Syria, HTS and its constituents will present a similar threat within the country.

Evolving Global Terrorist Threat Beyond the Middle East

IS footprint has shrunk in Iraq and Syria but it has grown outside the two countries. Although IS is primarily an Iraqi movement, it has been expanding to other parts of the Muslim world. IS first spread to Syria in 2011, and after its declaration of the 'caliphate' in June 2014, it expanded to nearby countries like Libya, Sinai, Yemen as well as other politically weak and unstable areas in northern Nigeria, Qawqas and Khorasan, designating them as wilayat.[2] In order to assert its presence in Muslim majority and minority countries, IS is exploiting encrypted communication platforms and harnessing its returnee fighters to make inroads into Muslim communities to further recruitment, develop bases of operation and search for alternative battlegrounds. In 2018, it is likely that Afghanistan, Yemen and certain African countries could emerge as territorial strongholds for IS fighters and members.[3]

The dominant actors in Afghanistan and Yemen include the Al-Qaeda centric groups - the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) respectively. Reports have mentioned that close to 35,000 Afghan Taliban[4], with 700 IS fighters down from 3,000 that are based mostly in eastern and north-eastern Afghanistan.[5] Additional reports have revealed that close to 200 French and Algerian IS fighters from Syria had joined IS Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan and were conducting trainings in the Jowzjan province.[6] The Salafi belt of Afghanistan that stretches from Kunar, Nuristan and Nangahar is being exploited as a ground for recruitment and operations by IS.[7] Similarly, the ongoing conflict in Yemen has created sufficient recruits for AQAP and IS, reaching almost 4,000 fighters[8] for the former and an estimated few hundred fighters for IS.[9]

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[1] Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Is Starting to Swallow the Syrian Opposition." *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2017. http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/15/al-qaeda-is-swallowing-the-syrian-opposition/.

[2] Bardia Rahmani and Andrea Tanco, "ISIS' Growing Caliphate: Profiles of Affiliates." *Wilson Center,* February 19, 2016, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates.

[3] Colin P. Clarke and Amarnath Amarasingham, "Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls?" *The Atlantic,* March 6, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/isis-foreign-fighter-jihad-syria-iraq/518313/.

[4] "The Taliban." *Mapping Militant Organizations: Stanford University.* Accessed December 22, 2017, http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/367.

[5] Mujib Mashal, "In the Tangled Afghan War a Thin Line of Defense against ISIS." *The New York Times,* December 27, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/25/world/asia/eastern-afghanistan-isis.html?_r=0.

[6] The Straits Times, "French fighters appear with ISIS in Afghanistan." December 10, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/french-fighters-appear-with-isis-in-afghanistan.

[7] Arif Rafiq, "What Happened to ISIS's Afghanistan-Pakistan Province?" *The Diplomat,* February 2, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/what-happened-to-isiss-afghanistan-pakistan-province/.

[8] "The Quadrupling of Al-Qaeda in Yemen." *The Soufan Group: Intel Brief,* June 6, 2016, http://www.soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-quadrupling-of-al-qaeda-in-yemen/.

[9] Andrew Blake, "Islamic State in Yemen has 'doubled in size' since 2016: Pentagon." *The Washington Times,* December 21, 2017,

Despite the small numbers on the ground, IS is growing both in the physical and cyber space in Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Yemen-Saudi theatres.

As IS relocates to its existing wilayat and searches for new theatres in 2018, it will deepen its presence in African countries. IS is moving from Maghreb into Sahel, especially its networks in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria that are operating in the region. In addition, quite a few IS fighters have also relocated to West Africa and East Africa. In Nigeria, IS created its West Africa affiliate and transformed Boko Haram into a transnational movement. IS West Africa has managed to build a presence in Niger, Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Similarly, IS is seeding a presence in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda with a new IS centric threat landscape emerging in Africa. IS has also extended its presence in Somalia where the US conducted multiple drone strikes in 2017, targeting the group's members in the Puntland region.[10] Even though estimates suggest that there are only a few dozen IS members in Somalia, it could increase if IS fighters from Iraq and Syria make inroads.

Comparatively, in Southeast Asia, IS suffered its most significant loss in Marawi (the Philippines) where it mounted a take-over of the city in May 2017. IS suffered a loss of over 950 local and foreign fighters, including the designated IS East Asia leader Isnilon Hapilon and several top leaders. IS Philippines is now headed by Ismael Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraype, a leader of a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).[11]

In a further setback, the directing figure of terror attacks in Indonesia, Bahrun Naim, was killed in Syria. The Indonesian IS ideologue Aman Abdur Rahman is in prison

and held in isolation. He nevertheless has been able to provide leadership to his followers and aspiring IS members. His writings continue to resonate among the 'jihadist' subculture in Southeast Asia as he wrote and translated works such as Ya, Mereka Memang Thagut (Yes, They are Indeed Tyrants) and Merenung Sejenak Terhadap Hasil-Hasil Jihad: Antara Kebodohan Akan Syari'at Dan Kebodohan Akan Realita (Reflecting on the Results of Jihad: Between Ignorance of the Sharia and Reality). The latter is a translation of a book in Arabic written by Abu Muhammed Al-Maqdisi, the mentor of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the founding father of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) that eventually became IS.

Like Bahrun Naim, the Malaysian IS leader Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi was also killed in Syria. His associate Dr Mahmud bin Ahmed, who played a central role in uniting the diverse Moro groups, met the same fate during the Marawi siege.[12] The employment of decapitation as a strategy has been successful in limiting the operational capabilities and influence of IS in the Philippines and broader Southeast Asia region. However, the threat from lone wolf and self-radicalised individuals is still present and could lead to attacks in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. IS has limited presence in Northeast Asia, besides its visibility in Xinjiang (where many Uyghur Muslims reside) in Western China. However, reports have revealed that more than 3,000 Uyghurs serve in the ranks of HTS, while a smaller number are linked to IS.[13]

More than 4,500 Russian fighters travelled to Syria to fight for IS and HTS.[14] In addition, most of the Russian and Central Asian

https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/dec/21/islamic-state-yemen-has-doubled-size/.

[10] The Telegraph, "US strikes Islamic State in Somalia for first time, killing 'several terrorists'." November 3, 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/03/us-strikes-islamic-state-somalia-first-time-killing-several/.

[11] Michael Quinones, "What Islamic State East Asia looks like post-Marawi." *Rappler,* October 15, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/185273-what-islamic-state-east-asia-looks-like-post-marawi.

[12] Raul Dancel, "Malaysia's most-wanted militant Mahmud Ahmad, who helped finance Marawi siege, believed killed in fighting." *The Straits Times,* June 23, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-militant-who-helped-finance-marawi-siege-believed-killed-in-fighting-report.

[13] Itamar Eichner, "Israeli report: Thousands of Chinese jihadists are fighting in Syria." *YNet News*, March 27, 2017, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4941411,00.html.

[14] Will Stewart, "Vladimir Putin's spooks warn 4,500 ISIS jihadis are planning to return to Russia to target fans at 2018 World Cup." *The Sun*, December 20, 2017, https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5177846/vladimir-putin-isis-jihadis-russia-world-cup-2018/.

fighters with IS were killed in Iraq and Syria. Overall, IS was successful in recruiting Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks when they were working as migrant workers and studying in Russia and Turkey. Reports mentioned that more than 2,500 Central Asians travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight and die while other reports have indicated that some of them might have started to relocate other theaters, including Afghanistan.[15] Certainly, the threat of attacks by Russian and Central Asians outside their homelands has increased. This is best illustrated by the truck attack in New York City in October 2017 by an Uzbek, Sayfullo Saipov that killed eight people and injured 11. Earlier in April 2017, an Uzbek named Rakhmat Akilov, drove a hijacked truck into pedestrians on a street in Sweden, killing five and injuring 14.

In order to sustain recruitment and support, IS has continued to propagate its jihadist goal of establishing an Islamic state. Its strategy includes attacks against the 'Crusader-Zionist' enemy as well as Shias whom IS has condemned as apostates. IS targets of attacks over the years have consistently depicted attempts to cause enmity between Muslims and others, including Christians, the West and Shias. The latest anti-Christian attack was the suicide bombing during Sunday service at Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta, Pakistan, in December 2017 where nine people were killed and 57 were injured.

Earlier in November, after IS attacked the Rawdah Mosque in Egypt's North Sinai, IS supporters distributed a claim by a hitherto unknown group called Harakar Anna Yeshua (Movement of the Sons of Jesus).[16] Shias in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere have also bore the brunt of IS attacks. For instance, in August 2017, 32 people were killed in a suicide bombing and shooting at a Shia mosque in Herat, Afghanistan. In North America, Europe and Australia, IS supporters are likely to mount intermittent attacks such

as those seen in 2017, during the Barcelona van attack in August that killed 14 and injured 130 and the Manchester attack in May that killed 22 and injured 119.

Online Threat

Despite the battlefield losses in Iraq and Syria, IS remains defiant and persistent. Putting up a bold front, its online propaganda narratives after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa continue to depict strength and eventual victory over the West and 'disbelievers'. A video entitled 'Inside the Khilafa 5' released by IS Al-Hayat Media in December 2017, called on supporters to remain patient and steadfast as their sacrifice will not be in vain, and will lead to 'a tremendous victory'. IS propaganda rhetoric not only attempt to rally and boost the morale of its supporters but also instigate them to mount terrorist attacks using whatever is at their disposal, including vehicles and knives.

Although IS online propaganda has continued, it has been adversely affected by battlefront losses as well as governments' collaboration with social media technology firms to remove extremist propaganda and recruitment material. Since 2016 there has been a constant decline in IS-centric online propaganda activity in terms of quantity as well as quality. Its flagship online publication Dabiq went out of circulation in July 2016 and its replacement Rumiyah has not been seen since September 2017. Social media accounts of avid supporters now have significantly less followers in 2017. Quite a few IS blogs and websites have ceased production due to strict regulation measures. Most other sites now recycle dated content or have not been updated for several months. The decrease in IS online activity is a positive development as it impedes recruitment and jihadist activities.

A new area of concern has however emerged. Terrorists are now communicating actively through encrypted platforms such as Telegram and Threema for propaganda as well as for terrorist operations. Indonesia in particular witnessed 14 attacks directed from Iraq and Syria where the terrorists used Telegram to communicate with local networks and fighters in the country.[17]

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[15] "Islamic State may set eyes on Central Asia, top diplomat warns." *TASS,* December 15, 2017, http://tass.com/politics/981299.

[16] SITE Intelligence Group. "Alleged Group "Movement of the Sons of Jesus" Claims Rawdah." December 2, 2017, https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/alleged-group-movement-of-the-sons-of-jesus-claims-rawdah-mosque-attack.html.

[17] These numbers are based on information provided by Police Chief General Tito Karnavian.

A shrinking pool of jihadists now plays a critical role in maintaining an unofficial IS online presence that expands to several channels in encrypted platforms. They re-post and re-distribute old materials, including works by ideologues and propagandists. They also highlight the grievances of Muslim communities in Rakhine, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere to inflame their followers with the spark of jihadism. These supporters also ensure that there is a regeneration of supporters and sympathisers online, providing platforms for interested and radicalised individuals to find other like-minded individuals who would reinforce their radical ideas, and engage in violence.

Way Forward

2017 has been a year of great achievement for the anti-IS coalition forces. IS has been militarily defeated in Iraq and Syria and its so-called caliphate destroyed. Many of its top leaders, commanders and fighters have been killed; some of its demoralised troops had absconded or surrendered rather than fight to the death. IS has also been deprived of its major sources of revenue from seized oil fields and illegal taxes.[18] The battlefield losses and greater regulation of extremist content online have also affected the quantity and quality of IS online propaganda activities. However, the IS threat is not over as IS core has not surrendered or conceded defeat. Its fighters could go to ground in remote pockets of Iraq and Syria to engage in guerrilla warfare or retreat to several strong wilayat where its affiliates hold sway over large swathes of land. Its remaining fighters and affiliates retain the operational capability to stage or inspire terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere as seen throughout 2017. Despite regulatory restrictions, IS still has a presence in cyberspace which it uses effectively for strategic communications, recruitment and propaganda.

In the final analysis, IS' ability to stage a comeback should not be underestimated. It has done so before when its founder Abu Musab Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 and when the Sunni tribal chiefs rose against the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in late 2006-2008. ISI came back in force to become ISIS and to eventually establish the 'caliphate' in June 2014 and hold territory in both Iraq and Syria over the next three years.

In order to prevent IS' re-emergence and losing the hard-fought victory, it is imperative that the international community address the underlying conditions that facilitated the rise of IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in Iraq and Syria, and the issues that give sustenance to other terrorist and militant groups like the Taliban, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab in other theatres of conflict. This would include addressing Sunni complaints about discrimination and marginalisation in Iraq and Syria and general grievances regarding unemployment, corruption, repression and misgovernance. Outstanding conflicts such as the Palestinian issue, ongoing war in Afghanistan, Rohingya crisis, unrest in Kashmir, Mindanao and elsewhere will also need resolution or they will become fodder for the propaganda machine of the terrorists and militants.

In addition, with the global expansion of IS, it is necessary for the international community to sustain and support governments that lack capabilities to fight terrorist groups. African and South Asian nations need resources to counter IS in the physical and cyber space. Africa is an important region in particular, as IS is moving from Maghreb to Sahel and further south, with close to 6,000 Africans who were fighting in Iraq and Syria.[19] It is also paramount to counter the growth of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan where there are strong networks of militant groups. The worsening conflict there risks infecting nearby countries in Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The partnership between governments and Islamic experts to debunk IS' distortion and misrepresentation of Islamic doctrines and practices, and collaboration with Internet and media technology giants to remove extremist content online, would further contribute to

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[18] Anne Barnard, "U.S.-Backed Fighters Take Largest Syrian Oil Field From ISIS." *The New York Times*, October 22, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/22/world/middleeast/syria-isis-oil.html.

[19] The National, "6,000 ISIL fighters could return to Africa, AU warns." December 11, 2017, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/6-000-isil-fighters-could-return-to-africa-au-warns-1.683452.

containing the influence and reach of IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups. These measures should substantially neutralise terrorist influence and consolidate the breakthrough achieved in degrading IS militarily and putting an end to the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. The international community must demonstrate strong political will to cooperate and collaborate not only in fighting terrorism but also in resolving the root causes of terrorism. IS must not be given another opportunity to stage a comeback as they did in 2014 or what has been achieved in Iraq and Syria will be in vain. In this respect, world leaders should take the long view. Rather than engage in geo-politics, their governments should take necessary measures to counter the emerging phase of IS and Al-Qaeda. Should the two powerful threat movements – IS and Al-Qaeda – unite, at least in some theatres of conflict, stability and security will be severely challenged.

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Southeast Asia

Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Online Extremism

Introduction

The terrorism threat in Southeast Asia reached new heights in 2017. The region witnessed not only terror attacks but also a daring attempt by 'Islamic State' (IS)-linked groups to take over a city of over 200,000 people. In May 2017, IS militants managed to capture control of parts of Marawi City in Mindanao, Philippines, and held it for five months, in a drawn-out battle that killed more than 1,170 people, including over 960 militants.[1] IS-linked terrorists also managed to carry out several attacks in Indonesia, including the bombing in Bandung in February, a shootout in Tuban in April, and twin suicide bombings in Jakarta that killed two and injured 10 others in May; five more plots were foiled. Malaysia thwarted attempted attacks by IS supporters and members, and detained more than 80 suspects for links to IS, adding to more than 340 terrorism-related arrests conducted since 2013.

The heightened terrorist activities in Southeast Asia highlight four critical features of the terrorism threat. First, the terrorism threat in the region transcends national boundaries in respect of recruitment and operations. In 2017, multiple arrests of Indonesians and Malaysians intending to wage 'jihad' in and outside the region were reported. Foreign terrorist fighters from the region as well from the Middle East and South Asia were involved in the Marawi siege. Leaders of terrorist groups in the Philippines and Indonesia were in close contact with IS' central leadership in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of US dollars flowed into the region from IS central to fund various terrorist activities, including the storming of

Marawi City. Since 2015, 490 Indonesians were deported from Turkey, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore for links to IS or Al-Qaeda. Indonesia saw the return of at least 95 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) from IS in Syria and six from IS-linked groups in the Philippines. The return of these ideologically-hardened and experienced fighters from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere poses significant security challenges to the region.

Second, IS decentralisation to its wilayat and enclaves after its territorial losses in Iraq and Syria has implications for Southeast Asia where it has appointed an emir and accepted pledges of allegiance from multiple terrorist groups from Indonesia and the Philippines. Its involvement in the Marawi siege suggests that it is open to involvement in terrorist operations in the region as well as in the insurgency in South Thailand and the Rohingya issue in Myanmar.

Third, the threat from home-grown and self-radicalised lone actors and radicalised segments of diaspora communities continues as IS and its army of supporters and sympathisers churn out and disseminate IS jihadist ideology and propaganda over open-source and encrypted social media platforms. 2017 however saw an overall decrease in the activity of extremist recruiters and sympathisers due in part to the active takedown of extremist content by social media companies. The death of key social media personalities and IS ideologues, Bahrun Naim and Muhammad Wanndy in 2017 also adversely affected IS propaganda in terms of quality and quantity. Regardless of these developments, IS central and its affiliates in Southeast Asia have relied on its virtual caliphate as a safe-haven for survival post its territorial losses in 2017. IS' virtualisation of the caliphate has continued with jihadists recycling old propaganda and promoting violent and extremist content. The continued use of cyber space and social media has made the terrorism threat

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[1] The Manila Times, "Islamic freedom fighters, Abu Sayyaf next after Maute 'wipeout' — defense chief." October 24, 2017, http://www.manilatimes.net/islamic-freedom-fighters-abu-sayyaf-next-maute-wipeout-defense-chief/358410/.

decentralised and harder to detect, with smaller cells plotting attacks and recruiting through encrypted messaging platforms, such as Telegram and Whatsapp.

Lastly, IS-linked groups have been the most active in mounting attacks throughout 2017. However, there are others such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional's (BRN) in South Thailand and Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in Myanmar which have carried bombings and attacks. Other terrorist groups such as Jamaat Ansar ut Dawlah (JuD), Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) are focused on propagating their puritanical and exclusivist ideas that undermine social cohesion and national integration. The once leading global jihadist movement, Al-Qaeda, has continued to adopt a low profile in the region. Its long-time affiliate, the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) which still aims to establish an Islamic state, has taken a strategic decision to reduce its visibility and engagement in violence and be in a state of preparedness and consolidation while it bide its time.

The Philippines

Shift from Jungle to Urban Warfare

The siege of Marawi City in central Mindanao by IS-linked militants indicates that the battleground has shifted from the jungles to urban areas. In December 2016, the emir of IS Philippines (ISP), Isnilon Hapilon, left the Sulu island of Basilan and traveled to mainland Mindanao to consolidate his power with other IS groups such as the Maute group.[2] The move signifies a change in tactics and strategy for ISP as it shifts from small and indefensible islands such as Basilan and Jolo to mainland Mindanao to capture cities and promote the IS narrative in Southeast Asia.

Marawi was the first city to fall, albeit temporarily, to IS terrorists outside the Middle East and North African region. The attack indicates that ISP was adopting a strategy similar to IS central which captured control of

the cities of Aleppo, Raqqa, Mosul and others in both Iraq and Syria.[3] The adoption of this strategy by IS groups in the Philippines, suggests that they hoped to gain territory and move towards the formal declaration of a wilayah.

In its take-over of Marawi, ISP adopted various IS tactics in Iraq and Syria. Imitating IS gruesome tactics, ISP beheaded hostages or forced them to fight with the terrorists; they made use of them as human shields, fielded child soldiers, destroyed buildings and released prison inmates. Like the war in Iraq and Syria, the battle for Marawi was also framed in ideological terms. Marawi City was selected because its population of over 200,000 is mostly Muslim. The IS leadership were hoping for their support so as to create the narrative of an Islamic city resisting the 'oppressive' 'Catholic state' of the Philippines. Similar to militants in the Levant, the terrorists holding Marawi were also prepared to fight to the death in the hope of achieving 'martyrdom' and heavenly rewards.[4]

After five months of urban warfare, ISP was eventually defeated in Marawi. The militants did not get the support of the people of Marawi who had to be evacuated. Over 1,170 people died, including 960 militants.[5] In terms of casualties, this battle was more devastating than the Zamboanga siege of 2013 by MNLF separatist elements; it is said to be the longest urban battle in Philippines history. The fact that the militants succeeded in overrunning a well-populated city and holding it for five months, suggests that they were well armed, financed and trained.

[2] Carmela Fonbuena, "ISIS makes direct contact with Abu Sayyaf, wants caliphate in PH." *Rappler*, January 26, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/159568-isis-direct-contact-isnilon-hapilon

[3] Joseph Franco, "Assessing the Feasibility of a 'Wilayah Mindanao'." Perspectives on Terrorism 11, 4. (2017): pp. 29-38.
[4] Amita Legaspi, "AFP admits it needs to upgrade urban warfare training." *GMA News Online*, August 14, 2017, URL: http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/621815/afp-admits-it-needs-to-upgrade-urban-warfare-training/story/; Joseph Franco, "Assessing the Feasibility of a 'Wilayah Mindanao'." Perspectives on Terrorism 11, 4 (2017): pp. 29-38.
[5] The Manila Times, "Islamic freedom fighters, Abu Sayyaf next after Maute 'wipeout' — defense chief." October 24, 2017, http://www.manilatimes.net/islamic-freedom-fighters-abu-sayyaf-next-maute-wipeout-defense-chief/358410/.

In light of the Marawi incident, the AFP has admitted that it needs to upgrade its theories, tactics, and techniques on urban warfare.[6] Urban warfare is particularly challenging for the military because of what President Rodrigo Duterte described as the rebels' total disregard for civilian lives, cruelty to combatants and non-combatants alike, widespread looting, and pillaging of communities.[7] The city was harder to penetrate for the military because they have to evacuate civilians and clear residential areas and other locations even though they might have the upper hand militarily.[8] The AFP were also taken aback by the sniping skills of ISP as Major General Rolando Bautista, commander of the first infantry division, recounted that "one sniper can paralyze the movement of a whole company, even a battalion".[9] Even military tanks are not effective as ISP militants were carrying 50 caliber machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades which could pierce through the tanks' metal".[10]

Rise of Foreign Recruitment and Fighters in the Philippines

Beyond Isnilon Hapilon and Abdullah and Omar Maute, Dr Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian national, played a critical role in the battle of Marawi. Mahmud was referred to as the key connection between IS central and IS groups in the Philippines. He also helped to bring in some USD$600,000 from IS Central to IS Philippines, recruited foreign

fighters, and planned the attack on Marawi.[11] Mahmud had a Doctorate in Religious Studies from Universiti Malaya and provided religious guidance to many members of the group. Mahmud's active participation in helping local militants to establish a wilayah demonstrates the significant involvement of foreign terrorists.

The presence of foreign terrorists in Mindanao is not a new phenomenon. Since the late 1990s until the early 2000s, a sizeable number of militants from the regional terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) with members from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore underwent training in arms and explosives in Mindanao. They trained in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Camp Abu Bakar where they set up their own base called Camp Hudaybiyya run by Indonesian JI militants.[12] This set the stage for strong regional linkages and allowed for further joint training and support among Southeast Asian terrorists.

In June 2016, IS released a propaganda video called, 'The Solid Structure' to reach out to sympathisers and members in Southeast Asia stating: "If you cannot go to [Syria], join up and go to the Philippines".[13] This call was also heard by recruits to IS beyond Southeast Asia as they heeded the message to help establish an IS caliphate in Southern Philippines.

The beginning of 2017 was already showing signs of a growing number of recruitment activities to bring foreign fighters, particularly Southeast Asians, to fight under Hapilon's banner. In January 2017, a Filipino man, Nurhan Sahi Hakim, was instructed by Mahmud to use Sabah in Malaysia as a transit point for Southeast and South Asian

[6] Amita Legaspi, "AFP admits it needs to upgrade urban warfare training." *GMA News Online*, August 14, 2017, http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/6218 15/afp-admits-it-needs-to-upgrade-urban-warfare-training/story/

[7] CNN Philippines, "Duterte: Marawi crisis introduced new type of urban warfare." July 19, 2017, http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/07/19/duterte-marawi-crisis-introduced-new-type-of-urban-warfare.html

[8] Jigger Jerusalem, "Urban warfare a 'challenge' for soldiers in Marawi." *Sun Star*, May 29, 2017, http://www.sunstar.com.ph/cagayan-de-oro/local-news/2017/05/29/urban-warfare-challenge-soldiers-marawi-544412

[9] Carmela Fonbuena, "Marawi battle zone: Urban warfare challenges PH military." *Rappler*, June 19, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/173050-battle-zone-marawi-urban-warfare

[10] Carmela Fonbuena, "Marawi battle zone: Urban warfare challenges PH military." *Rappler*, June 19, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/173050-battle-zone-marawi-urban-warfare

[11] Katerina Francisco, "Who is Mahmud Ahmad?" *Rappler*, October 17, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/185586-fast-facts-mahmud-ahmad

[12] Jasmeet Kaur, "Working of Jemaah Islamiya: A Radical Trajectory from 2000-2009." *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, 9B (2017): pp. 1210-1219. http://saspjournals.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/SJAHSS-59B1210-1219.pdf.

[13] Rappler, "ISIS to followers in SE Asia: 'Go to the Philippines'." June 25, 2016, https://www.rappler.com/nation/137573-isis-fight-southeast-asia-philippines.

recruits.[14] The man had attempted to bring two Bangladeshi men and a Malaysian woman to Mindanao, but had failed to do so. In March 2017, five Filipinos and two Malaysians were arrested in Sabah for facilitating the transit of Malaysian and Indonesian IS militants from Sabah to Mindanao.[15] There was also the case of Abu Naila, a Belizean national killed by the military in Sarangani province in January 2017.[16] He was reported to be a bomb expert training terrorists from Ansarul Khilafa Philippines (AKP).

Within Southeast Asia, some members of the Indonesian IS-aligned Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) that has sent jihadists to join IS in Syria and Iraq, also joined IS in the Philippines.[17] In March 2017, the group set up a jihadi camp in the Halmahera region (North Maluku), south of Mindanao.[18] Additionally, in June 2017 there were at least 40 JAD members and 28 Malaysians who fought alongside IS Philippines in the battle in Marawi.[19]

There are also reports of IS fighters from different nationalities that the military was unable to identify during the battle of Marawi. Within the first week of the Marawi siege, the military also killed two Saudis, one Yemeni, one Chechen, and one Indian.[20] The local authorities suspected that Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Singaporean jihadists had joined local IS groups in the country.[21]

These foreign fighters see the Philippines as the epicenter of IS in Southeast Asia. With about 20 IS-aligned Filipino terrorist groups and battalions, many are dedicated to fight with and/or train the local militants. They are primarily joining the larger groups, namely the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Maute Group (IS Lanao), AKP, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

There is evidence that IS is sharing a directive to its social media supporters to prepare for the second stage of attack in other cities in Southern Philippines, claiming that 'Marawi is just the beginning' because there are 'new cubs and soldiers' who will be newly trained.[22] Thus, the IS narrative of Marawi appears to continue with IS still pushing for the establishment of a wilayah in the Philippines. With heavy casualties for ASG and the Maute Group in Marawi, BIFF is seen to be next in carrying the banner of IS Philippines; the AFP is reported to be battling them in North Cotabato and has confirmed the presence of foreign jihadists within their ranks.[23]

Porous borders in the tri-border area between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, a hotbed for transnational crime, has facilitated the easy movement of jihadists to travel undetected from one country to another. This has numerically led to the

[14] Reuters, "Malaysia arrests four linked to Islamic State cell in Philippines." January 23, 2017, http://in.reuters.com/article/malaysia-security-arrests/malaysia-arrests-four-linked-to-islamic-state-cell-in-philippines-idINKBN1571KZ.

[15] Carmela Fonbuena, "5 Filipinos arrested in Sabah over alleged ISIS links." *Rappler*, March 13, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/164040-filipinos-arrested-sabah-alleged-links-islamic-state

[16] Micah Goodin, "Belizean ISIS Supporter Shot Dead in Philippines." *Amandala*, January 25, 2017, http://amandala.com.bz/news/belizean-isis-supporter-shot-dead-philippines/

[17] The Jakarta Post, "RI terror group eyes base closer to PH." March 25, 2017, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/25/ri-terror-group-eyes-base-closer-ph.html

[18] The Jakarta Post, "Alleged terrorists wanted to make Halmahera new Poso: Police." March 24, 2017, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/03/24/alleged-terrorists-wanted-to-make-halmahera-new-poso-police.html.

[19] Francis Chan, "Indonesian militants' presence in Marawi City sparks alarm." *The Straits Times,* June 12, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-militants-presence-in-marawi-city-sparks-alarm.

[20] Tom Allard, "Ominous signs of an Asian hub for Islamic State in the Philippines." *Reuters*, May 30, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-foreigners/ominous-signs-of-an-asian-hub-for-islamic-state-in-the-philippines-idUSKBN18Q0OO.

[21] Alexis Romero, "Authorities verifying presence of 89 foreign terrorists in Mindanao." *The Philippine Star,* June 24, 2017, http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/06/24/1713205/authorities-verifying-presence-89-foreign-terrorists-mindanao

[22] Jasminder Singh, "'Liberation' of Marawi: Implications for Southeast Asia." *RSIS Commentaries*, October 19, 2017, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CO17197.pdf

[23] Michael Punongbayan, "AFP: Foreign fighters join BIFF." *The Philippine Star*, November 20, 2017, http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/11/20/1760708/afp-foreign-fighters-join-biff

growth of foreign fighters in Mindanao. Whether their numbers will increase depends on how effective the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia are in beefing up their cooperation on counter-terrorism measures through enhanced information sharing, and joint maritime[24] and air patrols[25] in the Sulu Sea.[26]

Islamic State (IS) Philippines Continues Despite the Loss of Top Leaders

The end of the battle of Marawi was marked by the elimination of a few top leaders such as ISP emir Isnilon Hapilon, Omar and Abdullah Maute, and the Malaysian financier and recruiter Mahmud Ahmad. A week after the deaths of Hapilon and Omar Maute were announced, President Duterte declared that Marawi had been "liberated from terrorist influence".[27] Even so, the terrorism threat remains. Some reports have emerged stating that another city in the Philippines is being targeted, this time by BIFF.[28] In addition, reports have affirmed that Abu Toraype is the new leader of IS Philippines.

Although over 960 terrorists, including top leaders, were killed in Marawi, the resilience of these terrorists must not be underestimated as the elimination of the top leadership may give way to a new generation of leaders who could aspire to be more

successful than their predecessors. This is evident from the jihadists present in Marawi, where some of them, including teenagers, demonstrated their boldness and commitment in partaking in an IS-style ideological battle to fight to the death.[29]

Additionally, roughly 160 kilometers south of Marawi, BIFF, under the leadership of Esmael Abdulmalik alias Commander Bungos and Commander Abu Toraype, had already attempted to raise the IS flag multiple times in Maguindanao in June 2017.[30] Although they failed, they have continuously launched attacks in Central Mindanao to take over pocket areas of the region with the ultimate goal of taking over one of its cities. The Philippine authorities will therefore have to maintain high vigilance and continue pursuing these leaders and their followers to prevent another 'Marawi'.

Indonesia

Introduction

Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD), the largest Indonesian pro-'Islamic State' (IS) terrorist group, continues to dominate Indonesia's terrorism landscape. Overall, there were 12 terrorist attacks and five foiled plots in 2017, with police officers being the main targets. Terrorist tactics mostly involved bombings, shootings, and stabbings. JAD also dominated the Indonesian terrorism landscape in 2016. However, most attacks in 2016 were conducted by Aman Abdurrahman's group and individuals linked to Bahrun Naim. In 2017, the perpetrators were returning fighters from Marawi, Iraq and Syria, deportees and lone-wolf actors. Additionally, there has been an influx of JAD members fighting in Marawi with IS-linked members.

The Indonesian government has taken counter measures against JAD and other

[24] Francis Chan and Soeriaatmadja Wahyudi, "Joint Sulu Sea patrols launched; info-sharing from S'pore next." *The Straits Times*, June 20, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/joint-sulu-sea-patrols-launched-info-sharing-from-spore-next
[25] Trinna Leong, "KL, Manila, Jakarta launch joint Sulu Sea air patrols". *The Straits Times*, October 13, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-manila-jakarta-launch-joint-sulu-sea-air-patrols.
[26] The Straits Times, "Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines to discuss cooperation in counter-terrorism." November 10, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-malaysia-philippines-to-discuss-cooperation-in-counter-terrorism.
[27] Allan Nwal, Jeoffrey Maitem, Richel Umel and Divina Suson, "Marawi 'liberated' from terrorists but battle drags on." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 18, 2017, http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/938592/president-duterte-marawi-city-liberated-terrorists
[28] Malu Manar, "200 families in Cotabato flee homes amid military air strikes." *GMA News Online*, November 11, 2017, http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/regions/632763/200-families-in-cotabato-flee-homes-amid-military-air-strikes/story/.

[29] Ryan Rosauro, "Maute gunmen in their teens." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 29, 2017, http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/900478/maute-gunmen-in-their-teens.
[30] John Unson, "Militants attempt to hoist ISIS flag in Maguindanao areas." *The Philippine Star*, June 16, 2017, http://www.philstar.com/nation/2017/06/16/1710653/militants-attempt-hoist-isis-flag-maguindanao-areas

pro-IS groups. Detachment 88, the police anti-terror unit, has arrested about 96 terrorist suspects. Additionally, Indonesian National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) has conducted de-radicalisation programmes that have attempted to de-radicalise around 200 deportees while working with Detachment-88 and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Directorate General of Corrections (Dirjen Pas) has designated the Pasir Putih Prison on Nusa Kambangan Island (Central Java) as a special prison for terrorist inmates. Despite these government responses, JAD members were still able to recruit new members and prepare for future attacks.

Reduction in Violence Amidst Growing Threat in Indonesia

There has been a decline in the number of attacks in Indonesia. In 2016, there were 16 attacks and 10 failed plots. In comparison, there were at least 12 attacks and five failed plots in 2017.[31] A major factor in the decrease in attacks can be attributed mainly to the weakening of Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) whose members were responsible for the majority of the attacks in 2016. The death of MIT leader, Santoso alias Abu Wardah, in July 2016 was a big blow to MIT members. As of December 2017, there are only nine MIT members left.

In 2017, there was also a decrease in the activities of networks linked to Bahrun Naim. A significant number of attacks occurred in Poso (Sulawesi) in 2016. However, in 2017, the attacks were executed around Java. The theme of revenge attacks is strong as police officers have become the main targets because of their involvement in killing terrorists. The April 2017 shooting attack in Tuban (East Java) was conducted to avenge the arrest of Zainal Anshori, a national leader within JAD. The Kampung Melayu (Jakarta) suicide attack was conducted to retaliate against the arrest and killing of JAD members in Purwakarta (West Java) in 2016. In total, 5 police officers were killed and 10 others injured.

Tactical Developments in Attacks

On 24 May, terrorists showed their expertise in bomb-making through the Kampung Melayu bombing that killed 5 people and wounded 10 others. According to former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) military instructor, Nasir Abbas, the bombs and tactics used in the attack showed JAD members' bomb-making expertise and sophisticated attack tactics. In the bombing, the first perpetrator detonated his explosives to attract a crowd, while the second perpetrator targeted those crowds. Shooting was not a favoured tactic as it was difficult to obtain arms and ammunitions from Indonesian and Filipino gun dealers.

De-Radicalisation Initiatives by the Government

In response to the terrorism threat, Detachment-88 arrested 96 terrorist suspects and killed 14 others. These numbers are smaller compared to 2016 when 170 terrorist suspects were arrested and 33 others killed in counter-terrorism operations.

In addition to arresting terrorist suspects, BNPT continued efforts to deradicalise terrorist inmates. As of October 2017, 23 inmates were participating in BNPT's de-radicalisation programmes. They were selected from various prisons across Indonesia and inducted into BNPT's de-radicalisation programme held at BNPT's prison in Bogor. Seven of these inmates completed the programme in April 2017 and 16 others are still working towards completion.

Deportees have become an important part of the Indonesian threat landscape as they continue to spread extremism. Since 2015, there were close to 490 Indonesians who were deported from Turkey, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and other countries for their links with either IS or Al-Qaeda. It is estimated that less than 200 of these deportees have taken part in BNPT's one-month de-radicalisation programme. Unfortunately, as the programme has not directly addressed deportees' issues of extremism, several of them are still radicalised. The majority of deportees actively preaching extremism are pro-IS supporters. They include prominent figures

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[31] Kumpulan Insiden Terorisme 2016-2017. 2017. Pusat Kajian Radikalisme dan Deradikalisasi (PAKAR).

such as, Ahmad Santosa alias Abdul Aziz, with the al-Mahabbah Foundation.[32]

BNPT's de-radicalisation efforts have not been successful enough due to various reasons. The deportees' de-radicalisation programme does not have a standard guideline, which indicates that there is lack of coordination between BNPT and other stakeholders (government agencies and non-governmental organisations). The aims, objectives, and details of the programme are also still unclear, with its nature being ad-hoc at best. The programme also does not have structured follow- up and intervention strategies to monitor deportees after their release. This implies that BNPT has lost contact with a significant number of them.

In order to address these issues, BNPT is creating a blue print for the deportees' de-radicalisation programme. It is now working with the Indonesian National Police, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Directorate General of Corrections and NGOs. BNPT intends to complete the blueprint by the end of 2017. However, according to a report by Detachment-88, 80 percent of deportees are likely to spread extremism before the finalisation of this plan.[33] Overall, there are 95 returnees from Syria and six returnees from the Philippines.[34] A majority of these returnees are pro-IS extremists and they pose more problems than deportees due to the lack of information regarding their location and identity. At least four returnees were arrested in 2017 for their previous links with terrorist activities. These returnees include Sahrul Munif and Agus Trimulyono, members of Abu Jandal network,[35] Syawaluddin Pakpahan and Ardial Ramadhan who stabbed a police officer to death in Medan in June 2017. Pakpahan and Ramadhan previously spent 6

months in Syria in 2013, a year before the creation of IS.[36]

Indonesian 'Jihadists' Linked to Marawi

In early 2017, the influx of JAD members fighting in Marawi was seen when seven JAD members travelled there through Sabah, Marore and Miangas.[37] The battle of Marawi showed a line of command that extended from IS central leadership in Syria to IS regional leadership in the Philippines and Indonesia. The main leaders in this command are Bahrumsyah, a young Indonesian fighter in Syria, and Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian former university lecturer.[38] Both were central figures for collecting funds and recruiting Indonesians and Malaysians for IS operations in Marawi. In January-March 2017, Bahrumsyah, who is based in Syria, sent the accumulated funds of at least US$55,000 to Mahmud, who then transferred them to the Philippines via Western Union.[39] Philippine security officers reported that since the outbreak of the Marawi conflict, IS might have transferred a total of US$600,000 through Mahmud to support the battle of Marawi.[40]

The other lines of command established by Bahrumsyah and Abu Walid (a former member of KOMPAK) are linked to channeling funds, recruiting pro-IS combatants and smuggling weapons from Marawi. The Indonesian groups involved in these lines of command comprise Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), Katibah al Iman, pro-

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[32] This is a Bekasi based Pro-IS foundation, led by Syamsudin Uba.
[33] The number was presented by a Detachment-88 Officer in Jakarta, September 12, 2017.
[34] The number was presented by a Detachment-88 Officer in Jakarta, September 12, 2017.
[35] Nasional Tempo, "Police Find Evidence against Terrorist Suspect Agus Tri Mulyono." June 20, 2017, https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2017/06/20/05588593 7/Police-Find-Evidence-Against-Terrorist-Suspect-Agus-Tri-Mulyono.

[36] The Jakarta Post, "Police closely monitor Syria returnees after IS-linked attack in Medan." June 28, 2017, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/06/28/poli ce-closely-monitor-syria-returnees-after-is-linked-attack-in-medan.html.
[37] Aqwam Fiazmi Hanifan, "Inilah Jalur Para Militan dari WNI ke Marawi." *Titro.Id,* August 25, 2017, https://tirto.id/inilah-jalur-para-militan-isis-dari-wni-ke-marawi-cvja.
[38] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Marawi, The "East Asia Wilayah" And Indonesia." July 21, 2017, No. 38, p. 1.
[39] Raul Dancel, "ISIS-linked network in Marawi may be prepping for attacks on Singapore and Asia: Report." *The Straits Times,* July 19, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-linked-network-in-marawi-may-be-prepping-for-attacks-on-spore-and-asia-report.
[40] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Marawi, The "East Asia Wilayah" And Indonesia." July 21, 2017, No. 38, p. 8.

IS inmates under the leadership of Syaiful Anam alias Brekele and the Kafilah al-Hawariyun cell led by Abu Nusaibah.[41] Meanwhile, Mahmud had successfully united two competing pro-IS groups in Syria (Bahrumsyah and Abu Jandal's group) and linked them to JAD, which is Indonesia's largest pro-IS community.[42] JAD has sent members to join military camps run by Isnilon Hapilon and IS-linked groups in the Philippines.[43]

Online Debates: Pro-IS Networks Gain Influence

According to a Mediawave report, the heated online debates between pro-IS and pro-Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) jihadists lasted from September 2014 to early 2015.[44] However, the last two years saw a dramatic decline of online debates among pro-IS and pro-JN members due to three reasons. First, the restriction issued by the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, led these groups to shift from 'open and conventional' online platforms to more secretive channels including Telegram and Signal. Second, the continual arrests of local IS leaders and activists since 2014 to 2017 has contributed to a decline in their online propaganda. Lastly, the extensive counter and competing narratives against IS by local Al-Qaeda followers have drowned out the former's voices.

Reports have also revealed that pro-IS activists are gaining online support more readily than pro-JN networks. Sofyan Tsauri, an ex Al-Qaeda member, added that the penetration of pro-IS networks and movements has shifted to encrypted mobile applications to permit secretive communication. In comparison, discourse from pro-JN members has declined steadily

since their websites, such as Al-Mustaqbal.net and Manjanik.net, have been banned by BNPT and the Coordinating Ministry of Communication and Information.[45] This development suggests that despite IS' losses, its influence in social media remains.[46]

Future Outlook and Recommendations

It is evident that pro-IS extremists such as JAD members will continue to dominate the Indonesian terrorism landscape in 2018. Further attacks targeting police officers and the government using bombing, shooting and stabbing tactics are likely. These attacks will occur in Java and other islands including Sumatra, Sulawesi and West Nusa Tenggara.

As IS in Marawi has been defeated, fewer Indonesian pro-IS extremists will be traveling to the country. Presently, these groups have been discussing a new theater of jihad in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. In October 2017, leaders and members of Katibah al-Iman, a pro-IS group being led by Abdurrahman bin Thoyib alias Abu Husna, stated that fighting Buddhists in Myanmar will gain more support from the Muslims compared to fighting the Catholics in Marawi. In addition, the Solo based-groups will strengthen their networks with other groups in Jakarta and Poso. Their members will also continue to conduct military training under the guise of mountain climbing activities. Moreover, pro Al-Qaeda groups will continue to recruit members to public gatherings. They are unlikely to carry out attacks in 2018 because they believe that the attacks will only hamper their efforts of building stronger pro Al-Qaeda communities.

In order to further prevent terrorist attacks and radicalisation efforts, BNPT and other government agencies should monitor religious study circles called halaqahs or taklims, or events held by pro-IS networks around Indonesia. Such gatherings and other pro-IS public events should be banned to hamper related recruitment in the country.

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[41] Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, "Marawi, The "East Asia Wilayah" And Indonesia." July 21, 2017, No. 38, p. 12-14.

[42] Raul Dancel, "ISIS-linked network in Marawi may be prepping for attacks on Singapore and Asia: Report." *The Straits Times,* July 19, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-linked-network-in-marawi-may-be-prepping-for-attacks-on-spore-and-asia-report.

[43] Ibid.

[44] BBC Indonesia, "'Pertarungan' ISIS dan Al-Qaida di media social." September 4, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2014/09/140904_alqaida_asia_selatan_indonesia.

[45] Brief interview with Sofyan Tsaury, October 19, 2017.

[46] Bennett Seftel, "ISIS 'Caliphate' Fades but Social Media Empire Remains." *The Cipher Brief,* September 2017, 28, 2017, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/isis-caliphate-fades-social-media-empire-remains.

Second, BNPT should finalise and implement the blueprint for deportee and returnee de-radicalisation programmes by early 2018. Lastly, BNPT should focus on embracing and involving more stakeholders in countering pro-IS online narratives and propaganda as their tools for preventing radicalisation to terrorism.

Malaysia

Surrounded by Three Active Hotspots of Terrorism

As the Islamic State (IS) retreats into the virtual world, the online sphere of terrorism activity will be its centre of gravity. Malaysia, as well as other countries, are increasing its efforts in this realm to prevent and counter threats of radicalisation and terrorism in the home ground. Malaysia also faces external security threats. Firstly, individuals of different nationalities involved or interested in distant conflict zones such as Iraq, Yemen, Turkey, Xinjiang, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines have been arrested in different parts of Malaysia.[47] The country also sits in a region with three active centres of terrorism – Marawi in the Philippines, Arakan in Myanmar and the southern provinces of Thailand. As a result, Malaysia has been arresting individuals who are affiliated with the Filipino Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which has links to IS.[48] Further, a group of Malaysians have entered Myanmar through Thailand and Bangladesh in order to fight against the Myanmar army.[49]

This represents the second group of Malaysians that have traveled to a neighboring country to participate in 'jihadist'

activities in recent years. The earlier group, which included former university lecturer-turned-militant Mahmud Ahmad and his trusted lieutenant, former municipal contract worker Joraimee Awang, became part of the core leadership of IS-affiliated fighters in the Philippines, during the battle of Marawi.[50] In Southern Thailand, insurgents find it easy to cross the porous borders into Malaysia which is trying to mediate a peace deal between the militants and Bangkok.[51] Given Malaysia's proximity to the centre of three active conflict zones, it inevitably has an important role to play in curbing both regional terrorism, as well as online radicalisation.

Terrorists and Supporters: Three Clusters

Malaysia has arrested more than 400 individuals[52] who have links to terrorist groups since 2013 and has also foiled several terrorist plots. Malaysia has arrested 82 individuals as of October 2017, and authorities are expecting more arrests before the end of the year. In comparison, Malaysia had arrested 109 individuals last year.[53] The security threat that Malaysia faces from terrorism emanates from three major groups. The first group consists of locals as well as Malaysian foreign 'fighters' or terrorists who carry out acts of violence. These fighters include those who have planned to conduct various forms of attacks, such as knife attacks, robberies, kidnappings and bombings. Some of the fighters Malaysia has arrested include returnees from Iraq and Syria. They include Hidayat bin Azman and Zulkarnain bin Ghaz. In the days of Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI), fighters came from

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[47] Nadirah Rodzi, "Malaysian Police Arrest 45 Foreign Terrorist Fighters." *The Straits Times*, October 14, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-45-foreign-terrorist-fighters.
[48] Latiff Rozanna, "Malaysia Arrests Seven Suspected Of Involvement With Abu Sayyaf Militant Group." *Reuters*, September 21, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-security/malaysia-arrests-seven-suspected-of-involvement-with-abu-sayyaf-militant-group-idUSKCN1BW0FK.
[49] Nadirah Rodzi, "Malaysians In Rakhine To Fight Army: KL Top Cop." *The Straits Times*, September 19, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysians-in-rakhine-to-fight-army-kl-top-cop.

[50] Raul Dancel, "Philippine Military Says 'Big Possibility' Top Malaysian Militant Mahmud Ahmad Killed In Marawi." *The Straits Times*, October 19, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/philippines-says-big-possibility-key-malaysian-militant-mahmud-ahmad-killed-in-marawi.
[51] The Star, "ISIS cell found smuggling weapons into Malaysia." *The Straits Times*, 5 May 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-cell-found-smuggling-weapons-into-malaysia.
[52] The Straits Times, "KL detains 20 suspected militants." December 23, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/kl-detains-20-suspected-militants.
[53] Sumisha Naidu, "Surge In Malaysia's Islamic State-Linked Arrests; Official Explains Anti-Terror Strategy." *Channel News Asia*, October 19, 2017, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/surge-in-malaysia-s-islamic-state-linked-arrests-official-9324112.

Afghanistan and Sulawesi.[54] In addition to handling the challenges associated with returnees from the Middle East, Malaysia also has to ensure that the locals involved in Marawi are apprehended should they return or flee to nearby territories such as Sabah. With the end of the battle in Marawi, it is expected that IS-affiliated fighters of various nationalities would look for another opportunity or conflict zone to mount 'jihad'.

The second group consists of supporters of terrorist groups and their fighters. Although these individuals may not be members of terrorist groups, they provide crucial support for terrorist operations. No terrorist (or militant) group can survive for long without these facilitators or enablers. Therefore, they will have to be dealt with firmly. Malaysia has been arresting individuals who have contributed and collected funds and helped to facilitate terrorists within and out of the country. They include Rohaimi Rahim and Fauzi Miswak.

The third group represents terrorist sympathisers. They have little links with terrorist groups, except that they sympathise with their cause, agree with what they do and may express their sympathy vocally, privately or publicly. Online support of IS on social media platforms have resulted in IS' online hegemony of the public discourse on Islamic political and religious issues. IS sympathisers therefore constitute an online community that has allowed IS to spread their propaganda and gain new potential recruits and supporters.

Sympathisers Constitute a Threat

Today, there are still thousands of online IS sympathisers and their activities are concerning. As IS loses its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, it will move towards a 'virtual caliphate'. There are two meanings behind this term. Firstly, a virtual caliphate is a functioning organisation that is housed online. In his book, the Virtual Caliphate: Exposing the Islamist State on the Internet, Yaakov Lappin, a military and strategic affairs expert, argued that Al-Qaeda failed to achieve its goal of re-establishing the caliphate, hence necessitating a virtual community that exists on computer servers

that carry out functions traditionally held by a state. These include "creating training camps, mapping out a state's constitution, and drafting tax laws".[55] Lappin further elaborated on how Al-Qaeda's virtual caliphate included virtual ministries for 'Foreign Affairs', 'Morality', and even 'Finance'. Similarly, General Joseph Votel, the top commander for US forces in the Middle East, has warned that even if IS faces 'decisive defeat', the organisation will retreat to 'a virtual safe haven or a virtual caliphate, where it will continue to co-ordinate and inspire attacks', until it is capable of reclaiming physical territory.[56] IS, which grew from Al-Qaeda in Iraq, should be familiar with a strategic retreat into the virtual space as they have experienced operating in the online 'terrain'.

The second meaning behind the term 'virtual caliphate' is that of an 'imagined community' of terrorist sympathisers.[57] An 'imagined community' is a term used by Benedict Anderson, a political scientist and historian. According to Anderson, a 'nation' is akin to a socially constructed community. In this line of thought, the 'virtual caliphate' is also an 'imagined community', that is created by terrorist sympathisers who perceived themselves to be part of the global terrorist 'nation' or in IS' case, a 'caliphate'. Through IS propaganda, they are convinced of the existence and legitimacy of the so-called caliphate and its actions, and believe that whatever they do to build this community and sustain it amounts to real support of the caliphate. Some of the ways include sharing news and engaging in discussions about the caliphate. This is the case in Malaysia and other countries. Malaysia reported in 2015 that 75% of IS supporters were radicalised online indicating how sharing IS propaganda online built a community and promoted terrorism.[58] Since late 2015, arrested

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[54] Jemaah Islamiyah is a regional terrorist network that was exposed by the authorities in 2001.

[55] Yaakov Lappin, *Virtual Caliphate: Exposing the Islamist State on the Internet.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).
[56] "Islamic State: Defeating The Virtual Caliphate." *The Express Tribune*, October 6, 2017, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1524180/islamic-state-defeating-virtual-caliphate/.
[57] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin And Spread Of Nationalism.* (London: Verso, 2004).
[58] The Straits Times, "Malaysia Says 75 Per Cent of New ISIS Supporters Recruited Online." May 25, 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-

individuals who are linked to terrorism activities seem to have come from all walks of life; their backgrounds give a good representation of an online community. They include security officers, air-conditioning and vehicle inspection technicians, permanent residents with citizenship in conflict zones, retirees, bank workers and the unemployed.[59] These networks of 'interest-groups' could also transform into real terrorist cell that sometimes urge a terrorist to conduct attacks, or enhance the communication and dynamics of the pro-extremist group. The 2016 Puchong Attack was conducted by a cell that showed signs of online communication and organisation.

The bar for what action constitutes 'jihad' has also been lowered by IS. Those who cannot afford to travel to the Middle East are urged to travel to South Asia, Myanmar or the Philippines. Those who intend to conduct 'jihad' locally and cannot find the weapons and explosive materials to do so may be linked up with regional contacts that can help them. Stabbing and homicide using vehicles have also been normalised by IS as part of their so-called 'jihad'. Other than violence, IS has also encouraged crime as 'jihad', which includes bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom and even physical and online theft. In their minds, such activities are not merely fundraising initiatives, but part of the 'war' against individuals, communities and governments opposed to them.

A Targeted Response

Malaysia needs to prepare itself for the nexus between two trends, the virtualisation of IS and other terrorist groups as they face territorial defeat, and the 'jihadisation' of the online space. Malaysia, as well as other countries in the region, might not have time to wait for the various institutions of counter-messaging to come to fruition or reach their optimum level. These counter-radicalisation or counter-violent extremism institutions such as the Regional Digital Counter-Messaging

Communication Centre (RDC3) are still relevant and important for the broader audiences who have yet to be inducted into the terrorist and extremist milieu. However, the niche audiences synched with terrorist propaganda may need targeted efforts, such as rehabilitation and counseling, to bring them back into the fold of society before they pursue acts of violence and other criminal activities. As it is, Malaysia has criminalised the possession of terrorist-related media, such as flags, banners, or publications.[60] Malaysia could consider community-based approaches to identify at-risk individuals and provide them with the help they need. In addition, Malaysians spend a lot of time online and they could help look out for their fellow family members and friends in their community. Radicalised individuals who may not respond well to government initiatives may also be more receptive towards counter-messaging when the hands of the state they have learned to hate is out of the picture.

Myanmar

Ongoing Conflict in the Rakhine State

Myanmar is emerging as Southeast Asia's new flashpoint for terrorism as the plight of its Rohingya Muslim minority continues to be exploited by extremists including the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). 2017 saw major turbulence in the country's Rakhine state due to the military's controversial counter-insurgency campaign where over 6,700[61] Rohingyas have been killed and more than 600,000 were forced to cross the border to become refugees in neighbouring Bangladesh due to violence, insecurity and the growing humanitarian crisis.[62]

asia/malaysia-says-75-per-cent-of-new-isis-supporters-recruited-online.

[59] Trinna Leong, "Malaysian Police Arrest Nine ISIS Suspects In Diverse Occupations." *The Straits Times*, March 25, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-arrest-nine-isis-suspects-in-diverse-occupations.

[60] Bin Jani, Muhammad Haziq, "Annual Threat Assessment: Malaysia." *Counter Terrorist Trends & Analyses*, 9, 1. (2017): pp. 16-20.

[61] Poppy McPherson, "6,700 Rohingya Muslims killed in one month in Myanmar, MSF says." *The Guardian,* December 14, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/6700-rohingya-muslims-killed-in-attacks-in-myanmar-says-medecins-sans-frontieres.

[62] Donors pledge over US$344 million in response to Rohingya refugee crisis. UNHCR. http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2017/10/59ee1c494/donors-pledge-us344-million-response-rohingya-refugee-crisis.html.

The crisis erupted following vigorous military operations in August 2017 in response to several coordinated attacks on multiple police posts at a northern Maungdaw township by a Rohingya militant group. The government reported that 12 security forces personnel and at least 77 Rohingya fighters were killed.[63] In the ensuing crackdown, the military, police and local militias were accused of burning hundreds of Rohingya villages, gang-rapes and arbitrary killings.

Myanmar military's response towards the Rohingyas is controversial due to the collective punishment approach that is often referred to as 'Pyat Lay Pyat [Four Cuts]'. This doctrine makes use of the military to target civilians in order to cut the insurgents' access to food, funds, intelligence and a recruitment pool. The military's response has been criticised by the international community as disproportionate and heavy-handed and some sources indicated that rape had been used as a weapon. In addition, local Rakhine Buddhist vigilantes have been accused of burning Rohingya villages and committing human rights violations against the minority community.

The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a relatively little known armed insurgent group that claims to fight for the rights of the Rohingyas, was involved in the wave of attacks on the police posts. However, ARSA's acceptability among the Rohingya community is questionable; there is also a lack of substantial information on the group's motives.[64]

The Rohingya Narrative and Transnational Jihadist Groups

Despite living in Myanmar for centuries, Rohingyas are not recognised as citizens of Myanmar and largely regarded as outsiders due to ethno-linguistic and cultural differences and political reasons. Lack of recognition and legal status limits the Rohingyas' freedom of movement, access to

education and other basic human rights. It also makes them vulnerable to racial abuse, discrimination, ethnic violence and creates a fertile ground for their radicalisation.

The Rohingya 'persecution' narrative has been exploited by transnational jihadist groups, particularly Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate known as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). AQIS' intention to exploit the Rohingya crisis is evident from its propaganda materials.[65] In a recent statement, AQ identified Myanmar as a military target. In addition, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has urged AQIS leadership to physically support the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.[66] On 12 September, Al-Qaeda central released a statement calling for revenge attacks to punish the government of Myanmar for the persecution of Rohingya Muslims. The group also urged Muslims globally, and specifically those in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the Philippines, to support the Rohingyas in Myanmar financially and physically.[67] The reference to Bangladesh is significant because the country's proximity to the Rakhine state increases its suitability as an operating ground for local and foreign militant groups. The threat is further heightened due to local militant groups such as the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) viewing the protection of persecuted Muslims in the region as a religious duty.

The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group is also likely to exploit the Rohingya crisis. After suffering operational and territorial losses (Mosul and Raqqa), IS is decentralising and moving towards its wilayat and enclaves for refuge. As IS seeks to regain its balance and build up support, it could take advantage of local grievances to recruit Rohingyas and

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[63] Al Jazeera, "Myanmar troops open fire on civilians fleeing attacks." August 27, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/myanmar-violence-traps-rohingya-bangladesh-border-170826101215439.html.
[64] This information is based on an interview with Rohingya activist in Kuala Lumpur conducted in September 2017.

[65] Al Balagh. 2017. Issue 6, Titumir Media (in Bengali).
[66] Reuters, "Yemeni Al-Qaeda leader calls for attacks in support of Myanmar's Rohingya." September 3, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-alqaeda/yemeni-al-qaeda-leader-calls-for-attacks-in-support-of-myanmars-rohingya-idUSKCN1BD0U8.
[67] Reuters, "Al-Qaeda warns Myanmar of 'punishment' over Rohingya." September 21, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-rohingya-alqaeda/al-qaeda-warns-myanmar-of-punishment-over-rohingya-idINKCN1BO0UQ.

those disaffected by their persecution. Also, IS' members in Iraq and Syria[68] might consider Myanmar while searching for a new conflict zone as a base. Some of the early publications of IS' Dabiq magazine had already identified Myanmar as a target. These publications specifically focused on the strategic importance of Bangladesh as a potential launch pad for targeting Myanmar.

If the conflict in the Rakhine State deteriorates further, it risks becoming a lightning rod for radicals and jihadists from South and Southeast Asia. Following reports of increasing violence against the Rohingyas in November 2016, protests erupted in Dhaka, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Bangkok. In Dhaka, protesters chanted slogans condemning Myanmar, and burnt an effigy of Myanmar leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.[69] In early 2017, the Malaysian authorities announced the detention of a suspected IS follower of Indonesian origin who was planning to conduct attacks in Myanmar.[70] According to Malaysian authorities, the suspect wanted to engage in jihad in Myanmar, and fight against the government for persecuting the Rohingyas. More protests erupted in September 2017 following Myanmar's controversial military operations that drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to flee. The radical Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) claims that it has thousands of 'volunteers' ready to travel to Myanmar; it led thousands of Muslims to protest in Jakarta in front of the Myanmar embassy, calling for volunteers to wage jihad.[71] An FPI spokesman said

volunteers must be 'willing to die for their religion'.[72] During these protests, a petrol bomb was thrown at the embassy, while some protesters stamped on posters of Aung San Suu Kyi and others waved anti-Buddhist placards.[73] The violence and protests surrounding the Rohingya issue outside Myanmar highlights the notion of the 'persecuted Muslim community', a potent rhetoric for radicalisation.

Moving Forward

In order to reduce the threat of terrorism in Myanmar, it is necessary to find a durable solution for the Rakhine state. The Advisory Commission on Rakhine State headed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan recommended Myanmar to step up efforts to ensure that all communities feel safe and in doing so, restore inter-communal cohesion.[74] To attain this end the Commission recommended involvement of various stakeholders such as the Union and Rakhine state governments, the national and state parliaments, religious and community leaders and above all the people of Rakhine. Among the key recommendations made were to allow freedom of movement to people living in Rakhine, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or citizenship, and review the controversial 1982 citizenship law which does not acknowledge Rohingyas as one of Myanmar's ethnic groups. The report warns that if human rights concerns are not addressed, Rakhine may become a 'fertile ground for radicalisation'.[75] It also warns that

[68] Reuters, "Myanmar faces danger from Islamic State militants, Malaysian police say." January 4, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-security-rohingya/myanmar-faces-danger-from-islamic-state-militants-malaysian-police-say-idUSKBN14O0PX?il%3D0.
[69] Joseph Sipalan and Ruma Paul, "Malaysia to summon Myanmar envoy on Rohingya as protests mount." *Reuters,* November 25, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-protests/malaysia-to-summon-myanmar-envoy-on-rohingya-as-protests-mount-idUSKBN13K0SW.
[70] Reuters, "Al-Qaeda warns Myanmar of 'punishment' over Rohingya." September 21, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-rohingya-alqaeda/al-qaeda-warns-myanmar-of-punishment-over-rohingya-idINKCN1BO0UQ.
[71] Simon Roughneen, "Thousands of Indonesians protest at Jakarta embassy over Burma's treatment of Rohingya Muslims," *The Telegraph,* September 6,

2017. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/06/thousands-indonesians-protest-jakarta-embassy-burmas-treatment/.
[72] Amanda Hodge and Nivell Radya, "Indonesian Islamists recruiting volunteers for Rohingya jihad." *The Australian,* September 5, 2017, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/indonesian-islamists-recruiting-volunteers-for-rohingya-jihad/news-story/f9cd04129233827d4f2ba9f17664d844.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Towards a Peaceful, Fair, and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. Rakhine Commission. 2016. http://www.rakhinecommission.org/the-final-report/.
[75] May Wong, "Myanmar's Rakhine a human rights crisis: Kofi Annan." *Channel News Asia*, August 24, 2017, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-s-rakhine-a-human-rights-crisis-kofi-annan-9153350.

'a highly militarised response' is not going to bring peace to the area, adding that 'the situation requires an integrated and calibrated response'.[76]

Thailand

Introduction

Like other Southeast Asian states facing the terrorist threat from the so-called Islamic State (IS), Thailand is confronting a different yet familiar threat. The southern provinces of Thailand, namely Pattani, Yala, Songkhla and Narathiwat, have faced attacks by separatist groups for decades.[77] In 2017, insurgents stepped up their attacks in southern Thailand to pressurise Bangkok to accede to their demands, which range from significant autonomy to outright independence[78]. For instance, they carried out 38 coordinated strikes in April and detonated two bombs in downtown Pattani in May.[79]

The Thai government has attempted to contain the threat through a combination of hard and soft measures. These measures include enhanced security checkpoints, intensified cross-border security cooperation with Malaysia, and negotiations with the insurgents. Despite these measures, the insurgency persists. The crime-terror nexus and the government's inability to diffuse tensions in southern Thailand could provide IS a potential opportunity to exploit the indigenous struggle for autonomy or secession.[80]

Persistent Insurgency

The Thai separatist movement began in the late 1940s, after Thailand's policy of forced assimilation of the southernmost states of the former sultanate of Pattani that was annexed in 1902.[81] The low-intensity conflict escalated in the early 2000s, with various deadly incidents,[82] damaging the already strained relationship between Bangkok and the South.

The intensity of violent clashes between the Thai state and southern insurgents intensified in 2017. Constitutional changes, the revival of dormant factions of the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO)[83] and the renewal of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional's (BRN) leadership[84], probably account for this uptick in violence. The new constitution signed by the Thai King in April 2017 granted the military junta greater control over Thai politics,[85] and the amendments enabled the junta to appoint all 250 members of the Thai senate.[86]

The insurgents launched as many as 38 coordinated attacks in two separate waves, on 7 and 19 April. The first wave of attacks

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Madeleine Bowen, "Thailand: Little Prospect of Change in Deep South Violence." *Future Directions International*, September 27, 2017, http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/thailand-little-prospect-change-deep-south-violence/.

[78] Gabriel Dominguez, "A Look At Southern Thailand's Smouldering Insurgency." *Deutsche Welle*, July 20, 2017, http://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-southern-thailands-smoldering-insurgency/a-18591878.

[79] "Thailand: Insurgents Bomb Southern Mall." *Human Rights Watch*, May 9, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/09/thailand-insurgents-bomb-southern-mall.

[80] Yasmin Lee Arpon, "Conflict in Thai South Could Be Exploited By ISIS, Warn Analysts." *The Straits Times*, June 10, 2017,

http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/conflict-in-thai-south-could-be-exploited-by-isis-warn-analysts.

[81] Jayshree Bajoria and Carin Zissis, "The Muslim Insurgency in Southern Thailand," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 10, 2008, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/muslim-insurgency-southern-thailand.

[82] Anders Engvall and Magnus Andersson, "The Dynamics of Conflict in Southern Thailand." *Asian Economics Paper*, 14:3 (2014), pp. 171-191

[83] Vikram Rajakumar, "Insurgency in Southern Thailand: More Unrest Ahead?" *RSIS Commentaries*, July 4, 2016, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CO16167.pdf.

[84] Amy Chew, "New Generation Of Insurgents Could See Renewed Violence In Thailand's South." *Channel News Asia*, May 19, 2017, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/new-generation-of-insurgents-could-see-renewed-violence-in-8865058.

[85] Panarat Thepgumpanat and Panarat Tanakasempipat, "Thai King Signs Constitution In Step Toward Poll." *Reuters*, April 6, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-king-constitution/thai-king-signs-constitution-in-step-toward-poll-idUSKBN1780VB.

[86] Iam Bremmer, "Here's What You Need to Know About Thailand's New Constitution." *TIME*, August 11, 2016, http://time.com/4448655/thailand-constitutional-referendum/.

targeted 19 districts in the southern region, such as Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Songkhla.[87] Although no casualties were reported, 52 electricity pylons were damaged, resulting in power outages across the southern region. The second wave of attacks involved a range of operational tactics, including grenade attacks that wounded eight civilians and officials.[88]

Later in May, the insurgents detonated a bomb at the Big C shopping mall in downtown Pattani, injuring at least 61 people. This was followed by violent attacks during the month of Ramadan which killed approximately 25 people,[89] and coordinated bomb attacks in August which injured four soldiers.[90] In the following month, a bomb ambush killed two soldiers and wounded 18 others[91]. October was not any better as the insurgents used more heavy-handed tactics, planting a 100-kilogram bomb in Sai Buri district in Pattani that killed four Thai soldiers.

With so many insurgent attacks occurring over the past year, it is evident that this protracted conflict will not disappear anytime soon. The Thai government has attempted to mitigate the situation through negotiations with MARA Patani -- an umbrella panel which represents most of the southern insurgents. However, not much progress has been made[92]. For instance, although the Thai government and MARA Patani have intended to set up a "safety zone" with ceasefire in one district, both sides have not yet agreed on where to designate the "safety zone".[93]

The peace process also faces other challenges. The non-involvement of the most powerful separatist group in the peace process, the BRN, has affected the effectiveness of the peace talks. BRN continues to carry out attacks as it perceives the ongoing peace talks null and void.[94] Also, BRN has demanded a revamp of the current peace process, and insisted mediation (Malaysia aside) from the international community, a condition which the Thai government rejects. The failure of negotiations may push the more violent, younger generation of BRN to carry out more terrorist attacks to get Bangkok to heed their demands. The continuous instability in the south could therefore provide potential opportunities for exploitation by external jihadist groups such as IS.[95]

IS Presence in Southern Thailand?

There is no credible evidence of IS presence among the insurgent groups in southern Thailand.[96] They share neither ideologies nor objectives with IS.[97] Prior to IS, the insurgents also kept Al-Qaeda and its Indonesia-based affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah at arm's length to avoid the conflation of their domestic grievances with jihadist ideology.[98]

[87] Panarat Thepgumpanat and Panarat Tanakasempipat, "Wave Of Attacks Across Southern Thailand After New Constitution Signed." *Reuters*, April 7, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-south-attacks/wave-of-attacks-across-southern-thailand-after-new-constitution-signed-idUSKBN17908H.

[88] Joseph Hincks, "A Series of 15 Grenade, Bomb and Gun Attacks Rock Southern Thailand." *TIME*, April 20, 2017, http://time.com/4747715/southern-thailand-bomb-attacks/.

[89] Matahari Ismail and Mariyam Ahmad, "Thailand: Deep South Bomb Attack Injures 2-Year-old, 13 others." *Benar News*, June 23, 2017, http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/girl-hurt-06232017142120.html.

[90] The Nation, "Coordinated Pickup Truck Thefts Show New Insurgent Tactic." August 18, 2017, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30324131.

[91] Union of Catholic Asian News, "Deadly bombings dim peace prospects in Thailand's Deep South." October 11, 2017, https://www.ucanews.com/news/deadly-bombings-dim-peace-prospects-in-thailands-deep-south/80438.

[92] Don Pathan, "Southern Thailand's Peace Process Faces Many Challenges." *Channel News Asia*, June

18, 2017, https://www.ucanews.com/news/deadly-bombings-dim-peace-prospects-in-thailands-deep-south/80438.

[93] Razlan Rashid and Pimuk Rakkanam, "Thailand, MARA Patani Hold Technical Talks on Deep South Truce." *Benar News*, September 12, 2017, http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/technical-talks-09122017150326.html.

[94] Anthony Davis, "Thailand Peace Process Dead On Arrival." *Asia Times*, April 10, 2017, http://www.atimes.com/article/thailand-peace-process-dead-arrival/.

[95] International Crisis Group, "Thailand: Malay-Muslim Insurgency and the Dangers of Intractability.", July 20, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/8-watch-list-2017-second-update.

[96] International Crisis Group, "Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace." November 8, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/291-jihadism-southern-thailand-phantom-menace.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Shawn W. Crispin, "Islamic State in Thailand: A Phantom Threat?" *The Diplomat*, March 4, 2016,

Further, the association with an international jihadist group like IS will not only reduce local support and legitimacy, but incur international wrath.

However, this does not mean that jihadist expansion cannot develop in southern Thailand.[22] IS militants may sway the disaffected individuals or factions within existing southern insurgent groups to join its jihadist agenda. This is possible as several BRN members have personal ties to pan-Islamist groups.[99] Furthermore, recent developments indicate a faint IS footprint in the Deep South. The social media accounts that are affiliated with Thai insurgent groups have started to feature IS flags and symbols in November 2016. The Thai police had also received a tip-off from Australian intelligence which claimed that Thais were providing IS with financial assistance, and more than 100,000 Facebook users from Thailand had frequented IS-affiliated online communities.

Crime-Terror Nexus in Southern Thailand

The crime-terror nexus in the Deep South, in addition to the factors mentioned above, make Thailand an attractive place for IS to strike roots. Moreover, the high turnover of visitors to the country, well-developed communications and transportation infrastructure, porous borders and easy access to firearms, make southern Thailand vulnerable to IS infiltration.[100] It is notable that while owning weapons is legal in the country, the Thai government also covertly supplies civilians in the southern provinces weapons to fight the insurgents.[101] This has created a flourishing illegal arms market that IS has been able to exploit.[102]

In February 2017, six IS operatives in Kelantan were detained by Malaysian police for possessing bomb-making materials.[103] One of the arrested members, 40-year-old Uzman Jeh-umong, was a leading militant leader of BRN.[104] This development hinted at possible networks that IS might have established in southern Thailand. Three months later, in May 2017, the Malaysian police discovered a Kelantan-based IS cell, that had been smuggling weapons from southern Thailand into Malaysia.[105] Put together, these two incidents suggest that IS has some form of presence in southern Thailand.

The possibility of a crime-terror nexus between southern Thailand and Malaysia was further corroborated by the statement of a Malaysian arms smuggler, who claimed that some of his clients could be IS militants.[106] However, prior to these instances, indications of a nexus between transnational criminal networks and terrorists have existed in Thailand. For instance, in October 2016, Thai authorities arrested two Americans and a British trio at a Bangkok home during a fake passport raid.[107] The raid led to the discovery that Pakistanis were also involved in the fake passport ring and one of them, Atiq ur Rehman, had allegedly supplied Al-Qaeda operatives with fake passports.[108]

https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/islamic-state-in-thailand-a-phantom-threat/.

[99] Jason Johns, "Faint ISIS Footprint In Thailand's Deep South."*Asia Times*, March 8, 2017, http://www.atimes.com/article/faint-footprint-thailands-deep-south/.

[100] Peter Chalk, "Light Arms Trading in SE Asia." *RAND Corporation*, March 1, 2001, https://www.rand.org/blog/2001/03/light-arms-trading-in-se-asia.html.

[101] Gabriel Dominguez, "A Look At Thailand's Fervent Gun Culture." *Deutsche Welle*, February 19, 2016, http://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-thailands-fervent-gun-culture/a-19060721.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Shawn W. Crispin, "Islamic State in Thailand: A Phantom Threat?" *The Diplomat*, March 4, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/islamic-state-in-thailand-a-phantom-threat/.

[104] Pimuk Rakkam and Anis Natasha, "6 Men Arrested in Malaysia Involved in Thailand Bomb-Plot: Security Sources." *Benar News*, February 2, 2017, http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/bomb-plot-02022017170825.html.

[105] The Nation, "IS Terrorist Cell Has Smuggled Weapons From Thailand Into Malaysia: Sources." May 5, 2017, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/national/30314267.

[106] Nadirah H.Rodzi, "ISIS Links Fire Up Worries About Arms Smuggling." *The Straits Times*, November 20, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-links-fire-up-worries-about-arms-smuggling.

[107] Nirmal Ghosh, "Probe into Terror Links in Thailand-based Fake Passport Racket." *The Straits Times*, October 6, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/probe-into-terror-links-in-thailand-based-fake-passport-racket.

[108] Pimuk Rakkam and Anis Natasha, " 6 Men Arrested in Malaysia Involved in Thailand Bomb-Plot: Security Sources." *Benar News,* February 2, 2017,

Going Forward

At the domestic level, the Thai government has attempted to resolve the southern insurgency by engaging in peace talks with MARA Patani. However, the peace process has made little progress and terror attacks only seem to rise as the insurgents grow increasingly frustrated. In order for the peace process to move forward, the Thai government and insurgent groups should show some flexibility to pave the way for reaching a settlement.

At the regional and international level, Thailand has cooperated with regional neighbours to strengthen its counter-terrorism efforts.[109] The agreement between Thailand and the Philippines to exchange information and intelligence among security agencies, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and Interpol frameworks exemplify this.[110] Greater cooperation would help to counter the spread of terrorism and transnational crimes.[111] The Thai state should also focus on counter-insurgency strategies that include the implementation of development programmes to garner legitimacy in the eyes of the Malay-Muslim villagers at the expense of the insurgent groups.[112] Although there are plans for economic development in the south[113], it still remains underdeveloped in relation to

other parts of Thailand[114]. There are pockets of poverty in the South,[115] and the income gap between Southern Thailand and the rest of the country continues to widen.[116]

The prospects of improvement in the situation in southern Thailand remain bleak. If the peace talks continue to exclude BRN and fail to make progress, the insurgents may up the ante with more coordinated attacks to put pressure on Bangkok.[117]

Diffusing the situation in southern Thailand is imperative as IS jihadists who are leaving Iraq and Syria are looking for new theatres of conflicts to exploit. Although the southern Thai insurgents have little in common with IS jihadists (in terms of goals and ideology), the constant instability could provide openings for the foreign jihadists to exploit and establish a foothold. Bangkok should take heed that IS jihadists have already moved into Marawi, Mindanao, and are showing interest in Rakhine, Myanmar. This necessitates an engagement with the insurgents to deny IS a possible toehold in southern Thailand.

SINGAPORE

Introduction

The terrorism threat to Singapore in 2017 was at its highest in recent years according to a June 2017 report by Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs.[118] The report noted the targeting of Singapore by terrorists and the increase in 'Islamic State' (IS)-linked terrorist attacks and activities in Southeast Asia. It cited the 2016 suicide bombing in Jakarta

http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/bomb-plot-02022017170825.html.
[109] Sirisha Veera and Isabel Yeo, "Are Thailand's Counter-Terrorism Measures Effective?" *ASEAN Today*, October 7, 2017, https://www.aseantoday.com/2017/10/are-thailands-counter-terrorism-measures-effective/.
[110] Nontarat Phaicharoen, "Thailand, Philippines Pledge Closer Counter-Terror Ties," *Benar News*, March 23, 2017, http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/philippine-visit-03232017160943.html.
[111] Nadirah H.Rodzi, "ISIS Links Fire Up Worries About Arms Smuggling." *The Straits Times*, November 20, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/isis-links-fire-up-worries-about-arms-smuggling.
[112] Eugene Mark, "Roadblocks to Peace in Southern Thailand," *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/roadblocks-to-peace-in-southern-thailand/.
[113] Nirmal Ghosh, "Probe into Terror Links in Thailand-based Fake Passport Racket." *The Straits Times*, October 6, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/probe-into-terror-links-in-thailand-based-fake-passport-racket.

[114] Helen Kelly, "What are the sources of Islamic Militancy in Southern Thailand." Political Science Honours Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2006.
[115] The World Bank, "The World Bank in Thailand." September 2017, http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/overview.
[116] Op. cit, 33.
[117] Peter Shadbolt, "Explainer: Thailand's Deadly Southern Insurgency." *CNN*, February 19, 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/18/world/asia/thailand-explainer/.
[118] "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017." *Ministry of Home Affairs*, June 1, 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/Singapore-Terrorism-Threat-Assessment-Report-2017.aspx.

(Indonesia), the nightspot attack in Puchong (Malaysia) in 2016, and the siege of Marawi City (the Philippines) in 2017. Singapore's geographical proximity to these countries raises the threat of a spill-over.[119] Furthermore, Singapore remains an iconic target for terrorists,[120] with IS identifying it as part of its East Asia territory.[121]

The Threat of Radicalised Individuals

MHA's report states that "our greatest concern is the threat of an attack by radicalised individuals in our midst, who have been galvanised by IS' relentless exhortation to its supporters to take things into their own hands".[122] They pose a grave threat as lone-wolf attacks are difficult to detect and prevent, and they occur swiftly without much warning. As attacks in other countries have shown, such attackers can resort to everyday items for weapons, like trucks, cars and knives.

Between 2007 and 2014, there were only 11 cases of radicalised Singaporeans dealt within the ambit of the Internal Security Act (ISA).[123] However, from 2015 to November 2017, the number has risen to 19. In June 2017, the authorities detained the first female under the ISA. She was a 22-year-old infant care assistant who intended to travel to Syria to marry an IS fighter and fight for the group after being radicalised by online IS propaganda.[124]

In the same month, the Singapore authorities also detained two auxiliary police officers under the ISA.[125] One of them, Muhammad Khairul Mohamed, had worked as an out-rider at the Woodlands checkpoint with Aetos Traffic Enforcement Division. He became radicalised after prolonged exposure to online propaganda on the Syrian conflict from 2012 onwards. Khairul attempted to contact foreign militants through social media platforms as he sought to participate in the conflict in Syria. Khairul's colleague, Mohamad Rizal Wahid, supported Khairul and urged him to undertake armed violence in Syria. Rizal did not report Khairul's behaviour to his superiors and even suggested numerous ways for the latter to travel to Syria.[126]

The threat of online self-radicalisation is not just limited to Singaporeans as IS propaganda has also radicalised foreigners in Singapore. Since 2015, the Singapore authorities have arrested 40 Bangladeshi nationals who supported the use of violence to pursue their extremist ideology. None of them planned to carry out acts of violence in Singapore although several of them were planning to do so against the government in Bangladesh. Singapore also arrested eight radicalised Indonesian domestic helpers since 2015. All the foreigners arrested were deported except for six, who are serving prison sentences for terrorism financing offences.[127]

[119] "Terrorism In Southeast Asia: Is Singapore In The Crosshairs?" *Huffington Post*, May 11, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/terrorism-in-southeast-asia-is-singapore-in-the-crosshairs_us_5913a30ce4b016248243f17a.
[120] Bilveer Singh, "Why Singapore Is A Terrorist Target." *The Diplomat*, June 28, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-singapore-is-a-terrorist-target/.
[121] Danson Cheong, "ISIS Supporters Name Singapore as Part of Its East Asia Territory." *The Straits Times*, June 22, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/isis-supporters-name-singapore-as-part-of-its-east-asia-territory.
[122] "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017." *Ministry of Home Affairs*, June 1, 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/Singapore-Terrorism-Threat-Assessment-Report-2017.aspx.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Neo Chai Chin, "First Singaporean Woman Detained For RadicalismTried To Join IS, Become 'Martyr's Widow'." *TODAY*, June 12, 2017, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/first-singaporean-women-detained-radicalism-under-isa-0.
[125] Neo Chai Chin, "Two Aetos Officers Arrested Under ISA For Terror-Related Offences." *TODAY*, June 20, 2017, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/2-aetos-auxiliary-police-officers-dealt-under-isa-radicalism-mha.
[126] "Issuance of Order of Detention and Restriction Order Under The Internal Security Act." *Ministry of Home Affairs*, June 20, 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/Issuance-of-Order-of-Detention-and-Restriction-Order-Under-The-Internal-Security-Act.aspx.
[127] "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017." *Ministry of Home Affairs*, June 1, 2017, https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/Singapore-Terrorism-Threat-Assessment-Report-2017.aspx.

Counter-Terrorism Responses: Combatting Self-Radicalisation

Singapore has continued to enhance its counter-terrorism measures as the threat of terrorism grows. On the domestic front, Singapore has strengthened its community-driven approach by expanding the SG Secure movement which was launched in 2016 to sensitise, train and mobilise the community to counter terrorism. Singapore has also incorporated more full-time and operationally ready national servicemen in the armed forces into its counter-terrorism training operations.

The city-state has adopted a wide spectrum of preventive measures, including the development of a counter-ideology presence online, organising talks and seminars at schools, and distributing educational pamphlets at mosques. In fact, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) recently announced two new initiatives to further address the challenges of extremist ideology. On 14 June 2017, MUIS stated that it planned to organise a course to equip religious teachers with social media skills. The course would focus on how to make better use of social media platforms, and help them better connect with the younger generation.[128] MUIS also intends to set up a network of religious teachers and youth groups to offer the youth greater support and guidance.[129]

Looking Ahead

The June 2017 MHA report noted that while there was no credible intelligence of an imminent terrorist attack on Singapore 'at this point in time', Singapore faced threats from radicalised Singaporeans and foreigners, IS returnees to Southeast Asia and unrepentant terrorist prisoners released in the region.[130]

The authorities have rightly emphasised the need for a strong community response to the terrorist threat. The SG Secure movement aims to ensure that the community stays strong and united in the event of a terrorist attack. Great emphasis is also placed on fostering and promoting inter-racial and inter-religious harmony among different groups to strengthen social cohesion and resilience.

Trends of Online Extremism in Southeast Asia

In the last quarter of 2017, online extremism in Southeast Asia (specifically in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand), seemed to have lost its 'vibrancy'. In comparison to 2014 to 2016, there was a decrease in the total number of sites and the amount of content posted by extremist groups. Terrorist-related websites, Facebook, Twitter and Google+ accounts had lesser content and were smaller in numbers. Most were removed but more notably, participants were less enthusiastic in creating new accounts, an observation that was common especially between 2014 and 2015. Not only were extremist-recruiters less active online, supporters and sympathisers were also less visible as well. This might be due to a shift from open-source social media platforms to encrypted ones. This is a stark contrast to the trends observed from 2014 to early 2017. Terrorist operatives in Syria and Iraq namely those from Ajnad al Sham, Jabhat al Nusra and 'Islamic State' (IS), and later those in the Philippines, were then enthusiastic in mounting propaganda and recruitment campaigns. These operatives were powerful magnets in attracting recruits.

IS' loss of territory and manpower in the last quarter of 2017 appeared to have adversely affected the production of its online propaganda. A decline in the output and quality is apparent with active propagandists of violent extremism in Southeast Asia regularly recycling old IS propaganda releases, especially those written by Aman Abdurrahman, an Indonesian IS ideologue in detention. His followers include IS operatives

[128] Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh, "Muis To Harness Tech In Bid To Counter Radical Ideology." *The Straits Times*, June 14, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/muis-to-harness-tech-in-bid-to-counter-radical-ideology.

[129] Channel News Asia, "MUIS To Set Up Network Of Religious Teachers, Youth Groups To Counter Radical Ideology: Yaacob Ibrahim," July 7, 2017, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/muis-to-set-up-network-of-religious-teachers-youth-groups-to-9012730.

[130] Ministry of Home Affairs, "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2017." June 1, 2017,

https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/Pages/Singapore-Terrorism-Threat-Assessment-Report-2017.aspx.

in Syria, Bahrumsyah and Bahrun Naim, as well as perpetrators of the attacks in Central Jakarta in January 2016. His writings are amongst the materials which first appeared in websites and other open platforms before being copied and pasted onto encrypted platforms.

To maintain the support and interest of the online extremist community, the propagandists have reverted to bringing up Muslim grievances such as the Rohingya and Palestinian issues. In any case, the online extremist community in Southeast Asia has persevered, and have dwelled in a variety of online platforms. These include websites, social media and encrypted platforms, and are generally focused on maintaining a strong support base for their protracted battle to win hearts and minds.

Unyielding Supporters vis-à-vis Absence of Recruiters

Between 2015 and early 2017, Malaysian IS operative Muhammad Wanndy Muhammad Jedi and Indonesian IS operative Muhammad Bahrun Naim Anggih Tamtomo were the two top online recruiters in Southeast Asia. Based in either Syria or Iraq, they were touted to be exceptionally dangerous. This is due to their threatening statements online, and their links to terrorist cells that were arrested in Malaysia and Indonesia. Amongst others, Wanndy was the mastermind behind the Movida bar grenade attack in Puchong in 2016.

Bahrun Naim was linked to Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) members who had been planning terror attacks in Indonesia. He had also compiled and written a manual containing guidelines on how to operate as a terrorist. The manual includes information on how to escape detection online and build low-yield improvised explosive devices. This information was released on his YouTube channel, blogs, Facebook accounts, Twitter, Google+ and Telegram (they have all been taken down) between 2015 and 2016. He had compiled his manual into two books, 'Short Course: Nuclear for Dummy' and another known as Bahrun Naim's 'Manifesto' which were later disseminated onto Telegram in the last quarter of 2016 and early 2017.

Presently, along with other Southeast Asian foreign fighters, who were once active, Muhammad Wanndy and Bahrun Naim are no longer detected in social media. Wanndy was killed in a drone attack in Raqqah, Syria on 29 April 2017, while Bahrun Naim has been absent from open platforms since 2015. Malaysian terrorist personalities who were predicted to be Wanndy's replacements have also been avoiding open-end social media platforms[131]. They are Fudhail Omar, Akel Zainal, Abu Zahar and Rafi Udin. Fudhail was killed in an airstrike in mid-2017,[132] while the whereabouts of Akel Zainal and Abu Zahar, whose messages were usually disseminated by avid supporters based in Malaysia, are unknown.

Akel Zainal was especially popular among his online supporters and fans because of his past life as a drummer in a Malaysian pop band in the 1980's. Similarly, Abu Zahar, a former Malaysian military officer, became famous among online extremist-supporters because of his call to other Malaysian military officers to 'repent' and join "jihad". Meanwhile, Rafi Udin, an ex-Kumpulan Militant Malaysia (KMM) member and former Internal Security Act detainee, has always kept a low profile online, and appeared only in the videos produced by other fellow Southeast Asians and IS-central. It is assessed that they are communicating with a small trusted group of individuals through encrypted platforms.[133]

The absence of these principal recruiters has reduced the general online activity of Southeast Asian extremists. There is no more sharing of real-time information, and their incitement to violence lacks urgency and credibility. Constituting the majority of the online terrorist ecosystem, sympathisers

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[131] Mohamed Yasin, Nur Azlin, "The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia'." Counter Terrorist Trends & Analyses 9, 7 (2017) https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CTTA-July-2017.pdf.

[132] The Straits Times, "Would-be ISIS Malaysia Chief Killed: Report'." July 21, 2017, *www.straitstimes.com*. http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/would-be-isis-malaysia-chief-killed-report-0.

[133] Mohamed Yasin, Nur Azlin, "The Evolution of Online Extremism in Malaysia'." Counter Terrorist Trends & Analyses 9, 7 (2017) https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CTTA-July-2017.pdf.

who are at the early stages of radicalisation have particularly lost interest.

Nonetheless, online extremism in Southeast Asia still persists. Avid supporters at the advanced stages of radicalisation have been re-posting past materials while churning out new ones. However, the overall response to these repostings has been less enthusiastic. Previously, each terrorist Facebook account would garner thousands of followers. For instance, Muhammad Lotfi Arifin, the face of Malaysian foreign fighters in Syria, alone had over 72,000 followers on his first few Facebook pages in 2015.

In contrast, these supporters have less than 1,000 followers today. However, this does not mean the threat of online extremism has dwindled in Southeast Asia. The remaining followers are staunch believers of terrorist ideology and remain steadfast in their online jihad. They may be small in numbers but had expanded their online tracks successfully in more secured and encrypted platforms namely, Telegram and Whatsapp. More than 17,000 terrorist-related pages on Telegram have been reported by the authorities[134]. Each Telegram channel or group contains a few hundred members who would have access to several different channels and groups due to their close relations which is bonded by their strong support for terrorist ideology.

Active on Open and Closed Social Media Platforms

Cyberspace has developed into a 'second' world for jihadist groups to regain strength in the midst of their physical dismantlement on the ground. Building up the support base in Southeast Asia is especially important as IS and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups disperse from their territories in Syria and Iraq, toregroup and rebuild strength in other regions. Terrorist groups and supporters will continue to use a variety of platforms in their communication not only due to their

convenience, speed and extensive reach, but also to retain support and provide a steady flow of new recruits.

The online extremism in Southeast Asian can be broken down into websites and blogs, as well as open-ended and encrypted social media platforms. However, the activities of the extremist communities in Southeast Asia on encrypted social media platforms do not undermine the importance of terrorist-related websites and other open-end social media accounts. Each platform has its own role to play in pulling an individual deeper into the process of radicalisation. Among others, both Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, exploit a myriad of online platforms to support their propaganda strategy.

Although websites and blogs are the smallest in number (less than 1,000), they still possess the strongest influence on a larger audience. These websites and blogs contain warped and subtle narratives which focus on creating doubts on their perceived enemies, which are mainly governments. No clear support for terrorist groups can be found on these websites. More importantly, they are easily accessible and carry Islamic materials along with subtle terrorist propaganda. For instance, Arrahmah.com publishes articles by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), a recently proscribed radical group in the country.

Encrypted platforms, especially Telegram, represent the bulk of online extremism and terrorism today. As reported by the Indonesian authorities in 2017,[135] Telegram has the highest number of pages (17 000) in Bahasa Indonesia. They are also the most active where members regularly post old and new materials with recycled narratives and tactics. It is one of the most widely disseminated information centres on fundraising for family members of arrested and neutralised terrorists in Indonesia. However, unlike websites and social media accounts, Telegram channels and groups are inaccessible to the public. Only those that are already within the extremist network online in social media, or part of the extremist circle in the real world, have access to these channels. This is why Telegram channels

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[134] Achmad Rouzni Noor II, "Alasan Telegram Diblokir, Menkominfo: Ada 17 Ribu Halaman Teroris (The reason behind the Telegram ban, Ministry of Communication and Information: 17 thousand pages linked to terrorism)." *Detik,* July 14, 2017, https://news.detik.com/berita/d-3560986/alasan-telegram-diblokir-menkominfo-ada-17-ribu-halaman-teroris.

[135] Ibid.

and groups usually garner only a few hundreds of members at one time.

Providing Fertile Ground in Southeast Asia

Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria to 2016, terrorist materials on social media have focused on the Levant and hijrah (emigration). During this peak period of online activity for IS, even the Thai extremist domain was inspired by the group. Their online postings then included a map of Southern Thailand covered with the black flag of IS. When Marawi was attacked by IS-affiliated terrorists in May 2017, an influx of materials from IS operatives in Marawi were observed; they provided updates of IS' progress in Marawi and urged others to join the battle there.

Today, with the end of the Marawi siege and IS' losses in Syria and Iraq, online materials are focused on expanding their support base. IS materials increasingly call out to Muslims in Southeast Asia to join IS. This is seen in, amongst others, two of IS 'Inside the Khilafah' video series. In these videos, IS encourages their supporters to mount attacks, especially against law enforcement agencies which are regarded as thaghut or transgressors.

Notwithstanding JI's low profile in recent years, the group has a strong online presence and propaganda strategy. Putting on an Islamist and non-terrorist, non-extremist front, JI's websites and social media accounts are aimed at appealing to mainstream Muslims. Publications of JI-affiliated groups such as those by Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) focus on creating distrust in the government and sowing discord among communities. Governments and Shi'ism for instance, are portrayed as aggressors against the Muslim community. At face value, such messaging is subtly conveyed, with published materials that are hardly terrorist-related.

Examples of seemingly innocuous messaging can be found in the postings of JI personality Muhammad Jibriel Abdul Rahman who has over 23,000 followers online. Far from appearing as a terrorist, Jibriel presents himself as a progressive

Muslim and entrepreneur of Da'wah apparel business Omar. Most of his postings revolve around Islamic values and inspirational quotes on love and life, as well as his concerns for the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine state and Muslims in conflict zones. Like his website arrahmah.com, Jibriel has successfully gained notable support from the wider audience.

This deceptive media strategy of terrorist groups today is potent in creating fertile ground for both IS and JI to operate in Southeast Asia. It enables them to promptly disseminate and share information, and provides a readily available pool of supporters that they can tap in to carry out recruitment and fundraising.

Countering Extremism Online

In the past, the efficacy of shutting down terrorist-related websites was questioned. It was considered ineffective since the materials would re-appear again in other websites and accounts. However, the success of shutting down terrorist sites in 2017 has allayed this reservation. The crackdown has indeed reduced overall terrorist activity, online recruitment and support for terrorists.

Additionally, materials such as videos found in sites that are removed are less likely to appear again in other accounts. This is especially observed since December 2016 with the pledge from Google, Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft to work together in creating 'a database of unique fingerprints known as "hashes"'.[136] The collaboration allows for a more effective removal of videos and images promoting terrorism posted on the four technological platforms.

Following this, the four technology giants have also created the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) which had its first workshop in San Francisco on 1 August

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[136] Sam Levin, "Tech Giants Team Up To Fight Extremism Following Cries That They Allow Terrorism." *The Guardian,* June 26, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/26/google-facebook-counter-terrorism-online-extremism.

2017.[137] It promises to generate information sharing and best practices to counter the threat of terrorist content online with agencies not only in the technology industries, but also with both government and non-governmental agencies. Such public and private sector collaboration is key to better understand the threat and allow for appropriate counter-measures to be worked out.

Another example of such collaboration is the partnership between Telegram and Indonesia. In July 2017, Indonesia's ban on Telegram because of terrorists' exploitation of the platform had led to talks between the two. Today, Telegram is on the same bandwagon with the Indonesia government to ensure that its platforms are free from support for terrorists.[138] However, the removal of terrorist content by Telegram has not been as effective as that of GIFCT members. Hopefully, this will improve over time with future technological breakthroughs.

In Southeast Asia, web-messaging applications are increasingly used by terrorist groups as they look for new and alternative platforms to disseminate materials. In its 11th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) in September 2017, ASEAN member countries have expressed their determination to counter online radicalisation and violent extremism.[139] Their participation and cooperation enables the adoption of best practices in countering terrorism online among the different countries.

Finally, upcoming technological and communication platforms should also be guided and encouraged to join existing

countering terrorism efforts before entering the market. Terrorists and their supporters have always shown their dexterity in keeping up with the latest technology. Preventive measures in this regard could thwart further exploitation of the online extremist landscape.

Going Forward

Overall, considering the widespread implications and nature of the terrorist threat, reactive militarised measures need to be complemented with broader preventive peace-building initiatives to fight terrorism in the region. In 2017, the authorities have deployed decapitation as a strategy to target IS-linked terrorist leaders and others, including Mahmud Bin Ahmad, Muhammad Wanndy, Isnilon Hapilon, Abdullah and Omar Maute, which was partly successful. However, considering the borderless efforts by IS couched within narratives of a 'global caliphate', the Southeast Asian nations need to work in tandem to counter such narratives through collective countering violent extremism (CVE) and policy-based initiatives geared towards promoting tolerance, moderation and coexistence.

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[137] "Global Internet Forum To Counter Terrorism To Hold First Meeting In San Francisco." *Facebook Newsroom*, July 31, 2017, https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/07/global-internet-forum-to-counter-terrorism-to-hold-first-meeting-in-san-francisco/.

[138] "Message Service Telegram To Shut Some Public Channels After Indonesia Ban." *Reuters*, July 16, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-security-apps/message-service-telegram-to-shut-some-public-channels-after-indonesia-ban-idUSKBN1A105W.

[139] "ASEAN Ministers' Meet Gets Serious On Radicalisation, Violent Extremism; Adopts Manila Declaration." *ASEAN50*, September 25, 2017, https://www.asean2017.ph/asean-ministers-meet-gets-serious-on-radicalisation-violent-extremism-adopts-manila-declaration/.

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South Asia

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India

Introduction

South Asia, along with the Middle East and Africa, were among the most affected regions by terrorism in 2017. The worst hit were Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the face of the rapidly changing situation in the Middle East, particularly the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, the South Asian threat landscape has evolved continuously.

In addition to the lingering conflicts in Kashmir and Afghanistan, the reemergence of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state, has left South Asia vulnerable to jihadist exploitations. Both Al-Qaeda and IS issued statements in favour of Rohingya Muslims in a bid to exploit another conflict involving Muslim grievances in the region. At the same time, the on-going religious revivalist movements involving perceived insecurities of the majority faiths in India and Pakistan can create more openings for jihadists, if the trend is not checked in earnest.

South Asian jihadism is both complex and varied with overlapping ideological narratives and political agendas of varying scopes and orientations. The region is home to the largest number of jihadist groups of various hues in the world. The most lethal jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), among others, continue to operate from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. This overwhelming presence of jihadist groups constitutes three models of jihadism in South Asia: Al-Qaida's readjusted version of Gloacalised jihad, IS' caliphate narrative and the Taliban's emirate model along with narrower sectarian versions of Sunni and Shia jihadism as well as groups focusing on Kashmir.

Notwithstanding IS defeat in the Middle East, the ISK in Afghanistan has significantly upgraded its capabilities to inspire and lead attacks not just in the region but in the West as well. In the last two years, two foiled attack plots in the US were traced back to ISK, one of which involved a complex network of IS operatives in Pakistan, Canada and the Philippines. In mid-December 2017, the involvement of a US citizen of Bangladeshi origin, Akayed Ullah, in the failed pipe bomb attack in Manhattan's Port Authority Bus Terminal, is the precursor of likely things to come. The defeat of IS can make Afghanistan, once again, the most favoured destination for jihadists resulting in increasing levels of threat to regional and global peace. This year, ISK has succeeded in spreading its tentacles in Afghanistan to the northern Jawzjan province where it is training over 300 Afghan youth under the age of 20 for future attacks. Alarmingly, some French, Moroccan, Algerian, Tajik and Chechen foreign fighters who returned from Syria were spotted in Jawzjan's Darzab district.

A new dimension of the South Asian jihadist landscape in 2017 was the focus on recruiting and utilising female jihadists in primary and secondary roles as supporters and combatants. The Pakistani Taliban published two issues of its new English language magazine Sunnat-e-Khaula highlighting the importance of females with an aim to attract recruitment. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the IS-affiliated jihadist group, Neo-JMB has employed females in combat roles. Usually, females have been forced by their male family members to join the jihad.

A linked but separate trend in 2017 was the growing involvement of South Asian educated youth from urban middle and upper middle-class backgrounds into militant activism. The university and college-

educated youth have not only been joining the jihadist groups more frequently from South Asia at individual level but they have formed lone-wolf cells to carry out the so-called jihad by using the ideological umbrella of either Al-Qaeda or IS. The emergence of Al-Qaeda linked Jamaat Ansar Al-Sharia in Pakistan, comprising university-students and faculty members, and Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind in Kashmir under the disaffected Hizb-ul-Mujiadeen commander Zakir Musa, are worrying trends. It underscores the fact that educated youth of urban locales have become particularly vulnerable to slick propaganda operations of jihadist groups through social media.

Given the above, the jihadist threat will persist in South Asia with its epicentre in Af-Pak region for five particular reasons. First, porous borders coupled with pockets of conflict spread throughout the region provide jihadist groups with suitable conditions and openings to operate with impunity. Second, the US-Russia geopolitical fault line developing in Afghanistan, manifested by Moscow's assertive role in its backyard and Washington's new Afghan policy of stepping up the war effort in Afghanistan, will keep the jihadist threat alive. Russia, Iran and Pakistan have developed nexuses with the Afghan Taliban to counter ISK's security threat and US presence in Afghanistan, which they deem as threats to their regional interests and national securities.

Under President Donald Trump's new Afghan policy, the US military is also reviving the anti-Taliban tribal militias (known as local/tribal peace councils) at the village levels to counter Taliban's growing influence. However, backing such jihadist and anti-jihadist militias in Afghanistan is a recipe for more violence and instability. The Trump administration is also expanding the CIA-led drone programme to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, which will fuel jihadist recruitment and increase anti-Americanism. Both narratives will feed into the jihadist propaganda.

Third, the geo-sectarian fault-line emerging between Iran and Saudi Arabia with a renewed competition for dominance and influence in the Middle East will keep South Asia's Muslim majority nations vulnerable to the pull and push factors of this sectarian struggle. Fourth, the regional proxy-battles between India and Pakistan involving aiding and funding jihadist groups against each other in the region will keep the jihadists in business in South Asia.

Finally, the absence of regional counter-terrorism frameworks under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) umbrella not only keeps the counter-terrorism potential of the region under-utilised but provides jihadists a permissible environment to operate. This is unlike Southeast Asia where various initiatives under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework have been instrumental in enhancing the regional cooperation against the twin threats of extremism and terrorism. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have advanced militaries, intelligence apparatuses and law-enforcement structures and each country has done well, operationally, against the domestic terrorist threat. Moreover, the bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh in counter-terrorism and border management has been effective but it needs to be expanded at the SAARC level.

Pakistan, Indian and Bangladesh have also formulated their PVE and CVE strategies focusing on social media narratives, local grievances that drive jihadist recruitment, creating counter narratives against violent ideologies, targeting avenues that can possibly be exploited by jihadists to further their agendas such as madrassas, revision of religious curriculum and monitoring of vulnerable individuals. Along with enhancing the scope of existing PVE and CVE policies in South Asia, the region needs to move towards preventive approaches to complement the existing initiatives to fight extremism.

Afghanistan

In 2017, the security situation in Afghanistan remained turbulent as Afghanistan ranked the second most volatile country in the world after Syria, according to the Global Peace Index 2017.[1] While the Afghan Taliban

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[1] "Global Peace Index 2017," Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017, p.11, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GPI-2017-Report-1.pdf

further expanded their territorial control, the failure of Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG) to govern and provide security to the masses has added to public anger and frustration.[2] The overall deadlock of the Afghan conflict continued, despite US President Donald Trump's Afghanistan Policy of staying the course that has preserved the existing status quo.

The stalled Afghan peace process was reinitiated in October under the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), comprising Afghanistan, United States, Pakistan and China, but it did not make much headway.[3] Parallel to the QCG process, Russia launched its own Afghan peace initiative and held three meetings between late 2016 and early 2017.[4] This has not only complicated the on-off Afghan peace process but also ended the regional and international consensus of reaching a joint settlement to end the war.

Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan

According to Daniel Byman and Bruce Hoffman et al., insurgent movements require expertise in guerrilla warfare, control of territory, external support (sanctuaries, supply of weapons and finances) and a popular narrative that resonates with the local population to succeed.[5] The Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan have an advantage over the NUG in all four respects.

Insurgency is a political competition to gain credibility where the insurgents target the governments in an attempt to supplant them by creating parallel governance structures (state-within-a-state, Taliban fiefdoms). The Taliban have a well-entrenched shadow

governance system in Afghanistan with their governors and ministers.[6] On the contrary, the NUG has failed to deliver on its promises of economic development, curbing corruption and improving governance and security, which has further strengthened the Taliban's position.

The insurgency in Afghanistan remains resilient and undefeated and is expanding its territorial control.[7] According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Taliban control 11 of Afghanistan's 400 districts and influence another 34, while 100 districts remain contested between the Taliban and NUG.[8] At the same time, the Taliban have secured external support in the form of safe havens, financial assistance and weapon supplies from various neighbouring countries by exploiting the existing global and regional fault lines.[9]

In the context of an armed conflict, terrorist attacks work as communication and political strategies, which serve multiple purposes. According to Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, five main strategic logics underpin terrorism campaigns: attrition, intimidation, provocation, spoiling and outbidding.[10] For instance, attacks against government and security institutions aim to discourage people from joining government organisations, lower the morale of security personnel, and shake population's confidence in the government. On the contrary, attacks targeting the civilians are meant to create an impression

[2] "Afghanistan in 2017: A survey of the Afghan People," *The Asia Foundation*, 2017, p. 42, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2017_AfghanSurvey_report.pdf
[3] Kamran Yousaf, "Breakthrough eludes QCG talks on Afghan peace in Oman," *Express Tribune*, October 17, 2017, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1533208/breakthrough-eludes-qcg-talks-afghan-peace-oman/
[4] Sadaat Hassan Bilal, "Moscow Led Afghan Peace," *Regional Rapport*, April 5, 2017, http://regionalrapport.com/2017/04/05/moscow-led-afghan-peace/
[5] Daniel Byman and Bruce Hoffman et al. *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, (New York: Rand Corporation, 2001), p. 83.

[6] "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency," *Homeland Security Digital Library*, US Government, 2012, p.2, https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=713599
[7] "Quarterly Report," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, July 30, 2017, p.88, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-07-30qr.pdf
[8] Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Taliban Seize Two More Afghan Districts in Sustained Fighting," *New York Times*, July 23, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/23/world/asia/taliban-seize-two-more-afghan-districts-in-sustained-fighting.html
[9] "The Taliban; CFR Info Guide," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2017, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/taliban#!/#islamic-emirate
[10] Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Summer 2006), p. 51, http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.49.

that the government is incapable of providing security to the masses.[11] The Taliban are attacking both the government and civilians in Afghanistan to further discredit NUG and shrink its already narrow political base.

In 2017, the Taliban changed their operational strategies from solely relying on terrorism to more "traditional conflict tactics" against the NUG and the Afghan national police and army.[12] This year, the civilian casualties witnessed a slight decrease in Afghanistan due to the Taliban's strategy of conventional military methods to target the NUG and Afghan forces. Compared to 2016, there was an overall decrease of six percent in civilian casualties.[13] Additionally, knowing the local terrain, the Taliban have honed the art of guerrilla war, reflecting a superior will and a patient approach of waiting out on the US-led military mission in Afghanistan (you have the watch; we have the time). Most significantly, the Taliban's narrative of ending the US occupation in Afghanistan resonates with the masses even if they disagree with the ideological outlook and extremist worldview of the former.[14]

Insurgency Deadlock

Notwithstanding Taliban's impressive battlefield victories, the insurgency in Afghanistan is stalemated.[15] Neither side is in a position to impose a military solution over the other, nor are they willing to moderate their stated positions to reach a political compromise.[16] The Taliban lack the manpower, expertise and firepower to transform tactical gains into permanent strategic advantages. Similarly, with the international community's assistance, the NUG has managed to survive, albeit on a narrow political base, by retaining control of key urban centres, denying Taliban a complete takeover.[17]

The deadlock is further perpetuated by the efforts from both sides to gain an advantageous position to influence future negotiations. The Taliban have been expanding their territorial control to gain a better bargaining position, if and when, peace negotiations resume. Likewise, the NUG and the US have intensified their military operations and airstrikes against the Taliban to compel them to rethink their militaristic approach and reconcile with the government.

The deadlock has allowed the peace spoilers to exploit the existing fault lines. For instance, various factions of the Pakistani Taliban, which were uprooted from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) during the military operations, have found sanctuaries in Afghanistan's border areas. They continue to launch attacks inside Pakistan from their Afghan bases forcing the Pakistani authorities to fence the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which has been a source of constant friction between the two neighbours. The hideouts of Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban in Pakistan have generated recriminations and blame games. Similarly, the unrest in Afghanistan has allowed the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), the regional affiliate of IS, to create footholds in the eastern Nangarhar and northern Jawzjan provinces.

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[11] "The Taliban," ibid.

[12] "Global Terrorism Index 2017: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism," *Institute for Economics and Pea*ce, 2017, p. 23, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Global%20Terrorism%20Index%202017%20%284%29.pdf

[13] "Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Quarterly Report," *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, October 12, 2017, p. 1, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_quarterly_report_1_january_to_30_september_2017_-_english.pdf

[14] Anne Stenersen, "The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan –organization, leadership and worldview," *Norwegian Defense Establishment,* February 5, 2010, p.48, http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.188.8432&rep=rep1&type=pdf

[15] Joshua Fatzick, "Top US General: Afghanistan War Still a Stalemate," *Voice of America*, February 9, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/top-us-general-says-afghanistan-war-still-a-stalemate/3716256.html

[16] The Taliban demand a complete withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan as a pre-condition to the peace talks, while the NUG deems Taliban's demand to be the final outcome of negotiations.

[17] Samim Farmaz, "Peace And War Deadlocked In Afghanistan," *Tolo News,* March 16, 2017, http://www.tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/peace-and-war-%E2%80%98deadlocked%E2%80%99-afghanistan

Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)

Since its creation in 2015, the group has upgraded its operational capabilities from an opportunistic entity to a well-entrenched terrorist group, possessing the capability to carry out attacks in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the ideological allure to attract vulnerable individuals from India and Pakistan to its training centres in eastern and northern Afghanistan.[18] Presently, ISK has its presence in Afghanistan's Nangarhar, Ghor, Jawzjan, Uruzgan, Logar, and Kunar provinces.[19]

The defeat of IS in the Middle East has not affected the operational strength of ISK in Afghanistan, per se. Following territorial losses, IS has moved most of its external operations outside of Iraq and Syria. In early 2016, a cell comprising IS operatives in Pakistan, Canada and the Philippines plotted a high profile attack, involving suicide vests and firearms, in New York's Time Square. The explosive used in suicide vests was signature IS-explosive TATP.[20] Moreover, the authorisation of the attack came from IS' "Wilayat Khorasan" in Afghanistan.[21] The cell was neutralised in late 2016. Another US-based IS lone wolf terrorist Mahin Khan was arrested from Arizona in July 2016 for contacting ISK leaders in Afghanistan in a bid to seek help to carry out an attack on behalf of the group.[22]

This points to ISK's growing capabilities of inspiring and directing attacks in the US and the West from Afghanistan. Evidently, the aspiring jihadists of South Asian origins in the US and the West are taking directions from ISK leadership for carrying out lone-wolf attacks.[23] Given this, it is quite likely that in future pro-IS jihadists may travel to Afghanistan for training. The group has spread its tentacles to northern Afghanistan as well. In February, Abdul Malik, the son of IMU's founder Tahir Yuldashev, moved to northern Afghanistan's Jawzjan province along with fighters and families of pro-IS Pakistani Taliban factions by defeating the Afghan Taliban. As of November, they have achieved full freedom of operations along with getting reinforcements from southern Afghanistan.[24]

Despite losing three of its top leaders (Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadim and Abdul Haseeb Loghari), ISK has consistently carried out attacks underscoring its organisational strength and resilience. Other than attacking security and government officials in Afghanistan, ISK terrorists have also targeted the Shia community in an effort to exploit the Sunni-Shia sectarian fault-line.[25] In 2016, ISK carried out as many as 51 attacks, leaving over 500 people dead as opposed to 120 killings in 2015. This upward trend is likely to continue in the future as well because some of the IS-affiliated foreign fighters, uprooted from Iraq and Syria, will relocate to the Khorasan chapter, augmenting the operational and organisational strength of ISK.[26] Alarmingly, some French, Moroccan, Algerian, Tajik and Chechen foreign fighters who returned from Syria were spotted in Jawzjan's Darzab district.

The presence of ISK has generated fierce inter-group competition with the Taliban leaving very little space for the latter to engage in the peace process with the NUG. The more ambitious and ideologically devout

[18] Jennifer Cafarella and Caitlin Forrest, "ISIS Plotting Attacks from Afghanistan." *Institute for the Study of War,* November 17, 2017, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-plotting-attacks-afghanistan.

[19] Reza Jafari, "Pakistan-Backed Islamic State Khurasan: Spreading Tentacles, Raising Concerns In Afghanistan." *Khabarnama*, December 3, 2016, http://english.khabarnama.net/2016/12/03/pakistan-backed-islamic-state-khurasan-spreading-tentacles-raising-concerns-in-afghanistan/.

[20] "Charges Unsealed Against Three Men for Plotting to Carry out Terrorist Attacks in New York City for ISIS in the Summer of 2016." *US Department of Justice,* October 6, 2017, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/charges-unsealed-against-three-men-plotting-carry-out-terrorist-attacks-new-york-city-isis.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Andrew Blankstein and Eli Panken, "Arizona Terror Suspect Sought Guns, Bomb Instructions: Court Docs." *NBC News*, July 7, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/arizona-terror-suspect-sought-guns-bomb-instructions-court-docs-n605001.

[23] Jennifer Cafarella and Caitlin Forrest.

[24] "Yoldosh's son Resettling Militants in the North," *Slam Watandar*, February 8, 2017, http://salamwatandar.com/english/Article.aspx?a=29630.

[25] Rustam Ali Seerat, "Sectarian War is Looming Over Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/sectarian-war-is-looming-over-afghanistan/.

[26] Global Terrorism Index 2017," p. 23.

elements of the Afghan Taliban have the alternative option of joining the ISK if the pro-negotiation section of the insurgent movement joins the political negotiations.

Peace Process

This year, the peace process resumed under the QCG framework but it failed to make any progress. Until late 2016, despite its inability to produce any positive outcomes, the regional and international consensus of achieving a unified political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan remained intact. In 2017, the largest setback to peace process was the breakdown of regional and international consensus. While the QCG process was shelved in April 2016 with the killing of Taliban's supreme leader Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor in a drone attack in Balochistan, Russia launched its own diplomatic initiative on Afghanistan with the backing of Pakistan, China and Iran. Three meetings were held under the Russian initiative without much avail.[27]

This has created two rival blocs on the Afghan peace process led by the US and Russia, respectively. The US camp has India, Afghanistan and the West aiming to find a solution within Afghan democratic and constitutional framework.[28] The Russian camp has Pakistan, China, Iran and some Central Asian states advocating power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and NUG, while demanding a credible timeline from the US to exit from Afghanistan.[29]

Impact of Trump's Afghanistan-South Asia Policy

Like his predecessors George W. Bush and Barack Obama, US President Donald

Trump's Afghanistan policy, announced in August 2017, was no different. Trump adopted a condition-based approach instead of a timeline-driven agenda, moved from counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism, increased US military deployment by 4,000 soldiers and adopted a tough-line against Pakistan.[30] Moreover, the Trump administration gave the US military a greater role in handling matters in Afghanistan.[31]

However, despite making the right political noises the gap between policy and implementation is gigantic. For instance, the condition-based approach that ensures the long-term US commitment to Afghanistan has stabilised the NUG but the addition of 4,000 troops is insufficient to break the deadlock of insurgency.[32] Simply put, 15,000 troops cannot achieve what 150,000 US and NATO troops could not do. Furthermore, conflict militarisation in Afghanistan will prolong the war fuelling geopolitical competition and regional proxy-wars.

Similarly, pressurising Pakistan to use its influence on the Taliban to give up violence and negotiate with the NUG is appropriate but playing off India to force the former to comply with US demands is counterproductive. This strategy will further strengthen Pakistan's support of the Taliban and embrace of China because the policy rhetoric of giving India a larger role in Afghanistan adds to Pakistan's strategic anxiety of encirclement by India between its eastern and western fronts.

The paradox emanating from the continued US presence in Afghanistan has simultaneously generated both stability and instability, hopes and fears, peace and conflict in the war-torn country. No external

[27] Indrani Talukdar and Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, "Russia's Increasing Role in Afghanistan: Impact on Peace Process." *Issue Brief, Indian Council of World Affairs*, November 23, 2017, http://icwa.in/pdfs/IB/2014/RussiasIncreasingRoleIB23112017.pdf.
[28] "Afghanistan: The Next Big U.S.-Russia Proxy Battle." *Stratfor,* April 21, 2017, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/afghanistan-next-big-us-russia-proxy-battle.
[29] Scott Worden, "In Afghanistan, too, US and Russia Must De-conflict." *United States Institute of Peace*, November 21, 2017, https://www.usip.org/blog/2017/11/afghanistan-too-us-and-russia-must-de-conflict.

[30] Sumit Ganguly, "Trump's Afghan Plan: A Strategy, But Not Much Of One." *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-09-06/trumps-afghan-plan.
[31] Michael R. Gordon, "Trump Shifting Authority Over Military Operations Back to Pentagon." *New York Times,* March 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/19/us/trump-shifting-authority-over-military-operations-back-to-pentagon.html.
[32] Conor Friedersdorf, "Trump Backs a Surge Into Afghanistan He's Unfit to Lead." *The Atlantic,* August 22, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-is-unfit-to-lead-a-surge-in-afghanistan/537561/.

power other than the US wields enough diplomatic influence, military prowess and financial strength to support the government in Afghanistan. At the same time, the continued US stay in Afghanistan has generated a hedging attitude in regional powers, which have cultivated their own proxy groups in Afghanistan to secure their regional interests.

Taliban's Diversified Regional Relations

Since 2015, the Afghan Taliban have diversified their ties with Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China, minimising their sole reliance on one particular country. This has increased their leverage and enhanced their options for safe havens, weapons and funding. More importantly, the diplomatic support of these regional countries has given them more space to operate with greater freedom. The common threads in these nexuses are their reservations and antipathy towards the US and to neutralise the ISK threat.

Pakistan-Taliban Nexus

Pakistan hosts Taliban's top three Shuras (religious and political councils), the Quetta Shura, the Haqqani Shura in the Kurram tribal region and the Peshawar Shura.[33] Cultivating the Afghan Taliban is Pakistan's most cost-effective leverage to influence future developments in Afghanistan and minimise the Indian influence.[34] Islamabad has always advocated finding a peaceful settlement of war in Afghanistan by engaging the Taliban politically.

Following the killing of Akhtar Mansoor in 2016, Pakistan further increased and consolidated its control over the Taliban movement by elevating the head of the Haqqani Network Siraj-ud-Din Haqqani as one of the two deputies of the Taliban supremo Maulvi Haibatullah Akhundzada.[35]

In fact, Siraj Haqqani is considered the de-facto leader of the Taliban movement for managing the group's successful military campaign and helping the Quetta Shura in overcoming the internal divisions within the movement.[36]

The inconsistent US policies in Afghanistan has strengthened the impression in Islamabad that the US will, like in the late 1980s, abandon Afghanistan leaving Pakistan alone to face the blowback of Afghan civil war.[37] To minimise the expected blow back, maintaining ties with the Taliban, arguably the most powerful non-state actor in Afghanistan, is necessary as its influence will increase even more in case of a civil war in Afghanistan.[38]

Moreover, the US tendency of scapegoating Pakistan for its policy failures in Afghanistan and ignoring Pakistan's genuine security concerns via a vis Afghanistan is another reason why Pakistan supports the Afghan Taliban.[39] Pakistan alleges that India is aiding, arming and financing various Pakistani Taliban groups and the Baloch separatists to destabilise Pakistan from Afghanistan.[40] However, the US has ignored the Pakistani complaints forcing it to rely on the Afghan Taliban as its proxy. The rise of ISK, which primarily comprises former Pakistani Taliban commanders and fighters,

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[33] Antonio Giustozzi, p.6.

[34] A comment made by Amin Saikal, Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies and Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University, during a visit to S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore on November 9, 2017.

[35] Khyber Sarban, "The Taliban Enter the Haqqani Era." *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/the-taliban-enter-the-haqqani-era/.

[36] Ahmad Murid Partaw, "The Haqqanization of the Afghan Taliban." *Foreign Policy Journal*, July 15, 2016, https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2016/07/15/the-haqqanization-of-the-afghan-taliban/.

[37] Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, "Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite." *United States Institute of Peace*, July 25, 2011, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB100.pdf.

[38] Michel Kugelman, "US-Pakistan Relations: A broken record." *CNN*, December 5, 2017, http://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/05/opinions/pakistan-mattis-us-relations-intl/index.html.

[39] "FO: US can't scapegoat Pakistan on its failures in Afghanistan." *The News,* October 5, 2017, https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/234744-FO-US-cant-scapegoat-Pakistan-on-its-failures-in-Afghnaistan.

[40] Syed Raza Hassan, "India, Afghanistan gave help to Pakistani Taliban, says group's ex-spokesman." *Reuters*, April 26, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-militants/india-afghanistan-gave-help-to-pakistani-taliban-says-groups-ex-spokesman-idUSKBN17S1VN.

has added another convergence of interest between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban to cooperate.

Iran-Taliban Nexus

Historically, the ties between the Taliban, a Sunni extremist group, and Iran, a Shia majority country, remained tense. In fact, the two came close to a war in 1998 following the killing of 14 Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan's western Herat province. Moreover, Iran provided key intelligence to the US after 9/11 to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

However, since 2015, Iran's relationship with Taliban has evolved. Tehran is supporting the Taliban to create a buffer between its 91-kilometre long border with Afghanistan and the US military bases in the country, and to eliminate ISK, which has targeted the ethnic Hazara Shias in Afghanistan.[41] It is important to point out that Iran has recruited Shias from Afghanistan to fight its proxy war in Syria making the Afghan Shias a potential target of ISK.

The closeness of Iran-Taliban ties can be measured from the fact that the former Taliban chief Akhtar Mansoor had his businesses in Iran. He was killed while returning from Iran. [42] The Taliban have opened an office in Iran's city of Mashhad known as the 'Mashhad Shura'.[43] Families of various high-ranking Taliban leaders live in the Iranian cities of Yazd, Kerman and Mashhad.[44] Tehran also has a covert open

border agreement with the Taliban providing them medical facilities, finances, weapons and shelter.[45]

Russia-Taliban Nexus

The geopolitical developments in Afghanistan have compelled Russia, who fought jihadists in the 1980s, to align with them. Moscow has cultivated close ties with the Afghan Taliban to use them as a proxy against US military presence in Afghanistan. Russia views the US long-term presence in Afghanistan through a broad geo-political perspective instead of taking a narrow view of defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.[46]

The Russian President's Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kablouv has termed the long-term US presence in Afghanistan as a threat to Russian security and regional interests. In a statement, he mentioned that the level and magnitude of US presence in Afghanistan allows it to mobilise against Iran, China or Russia in two weeks. Moreover, Afghanistan gives America a strategic toehold at the confluence of South and Central Asia to contain the globally rising China, diplomatically and militarily assertive Russia and the defiant Iran and Pakistan.

Moreover, Russia's proactive military role in defeating the IS in Syria and keeping the Assad regime in power with the Iranian has made it IS' main enemy. After Arabic, Russian was the second largest language spoken in the IS-held territories in Iraq and Syria. Approximately 5,000 to 7,000 militants of Russian, north Caucus and Central Asian origins moved to Iraq and Syria to join IS.[47] Now that IS has lost more than 80% of its territory in the Middle East, Moscow fears the return of these fighters will create serious security issues for it. Hence, it has fostered closer ties with the Afghan Taliban to deny

[41] Erin Cunningham, "While the US wasn't looking, Russia and Iran began carving out a bigger role in Afghanistan." *Washington Post*, April 13, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/with-us-policy-in-flux-russia-and-iran-challenge-american-power-in-afghanistan/2017/04/12/f8c768bc-1eb8-11e7-bb59-a74ccaf1d02f_story.html?utm_term=.055c53660094.
[42] Margherita Stancati, "Iran Backs Taliban with Cash and Arms." *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backs-taliban-with-cash-and-arms-1434065528.
[43] Antonio Giustozzi, "Afghanistan: Taliban's organization and structure." *Land Info*, August 23, 2017, p.6, https://landinfo.no/asset/3589/1/3589_1.pdf.
[44] "How Iran, Qatar and Taliban links threaten the US mission in Afghanistan." *Al-Arabiya*, June 11, 2017, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/11/How-Iran-Qatar-and-Taliban-links-threaten-US-the-mission-in-Afghanistan.html.

[45] Michael Kugelman, " What was Mullah Mansour Doing in Iran." *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/27/mullah-mansour-iran-afghanistan-taliban-drone/.
[46] Patryk Kugiel, "Russia's Greater Involvement in Afghanistan: International Aspects." *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, No. 15 (997), June 13, 2017, https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=23304.
[47] Ian Bremmer, "The Top 5 countries Where ISIS Gets Its Foreign Fighters." *Time Magazine*, April 14, 2017, http://time.com/4739488/isis-iraq-syria-tunisia-saudi-arabia-russia/.

ISK any substantial presence in Afghanistan.[48]

Policy Recommendations

The American interventions in Vietnam (1955-1975) and Afghanistan (2001-present) and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1988) have three common features. First is the failure of Russia and the US to sell the war to the locals: the foreign occupation remained highly unpopular in all three cases. Second, they failed to stop the predatory behaviours and interventions of neighbouring states into Vietnam and Afghanistan. Lastly, they failed to find credible and capable local partners to strengthen democracy, improve governance and build up the economy. As a result, they preferred personalisation of politics as opposed to its institutionalisation and not allowing the system to evolve and take roots.

Three major fault lines, Russia-America geo-political competition, India-Pakistan proxy-battles and the Saudi-Iran geo-sectarian rivalry, have prevented the development of a genuine Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. To give peace a real chance in Afghanistan, these fault lines will have to be neutralised. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's heavy reliance on foreign aid as well as dependence on neighbouring countries, being a landlocked country, for its trade has kept it vulnerable to external manipulations.

At the local level, the greatest challenge for Washington and Kabul is to extend an olive branch to the Afghan Taliban and convince them to shun violence and engage in meaningful peace talks without compromising Afghan constitutional framework and democratic order. While Pakistan can be compelled or persuaded to use its influence on the Afghan Taliban to pursue peace talks, if various power centres within the Afghan government do not speak with one voice, progress in the peace process is unlikely. In the past, the divisions within the NUG undercut the peace process.

At the regional level, to break the current gridlock, it is instructive to re-examine Afghanistan's pre-Cold War position of neutrality. A neutral Afghan government at the regional and global level can pave the way for a regional agreement of non-interference to create a suitable environment for the peace process. Afghanistan should disengage from security-based regional partnerships in favour of cooperation agreement signed by all its neighbours. As long as Afghanistan takes sides in regional and global geopolitical competition, it will force certain states to respond in kind by cultivating proxy groups.

At the global level, if Russia and the US continue along the same trajectory of outbidding each other in Afghanistan with the help of pliant neighbouring states then the country might turn into another Syria where the jihadist groups will be the ultimate beneficiaries. The Af-Pak region has the highest concentration of terrorist groups in the world. Of the 98 US-designated terrorist groups, 20 operate in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal region, including Al-Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jandullah, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Lahkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS).[49] Any further destabilisation of Afghanistan will negatively affect South and Central Asian regions with reverberations felt as far as Russia and China. The defeat of the IS in the Middle East can once again transform Afghanistan into the most favoured destination of jihadists around the world.

Outlook

The status quo is likely to prevail in Afghanistan and further intensify the regional and global geopolitical competition. Afghanistan will continue to be the epicentre of jihadism in South Asia, providing various jihadist groups enough space to survive and expand. Moreover, the presence of ISK will attract sympathisers of the Caliphate narrative from South Asian states to undertake the so-called *hijrah* (emigration) to ISK-held territories in Afghanistan. This is both a challenge and opportunity for South Asian countries to work together in regional

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[48] Kamran Bukhari, "Russia's View of the Afghan Taliban." *Geopolitical Futures*, January 18, 2017, file:///C:/Users/isabasit/Downloads/russias-view-of-afghanistan-and-the-taliban.pdf.

[49] "Enacting Security and Stability in Afghanistan." Congressional Report, *US Department of Defense,* June 2017, p.18, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/June_2017_1225_Report_to_Congress.pdf.

settings to overcome the common threat of violent-extremism and terrorism.

Pakistan

Pakistan faces security challenges from a plethora of terrorist groups, including the Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) and Al-Qaeda linked networks that are either working in tandem or at odds with each other. The overlapping ideological narratives of these jihadist organisations espouse sectarian agendas (anti-Shia/Ahmadi inclinations), the creation of an Islamic caliphate, Kashmir jihad and Ghazwa-e-Hind ambitions.

Beyond the threat of jihadist movements, the mainstreaming of extremist values that legitimises intolerance, sectarian polarisation and radicalism has been troublesome. This is best illustrated by the glorification of a convicted terrorist (Mumtaz Qadri) by religious-political parties and approval for Hafiz Saeed, a UN-designated terrorist leader, to contest the 2018 general election.

Both IS and Al-Qaeda have gained more clout in Pakistan's jihadist landscape and strengthened their recruitment campaigns, specifically targeting the disenfranchised youth including women. The traction of extremist narratives among educated young men and women signals the deepening political crisis, characterised by growing alienation from mainstream politics and worsening sectarian, ethnic and religious polarisation. These threats will mostly likely spill-over into 2018 with local and transnational groups perpetrating attacks at soft targets in urban centres. The state's militarised counter-terrorism policies are fragmented at best, and marked by the neglect of soft policy approaches to counter and prevent extremism and radicalisation.

Mainstreaming the Far-Right and Traction of Extremist Narratives

The mainstream political participation of radicalised entities and the state's subsequent lack of response highlight a growing space for intolerance and extremism. This trend is best illustrated by

the rise of the Milli Muslim League (MML), the newly-formed political front of the proscribed Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), bagging as many as 5,822 votes, and the Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY), a Barelvi extremist organisation garnering 7,130 votes, in a national assembly by-election which was won by the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz's (PML-N) with 61,254 votes.[50]

Traditionally, religious parties have not performed well in Pakistan's electoral politics and have never been in power at national level. They have largely been reduced to being a part of coalitions and harnessing their street power to advocate religious interests.[51] The by-election and the recent sit-in by TLY in Islamabad resulting in the resignation of the law minister indicate growing political clout and influence for the new religious-political groups. These groups are transforming Pakistan's Islamist politics from pan-Islamism to narrower sectarianism. The shift in voting patterns in favour of MML and TLY can be attributed to the political evolution of the PML-N from being a centre-right to a centre-left party in Pakistan.

TLY's case in particular threatens to polarise the society along sectarian lines because it is glorifying the former Punjab governor's self-righteous assassin Mumtaz Qadri as a hero. TLY, initially named the Movement to Free Mumtaz Qadri, adopts a strict anti-Ahmadi and anti-Deobandi stance, and had sieged Islamabad for three weeks.[52] More than 3,000 TLY supporters blocked the bridge connecting the garrison city of Rawalpindi, home of Pakistan military's General Headquarters (GHQ), with Islamabad. The 21-day sit-in symbolises the rise of the far-right and their street power in Pakistan.[53] The

[50] Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, "A Win for All: Pakistan's NA-120 By-Election." *The Diplomat,* September 21, 2017. https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/a-win-for-all-pakistans-na-120-by-election/.
[51] Abdul Basit, "The rise of the far-right." *The News,* October 6, 2017, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/234962-The-rise-of-the-far-right.
[52] Jibran Nasir, "Popularising Terrorists: How militants have become a political force in Pakistan." *The Nation,* September 18, 2017, http://nation.com.pk/18-Sep-2017/na-120-the-by-election-belonged-to-hafiz-saeed.
[53] Imdad Hussain, "Pakistan's protests have exposed long-standing sectarian fault lines." *The National,* November 26, 2017,

protests ended with an agreement between the civilian government and TLY, whose demands included easy registration of blasphemy-related cases, and direct oversight of the education board and related textbook changes.

Beyond an extremist party embroiling itself in national politics, the leader of the internationally designated terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT) (now JuD), Hafiz Saeed, announced that he will contest the general election in 2018 under the MML. Saeed and his organisation has adopted an anti-India stance on Kashmir and was placed under house-detention for terrorism-related charges that were withdrawn in October 2017. Saeed was released in November and was greeted by hundreds of his supporters, who identify with his brand of 'Kashmir jihad' and anti-India positioning. This development signified that a section of Pakistan's security establishment still views Saeed and his party as an asset and a useful proxy against India, as their support base furthers Pakistan's confrontational outlook towards the country.

Overall, the electoral performance of both parties will not result in a political upheaval with them winning a majority of the vote during the 2018 elections. However, allowing TLY, an organisation defending a convicted terrorist and the MML, the political wing of a terrorist organisation, to gain electoral strength signifies that radical and militant Islamism will gain a deeper foothold within the country. In the context of efforts to fight terrorism, this is a serious if not ominous development. As such, Pakistan's accommodation of extremists in hopes of moderating them is a flawed approach as moderation should be a prerequisite to political inclusion and mainstreaming.

Al-Qaeda's Resurgence and Islamic State's (IS) Operational Presence

The emergence of a pro Al-Qaeda group, Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia Pakistan (ASP), comprising jihadist returnees from the Middle East, in June 2017 signalled the revival of Al-Qaeda in the country. ASP has conducted multiple attacks in Karachi and is headed by a relatively less well known jihadist named

Ahmad Farooq.[54] The group's ascendance indicates an acceptance of those returning from Libya, Iraq and Syria and an operational resurgence of Al-Qaeda to compete with IS-Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan. ASP has been making efforts to establish itself as a highly active and trained organisation, in comparison to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) that was unable to elicit significant recruits or perpetrate major attacks since its formation in 2014.[55] However, ASP was neutralised in October 2017 after its members and leader were killed in security forces operations in various parts of Karachi.

Broadly, Al-Qaeda's resurgence is likely to have two major implications for the local militancy landscape. First, IS' territorial losses in Iraq and Syria will grant credence to AQ's claims as the leader of the global jihadist movement among local militant outfits. As such, returning fighters and those attracted by IS ideology could turn towards Al-Qaeda to wage jihad in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Second, Al-Qaeda's credibility and legitimacy will be strengthened further with growing linkages with local militant groups.

However, throughout 2017, IS in Pakistan has managed to remain operationally strong and visible, through its local affiliated groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami (LeJ-A) and Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA).[56] Both groups perpetrated mass-casualty and high-profile attacks targeting Sufi shrines and in urban centres such as Lahore. Both organisations have targeted religious minorities, such as Shia and the Barelvi sect, with ISK claiming responsibility. A report by the Royal Unit Services Institute in January 2016, estimated that IS had at least 2,000 to 3,000 members

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https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/pakistan-protests-have-exposed-longstanding-sectarian-fault-lines-1.678963.

[54] Farhan Zahid, "The Return of Al-Qaeda to Pakistan." *Middle East Institute,* August 24, 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/return-al-qaeda-pakistan; Farhan Zahid, "Jamaat ul Ansar al-Sharia: The New al-Qaeda Threat in Pakistan." *Jamestown Foundation*, Volume 15: Issue 18, September 22, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/jamaat-ul-ansar-al-sharia-the-new-al-qaeda-threat-in-pakistan/.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Fatima Bhojani, "ISIS is on the decline in the Middle East, but its influence in Pakistan is rising." *The Washington Post,* May 5, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/05/isis-is-on-the-decline-in-the-middle-east-but-its-influence-in-pakistan-is-rising/?utm_term=.ccea64359c5b.

in Pakistan.[57] Alternately, intelligence representatives confirmed that more than 650 Pakistanis are fighting abroad in different conflict zones, including Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan and 100 of them are fighting for IS.[58] It is evident that Pakistan faces a more significant threat from local IS-inspired fighters than those who have travelled abroad and might return after territorial losses.

However, the likelihood of IS and its fighters moving towards Afghanistan after facing losses in Iraq and Syria cannot be denied. Afghanistan's current situation, including the active insurgency and general lawlessness, confirms this. Any influx of IS fighters in Afghanistan is bound to further increase already high levels of radicalisation and extremism in Pakistan, as the group seeks to expand and attract more recruits. The threat from Al-Qaeda and IS-linked groups will possibly accumulate and inspire attacks in urban centres with religious sects being targeted as both groups continue vying for power and recruits.

Urban Educated Jihadists as a Growing Support Base

The recruitment of urban and educated jihadists from universities in Peshawar, Karachi, Lahore, Hyderabad and Multan continued to negate the madrassa-terrorism nexus in 2017. The move towards violent extremism within these self-radicalised and lone-wolf jihadists is primarily related to desires to create a global Sunni caliphate.[59] This recruitment is also triggered by the use of social media and its related manipulation by local and transnational jihadist organisations, and the political disenfranchisement of the youth. The authorities are aware of the threat, with the head of the Counter Terrorism Department

(CTD) Sindh, Additional Inspector General stating, "Radicalisation is growing at academic institutes with the CTD assessing that the next generation of militants is more likely to have university education rather than a *madrassah* background".[60]

Moreover, reports of recruitment of the students and faculty members from Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Liaquat University of Medical and Health Sciences, Karachi University and International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), University of Peshawar (UoP) represent a potent challenge for the state. The urban and educated jihadists are being recruited from networks outside their universities, but then seek to establish cells and networks within their institutes. These cells then come together to form small militant organisations that conduct attacks targeting soft targets which is evident in the case of ASP, identified above. Effectively this phenomenon represents a 'decentralisation of jihad' where smaller terrorist cells can operate without oversight from larger organisations, making it easier to perpetrate small-scale attacks without being detected by the authorities.

Female Radicalisation and Recruitment

Pakistan witnessed an uptick in female radicalisation and recruitment by IS and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The recruitment drives by IS and the TTP underscore a growing realisation of the benefits a female membership can offer. First, incorporation of women highlights the long-term approach for traditional Islamist societies where mothers indoctrinate their children as future members of the group. Second, women provide a critical support base as financiers, propagandists and recruiters to strengthen the organisation further. Lastly, women are elicited as fighters and suicide bombers as they can penetrate targets more easily than men and attacks by women provide higher shock value. Specifically, in April 2017, Noreen Leghari, a student from Liaquat Medical University, was supposed to conduct a suicide attack targeting a church before she was arrested

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[57] Ibid.
[58] "650 Pakistanis fighting in conflict zones abroad." *Dawn,* August 3, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1275069.
[59] Abdul Basit, "The Urban and Educated Jihadists of South Asia." *RSIS Commentaries,* January 12, 2017, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CO17011.pdf; Moeed Yusuf, "Prospects of Youth Radicalisation in Pakistan: Implications for US Policy." *Saban Centre at Brookings: Analysis Paper,* October 14, 2008, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10_pakistan_yusuf.pdf.

[60] Muhammad Suleman, "Educated Radicals: Pakistan's Neo-Extremists." *IAPS Dialogue*, October 19, 2017, https://iapsdialogue.org/2017/10/19/educated-radicals-pakistans-neo-extremists/.

by the authorities.[61] Reports revealed she was being deployed as a suicide bomber because of the lack of physical checks at security check-points due to the presence of male staff that subsequently increases the chances of striking the location for maximum casualties.

In 2017, TTP released two issues of the *Sunnat-e-Khaula* magazine, named after a historical Muslim female fighter, urging women to wage 'jihad'. TTP's female recruitment drive is likely linked to its weakened position in Pakistan that has been triggered due to the recruitment drive by IS.[62] Despite suffering losses in Iraq and Syria, signs of IS' recruitment efforts within Pakistan pose a threat to TTP's already diminished status. The drive to recruit women coincides with TTP's ongoing battlefield losses due to intensified military operations and drone strikes in its tribal strongholds.

Pakistan's Regional Policy Conundrum

In August 2017, the United States (US) announced its Afghan policy, which indicated that the country is reinforcing and asserting its presence in Afghanistan as the country faces violence with an active Afghan Taliban, Haqqani Network and ISK. First, the US has threatened to decrease its military aid to Pakistan, if the former did not dismantle sanctuaries of the Afghan Taliban (based in Quetta) and Haqqani Network (based in Kurram Agency) from its soil. The US specifically stated that at least USD527 million will be released in aid to Pakistan, if the country takes strict action against Afghanistan-focused terrorist groups on its soil.[63] The adoption of a threatening stance towards Pakistan is unlikely to change Pakistan's policies and could alienate it further.

Second, the US open invitation to India to cooperate in Afghanistan is not well received by Pakistan. As such, propping up India in Afghanistan means that the country is effectively circled in the east and the west. This relates to the concept of strategic depth that focused on supporting the Afghan Taliban against the India-backed Northern Alliance (NA) in the 1990s, which is not an ideal stance to adopt today as instability in Afghanistan is correlated with instability in Pakistan partly due to the presence of cross-border terrorism.[64]

In November 2017, US Defense Secretary James Mattis urged Pakistan to take action against cross-border movement of terrorists. In response, Pakistan affirmed its resolve in fighting terrorism, highlighting the efforts made specifically through military operations. However, 2018 remains a critical year with reference to counter-terrorism efforts, and letting go of the notorious 'Good Taliban' and 'Bad Taliban' distinction which has been doing the country more harm than good. Overall, cross-border ties between the good and the bad terrorists make it harder to defeat and eliminate them, which could further instability between US-Pakistan relations and block the release of military aid to the country.

Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's (TTP) Revival and Military Operations

A fresh wave of terrorist attacks unleashed by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from its bases in Afghanistan highlights three security implications for Pakistan. First, TTP has continued targeting educational institutes as part of its reprisal attacks against the Pakistani state and security forces. In December 2014, TTP targeted the Army Public School in Peshawar and earlier in January 2016, the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda was attacked. Specifically targeting educational institutes signifies efforts to eliminate the 'future generation' that does not subscribe to the group's vision of a state imbibing Sharia law. Second, this attack marks TTP's continued revival after being targeted and operationally weakened through drone strikes and ground operations since 2014. As such, TTP is likely to become more

[61] Naimat Khan, "Pakistan's universities: Temples of learning or breeding grounds for terror?" *Arab News*, December 1, 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1202106/metropolitan.

[62] Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Militant Rivalries Extend to Female Recruitment in Pakistan," *CTC Perspectives*, September 14, 2017, https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/ctc-perspectives-militant-rivalries-extend-to-female-recruitment-in-pakistan.

[63] Madiha Afzal, "Why the Trump Administration's Policy on Pakistan is Likely to Fail." *Lawfare*, November 30, 2017, https://lawfareblog.com/why-trump-administrations-policy-pakistan-likely-fail.

[64] A. Z. Hilali, "FATA: The Strategic Depth of Pakistan," Margalla Papers 2010, pp. 18-50.

active in 2018, as it was previously overshadowed by JuA and LJA which claimed a majority of the attacks over the past two years. Lastly, this attack points towards the inability of military operations to fully 'eliminate' or 'defeat' the organisation that killed more than 140 people in the Army Public School in 2014.

As of 26 November 2017, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) database points to a decrease in terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan from 612 to 489 in 119 terrorist attacks.[65] In addition, a US State Department report looking at global terrorism and its impact in 2016 stated that Pakistan experienced decreasing casualties in terrorism in the past two years.[66] The National Counter Terrorism Authority of Pakistan (NACTA) also affirmed that terrorist incidents had decreased by 31 percent in Pakistan with 426 incidents till September 2016.[67] This decrease in attacks and casualties can consistently be explained by the various operations (Zarb-e-Azb, Rad-ul-Fassad and Khyber-II) targeting terrorists in the restive tribal areas.[68] They have contributed to the elimination of multiple high-profile terrorist commanders and their cadres/support base. A temporary lull in violence was seen since these operations began, but a revival is now evident as the militant group recover from the loss of fighters, leaders and operational bases. This revival is likely to continue as terrorists move from rural to urban areas and form smaller isolated cells to perpetrate attacks in the mainland (specifically urban cities in Punjab).

State Responses: The Neglected National Action Plan (NAP)

Pakistan's counter-terrorism policies continue to be dictated by an over-militarised approach, where counter-ideology, countering violent extremism (CVE) and peace-building measures are neglected. Any cohesive and holistic policy to fight terrorism in Pakistan must pair kinetic measures with CVE measures. In this regard, the engagement of the religious clergy and educational institutes in promoting narratives of tolerance, and negating extremist interpretations of Islam are limited at best. The National Action Plan (NAP), a 20-point instrument geared towards fighting sectarianism, intolerance and extremism within Pakistan, has been in force since 2014. However, the lack of initiative to act upon the plan shows that Pakistan has become adept in killing terrorists, but not in negating the ideology that fuels them.[69] In addition, considering the mainstreaming of religious intolerance and sectarianism, it would be advantageous to implement preventing violent extremism (PVE) narratives. Overall, a holistic response that extends beyond short-term kinetic policies would include promoting peace and coexistence through the education system, and increased oversight on madrassas and educational institutes advocating sectarianism and intolerance. Here, the growing radicalisation of educated urban youth, including young women, highlights the urgent need to address their grievances, integrate them politically and provide alternatives for taking up arms against the state.

Bangladesh

In 2017, Bangladesh witnessed a significant decline in terrorist attacks across the country as compared to 2015 and 2016. This can be attributed to the successful counter-terrorism operations launched by the Bangladeshi authorities. However, there are new challenges. The persecution of the Rohingya

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[65] South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Report: Pakistan." Accessed December 1, 2017, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/majorincidents.htm.
[66] "Global Terrorism Index 2017." *Institute for Economics & Peace,* Accessed December 1, 2017, http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2017.pdf.
[67] Pervaiz Jabri, "Terrorism decreasing in Pakistan: NACTA." *Business Recorder*, September 7, 2017, https://www.brecorder.com/2017/09/07/368107/terrorism-decreasing-in-pakistan-nacta/.
[68] "Terrorism Decline in Pakistan." *National Counter Terrorism Authority Pakistan (NACTA),* Accessed December 15, 2017. http://nacta.gov.pk/terrorism-decline-in-pakistan/.

[69] Ume-Farwa, "National Action Plan: The Need for a National Narrative." *Institute of Strategic Studies,* February 2016, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Final_IB_Ume-Farwa_dated_11-2-2016.pdf.

Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine state has resulted in an influx of over 600,000 refugees into Bangladesh. The resultant humanitarian crisis has opened up the space for jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) to exploit the Rohingya issue for recruitment and propaganda. Bangladeshi militant groups have also been changing their operational tactics to adapt to the rapidly evolving security environment. The plight of the Rohingya Muslims has given them an opportunity to propagate their jihadist narrative to win over vulnerable Bangladeshi youth.

Islamic State (IS) Threat

Notwithstanding IS defeat in the Middle East, the group remains a long-term internal security challenge for Bangladesh. On this issue, counterterrorist operations have achieved a measure of success as they have weakened the Neo-JMB, a local IS affiliate group. Bangladeshi authorities have carried out nearly a dozen counterterrorism operations across the country to contain IS, forcing IS operatives to maintain a low profile. IS/Neo-JMB's organisational structure in Bangladesh has been damaged, and most of its top leaders have been arrested or killed since the Dhaka Café attack in July 2016.[70] Instead of carrying out attacks, Neo-JMB is now focused on recruiting new members, mostly online, particularly from the urban areas and scaling up its explosive-making capabilities. According to Bangladeshi law-enforcement agencies, every month at least two or three youth go missing and some of the cases go unreported. For now, the group has decentralised to avoid further disruption to its network and penetration in social media.[71]

IS currently has highly mobile teams which move from district to district, and small pre-attack dens in all the country's six divisions, highlighting IS' nationwide outreach and penetration. The group is stockpiling arms and explosives, like Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP) [used by terrorists in the Paris, Brussels and London attacks]. The militants have possibly learnt to stabilise TATP.[72] Moreover, there has been a sharp increase in the recovery of suicide belts in Bangladesh.[73] According to explosive experts, these surgical belts are difficult to detect, and an upgraded version of suicide vests compared to the ones recovered earlier.

The rebuttals by IS propagandists of the counter-narratives given by the local Muslim scholars against extremist ideologies, is another noteworthy trend in 2017. This means that IS ideology will have long-term implications for Bangladesh's internal security. It underscores the need for a more pro-active counter-ideology strategy and investment in building social awareness against violent-extremism.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) Threat

In 2017, Al-Qaeda's (AQ) Bangladeshi affiliate Ansar Al-Islam did not carry out any attack in Bangladesh; the group was mostly active in the propaganda domain using social media platforms. AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) regularly published its Bengali language magazine Al Balagh (The Conveyed), which covered various issues for the Bengali-speaking audience. Before 2017, the group had carried out eleven targeted assassinations of writers and secular bloggers, social media activists and one publisher.

AQIS tried to exploit the Rohingya issue and frame it as part of its jihadist narrative. In June 2017, the group released a publication titled "Code of Conduct" which defined the parameters for its members, supporters and sympathisers. The publication was a public relations effort by the group to appear more acceptable to the larger community of

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[70] "RAB arrests suspected member of Neo-JMB at Dhaka's Banani." *Bdnews24.com*, September 18, 2017,
https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/09/18/rab-arrests-suspected-member-of-neo-jmb-at-dhakas-banani.

[71] "They couldn't have been saved, even if the operation was launched earlier." *Prothom Alo*, July 2, 2017, http://en.prothom-alo.com/bangladesh/news/152615/%E2%80%98They-couldn%E2%80%99t-have-been-saved-even-if-the

[72] "TATP: explosive of choice for 'Neo JMB," *The Daily Star*, July 9, 2017,
http://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/tatp-neo-jmbs-explosive-choice-1430398.

[73] "Large number of IEDs, 3 suicide vests found in Jhenaidah militant hideout." *The Dhaka Tribune*, April 21, 2017,
http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2017/04/21/militant-den-cordoned-off-jhenaidah/.

extremists who are somewhat uneasy with the brutality and excessively violent methods of IS. AQIS' attempt to appear 'more legitimate' and 'rational' than IS through the "Code of Conduct", shows the group's desire to reclaim its place in the jihadist domain, which it lost to IS in the last few years.

Additionally, AQIS is being advised by other AQ affiliates to target Myanmar. For instance, in a video message released in September, a senior leader of AQ's Yemeni branch Khaled Batarfi called on Muslims in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Malaysia to support their Rohingya Muslim brethren against the "enemies of Allah."[74] Although more propaganda and less attack appears to be a core strategy for AQIS, the law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh believe that AQIS will possibly try to re-emerge and rebrand itself by capitalising on the Rohingya issue. The persecution of the Rohingya resonates with the Bangladeshi public at an emotive level, giving AQIS an opportunity to recruit some vulnerable youth.

Female Jihadists

Radicalisation and recruitment of females by the jihadist group Neo-JMB is concerning for Bangladesh's internal security and it underscores a need for more gender-specific policing as well as gender-targeted counter-narrative.[75] Women's involvement in jihadist groups is a relatively new trend in Bangladesh which has been partly influenced by IS' strategy of integrating women in the group's activities in order to boost manpower of the group and to operate below the radar of the law enforcement agencies as women are not the usual suspects. In the Bangladeshi context, women are radicalised, recruited and often forced to join the militant groups by their male family-members. Interrogation of some of the female terrorist detainees show that they accompanied their

husbands as they were worried about how the society would treat them if their husbands' involvement in militant activities came to light.[76]

Several counterterrorism operations conducted in 2017 shows that some women are also highly trained. During counter-terrorism raids, some female militants also committed suicide with their husbands and children to avoid arrests.[77] Bangladesh police however has no information so far about women joining the terrorist outfits willingly but possibilities of a greater involvement of women in the future cannot be ruled out.

India-Bangladesh Border

The situation at the India-Bangladesh border posed a major challenge to counter-terrorism efforts in Bangladesh. Various Bangladeshi militant groups, particularly Neo-JMB, have found safe havens in Indian West Bengal where most of the high-profile terrorists are hiding. Some of the militants released on bail from Bangladeshi prisons have also managed to cross the border to hide in and operate from India.[78] For instance, in September 2017, Samiun Rahman alias Ibne Hadan, a 31-year-old British citizen of Bangladesh origin, was arrested in New Delhi by Indian law enforcement authorities for trying to set up bases in Delhi, Mizoram and Manipur to radicalise and recruit young Muslims to attack India and Myanmar.[79] Samiun was detained in Dhaka in 2014 but

[74] "Yemeni al Qaeda leader calls for attacks in support of Myanmar's Rohingya." *Reuters*, September 3, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-alqaeda/yemeni-al-qaeda-leader-calls-for-attacks-in-support-of-myanmars-rohingya-idUSKCN1BD0U8.

[75] "Kushtia raid: 3 female militants remanded." *The Daily Star*, July 3, 2017, http://www.thedailystar.net/country/kushtia-anti-militancy-raid-3-female-militants-remanded-neo-jmb-counter-terrorism-bangladesh-1427725.

[76] "Female 'Neo JMB' Members: Dragged into militancy by husbands." *The Daily Star,* December 28, 2016, http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/female-neo-jmb-members-dragged-militancy-husbands-1336594.

[77] "When children become shield for militants." *The Dhaka Tribune*, September 8, 2017, http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2017/09/08/children-become-shield-militants/.

[78] "Dhaka attack planner Sohel was ameer of West Bengal JMB: Cops." *The Daily Star*, July 8, 2017, http://www.thedailystar.net/dhaka-attack/dhaka-gulshan-cafe-militant-attack-case-accused-among-4-suspected-neo-jmb-men-held-chapainawabganj-1430065.

[79] "Al-Qaida man on mission to 'recruit Rohingya youth' held in Delhi." *Times of India,* September 19, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/al-qaida-man-on-mission-to-recruit-rohingya-youth-held-in-delhi/articleshow/60739539.cms.

was released on bail by the High Court in April 2017.

During his interrogation, Samiun revealed to Delhi police that his task was to raise funds and incite youths to fight against the Myanmar military and to facilitate their entry into Myanmar from northeastern states.[80] Being bound by India on three sides and sharing a border with Myanmar's conflict zone, such cross-border linkages are highly problematic for Bangladesh's counter terrorism campaign. In addition to being a sanctuary for Bangladeshi militants, India's black-market for weapons is a key source of explosives and small weapons for Bangladeshi jihadists.[81] Several border districts of the Indian state of West Bengal have pockets of support for Bangladeshi militant groups. Moreover, the Bangladesh-India border is a major conduit of illicit flows, which creates a permeable environment for the militants to operate there.

State Responses

To effectively combat terrorism at the operational level, the Bangladesh government has created the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) in 2017. With a nation-wide mandate, this unit will focus solely on counter-terrorism in Bangladesh. An additional Inspector General of Police (IGP) will head the new anti-terrorism unit, which will have around 600 officials, including a Deputy Inspector General (DIG) and two additional DIGs. The new unit will have 41 vehicles, including ambulances and armored personnel carriers.[82] Bangladesh currently has a Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC), under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), which has been carrying out operations outside the capital Dhaka under special arrangement, but the

new ATU will have a country-wide jurisdiction.[83]

CVE Initiatives in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's renewed CVE initiatives are in response to the IS-led attack on the Holey Artisan Café in Dhaka. A 17-member National Committee on Militancy, Resistance and Prevention is overseeing the ongoing CVE measures in the country.[84] The CVE policy in Bangladesh focuses on creating better awareness of religious teachings and building social resilience. Moreover, Bangladesh's CVE programme partners with religious leaders who play an important role as community leaders. Religious leaders are co-opted to educate the Muslim community about violent extremism. For instance, Bangladesh Islamic Foundation (BIF), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is working with Imams (prayer leaders) from a network of 70,000 mosques to ensure that the BIF-prepared pre-sermon speeches are delivered during Friday prayers.

Bangladesh's ministries of Information and Culture use newspapers, radio, and televisions for CVE messaging. Presently, the government is producing documentaries, short-films, and advertisements with a focused CVE messages to confront the extremist narratives. The core message of CVE in Bangladesh is that Islam stands for peace, tolerance and peaceful coexistence and that Islam does not approve of militancy.

Similarly, the ministries of Education and Home Affairs are engaging with the educational institutions to create awareness about extremism and terrorism among teachers, students, and parents. The educational institutions have also instructed the teachers, parents, and students to remain vigilant and report to the police if any student

[80] "How did a jailed Bangladeshi militant end up in Delhi?" *The Dhaka Tribune,* September 22, 2017, http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2017/09/22/militant-samiun-leave-country/.
[81] "Gulshan Attack: Firearms came from border." *The Daily Star*, November 4, 2016, http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/gulshan-attack-cops-arrest-4-arms-suppliers-1309357.
[82] "Bangladesh clears new antiterrorism police unit." *Bdnews24.com*, September 21, 2017, https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/09/21/bangladesh-clears-new-antiterrorism-police-unit.

[83] "Police gets nationwide Anti-Terrorism Unit." *The Daily Star*, September 21, 2017, http://www.thedailystar.net/city/police-gets-nationwide-anti-terrorism-unit-1465351.
[84] Headed by Home Affairs Minister, the committee comprises of Home Affairs, Education, Information, Youth and Sports, and Culture ministries, and security agencies such as Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, National Security Intelligence, Police Headquarters, Rapid Action Battalion, Special Branch, Border Guards Bangladesh

is involved in extremist activity or goes missing for ten days.[85]

Likewise, the Ministry of Youth is preparing a Youth Database to develop new programmes. Through its countrywide network, it is organising various sporting events across the country to channel the energy of Bangladeshi youth into creative and constructive activities.

Some madrassas have been known to preach religious intolerance and extremism. Consequently, madrassa textbooks have been revised and the government has directed the Ministry of Education to continue its scrutiny of the madrassa curriculum. Additionally, the government has co-opted the Qawmi Madrassa, which is one of the two major madrassas in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has also taken steps to monitor social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Efforts are underway to develop the technological capacity of the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) to enhance the detection of extremist websites. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) is also working in this regard with Muslim clerics in Bangladesh.

Outlook

By preventing further terrorist attacks following the Holey Artisan Bakery siege, Bangladesh has certainly made progress in counterterrorism. The authorities have also prevented the speed of IS expansion in Bangladesh by disrupting IS leadership through operations. Due to the absence of charismatic and capable leaders, the supporters are unable to mount large-scale attacks.

In 2018, the key challenge for Bangladesh will be to tackle the residual strength of militants and checking new recruitment in the face of the worsening Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. The law enforcement agencies will also have to grapple with the changing tactics of the groups. In this respect, Bangladesh will need to enhance the capabilities of its counterterrorism agencies and at the same time broaden its CVE

campaign to negate terrorist propaganda and appeals.

India

In 2017, the twin threats of online Islamist radicalisation and militancy in Kashmir, where a Pan-Islamist sentiment is slowly burgeoning, expanded in India. As a result, India witnessed an increase in violence, casualties, militant recruitment and cross-border infiltration from Pakistan and Bangladesh. At the same time, Hindu extremism has also added a new dimension to violence in India. This year witnessed a significant increase in the number of beef-related lynching and minority persecutions.

The Quiet Islamic State (IS)

IS has struggled to establish a foothold in India since its formation. India's security forces have neutralised six to eight IS-affiliated cells and lone-wolf individuals, which were mainly concentrated across Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.[86]

Although many Indians who travelled to Afghanistan to fight for IS were killed in a US offensive in April 2017,[87] the war-torn nation may remain a prospective site for Indians joining IS in the region. This is because of the growing IS footprint in Afghanistan's ungoverned spaces, and IS moving its battles to other parts of the world such as South Asia (Khorasan) and South-East Asia (Marawi) following the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria.

Demographically, 90% of the 100 individuals who travelled to join IS from India are between 18 and 33 years, with 70% having

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[85] Author's interview with a Bangladeshi security official in September 2017.

[86] Please see South Asia Terrorism Portal: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/timeline/index.html - January 15, One major concentration of online recruits were found in the state of Kerala whereby 350 people were put under surveillance for their social media activities when the authorities conducted a counter radicalisation drive terms as 'Operation Pigeon Hole'.
[87] "13 Indians reported killed in U.S. MOAB bombing." *The Hindu,* April 17, 2017, http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/13-indians-reported-killed-in-us-bombing/article18115554.ece.

educational qualifications.[88] These figures suggest that the IS threat in India has largely been an urban phenomenon. Multiple intelligence reports across the country have pinpointed the role of the Internet as a facilitator of violent radicalisation. Social media propaganda has spread across the country and encrypted private messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram have enabled prospective members to chat with ideologues without fear of detection or restriction.[89]

Security agencies, investigating online radicalisation, have discovered Shafi Armar and Karen Aisha Hamidon as the two main ideologues subverting India from abroad. Armar, also the emir of the Indian IS branch, is a well-known figure who was reported to be in contact with almost 700 youth across the country through closed Facebook groups.[90] Aisha Hamidon, a female propagandist, is said to have recruited over 20 Indians through private messaging applications; she was arrested in October in Manila, the Philippines.[91]

Dormant Threat of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)

In 2017, Al-Qaeda's South Asian affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), continued to maintain a nominal presence in India without carrying out any terrorist attack.[92] The operational preparedness and effective counter-terrorism intelligence of the Indian security forces have been instrumental in keeping the AQIS threat in check. Despite the group's propaganda claims of spreading its tentacles to India, most of its operations have been restricted to recruitment and preaching.

It is important to point out that AQIS' low profile in India is consistent with Al-Qaeda's overall policy of embedding its jihadist agendas within like-minded local groups. This potentially makes AQIS more dangerous and a long-term security threat despite its low-profile posture in India. Moreover, its ability to stay off the radar of Indian security forces allows it time and space to revive and regroup.

To gain a foothold and expand its presence in India, AQIS tried to exploit the fault-lines of the Kashmir conflict. In July 2017, Al-Qaeda managed to secure the allegiance of Zakir Musa, a disaffected leader of the Kashmiri militant group Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). Musa defected to Al-Qaeda and created his own jihadist faction, Ansar Ghazwat-Ul-Hind, prioritising Sharia over a political struggle for freedom.[93] Musa, already an influential tech-savvy figure among Kashmiri youth due to his star persona online, rose to prominence in mid-2017 when he criticised the HM leadership for being complacent, and promoted jihadist aspirations in Kashmir.[94]

[88] "India – 2017 Timeline." *South Asia Terrorism Portal,* January 15, 2017, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/timeline/index.html.
[89] This assertion has been made after a scrutiny of the India 2017 timeline in the South Asia Terrorism Portal. For more details see: www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/timeline/index.html. This role of social media was further highlighted with separate counter-radicalisation drives across the country churning up almost 700-900 different people at risk of succumbing to IS propaganda online. For more details see: "Kerala: Operation Pigeon 'saves' 350 youths from ISIS." *Times of India*, June 30, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/kerala-operation-pigeon-saves-350-youths-from-isis/articleshow/59376792.cms.
[90] Ashutosh Mishra and Santosh Mishra, "Social media savvy ISIS chief recruiter in India declared global terrorist by US." *India Today,* June 15, 2017, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/us-declares-isis-operative-mohammad-shafi-armar-global-terrorist/1/979973.html.
[91] Neeraj Chauhan, "Philippines nab IS operative for radicalising Indian youth." *Times of India,* October 21, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/philippines-nab-is-operative-for-radicalizing-indian-youth/articleshow/61158519.cms.
[92] "Code of Conduct: Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent." *As Sahab Media Subcontinent,* June 2017, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/al-qacc84_idah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-22code-of-conduct22-en.pdf.
[93] Muzaffar Raina, "Al Qaida group in Kashmir." *The Telegraph India,* July 28, 2017, https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170728/jsp/nation/story_164299.jsp.
[94] Sameer Yasir, "Zakir Musa versus Syed Salahuddin: Is Al Qaeda taking limelight away from Hizbul Mujahideen in Kashmir?" *First Post,* October 20, 2017, http://www.firstpost.com/india/zakir-musa-versus-syed-salahuddin-is-al-qaeda-taking-limelight-away-from-hizbul-mujahideen-in-kashmir-4159149.html.

While his calls for jihad were initially rejected,[95] a response to his pro-Sharia calls evinced a response in November 2017 when a number of Kashmiris who attended the funeral of a Tehreek-ul Mujahideen militant shouted slogans in his favor.[96] These developments are concerning and will bear close watching in 2018.

Kashmir

According to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, Kashmir witnessed a rise in violence with close to 200 incidents in 2017 and the recruitment of 90 individuals into terrorist groups.[97] India however, claims to have curbed the violence, citing a 90% drop in stone pelting (a general indicator of violence in the region), and restored normalcy.[98] The authorities have attributed this reduction in violence to improved coordination between various security institutions, reduction in lethal weapons used by security forces and better counselling services provided to youth (endeavors that prevented 60 people from joining militant groups).[99]

Additionally, HM struggled to recuperate from its loss of fighters following encounters with Indian security forces. The split with Musa and the declaration of HM as a Globally Designated Terrorist group have undermined the group even further.[100] But HM's decline has created space for IS to gain a foothold in Kashmir where it claimed its first attack in Kashmir in November.[101] While unverified, this also accompanies reports of residents draping slain militants with IS black flags.[102]

Coupled with the rise of Zakir Musa, this represents a slight but significant shift from a nationalist to perhaps a pan-Islamist struggle in Kashmir, a development that will not bode well for security and stability in Kashmir.

Government Response

The Indian responses to terrorism have increasingly incorporated soft measures in 2017. This is reflected in its opening of a new government division to counter radicalisation.[103] This is in line with its programmes in states such as Kerala (in June 2017) and Maharashtra (operational since 2015),[104] where the respective police departments declared successful de-radicalisation drives involving close to 500 people. Reportedly, these individuals were radicalised over propaganda present on Facebook and were identified by the cyber security division. Subsequently, police forces

[95] Sameer Yasir, "After Abu Dujana, Zakir Musa only prominent militant leader left in Kashmir: Only matter of time before army gets him." *First Post,* August 2, 2017, http://www.firstpost.com/india/after-abu-dujana-zakir-musa-only-prominent-militant-leader-left-in-kashmir-only-matter-of-time-before-army-gets-him-3884867.html.

[96] "Saleem Pandit, "J&K: Pro-IS slogans at funeral of slain terrorist." *Times of India,* November 20, 2017, ,https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jk-pro-is-slogans-at-funeral-of-slain-terrorist/articleshow/61717098.cms.

[97] Kamaljit Kaur Sandu, "2017 most violent year in Jammu and Kashmir with 184 incidents of violence: Govt." *India Today,* August 02, 2017, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/jammu-and-kashmir-terror-attacks-mha-violence-burhan-wani/1/1016789.html.

[98] "'Green shoots of peace' visible in Kashmir Valley: Rajnath Singh." *Times of India,* September 11,2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/green-shoots-of-peace-visible-in-kashmir-valley-rajnath-singh/articleshow/60462565.cms; "90 Per Cent Drop In Stone-Pelting Incidents: Jammu And Kashmir Police Chief." *NDTV,* November 13, 2017, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/90-per-cent-drop-in-stone-pelting-incidents-jammu-and-kashmir-police-chief-1774921.

[99] "Stone-pelting in Kashmir Valley down 50% this year, claims CRPF." *Times of India*, July 24, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/stone-pelting-in-kashmir-valley-down-50-this-year-claims-crpf/articleshow/59783123.cms.

[100] Sudha Ramachandra, "Al Qaeda joins the Kashmir Conflict." *Jamestown Foundation,* November 27,2017, https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaeda-joins-kashmir-conflict/.

[101] "'Amaq Reports 1st Is Attack in Kashmir Valley with Killing of Police Officer in Srinagar." *SITE,* November 18, 2017, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/amaq-reports-1st-is-attack-in-kashmir-valley-with-killing-of-police-officer-in-srinagar.html.

[102] "Jammu-Kashmir police looking into militant draped in ISIS flag at funeral." *Indian Express,* July 14, 2017, http://indianexpress.com/article/india/jammu-kashmir-police-looking-into-militant-draped-in-isis-flag-at-funeral-4750938/.

[103] "Government Sets Up New Division to Check Radicalisation." *NDTV,* November 17, 2017, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/government-sets-up-new-division-to-check-radicalisation-1774038.

[104] "Aaj Ki Baat November 1 episode: 'A good move by Maharashtra ATS." *India TV,* November 02, 2017, http://www.indiatvnews.com/aaj-ki-baat/news-aaj-ki-baat-november-1-episode-a-good-move-by-maharashtra-ats-409855.

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China: Xinjiang Province

Introduction

China, for the second consecutive year, has seen a substantial decline in the frequency and scale of violence committed by members of the Uyghur Muslim minority community in the north-western province of Xinjiang. In the past two years, the number of attacks involving Uyghurs has dropped more than six times and casualties have decreased thirty times compared to the period when the cycle of violence reached its peak between 2014 and 2015.[1] However, regardless of this development, the security situation in the province remains tense and fragile. The continued instability in Xinjiang can be explained by two main factors. First, there is a growing terrorist threat from the current transnational network of Uyghur jihadist groups fighting in Afghanistan and Syria. Second, home-grown attacks have been launched sporadically by individuals with no affiliation to any organised militant entities.

Uyghur Militancy on the Rise

Uyghur jihadists have increased their military capabilities, manpower and geographical reach while actively taking part in the armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria. They have acquired significant combat skills and tactics, strategy formulation and more sophisticated methods of ideological propaganda due to close engagement with Al-Qaeda, IS and other jihadist groups. Currently, there are three dimensions to the security threat posed by Uyghur militants to China. The first is the presence of Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an Al-Qaeda-linked Uyghur terrorist group fighting in Afghanistan and Syria. The second dimension is linked to Uyghur militants affiliated with IS and related groups in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Lastly, the

rise of the Malhama Tactical, a Syria-based militant group that positions itself as an 'elite unit of military instructors' who recently issued a threat to China.[2]

TIP is Getting Stronger in the Middle East

TIP has fought for the creation of an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang as part of a wider caliphate since its creation in 1997 in Afghanistan. TIP's central structure in Afghanistan lost a large contingent of its fighters when the group was expelled from the tribal areas of Pakistan to Afghanistan in 2015 due to Pakistani military operation against local and foreign militants. Since then, many TIP members have decided to move to the Middle East to join the group's Syrian division known as the TIP in the Levant (TIP-L). As the group's fighters in Afghanistan struggle to survive and reorganise themselves, TIP has not staged any terrorist attacks against China and its proxies outside of the country. Given its close historical ties to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, TIP will most likely manage to secure the support of local militants and find a permanent shelter in Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan will continue to be less attractive for the Uyghur recruits than Syria as the Middle East is logistically easier to travel to.

Separate accounts coming from Syria and Israel revealed that about 3,000 to 5,000 Uyghur fighters and families were in Syria and Iraq as of May 2017.[3] This is several times higher than China's initial estimate of

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[1] Data compiled by the author based on newspaper reports, which indicated that there were a total of 19 incidents of Uyghur-perpetrated violence across China from 2014 to 2015, resulting in nearly 440 fatalities and 460 injuries. In contrast, in 2016 and 2017, there have been only three cases of such incident of violence that killed 14 and injured 15 others.

[2] Alessandro Arduino and Nodirbek Soliev, "Malhama Tactical Threatens to Put China in its Crosshairs." *Terrorism Monitor (The Jamestown Foundation)*, https://jamestown.org/program/malhama-tactical-threatens-put-china-crosshairs/.

[3] Ben Blanchard, "Syria says up to 5,000 Chinese Uighurs fighting in militant groups." *Reuters*, May 11, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-china/syria-says-up-to-5000-chinese-uighurs-fighting-in-militant-groups-idUSKBN1840UP. Itamar Eichner, "Israeli report: Thousands of Chinese jihadists are fighting in Syria." *Ynetnews*, March 27, 2017, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4941411,00.html.

300 Uyghur fighters in 2014. Another report stated that the numbers were between 10,000 and 20,000.[4] Most of these Uyghurs live in Syria's northern province of Idlib and Latakia and belong to TIP-L.[5] The latter has played a crucial role in the military gains of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as al-Nusra Front and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, in its offensives against the Syrian government forces in Idlib, Latakia and Aleppo. The group claimed that it has participated in military offensives launched by Syria's local Turkmen brigades and moderate insurgent groups fighting against the Syrian government. In addition, TIP's leadership has denied any links to IS and has condemned it as an 'illegitimate' entity that 'lacks the necessary theological footing'.[6]

TIP and TIP-L have built an extensive network of clandestine recruitment and operative cells across China, Pakistan, Turkey, and Central Asia. In August 2016, a network comprising underground operatives of TIP-L, Kateeba Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham coming from Syria, Turkey, and Kyrgyzstan, attacked the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan. The suicide attack highlighted TIP's capability to conduct sophisticated and premeditated attacks against China and hit hard targets in geographically distant countries.

IS-linked Uyghurs Remain Focused on the Middle East

In Syria, Uyghurs who joined IS are believed to have operated mainly in Aleppo and Raqqa. According to a report published by *New America*, a Washington-based think tank, IS had 114 Uyghurs in its ranks in

2016.[7] In February 2017, in an online propaganda video issued by jihadist media outlet of al-Furat, IS' Uyghur fighters warned China of future attacks.

IS-linked Uyghurs remain a threat mainly to Chinese interests abroad, particularly in the Middle East and Turkey. This became evident after the execution of a Chinese hostage, along with a Norwegian citizen, by IS in Syria in 2015. The aforementioned case has been the first and only known case of a non-combatant Chinese citizen being killed by IS. It is also noteworthy that IS has not gained much traction among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang compared to TIP which has traditionally been more effective in propaganda outreach and recruitment through the mass dissemination of hundreds of extremist messages and videos. On the other hand, IS has issued only three propaganda videos of Uyghur fighters and an audio message in Mandarin. The comparative volume of this online propaganda underscores the strategic objective of IS which has primarily been to draw new Uyghur recruits into the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq, instead of waging war against China. To date, there has been no report on the presence of any IS Uyghur member, active supporter, or returnee fighter in China and its immediate neighbourhood, particularly in Central and South Asia.[8] Moreover, as a result of international military campaign launched by multiple coalitions throughout 2017, IS has suffered significant losses of territory, resources, and manpower, including Uyghur fighters. Due to IS' decreasing clout, it is possible that some Uyghurs might defect to TIP to remain relevant.

Involvement in Militancy in Southeast Asia

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the involvement of Chinese Uyghurs in Southeast Asian terrorism. Between 2014 and 2016, the Indonesian

[4] Christina Lin, "Chinese Uyghur colonies in Syria a challenge for Beijing." *Asia Times,* May 21, 2017, http://www.atimes.com/chinese-uyghur-colonies-syria-challenge-beijing/.
[5] Mohamad Hage Ali, "China's proxy war in Syria: Revealing the role of Uighur fighters," *Al Arabiya English,* March 2, 2016, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2016/03/02/China-s-proxy-war-in-Syria-Revealing-the-role-of-Uighur-fighters-.html.
[6] Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Turkistan Islamic Party leader criticizes the Islamic State's 'illegitimate' caliphate." *The Long War Journal,* June 11, 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/turkistan-islamic-party-leader-remains-loyal-to-al-qaeda-criticizes-islamic-states-illegitimate-caliphate.php.

[7] The Straits Times, "Beijing's tough religious restrictions driving Muslims in China to join ISIS: Study." July 20, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/beijings-tough-religious-restrictions-driving-muslims-in-china-to-join-isis-study.
[8] Nodirbek Soliev, "How Serious Is the Islamic State Threat to China?" *The Diplomat,* March 14, 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/how-serious-is-the-islamic-state-threat-to-china/.

police have killed or arrested at least twelve Uyghurs in counter-terrorism operations for their links with local pro-IS factions such as Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT) and Katibah Gonggong Rebus (KGR). These radicalised Uyghurs were covertly travelling from China's Xinjiang to Turkey and then to Syria and Iraq via Southeast Asia. However, when they failed to travel to Turkey due to various reasons, they decided to remain in Southeast Asia instead of going back to China. They were then recruited by MIT and KGR. Indonesia has offered an 'alternative jihadi ground' for them as it appears to be more accessible than other countries in the region.[9] Indonesia's ungoverned areas with porous borders, well-connected clandestine channels of jihadist recruitment and human trafficking routes run by IS' local affiliates have facilitated the Uyghurs' illegal trips across the country.

In 2017, there were no reports of Uyghurs entering Southeast Asia to join local militant elements. However, given the porous borders and existing human trafficking networks in a number of Southeast Asian countries close to China,[10] the infiltration of radicalised Uyghurs into the region cannot be ruled out. An increasing number of Uyghur fighters in the Middle East could indicate that Uyghurs are still departing from China using Southeast Asia as a transit route.

Malhama Tactical Trains a New Batch of Uyghur militants

The Malhama Tactical is a militant group, which has been viewed by many as the world's first 'private jihadist contractor',[11] has expressed its intention to attack China.[12] As

of now, Malhama Tactical has not pledged allegiance to any jihadist groups. However, it claims to 'provide military consultation and tactical infantry training' for various Al-Qaeda-linked jihadist groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and TIP-L.

Although Malhama Tactical has focused on operations inside Syria, the group's propaganda has recently adopted anti-Chinese rhetoric. In an online statement issued in August 2017, the group specifically mentioned the Uyghurs and threatened Beijing with 'bringing the war into Xinjiang'. Malhama Tactical appears to be trying to increase funding and recruitment for its operations by publicising the Uyghur minority cause in Xinjiang. Malhama Tactical presently has more than 30 well-trained militants mostly coming from the former Soviet countries, the Middle East, Turkey and China. The group has constantly claimed that most of its 'instructors' are former soldiers of military special forces units while attempting to project itself as an 'elite jihadist squad'. For instance, the group's current leader, who goes under the nom de guerre of Abu Salman Belarussi, was the senior sergeant of the Special Operations Forces of Belarus. In April 2017, the group claimed to have a Chinese 'instructor' named Yunus Kitaets ('Yunus from China') but did not disclose his ethnicity.[13]

Domestic Violent Uyghur Separatism Persists

Some scholars of security studies believe that the recent decline in violence in Xinjiang has been largely achieved because of 'tougher security measures' that were employed by the Chinese government after the upsurge in violent incidents from 2014 to 2015.[14] As such, the ethno-nationalist separatist campaign led by domestic secessionist elements in Xinjiang has fluctuated in intensity.

[9] Soliev, Nodirbek. "The Rise of Uyghur Militancy in and Beyond Southeast Asia: An Assessment." Counter Terrorist Trends & Analyses 9, 2. (2017): p.16. http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CTTA-February-2017.pdf
[10] Ben Blanchard, "Poor intelligence, porous borders stymie Chinese control of Uighurs." *Reuters,* July 23, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang/poor-intelligence-porous-borders-stymie-chinese-control-of-uighurs-idUSKCN0PN0ZH20150713.
[11] A jihadist version of an American private security contractor originally known as 'The Blackwater'.
[12] Alessandro Arduino and Nodirbek Soliev, "Malhama Tactical Threatens to Put China in its Crosshairs," *Terrorism Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation),

https://jamestown.org/program/malhama-tactical-threatens-put-china-crosshairs/.
[13] This information was uploaded on Twitter by a Malhama Tactical fighter on 8 April 2017. However, the page has already been removed.
[14] Cao Yin and Cui Jia, "Terror attacks down, but attempts remain high, study finds." *China Daily*, March 21, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/21/content_28621171.htm.

The separatist tensions have sporadically descended into violence – usually in the form of knife stabbings. In February 2017, three knife-wielding assailants attacked a residential compound in Xinjiang's Hotan Prefecture, killed five civilians and injured five others before being killed by the police. The incident in Hotan was the only attack to be reported throughout the year. The Chinese government mobilised more than 10,000 paramilitary police forces to maintain peace and stability in Xinjiang following the incident and announced a 20 percent increase in the security and defence budget in Xinjiang, estimated at USD 4.37 billion.[15] Meanwhile, China is cooperating with Frontier Services Group Ltd, a Hong Kong registered company co-founded by Erik Prince, the former head of the controversial U.S. private military services contractor, 'Blackwater' to ensure security in Xinjiang and other areas.[16]

Two-thirds of the violent attacks perpetrated by the Uyghurs in China over the last five years have involved stabbing with knives, making it difficult for the government to detect and prevent these incidents. Knife attacks are usually spontaneous and indiscriminate in nature and often carried out by individuals with no links to any particular organised militant group. In most cases, Han civilians have become a target of knife attacks, indicating that the Uyghurs are increasingly resorting to terrorist tactics as a form of 'resistance' against what the Uyghur separatists describe as 'the state's repressive policies' towards their cultural and religious traditions.[17]

Looking Ahead

The radicalisation of Uyghurs is a security challenge that the Chinese government will need to deal with in the long run. It is likely that the TIP-centric threat to China will continue to be more serious compared to the Ugyhur fighters affiliated to IS and Malhama Tactical. However, the current network of Uyghur jihadists remain a threat mainly to China's interests abroad – particularly in the Middle East and Afghanistan and countries adjacent to these regions. With many Uyghur jihadists committed to die as 'martyrs' in the 'holy war', they may not choose to return to China. Most Uyghurs sold their houses in Xinjiang and left with their families for Syria through illegal means and routes. They also did not obtain an international passport that would allow them to leave China and return legally.

In the domestic context, the main threat to China will come from the ongoing low-level Uyghur separatist struggle. Simmering tensions in Xinjiang from time to time may erupt into violent protests against the Chinese government with knife attacks as a common tactic. Any possible deterioration of the security situation in Xinjiang could prompt a further influx of Uyghurs into Southeast Asia and create a security problem for the countries in that region. So it is important for Southeast Asia to work on developing effective border management mechanisms and enhance regional security cooperation to minimise the emerging and potential challenges. For its part, China needs to work on addressing the root causes of ethno-cultural and religious grievances of its Uyghur minority community and improve their socio-economic conditions. There is also a need to develop effective counter-radicalisation and community engagement strategies that rely on soft approaches aimed at winning 'hearts and minds' of the Uyghurs rather than solely deploying military-intensive measures.

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Islamic State after the Fall of Mosul and Raqqa: Impact on Organisation and Propaganda

The 'Islamic State' (IS) After the Fall of Mosul and Raqqa: Still a Persistent Threat

The year 2017 marked the defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, three years after it declared the establishment of a 'caliphate' in June 2014. The group has lost all its strongholds including Mosul in Iraq and its de facto 'capital' Raqqa in Syria, and almost all the lands it controlled. It has also lost many of its top leaders, commanders, strategists and fighters, with the remaining leaders, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on the run and in hiding. It is a matter of time before al-Baghdadi too will meet the same fate as his predecessors and mentors like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden. With the defeat, IS has also lost its main sources of revenue from seized oilfields, illegal taxes and other unlawful means. The output of its 'much touted' online propaganda materials has also declined substantially. Overall, the defeat constitutes a serious blow to its leadership of the global jihadist movement and its propaganda slogan of "remaining and expanding" (Baqiya wa tatamaddad).

The Terrorist Threat Persists

IS' territorial defeat, however, does not spell the end of the group. Nor does it sufficiently reflect its current strength and versatility to reinvent itself and return with force. It should be remembered that IS leaders, in particular al-Baghdadi, have faced territorial losses and challenging situations before, such as when IS founder Zarqawi was killed in a drone attack in June 2006 and when the Sahwa movement rose against IS (then known as Islamic State in Iraq) in late 2006 and drove them out of areas they controlled. IS reconsolidated in the ensuing years, exploited the Arab Spring, expanded into Syria in 2011, recaptured Iraqi Sunni territories it lost to the Sahwa tribal militias, and declared the establishment of Islamic

State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013 and later IS in June 2014.

Despite the territorial losses in its heartlands in Iraq and Syria, IS still has four substantial 'assets' it could count on to remain relevant in the jihadist movement and pose a serious security threat: (a) its jihadist ideology and vision of a global caliphate, (b) its *wilayat* (governorates) and enclaves, (c) its army of loyal followers and fighters, and (d) the Internet and social media platforms. With these assets, IS is likely to persist as a global jihadist movement, recruiting and radicalising more followers, launching opportunistic and targeted terrorist attacks, and supporting the local religious and political agenda of its wilayat.

Ideology

IS' vision of a worldwide caliphate has some resonance among certain vulnerable segments of the Muslim community. Consequently, over thirty thousand foreign fighters and civilians from over 80 countries flocked to Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2016 to defend and build up the caliphate. Many thousands more continue to be beguiled by IS religious and political narratives and battlefront news weaved in glossy and well-packaged online propaganda magazines (first *Dabiq*, then *Rumiyah*, and now other small scale versions). Although propaganda output is down, IS media outlets and its army of social media 'warriors' continue to produce, repost and recycle articles and videos, radicalising new ones and reinforcing the extremism of existing supporters.

IS' virulent anti-Shia sectarian agenda coincides with the current confrontation between two major regional players -- Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran -- and their proxy wars. The group views Shias, among others, as heretics and uses this ideological justification to target them. IS' anti-Shia

narratives skilfully exploit the discrimination and marginalisation of Sunnis in Shia-controlled Iraq and Syria to win and expand its support base. Zarqawi and later al-Baghdadi carried out numerous attacks against Shia neighbourhoods, shrines and mosques, killing and injuring many thousands. The question arises whether the ongoing Sunni-Shia geo-political conflict would increase support for IS' anti-Shia propaganda, and enlarge the catchment for IS recruitment.

Wilayat, Foreign Fighters and Other 'Assets'

IS' military setbacks since late 2016 has resulted in displacement of its foreign fighters from Iraq and Syria. It is estimated that there were about 31,000 foreign fighters from 86 different countries from Africa, Asia and the West.[1] Many have been killed but those who survived are returning to their home countries or IS wilayat like IS Khorasan and IS Philippines. These returnees pose a significant threat to the countries concerned as they are ideologically-hardened and experienced combatants who will strengthen IS in conflict zones.

IS could also rely on the returnees and its existing networks of supporters to spread its ideology, increase recruitment, raise funds and mount terrorist operations. As it came under intense pressure and began losing territories, IS had exhorted its supporters worldwide to launch mass-casualty and high-impact attacks as well as lone-wolf attacks using whatever means, including knives and vehicles. Some of these strikes, particularly those by radicalised lone-wolves, are hard to detect and prevent as they occur without warning. Some of the major attacks in 2017 included the New York truck attack in October that killed 8, the Barcelona van attack in August which killed 14, the London Bridge van and stabbing attacks in June, killing 8, and the concert bomb attack in Manchester in May in which 22 were killed. There were worst attacks in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

With the dislocations and disruptions caused by the loss of territories, manpower and resources, IS will place greater importance on the Internet and social media platforms, particularly encrypted messaging applications, for strategic communications, propaganda, recruitment and operations. Internet enables IS to establish a 'virtual caliphate' and bide its time as it did between 2007 and 2010 when it was driven out of its Sunni strongholds by Sahwa militias in Iraq. It is not known what exactly is the size of IS 'army' of supporters and sympathisers on the Internet but there are some online persona with several thousand followers. For instance, a Malaysian foreign fighter in Syria had a following of some 72,000 on his first few Facebook pages in 2015.[2]

Conclusion

With its jihadist ideology, wilayat, loyal followers and social media apps, IS will continue to pose a formidable security challenge in respect of terrorist attacks. Dislodging IS from its heartlands in Iraq and Syria is a significant achievement as it would deprive IS of a base to operate, generate revenue and plot attacks. To further neutralise and decapitate it, the following will need to be done: (a) continue efforts to neutralise IS leadership as well as IS leaders in the various wilayat; (b) debunk its jihadist ideology and expose its distortion and misrepresentation of Islamic doctrines and practices; (c) address prevailing grievances that have allowed groups like IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant and extremist groups to emerge and flourish; and (d) disrupt its communications and curtail its dissemination of virulent propaganda. Any let-up in these areas will see the IS expanding further in cyberspace, and emerging stronger in poorly-governed and volatile areas like Africa and the Khorasan.

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IS Propaganda after the Fall of Mosul and Raqqa

Following eviction from its remaining Iraqi and Syrian strongholds, IS has lost its tenuous claim of being a 'Caliphate' and control of its previously self-proclaimed wilayat. The recent setbacks have not only shrunk the group's finances, destroyed their training camps and forced the exodus of foreign fighters, but also caused a considerable decline in the group's social media propaganda as well.

Decline in Propaganda

Since July 2017, IS' distribution of governance-related media has been reduced by two-thirds, especially after the fall of Mosul. Only 255 visual reports covering IS activities in Syria and Iraq were observed in the period between July and September 2017, a sharp decrease from the 486 propaganda materials released earlier between May to July 2017.[3] In 2015, IS media activity was at its record high with over 892 units of propaganda being published.[4]

Since September 2017, Al-Hayat Media has not released any new *Rumiyah* magazine, the group's main online propaganda publication since the cessation of its more substantive magazine *Dabiq* in July 2016. The multilingual Rumiyah is usually distributed in the first week of every month.[5] The delay in its publication or even its possible cessation may be attributed to the lack of news, developments and updates on the 'caliphate', its 'wilayat' and military operations, as well as declining morale and possible decimation or departure of its editorial staff. The daily broadcast of, Al-

Bayan Radio, another IS propaganda mouthpiece, has also ceased since October 2017.[6] The only consistent and operational publication is the 16-page Arabic-language news bulletin, Al-*Naba*.

Marawi Narrative: New Strategic Shift

IS central media office is clearly desperate for a new media strategy and fresh narrative to sustain its future propaganda. In the tenth issue of Rumiyah entitled "The Jihad in East Asia" released in June 2017, the group focused on alternative fronts, putting its stakes on the city of Marawi in the Philippines. Before 2016, IS had limited interest in Southeast Asia and has never recognised the Philippines as an official wilayat. The release of a 20-minute video titled "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus" (The Solid Structure) in June 2016,[7] which introduced three East Asian fighters calling for *hijra* (emigration) to IS-held territories [8] and a united leadership under Filipino militant commander Isnilon Hapilon became the turning point.

With the rapid rise of IS-affiliated militants in the Philippines,[9] IS central reportedly sent nearly US$2 million to the Philippines wilayah.[10] During the Marawi siege, IS official news agency, Amaq, regularly released

[3] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Interpreting the Fall of Islamic State Governance." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 16, 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/interpreting-the-fall-of-islamic-state-governance.

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[5] Mahzam, Remy. "Rumiyah – Jihadist Propaganda & Information Warfare in Cyberspace." Counter Terrorist Trends & Analyses 9, 3 (2017) https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CTTA-March-2017.pdf.

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[9] Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani and Jasminder Singh, "The Siege of Marawi City: Some Lessons." *RSIS Commentaries*, August 22, 2017, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co17153-the-siege-of-marawi-city-some-lessons/#.WjC7HkxuKmQ.

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updates on the battlefront in the form of videos, news bulletin and infographics. An infographic report released on 19 August 2017 claimed that the IS Maute group had killed over 335 army soldiers, of which 37 were shot by snipers during the first 86 days of fighting. The report also claimed that Pangarungan, Marinaut and Alaa districts in Marawi city were still under IS control.[11] These updates were futile attempts to counter mainstream news that were reporting on the siege. Official figures put the death toll of the Philippine soldiers at 129.[12]

On 21 August 2017, Al-Hayat Media centre released "Inside the Khilafah 3"[13], the third installment for the "Inside the Khilafah" video series, which covered Marawi. The six-minute video featured militants from the Maute group who shared their experiences amidst fighting in Marawi. When the militants were defeated, Al-Hayat Media Centre released a two-minute English *nasheed* (religious hymn) "Brothers in Marawi"[14] on 12 October 2017, and paid tribute to the soldiers who died in battle.

Sustaining the 'Virtual Caliphate' through Encrypted Social Media Apps

Notwithstanding the absence of Rumiyah and the decline in IS propaganda, the parallel information warfare still rages on. IS messaging thrives on an off-line propaganda strategy with the group's media-savvy supporters keeping the group's 'virtual caliphate' alive.[15] To fill the production void,

propaganda is now disseminated on encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram as well as file-sharing platforms like Google Drive and Archive.org, which are harder to detect. Past propaganda materials including videos, magazines and reports have been made available in small downloadable file sizes and are shared on mobile communication channels.

Independent media outlets such as Khattab Media and Wafa' Media Foundation continue to release new propaganda materials in support of IS' ideology. An infographic video on the IS- claimed Las Vegas shooting massacre was distributed by Khattab Media in the English language.[16] Wafa' Media released posters that threatened to carry out attacks in Russia during the FIFA World Cup 2018,[17] as well as in Vatican City during Christmas[18].

Through potent propaganda, IS has developed a loyal following in the digital realm even if it stops producing new materials. The '*Just Terror Tactics*' segment which provides instructions for aspiring militants to execute do-it-yourself attacks in their home countries in Rumiyah, exemplifies the form of messaging that was sufficient to inspire attacks around the world in recent years, including attacks in Nice, London and New York.

IS' digitisation of its propaganda and the comprehensive resource options of accessing its content reflect a long-term strategy to increase the group's digital metabolism to sustain and win continued

[11] "Remaining ISIS Members Besieged Inside Marawi's Grand Mosque." *SouthFront Analysis & Intelligence*, August 19, 2017, https://southfront.org/remaining-isis-members-besieged-inside-marawis-grand-mosque
[12] Carmela Fonbuena, "Duterte Returns To Marawi As Clashes Enter 4th Month." *Rappler*, August 24, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/179939-duterte-marawi-third-visit-soldiers-retake-mosque
[13] "New Video Message From The Islamic State: "Inside THE Caliphate #3"." *Jihadology*, August 20, 2017, http://jihadology.net/2017/08/20/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-inside-the-caliphate-3/
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[18] "Using Image of Vatican, "Pro-IS Wafa' Media Calls Lone Wolves to Prepare Attacks on Crusaders." *SITE Intelligence*, November 22, 2017, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/using-image-of-vatican-pro-is-wafa-media-calls-lone-wolves-to-prepare-attacks-on-crusaders.html

support from IS followers worldwide. Even though IS might have been defeated militarily, its ideology lives on, with its leadership and followers remaining committed to realising their religio-political goal of establishing a caliphate.

Going forward, governments and social media companies must decide which measures can counter and prevent mass dissemination of online extremist messages. The continuing radicalisation in the virtual world, and the communication of terrorist attacks in encrypted social media apps indicate that more efforts are needed in this direction. The need of the hour is not only to stop the dissemination of extremist propaganda, but to accompany this direction with counter-ideology efforts as well as to rebut the exploitation and misrepresentation of religious doctrines by extremist groups.[19] Terrorist groups that face operational defeats in the real world would take refuge in virtual communities,[20] where they can push their agenda effectively. After Mosul, Raqqa and Marawi, the next great challenge is to deny them this space and limit their reach and influence.

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[19] Azman, Nur Aziemah. "Islamic State (IS) Propaganda: Dabiq and Future Directions of Islamic State." Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses 8, 10 (2016). http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CTTA-October-2016.pdf.

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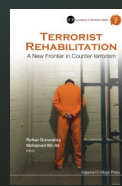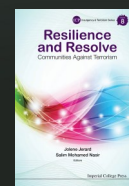
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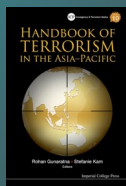
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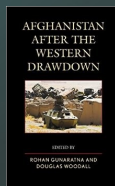
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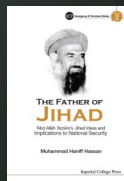(Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015)

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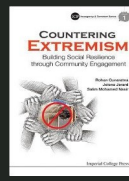Rohan Gunaratna and Mohamed Bin Ali
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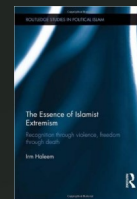(Imperial College Press, 2015)
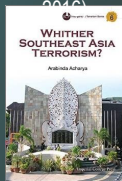
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