

## **Does Boko Haram Pose a Threat to the US?**

Mustapha Kulungu

## **A Study of Al-Qaeda's Propaganda Narratives in Bangladesh**

Shafi Md Mostofa

## **Women in Terrorism: Evolution from Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Indonesia and Malaysia**

Amalina Abdul Nasir



# Geographically Diverse, Organisationally Complex and Gender Inclusive Islamist Terrorist Landscape

The landscape of Islamist terrorism is diverse, multifaceted and fractious, simultaneously characterised by inter and intra-group rivalries and various forms of cooperation at the operational, tactical and strategic levels. It cuts across geographical, gender and ideological lines/boundaries. More importantly, it evolves at a very rapid pace resulting in fluid security and conflict environments in different geographical locales. For instance, there are local groups like Nigerian Boko Haram that are trying to globalise their jihadist agenda through affiliations with the Islamic State (IS). However, this cooperation is not entirely collegial and is marked by friction and a trust deficit on both ends. In contrast, Al-Qaeda's (AQ) South Asian affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), despite its regional character is localising its recruitment and operational strategies to avoid visibility from media and security agencies. AQIS is abstaining from violence while Boko Haram is engaging in violence to gain public attention. At the same time, the evolution of the terrorist landscape in Indonesia and Malaysia from Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and AQ-dominated to IS-led and inspired, has affected the recruitment and participation of women. The growing involvement of female militants in diverse roles gives rise to further security threats.

In this issue, the first article by **Mustapha Kulungu** examines the genesis of Boko Haram in Nigeria as a local movement representing grievances of Muslims to its transformation as an operationally strong terrorist group. The author writes that the growing links over the last few years between IS and Boko Haram have added to the lethality and brutality of the latter, which has relied on narratives of Muslim victimhood in Nigeria to expand its footprint outside the country. The

article analyses Boko Haram's organisational structure, operational strategies, sources of funding and ideological ambitions. While it is argued that Boko Haram's growing capabilities will undermine the US' interests in Africa, enhancing US-Nigerian security cooperation may act as a counter Boko Haram's threat.

The second article by **Shafi Mostofa** discusses AQIS' online and offline propaganda operations in Bangladesh and the various political and ideological narratives the group has used to grow further. Along with issuing several online videos and pamphlets, AQIS publishes two Bengali language magazines: Al-Balagh and Azan. In these publications, AQIS has frequently invoked four themes to justify its activities in Bangladesh. These four themes are: Indian hegemonic ambitions in South Asia, Muslim persecution, religious credentials of the head of a Muslim state and Islamic values. The author argues that AQIS is targeting affluent Bangladeshi youth for recruitment. AQIS' continued online propaganda is likely to have negative security implications. As such, the author recommends adoption of long-term kinetic and non-kinetic counter-terrorism and counter-extremism strategies to neutralise AQIS.

The last article by **Amalina Abdul Nasir** observes how women's roles in terrorism have evolved in Indonesia and Malaysia from JI to an IS-dominated threat landscape. Overall, the roles of women have become more diverse due to IS' physical inroads in the region, particularly in light of online recruitment through the open and close media platforms. The author discusses the evolution of women's roles from wives and mothers to suicide bombers and combatants as recently witnessed in Indonesia and Malaysia.

# Geographically Diverse, Organisationally Complex and Gender Inclusive Islamist Terrorist Landscape

This development will need to be addressed by counter-terrorism agencies so as to mitigate its impact on the security threat landscape. It also requires an examination of the current perception of women in terrorist groups, and developing policies that factor in the gender-inclusive nature of the terrorist landscape in parts of Southeast Asia.

## ADVISORY BOARD

---

**Dr. Jolene Jerard**

*Research Fellow, Deputy Head of  
International Centre for Political  
Violence and Terrorism Research,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

**Dr. Rohan Gunaratna**

*Professor of Security Studies  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

**Dr. Kumar Ramakrishna**

*Associate Professor  
Head of Policy Studies & Coordinator of  
National Security Studies Programme,  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*

**Dr. Marcin Styszyński**

*Assistant Professor,  
Adam Mickiewicz University  
Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies*

**Dr. Stephen Sloan**

*Professor Emeritus,  
The University of Oklahoma  
Lawrence J. Chastang,  
Distinguished Professor, Terrorism Studies,  
The University of Central Florida*

**Dr. Fernando Reinares**

*Director, Program on Global Terrorism,  
Elcano Royal Institute Professor of Security  
Studies, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos,  
Madrid, Spain*

**Dr. John Harrison**

*Associate Editor  
Journal of Transportation Security*

**Dr. Hamoon Khelghat-Doost**

*Senior Lecturer in Political Science  
Science University of Malaysia*

## EDITORIAL BOARD

---

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Senior Editorial Advisor</b> | Vijayalakshmi Menon                                    |
| <b>Editor-in-Chief</b>          | Sara Mahmood   |
| <b>Associate Editors</b>        | Abdul Basit<br>Jennifer Dhanaraj<br>Amresh Gunasingham |
| <b>Copy Editor</b>              | Sylvene See  |
| <b>Design and Layout</b>        | Okkie Tanupradja                                       |

*The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and not of ICPVTR, RSIS, NTU or the organisations to which the authors are affiliated. Articles may not be reproduced without prior permission. Please contact the editors for more information at [cta@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:cta@ntu.edu.sg). The editorial team also welcomes any feedback or comments.*

# Does Boko Haram Pose a Threat to the US?

Mustapha Kulungu

*This article examines the genesis and the possible future of Boko Haram by focusing on why the group mostly thrives in some parts of Nigeria. It also looks at the American and Nigerian governments' responses to security challenges emanating from Boko Haram's terrorist activities. Based on the evidence and analysis, the article identifies the implications of the continued existence of the group for stability in Nigeria and the US. The conclusion offers policy recommendations for the US and Nigeria to mitigate Boko Haram's threats.*

## Introduction

The Nigerian militant group, Boko Haram, emerged in 2002 under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf. Since 2009, the group has been involved in various attacks in Nigeria including the attack on the United Nations' (UN) offices in Abuja and several attacks on various government institutions. Boko Haram also poses a security threat to America considering that it has been issuing threats to America. Additionally, Nigeria is a key strategic partner of the US implying that Nigeria's stability or lack of it affects the US in various ways. This is another reason why Boko Haram's operatives would want to attack the US or its citizens living in Nigeria or in the neighboring countries.

In the last few years, links between the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group and Boko Haram have flourished. IS has offered advice to Boko Haram on how to build an African caliphate. The ongoing links between the two groups have now developed "into a practical relationship."

In August 2016, IS supported a group of militants desiring to separate from Boko Haram's long-time leader Abubakar Shekau. The IS leadership preferred to deal with Boko Haram's former spokesperson, the son of the

late Boko Haram's founder, Muhammad Yusuf, known as Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The principal disagreement between Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) is an ideological one about targeting Muslim civilians and mosques. Essentially, the difference between the two groups centers on ISWA's tactical decision to engage, rather than target, Muslim civilians. This notion stipulates that appealing and gaining the support of local civilians is paramount to its fight and survival. In contrast, JAS views the local farmers and herders as enemy combatants, grounded on a belief that these groups do not really support their cause.

## Context

Nigeria remains one of the US government's key strategic partners in Africa.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the largest oil producers in Africa, a commodity that is supplied in large quantities to the US. In recent years, the political and economic partnership between the US and Nigeria has flourished. The US-Nigerian partnership centers on three elements; security, governance and regional leadership. Also, the US imports more oil from Nigeria than from any other country in Africa. However, Boko Haram's continued attacks in Nigeria threaten to create more instability in the country and the West African region, making the group's activities a significant concern for the US. Additionally, going by the history of terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and IS, there are fears that Boko Haram may turn to external attacks if it grows further.<sup>2</sup> Owing to the close socio-economic

<sup>1</sup> Clarence Bouchat, "The Causes of Instability in Nigeria and Implications for the United States," *Strategic Studies Institute*, August 19, 2013, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1163>.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald McLaughlin and Clarence Bouchat, "Nigerian Unity In The Balance," *Strategic Studies Institute*, June 2013.

and political ties between Nigeria and the US, the group may attack US nationals and interests in the African region. For that reason, it is imperative to analyse the group – starting from its senior leadership to its ideological inclination. This analyses can aid in identifying recommendations to mitigate the threats that the group poses to the national security of Nigeria and that of the US.

### **Boko Haram Leadership: Structure, Style and Characteristics**

Boko Haram's highest-ranking power structure is the Shura Council (Executive Council) and the various divisions within the group have representatives on this council.<sup>3</sup> The Shura has handled the group's most critical issues including some of the recent sophisticated attacks. While the Council makes a decision that applies to the entire group, each division's commander or leader enjoys great autonomy in routine operations. Currently, Abubakar Shekau is the leader of the group, and he heads the Shura Council. Before that, he was the assistant of the group's first leader Muhammad Yusuf who was killed in July 2009 by the Nigerian military forces. Shekau is a member of Nigeria's Kanuri community which lives in the Northern region near the border with Niger.

Shekau's leadership style is dictatorial as he has been accused of unilaterally making decisions on many occasions without consulting with the Shura Council.<sup>4</sup> Shekau is more radical and hostile than his predecessors. Also, he is neither charismatic nor an eloquent speaker unlike most of his predecessors.<sup>5</sup>

Under Shekau, the group has become more violent and less willing to negotiate with the Nigerian government. Some people feel that due to Shekau's appetite for ruthless violence especially against innocent civilians,

---

<sup>3</sup> Patricio Asfura-Heim and Julia McQuaid, Diagnosing The Boko Haram Conflict: Grievances, Motivations, And Institutional Resilience In Northeast Nigeria, CNA, January 2015, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/DOP-2014-U-009272-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DOP-2014-U-009272-Final.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Farouk Chothia, "Who are Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists?" *BBC News*, January 11, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13809501>.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Johnson, "Backgrounder: Boko Haram," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 31, 2011.

it has weakened the group's support at the grassroots level. Recently, some reports have surfaced claiming that Shekau's autocratic leadership style has caused internal divisions within the group.<sup>6</sup> Other groups, notably the Ansaru and Yusufiya Islamic Movement (YIM) have been formed within the group with each sub-group having its leader. Al-Barrnawi and Mamman Nur respectively, are the two leaders leading the factions that have split. However, in a video released on March 7, 2010, Shekau dismissed the claims of the emergence of other leaders within the group and claims to have full control of Boko Haram.

### **Grievances leading to Boko Haram's Emergence**

While Boko Haram started as a non-violent movement, deep-seated grievances have since driven the group to violence. Undeniably, the yearning for revenge against the government for the death of the group's founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf, has been a principal motivation for the current leaders.<sup>7</sup> Further, some leaders argue that they are motivated by a conviction that politicians in the affected states of Nigeria are dishonest Muslims who are fulfilling personal interests to the detriment of the Muslim community. Also, these Muslim politicians are working with the Christian-majority government and its secular democratic system.<sup>8</sup> What is more, they feel that the problem of corruption, politics, and western influences are the main reasons for the decline of Islam in the North. The group contends that social problems such as inequality and poverty can be resolved by adopting Sharia law.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Freedom Onuoha, "The Islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram Crisis Explained," *African Security Review* 19, no.2 (2010): 54-67.

<sup>7</sup> N.D. Danjibo, "Islamic Fundamentalism, and Sectarian Violence: The 'Maitatsine' and 'Boko Haram' Crises in Northern Nigeria," Institute of African Studies, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Kwaja, "Nigeria's Pernicious Drivers of Ethno-Religious Conflict," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, July 31, 2011, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ASB14EN-Nigeria%E2%80%99s-Pernicious-Drivers-of-Ethno-Religious-Conflict.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Oyewole, "Boko Haram: Insurgency and the War against Terrorism in the Lake Chad Region," *Strategic Analysis* 39, no.4 (2015): 428-432.

Experts such as Ted Robert and others argue that the group is fueled by inter-ethnic and regional conflicts.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the smaller Kanuri ethnic group from which most Boko Haram members hail from has been sidelined economically and politically. The Kanuri blame the dominant Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, which controls the economy and politics of the north, for marginalising them. Perhaps to gain support and sympathy, Boko Haram has denied being driven by inter-ethnic disputes but rather by religious differences. They claim the war is between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Boko Haram leadership strategically claims that they fight only Christians who have benefited from colonisation and that Muslims had suffered under the colonial masters because of the treatment they were subjected to. In so doing, it appeals to the psyche of Muslims for their constant support.<sup>11</sup>

### Functioning of Boko Haram

The exact date of Boko Haram's formation is somewhat controversial but many scholars tend to agree that it emerged in 2002-2003.<sup>12</sup> Under Mohammed Yusuf, the group started as a small Sunni prayer assembly under his guidance. Yusuf's literal understanding of the Quran influenced him to push for the rejection of some aspects of western education. At the time, the group used to refer to itself as *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al-Jihad* '(People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad).<sup>13</sup> During its formative years, Boko Haram remained a predominantly peaceful organisation and the government never disrupted its activities. Boko Haram's inception years were relatively moderate and its first mosque was not just a place of worship - it also served as a center for community organisation and mutual

assistance. It provided services that the government continuously ignored.

Additionally, Boko Haram provided security for the community and had a farm that provided produce to its members. As a result, many unemployed young men joined the group and received a monthly provision. These services provided the platform for Boko Haram to gain sympathy and momentum to morph into criminal activities in the name of fighting injustice and corruption. The Boko Haram leadership claimed that its last endeavor was to achieve self-sufficiency. Many people in the community and the neighboring communities became sociologically and psychologically attracted to these ideologies and services and began to support all of Boko Haram's activities regardless of its nature. Over the years, the group extended its existence into new areas including Yobe, Bauchi, and Niger provinces.<sup>14</sup>

Yusuf continued to criticise the government while advocating for the official introduction and implementation of Islamic law in northern states. Scholars observe that by 2008 the group had started taking on a militant stance characterised by collection and storage of small arms in their head office in Maiduguri and Bauchi. The group's first violent encounter happened on June 11, 2009 when its members clashed with the police for disobeying a motorcycle helmet law. This triggered five days of violence between the government and supporters of Boko Haram resulting in over 800 deaths including that of Mohammed Yusuf.<sup>15</sup> Following Yusuf's death, Boko Haram evolved into an armed radical group that sought to overthrow the northern regional governments and finally expel the Nigerian national government.

### Funding

Boko Haram has multiple sources to finance its operations stemming from its social networks and illegal activities.<sup>16</sup> Initially, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Carlo Davis, "Boko Haram: Africa's Homegrown Terror Network," *World Policy Journal*, June 12, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Abimbola Adesoji, "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria," *Africa Spectrum* 45, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Walker, "Special Report: What is Boko Haram?" *United States Institute of Peace*, June 2012,

<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR308.pdf>

---

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no.10 (2012).

<sup>15</sup> Lere Amusan and Samuel Oyewole, "Boko Haram Terrorism In Nigeria: A Reflection on the Failure of Democratic Containment," *Politeia* 33, no.1 (2014): 35-59.

<sup>16</sup> Hakeem Onapajo, "Has Nigeria Defeated Boko Haram? An Appraisal of the Counter-Terrorism

group received funding from its members and foreign donors. Some reports indicate that Mohammed Yusuf used to get funds from international Salafi connections. Historically, Saudi Arabia has not been the only source of resources for jihadism—public and private entities in Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and others have also been linked to the collection and transfer of funds supporting terror groups. Yusuf used these funds to establish microcredit schemes for the group's members and provide food, shelter, and other amenities for jobless youths and refugees. Additionally, some funding came from local politicians, government officials, and businesses.<sup>17</sup>

Currently, Boko Haram supports its operations through bank robberies, trafficking illegal drugs and weapons, kidnapping for ransom, exploiting local resources and human trafficking.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars point out that Boko Haram also extorts money from well-off people. The group also collects taxes from ordinary citizens who reside in areas under its control. The total amount of money received as ransom is estimated to run into millions of dollars. The group also relies on money laundering as a source of funding.<sup>19</sup> Nigerian intelligence has traced transfers of money to Boko Haram from Nigerians living in the US, Pakistan, and Europe. Other studies also indicate that the group receives small amounts of money from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and sometimes intercepts funds meant for humanitarian assistance in Nigeria coming from abroad.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps to minimise the risk of being arrested by the authorities, Boko Haram conducts its financial operations outside of Nigerian financial institutions. Instead, it employs a system of couriers to send money within and without Nigeria.

---

Approach under the Buhari Administration," *Strategic Analysis* 41, no.1 (2017): 61-73.

<sup>17</sup> Bayo Oladeji and George Agba, "Smoke out Boko Haram Sponsors, Jonathan Orders Security Chiefs," *All Africa*, December 30, 2011, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201112300822.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel A. Ekanem, Jacob A. Dada and Bassey J. Ejue, "Boko Haram and Amnest: A Philo-legal Appraisal," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no.4 (2012).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

<sup>20</sup> A.J Coates, *The Ethics Of War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

## Recruitment and Indoctrination

Boko Haram's followers are primarily drawn from the Kanuri community. The recruitment is usually facilitated by the networks of Kanuri society using familial connections and, business acquaintances.<sup>21</sup> The Boko Haram-affiliated clerics from Borno recruit members from their locality and even beyond the national borders.<sup>22</sup> The new members are attracted to join because of the financial inducements offered as well as a victimhood narrative of the Kanuri community's marginalisation and how the government mistreats the group.

The heavy-handed responses of the Nigerian government against Boko Haram members is also believed to be pushing new members to join the group. Others are attracted by the boldness the militant members have exhibited towards government forces.<sup>23</sup> However, the group's popularity has declined recently, forcing the group to depend on forced recruitment and criminality. In some instances, Boko Haram members have broken into jail and freed young men who, in turn, are recruited into their group. Some youths also reportedly join so that they will be paid to raid banks, assassinate government officials, and steal cars. In February 2012, a spokeswoman of the Nigerian Prisons system told the BBC that Boko Haram insurgents killed a jail officer during the attack, and freed youth prisoners before recruiting them to generate funds.<sup>24</sup>

## Boko Haram's Attacks

Initially, Boko Haram targeted the Christian community in Nigeria using small non-conventional weapons such as butcher-knives, clubs, sticks, and machetes with the aim of sparking sectarian animosity. Later, in

---

<sup>21</sup> Philips John, "Spurious Arabic: Hausa and Colonial northern Nigeria," *African Studies Center*, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no.10 (2012).

<sup>23</sup> Aboul-Enein, Youssef H., and Sherifa Zuhur, "Islamic Rulings On Warfare," *Strategic Studies Institute*, October 2004, <http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/1693.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> "Nigeria Jailbreak: Boko Haram Claims Kogi Prison Attack," *BBC News*, February 16, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17059895>.



2010, the group scaled up its operational tactics as it begun to use simple but effective Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). These IEDs were often lit and thrown from a moving vehicle or motorcycle.<sup>25</sup> Lately, the group's attacks have increased immensely, key among them being the UN bombing in Abuja in March 2016, church bombings in the country's largest cities coupled with other small attacks.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, the group ambushed the military headquarters in Maiduguri, and in the same year, it abducted over 200 schoolgirls in Borno state and over 100 girls in 2017.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Boko Haram has executed more attacks in Nigeria than any other armed group, making it the country's most significant security threat. In early January 2015, the insurgents captured about 20,000 square miles of land in Nigeria in the region bordering Cameroun and Chad.<sup>28</sup>

It is also evident that Boko Haram has expanded its attacks in different parts of Nigeria unlike in the past where most attacks took place in the northeastern states such as Yobe, Bauchi, and Borno. Some academics stipulate that Boko Haram's increased aggression is an indicator that the group has been receiving training and support from experienced terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the number of victims from the group's attacks has considerably increased over the years.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Temidayo, A. "Boko Haram: The Way Out," *The Nation Lagos*, July 10, 2011, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> "Boko Haram Destroyed One Million Houses, 5,000 Classrooms, N1.9 Trillion Properties In Borno-Official," *Premium Times*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-east/239645-boko-haram-destroyed-one-million-houses-5000-classrooms-n1-9-trillion-properties-borno-official.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Oyewole and Freedom Onuoha, "Boko Haram's Abduction of Dapchi Schoolgirls: Context, Controversy, and Concerns," *African Security Review* (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> See Table 1 and 2 for the patterns of Boko Haram's violence and associated fatalities from 2009 to 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's International Connections," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no.1 (2013).

<sup>30</sup> See Table 3 in the Appendix for a visual representation of incidents executed by Boko Haram in 2016 and 2017.

## Responses to Counter Boko Haram

### a) *Monitoring and Preventing Boko Haram Propaganda via the Internet and other Means*

Since 2013, Boko Haram has been consistently releasing videos and other online publications to issue threats or to spread its ideological propaganda. The videos include footage of attacks, messages from Boko Haram leaders and beheadings of disloyal members. The Internet and social media platforms have also allowed the group to work in coordination with other terrorist groups outside of Nigeria and spread their ideological narrative. For instance, in a few videos, Boko Haram members have openly threatened to attack the US.

A case in point is a message by former Boko Haram spokesman Musa Tanko issued in March 2010, "the United States is the number one target for its oppression and aggression against Muslim Nations."<sup>31</sup> It is against this background that the US and Nigeria have intensified their online monitoring and countering measures to prevent Boko Haram's online propaganda alongside other measures on the ground.

In 2011, the US established its first strategy for countering violent extremism which sought to engage terrorists in an online debate, disputing their ideologies with a view to discourage others from joining terrorist groups. It also created a Twitter account to persuade jihadists and their sympathisers to rethink their actions.<sup>32</sup> The international community also joined the war against terrorism in 2014, following Boko Haram's attack on UN offices in Nigeria. In this context, in September 2014, the UN adopted a resolution that required member states to implement criminal justice and prosecute people who travel or attempt to travel for terrorism purposes. In 2015, the US

---

<sup>31</sup> Omar S. Mahmood, "More than Propaganda: A Review of Boko Haram's Public Messages," *Institute for Security Studies*, March 2017, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war20.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Christina Liang, "Cyber Jihad: Understanding and Countering Islamic State Propaganda," *GSCP Policy Paper 2* (2015): 4, <https://www.gcsp.ch/News-Knowledge/Publications/Cyber-Jihad-Understanding-and-Countering-Islamic-State-Propaganda>.

government announced another programme aimed at stopping terrorist propaganda on the Internet. The programme is intended to foster real-time monitoring of social media. Other actions included active takedown of terrorist websites and terrorist publications, and equally financing civil society groups to create counter-narratives to mitigate and challenge terrorist messages being propagated online.<sup>33</sup>

b) *Countermeasures against Boko Haram's Attacks*

The Nigerian government and some of the neighboring countries have undertaken various actions including legal, political, economic, military and diplomatic measures to deal with the Boko Haram insurgency. At the beginning of the crisis, it was reported that some of the northern state governments paid Boko Haram in exchange for peace. Businessmen, government officials, politicians and some neighboring governments were asked to pay fees for protection. In any case, as it later turned out, this was an extortion scheme orchestrated by the Boko Haram. Since 2011, many government officials and religious leaders have been making deliberate attempts to negotiate with the group.<sup>34</sup> In September 2011, then President Goodluck Jonathan met with some Boko Haram members who demanded compensation for families of murdered colleagues in the 2009 violence and the arrest of police officers involved. The president forwarded the demands to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), which, in turn, formed a board for dialogue and peaceful resolution. Nigerian officials have made several attempts to dialogue with Boko Haram, but Shekau, the leader, has categorically refused to do so. Shekau has also been accused of executing those members of Boko Haram who have sought to meet with the government officials.

The failure of peace talks and the need to maintain peace has since compelled Nigeria

and some neighboring countries to deploy security forces in the affected areas. Nigeria's national parliament enacted the Terrorism Prevention Act in 2011 to intensify the fight against terrorism. Since 2012, the military has been the main countermeasure against the activities of Boko Haram.<sup>35</sup> By the end of 2016, over 50,000 African soldiers were being deployed to fight Boko Haram while another 5,000 foreign troops were offering logistic support. Neighboring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have also recently sent troops to combat the group as the threats increasingly become a transnational security issue. The US, Canada, Israel, Great Britain, France, and the UN have also deployed Special Forces to assist in countering the group.<sup>36</sup>

**Analysis**

To realise its objectives, Boko Haram employs various tactics including terrorism, subversion, and guerrilla warfare tactics. The principal goal is to destabilise the government and eventually overthrow it and replace it with an Islamic government. Boko Haram has been able to pose a significant threat to the Nigerian government and has been able to undermine the stability of the region in particular. The danger posed to Nigeria's stability can undermine the country's ability to produce oil and consequently, hinder its ability to supply oil to the US. Furthermore, the group's connection to and declared support for international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and AQIM threatens America's national security. There are valid reasons to believe that a few supporters of Boko Haram have also been advocating attacks on the US.

Unlike other terrorist groups such as the Afghan Taliban and IS, Boko Haram does not have a politically organised system. It has weak structures which can be easily dismantled. The group's grassroots support is dwindling as Muslims in the country have

<sup>33</sup> Michael Bazzell, *Open Source Intelligence Techniques: Resources for Searching and Analyzing Online Information*, (North Charleston: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Oyewole, "Human Security Initiatives for National Security Crisis: Vigilant Civilian Groups and Counterinsurgency from Below in North-Eastern Nigeria," *Federal University Oye-Ekiti*, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Rafiu Ajakaye, "Nigeria Announces Military Operation To Rout Boko Haram," *Anadolu Agency*, April 21, 2018, <https://aa.com.tr/en/africa/nigeria-announces-military-operation-to-rout-boko-haram/1124309>.

<sup>36</sup> John Campbell, "Nigerian Government Has Been Negotiating With Boko Haram For 'Some Time,'" *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerian-government-has-been-negotiating-boko-haram-some-time>.

overwhelmingly distanced themselves from the harmful ideologies broadcast by the group.<sup>37</sup> However, some of the grievances raised by the group including poverty, neglect, and joblessness are a reality in most parts of the north and the group may, in the meantime, use this as leverage to gain further grassroots support.

### Implications and Recommendations

Boko Haram could resort to kidnapping US citizens residing or working in Nigeria and neighboring countries. The Nigerian government could impose a mandatory evacuation of Sambisa forest by common villagers, and keep them in a safe location, and finally deforest the Sambisa forest to ensure that none can hide within. Also, while the group may not be able to launch a direct attack on the US due to its weak structures, it may collaborate with more established extremist violent groups for their global reach such as Al-Qaeda and the IS to orchestrate and execute attacks against the US.<sup>38</sup>

Although the Nigerian military has the backing of neighboring countries and international allies have made tremendous achievements in weakening the group, it still has the capability to gain momentum in the future and continue to cause security threats. This is because the conditions in the northeastern area are favorable for expansion. The Muslims in the region still feel disappointed with the government; poverty levels are high and there is substantial economic inequality with the rest of the country. With such factors, more youth will find reasons to join the movement. Strikingly, if Boko Haram leaders change their leadership style and tactics and the politicians continue to ignore the plight of the northerners, Boko Haram may morph into a global terrorist group that will threaten the national security of the region and America.

The US can help curb the Boko Haram's threat by offering support to the Nigerian

government. In this context, American resources such as the Special Operations Forces (SOF) can be used to help influence some of the combat tactics used to counter Boko Haram. Initiatives such as the current financing of several programs in northern Nigeria through funds from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) should be expanded. These funded programs seek to promote accountability and delivery of services. This is vital because issues of corruption and poor governance are some of the leading grievances and causes of the Boko Haram insurgency.

By addressing these grievances, young people may no longer have reasons for joining the group. More significantly, Nigerian politicians should be willing to be transparent and accountable to foster a more inclusive and people-centered type of government.<sup>39</sup> The country's security intelligence should be organized in a manner that decreases the barriers to sharing information between the states and the national government. Information sharing among national security authorities should be equally streamlined to allow for coordinated analysis of data. The Nigerian government must employ effective strategies to combat terrorism while simultaneously observing human dignity. It is likely that the public will support the government's anti-terrorism efforts if it ensures respect for human lives.

### Conclusion

Boko Haram remains a significant danger to the stability of Nigeria and some of its neighbors. In the recent past, hundreds of deadly attacks have been attributed to Boko Haram. It is feared that the group may evolve into a more complex terrorist group owing to the sophistication associated with some of its attacks. The principal motivation of the group is the high poverty rates, marginalisation, and economic disparity in the northeastern states of Nigeria to name just a few. The situation may get worse if these grievances are not addressed. It is also in the best interest of the US to help counter Boko Haram because of

---

<sup>37</sup> Jimmoh Abbas, "Boko Haram Not Representing Islam- Governor Aliyu," *Sunday Trust*, June 13, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Freedom C. Onuoha, "Split in ISIS-Aligned Boko Haram Group," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, Reports, October 27, 2016, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2016/10/split-isis-aligned-boko-haram-group-161027113247008.html>.

---

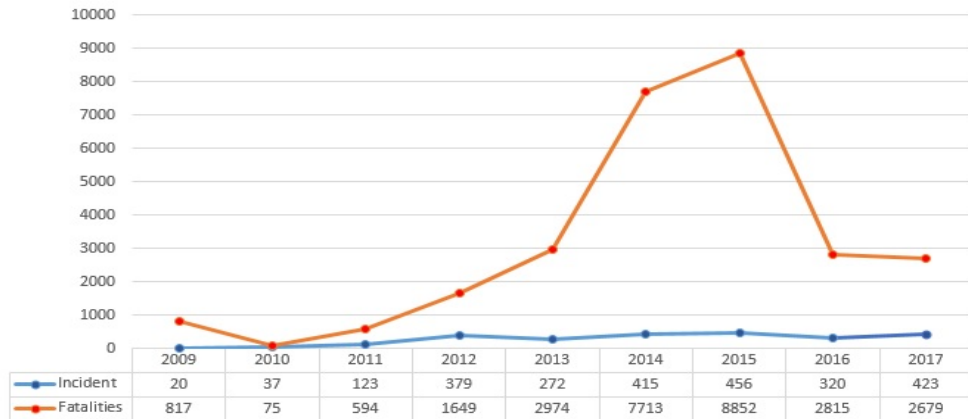
<sup>39</sup> Michael Sodipo, "Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria," *African Center for Strategic Studies* no.26, August 31, 2013, <https://africacenter.org/publication/mitigating-radicalism-in-northern-nigeria/>.

the critical role of Nigeria for the American economy.

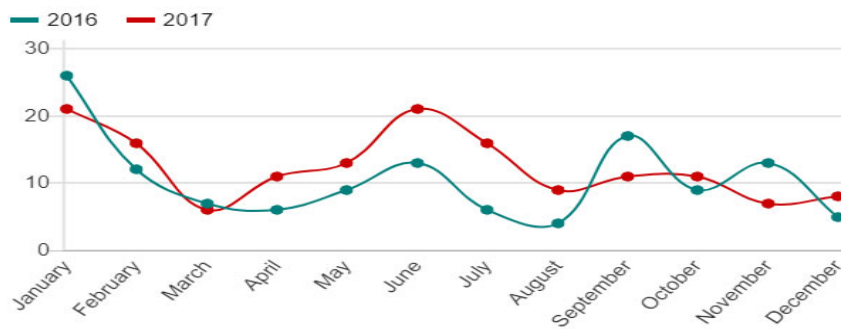
Finally, as the group has in the past threatened to attack the US, it is something which should not be taken lightly by US security agencies. Accordingly, the US government should collaborate with the Nigerian government to address this threat. Technical, logistical, and financial support from the US will assist Nigeria in tackling this issue. The Nigerian government should also be ready to solve the social, economic, and political grievances of the people of northern Nigeria.

*Mustapha Kulungu is a Principal Researcher at ILM Foundation Institute of Los Angeles, California and a student at American Military University, School of Security and Global Studies. He can be reached at: [drmkulungu@yahoo.com](mailto:drmkulungu@yahoo.com).*

**Appendix**



*Figure 1: Patterns of Boko Haram's violence and Associated Fatalities, 2009-2017 (Adapted from ACLED)*



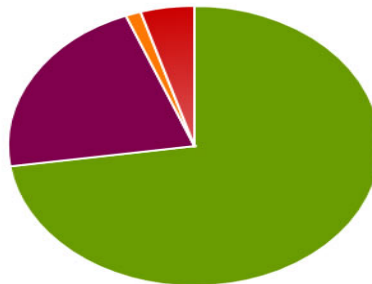
Source: BBC Monitoring



*Table 2: Chart showing the number of violent incidents executed by Boko Haram<sup>1</sup>*

**Where Boko Haram attacked in 2017**

- Nigeria (109 attacks)
- Cameroon (32 attacks)
- Chad (2 attacks)
- Niger (7 attacks)



Source: BBC Monitoring



*Table 3: Casualties of Boko Haram attacks<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 1997-2018. Available at <http://www.acleddata.com>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 6.

# A Study of Al-Qaeda's Propaganda Narratives in Bangladesh

Shafi Md Mostofa

*AQ's activities in Bangladesh have primarily been conducted through its South Asian affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which has adopted a propaganda-centric approach to gain a foothold in the country. This article assesses AQIS' online presence and propaganda aimed at recruiting affluent urban youth and exploiting longstanding domestic and regional issues including the grievances of the Rohingya Muslims and domestic Islamist extremist groups.*

## Introduction

On June 12, 2018, a prominent Bangladeshi writer and publisher of secular-bent, Shahzahan Bachchu was killed in a terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup> His killing ended a two-year lull in militant violence in Bangladesh. This lull was said to be a result of law enforcement agencies scaling up their operations across the country, resulting in the killing of around 90 militants between July 2016 and December 2018.<sup>2</sup> Yet Bangladesh continues to face a multitude of issues that make it highly attractive to terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (IS), both of which have adopted different tactics in the country.

AQIS, in its propaganda activities in Bangladesh, has focused on recruiting youth who are of a middle class or upper class background from colleges, higher education institutions and universities. This article examines the recruitment strategy of AQIS in Bangladesh by assessing propaganda

material such as online pamphlets, statements and online magazines like *the Azan* (the call to prayer), and the Bengali magazine *Al-Balagh* (the Messenger). For this purpose, the four most frequently discussed themes in the group's propaganda narrative i.e. Indian Hegemonic Ambitions in the region, notion of Muslim Persecution, Religious Credentials of the Head of a Muslim State and Promotion of Islamic Values are examined. The conclusion assesses the implications and offers some recommendations.

## AQIS' Propaganda Narratives

In June 2018, AQIS, in an online statement, urged Bangladeshi nationals to join the group, citing illegal acts of aggression against Muslim prisoners held at the Kashimpur Central Jail by a Hindu police officer. The statement claimed this as evidence of growing Hindu fundamentalism within a Muslim majority country.<sup>3</sup> In its online Bengali magazine, *al-Balagh*, AQIS has attempted to radicalise urban youths in Bangladesh by invoking religious arguments based on its interpretation of Quranic texts to legitimise its various jihadi appeals.

### a) Indian Hegemonic Ambitions

In its publications, AQIS frequently criticises Indian hegemonic ambition in South Asia which is "undermining Muslims values and culture," according to the group. India, by virtue of its size, location and economic potential, assumes a natural leadership position in the region, scholars believe.<sup>4</sup> Several Indian policies are highlighted by

<sup>1</sup> "Prominent Bangladeshi Writer Dragged Out Of Shop, Shot Dead," *NDTV*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/prominent-secular-writer-publisher-shahzahan-bachchu-shot-dead-in-bangladesh-1866143>.

<sup>2</sup> The researcher collected this information from three Bangladeshi newspapers as part of his PhD fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> "AQIS Heinous Aggression on the Fasting-Muslim Prisoners in Bangladesh: A Call For the Muslims To Rise-up," *Al Hikmah Media*, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Madhavi Bhasin, "India's Role in South Asia— Perceived Hegemony or Reluctant Leadership?" *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 3, no.4 (2008): 1-25.

AQIS, including its interference in Bangladesh's independence struggle and bilateral deals deemed as detrimental to Bangladeshi commercial interests and its struggling agricultural sector.<sup>5</sup>

The group also argues that India wants to promote secular values that are opposed to Islamic principles<sup>6</sup>. They have brought up examples including the supposed sponsoring of Indian cultural shows on Bangladeshi TV channels and movies. AQIS propagandists have also exploited the 2009 Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) mutiny, in which 57 army officers were killed in a revolt involving the BDR, a regiment comprising border patrol guards, over alleged pay and other grievances.<sup>7</sup> The crisis prompted a debate about the true motives of the mutineers and the prospect of a conspiracy behind the murders. Terrorist narratives frame the event as part of an Indian ploy to weaken Bangladesh with the help of a 'so-called secular' and compliant government.<sup>8</sup> In addition, India's strong support for the ruling BAL (Bangladesh Awami League) party has also generated anti-Indian sentiment among the masses in Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> The propagation of such neo-colonial sentiments by AQIS through its online propaganda has garnered some sympathy and support.<sup>10</sup>

#### b) Muslim Persecution

The notion of Muslims' persecution is another powerful tool exploited by AQIS to gain legitimacy and a foothold in Bangladesh's militant landscape. For instance, AQIS has

attempted to exploit the treatment of Rohingya Muslims by Myanmar's army and Buddhist extremist groups. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fled to refugee camps inside the Bangladeshi border following a brutal military campaign against them in the northern Rakhine state. Even before the establishment of AQIS in September 2014, AQ had expressed sympathy and support for the Muslims of Myanmar and urged Muslims throughout the world to help their Muslim brethren. It warned the Myanmar Government to relax its policy or "be ready for the consequences."<sup>11</sup> AQIS also provides a different narrative about the sovereignty of the Arakan region, where Rohingya Muslims live in Myanmar, arguing that it was historically a part of the Chattogram region in Bangladesh. According to this AQIS' narrative, Islam was widely practiced in Arakan and in Chattogram, having been brought to the region by Arab traders long before the arrival of the British in Myanmar in 1888, who then made the Arakan region part of the then British Burma.

In September 2017, AQIS also urged Muslims to support and fight against the Myanmar government for its perceived mistreatment of the Rohingya Muslims.<sup>12</sup> AQIS ties the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state with Muslim victimisation in other parts of the world, including those in Kashmir, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. By pointing to several examples of Muslim persecution across the world, AQIS propagates the idea that Muslim life is deemed to be of lesser value.<sup>13</sup> Such narratives have found traction with some Muslims in Bangladesh. This has paved the way for their recruitment and willingness to contribute to the financing of terrorist activities.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> AQIS Code of Conduct, *Al Shabab Media*, 2017: p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> "Bangladesh Mutiny: 723 Border Guards Jailed," *BBC News*, October 20, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20018665>.

<sup>8</sup> AQIS, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads," *Resurgence*, October 19, 2014, [https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019\\_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>9</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Bangladesh Elections: Was India Right?" *The Gateway House*, January 16, 2014, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/bangladesh-elections-was-india-right/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Nazeen Mohsina, "Anti-India Sentiments in South Asia: Terrorist Recruitment Narratives," *Middle East Institute*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/anti-india-sentiments-south-asia-terrorist-recruitment-narratives>.

<sup>11</sup> AQ, "Burma," *Azan* (2), 2013, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> AQIS, "To Help The Oppressed Rohingyas, What Do The Muslim Ummah Do?" *Al Balagh* (6), 2017, pp. 17-24.

<sup>13</sup> "AQIS Call to Muslim Ummah," *Ansar Al Islam*, 2016, pp. 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> The author of this paper has conducted a year-long fieldwork in Bangladesh to uncover the reasons of radicalisation in Bangladesh. He interviewed more than 50 experts including two extremists on radicalisation in Bangladesh and most of them point to the fact of Muslim victimisation as one of the main reasons for the recent radicalisation in Bangladesh.

### c) Religious Credentials of the Head of a Muslim State

The AQIS propagandists have also discussed, at length the Islamic credentials of the Head of an Islamic or a Muslim State. For example, in *Al-Balagh*, AQIS challenges the legitimacy of a woman as the head of an Islamic state. Two women, the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, have been leading the country's two major political parties, the Awami League and BNP respectively, for more than three decades. AQIS propounds that "people will not prosper when their affairs are dictated by a woman (as a head of the state)."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the group has also questioned the so-called "secular" nature of the Bangladeshi state and constitution.

*"We, the Muslims of Bangladesh, must not shy away from asking ourselves: Will we allow Ataturk's model of secularism to be replicated in this country? Will we allow the dark memories of British colonialism, when one had to pay a tax for just keeping a beard or a Muslim name, to become a living reality in this age? Will we allow a bunch of atheists to set the agenda in this country using platforms like the Shahbagh movement, while ordinary Muslims demanding basic Islamic rights are butchered at Motijheel? Will all of this pass while we alone suffer in silence? Will we allow a misplaced sense of national pride to rob us of our Islamic identity? Will we allow the feeling of 'victimisation' that has been carefully instilled in the collective psyche of this nation to be used as a justification for turning a segment of this nation into the very monsters we so loathed? Will we allow the 'spirit of 71' to turn into a fire that consumes the entire nation?"<sup>16</sup>*

AQIS is also intolerant of other faiths and ideologies, such as secularism, liberalism and democracy and they are often framed as contradictory to Islam, while secular regimes are framed as perpetrators of Muslim victimisation. AQIS is not only critical of

Bangladesh's secular character but also portrays Bangladesh's democracy and several government policies as a form of polytheism. The group describes the Bangladeshi government's actions as akin to a polytheist: The AQIS' narrative is as follows:

*"The democracy of Bangladesh has been declared as the "best democracy" by the West because of its extreme measures against Islam such as removing "Bismillah" from the constitution, secularizing the education system, insulting the honorable Muslim women who observe the veil, declaring mosques to be the "centers of terrorism", declaring men and women equal in inheritance contrary to the Law of the Quran etc... Such is the reality of this corrupt Government that awaits destruction at the hands of Muslims. There are several Mujahideen of Bangladesh who are present on the Jihadi fields and Insh Allah (God willing), the day is near when the Muslims of Bangladesh will also rise up against this corrupt secular system and will erect the flag of Shariah in their country."<sup>17</sup>*

AQIS has found traction by framing democracy as an un-Islamic tool propagated by the West to maintain control over Muslim countries. The group argues that the democratic system has failed to deter corruption, provide good governance and assert the rule of law, create jobs for youth and provide for the basic needs of the people around the world. AQIS claims a sharia-governed system is the only legitimate model of governance in an Islamic state as it ensures Islamic values and Muslims' rights and dignity are upheld<sup>18</sup>. In short, AQIS seeks to delegitimise Bangladesh's system of governance by highlighting factors such as the illegitimacy of a woman as the head of state, and the failure of secularism and democracy.

### d) Promoting Islamic Values

AQIS is highly critical of government policies that it perceives as violating or undermining the interests of Bangladeshi Muslims. A case

<sup>15</sup> AQIS, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads," *Resurgence*, October 19, 2014,

[https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019\\_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> AQ, "Bangladesh," *Azan 2*, 2017, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> AQIS, "Don't Be Frustrated Victory Will Be Yours," *Al Balagh* (1), 2016, p.1.



in point is AQIS' attempt to frame the government's move in 2017 to recognise the 'Qwami<sup>19</sup> Dawrah<sup>20</sup>' degree issued by madrassas (religious seminaries) as equivalent to the Master's degree issued by secular educational institutions, as an attempt to control the religious schools.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Sheikh Hasina's promotion of religious freedom is also criticised by conservative Islamists who argue the Muslim majority country should be governed under strict Sharia law.<sup>22</sup> This hardline stance has on occasion been softened, such as when AQIS opportunistically sided with the government when it wanted to reduce the legal marriageable age, a move that was widely opposed by more liberal elements in civil society.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from issues of faith, AQIS' propaganda also taps on broader contemporary social issues in Bangladesh, such as a rise in divorce rates, a greater proportion of family breakdowns, higher cases of extra-marital relations and an increase in cases of rape. AQIS highlights these issues to advocate for the establishment of shariah law as a means to counter moral degradation. The group proclaims that only sharia law can protect Bangladesh from moral degradation and urges Bangladeshis to join it to fight both the 'near enemy' and 'far enemy.'<sup>24</sup> In order to encourage Bangladeshi youths to join AQIS, the group reminds Bangladeshi youth of their glorious past in which Bengali Muslims fought against the British to save their religion. For example, a prominent Islamic reformer in Bangladesh, Haji Shariatullah<sup>25</sup> has said: "No matter how harsh it sounds, a

rebellion against this oppressive system is what the land of Haji Shariatullah needs these days. And as we do so, let us also revive the spirit of the Faraizi movement<sup>26</sup> and return to our true roots. A revival of Islam in our individual and collective lives should be our answer to those who seek to stamp out Islam from Muslim Bangladesh."<sup>27</sup>

AQIS' ideological efforts are largely seen as attempts to mobilise Muslims to participate in Jihad or commit acts of violence in the name of Jihad. In order to appeal to vulnerable Muslims, the group preaches about the lives of different Prophets, martyrs, and leading Al Qaeda figures such as Osama Bin Laden and repeatedly stresses the individual's responsibility to fight for the cause of Islam.

### Implications

It is increasingly evident that AQIS's online propaganda has attracted disenchanted and frustrated youths within Bangladesh. A 2017 survey conducted by the Bangladeshi Police with 250 extremists revealed that 82 percent of them were originally inspired by social media propaganda and 80 percent of them used Thrima, WeChat, Messenger, as well as other social media apps to communicate.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the recent series of operations aimed at disrupting the networks of Islamist militants,<sup>29</sup> AQIS' continued online propaganda efforts have negative implications for peace and security in Bangladesh. Security forces are in the dark about the whereabouts of some of the key figures of AQIS like the commander in

<sup>19</sup> Qwami is an adjective describing one of the two major madrasa educational systems in Bangladesh.

<sup>20</sup> Dawrah is the highest degree provided by Qwami madrasas.

<sup>21</sup> AQIS, "Call to Muslim Ummah," *Ansar Al Islam* 2, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> AQIS, "Religion Is Personal But Festivals Are for All: An Un-Islamic Slogan," *Al Balagh* 6, 2017, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> AQIS, "Reverse Thinking about Marriageable Age," *Al Balagh* 1, 2016, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> AQIS, "What is the Main Reason Behind the Rise of Divorce, Extra-Marital Relations and Conjugal Dissatisfaction," *Al Balagh* 1, 2016, p. 40; AQIS, "Rape Is on the Rise, What Is the Remedy?" *Al Balagh* 5, 2017, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840), was a prominent Islamic reformer who founded the Faraizi Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century for Bengali Muslims. He encouraged Muslims to perform their religious obligations seriously.

<sup>26</sup> The Faraizi Movement is noted for its popularity among the Muslim peasantry during an era of oppressive rule under the British.

<sup>27</sup> AQIS, "Bangladesh at the Crossroads," *Resurgence*, October 19, 2014,

[https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019\\_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/17033/AQD20141019_P.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>28</sup> Kamrul Hasan, "82% Extremist Inspired by Social Media Propaganda," *The Prothom Alo*, March 22, 2017,

<http://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1115962/>.

<sup>29</sup> After the Holy Artisan Café attack in July 2016, the government of Bangladesh adopted a 'zero tolerance' approach to Islamist militants. To date, this has resulted in killing 90 militants, comprising members of AQIS and like minded Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) followers.

Bangladesh, Major Zia, AQIS spokesperson in Bangladesh Mufti Abdullah Ashraf, and fighters such as Muhammad Miqdadd. They remain active as evident from their online statements. In addition, the security forces have recently shifted their focus from jihadist militants to cracking down on drug trafficking networks. Closer attention should be given to the threat posed by jihadists considering their ongoing online propaganda activities.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that Al-Qaeda has made South Asia a strong focus of its activities particularly since the formation of AQIS in 2014. AQIS selectively uses Islamic verses tailored to the Bangladeshi context in order to build a strong narrative. It is challenging to effectively counter such narratives, which are based on a powerful mix of myth and reality, through kinetic responses alone. The escalation of militant activities and volumes of online propaganda used by Islamist groups demand the adoption of long-term counter terrorism strategies, which are lacking. Counter-terrorism and counter-extremism experts need to develop more robust counter narratives to neutralise the propaganda efforts of AQIS and other terrorist groups. For example, more contextual interpretations of religious texts have to be developed that counter jihadis' literal reading of scriptures to justify their acts of violence. Education plays an important role in this regard.

**Shafi Md Mostofa** is a PhD candidate at the University of New England, Australia & an Assistant Professor of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He can be reached at [shafi@du.ac.bd](mailto:shafi@du.ac.bd), [smostofa@myune.edu.au](mailto:smostofa@myune.edu.au).

# Women in Terrorism: Evolution from Jemaah Islamiyah to Islamic State in Indonesia and Malaysia

Amalina Abdul Nasir

*The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group's rise and traction in Southeast Asia has changed the threat landscape of countries in the region. In Indonesia and Malaysia, religiously-motivated terrorism that was dominated by Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI) centralised and physical networks, has shifted towards IS-linked groups and decentralised cells operating physically and in the online domain. Despite espousing extremist religious ideologies, both terrorist groups adopted similar yet contrasting strategies towards the recruitment of women, their roles and participation within the organisation. This article discusses the transition of women's roles from JI to IS, and highlights cyberspace as the key variable that has facilitated increased recruitment for women by IS.*

## Women in Jemaah Islamiyah

Similar to Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) doctrine has broadly prohibited women from taking up an active role in fighting.<sup>1</sup> Instead, women linked to JI were encouraged to adopt more traditional and passive roles. Their contribution was primarily envisioned in domestic roles or those restricted to the private sphere, as daughters, wives and mothers. However, to a small extent, women were utilised in the public sphere as propagandists, spreading the group's ideology and engaging in recruitment efforts. In both Malaysia and Indonesia, the JI women played a critical role in expanding membership of the group. Despite these exceptions, women's roles

under JI were largely restricted and controlled.<sup>2</sup>

## Focus on Domestic Roles

The division of roles for women is mainly found in two critical books released by the group. Titled the Handbook of Womanhood, the first book was produced in Al-Mukmin boarding school in Solo, Indonesia. Al-Mukmin boarding school was co-founded by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Basyir in 1979, two decades prior to the establishment of JI. The handbook was one of the core texts used in the network of JI satellite schools. As a core text, the handbook outlined the role of women as daughters, wives and mothers while simultaneously underscoring the importance of being subservient to men in the family. The emphasis on obedience to men reflected the clandestine nature of the organisation.<sup>3</sup> These teachings were also in line with the guidelines outlined by Ayman Al-Zawahiri's (current leader of AQ) wife, Omaima Hassan, in her seven-page letter to women which was disseminated in extremist websites in 2009.<sup>4</sup> In her letter, she encouraged women to support the men who are mandated to carry out jihad.<sup>5</sup> This deep-seated restrictive view on women's roles left them on the sidelines to simply advocate for their husbands to wage jihad. Several security handbooks translated from Arabic were also found to contain warnings and reminders that

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Shishani and Murad Batal, "Is the Role of Women in Al-Qaeda Increasing?" *BBC News*, October 7, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11484672>.

<sup>5</sup> V. Arianti, and Nur Azlin Yassin, "Women's Proactive Roles in Jihadism in Southeast Asia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 8, no. 5 (2016): 9-16.

<sup>1</sup> "Mothers to Bombers: The Evolution of Indonesian Women Extremists," *Institute for Policy Analysis Of Conflict*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.understandingconflict.org/en/conflict/read/58/Mothers-to-Bombers-The-Evolution-of-Indonesian-Women-Extremists>.

discussion on jihad should be kept private by the men, and details not shared with women and children.<sup>6</sup>

### *Prohibition of Violent Jihad and Some Exceptions*

In addition to the patriarchal nature of the group, the role of women was also largely shaped by the prohibition of women in jihad. This doctrine was underpinned by the second critical book titled the Essential Guide for Preparation (*Al-Umdah fi al-l'dad al-uddah*), authored by an Egyptian scholar Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, one of the top AQ ideologues.<sup>7</sup> His work was widely used and later became the core text during jihadi training courses and discussion groups. His book, *Al-Umdah*, stated that women should take up arms and fight as it is mandated upon every Muslim in exceptional cases where the country is under attack. They were only allowed to bring water to the fighters and to attend to their injuries. The book stated that jihad is only obligatory upon them, when the enemies enter their homes and cause physical harm. Relevant excerpts from *Al-Umdah* were circulated on extremist websites between 2004 and 2005 and also distributed as photocopied leaflets titled 'The Law of Jihad for Women'.<sup>8</sup>

In other accounts, female combatants also participated during the sectarian conflict in Poso (1999 to 2001 and 2015 respectively).<sup>9</sup> From 1999 to 2001, a group of women retaliated against the restrictions imposed upon them. They had exhibited a desire to fight, but were not supported by male members. For that reason, the leader of the women, Ina, turned to a non-JI jihadi group to train her brigade. They received physical and weapons training and later went to launch assaults alongside male fighters. However, not all women take up the role of combatants. Other women carried food and water and provided medical attention to the wounded fighters. After the conflict returned to normalcy, jihad again became restricted to men.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

### *Alliances Through Marriage*

Women also played a critical role in expanding the JI network through marriages. Marriages within the organisation allowed JI to strengthen weak alliances and forge them in other cases, while expanding its influence.<sup>10</sup> Beyond expanding the JI network, marriage alliances also solidified loyalty amongst its members.<sup>11</sup> In one case, Malaysian Paridah Abbas' obedience to her father led her to marry Indonesian Bali bomber Ali Guhfron alias Mukhlis.<sup>12</sup> She had initially disagreed with her father on the arrangement of her marriage, but caved in after not being able to obtain any Islamic references that permitted her disobeyal. Paridah Abbas' father had trained with Hambali in Afghanistan and her marriage secured JI memberships for her two brothers, paving the way for her sister to be married to another terrorist suspect.

### *Role of the Cyber Domain*

In comparison to the cyber domain, there was minimal progress of women's role on the ground in JI. In the early 2000s, jihadi internet forums started gaining traction and women sought them as an avenue of participation and became propagandists. The anonymity of the chat forums presented the women opportunities without the socio-cultural and religious restrictions in the real world.<sup>13</sup> To this end, the rate of participation of women in extremists forums such as Arrahmah.com increased steadily, with women gaining support from fellow women.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, local developments regarding JI's male fighters also spurred women's participation. From 2002 to 2016, at least 1,000 men were arrested and imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> This dip in male terrorists and extremists led to an increased acceptance of

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Family Ties Bind Muslim Militants Together," *Taipeitimes.com*, September 3, 2003, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2003/09/03/2003066310>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sergio E Sanchez, "The Internet and the Radicalization of Muslim Women," April 2014,

<http://www.wpsanet.org/papers/docs/The%20Internet%20and%20the%20Radicalization%20of%20Muslim%20Women.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

women's involvement. Women began to undertake the role of facilitators, such as couriers carrying messages, recorded speeches or written documents as needed.

### Women in Islamic State

Similar to AQ and JI, women's roles in IS depict the public and private sphere divide. IS propaganda magazines such as *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* and *Al-Fatihin* were focused on encouraging women to play supporting roles such as mothers, wives, assistants and helpers. For instance, in *Al-Fatihin* 6 which was released in April 2018, women were encouraged to physically fight only if the safety of their home were in danger.<sup>16</sup> This narrative is similar to that discussed earlier about JI. In Indonesia and Malaysia, women in terrorism are recruited by IS-linked networks and cells as well as radicalised by IS propaganda online.

#### *Centrality of the Cyber Domain*

IS differs significantly from JI in terms of the usage of social media as a primary tool for recruitment and radicalisation. As such, the cyberspace became an avenue for women to extend their participation in the organisation without physically leaving their homes. During the rise of IS, open media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and currently closed media platforms (Telegram and WhatsApp) furthered women's radicalisation. The use of social media as a primary tool for recruitment led to the decentralisation of the radicalisation process. Therefore, the leveling of hierarchies, access to recruiters and the spread of propaganda materials meant that women could partially define their own roles as IS members. As such, women became active supporters and independently participated in IS. The fast paced and independent radicalisation of women became a possibility in the virtual world due to strict gender segregation that did not allow them to physically interact with male IS members. Propaganda materials such as accounts or online entries on *hijrah* (emigration) has also led to women to plan travelling to Iraq and Syria.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "Istri Shalihah Meneguhkan Jihad Suami: Jadilah Asisten Mujahidin (A pious wife strengthens a husband's jihad: Be a Mujahidin's Assistant)," *Al-Fatihin* 6, April 16, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> The wife of an Indonesian IS fighter who went by

#### *Violent Roles (Suicide Bombers and Family-Based Attacks)*

The role of women has progressed in the cyber domain and it was reflected on the ground. Since 2015, women as suicide bombers have been glorified, while other women are taking active violent roles. On 13 May 2018, Puji Kuswati, the wife of pro-IS group Jemaah Ansarul Dawlah's Surabaya branch leader, together with her two daughters conducted a suicide attack at a Christian Church in Surabaya. Police reports confirmed that the bomb was strapped on her waist as the explosion only damaged her lower abdomen. This attack also marked the first employment of children in terrorist attacks in Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> On 14 May 2018, another woman named Tri Ernawati also conducted a suicide attack at the entrance gate of the Police Headquarters of Surabaya. She detonated herself together with her husbands, two sons and a daughter, in what has been termed as an incident of 'family-based terrorism'.

While the rise of online-radicalisation has been discussed in detail in the context of IS, exceptional case studies, where traditional and physical networks have primarily facilitated radicalisation are also visible. Puji's family was one of the exceptional cases, as they hosted weekly study sessions with other families in their house. These sessions were conducted by Cholid Abu Bakar, who attempted to go to Syria to join IS with his family, but was later deported by the Turkish authorities.<sup>19</sup> The study sessions focused on spreading IS ideology and propaganda, where the attendees (including children) watch extremist videos that featured

---

the online moniker Angsa Hitam (Black Swan), also wrote about her hijrah to Syria in August 2015 with her three kids, aged five, three and one. Angsa Hitam is the wife of Nanang Pambudianto who was once featured in an IS video on refugees in September 2015. Nanang has been in Syria since late 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "Family of Six behind Deadly Surabaya Church Bombings," *The Straits Times*, May 13, 2018,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/family-of-six-behind-deadly-surabaya-church-bombings>.

<sup>19</sup> Abi Sarwanto, "Polisi Buru Abu Bakar, Guru Dita Pengebom Gereja Surabaya," *Gaya Hidup*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180515132040-20-298334/polisi-buru-abu-bakar-guru-dita-pengebom-gereja-surabaya>.

suicide bombings and executions.<sup>20</sup> On 9 May 2018, a 51-year-old housewife was arrested on Malaysia Polling Day for planning to ram a car into non-Muslim voters and attack non-Muslim places of worship. This incident marked the first case of a woman aspiring to conduct a terrorist attack in Malaysia.<sup>21</sup> Similar cases of self-radicalisation have been reported in Indonesia and Singapore.

### *Recruiters and Propagandists for Men*

One of the predominant differences between inspired women who are linked to IS and their predecessors is that they recruit both women and men. One of the prominent cases is Ika Puspitasari<sup>22</sup>, an Indonesian domestic helper who worked in Hong Kong from 2004 to 2016. In comparison to local male IS supporters working in informal sectors, her relatively high salary allowed her to position herself as a recruiter and financier. Puspitasari frequently visited Indonesian extremist websites such as Arrahman and also created Facebook accounts to spread violent jihad. Due to the extremist and exclusivist nature of her postings, her accounts were often taken down. Still, she was relentless in her pursuit and created 100 Facebook accounts to sustain her online presence.<sup>23</sup> She advanced recruitment efforts through her postings by engaging users who comment on the materials she posted. Once caught in the honey trap, Puspitasari proceeded to engage these individuals (who are mostly men) on encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. In some cases, the conversations focused on *amaliyyah* (attacks) for which she was willing to provide funds.

<sup>20</sup> Heru Margianto, "Polisi Buru Abu Bakar, Guru Pelaku Bom Gereja Surabaya," *KOMPAS.com*, May 15, 2018,

<https://regional.kompas.com/read/2018/05/15/21511921/polisi-buru-abu-bakar-guru-pelaku-bom-gereja-surabaya>.

<sup>21</sup> Nadirah H Rodzi, "Student, Housewife Among 15 Terror Suspects Held In Malaysia For Planning Attacks," *The Straits Times*, June 1, 2018,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/student-housewife-among-15-terror-suspects-held-in-malaysia>.

<sup>22</sup> Police' Interrogation Reports: Ika Puspita Sari, December 19, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

### *Travelling to Wage Jihad*

In comparison to JI, women largely traveled with their husband or families in order to facilitate their husband's duties to wage jihad. This is a stark contrast when contrasted to travel attempts of women under IS. Multiple women have been arrested in the Southeast Asia region for planning to marry an IS fighter or to travel to IS territory. These cases appeared in Malaysia as early as 2014, where Malaysian authorities arrested Ummi Khalsom Bahak, a credit control officer who intended to marry IS operative Muhammad Aqif Heusen Rahizat. Both parties had gotten to know each other through Facebook.<sup>24</sup> More recently, Nur Afiah Farhanah Che Samudin was sentenced to eight years jail for attempting to travel to Syria to join IS. She was later apprehended at the Syrian border. In June 2017, Syaikhah Izzah Zahrah Al Ansari was arrested while planning to travel to Syria from Singapore. After being self-radicalised online, Syaikhah turned to Facebook to search for an IS supporter to marry and settle down with in Syria along with her young child. She was aspiring to be a 'martyr's widow' and forged networks with foreign online contacts to facilitate her plans to travel to the conflict zone.<sup>25</sup>

### **Outlook**

The role of women has expanded from an AQ dominated threat landscape, marked by JI to an IS-centric threat landscape, specifically in Indonesia and Malaysia. While the narrative of women as supporters is still relevant, the propensity for them to be deployed in combat and as suicide bombers must not be ruled out. Hitherto, the proliferation of cyberspace has increased the accessibility of women to advance and increase their participation. The existing incidents of women's radicalisation in Indonesia and Malaysia may inspire women who have similar grievances in the region. Overall, IS' presence in the cyber domain

<sup>24</sup> "In New Year Message, Malaysian IS Militant Records Video Urging Jihad At Home," *Malaysian Digest*, <http://malaysiandigest.com/news/715926-in-new-year-message-malaysian-is-militant-records-video-urging-jihad-at-home.html>.

<sup>25</sup> "Father of First Woman Held under ISA for Radicalism Regrets Not Reporting Her," *The Straits Times*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/father-of-radicalised-woman-regrets-not-reporting-her>.

has broken the physical boundaries, which previously impeded the participation of women. Social media in particular, has allowed women to independently build networks and plan attacks without the need of a *mahram* (male guardian). It is pertinent to note that the indoctrination of women is not an anomaly within the region. Since Indonesia has experienced its first case of a suicide bombing perpetrated by a woman, there is a heightened possibility of more women becoming operatives.

With authorities tightening border security, women aspiring to travel to the conflict zones may resort to conduct attacks within their home countries. Given that Puji has successfully waged an attack, the Southeast Asia region may see more family-based attacks with the rising trend of active female supporters. Although JI is regaining its momentum and still poses as an imminent threat within the region, the security agencies should not overlook IS despite the group's territorial losses.<sup>26</sup> Even though IS has been physically defeated, it remains virtually present in open and encrypted media platforms globally, aggravating the threat of women's radicalisation and their turn to towards violence.

***Amalina Abdul Nasir*** is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, a specialist unit with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. She can be reached at [isamalina@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isamalina@ntu.edu.sg).

---

<sup>26</sup> Faris Mokhtar, "Terror Group Jemaah Islamiyah Poised To Make A Comeback," November 9, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/terror-group-jemaah-islamiyah-poised-make-comeback-observers-say>.

## Submissions and Subscriptions

---

# Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses

**L**aunched in 2009, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) is the journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR). Each issue of the journal carries articles with in-depth analysis of topical issues on terrorism and counter-terrorism, broadly structured around a common theme. CTTA brings perspectives from CT researchers and practitioners with a view to produce policy relevant analysis.

The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research has entered into an electronic licensing relationship with EBSCO, the world's largest aggregator of full text journals and other sources. Full text issues of Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses can be found on EBSCOhost's International Security and Counter-Terrorism Reference Center collection.

### **CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) welcomes contributions from researchers and practitioners in political violence and terrorism, security and other related fields. The CTTA is published monthly and submission guidelines and other information are available at [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta). To pitch an idea for a particular issue in 2017 please write to us at [ctta@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ctta@ntu.edu.sg).

For inclusion in the CTTA mailing list, please send your full name, organisation and designation with the subject 'CTTA Subscription' to [ctta@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ctta@ntu.edu.sg).

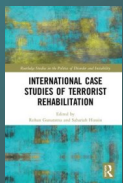


The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific. For more information about RSIS, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg).

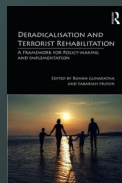


The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist research centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. ICPVTR conducts research and analysis, training and outreach programmes aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with field research, which is essential for a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups. The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, counter-terrorism analysts and other research staff. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America as well as Islamic religious scholars. Please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/) for more information.

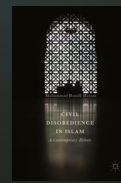
## STAFF PUBLICATIONS



**International Case Studies of Terrorist Rehabilitation**  
Rohan Gunaratna,  
Sabariah Hussin (eds)  
(Routledge, 2019)



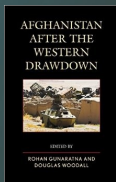
**Deradicalisation and Terrorist Rehabilitation—A Framework for Policy Making & Implementation**  
Rohan Gunaratna, Sabariah Hussin (eds) (Routledge, 2019)



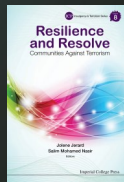
**Civil Disobedience in Islam—A Contemporary Debate**  
Muhammad Haniff Hassan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)



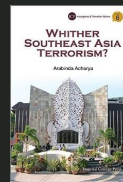
**Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific**  
Rohan Gunaratna and Stefanie Kam (eds) (Imperial College Press, 2016)



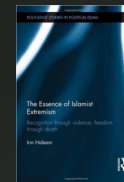
**Afghanistan After The Western Drawdown**  
Rohan Gunaratna and Douglas Woodall (eds) (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015)



**Resilience and Resolve**  
Jolene Jerard and Salim Mohamed Nasir (Imperial College Press, 2015)



**Whither Southeast Asia Terrorism**  
Arabinda Acharya (Imperial College Press, 2015)



**The Essence of Islamist Extremism**  
Irm Haleem (Routledge, 2011)

## ICPVTR'S GLOBAL PATHFINDER

Global Pathfinder is a one-stop repository for information on current and emerging terrorist threats from the major terrorism affected regions of the world. It is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. This includes profiles from emerging hubs of global terrorism affecting the security of the world, as well as the deadliest threat groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The database also contains analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles. For further inquiries regarding subscription and access to Global Pathfinder, please contact Jolene Jerard at [isjolene@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isjolene@ntu.edu.sg).

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: + 65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)