

**Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An Examination**  
Amresh Gunasingham

**Leadership Decapitation and the Impact on Terrorist Groups**  
Kenneth Yeo Yaoren

**Denmark's De-Radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign  
Terrorist Fighters**  
Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan



# March Issue

The discourse on religious extremism in the past few decades has largely been dominated by Islamist-oriented trends and actors. However, there are emerging alternate discourses of religious extremism that are becoming relevant in South and Southeast Asia – Buddhist and Hindu extremism. The March Issue thus focuses on Sri Lanka and Myanmar as case studies depicting the rise of Buddhist extremism and related intolerance towards the minority Muslim communities. The Issue also delves into two different responses to counter-terrorism by the state and community stakeholders in their bid to tackle religious-motivated terrorist groups. It takes a look at two divergent ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ counter-terrorism responses: (i) leadership decapitation; and (ii) the Danish de-radicalisation programme.

First, **Amresh Gunasingham** narrows in on radical Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar focusing on the rise of the Bodu Bolu Sena (BBS) and Ma Ba Tha groups respectively. The author argues that these groups, rooted in Theravada Buddhism, have justified intolerance and violence towards minority Muslim populations that could escalate further, if neglected or exploited by the state. In Sri Lanka, periodic attacks against Muslims since 2014 and the legitimacy of groups such as BBS have emboldened a segment of the Sinhalese Buddhists. In Myanmar, the violent clashes between the Buddhist majority and the Rohingya, minority Muslim community since 2012, coupled with Ma Ba Tha’s rhetoric bordering on Islamophobia, have exacerbated intolerant ethno-nationalist sentiments within the country. The author proposes the need for a national identity that is inclusive and peaceful in both countries with political leaders taking a stand against intolerant narratives to mitigate long-term unrest.

**Kenneth Yeo Yaoren** discusses leadership decapitation as a counter-terrorism strategy, which includes killing or arresting the senior leadership of a terrorist group. The author outlines the varying outcomes of the strategy in the context of religiously-motivated terrorist groups in the Israel-Palestine and Malay Archipelago regions. The impact of leadership

decapitation on four key groups: Hamas, Hezbollah, Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah in terms of the frequency and lethality of attacks after the arrests or killings of their leaders are observed. It is argued that, “leadership decapitation is not a silver bullet against terrorism”, necessitating broader responses to counter the ideology and operational strength of religiously-motivated terrorist groups.

Lastly, **Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan** focuses on Denmark’s de-radicalisation programme in light of the returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) phenomenon. The author delineates the components and key features of the ‘De-radicalisation – Targeted Intervention’ and the ‘De-radicalisation Back on Track’ projects which constitute a ‘soft’ approach towards dealing with homegrown terrorists and FTFs in the country. Overall, three guiding principles dictate Denmark’s de-radicalisation programme – (i) inclusion over exclusion; (ii) collaboration between public, private and people sector bodies; and (iii) assumption that every individual aspires to live a ‘good life’. The article then focuses on the perceived efficacy of the programme in the Danish context vis-a-vis contending views made by other interested observers.

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# Buddhist Extremism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar: An Examination

Amresh Gunasingham

## Synopsis

*This article examines the rise of radical Buddhism against the backdrop of the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and episodic violence involving Buddhist extremist groups and Muslim minority communities in Sri Lanka. In this respect, three factors are important to consider: (i) a majority-minority construct that underpins religio-ethnic relations; (ii) the state-clergy nexus; and (iii) the inadequacy of state responses and counter-narratives. Radical Buddhist groups, such as the Bodu Bolu Sena (BBS) in Sri Lanka and Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar, justify intolerance, discrimination and violence against minority Muslim populations by using Theravada Buddhism, which is widely practised in South and Southeast Asia. If left unchecked, political violence will proliferate in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and could further spill over into nearby regions. As such, alternate narratives that support peace and religious pluralism need to be promoted. There is also a need for economic, political and social reforms to achieve long-term peace and stability.*

## Introduction

Across Asia, the rise of hardline religious movements is fueling an insular nationalism and exacerbating fault-lines in inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations.<sup>1</sup> This article examines violent incidents in Sri Lanka and Myanmar

perpetrated by hardline Buddhist groups against Muslim minority communities, which indicate that a militant, ultra-nationalist strand within a segment of Theravada Buddhism is on the rise. Sri Lanka and Myanmar have Buddhist majorities — about 75 percent and 90 percent of the population respectively — and both have sizeable Muslim minorities.<sup>2</sup> Despite such demographic majorities, the notion that Buddhism is under siege and in danger of being wiped out resonates with the Sinhalese and Bamar Buddhist majorities in both countries. Religious justification for the abovementioned rhetoric is derived from distorted interpretations of Theravada Buddhism scriptures, which elevate the preservation and defence of Buddhism (the sasana) above other traditional Buddhist values such as peace and compassion. The defence of one's religion has also evolved from key themes related to cultural, national and ethnic identity.<sup>3</sup> Hardline Buddhist organisations, such as Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar and BBS in Sri Lanka, have exploited such narratives to advocate the protection and promotion of Buddhism and the state against perceived threats from within and outside the country.<sup>4</sup> Their rhetoric has partly been framed against Islamist movements involved in global terrorism and extremism that are seen as inherently violent and driven by an agenda to take over the country, wider region and eventually the rest of the world. The December 2018 political crisis in Sri Lanka involving the country's President and Prime

<sup>1</sup> Mallika Joseph, "Political Change in Sri Lanka? Challenges for A Stable Post Civil War Consensus," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Panorama Journal*, July 17, 2018, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=12c3384f-09f1-1ba2-cd12-a8a04933f740&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=12c3384f-09f1-1ba2-cd12-a8a04933f740&groupId=252038).

<sup>2</sup> "Buddhist Extremism: Meet the Violent Followers" *ABC News*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-21/buddhist-extremism-meet-the-religions-violent-followers/10360288>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Fuller, "Blood Sutra: Whatever Happened to Buddhism," *The South China Morning Post*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2152083/blood-sutra-whatever-happened-buddhism-religion-peace-and>.

<sup>4</sup> "Buddhism And State Power In Myanmar," *International Crisis Group*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>.

Minister as well as escalating violence between Buddhist secessionist militias and Myanmar's military in Rakhine state have prompted fresh fears of extremists stoking religious and ethnic tensions that could trigger violence.<sup>5</sup>

Arjun Appadurai argues that, for large-scale violence to occur between ethnic and religious groups who have lived together, there must be a combination of high certainty and uncertainty among the majority about the intentions of the other (minority communities).<sup>6</sup> In an era of globalisation, which has eroded settled connections between territory and identity, a threatened majority can turn predatory by creating fears of a minority group taking over the country from the demographic majority.<sup>7</sup> This hostile interpretation of the intentions of the other (minority groups) mobilises the masses to use violence as a form of self-defence.<sup>8</sup>

### Sri Lanka

In post-independence Sri Lanka, some scholars argue that Sinhala majoritarian influence has been legitimised through the electoral process by successive governments involving the two major political parties - the United Nation Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party.<sup>9</sup> These developments fit within the larger trend of South Asian governments pursuing populist policies for political expediency since the end of colonial rule. In a region of myriad religious, cultural and ethnic identities, such attempts to reinforce a particular nationalism to win elections have adversely affected the peaceful co-existence of multiple identities.<sup>10</sup> For Sri Lanka, multiple issues, including

colonialism, a sense of Sinhalese Buddhist entitlement rooted in mythological history, economic grievances and communal violence, have contributed to a prevailing Sinhalese Buddhist majoritarian construct, which is also referred to as Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism.<sup>11</sup>

According to Neil Devotta, the constitution plays a vital role in conditioning the degree of institutionalisation and trajectory of ethno-nationalist narratives and inter-communal relations in nation-states.<sup>12</sup> The political structure of the post-colonial constitution created in Buddhist majority Sri Lanka lacked specific minority guarantees and largely fulfilled a majoritarian agenda, he argues. Key among the majoritarian features that aligned the state with a Sinhalese nationalist vision were revisions made to the Constitution in 1972 and 1978 that established Sinhala as the official language and accorded Buddhism the foremost place among religions in Sri Lanka - which the state was compelled to uphold.<sup>13</sup> These and numerous other discriminatory education and economic policies sharpened the schisms of identity along linguistic lines, initially between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil, culminating in the 30 year-long civil war waged by Tamil ethnic separatists in the north and eastern parts of the island-state. According to observers, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's subsequent defeat in 2009 only emboldened Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists, whose cause was given patronage by the then administration.<sup>14</sup>

Around the time Buddhist nationalism was emerging in Myanmar, radical Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka began targeting Muslim and Christian minorities with the use of hate-

<sup>5</sup> "Religious Extremism Poses Threat To ASEAN's Growth," *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 13, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Religious-extremism-poses-threat-to-ASEAN-s-growth2>.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay On the Geography of Anger*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Francis Wade, "Myanmar's Enemy Within", (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017)

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed: religion, politics and violence in Sri Lanka*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Mallika Joseph, "Political Change in Sri Lanka? Challenges For A Stable Post Civil War Consensus,"

*Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Panorama Journal*, July 17, 2018, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=12c3384f-09f1-1ba2-cd12-a8a04933f740&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=12c3384f-09f1-1ba2-cd12-a8a04933f740&groupId=252038).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Devotta, "Majoritarian Politics in Sri Lanka," *Global Centre For Pluralism*, April 2017, <file:///C:/Users/HP%20PROBOOK1/Downloads/Devotta2017.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "Why Sri Lanka Risk Return To Violence," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-23/sri-lanka-finally-at-peace-risks-return-of-violence-quicktake>.

speech and violence. Since 2014, sporadic attacks against Muslims in some towns have led to the loss of lives and destruction of property and places of worship. The BBS and other extremist Buddhist groups have propagated several myths of Muslim infringement on Sinhalese Buddhists and launched hate campaigns against Muslim communities, including attempts to abolish the system of halal certification for food and other products produced in Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup> These have provided the ideological legitimacy for Buddhist radicals to engage in acts of violence. Notwithstanding debates on its sources of funding and links to the state, the BBS is an influential, well-funded and connected organisation.<sup>16</sup>

### Clergy's Involvement in Politics

Following independence, the Buddhist sangha, or monastic order, has also engaged in politics and exercised influence through linkages with political parties.<sup>17</sup> It is customary for Sri Lankan politicians to play up their religious affiliations, and leading members of the clergy are publicly consulted on policy matters. The clergy has also participated in public discourse through intermediary movements composed of laity and monks.<sup>18</sup> The three most prominent clergy-linked political parties in Sri Lanka are the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), National Liberation Front (NLF), a breakaway faction of the JVP, and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party (JHU)).<sup>19</sup> Recent iterations, although of a more radical bent, include BBS and the Ravana Balaya, also known as the Ravana Force (RB).

### Rise of Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar

Since 2012, violence between the majority Buddhist and minority Muslim communities, which began in West Rakhine, has spread across Myanmar. Following a series of military operations in Rakhine state, more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled to Bangladesh.<sup>20</sup> The government says the crackdown "was in response to attacks by Rohingya militants on a military camp and security forces outposts."<sup>21</sup> The crisis in the Rakhine state has been exploited by radical Buddhist nationalists to promote a majoritarian and exclusivist agenda, which has led to several incidents of violence around the country. Unlike Islamist terror groups, these groups focus more on protests, propaganda and, in extreme cases, intimidation and violence.<sup>22</sup> One of the most prominent ultra-nationalist movements is the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion, or 'Ma Ba Tha', which is estimated to have hundreds of thousands of monks and lay-people from across the country as members.<sup>23</sup> Although it insists that it seeks to promote Buddhist principles of peace and harmony, Ma Ba Tha has become a crucial source of support for hardline ethno-nationalists, who have successfully lobbied for, among other things, several controversial laws designed to protect Buddhist concerns, but viewed by religious minorities as discriminatory to their interests.

Many claims made by the Ma Ba Tha, in the form of sermons, statements and publications, feed into "larger scripts" which tap on broader sentiments of Islamophobia playing out globally, observers say.<sup>24</sup> Most of the Myanmar Buddhist majority do not recognise the existence of a Rohingya identity and there are entrenched perceptions that the broader

<sup>15</sup> "Violent Buddhist Extremists Are Targeting Muslims in Sri Lanka," *The Conversation*, April 26, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/violent-buddhist-extremists-are-targeting-muslims-in-sri-lanka-92951>.

<sup>16</sup> S.M. Aliff, "Post-War Conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist Hegemony", *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, Vol. 59, pp. 109-125, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed: religion, politics and violence in Sri Lanka*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> "Rohingya Refugees Face More Tragedy One Year After Crackdown," *Time*, August 23, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> "The Regional Reach Of Buddhist Nationalism," *USA News*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-11-07/buddhist-nationalism-reaches-beyond-myanmar>.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand*, (London: Palgrave, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Religious Extremism Poses Threat To ASEAN's Growth," *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 13, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Religious-extremism-poses-threat-to-ASEAN-s-growth2>.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within*, (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 2017).

Muslim population has grown at the expense of the Buddhists, particularly in the Rakhine state.<sup>25</sup> According to the International Crisis Group, groups such as Ma Ba Tha claim, among others, that Myanmar is under threat from a powerful global Islamic movement perceived to have substantial commercial clout and which, for centuries, has used violence to extend its influence. This has already brought about the Islamisation of previously Buddhist areas such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia, they claim.<sup>26</sup>

### Myanmar's State-Clergy Nexus

Historically, the relationship between the state and religion in Myanmar has been characterised by mutual dependence.<sup>27</sup> Charles Keyes notes that the military often sought to demonstrate public relationships with Buddhist sacred rites and sites, particularly *stupas*, which are thought to contain relics of the Buddha, and the *sangha*.<sup>28</sup> This has led to criticism by some scholars that “political power is bound up in religious affiliation, whereby Buddhism is being used to legitimise the ruling political power, while ethnic and religious minorities undergo systematic exclusion.”<sup>29</sup> The military's operation against the Rohingya minority in the Rakhine state appears to have revived its public image domestically. Prior to the enactment of democratic reforms, the military had long targeted dissidents, minority ethnic groups and monks involved in protest movements such as the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007.<sup>30</sup>

Myanmar's political transition has also relaxed restrictions on freedoms of speech and assembly, which have allowed the country's roughly 500,000 monks to preach freely.<sup>31</sup> Several radicals, including prominent Ma Ba Tha leader Ashin Wirathu, have exploited the open climate to spread an exclusivist and extremist agenda. Most are careful to avoid open calls to violence. Instead, they attend and speak at mass rallies and demonstrations where they stoke anti-Muslim sentiments and preach “pro-Buddhist affirmative action.”<sup>32</sup> Their rhetoric calls on Buddhists to refrain from, for example, buying from Muslim-owned shops, socialising with Muslims and also allowing their children to marry Muslims. For his part, Wirathu has continually denied links to hardline Buddhist elements in the country accused of harnessing the nationalism of his movement to rally support for political purposes.<sup>33</sup>

The growing resonance of ethno-nationalist sentiments has complicated efforts by Aung Sun Suu Kyi's government, which swept to power in 2015, to curtail Ma Ba Tha and other extremist groups. In the Rakhine state, human rights groups have criticised the state's perceived inaction against Rohingya oppression while Buddhist nationalists accuse the government of being soft on Muslim agitators.<sup>34</sup> The recent upsurge in Bamar nationalism introduces a disturbing new dynamic to Myanmar's religious-political conflict and there is a concern that, while the Myanmar authorities are ‘waiting for Ma Ba Tha’ to fade away, it continues to sink its roots further and has endangered an already fragile political transition.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>25</sup> “Religious Extremism Poses Threat To ASEAN's Growth,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 13, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Religious-extremism-poses-threat-to-ASEAN-s-growth2>.

<sup>26</sup> “Buddhism And State Power In Myanmar,” *International Crisis Group*, September 5, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>.

<sup>27</sup> “Are Myanmar's Monks Hindering Democratisation?” *East Asia Forum*, November 4, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/11/04/are-myanmars-monks-hindering-democratisation/>.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Keys, “Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist Nationalism,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 42-52, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> “Are Myanmar's Monks Hindering Democratisation?” *East Asia Forum*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> “Why Are Buddhist Monks Attacking Muslim,” *British Broadcast Corporation*, May 2, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> “Special Report: Myanmar Gives Official Blessing to Anti-Muslim Monks,” *Reuters*, June 27, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Lehr, 2017, “Militant Buddhism Is On The March in South-East Asia – Where Did It Come From?” *The Conversation*, November 8, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> “Ultranationalist Monks In Myanmar Face Crackdown,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/asia/myanmar-buddhist-yangon.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Iftekhar Bashir, “Myanmar,” *Counter Terrorist Trends And Analyses: Annual Threat Assessment*, January 2019, pp 19, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA\\_Annual\\_2019-1.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA_Annual_2019-1.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

## Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Myanmar

Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar are bound by common historical circumstances that witnessed Buddhist revivalist movements fueling ethno-nationalistic sentiments as a response to colonial occupation; these sentiments helped both countries achieve independence. In the contemporary context, both countries have gone through rapid economic and political transitions in the last decade. In 2011, Myanmar initiated democratic and economic reforms after 50 years of a military dictatorship, while Sri Lanka's civil war only ended in 2009. These unique circumstances provided the necessary conditions for Buddhist extremism to proliferate around the same time in both countries.

BBS are also among several groups that have close ties to Myanmar's Buddhist extremists and are known to use similar rhetoric and tactics. This has led observers such as Alan Keenan of the International Crisis Group to warn that events in Myanmar, where Rohingya Muslims have faced persecution in and expulsion from the country, could further empower radical Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup> In a sign of growing coordination of interests, Buddhist groups have attacked Rohingya refugees in the capital Colombo and vowed to drive them out of the country.

However, some differences rooted in their respective domestic circumstances are apparent. The direct participation of Buddhist monks in Sri Lankan national politics arguably puts Sri Lanka's version of Theravada Buddhism in a "different league" than its counterparts in Myanmar, where rules limit monks from participating in politics.<sup>37</sup> In the 2004 parliamentary elections, a Buddhist-dominated JHU party fielded an entire slate of monks - nine were elected, marking a first in Sri Lanka.<sup>38</sup> These groups have also emerged as major players in coalition-building and

legislation-making in Sri Lanka.<sup>39</sup> For example, an alliance with the JHU enabled the then ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) to secure an absolute majority in the 2004 general election.

## Counter-narratives and Outlook

The majority Buddhist communities and clergy in both Sri Lanka and Myanmar are not monolithic and many have criticised the actions of a fringe minority of extremists. There are several examples, both on social media and on the streets, of public sermons and demonstrations by those championing peaceful coexistence and an end to violence. Proactive state action such as the 2018 prosecution of BBS leader Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara in Sri Lanka is also a positive step, but strong measures are needed for others who instigate violence.

There is also an urgent need for efforts to promote and protect peaceful narratives of coexistence. Political leaders will have to forge a national identity that is inclusive and ensures that the sentiments of all ethnic groups can be articulated. In a rare and positive move, Sri Lanka's current House Speaker Karu Jayasuriya acknowledged at a public conference in December 2018 that religious and ethnic extremism was re-emerging and urged the country's various communities to play their part to arrest this trend by not allowing "politicians to spread extremism using temples and other places of worship."<sup>40</sup> More leaders should take the lead in these efforts by speaking out.

Other challenges to address include poor socio-economic conditions of the significant rural populace in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Rising income inequality and social unrest could fan a broader conflict in mainstream society.

Both governments need to sustain counteractions against radical Buddhist narratives and agitation and address perceived and real

<sup>36</sup> "Buddhist Militancy Rises Again," *International Crisis Group*, March 7, 2018,

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/buddhist-militancy-rises-again-sri-lanka>.

<sup>37</sup> Religious Extremism Poses Threat To ASEAN's Growth," *Nikkei Asian Review*, December 13, 2017,

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/Religious-extremism-poses-threat-to-ASEAN-s-growth2>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> S.M. Aliff, "Post-War Conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist Hegemony," *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, Vol. 59, pp. 109-125, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> "Defeat Extremism And Abolish Executive Presidency," *Daily Mirror*, December 29, 2018, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/160407/Defeat-extremism-abolish-executive-presidency-Speaker>.

socio-economic grievances of the affected communities. Failure to do so could see hate speech and political violence proliferate and spread across the region. Thailand, for example, could be vulnerable to such cross-border influences. Another Buddhist majority country, Thailand, has seen anti-Muslim sentiments on the rise, owing to factors such as the persistent activities of Muslim separatist groups operating in the south of the country. In a social media age, extremist groups are increasingly relying on open and closed social media platforms to interact with one another. These social media platforms then amplify false narratives that may ultimately lead to more violence. The plight of the Rohingya and other Muslim communities could also be exploited by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda to call for attacks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, thus expanding their theatre of operations further into South and Southeast Asia.

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# Leadership Decapitation and the Impact on Terrorist Groups

Kenneth Yeo Yaoren

## Synopsis

*Leadership is critical to a terrorist organisation and has been targeted by security agencies in decapitation attacks to weaken and eliminate groups. However, this counter-terrorism strategy has varying outcomes. This article discusses the alternate and inconsistent outcomes of leadership decapitation in eliminating religiously-motivated terrorist groups in two key regions: Israel-Palestine and the Malay Archipelago. Given the varied outcomes, the assessment is that leadership decapitation, on its own, should not be seen as a silver bullet to defeat religiously-motivated terrorist groups.*

## Introduction

Leadership is critical to the longevity of violent organisations, specifically terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup> Security agencies globally have relied on leadership decapitation to weaken, dismantle and eliminate terrorist groups. Bryan C. Price

defines decapitation as killing or capturing the key leader of a terrorist group as a counter-terrorism strategy. This article will study decapitation as the removal – which includes assassinations and arrests – of the senior leaders of organisations.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, leadership decapitation has had varying outcomes including fractionalisation or weakening of the group<sup>3</sup> and increased radicalisation of its members<sup>4</sup>. In other cases, leadership decapitation also did not unlikely to affect the group. While some organisations are weakened after a decapitation strike, this cannot completely be attributed to leadership decapitation itself.

The continued existence and operational capabilities of various terrorist groups, despite facing leadership decapitation, demonstrates a weakness in the strategy.<sup>5</sup> This can be observed in the continued survival of the Taliban after the killing of Mullah Mohammed

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Chasdi, *Serenade of Suffering: A Portrait of Middle East Terrorism, 1968-1993* (Lexington Books, 1999); Christopher D. Kolenda, *Leadership: The Warrior's Art* (Stackpole Books, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Bryan C. Price, "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *International Security* 36 (2012): 9–46.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas A. Hibbs, *Mass Political Violence: A Cross-National Causal Analysis*, vol. 253 (Wiley New York, 1973); Anthony Oberschall, *Social Conflict and Social Movements* (Prentice hall, 1973); Pamela Oliver, "Rewards and Punishments as Selective Incentives for Collective Action: Theoretical Investigations," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980): 1356–75; Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* 31 (2006): 7–48; Mohammed M. Hafez and Joseph M. Hatfield, "Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israel's Controversial Tactic during Al-Aqsa Uprising 1," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): 359–82; Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation"; Price, "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism"; Péter Marton, "Investigating the

Calculated Elimination of Removable Enemies: The Puzzle of Terrorism Decapitation Research," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22 (2013): 63; Steven T. Zech, "Decapitation, Disruption, and Unintended Consequences in Counterterrorism: Lessons from Islamist Terror Networks in Spain," *Defense & Security Analysis* 32 (2016): 177–91.

<sup>4</sup> Paschalis M. Kitromilides, "Political Repression in Nineteenth Century Europe. By Goldstein Robert J.. (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983. Pp. Xv+ 400. \$27.95.)," *American Political Science Review* 79 (1985): 557–58; Stephen T. Hosmer, *Operations Against Enemy Leaders* (Rand Corporation, 2001); Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 343–61; Byman, "Do Targeted Killings Work?"; Stephen David, "Fatal Choices: Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Bar-Ilan University Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 51)," 2010; Boaz Ganor, *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers* (Transaction Publishers, 2011); Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes."

<sup>5</sup> Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 18 (2009): 719–55.

Omar in 2013<sup>6</sup> and Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in 2016<sup>7</sup> and the persistence of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) after the death of both Abdurajak Janjalani and Khadaffy Janjalani. This article will examine case studies where leadership decapitation did not eliminate religiously-motivated terrorist groups. It focuses on the frequency and lethality of attacks conducted after decapitation has taken place, in order to find out whether the strike has weakened or strengthened the group.

### Varying Outcomes of Leadership Decapitation

Studies of leadership decapitation targeting terrorist outfits have highlighted that the strategy has had varying results, some of which run counter to the objective of weakening, dismantling or eliminating the outfits in question. One possible explanation for the variation in outcomes of leadership decapitation is linked to the relative strength/weakness of the charismatic leadership.<sup>8</sup> Organisations with charismatic leaders are more vulnerable to decapitation attempts. However, religious groups, often led by charismatic leaders, are very resilient to decapitation strikes. This can be observed in many groups with religious identities or even in non-religious, secular groups with leaders who exhibit divine or supernatural abilities.<sup>9</sup> In cases where members of the organisation

have limited linkages and contact with the leader, the latter is replaced shortly after decapitation. Hence, the leader's death does not have a significant impact on the group's operations that had been ongoing independently from the leader.

Religiously-motivated terrorist organisations have also retaliated after leadership decapitation, temporarily improving their ability to mobilise and increasing the number and/or severity of attacks. This is reflected in cases such as the Luxor massacre conducted by Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyya (an Egyptian Islamist group) after the exile of their leaders in 1997; the Algerian Civil War after the military coup against the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in 1991; and the sustained insurgency of the Chechen Second War after the killing of Movsar Barayev, leader of the Chechen Islamist separatist group.<sup>10</sup>

Alternately, it has been argued that groups with bureaucratic-hierarchical structures tend to either develop radical splinter groups or disintegrate after decapitation.<sup>11</sup> The latter can be observed from the inability of the highly centralised organisation, Aum Shinrikyo, to execute a successful attack after the arrest of their leader, Shoko Asahara.<sup>12</sup> This is attributed to the criticality of the leadership that, at times, plays a key role in the bureaucratic and day-to-day operations of the group.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Finn, "Taliban Leader Mohammad Omar Is Said to Have Died in 2013," *Washington Post*, July 29, 2015,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mullah-mohammad-omar-taliban-leader-said-to-have-died-in-2013/2015/07/29/1dd546bc-3606-11e5-9d0f-7865a67390ee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mullah-mohammad-omar-taliban-leader-said-to-have-died-in-2013/2015/07/29/1dd546bc-3606-11e5-9d0f-7865a67390ee_story.html).

<sup>7</sup> Micah Zenko, "Did Killing Mullah Mansoor Work? *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/did-killing-mullah-mansoor-work>.

<sup>8</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, "Crises of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements," *Cults, Religion, and Violence*, 2002, 80–101; Lisa Langdon, Alexander J. Sarapu, and Matthew Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers," *Journal of Public and International Affairs -Princeton-* 15 (2004): 59–78; Willi Winkler, *Die Geschichte Der RAF* (Rowohlt Berlin, 2007); T. W. Van Dongen, "Law Enforcement as Politics by Other Means: Lessons from Countering Revolutionary Terrorism," *Police Practice and Research* 14 (2013): 428–41; Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes";

Bryan C Price, "Top Leadership Decapitation," 2018, <http://www.bryancprice.com/Data.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Weigert, *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare in Modern Africa* (Springer, 1995); Daniel Castro, *Revolution and Revolutionaries: Guerrilla Movements in Latin America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999); Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers."

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Mannes, "Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group's Activity?," *The Journal of International Policy Solutions* 9 (2008): 40–49.

<sup>11</sup> Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers."

<sup>12</sup> Wojciech Grabowski, "Targeting Terrorist Leaders: Limits and Opportunities," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22 (2013): 28; Matt Frankel, "The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns against Insurgents and Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (2010): 17–30.

<sup>13</sup> Grabowski, "Targeting Terrorist Leaders: Limits and Opportunities."

Leadership decapitation can be effective when the leader acts as the hub of the network.<sup>14</sup> Hence, one argument is that targets should specifically be the hubs or centroids of the group, around whom operations are organised.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, targeted attacks against both human and resource coordinators can reduce the ability of terrorist groups to mobilise.<sup>16</sup> This can be seen in the examples of Abdullah Öcalan of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) and Abimael Guzmán of Sendero Luminoso, two leaders who had coordinated resources or people in their organisations.<sup>17</sup> Taking them out subsequently resulted in the weakening of their respective organisations. This focused strategy against organisational hub/centroids was also executed in France to cripple the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA).<sup>18</sup>

### Case Studies

This section will take a closer look at the frequency and severity of attacks conducted by major groups in the respective Israel-Palestine and Malay Archipelago regions in the aftermath of a leadership decapitation. The datasets on frequency and severity of attacks are retrieved from the Global Terrorism Database<sup>19</sup> and dates of decapitation are from Bryan C. Price's findings<sup>20</sup>. All groups mentioned here operate within a specific region and are religiously-motivated.

### Israel-Palestine Region – Hamas and Hezbollah

A Palestinian Sunni-Islamist group formed in 1987, Hamas has been designated a terrorist group by the United States, the European Union and Israel. During the First Palestinian Intifada, decapitation aimed to nip the problem in the bud.<sup>21</sup> In 1989, Sheikh Yassin – the spiritual leader of Hamas<sup>22</sup> – was sentenced to life imprisonment. The removal of Sheikh Yassin did not end the First Intifada, however. From Tables 2 and 3, it is evident that despite the recent formation of the group at that juncture, it showed resilience and engaged in increased attacks which only concluded on 13 September 1993. It is also important to highlight that the release of Sheikh Yassin in 1997 did not lead to a political reconciliation between Palestine and Israel as the Second Intifada occurred shortly after on 28 September 2000. During the Second Intifada, both Hamas' spiritual and political leaders, that is Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz al-Rantisi, were killed on 22 March 2004 and 17 April 2004 respectively.<sup>23</sup> In response to this, Hamas vowed to seek revenge and attack Israel with suicide bombers and Qassam rockets.<sup>24</sup> However, this vengeance narrative was only useful in mobilising militants. Even though there was an increased frequency of attacks, the lethality of each attack declined. Nevertheless, the decapitation of leaders may not be the only reason for the decline in lethality of each attack. The Israeli Defence

<sup>14</sup> Zech, "Decapitation, Disruption, and Unintended Consequences in Counterterrorism: Lessons from Islamist Terror Networks in Spain."

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Carley, "A Theory of Group Stability," *American Sociological Review*, 1991, 331–54; John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Rand Corporation, 2001); Kathleen M. Carley, Ju-Sung Lee, and David Krackhardt, "Destabilizing Networks," *Connections* 24 (2002): 79–92; Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, "The Changing Nature of Suicide Attacks: A Social Network Perspective," *Social Forces* 84 (2006): 1987–2008; Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes."

<sup>16</sup> Van Dongen, "Law Enforcement as Politics by Other Means: Lessons from Countering Revolutionary Terrorism."

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Heiberg, Brendan O'Leary, and John Tirman, *Terror, Insurgency, and the State: Ending Protracted Conflicts* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Assia Alexieva, "Targeting the Roots and Goals of ETA: A Counter-Terrorist Strategy to Consider?" *Journal of IPS*, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Global Terrorism Database," n.d., <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

<sup>20</sup> Price, "Top Leadership Decapitation."

<sup>21</sup> BBC, "Who Are Hamas?," *BBC News*, May 12, 2017, sec. Middle East, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13331522>.

<sup>22</sup> BBC, "Sheikh Yassin: Spiritual Figurehead," March 22, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/1695470.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1695470.stm).

<sup>23</sup> BBC, "Who Are Hamas?"

<sup>24</sup> "Hamas Promises Revenge Following Assassination," *ABC News*, April 18, 2004, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-04-18/hamas-promises-revenge-following-assassination/171920>; "Hamas Vows Revenge for Yassin's Death," *The Telegraph*, March 22, 2004, sec. News, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1457477/Hamas-vows-revenge-for-Yassin-death.html>.

Force's (IDF) organisational innovation and increased vigilance of the Israeli people during this period could have also contributed to the decline.

Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist militant group formed in 1985, has been designated a terrorist organisation by the United States and Israel among other countries. In 1992, the group's leader, Abbas Moussawi, was killed in an airstrike together with his son.<sup>25</sup> Despite the assassination of Moussawi and the kidnapping of some Hezbollah leaders, the South Lebanon conflict between Hezbollah and Israel persisted. The conflict ended on 25 May 2000 with the withdrawal of Israel from South Lebanon and Syria.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, on 12 February 2008, Hezbollah's Chief of Staff, Imad Mughniyah, was assassinated through the combined efforts of Israel and United States' intelligence agencies.<sup>27</sup> This led to a decrease in frequency of attacks mounted by Hezbollah, signalling its inability to mobilise after the decapitation of Imad Mughniyah.

#### *The Malay Archipelago – Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah*

Designated a terrorist group by numerous countries including the United States and the Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is an Islamist terrorist group operating in Mindanao, South Philippines since 1991. In December 1998, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, founder and leader of ASG, was killed in a police shootout in Basilan.<sup>28</sup> Abdurajak Janjalani had served as the link

between ASG and Al-Qaeda (AQ), having fought with Osama Bin Laden in the Soviet-Afghan war. AQ had also funded ASG through Abdurajak Janjalani<sup>29</sup>. However, when the funding ceased after his death, there was an increase in violent attacks and multiple kidnapping operations in subsequent years to keep ASG fiscally viable.<sup>30</sup> Leadership changes in ASG also took place after Abdurajak Janjalani's death. His brother Khadaffy, who took over as the leader of ASG, was killed on September 2006 in skirmishes with the authorities.<sup>31</sup> Khadaffy's successor, Radullan Sahiron, has not been able to play an active leading role, due to his age and physical condition.<sup>32</sup> It has since been argued that the dearth of a central command in ASG has resulted in the loss of discipline within the outfit. As seen in Tables 6 and 7, ASG has increased its frequency of attacks yet causing few casualties. As such, it could be argued that leadership decapitation has had limited success in weakening ASG.

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is an Islamist terrorist group operating in Southeast Asia since 1993. JI has been designated as a terrorist organisation by the United States and United Nations. On 15 October 2003, Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual leader of JI, was arrested after the 2002 Bali Bombings and 2003 Marriott Hotel attack in Indonesia.<sup>33</sup> Since his arrest, the group has returned to low-scale recruitment operations and established a sanctuary in Poso, Central Sulawesi.<sup>34</sup> The frequency of its attacks is insignificant to analyse as JI tends to conduct sporadic large-

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's 1992 Attack in Argentina Is a Warning for Modern-Day Europe," *The Atlantic*, March 19, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/hezbollahs-1992-attack-in-argentina-is-a-warning-for-modern-day-europe/274160/>.

<sup>26</sup> Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Israeli Decision to Withdraw from Southern Lebanon: Political Leadership and Security Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (2002): 561–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/798135>.

<sup>27</sup> Haaretz, "Report: Assassination of Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyah Was Joint U.S.-Israeli Operation," *Haaretz*, January 31, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/cia-mossad-killed-hezbollah-s-imad-mughniyah-1.5367365>.

<sup>28</sup> The Manila Times, "Foreign Jihadists Helping Abu Sayyaf," *The Manila Times Online* (blog), July 9, 2016, <http://www.manilatimes.net/foreign-jihadists-helping-abu-sayyaf/272732/>.

<sup>29</sup> Stanford University, "Abu Sayyaf Group | Mapping Militant Organizations," Mapping Militant Organizations, accessed March 17, 2018,

<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/152>.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>31</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Abu Sayyaf Group (Philippines, Islamist Separatists)," Council on Foreign Relations, May 27, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/abu-sayyaf-group-philippines-islamist-separatists>.

<sup>32</sup> Zachary Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines," *CTC Sentinel. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 1 (2008): 10–13.

<sup>33</sup> Zachary Abuza, "Jemaah Islamiyah Adopts the Hezbollah Model," *Middle East Quarterly*, January 1, 2009, <http://www.meforum.org/2044/jemaah-islamiyah-adopts-the-hezbollah-model>; BBC, "Profile: Abu Bakar Ba'asyir," *BBC News*, June 16, 2011, sec. Asia-Pacific, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-10912588>.

<sup>34</sup> Abuza, "Jemaah Islamiyah Adopts the Hezbollah Model."

scale bombings such as their coordination of a major attack on 9 September 2004. Ultimately, there was no significant change in terms of JI's operational strength after the arrest of Abu Bakar Bashir. However, after the 2007 arrest of Zarkasih, who was appointed as leader of the group in 2004, both the frequency and lethality of JI attacks significantly reduced. Nonetheless, the group's decline cannot be solely attributed to the arrest of Zarkasih. Another possible reason could be linked to the arrest of Abu Dujana, JI's military commander who was arrested alongside Zarkasih. He had been more involved in the operational planning and implementation of the group's attacks.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Leadership decapitation yields inconsistent results. From the case studies, we observe that leadership decapitation has in part contributed to independent attacks, tactical shifts and the weakening of organisations. We have also observed that, at times, decapitation has supported mobilisation and demonstrated the resilience of religiously-motivated groups.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the assassinations of Hamas' Sheik Yassin and al-Rantisi, leadership decapitation led to increased mobilisation.<sup>37</sup> One explanation for this is that the absence of a leader could have contributed to outbreaks of violence due to the lack of centralised direction.<sup>38</sup> Increased mobilisation could also be linked to the theme of revenge – where terrorist groups become more assertive and conduct reprisal attacks in response to the targeting of their leaders.

In cases when the group weakens after leadership decapitation, it is difficult to prove the causal relationship. This can be observed in cases of Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyah and JI's Abu Bakar Bashir, where the defeat of a terrorist group cannot solely be attributed to leadership decapitation. Successful strikes could be attributed to the leader's involvement in the group's military affairs. Nevertheless, this study heavily relies on quantitative data and does not take into account the latent potential of other inactive groups in the regions studied - specifically Mujahideen Indonesia Timur (MIT) and the Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) in Indonesia.

It can be concluded that "decapitation strikes are not a silver bullet against terrorist organisations."<sup>39</sup> Enforcement agencies need to consider other strategies as well, due to the varying outcomes of decapitation strikes.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, leadership decapitation could still complement a broader counter-terrorism strategy, paired with long-term strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism.

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<sup>35</sup> BBC, "Arrestan a líder de Jemaah Islamiyah," June 15, 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/international/newsid\\_6755000/6755691.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/spanish/international/newsid_6755000/6755691.stm).

<sup>36</sup> Langdon, Sarapu, and Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers"; Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation"; Geoffrey Nelson, *Cults, New Religions and Religious Creativity (Routledge Revivals)* (Routledge, 2011); Grabowski, "Targeting Terrorist Leaders: Limits and Opportunities."

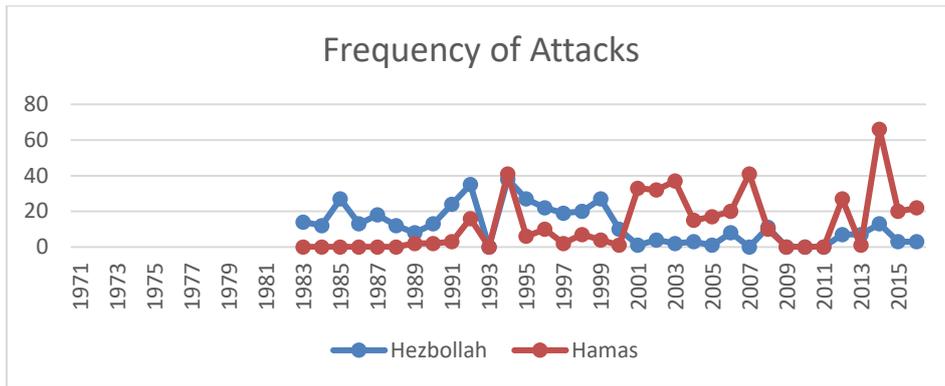
<sup>37</sup> Applied the Chi-Square Test of Independence on both variables and came to this conclusion.

<sup>38</sup> Kent Layne Oots, "Organizational Perspectives on the Formation and Disintegration of Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 12 (1989): 139–52.

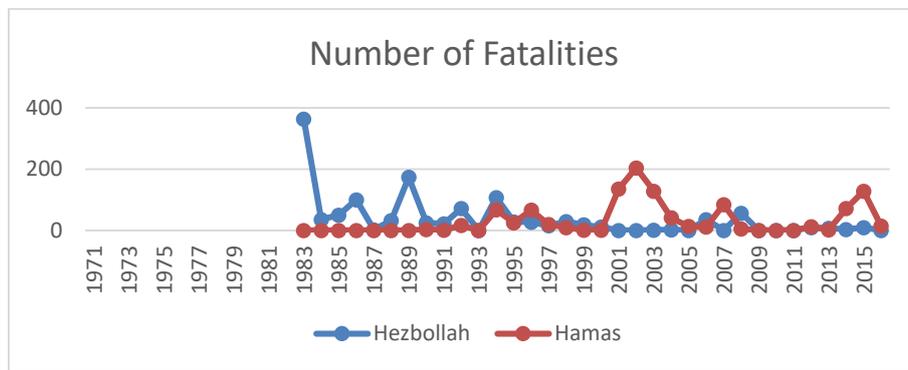
<sup>39</sup> Mannes, "Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group's Activity?" 44.

<sup>40</sup> Zussman and Zussman, "Assassinations: Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Israeli Counterterrorism Policy Using Stock Market Data."

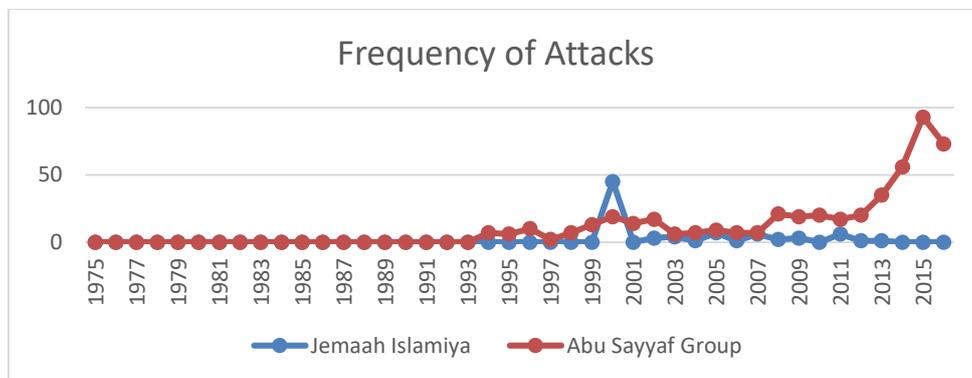
**Appendix**



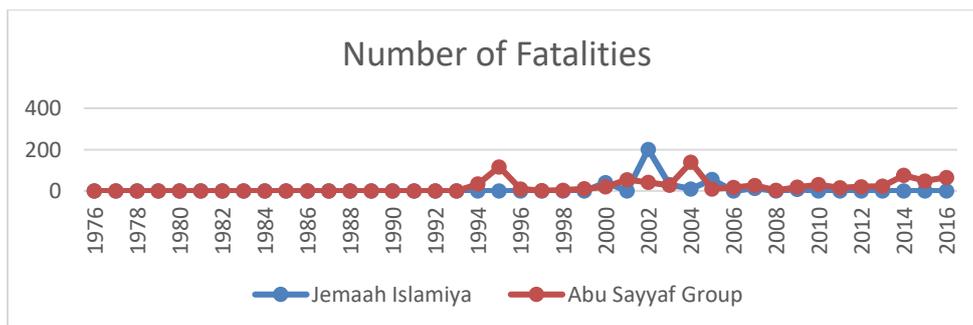
*Table 1: Frequency of attacks in the Israel-Palestine Region*



*Table 2: Number of fatalities in the Israel Palestine Region*



*Table 3: Frequency of Attacks in the Archipelago*



*Table 4: Number of attacks in the Malay Archipelago*

# Denmark's De-radicalisation Programme for Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan

## Synopsis

*In order to address the threat that returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) pose to Denmark's security, Danish authorities have pioneered a de-radicalisation programme focused on providing former FTFs with the opportunity to reintegrate into mainstream society. This article discusses the elements of the programme, its guiding principles and questions relating to its effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

According to the report done by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), Denmark's returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) account for the second highest number of FTFs per capita in Europe.<sup>2</sup> As of January 2018, at least 150 Danish citizens had travelled to Iraq and Syria to join terrorist groups.<sup>3</sup> Of this number, close to 30 are currently fighting and 50 have returned to Denmark. Reports have also revealed that approximately 37 have died, while 33 others have shifted to other countries outside Iraq and Syria. In order to address the threat that FTFs pose to Denmark's security, the country has launched a de-radicalisation programme. While the initial programme was an ad-hoc project that prevented individuals from joining radical and violent extremist groups in 2009, it has since become part of a nationwide initiative post-2016.

The Danish de-radicalisation programme, including the 'De-radicalisation – Targeted Intervention' and the 'De-radicalisation Back

on Track' Projects, has gained global attention due to its 'soft' approach towards FTFs and other homegrown extremists. In contrast, many Western countries have chosen detention and incarceration to prevent and counter violent extremism. The Danish programme is based on holistic collaborative efforts between various public, private and people sector agencies. It draws benefits from previous initiatives and processes that were designed to tackle criminal activity as opposed to programmes that are directly related to radicalisation or extremism. It has been developed through trial and error by various local agency practitioners, comprising schools, youth clubs and social services. The Danish state plays a role in providing guidelines and receives feedback from practitioners before programme implementation. Even though this programme seeks to address the FTF issue, it also serves as an important strategy to prevent radicalisation and extremism from taking root in Danish societies. The programme targets Islamist radicalisation and the other strands of religious and political radicalisation – both left and right wing.

## 'De-radicalisation – Targeted Intervention' Project

The Danish government has implemented a project that is targeted at those who espouse extreme ideologies or are at an early stage of radicalisation. The 'De-radicalisation – Targeted Intervention' project aims to help youth leave extremist environments and prevent them from getting involved in extremism.<sup>4</sup> Tools are developed to provide

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on an RSIS Commentary that was published in October 2018 and can be accessed here: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/deradicalising-returning-foreign-fighters-lessons-from-denmark/#.XIE2oi-p0Wo>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Neumann, "Foreign Fighter Total In Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict In The 1980s," January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq->

<now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Denmark: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," Counter Extremism Project. 2018. [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country\\_pdf/DK-11272018.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/DK-11272018.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> "De-radicalisation – Targeted Intervention", *Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration*, 2011, <http://www.dwta.nl/download.cfm?file=Deradicalisati-on-Targeted-Intervention-Aarhus.pdf>.

these youth with the necessary social support and advice that will keep them away from extremist circles. The programme comprises two approaches: (i) mentor support; and (ii) exit talks.

### *Mentor Support*

The mentor support approach refers to the development of methods for individual mentorship of young people who show signs of radicalisation. Coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration, this approach involved training 20 mentors and resource personnel in conflict management, prevention of radicalisation and extremism, as well as to undertake the role and responsibilities of a mentor. Currently, this approach is applied in the municipalities of Copenhagen and Aarhus. With help from schools, social services and the police, mentors and resource personnel provide advice, guidance, counseling and social support that radicalised individuals need in order to stay out of extremist circles.<sup>5</sup>

### *Exit Talks*

Coordinated by the Danish Security and Intelligence Services' Centre for Prevention, the exit talks approach refers to preventive talks targeted at individuals who are assessed to be radicalised or those who have accepted violence as a legitimate means to achieve their personal and political goals. Possessing specific knowledge about radicalisation processes and broad experiences in building relationships, coaches carry out extensive engagement with individuals who are involved in extremist circles. Under the premise that personal contact is a vital component to help people leave an extremist environment, the coaches will try to foster, within the affected individuals, an understanding of the consequences of extremism and a criminal way of life. At the same time, they offer legitimate alternatives to extremist ideology in order to reduce the appeal of violent extremism. Some alternatives include helping Syrian and Iraqi refugees through humanitarian aid, instead of joining a terrorist group to fight for them. The main idea is to

create mutual understanding between the counselor and the individual, which may lead him or her to craft a personal plan of action for a more peaceful and moderate life.<sup>6</sup>

### **'De-radicalisation – Back on Track' Project**

The 'De-radicalisation – Back on Track' project is conducted by the Danish Department of Prisons and Probation, the Danish Ministry of Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs, and supported by the EU Commission. The approach is established within the framework of an existing mentoring programme targeted at different groups of inmates.<sup>7</sup> This project helps prison inmates who have been convicted of terrorism or charged with criminal activities, involving hate crimes, with the necessary support needed to get 'back on track'. As a tool, it supports them in their efforts to leave far-right, far-left or religious extremism behind and assists them to reintegrate into mainstream society upon their release.<sup>8</sup> Under the provisions of the Danish Sentence Enforcement Act, inmates who have been identified as extremists or radicals are placed in special units where they cannot exert their influence over other inmates. Mentors will then be assigned to designated inmates and assessments will be made to better facilitate the mentorship process. The local network of social service, healthcare providers and schools also participate in the rehabilitation process. It is a requirement for the individual to participate in all aspects of the rehabilitation programme in order to be released on parole.<sup>9</sup>

### **Guiding Principles**

The Danish de-radicalisation programme comprises three main guiding principles. The first is the principle of inclusion rather than stigmatisation or exclusion. Preben Bertelsen, the lead expert of the programme explains that, "these are young people struggling with pretty much the same issues as any other – getting a grip on their lives, making sense of things, finding a meaningful place in society. We have to say: provided you have done

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "De-Radicalisation – Back on Track, Concept for mentor training programme with a focus on extremism and radicalisation," *Ministry of Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs*, May

2014,

[https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/Back%20On%20Track\\_Denemarken.pdf](https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/Back%20On%20Track_Denemarken.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

nothing criminal, we will help you to find a way back".<sup>10</sup> This principle of inclusion denotes meaningful participation in common cultural and social life. The Danish government recognises that these individuals are no different from any other citizen and should be able to get an education and a job, if they renounce extremism and violence.

A case in point would be Mohammed, a young Dane who was an Al-Qaeda (AQ) sympathiser. He had been self-radicalised by watching AQ ideologue Anwar Al-Awlaki's sermons on YouTube and subsequently dropped out of school. He started to fraternise with extremists (some of whom had travelled to Syria and Iraq), in Gellerupparken, a largely immigrant neighbourhood on the outskirts of Aarhus and Denmark's lowest-income area. In 2014, Mohammed's family called a hotline after he vowed to travel to Syria. Aarhus authorities then arranged for a mentor who engaged in a debate on the meaning of jihad with him. In subsequent meetings, the mentor introduced a more rational worldview to Mohammed that allowed him to help other Muslim Danes by being a moderate role model. Since then, Mohammed has continued with his studies and also helped his mentor dissuade students and individuals from joining extremist circles.<sup>11</sup>

The second principle is the strong collaboration between the various private sector bodies, institutions and government agencies in the implementation process. According to the Aarhus Mayor, Jacob Bundsgaard, "a major strength of our approach is the close collaboration that has been established...because it provides unique opportunities to identify and intervene in relation to youth who may be at risk for radicalisation, just as the involvement of several local government agencies makes it possible to take a holistic approach to intervention."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> JonHenley, "How do you deradicalise returning Isis fighters", *The Guardian*, November 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/12/deradicalise-isis-fighters-jihadists-denmark-syria>.

<sup>11</sup> Mila Koumpilova, "How Denmark Is Trying To Subvert The Call To Terror?" *Star Tribune*, July 31, 2016, <http://www.startribune.com/how-denmark-is-trying-to-subvert-the-call-to-terror/388563371/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Interview with the mayor of Aarhus Jacob Bundsgaard," *Freedom From Fear*, <http://f3magazine.unicri.it/?p=1113>.

Coordination of the various agencies is facilitated by an organisation framework commonly known as the Schools, Social Service and Police (SSP). As an existing structure in Denmark designed to prevent crime, the SSP has been incorporated into the effort to counter violent extremism and radicalisation. Engagement with youth at the local level has been well received by various institutions including youth clubs, schools, and social services. At the national level, the focus is on building capacity and supporting local initiatives by offering skill enhancement activities, counseling workshops and developing concrete methods to combat extremism and radicalisation.<sup>13</sup>

The third principle relates to the importance of a scientific foundation for the de-radicalisation programme. The Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Aarhus University has developed a scientific discipline called 'Life Psychology'. It provides a theoretical grounding to understand the processes, risks, and resilience factors in all kinds of radicalisation, not just radical Islamist extremism.

The basis of "Life Psychology" is the presumption that every individual aspires to lead a 'good life'. To achieve that, one must overcome various obstacles, challenges and setbacks. The second presumption is that to have a 'good life', the person must possess sufficient skills to enable him or her to cope with life tasks, and the process of making important decisions. An example of a life task would be to create awareness of the importance of peaceful co-existence. This particular task might require the individual to write a short essay that inspires others to value peaceful co-existence. The third presumption is that regardless of gender, life history and religious, social and cultural background, every individual will encounter the same fundamental life tasks. By identifying specific risk factors and

<sup>13</sup> "Preventing and Countering Extremism and Radicalisation," National Action Plan, *Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing*, October 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/docs/preventing\\_countering\\_extremism\\_radicalisation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/docs/preventing_countering_extremism_radicalisation_en.pdf).

encouraging empowerment and resilience, the 'Life Psychology' model can act as a guide for mentorship training as well as to supervise mentors who work with specific individuals.

## Conclusion

Denmark's de-radicalisation model is composed of an assortment of multiple agencies and has its roots in a broader approach to crime prevention in Danish society. The use of existing structures to counter extremism and radicalisation has proven to be valuable and the model itself boasts sufficient capacity and resources from municipality to municipality. There are, however, functional challenges such as coordination issues between different stakeholders when it comes to the allocation of different roles and responsibilities. For example, the issue of who would assume the leadership role during the transition from prison to society is pertinent. Another challenge faced would be to ensure that frontline staff is safe and not targeted by extremists, in the course of their engagement with radicalised elements.

Regardless of such challenges, some observers have assessed the Danish de-radicalisation programme as an effective solution to the radicalisation problem in Denmark, even as many of its European counterparts continue to struggle with the same issue. For instance, France has adopted a top-down approach where the state dictates the course of action for extremists and identifies the stakeholders involved in the de-radicalisation process. This has led to families being reluctant to report cases of radicalisation for fear of legal consequences. In Germany, the bottom-up approach empowers local actors who have been active in winning the trust of affected individuals and communities. However, the German approach lacks governmental involvement, which means that its legitimacy could be challenged by those who oppose it. On the other hand, the Danish experience seeks to counter radicalisation through firmly institutionalised cooperation between local and state actors.

However, some experts question the effectiveness of the Danish soft-handed

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Cobiella, "Denmark De-Radicalization Program Aims to Reintegrate, Not Condemn," *NBC News*, May 8, 2015,

approach and believe that there should be a greater focus on punitive measures. In this sense, some have referred to the de-radicalisation programme as 'dangerous and soft' considering the violent attacks that Islamist extremists, specifically those aligned with Islamic State (IS), have conducted in parts of Europe. In fact, Danish legislator Martin Henriksen has stated that, "[The program] sends a signal of weakness that instead of punishing the so-called holy warriors, they're given all the advantages of a welfare state."<sup>14</sup>

In the overall scheme, the Danish programme's effectiveness remains difficult to measure. If the number of Danes travelling to Iraq and Syria is used as the basis of measurement, the number has decreased conclusively from 2013 to date. However, this decrease could be due to other factors, relating to IS' weakness, including territorial losses in Iraq and Syria and the reduction in propaganda volume on extremist social media platforms.

Nevertheless, there is a continued need for preventing and countering violent extremism programmes to gain support and acceptance from the wider public. These programmes need to be consolidated, developed and adapted based on local circumstances and risk factors. Broadly, any de-radicalisation programme needs to address their specific targets on a whole spectrum of motivating and incentivising factors, including societal norms and expectations.

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<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/denmark-de-radicalization-n355346>.

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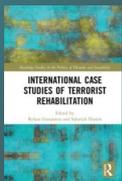
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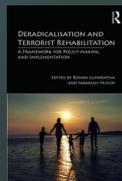


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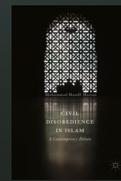
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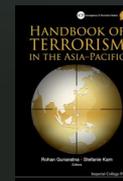
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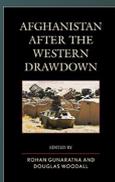
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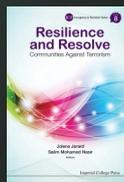
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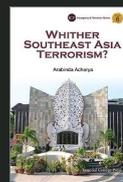
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