

ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

Global Threat Landscape

Southeast Asia

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore

South Asia

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

China

Xinjiang Province

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

The Islamic State (IS): Maintaining Resilience in a Post-Caliphate, Pandemic Environment

Religious Extremism: Challenging Extremist and Jihadist Propaganda

Persistence Of Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism In The West



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THE GLOBAL THREAT LANDSCAPE IN 2020

In 2020, despite its territorial losses, the Islamic State (IS) proved resilient, capitalising on the COVID-19 pandemic to increase its online propaganda and execute attacks in Iraq and Syria, while its affiliates did the same elsewhere. Ideologically, the pandemic was exploited by IS and Al-Qaeda, with narrative propagated being that the pandemic was God's punishment on infidels. Globally, the violent Islamist threat was characterised by the continued salience of lone actor attacks against civilian and government targets; the involvement of women, youth and family networks, at times in combatant roles; the rehabilitation and reintegration challenge posed by returning foreign fighters and their families; the role of diasporas and ideological ecosystems sustaining extremist narratives and the diversity of terrorist financing mechanisms. Furthermore, the close nexus between broad Extreme Right social movements and Far-Right political entities was noted in the Buddhist, Hindu and White Nationalist cases, along with striking ideological similarities amongst the latter. Finally, the importance of nuanced state responses incorporating judicious and customised mixes of "hard" and "soft" approaches, to deal both with the physical terrorist threat as well as the underlying conditions sustaining it, was underscored.

Introduction - The Violent Islamist Threat Remains the Key Global Concern

The year 2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of December 18, 2020, with

more than 75 million cases and over 1.7 million deaths worldwide, the struggle against COVID-19 is, as has been said in some quarters, likely to be the defining struggle of this generation.¹ Unsurprisingly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt across the board, including within the domain of countering and preventing transnational terrorism and violent extremism, in various ways. That said, strategic trends evident in recent years remained robust into 2020, certainly as far as the violent Islamist terrorist threat – still the most potent terrorist threat to global peace and stability - was concerned.² Despite the military demise of its so-called territorial caliphate carved out of Iraq and Syria last year, the Islamic State (IS) managed to remain resilient and active, not just on the ground in the Middle East – where it launched notable attacks on civilian sites, oil fields and security forces³ - but also in the cyber domain.

In fact, IS has re-envisioned the caliphate as an overarching global state rather than one that is confined to Iraq and Syria, and has sought to make opportunistic virtue out of a strategic necessity. Its spokesperson, Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi, in January 2020, reframed the inclement strategic situation IS faced in 2020 as a "protracted resistance" strategy that had to be waged stoically and with resilience, taking supposedly temporary military setbacks in stride. Al-Qurasyi called on IS supporters and cells worldwide to intensify "clandestine" activity to "spread influence" throughout the anti-IS Coalition.⁴ Subsequently IS propaganda online – put out

¹ "COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC," Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>.

² While there has been an increase in attacks in the West by violent "far right", White nationalist extremists in recent years, such incidents have been less lethal than Islamist terrorism in the West. Also "the absolute number of far-right attacks remains low when compared to other forms of terrorism". See *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney:

Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2020), p. 3.

³ See the essay by Amin Saikal, "The Middle East: Between Covid-19, Conflicts, Jihadist Threat and Public Discontent" in this volume.

⁴ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," *The US Department of Defense*, January 1- March 31, 2020, pp. 22-23, https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/liq_oir_q2_mar2020_gold_508_0513.pdf.

by both the weakened central network in Iraq and Syria as well as its affiliates around the world, produced content in various languages - reiterating the rallying call of *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding). This narrative was reinforced by more aggressive campaigns such as the “Battle of Attrition” series first begun in June 2019 and repeated in May and July 2020. Such ramped-up online propaganda efforts were not without effect, apparently helping spark violence by IS affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Somalia, West Africa and the Philippines.⁵

As far as the estranged ideological cousin of IS, Al-Qaeda was concerned, the year in some ways proved particularly traumatic. The deaths of Abu Muhsin al-Masri (Husam Abd-al-Rauf) in Afghanistan, Abu Muhammad al-Masri (Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah) in Iran and the reported demise of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri have undoubtedly impacted the network seriously. It does seem that “the core organisation is no longer able to project its power and force in the same way” and that “a continuing disintegration will take place as the various groups using the name around the world continue to focus their attention on local conflicts rather than the global clash the core group was advancing”.⁶ Some observers argue that IS by contrast appears relatively more astute in “connecting and inspiring this new generation”, albeit there is “very little evidence usually of cases having specific direction and planning organised by the group”.⁷ In essence, what can be asserted is that both IS and its rival AQ remained battered in 2020 but somewhat resilient, “disseminating extremist propaganda and generating violence around the world through insurgency tactics, or facilitating or inspiring

attacks”.⁸ Rather than tight strategic control, both IS and Al-Qaeda have sought through social media to provide a broad *strategic narrative* to guide the actions of a widely scattered global network of affiliates and cells.⁹ This violent Islamist global strategic narrative remained centred on three core themes, as in previous years, but adapted to diverse local contexts across the world: armed jihad to establish the *khilāfa* (caliphate); hatred of the non-Muslim Other, and the End Times and the coming of the Mahdi.¹⁰

Six Major Trends

Across the regions surveyed in this volume, the evolving global violent Islamist threat could be deconstructed by way of six major trends.

The Continuing Salience of Lone Actor Attacks against Civilian and Government Targets. While attacks by organised cells and networks remained a real threat, what seemed striking was the continuing salience of the threat of lone actor attacks by self-radicalised individuals inspired if not necessarily directed by IS, Al-Qaeda or their affiliates online. In 2020, for example, in Indonesia, “stabblings were the most preferred tactic, followed by shootings and bombings” by not just “pro-IS groups” but also “individuals in Indonesia, which reflects a continued preference to execute attacks that require little training, planning or funds”.¹¹ This was partly due to “the decentralised structure inherent in most pro-IS local groups”, which “limited a transferring of skills and funds between cells”.¹² Low-tech – involving knives and/or vehicles¹³ – lone actor/lone wolf or “wolf pack”¹⁴ terrorism

⁵ For more details see the essay by Nur Aziemah Azman, “The Islamic State (IS): Maintaining Resilience in a Post-Caliphate, Pandemic Environment” in this volume.

⁶ Raffaello Pantucci, “End of Al Qaeda Era?”, *RSIS Commentary*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/end-of-al-qaeda-era/#.X9xPKOkzbdC>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, “Religious Extremism: Challenging Extremist and Jihadist Propaganda”, in this volume.

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*. Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge, 2006). See also Brian A. Jackson, “Groups, Networks, or Movements: A Command-

and-Control-Driven Approach to Classifying Terrorist Organizations and its Application to Al Qaeda”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 29/3 (2006), pp. 241-262.

¹⁰ Halimi and Sudiman, “Religious Extremism”.

¹¹ See Unaesah Rahmah, “Indonesia”, in this volume.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Meaning involving either knives and/or use of vehicle rammings, or other rudimentary everyday items, as called for in IS propaganda.

¹⁴ Involving a self-organizing small number of attackers not necessarily directed by an organized network but planning and acting on their own. For instance, see “Police Monitoring ‘Wolf Pack’ Terrorism”, *The Star*, April 8, 2019,

concerns, along with those related to regular cell-based attacks, were certainly evidenced beyond Indonesia. This lone actor trend manifested itself in some fashion throughout the year in other places such as Malaysia; in Maldives, particularly against foreign tourists; in Bangladesh against the police, secular bloggers and religious targets; as well as in India, against Hindu politicians and other government targets. Some Central Asian lone actors with somewhat more expertise or access to weapons or explosives, employed or tried to employ, relatively more advanced means of killing, such as shootings or bombings of civilian and other targets.¹⁵

The Involvement of Women, Youth and Family Networks. Another trend of some concern - certainly in Southeast Asia - that was evident was the increasing involvement of women, youth and family networks in active combatant roles. In October 2020, a young Indonesian woman was arrested in Jolo island in the southern Philippines for involvement in a suicide bombing plot.¹⁶ The foiled suicide bomber was later identified as the widow of a slain Indonesian terrorist.¹⁷ She was also the daughter of an Indonesian husband-and-wife suicide attack team that had bombed the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, also in Jolo, in January 2019, killing at least 23 civilians.¹⁸ Separately, two other female terrorists, the wives of Abu Sayyaf terrorists, were also detained.¹⁹ These incidents indicated the increasing role of women and family networks in local terrorist networks' operations in recent

years.²⁰ That said, family networks were also detected in 2020 acting in a more supporting role, as was the case of the US-based Bangladeshi couple that provided funds for two relatives to travel to Syria to join IS.²¹ The relatively emotional and psychological vulnerability of youth to the rigid binary certitudes offered by extremist ideologies was further driven home in 2020.²² One case in Singapore involved a 17-year old who, despite repeated efforts by the authorities to steer him away from the IS path, remained "staunch" in his support for the latter.²³

Returning Foreign Fighters and their Families. Another trend of note in 2020 was that of returning foreign fighters and their families, and more specifically, the complex challenge of dealing with them humanely without compromising legitimate national security concerns. For example, it was reported earlier in the year that more than 50 Malaysians, who joined IS since 2013, could be returning to Malaysia from Syria, prompting discussions about how to properly rehabilitate and reintegrate them, not least because potential returnees were "expected to include battle-hardened jihadists".²⁴ Dealing with returnees that may have been exposed to radicalising influences was an issue occupying Indonesian authorities as well; in this case, it related to efforts to repatriate some children below 10 years whose parents had joined IS in Syria, though such attempts were impaired by the pandemic.²⁵ In Central Asia, again largely owing to the global pandemic, repatriation of

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/04/08/police-monitoring-wolf-pack-terrorism>.

¹⁵ See the essay by Nodirbek Soliev and Raffaello Pantucci, "Central Asia", in this volume.

¹⁶ 'Suspected Indonesian Suicide Bomber, 2 Others Nabbed in Jolo —Military', *GMA News Online*, October 10, 2020,

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/regions/759268/indonesian-suicide-bomber-nabbed-in-jolo-military/story/>.

¹⁷ "Indonesian Suicide Bomber Arrested in Jolo," *Rappler*, October 12, 2020,

<https://www.rappler.com/nation/indonesian-suicide-bomber-arrested-jolo>.

¹⁸ Mara Cepeda and Rambo Talabong, "At Least 23 Dead in Jolo Cathedral Bombing", *Rappler*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/jolo-sulu-cathedral-bombing-january-27-2019>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Amalina Abdul Nasir, "Female Suicide Bombers; Urgent Deterrence Needed", *RSIS Commentary*, 4 September 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis->

<publication/icpvtr/female-suicide-bombers-urgent-deterrence-needed/#.X9xTTukzZ-U>.

²¹ See the essay by Iftekharul Bashar, "Bangladesh", in this volume.

²² Kumar Ramakrishna, "Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis", *E-International Relations*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/11/understanding-youth-radicalization-in-the-age-of-isis-a-psychosocial-analysis/>.

²³ See the essay by Amalina Abdul Nasir, "Singapore", in this volume.

²⁴ See the essay by Remy Mahzam and Jasmin Singh, "Malaysia", in this volume and "56 M'sians still held in Syria for alleged terrorism", *Malaysiakini*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/508960>.

²⁵ IPAC, "COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Short Briefing No.1*, April 2, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/COVID-19_and_ISIS_fixed.pdf.

nationals from Syria slowed down significantly in 2020. For example, Tajikistan halted plans to repatriate a group of women and children from Syria due to the ongoing lockdowns and other challenges.²⁶ Nevertheless, government and civil society organisations in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have conducted large-scale repatriations of women and children in recent years and have tried to facilitate their reintegration into their respective communities. However, it has been acknowledged that “transforming the extreme beliefs of some ideologically hardened repatriates has been notoriously slow”.²⁷ As elsewhere, this could pose a nascent security issue should such barely rehabilitated individuals be released back into mainstream society. This is certainly true for the Maldives, which contributed the greatest number of IS fighters per capita to the Syrian civil war,²⁸ and whose “returning terrorist fighters could pose a grave internal threat to Maldivian society and government in the near future”.²⁹

The Role of Diasporas. Another finding that emerges from a scan of the violent Islamist threat landscape in 2020 is the role of diasporas. The plight of the Rohingya Muslim diaspora was particularly pertinent. At least 1.1 million Rohingyas refugees who fled persecution in Myanmar are currently living in Bangladesh, mostly in refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar and are vulnerable to exploitation by both criminal and terror networks - such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). ARSA, which claims to fight for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, reportedly also has ties to the estimated 100,000 Rohingya refugees currently residing in Malaysia. Increasingly, ARSA has been active on social media and evidence is surfacing of its activities amongst and support from Rohingya refugees in the region.³⁰ Meanwhile, elements of Bangladeshi diaspora communities in

Southeast Asia were also of concern. At least 18 radicalisation cases within Bangladeshi diaspora overseas were detected in 2020 of which 16 were in Singapore and two in the U.S..³¹ Another diasporic community of note in our survey of the year were Central Asians who continued to be targeted for online jihadi propaganda and recruitment.³² Meanwhile the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey was implicated in providing funding to the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) terrorist network in Syria.³³

Ideological Ecosystems Sustaining Violent Islamist Ideology and Perspectives. An important trend that merited closer analysis in 2020 was the role of *ideological ecosystems* sustaining and propagating violent Islamist extremist ideology and perspectives. Violent Islamist propaganda organs and voices notably offered virulent justifications for the beheading of French teacher Samuel Paty, whilst legitimising economic boycotts and even violence against France for its defence of the freedom to publicly display and discuss the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. Such ecosystems implicated in propagating the violent Islamist strategic narrative included interconnected networks of social media applications and platforms, online magazines, individual social media-savvy influencers, as well as certain extremist organisational, educational and religious institutions relatively insulated from mainstream society. For instance in India in October, IS put out its new monthly propaganda magazine, *Sawt al-Hind (Voice of India)*,³⁴ while Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) rebranded its monthly magazine *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* to *Nawa-i-Ghazwat al Hind (Conquest of India)*.³⁵ In Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) used its “propaganda magazine *Mujallah Taliban* to articulate its ideological position on various issues”.³⁶ In Bangladesh, the Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar-al-Islam (AAI) put

²⁶ “Nearly 300 Tajik women and children ready to return home from Syria,” *Asia-Plus*, July 28, 2020, <https://asiaplus.tj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20200728/nearly-300-tajik-women-and-children-ready-to-return-home-from-syria>.

²⁷ Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia”.

²⁸ See the essay by Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Kalicharan Veera Singam, “Maldives”, in this volume.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mahzam and Singh, “Malaysia”.

³¹ Bashar, “Bangladesh”.

³² Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia”.

³³ See the essay by Nodirbek Soliev, “China”, in this volume.

³⁴ “Terrorism Update Details - Ninth-edition-of-is-magazine-‘the-voice-of-hind’-calls-for-jihad,” *South Asian Terrorism Portal*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.satp.org/terrorism-update/ninth-edition-of-is-magazine-‘the-voice-of-hind’-calls-for-jihad>.

³⁵ See the essay by Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Kalicharan Veera Singam, “India”, in this volume.

³⁶ See the essay by Abdul Basit, “Pakistan”, in this volume.

out narratives structured around the *Ghazwatul Hind* or the eschatological last battle of the Indian subcontinent, which would supposedly make Muslims victorious.³⁷ AAI also promoted extremist propaganda through Facebook, Messenger, Whatsapp and other platforms, recruiting young people in the process.³⁸ In the Maldives, a Telegram channel, “TouristWatchMv,” was set up in January that “churned out propaganda in the country” whilst its members were believed to have been involved in stabbing tourists.³⁹ A key radicalising and logistical role was reportedly played by Mohammed Ameen, an extremist preacher.⁴⁰ Meanwhile in Russia, radicalised Central Asians regularly assembled to listen to and discuss online audio and video propaganda preached by extremist ideologues, while in the Uzbek province of Jizzakh, a cell whose leader had reportedly been radicalised by extremist ideologues in Turkey, in turn began recruiting via the Odnoklassniki and Telegram social media networks.⁴¹ In Indonesia, some members of the pro-IS groups Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK), “continued to conduct closed-door sessions for the purpose of ideologically indoctrinating followers”.⁴² In Sri Lanka, investigations following the Easter Sunday attacks last April revealed that some Muslim-majority towns like Kattankudy continue to be “hotbeds for extremist activity” via extremist sermons reportedly delivered in various unregistered mosques and madrassas.⁴³

The Diversity of Terror Financing Mechanisms. A final major trend was the sheer diversity of terror financing mechanisms across the regions surveyed. One fairly common model was seen in Bangladesh, where the proscribed Allahr Dal extremist network had received financial help

from various individuals, including members, working in or running businesses, who provided a percentage of their monthly income to the group.⁴⁴ The Central Asian Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari network employed the *hawala* system to transfer funds, while other Central Asians engaged in robberies and even murder-for-hire operations.⁴⁵ At the same time, the Uyghur-based TIP terrorist network active in Syria reportedly secured funds by “plundering and selling public utility installations such as metal pipes from the Sahl al-Ghab area in Hama countryside”.⁴⁶ Meanwhile the resurgent Jemaah Islamiyah network in Indonesia reportedly modernised its funding model: while JI members still donate 5-10 percent of their monthly salary to the network, at the same time, JI has also developed legitimate businesses.⁴⁷ In the case of Pakistan, despite the passage of new anti-terror financing legislation in 2020, the sustained seriousness of the issue in that country prompted the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to retain Pakistan on its grey-list or the increased monitoring list until February 2021.⁴⁸ Given that funding is the lifeblood for terrorist activity everywhere, close tracking of these diverse and evolving mechanisms across the board remains warranted.

The Impact of COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, the global COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the transnational Islamist terrorism and extremism landscape in 2020. The impact was felt on both the ideological and operational fronts. Ideologically, many Islamist extremist ideologues exploited the pandemic to push out the narrative that the End Times and, hence ultimate victory, were nigh. Thus in Bangladesh, Syed Mostaq bin Arman, a Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)

³⁷ Iftekharul Bashar, “Bangladesh,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2020), p. 47.

³⁸ “Ansar Al Islam militant held,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/09/30/ansar-al-islam-militant-held>.

³⁹ Siyech and Singam, “Maldives”.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia”.

⁴² Rahmah, “Indonesia”.

⁴³ See the essay by Amresh Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka”, in this volume.

⁴⁴ Bashar, “Bangladesh”.

⁴⁵ Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia”.

⁴⁶ Soliev, “China”.

⁴⁷ Amy Chew, “‘US still the target’: Indonesia’s arrest of Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist leader reveals thousands of recruits”, *South China Morning Post*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3113648/us-still-target-indonesias-arrest-jemaah-islamiyah-terrorist>.

⁴⁸ Ayaz Gul, “Global Terror-Funding Watchdog Keeps Pakistan on Gray List,” *Voice of America*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/global-terror-funding-watchdog-keeps-pakistan-gray-list>.

leader, “actively used the COVID-19 pandemic in his propaganda materials, describing it as a sign of the end of time, and urged his followers to prepare to fight the last battles of the end of time”.⁴⁹ Likewise, in the southern Philippines, “terrorist groups’ propaganda” early in the year framed “the pandemic as divine retribution to the ‘kuffar’ (non-believer) government”,⁵⁰ while another Indonesian terrorist leader called the virus an “ally” that would defeat the Indonesian authorities.⁵¹ There were local nuances in messaging though. In Indonesia, local Chinese communities were targets of incendiary Islamist propaganda irrationally blaming China and ethnic Chinese communities around the world for supposedly giving rise to the virus. In Muslim Mindanao, one violent Islamist militant leader, Commander Kagi Karialan, who leads a faction within the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), promoted the notion “that COVID-19 was a government conspiracy to stop Muslims from praying at mosques”.⁵² At times such violent Islamist diatribes surfaced in non-violent – but certainly intolerant and xenophobic – quarters. In Singapore, a local religious teacher claimed that the virus, “which first emerged in China, was God’s retribution against the Chinese for oppressing the Muslim Uighurs in the country’s Xinjiang province”.⁵³

The pandemic impacted the operational efficiency of both security forces and terrorist networks alike. Security forces had to split attention and limited resources between operations to enforce physical lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus and ongoing operations against terrorist networks - a situation quickly exploited by the latter, for

instance, in Iraq, Syria and Muslim Mindanao.⁵⁴ However, the sudden imposition of border controls and lockdown measures also significantly reduced terrorist operating space. Cross-border movement – with the exception of that via unregulated routes such as those in the Tri-Border Area of maritime Southeast Asia – was much tightened, while domestic lockdowns prevented the face-to-face meetings that facilitate the radicalisation of new recruits.⁵⁵ On the other hand, lockdowns also compelled vulnerable individuals to spend more time online, where they were potentially able to immerse themselves even more deeply in violent extremist ideological content - whose output was discernibly ramped up with the onset of the pandemic.⁵⁶ No less important, the pandemic “increased economic hardships and growing social insecurity” throughout the various regions surveyed, thereby laying the foundations for “significant domestic unrest” that could only fuel “radicalisation”. Hence the international community is likely to confront a “Covid-19-driven surge of extremism in the near future”.⁵⁷

Three Extreme Right Movements in 2020

It would be remiss to ignore the key dynamics of three important Extreme Right Movements that characterised the terrorist threat landscape in 2020 as well: those fueled by Buddhist, Hindu and White Nationalist extremism. According to Julia Ebner, while the Extreme Right can usefully be thought of as comprising groups and individuals that espouse “at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy”, the Far-Right can be regarded as referring to the “political manifestation of the extreme

⁴⁹ Bashar, “Bangladesh”.

⁵⁰ See the essay by Kenneth Yeo, “Philippines”, in this volume.

⁵¹ “COVID-19 and The Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT),” *IPAC Short Briefing* No.3, April 28, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/Covid_19_and_MIT.pdf.

⁵² Yeo, “Philippines”.

⁵³ Nasir, “Singapore”, also Alif Chandra, “Religious Teacher under Investigation by MHA, Muis for Post Saying Novel Coronavirus Was Retribution from Allah against Chinese,” *TODAYonline*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/Religious->

[Teacher-under-Investigation-Mha-Muis-Racist-Post-Saying-Novel-Coronavirus-Was](https://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/Religious-Teacher-under-Investigation-Mha-Muis-Racist-Post-Saying-Novel-Coronavirus-Was).

⁵⁴ Kenneth Yeo, “Are Philippines Militants Looking to Take Advantage of COVID-19?” *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/are-philippine-militants-looking-to-take-advantage-of-covid-19/>. See also Azman, “The Islamic State”.

⁵⁵ Halimi and Sudiman, “Religious Extremism”; Rahmah, “Indonesia”; Yeo, “Philippines”.

⁵⁶ Azman, “The Islamic State”.

⁵⁷ Ibid., see also Ilan Berman, “ISIS is Using the COVID Distraction to Re-arm and Regroup,” *USA Today*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/08/28/isis-did-not-disappear-and-now-its-poised-rise-again-amidst-instability-column/5644397002/>.

right”.⁵⁸ The policy implication of Ebner’s arguably persuasive analysis is that the political, non-violent Far-Right is ideologically related, albeit distantly, to the relatively more violent Extreme Right. Certainly, the relatively close nexus between Extreme Right social movements and Far-Right political parties was a distinct feature of Buddhist, Hindu and White Nationalist extremist movements in the regions surveyed in 2020.

In Sri Lanka, the leading Extreme Right Buddhist monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara, who has long been “accused of instigating hate crimes against Muslims in the country” secured a seat in the parliament, on behalf of his Far-Right Our Power of People party.⁵⁹ Gnanasara, leader of the Extreme Right Buddhist movement Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Power Force, has long urged Sinhalese Buddhists to defend their identity and interests against Islamist extremism.⁶⁰ Gnanasara himself alluded to the overlap amongst Buddhist, Hindu and White Nationalist narratives when he asserted in 2019 that his “ideology” was influenced by “Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French Far-Right leader Marine Le Pen - all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and Muslims”.⁶¹ Meanwhile in Myanmar, another Extreme Right Buddhist monk, Ashin

Wirathu, days prior to Myanmar’s November general election, voluntarily surrendered to the police in Myanmar’s commercial capital Yangon.⁶² Wirathu has long been influential over a significant portion of the Bamar Buddhist majority following the country’s transition from military rule in 2011. In several incendiary speeches and sermons given over the years, he has regularly targeted Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslim minority.⁶³ Despite Wirathu’s arrest, Myanmar’s 2020 election saw Rohingyas almost completely excluded from participating.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, members of the Extreme Right Buddhist movement Ma Ba Tha openly campaigned for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).⁶⁵ The Far-Right orientation of the USDP was somewhat reflected in its exploitation of the race and religion card during the campaigning, further suggesting that the politicisation of Buddhism in Myanmar will persist.⁶⁶

Furthermore in India, the same close nexus between Extreme Right social movements and Far-Right political parties continued to be seen. The Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) government remained very much in sync with the broader Extreme Right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) social movement – characterised as “the holding company of Hindu supremacism” or “Hindutva” ideology.⁶⁷ The BJP is widely

⁵⁸ Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 288.

⁵⁹ “Firebrand Buddhist Monk Gets Seat in Sri Lanka parliament”, *New Straits Times*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/region/2020/08/614874/firebrand-buddhist-monk-gets-seat-sri-lanka-parliament>.

⁶⁰ Jeff Kingston, “Sri Lanka’s Firebrand Monk Invokes Muslim Menace”, *Japan Times*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/06/17/commentary/sri-lankas-firebrand-monk-invokes-muslim-menace/>.

⁶¹ Adrian Lim, “Political Movements Misusing and Abusing Religion: Academic”, *Straits Times*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/political-movements-misusing-and-abusing-religion-academic>.

⁶² “Myanmar fugitive monk Wirathu hands himself in to face sedition charges”, *Reuters*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-election-monk/myanmar-fugitive-monk-wirathu-hands-himself-in-to-face-sedition-charges-idUKKBN27117T>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ For details see, Wai Wai Nu, “Myanmar Went To the Polls for the Second Time Since the End of Military Rule but the Election Was Not Free or Fair,” *Time*, November 12, 2020, <https://time.com/5910739/myanmar-election-rohingya/>; also see Matthew Smith, “For Myanmar’s Elections to Be Free and Fair Rohingya Must Get the Right to Vote,” *Time*, July 27, 2020, <https://time.com/5872096/myanmar-2020-national-election-rohingya-vote/>.

⁶⁵ Khin Moh Moh Lwin, “Ma Ba Tha nationalists hold pre-election rally to ‘protect national religion’,” *Myanmar Now*, November 8, 2020, <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ma-ba-tha-nationalists-hold-pre-election-rally-to-protect-national-religion>.

⁶⁶ San Yamin Aung, “Military and USDP Play Nationalism Card Ahead of Myanmar’s Election,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/military-usdp-play-nationalism-card-ahead-myanmars-election.html>.

⁶⁷ Samanth Subramaniam, “How Hindu Supremacists are Tearing India Apart”, *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/20/hin>

regarded as the “political wing” of the RSS.⁶⁸ The continued mainstreaming of Hindutva perspectives into India’s national politics in 2020 contributed to several incidents that appeared to target the country’s Muslim community, such as the Delhi riots in February 2020 against the backdrop of the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests.⁶⁹ The CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) were criticized as forms of official BJP government discrimination against Muslims. At the same time, the government’s “unilateral revocation of Kashmir’s semi-autonomous status and the subsequent decision to allow non-residents to purchase properties in Kashmir” as well as the attacks on the Tablighi Jamaat missionary movement - and even ordinary Muslims - for allegedly ignoring safe distancing measures and contributing to the spread of COVID-19, reinforced the Hindutva line that Muslims were an existential threat to the Hindu majority in India.⁷⁰

Extreme Right White Nationalist movements are a complex, continually evolving, if fragmented, phenomenon - a trend clearly discernible in 2020 as well. The movement continued to be an at-times bewildering amalgam of White nationalists, racists, anti-government militias, misogynists, anti-globalisers, and anti-vaxxers, amongst others, seeking “to capitalise on the global social and political upheaval” – including the current pandemic – “to advance intolerant ideas and in some cases inflict violence”.⁷¹ According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 67 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks and plots in the

U.S. between January 1 and August 31, 2020 were carried out by right-wing extremists.⁷² Meanwhile in the UK, security services reported in 2020 that out of the 27 late-stage terrorist attack plots in Great Britain disrupted by MI5 and CT Policing since 2017, 8 have been right wing extremist.⁷³ One important strand of the White Nationalist Extreme Right that is very much in common with its Buddhist and Hindu ideological counterparts is the notion of an existential threat to core group identity, in this case, White European identity.

According to this discourse, a supposed “White Genocide” is underway perpetrated by non-White European groups - Muslims, Jews, Hispanics for instance - through a combination of stronger, insular and unassimilable in-group identities, lax national immigration policies and greater relative fertility rates. Hence there is a so-called “Great Replacement” of the White European races ongoing that urgently needs to be thwarted.⁷⁴ While such notions have certainly fuelled violent Extreme Right attacks such as the New Zealand mosque shootings in 2019, they have been increasingly mainstreamed into Far-Right political discourse as well. For example, the European Far-Right political parties portray themselves as the “defenders of European values, culture, and civilization”,⁷⁵ while slogans such as “Europe for Europeans”, a “pure Europe”, a “white bastion of civilization”, have been increasingly prevalent.⁷⁶ In 2020, it was clear that dealing with “the extreme right threat” – across all three extremisms - has proven “deeply complicated for states”; precisely

[du-supremacists-nationalism-tearing-india-apart-modi-bjp-rss-jnu-attacks.](#)

⁶⁸ Lauren Frayer and Furkan Latif Khan, “The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise Of Hindu Nationalism In India”, *NPR*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>.

⁶⁹ “What Is CAA, Citizenship Amendment Act? What Is It and Why Is It Seen as a Problem? Everything You Need to Know,” *The Economic Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/et-explains/citizenship-amendment-bill-what-does-it-do-and-why-is-it-seen-as-a-problem/articleshow/72436995.cms?from=mdr>.

⁷⁰ Siyech and Singam, “India”.

⁷¹ See the essay by Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, “Persistence of Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in the West” in this volume.

⁷² Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Nicholas Harrington, Grace Hwang and James Suber, “The War Comes Home. The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>.

⁷³ Address by MI5 Director General Ken McCallum, October 14, 2020, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-makes-first-public-address>.

⁷⁴ Dirk A. Moses, “White Genocide” and the Ethics of Public Analysis”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2019), pp. 201-213.

⁷⁵ Sertan Akbaba, “Re-Narrating Europe in the Face of Populism: An Analysis of the Anti-Immigration Discourse of Populist Party Leaders”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer 2018), p. 205.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

because of the “bleed into the political mainstream”, the “problem becomes very difficult to isolate and eradicate” neatly and surgically.⁷⁷

Going Forward: Nuanced State Responses Needed

Given the challenging transnational terrorism and extremism landscape in 2020, how should governments and other relevant stakeholders respond? The following preliminary observations appear pertinent. First, there should be a judicious blend of *hard, short-term counter-terrorist* and *softer medium to longer-term counter-terrorism* approaches to deal comprehensively with the full spectrum of the threat.⁷⁸ Second, there is a growing need to better understand how the ideological ecosystems that propagate the extremist ideologies that sustain terrorist and support networks operate - including the scarcely understood role of ostensibly non-violent but intolerant individuals, social media platforms, institutions, amongst other “nodes”.

Hard Approaches Remain Needed. A scan of State responses across the regions surveyed in 2020 suggests that national-level hard approaches – involving various combinations of military, police, legislative and administrative instruments – did achieve significant tactical results. Regional forces all attained battlefield, counterinsurgency and/or law enforcement successes against various combinations of violent Islamist insurgents and terrorists in their respective territories. In Pakistan, the relatively straightforward measure of the construction of border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran - work that persisted despite the pandemic - appeared to have a salutary effect on the security situation.⁷⁹ China, on the other hand,

employed more hi-tech means, including “facial recognition, iris scanners, DNA collection and artificial intelligence to predict suspicious behaviour”.⁸⁰ Some state hard approaches appeared especially calibrated, where military and police power were meshed with strong laws and guiding strategic frameworks to ensure that tactical successes were consolidated. Hence, in Sri Lanka, the new Rajapaksa government’s aggressive response to the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019 led to a significant number of arrests under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, while a new National Intelligence Act was passed to strengthen national intelligence agencies, alongside the revamp of the top leadership of the State Intelligence Service (SIS), Sri Lanka’s top intelligence agency.⁸¹

In 2020, long-standing internal security legislation in Singapore continued to be applied with circumspection against individuals showing support for violent Islamist causes, particularly in the wake of the Samuel Paty beheading-inspired violence in France and elsewhere.⁸² In the Philippines, a more potent Anti-Terrorism Act was passed in July, replacing the older and less effective Human Security Act. The new Act provided greater powers to the authorities although some human rights groups raised concerns about the new law’s more expansive remit.⁸³ Concerns about anti-terrorism legislation were also observed in Indonesia, where as prescribed under the revised 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law, newer legislation proposed to enhance the role of the military (TNI) in countering terrorism was criticised. It was argued that the new legislation could potentially obfuscate instead of clarify the respective roles of the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), the TNI, the National Intelligence Agency (BIN) as

⁷⁷ Pantucci and Ong, “Persistence of Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in the West”.

⁷⁸ Hard, short term counter-*terrorist* approaches attempt to curtail terrorist activities, while softer, medium to longer term counter-*terrorism* approaches attempt to diminish the underlying conditions that produce terrorists in the first place. See Kumar Ramakrishna, “US Strategy in Southeast Asia: Counter-Terrorist or Counter-Terrorism?” in *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia*, ed. by Kumar Ramakrishna and See Seng Tan (Singapore: World Scientific/Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2003), p. 306.

⁷⁹ Basit, “Pakistan”.

⁸⁰ “Big data used to detain minorities in Xinjiang: US rights group,” *The Straits Times*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/big-data-used-to-detain-minorities-in-xinjiang-us-rights-group>.

⁸¹ Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka”.

⁸² Nasir, “Singapore”.

⁸³ Yeo, “Philippines”. See also Philippines article. Rommel C. Banlaoi, “The Philippines’ New Anti-Terrorism Law: Fighting Terrorism With Justice - Analysis,” *Eurasia Review* (blog), June 5, 2020, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/05062020-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law-fighting-terrorism-with-justice-analysis/>.

well as the Police - thereby hampering the “effectiveness of counter terror operations”.⁸⁴ That said, in Malaysia, apart from its relatively strong anti-terrorism legislation and security agencies, a significant and potentially positive development in 2020 was the government’s announcement of plans to formalise a Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy (MCSS) 2020-2024 to *inter alia*, combat the terrorist threat, particularly the use of the Internet and social media platforms for terrorist propaganda, terrorist fund-raising and recruitment as priorities.⁸⁵

“Hard” approaches to counter terrorist activities also cover security and intelligence collaboration within and between states as well as other relevant international actors. In this regard, a notable and positive development in Malaysia in 2020 was UNODC’s Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) consultation with Malaysian criminal justice practitioners to explore the potential threats and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁶ Another positive move was the conclusion of a Strategic Cooperation Agreement Note between the Royal Malaysia Police and the Malaysian Armed Forces on 7 October 2020 on the implementation of Operation *Cegah Pati Daratan*, a joint exercise aimed mainly at securing the waters off East Malaysia bordering the Philippines and Indonesia.⁸⁷ Such national interagency cooperation complemented cross-border arrangements to strengthen monitoring of the Tri-Border Area, such as in March, when the Western Mindanao Command (Westmincom) of the Philippines hosted the Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Security Conference.⁸⁸ Additionally, an INTERPOL-led operation codenamed ‘Maharlika III’ was conducted from 24 February to 20 March 2020 in the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (BIMP) region.⁸⁹ The operation underscored the strategic importance of securing travel routes and continued regional cooperation

amongst the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in combating terrorism.⁹⁰ Likewise, in Central Asia, regional governments increasingly sought international collaboration on counter-terrorism matters with the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁹¹

Soft Approaches Remain an Important Part of the Policy Mix. It was equally clear in 2020 though that an over-reliance on hard approaches may deliver short-term tactical successes at the expense of longer term strategic and political gains. Without sustained and simultaneous efforts to deal with the underlying causes of extremism and terrorism, states would have to continually cope with an exhausting, continually regenerating supply of violent extremists and terrorist networks. This observation was reinforced in Pakistan, where the “TTP’s resilient nature and regenerative capacity in evolving and fluid operational environment” meant that it could not “be tackled only through kinetic means”; rather, “a more holistic view of these groups and their overall aims” was clearly critical in “devising a condition-centric, instead of a group-centric”, hard, counter-terrorist approach.⁹² A scan of the threat landscape in 2020, moreover, also drove home the point that when it comes to medium to longer-term soft approaches, there is no universal one-size-fits-all approach, but rather contextualised and organic policy responses, involving governments and other relevant stakeholders was necessary.

In this regard, a key aspect of a nuanced state response that suggested itself based on the threat landscape in 2020 was the continuing need to address the systemic and long-standing social, economic and political grievances that fuel violent extremist ideologies of all stripes. Thus while “societal

⁸⁴ Rahmah, “Indonesia”.

⁸⁵ “Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy,” October 13, 2020, p 38, <https://asset.mkn.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/MalaysiaCyberSecurityStrategy2020-2024.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Mahzam and Singh, “Malaysia”.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Teofilo Garcia, Jr., “Westmincom Hosts IndoMalPhi Trilateral Security Conference”, *Philippines News Agency*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1095688>.

⁸⁹ “Hundreds arrested in crackdown on terrorist routes in Southeast Asia,” *Interpol*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Hundreds-arrested-in-crackdown-on-terrorist-routes-in-Southeast-Asia>.

⁹⁰ Mahzam and Singh, “Malaysia”.

⁹¹ Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia”.

⁹² Basit, “Pakistan”.

disaffection over poor governance, the lack of democratic rights and freedoms, little public accountability, widespread corruption, and poor living conditions have surged across the Middle East region, from Iran to Lebanon to Algeria”,⁹³ in Myanmar, it was observed that the State’s counter-insurgency campaigns “need to be re-calibrated to prioritise the protection of civilians”, while “greater political dialogue between the state and the various rebel groups operating in Rakhine State” need to be further explored.⁹⁴ In 2020, moreover, while the Indian army achieved significant tactical success, “at the strategic level, the government efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiri people had been inadequate”.⁹⁵ In Afghanistan, it is by no means certain that the Taliban-US peace agreement inked in February, ostensibly ending almost twenty years of fighting, will bring positive results for that country and the wider region. It remains unclear if “future talks will actually move forward, addressing the distrust and divergent world views of the different stakeholders”.⁹⁶ On the one hand, while the US desires to expedite troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and the government in Kabul seeks to consolidate a constitutional republic based on a popular mandate, “the Taliban are using the peace talks to buy time in achieving its goal of re-establishing an Islamic Emirate after driving the infidels (foreigners) away”.⁹⁷ At the same time, while Beijing insisted that its centralised vocational training centres and employment schemes were alleviating poverty among the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, many Western countries criticised the Chinese approach and “alleged that Uyghur minorities are working under coercive conditions” - though some other countries supported these controversial measures as well.⁹⁸

In southern Thailand, meanwhile, peace negotiations with the BRN insurgents continued to be hampered by intra-governmental disagreements: while the army’s long-held view has been that the southern conflict is a criminal issue, “and the

BRN and other insurgencies in the area do not have legitimate grievances”, the government “supports the idea of face-to-face talks with all the long-standing separatist movements”.⁹⁹ These disagreements, coupled with the Thai military’s strong kinetic-focused counterinsurgency approach in the South, as well as divisions within the insurgent movement itself, continue to fuel violent extremist narratives and activity.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, in Muslim Mindanao, it was observed that while the Philippines military “has made significant strides in weakening the military capabilities of terrorist groups over the past year”, they “now have to increase their attention towards winning the hearts and minds of the communities ravaged by the ongoing armed conflict in Mindanao”.¹⁰¹ In particular, the large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who had to flee the fighting in Marawi during the siege of the city by pro-IS groups in 2017 remain a concern as their current conditions “could create conditions for IS to again recruit into its networks and sow discord”.¹⁰² The economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as elsewhere, has only exacerbated matters.¹⁰³ Going forward, it would be pretty much axiomatic that the resolution of the COVID-19 pandemic can only have positive knock-on effects on politics, society and the economy across the broad – which in turn would have salutary effects on the CT/PCVE fronts as well.

Another important key aspect of the soft approach going forward must be continuing investment in effective strategies for rehabilitation and reintegration of terrorists and returning foreign fighters. In Central Asia, such programmes were declared as a work-in-progress, while in the Maldives, the police sought capacity-building assistance from civil society organisations, INTERPOL and other regional agencies on, *inter alia*, “improving measures to help the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign fighters in the Maldives”.¹⁰⁴ Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia’s “deradicalisation

⁹³ Saikal, “The Middle East”.

⁹⁴ See the essay by Iftekharul Bashar, “Myanmar” in this volume.

⁹⁵ Siyech and Singam, “India”.

⁹⁶ See the essay by Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, “Afghanistan”, in this volume.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Soliev, “China”.

⁹⁹ See the essay by Don Pathan, “Thailand”, in this volume.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Yeo, “Philippines”.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Siyech and Singam, “Maldives”.

programmes in prisons” were partially conducted via video conferencing for several months”, but were hampered by “poor internet connectivity and the lack of an adequate digital infrastructure in each prison housing terrorist inmates”.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the effectiveness of the “deradicalisation programme run by BNPT” remained under scrutiny given the “continued instances of recidivism in 2020” - suggesting that Indonesian rehabilitation and reintegration programs also very much remained a work-in-progress.¹⁰⁶ Across the Malacca Strait, a constructive development was UNODC-Malaysian consultations to identify legal and policy measures to address “the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their families”, while “involving local communities and civil society organisations”, as well as “strengthening the role of women and youth in initiatives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism”.¹⁰⁷ More generally, it could be said that going forward, truly effective terrorist and returnee rehabilitation and reintegration programs must require a comprehensive and holistic strategy that includes the provision of “post-release employment opportunities, programmes to facilitate the re-integration of ex-inmates with their families and communities, as well as the provision of continued religious counselling”.¹⁰⁸

More fundamentally, there appears a need for such rehabilitation and reintegration efforts to be rooted in an *alternative strategic narrative*: precisely because the Qur’an “carries with it the potential to be relevant to the new and emerging needs of Muslims in the contemporary context and has the capacity to accommodate new and changing societal circumstances as it did in the past”.¹⁰⁹ “The contextualist reading of the Qur’an”, which is fully and authentically “deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition”, remains the way forward.¹¹⁰

Finally, the survey of the threat landscape in 2020 revealed the need for more granular understanding of how the ideological ecosystems that propagate the extremist ideologies that sustain terrorist and support networks operate. As seen, a considerable diversity and combination of ideological transmission “nodes” exist, ranging from Net-savvy charismatic individual influencers and organisations, to political parties, to online publications and social media platforms, to physical closed-door study sessions - a list that is by no means comprehensive. It would be important to perhaps map out how the nodes of these various ideological ecosystems interconnect, not just within but across the regions surveyed. Furthermore, related to this, it would be important to analyse and better understand the nexus between mainstream, ostensibly non-violent but intolerant political and religious influencers and violent extremist networks. As seen, within the Extreme Right domain, supposedly non-violent individual influencers and entities were at times linked to actual outbreaks of out-group violence. Moreover, there is evidence that a similar nexus exists in the Islamist domain as well. Hence in the Maldives, it did not go unnoticed that increased terrorist activities in 2020 came “amidst the growing appeal of more exclusivist versions of Salafism which is gradually replacing the non-fundamentalist and tolerant Islamic traditions in the Maldives”.¹¹¹ It was observed that “in addition to contemporary terrorist influences”, the “Wahabi and Salafi teachings that originated from Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the last few decades have increased the appeal for a puritanical Islam and possibly contributed to the ingress of IS in the archipelago”.¹¹² While the ostensible links between non-violent if puritanical Salafism and violent Islamist extremists, remains a controversial issue, the debate appears as relevant as ever going forward.¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ Rahmah, “Indonesia”.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., also Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, “Does Indonesia’s Deradicalization Program Work?,” *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/does-indonesias-deradicalization-program-work/>.

¹⁰⁷ Mahzam and Singh, “Malaysia”.

¹⁰⁸ Rahmah, “Indonesia”.

¹⁰⁹ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur’an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, New York, 2014), 79.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 182-183.

¹¹¹ Siyech and Singam, “Maldives”; also Sudha Ramachandran, “The Maldives: Losing a Tourist Paradise to Terrorism,” *Refworld*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56a7913b4.html>.

¹¹² Siyech and Singam, “Maldives”.

¹¹³ Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism: ‘Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters’,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore

INDONESIA

The number of terrorist attacks and plots in Indonesia reduced to seven and eight respectively in 2020, compared with eight attacks and ten foiled plots recorded in 2019. The decrease can be attributed to several factors. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited some aspects of the militants' physical interactions and movements. Second, the extensive Counter-Terrorism (CT) operations conducted by state security agencies have yielded several arrests and weapons hauls. Third, the apparent absence of financial assistance and instructions from Indonesian Islamic State (IS) foreign fighters based in Syria to local networks. While the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and East Mujahideen Indonesia (MIT) groups continue to dominate the terrorist landscape, foiled plots attributed to pro-Al-Qaeda Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) members, also indicate a possible return of the group to a violent path.

COVID-19 and Terrorism Landscape in Indonesia

COVID-19 has impacted the terrorism landscape in Indonesia in a number of ways. Firstly, it has limited physical interactions and radicalisation activities among militants. In the Indonesian context, the organisation of offline meetings, including religious study sessions, *i'dad* (physical training) as well as bomb-making and firearm-assembling activities, are crucial components in the

process of fostering radicalisation, and an individual's turn to violence.¹¹⁴ Restrictions on movements imposed by the government to contain the spread of the coronavirus over the past year significantly impeded the organisation of such activities and, in turn, the militants' attack preparations.

Nevertheless, terrorist activity has persisted, despite the operational limitations. In June 2020, a sword yielding militant, Abdul Rahman, killed an Indonesian policeman and critically injured another in an IS-linked attack in Daha, South Kalimantan. It later emerged that in the period prior, Rahman had gathered two men to craft a home-made samurai sword, which he later used as the attack weapon.¹¹⁵ Separately, members of JAD cells based in Batang, Central Java¹¹⁶ and Riau, Sumatra, respectively, congregated to assemble explosive materials in preparation of launching attacks.¹¹⁷ Some members of JAD and Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK), another pro-IS militant group, also continued to conduct closed-door sessions for the purpose of ideologically indoctrinating followers.¹¹⁸

Radical groups in Indonesia, including the JAD, which is the largest terrorist network in the country, have exploited the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to propagate a variety of narratives aimed at recruiting new members and inciting supporters to violence. In some instances, pro-IS groups and individuals have promoted an apocalyptic narrative of the pandemic, resulting in them

¹¹⁴ Unaesah Rahmah, "The Medan Suicide Attack: Enablers of Radicalism," *RSIS Commentary*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/the-medan-suicide-attack-enablers-of-radicalism/#.X1cxYHkza70>.

¹¹⁵ "2 Terduga Teroris Penyerang Polsek Daha Selatan Dibekuk Polisi," *Tirto.id*, June 8, 2020, <https://tirto.id/2-terduga-teroris-penyerang-polsek-daha-selatan-dibekuk-polisi-fF6H>.

¹¹⁶ Yakub Prytama Wijayaaymaja, "Teroris Batang Sudah Uji Coba Bom," *Media Indonesia*, March 31, 2020,

<https://mediaindonesia.com/read/detail/300041-teroris-batang-sudah-uji-coba-bom>.

¹¹⁷ "Selama 1-11 Agustus 2020, Densus 88 Tangkap 10 Terduga Teroris di 3 Provinsi," *Kompas.com*, August 24, 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/08/24/17541951/selama-1-11-agustus-2020-densus-88-tangkap-10-terduga-teroris-di-3-provinsi?page=all>.

¹¹⁸ V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman, "Security Implications of COVID-19 for Indonesia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, (April 2020), p.13.

opting to suspend portions of their activity. This is despite repeated calls by IS Central urging its affiliates worldwide to exploit the fact that governments are caught up trying to combat the coronavirus, and carry out more attacks.¹¹⁹ By contrast, some smaller groups and individuals, including networks linked to the MIT, have themselves attempted to seize on the uncertain environment to make opportunistic calls for attacks.¹²⁰

Group Strategy

Pro-IS Groups

For the most part, networks affiliated with both the JAD and MIT, among the groups that have been in the spotlight in previous terrorist incidents in Indonesia in recent years, have continued to orchestrate attacks. Compared to MIT, which has focused on orchestrating small-scale attacks around its base in Poso, Central Sulawesi, JAD's networks are dispersed around the country. In 2020, four attacks and four plots linked to JAD operatives were recorded in Kalimantan, Sumatra and Java, and followed a pattern of less lethal attacks in recent years that only resulted in minor casualties. In many instances, these only killed the perpetrators.

In a broader sense, with the exception of the 2016 Jakarta attacks and the Surabaya church bombings two years later, which were complex, dramatic and deadly, JAD's attacks in recent years have generally been poorly planned and orchestrated by low-skilled perpetrators. The group's low-fatality attacks has been attributed to its adoption of a decentralised organisational structure.¹²¹ According to experts, the lack of a centralised training unit within the JAD, due to its decentralised model, hinders operational

skills-transfer between cells or individual members, including bomb and weapon assembly.¹²² Yet JAD continues to maintain a decentralised strategy, partly to circumvent the extensive CT operations conducted around the country. Meanwhile, JAK remained active in 2020 in recruiting, training and fundraising, although unlike JAD and MIT, it refrained from perpetrating attacks. JAK has sought to adopt a "patient" approach, in order to build operational capacity as well as shield members from possible capture by the authorities.¹²³

Pro-AQ Jemaah Islamiyah

In similar vein, the pro-Al-Qaeda JI group, particularly under the leadership of Para Wijayanto over the past decade until his arrest in 2019, has focused on building up its *dakwah* (preaching), *i'dad* (physical training) and education activities as well as rebuilding its economic and human resource capacities, rather than waging militant jihad. JI, it appears, has learnt from previous experiences (the group was responsible for Indonesia's major terrorist attacks from 1999 to 2010), and inferred that it could not conduct *amaliyat* (attacks) in Indonesia without risking the decimation of its network, as well as the imprisonment of its prominent members.¹²⁴ There is also a belief that JI currently has insufficient military capability as well as community support to realise its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state in the country.¹²⁵ However, JI's strategy of *dakwah* before jihad (or jihad later) does not mean it has renounced violence entirely. Instead, it appears that JI has merely been postponing a resumption of violence, until it feels confident in its operational capacity.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ IPAC, "COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia," *IPAC Short Briefing No.1*, April 2, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/COVID-19_and_ISIS_fixed.pdf.

¹²⁰ Zachary Abuza and Alif Satria, "How Are Indonesia's Terrorist Groups Weathering the Pandemic?" *The Diplomat*, June 23, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/how-are-indonesias-terrorist-groups-weathering-the-pandemic/>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman, "The Quite Threat of Indonesia's Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah," *The Diplomat*, August 11, 2020,

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/the-quiet-threat-of-indonesias-jamaah-ansharul-khilafah/>.

¹²⁴ Julie Chernov Hwang, "Dakwah Before Jihad: Understanding the Behavior of Jemaah Islamiyah," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.41, Issue 1, April 2019

¹²⁵ V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, "Jemaah Islamiyah on The Brink of Splintering?" *Indonesia at Melbourne*, November 2, 2020, <https://indonesiatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/jemaah-islamiah-on-the-brink-of-splintering/>.

¹²⁶ Julie Chernov Hwang, "Dakwah Before Jihad: Understanding the Behavior of Jemaah Islamiyah," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.41, Issue 1, April 2019

In August, a terrorist plot to attack shop owners in ethnic Chinese communities in West Java, was foiled by the police. Law enforcement arrested 17 members of the group before the planned attacks could be executed. Several firearms and hundreds of bullets were recovered in the operation. The plot indicates elements within JI are prepared to adopt a “jihad now” policy by planning and carrying out attacks similarly done by pro-IS groups in Indonesia, such as JAD and MIT, in the near term. The arrest of Arif, who succeeded Para for eight months before the former was arrested around October 2020,¹²⁷ coupled with uncertainty over whether the next JI leader can unify the organisation in the manner Wijayanto did, risks JI’s further splintering, a prospect that favors the emergence of more militant sub-factions prepared to carry out a “jihad now” policy.¹²⁸

In recent years, JI’s *i’dad* has included sending some of its members for combat training overseas, including with the Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliated rebel group based in Syria.¹²⁹ These combat missions ranged from several months to two years. In August 2020, a JI member who manned the training, education and deployment of its cadres to Syria, was arrested.¹³⁰ Another member who was responsible for recruitment was also arrested in West Java in June 2020.¹³¹ In terms of weaponry, JI’s attack

preparations continue, evident by the April arrest of an operative named Abdullah. He had attempted to transfer a stash of firearms and ammunition from Surabaya, East Java, to West Java after buying the weapons from military personnel in Malang, East Java for an estimated Rp 200 million (US\$14,000).¹³²

Attacks, Tactics and Weapons

In 2020, there were at least seven attacks and eight foiled terrorist plots around the country. As in recent years, stabbings were the most preferred tactic, followed by shootings and bombings. The most recent bombing attack in February 2020 – involving the use of a pipe bomb – was perpetrated by Wahyu Firmansyah, a fugitive also wanted for his involvement in a stabbing attack in Bogo Rejo village, Jambi, last year.¹³³ The February bombing wounded a police officer.¹³⁴

There were a further four foiled bombing plots in 2020. In one instance, a JAD cell in Batang had experimented with explosive material¹³⁵ and also planned to rob shops owned by Indonesian Chinese in Central Java.¹³⁶ Another JAD cell in Riau had also allegedly assembled explosives, and planned to plant a bomb inside a food cart carrying *cilok* (skewered tapioca balls). The cart was owned by a group member who was a *cilok*

¹²⁷ Amy Chew, “Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist leader under arrest in Indonesia, security sources say,” *South China Morning Post*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3113448/al-qaeda-linked-terrorist-leader-under-arrest-indonesia-security>.

¹²⁸ V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, “Jemaah Islamiyah on The Brink of Splintering?” *Indonesia at Melbourne*, November 2, 2020, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/jemaah-islamiah-on-the-brink-of-splintering>.

¹²⁹ Julie Chernov Hwang, “Dakwah Before Jihad: Understanding the Behavior of Jemaah Islamiyah,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.41, Issue 1, April 2019.

¹³⁰ “Densus 88 Menangkap 10 Terduga Teroris Selama 1-10 Agustus 2020,” *Tempo.Co*, August 24, 2020, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1379022/densus-88-menangkap-10-terduga-teroris-selama-1-10-agustus-2020>.

¹³¹ “Terduga Teroris yang Ditangkap di Cirebon adalah Perekrut Kader JI,” *Ayo Cirebon.com*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.ayocirebon.com/read/2020/06/09/5643/terduga-teroris-yang-ditangkap-di-cirebon-adalah-perekrut-kader-ji>.

¹³² Farouk Arnaz, “Indonesian Police Detect Resurgence of Jemaah Islamiyah,” *Jakarta Globe*, June 15, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesian-police-detect-resurgence-of-jemaah-islamiah>.

¹³³ “Siapa Sebenarnya Wahyu Firmansyah? Terduga Teroris di Jambi Tusuk Anggota Densus 88,” *Tribun Jambi*, December 21, 2019, <https://jambi.tribunnews.com/2019/12/21/siapa-sebenarnya-wahyu-firmansyah-terduga-teroris-di-jambi-tusuk-anggota-densus-88?page=2>.

¹³⁴ “Terduga Teroris di Riau Lempar Bom Pipa sebelum Dilumpuhkan Polisi,” *Tirto.id*, February 10, 2020, <https://tirto.id/terduga-teroris-di-riau-lempar-bom-pipa-sebelum-dilumpuhkan-polisi-ex6E>.

¹³⁵ “Polri: Teroris JAD di Batang Rencanakan Aksi Teror, Sudah Uji Coba Bom,” *Detik News*, March 30, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4958375/polri-teroris-jad-di-batang-rencanakan-aksi-teror-sudah-uji-coba-bom>.

¹³⁶ Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, “How Covid-19 is Reshaping Terror Threats in Indonesia,” *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-covid-19-is-reshaping-terror-threats-in-indonesia/>.

seller.¹³⁷ In addition, the group had also planned a suicide attack.¹³⁸ Zulfikar, who was previously deported from Turkey for attempting to join IS in the Middle East theatre, was found in possession of explosive materials and firearms, indicating he was planning a bombing and shooting plot.¹³⁹ Another pro-IS militant, Taufik Ramadani, was also found to have dabbled with explosive materials, possibly in anticipation of launching an attack in East Java.¹⁴⁰

The series of arrests made in 2020 again revealed a continued preference for shootings and stabbings as a *modus operandi* by the terrorists. During the year, Indonesian police confiscated more sharp weapons and firearms than explosive materials from terrorist suspects. From January to October 2020, Detachment 88, the special counter-terror unit of the police, seized firearms and ammunition in several cities including Kuansing (Riau),¹⁴¹ Serang (Banten),¹⁴² Surabaya (East Java),¹⁴³ Tasikmalaya (West Java),¹⁴⁴ Bekasi (West

Java),¹⁴⁵ and Kendari (Southeast Sulawesi).¹⁴⁶

In some cases, the perpetrators used a combination of attack tactics. For example, Abdul Rahman, who attacked the Daha police station in South Kalimantan province, used a combination of arson and stabbing when he burned a patrol car and stabbed a policeman with a sword.¹⁴⁷ The attack followed a similar pattern to previous ones involving Ivan Armadi Hasugian and Suliono, who in 2016 and 2018 respectively, had conducted stabbings while simultaneously carrying bombs, although on each occasion, they failed to explode. In November 2020, operatives linked to the MIT group, for the first time used a combination of mutilation, a beheading and arson in an attack on a Christian family in Central Sulawesi.¹⁴⁸

For JI, its members appear to have pursued a strategy of chaos management (a term used by the Indonesian police), a tactic which leverages attack opportunities during periods of chaos. As shown in the plot in Serang

¹³⁷ Rizal Harahap, "Five Suspected Terrorists with Alleged Ties to JAD Arrested in Riau," *The Jakarta Post*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/08/13/five-suspected-terrorists-with-alleged-ties-to-jad-arrested-in-riau.html>.

¹³⁸ "Tim Densus Berhasil Tangkap 10 Terduga Teroris di Tiga Provinsi, Termasuk Seorang Mahasiswa," August 25, 2020, <https://jambi.tribunnews.com/2020/08/25/tim-densus-berhasil-tangkap-10-terduga-teroris-di-tiga-provinsi-termasuk-seorang-mahasiswa?page=2>.

¹³⁹ Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, "How Covid-19 is Reshaping Terror Threats in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-covid-19-is-reshaping-terror-threats-in-indonesia/>.

¹⁴⁰ "Tertangkap Bolang Terduga Teroris, Dituduh Densus 88, Sosok Penyusun Serangan Teror Kepada TNI-Polri," *Tribun Manado*, August 26, 2020, <https://manado.tribunnews.com/2020/08/26/tertangkap-bolang-terduga-teroris-dituduh-densus-88-sosok-penyusun-serangan-teror-kepada-tni-polri?page=all>.

¹⁴¹ "Terduga Teroris Ditangkap di Kuansing, Ditemukan Tiga Pucuk Senjata Api dan Ratusan Peluru," *RiauPos*, January 12, 2020, <https://riaupos.jawapos.com/kuantan-singingi/12/01/2020/220199/terduga-teroris-ditangkap-di-kuansing-ditemukan-tiga-pucuk-senjata-api-dan-ratusan-peluru.html>.

¹⁴² "Tangkap 3 Teroris di Serang, Densus Sita Senpi dan Anak Panah," *CNN Indonesia*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/202004272>.

[01132-12-497845/tangkap-3-teroris-di-serang-densus-sita-senpi-dan-anak-panah](https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/202004272).

¹⁴³ "Terduga Teroris Ditangkap, Polri Sita Tiga Senpi dan Amunisi," *Republika*, April 24, 2020, <https://republika.co.id/berita/q9997s354/terduga-teroris-ditangkap-polri-sita-tiga-senpi-dan-amunisi>.

¹⁴⁴ "Densus 88 Geledah 2 Rumah Terduga Teroris di Tasikmalaya, Ditemukan Senjata Rakitan dan Panah," *Kompas*, May 13, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/05/13/15421601/densus-88-geledah-2-rumah-terduga-teroris-di-tasikmalaya-ditemukan-senjata-rakitan-dan-panah>.

¹⁴⁵ "Tangkap 4 Teroris di Bekasi, Densus 88 Sita Buku Jihad dan Senjata Api," *Poskota*, October 5, 2020, <https://poskota.co.id/2020/10/5/tangkap-4-teroris-di-bekasi-densus-88-sita-buku-jihad-dan-senjata-api>.

¹⁴⁶ "Densus 88 Tangkap 4 Terduga Teroris JAD di Kendari," *OkeNews*, April 15, 2020, <https://nasional.okezone.com/read/2020/04/15/337/2199375/densus-88-tangkap-4-terduga-teroris-jad-di-kendari>.

¹⁴⁷ "Pelaku Serahkan Rp 1.8 Juta Ke Orangtua Untuk Pemakaman Sebelum Serang Maolsek di Kalsel," *Kompas.com*, June 03, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/06/03/16100021/pelaku-serahkan-rp-1-8-juta-ke-orangtua-untuk-pemakaman-sebelum-serang?page=all>.

¹⁴⁸ Rully Satriadi and Jeis Montessori, "Islamist Terrorists Kill Four Salvation Army Members in C. Sulawesi, Manhunt Launched," November 29, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/islamist-terrorists-kill-four-salvation-army-members-in-c-sulawesi-manhunt-launched>.

(Banten) and Tasikmalaya (West Java), the JI members had planned to infiltrate a local motorbike gang with the intention of instigating chaos, hoping this would serve as a convenient distraction in the event of a police operation. With the police distracted, the JI members had hoped to swoop in and attack the shops in the ethnic Chinese area.¹⁴⁹ In 2020, there was a reduction in the number of women arrested for terrorism offences compared to the previous year. Significantly, 2020 also marked the absence of women perpetrators in a successful attack, unlike in 2018 and 2019. In 2020, only two women were arrested for terrorism-related offences. The first woman, IS (an initial) was arrested due to her involvement with Karyono Widodo, who had attacked a Karanganyar police officer in June 2020. She had also planned to launch an attack in Lampung with two men who had assisted Karyono. They were arrested in July 2020.¹⁵⁰ The second woman arrested last year was the wife of Ali Kalora, the current leader of MIT. Ummu Syifa alias L was arrested in Poso in July 2020 for hiding her husband, and for also joining MIT for 23 days.¹⁵¹ She also had a role in logistics and as a money courier for the MIT group.¹⁵²

Targets

Police officers are still the main targets of terrorist attacks in Indonesia. Out of seven successful attacks in 2020, four targeted police and three targeted civilians. The three attacks that targeted civilians were orchestrated by the MIT group.¹⁵³ The threat from MIT would take a brutal turn in November, when a group of militants it killed four Christians after attacking a village in Central Sulawesi. Among the dead was a man whose decapitation was witnessed by his wife. She was also killed along with another woman.¹⁵⁴ Whilst MIT has attacked civilians in the past, this is the first time the group had targeted and killed women. In 2020, some of the foiled plots recorded in Indonesia had also targeted police, including the plots that were orchestrated by Bolang Guroba bin Safrudin, who is linked to Muhajirin Anshor Tauhid (MAT) in West Nusa Tenggara, as well as JAD cells in West Sumatra and Riau.

Significantly, local Chinese communities around the country were increasingly targeted in the past year, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic which some irrationally blamed on China and ethnic Chinese communities around the world. Other issues such as the alleged oppression of Uyghurs by the Chinese government and ongoing Rohingya Muslim crisis in Myanmar¹⁵⁵ had

¹⁴⁹ Amy Chew, "Indonesian Terrorists Planned to Attack Shop Owners in Areas with Chinese Communities," *South China Morning Post*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3099151/indonesian-terrorists-planned-attack-shop-owners-areas-chinese>.

¹⁵⁰ Eka Setiawan, "Seorang Perempuan ditangkap di Semarang diduga Terkait Karyono Widodo Penyerang Wakapolres Karanganyar," *Ruangobrol.id*, June 03, 2020, <https://ruangobrol.id/2020/07/03/fenomena/seorang-perempuan-ditangkap-di-semarang-diduga-terkait-karyono-widodo-penyerang-wakapolres-karanganyar/>; Bayu Ardi Isnanto, "Pemuda Tewas Usai Ditangkap Densus, Keluarga: Ditembak di Perut dan Paha," *DetikNews*, July 12, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-5090430/pemuda-tewas-usai-ditangkap-densus-keluarga-ditembak-di-perut-dan-paha/2>.

¹⁵¹ "Polisi Tangkap Lagi Istri Ali Kalora, Baru Gabung MIT 23 Hari," *CNN Indonesia*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200818162249-12-536948/polisi-tangkap-lagi-istri-ali-kalora-baru-gabung-mit-23-hari>.

¹⁵² Rina Chadijah, "Densus 88 Tangkap Istri Buronan MIT di Poso," *Benar News*, August 18, 2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/istri-buronan-mit-ditangkap-08192020154247.html?searchterm=utf8:usting=&Mujahidin+Indonesia+Timur>.

¹⁵³ Keisyah Aprilia, "Polisi: Petani Poso Tewas Diduga Dibunuh Kelompok MIT," August 10, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita-poso-mit-08102020163139.html>, and Nanda Perdana Putra, "Polisi: Situasi Poso Membaik Usai Penculikan Petani Oleh Kelompok Teroris Ali Kalora," April 28, 2020, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/4240043/polisi-situasi-poso-membaik-usai-penculikan-petani-oleh-kelompok-teroris-ali-kalora>.

¹⁵⁴ Rully Satriadi and Jeis Montesori, *Jakarta Globe*, "Islamist Terrorists Kill Four Salvation Army Members in C. Sulawesi, Manhunt Launched," November 29, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/islamist-terrorists-kill-four-salvation-army-members-in-c-sulawesi-manhunt-launched/>; The attack on the Christian family by the MIT group may re-ignite communal tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in Poso that had been extinguished by the early 2000s.

¹⁵⁵ In Islamist radical quarters, the crisis has been blamed on the Buddhist nature of the Myanmar government and society. Further to this, a tenuous

also been cited by terrorists as justification for the targeting of local Chinese.¹⁵⁶ At least three foiled attacks targeting the community were recorded in 2020, and involved the JAD's network in Batang, a pro-IS individual, Zulfikar, and JI. In the case of JI, its members have justified the targeting of local Chinese based on spurious claims that they seek to bring back communism into Indonesia. In a broader sense, several symbols that could be tied to China, including the local Chinese populace, Chinese foreign workers residing in Indonesia as well as communism, have been framed as antithetical to Indonesia's domestic interests.¹⁵⁷ In 2019, Abu Rara, prior to stabbing the country's then Indonesian Chief Minister for Security, Wiranto, had also planned to attack a local store owned by an Indonesian Chinese. Abu Rara, along with his accomplice Syamsudin, had aimed to rob the shops owned by the Indonesian Chinese in the name of *fa'i* to fund their terror plans.¹⁵⁸ A plot to attack a Buddhist temple – usually frequented by local Chinese – was also devised by the JAD's Riau network.¹⁵⁹

Responses

Detachment 88 continued to arrest terrorist suspects despite the COVID-19 pandemic ravaging parts of the country. In 2020, 228 suspects were apprehended.¹⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the number of arrests

decreased from 2019, when 297 terrorist suspects were apprehended.¹⁶¹ The reduction in terrorist activities in 2020 likely contributed to the decrease in arrests. Last year's arrests were mainly made in 13 regions - West Sumatra, Bali, Central Sulawesi, East Java, Central Java, Riau, Jakarta, West Java, South Kalimantan, Nusa Tenggara Barat, West Kalimantan, Maluku and Gorontalo.¹⁶² The police also foiled bomb and suicide attacks involving small terrorist cells in Batang and Riau.

In terms of legislation, a point of contention that surfaced in 2020 centred around the draft presidential regulation (*Perpres*) on the involvement of the Indonesian military (TNI) in counter-terrorism operations. The draft spells out the government's intention to give the TNI new roles and powers in countering terrorism, as prescribed under the revised 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law. However, the proposed regulation was criticised by some stakeholders, given it potentially creates overlapping responsibilities between the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT), the primary institution which leads and coordinates responses to terrorist threats, and the TNI, National Intelligence Agency (BIN) as well as the Police. This, it was argued, could hamper the effectiveness of counter terror operations.¹⁶³ Activists also cautioned against granting the military excessive powers, given concerns "there is

extension has been made to Buddhism being a Chinese-linked religion, resulting in the Chinese community in Indonesia being targeted hence.

¹⁵⁶ Akhmad Kusairi, "Teroris Ancam Etnis Tionghoa di Indonesia," *Ruangobrol.id*, June 06, 2020, <https://ruangobrol.id/2020/06/06/fenomena/teroris-ancam-etnis-china-di-indonesia/>.

¹⁵⁷ Amy Chew, "Terror Attacks Feared ahead of Chinese Workers Returning to Indonesia," *South Morning China Post*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3087408/terror-attacks-feared-chinese-workers-return-indonesia-amid>.

¹⁵⁸ Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, "How Covid-19 is Reshaping Terror Threats in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/how-covid-19-is-reshaping-terror-threats-in-indonesia/>.

¹⁵⁹ "Tim Densus Berhasil Tangkap 10 Terduga Teroris di Tiga Provinsi, Termasuk Seorang Mahasiswa," August 25, 2020, <https://jambi.tribunnews.com/2020/08/25/tim-densus-berhasil-tangkap-10-terduga-teroris-di-tiga-provinsi-termasuk-seorang-mahasiswa?page=2>.

¹⁶⁰ Riza Chadijah, "Polri Tangkap 228 Terduga Teroris Sepanjang Tahun 2020," *Benar News*,

December 22, 2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/penan-gkapan-terduga-teroris-2020-12222020155150.html>.

¹⁶¹ V. Arianti and Ahmad Sobirin, *Annual Threat Assessment: Indonesia, Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol.12, Issue 1, January 2020

¹⁶² Devina Halim, "Dalam 7 Hari, Densus 88 Bekuk 9 Teroris Anggota JAD Padang," *Nasional Kompas*, August 18, 2020, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/08/18/23290471/dalam-7-hari-densus-88-bekuk-9-teroris-anggota-jad-padang?page=2>.

¹⁶³ "Draf Perpres Pelibatan TNI Tangkal Terorisme Diusulkan Memuat 7 Prinsip Ini," *Hukum Online*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.hukumonline.com/berita/baca/lt5f0f232258cb7/draf-perpres-pelibatan-tni-tangkal-terorisme-diusulkan-memuat-7-prinsip-ini?page=2>; Muhamad Arif, "On the Role of the Indonesian Military in Counterterrorism," *THC Insights*, No.17, May 14, 2020, <https://www.habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/f939bd431e27384adb4f86f2d6267759.pdf>.

little hope for a fair mechanism to hold soldiers responsible for human rights violations committed during counter terror operations.¹⁶⁴ Such concerns stem from the TNI's "past trajectory of human rights abuses under the guise of security operations."¹⁶⁵

Deradicalisation Programmes

Affected by the safe distancing measures enforced following the onset of the pandemic, Indonesia's deradicalisation programmes in prisons were partially conducted via video conferencing for several months.¹⁶⁶ However, many of the virtual programmes could not run smoothly due to poor internet connectivity and the lack of an adequate digital infrastructure in each prison housing terrorist inmates.¹⁶⁷ While Detachment 88 and the BNPT continued to run their deradicalisation programmes in the prisons, the access usually given to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) to carry out their work in the prisons were significantly impacted.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the NGOs continued to run their campaigns on Preventing/ Countering Violent Extremism

(P/CVE) issues online, such as through webinars.¹⁶⁹

As the year came to an end, the prison-based deradicalisation programmes would revert to the offline mode.¹⁷⁰ BNPT also runs an online webinar series as part of its CVE programme.¹⁷¹ It also launched a BNPT TV Channel¹⁷² and mobile application, ASN No Radical (Civil Servants No Radical), as a part of an ongoing effort to digitalise its P/CVE programmes in the past year.¹⁷³ However, the effectiveness of the deradicalisation programme run by BNPT has been questioned given the continued instances of recidivism in 2020.¹⁷⁴

Outlook

In sum, IS' ideology and narratives continue to find traction among terrorist groups in Indonesia. In 2020, stabbings remained the preferred attack tactic used by most pro-IS groups and individuals in Indonesia, which reflects a continued preference to execute attacks that require little training, planning or funds. This is partly due to the decentralised structure inherent in most pro-IS local

¹⁶⁴ Editorial Board, "United fight against terror," *The Jakarta Post*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/05/15/united-fight-against-terror.html>

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with Siti Darajatul Aliah, Executive Director of Society against Radicalism and Violent Extremism (SeRVE)

¹⁶⁷ "Akibat Corona BNPT Ubah Deradikalisasi Jadi Online," *VoA Indonesia*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/akibat-corona-bnpt-ubah-deradikalisasi-jadi-online/-5413148.html>

¹⁶⁸ NGOs have played an important role in complementing the deradicalisation programmes which are largely run by the government. They are able to create stronger social relations with the detainees which make them more trusted in the eyes of the militants. Their programmes also focus on building the detainees' vocational skills rather than changing their ideologies; hence, they are less likely to face resistance from the detainees. See I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia, "Pentingnya Melibatkan Organisasi Masyarakat Sipil dalam Program Deradikalisasi Pemerintah," *The Conversation*, March 11, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/pentingnya-melibatkan-organisasi-masyarakat-sipil-dalam-program-deradikalisasi-pemerintah-132363>

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Noor Huda Ismail, the founder of the Institute for International Building and Executive Director of *Ruangobrol.id*,

¹⁷⁰ This followed the new head of BNPT, Boy Rafli Amar, visiting the Nusakambangan prison to check

on the facility's deradicalisation programme and Covid-19 health protocols in July. See Sania Mashabi, "Kepala BNPT Kunjungi Nusakambangan Pantau Program Deradikalisasi,"

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/07/30/11084221/kepala-bnpt-kunjungi-nusakambangan-pantau-program-deradikalisasi>, July 30, 2020

¹⁷¹ "FKPT Kalimantan Selatan Gelar Dialog Daring, Waspada Mewabahnya Virus Radikalisme di Tengah Pandemi," *BNPT.go.id*, June 16, 2020, <https://bnpt.go.id/fkpt-kalimantan-selatan-gelar-dialog-daring-waspada-mewabahnya-virus-radikalisme-di-tengah-pandemi>

¹⁷² "Mengembangkan Informasi kepada Masyarakat Melalui Digitalisasi, BNPT Luncurkan Platform BNPT TV Channel," *BNPT.go.id*, September 07, 2020, <https://bnpt.go.id/mengembangkan-informasi-kepada-masyarakat-melalui-digitalisasi-bnpt-luncurkan-platform-bnpt-tv-channel>

¹⁷³ "Kepala BNPT Sharing Strategi Pencegahan Radikalisme di Lingkungan ASN dalam Peluncuran Aplikasi 'ASN No Radikal' Kemenpan-RB," *BNPT.go.id*, September 7, 2020, <https://bnpt.go.id/kepala-bnpt-sharing-strategi-pencegahan-radikalisme-di-lingkungan-asn-dalam-peluncuran-aplikasi-asn-no-radikal-kemenpan-rb>

¹⁷⁴ Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, "Does Indonesia's Deradicalization Program Work?" *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/does-indonesias-deradicalization-program-work/>

groups, including the JAD, which limits a transferring of skills and funds between cells. The decentralised structure of the JAD also means security operations will likely continue to yield further arrests, given militants are geographically scattered around the country. The authorities also need to be alert to the hidden threat from “low-key” terrorist groups such as the JAK.

Security risks could heighten in the near term if the JI splinters, and more militant factions defect from JI's traditional leadership under Para Wijayanto, which has so far forbidden its members to conduct attacks in Indonesia, and maintain a focus on *i'dad* activities instead. A fracture within the movement has already emerged with the arrest of members of the Banten faction of JI in April-May 2020. As such, there remains a possibility that JI under a post-Para Wijayanto leadership or further factional splintering could seek to adopt a “jihad now” vision, and carry out attacks in Indonesia in the near term.¹⁷⁵

The government also needs to be on guard against Indonesian IS fighters and their families currently in Syria, attempting to return home illegally, following the government's decision in February 2020 to not repatriate most of them. Some Indonesian fighters are already known to have relocated from Syria to Afghanistan and Yemen since IS lost its last territory in Baghouz in March 2019.¹⁷⁶ Given it is expected that the government will resume its repatriation efforts of selected children below 10 years whose parents joined IS in Syria,¹⁷⁷ it is important to develop a more structured deradicalisation programme catered for the

returnee children. This should be part of a broader strategy for terrorist inmates that also includes the provision of post-release employment opportunities, programmes to facilitate the re-integration of ex-inmates with their families and communities, as well as the provision of continued religious counselling. It is also important for BNPT to invest in its technology infrastructure further, to ably support its programmes, particularly given the COVID-19 pandemic shows little sign of abating in the near term.

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Terrorist incidents and attacks declined in the Philippines in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic also did not have a significant impact on terrorist activity, while the authorities faced challenges in enforcing movement restrictions in the conflict zones in parts of Mindanao. Skirmishes between the Abu Sayyaf splinter groups and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) against the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) contributed to a dynamic and rapidly evolving

¹⁷⁵ V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, “Jemaah Islamiyah on The Brink of Splintering?” *Indonesia at Melbourne*, November 2, 2020, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/jemaah-islamiyah-on-the-brink-of-splintering/>.

¹⁷⁶ In early 2020, some Indonesian IS members, formerly in Syria, were detained in Afghanistan, having also travelled to northeast Syria and Turkey. In August 2020, an Indonesian national, Syamsul Hadi Anwar, was likely involved in the Yemen civil war. His ID card and Indonesian banknotes were found on the raid conducted by the Shia Houthis on an Islamic militant's stronghold in Yemen. See: “Penjelasan BNPT Soal Viral KTP Warga Mojokerto di Markas ISIS Yaman,” *Detik News*, August 31, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5153343/penjelasan-bnpt-soal-viral-ktp-warga-mojokerto-di-markas-isis-yaman>.

¹⁷⁷ In February 2020, the Indonesian government decided to halt efforts to repatriate Indonesian adult IS supporters currently holed up in detention facilities in Syria with the exception of selected children under 10 years old. The current estimated number of Indonesians in Syria is estimated to be between 660 and 689. Another data source as of August 2020 suggested that there are 550 children in Syria whose parents are Indonesian nationals who had joined IS. While Indonesian officials continue to monitor the hundreds of Indonesians who remain in Syria, progress on their repatriation, even of the unaccompanied children, has stalled amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. See: IPAC, “COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia,” IPAC Short Briefing No.1, April 2, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/COVID-19_and_ISIS_fixed.pdf.

threat environment in 2020. Further, following an encounter with security forces in the Sulu sea in November, Abu Amara, the purported successor to the IS Philippines' previous leader Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, was reportedly killed. This could leave a potential power vacuum in the IS-linked faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Introduction

The terrorism threat in the Southern Philippines declined in 2020, following a series of military operations on terrorist strongholds in the Patikul forest¹⁷⁸ and the Liguasan marsh¹⁷⁹. In the first half of the year, terrorist groups attempted to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic by making fresh calls for attacks on security forces in the restive Mindanao province.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps the most significant incident was the Jolo suicide bombing attack on August 24.¹⁸¹ This was a two-stage attack involving the widows of two prominent local militants affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), one of whom was Norman Lasuca, the first Filipino known to have launched a suicide attack in the country.¹⁸² Between 2019 and last year, there was a significant drop in reported militant activities. Based on newspaper reports, the total number of IS-related incidents in Mindanao dropped from 223 incidents in 2019 to 43

incidents in 2020.¹⁸³ In 2019, 48% of all IS-affiliated activities were attributed to the Hatib Sawadjaan-led Abu Sayyaf faction based in Patikul, Sulu. A further 26% of militant activity was linked to the BIFF, another local militant group, with factions led by Abu Turaife, Hasan Salahuddine,¹⁸⁴ and Commander Karianan respectively, operating in the Lingusan marsh. The relentless assaults of the Armed Forces of Philippines (AFP) in 2020 have likely significantly depleted the number of fighters in local militant groups, with many also convinced to surrender.¹⁸⁵ The subsequent section analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and enforcement efforts on terrorist activity in the Philippines over the past year.

Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism and Military Operations

The first COVID-19 case in Mindanao was detected on March 8, 2020¹⁸⁶, followed by Sulu on May 1, 2020¹⁸⁷; this was significantly later than in Manila, the capital city, which experienced its first case of COVID-19 on January 21, 2020.¹⁸⁸ The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), effectively a lockdown which significantly restricted the movement of people, was only imposed in selected parts such as Davao del Norte,

¹⁷⁸ Rommel C. Banlaoi, "The Abu Sayyaf Group: From Mere Banditry to Genuine Terrorism," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2006, pp. 247–62.

¹⁷⁹ Edwin Fernandez, "BIFF, Dawlah Islamiya Declared 'Persona Non Grata'," *Philippine News Agency*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1093439>.

¹⁸⁰ Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Jani, "COVID-19 and Terrorism in the Southern Philippines: More Trouble Ahead," *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/covid-19-and-terrorism-in-the-southern-philippines-more-trouble-ahead/>.

¹⁸¹ Kenneth Yeo and Remy Mahzam, "2020 Jolo Suicide Attack: Evolving Tactics," *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 165, August 31, 2020 <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CO20165.pdf>.

¹⁸² The attack started with the detonation of an explosive-laden motorcycle beside a military supply vehicle. Inday Nah then walked up to the bomb-site and activated her suicide vest.

¹⁸³ Compiled from various news outlets from 2019 to 2020 which include the Inquirer, Rappler, and Philippines News Agency.

¹⁸⁴ Keith Bacongco, "Dangerous 'Marwan' Protégé on the Loose," *Tempo*, January 27, 2020, <http://tempo.com.ph/2020/01/27/dangerous-marwan-protége-on-the-loose/>.

¹⁸⁵ Third Anne Peralta-Malonzo, "55 Abu Sayyaf Group Members Killed since January," *Sunstar*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1872633/Manila/Local-News/55-Abu-Sayyaf-Group-members-killed-hospital-and-later-cdo/>.

¹⁸⁶ Bobby Timonera, "Mindanao's First COVID-19 Case Went Home to Lanao Sur before Admission in Iligan Hospital and Later CDO," *MindaNews*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2020/03/mindanaos-first-covid-19-case-went-home-to-lanao-sur-before-admission-in-iligan-hospital-and-later-cdo/>.

¹⁸⁷ Julie S. Alipala, "Sulu Records First COVID-19 Case," *Inquirer.net*, May 1, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1268185/sulu-records-first-covid-19-case>.

¹⁸⁸ "Philippines Confirms First Case of New Coronavirus: Health Minister," *Channel News Asia*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/wuhan-virus-philippines-confirm-first-case-12370262>.

Davao de Oro, and Davao City¹⁸⁹, all more developed areas in Mindanao, known to be relatively free from IS' influence. As such, given the lack of lockdown enforcements elsewhere, the ECQ largely failed to have an immediate impact on IS-inspired terrorism.

Terrorist groups in the Philippines actively sought to exploit the COVID-19 crisis and the government's military enforced lockdowns to lure disgruntled youth to the terrorist cause in the first few months of the year. In the early phase of the outbreak, terrorist groups' propaganda would frame the pandemic as divine retribution to the "kuffar" (non-believer) government.¹⁹⁰ Another narrative promoted by Sheik Muhiddin Animbang alias Commander Kagi Karialan, who leads a faction within the BIFF group, was that COVID-19 was a government conspiracy to stop Muslims from praying at mosques.¹⁹¹ He used this claim to urge fighters to launch attacks on government assets in Mindanao.¹⁹²

Due to the health crisis, the AFP's resources have been severely stretched, given the need to address both the pandemic and terrorism simultaneously. The pro-IS Abu Sayyaf splinter led by Hajan Sawadjaan, previously named in security papers as IS' emir in the Philippines and who was subsequently killed in July 2020, was able to launch ambushes and counterattacks in partnership with the main Abu Sayyaf faction led by Radullan Sahiron.¹⁹³ Over the past year, it appears the

Sawadjaan-led IS faction and Sahiron's main Abu Sayyaf group have consolidated their forces and grown in strength. It is also notable that the joint attacks against state forces last year marked the first time the main Abu Sayyaf faction led by Sahiron has supported the IS-aligned faction in a significant way.

Foreign Fighters

On July 26, 2020, the AFP's Western Mindanao Command (WESMINCOM) declared that foreign fighters' presence was no longer detected in Mindanao.¹⁹⁴ Such non-regional fighters previously played a significant role in terrorist activity in Mindanao between 2017 and 2019. During the 2017 Marawi siege, for example, many fighters from the Middle East and African regions, among others, travelled to Lanao del Sur to support the consolidated effort to establish IS' easternmost province.¹⁹⁵ In 2018, non-regional foreign fighters continued to attempt to enter Mindanao to support IS causes.¹⁹⁶ A year later, three Egyptians and a Moroccan were involved in suicide bomb attacks on Jolo island.¹⁹⁷ The decline in foreign fighter presence more recently, however, could be attributed to the travel restrictions imposed by governments around the world to control the spread of the coronavirus, and the consistent assaults against Abu Sayyaf strongholds by security forces at Patikul. Both developments have limited the group's access to foreign

¹⁸⁹ "Health Alert: Philippines, Enhanced Community Quarantine Extended Until May 15," *Overseas Security Advisory Council*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.osac.gov/Country/Philippines/Content/Detail/Report/8e27b40f-7623-4acb-bb30-1885b39c053a>.

¹⁹⁰ Nur Aziemah Azman, "Islamic State's Narratives of Resilience and Endurance," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 1, 2020, p. 82–86.

¹⁹¹ "IS-Pledged BIFF Leader Accuses Non-Muslims of Creating COVID-19, Calls for Violence," Site Intelligence Group, August 13, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/is-pledged-biff-leader-accuses-non-muslims-of-creating-covid-19-calls-for-violence.html>.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Kenneth Yeo, "Are Philippines Militants Looking to Take Advantage of COVID-19?" *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/are-philippine-militants-looking-to-take-advantage-of-covid-19/>.

¹⁹⁴ Bombo Analy Soberano, "Presensiya Ng Mga Foreign Terrorists Sa Mindanao 'di Na Nararamdaman – Wesmincom Chief | Bombo Radyo News," *Bombo Radyo Philippines* (blog), July 26, 2020,

<https://www.bomboradyo.com/presensiya-ng-mga-foreign-terrorists-sa-mindanao-di-na-nararamdaman-wesmincom-chief/>.

¹⁹⁵ Zam Yusa, "Philippines: 100 Foreign Fighters Joined ISIS in Mindanao since the Marawi Battle," *The Defense Post*, November 5, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/11/05/100-foreign-fighters-join-isis-mindanao-philippines-marawi/>.

¹⁹⁶ Robert Postings, "The Philippines: Destination for ISIS Foreign Fighters from Europe and Beyond?" *The Defense Post*, September 12, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/09/12/philippines-isis-foreign-fighters-europe/>.

¹⁹⁷ ICPVTR, "Annual Threat Assessment 2019," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 11, no. 1, January 2019, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CTTA_Annual_2019-1.pdf.

fighters, while depleting the pool of foreign fighters already active in Mindanao.

Despite this, the various unregulated routes into Mindanao have not been disrupted significantly. Some analysts have claimed that Indonesian terrorist groups such as the *Jamaah Anshaarut Khilafah* (JAK) are “drawing up plans to send jihadists to the Philippines”.¹⁹⁸ This is due to the unregulated routes that lead to the Philippines, such as via the Sulu Archipelago and Sangihe Island, being transit routes from Malaysia and Indonesia to Mindanao.¹⁹⁹ Also known as the tri-border region, there are no Customs and/or Immigration Checkpoints regulating the flow of persons and goods through these areas.²⁰⁰ Although legitimate travel routes have been disrupted due to the pandemic, aspiring foreign fighters from Borneo and Sulawesi may still be able to enter Mindanao through these alternative routes which are hard to regulate.

August 2020 Jolo Suicide Bombing

The twin suicide bombing in August that targeted a military supply vehicle was perhaps the most significant terrorist attack in the Philippines over the last year. The attack

had been initiated by an explosive-laden motorcycle parked beside a military supply vehicle. A woman then walked up to the site and detonated her suicide vest, killing 14 people and injuring 75 others.²⁰¹ The bombers were later identified as Nana and Indah Nay,²⁰² both widows of slain terrorists Norman Lasuca²⁰³ and Abu Talha²⁰⁴ respectively.

Suicide bombings akin to the 2020 Jolo attack are a relatively new phenomenon in the Philippines. The first suicide bombing in the country occurred on January 27, 2019 in which the Jolo Cathedral was also targeted.²⁰⁵ In the main, suicide attacks in the Philippines have been carried out by foreign terrorist fighters.²⁰⁶ All the five suicide bombing attacks and attempts to date have also been concentrated around Jolo island, the stronghold of the IS-aligned Abu Sayyaf Sulu faction (“IS Sulu”) led until recently by Sawadjaan.²⁰⁷

Over time, the frequency of suicide bombings in Sulu has increased. Most recently on October 10, 2020, an Indonesian woman was arrested in Jolo island, for plotting a suicide bombing attack.²⁰⁸ The suicide bomber was

¹⁹⁸ Noah Lee et al., “Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines,” *BenarNews*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesia/n/SEA-ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Kenneth Yeo and Unaesah Ramah, “Southeast Asia: Returning Foreign Fighters,” *The Defense Post* (blog), June 23, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/06/23/asian-foreign-fighters/>.

²⁰⁰ Jasmininder Singh and Muhammad Haziq bin Jani, “The Tri-Border Area: Jihadi Epicentre in Southeast Asia,” *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 186, July 20, 2016, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CO16186.pdf>.

²⁰¹ Jason Gutierrez, “At Least 14 Killed After Suicide Bombers Hit Philippines,” *The New York Times*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/world/asia-philippines-explosions-jolo-sulu.html>.

²⁰² Zam Yusa, “Indonesian National Police Contact Confirmed Both Jolo Aug 24 Female Suicide Bombers Were Filipinos,” *Facebook*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ZamYusa/posts/2114780495322903>.

²⁰³ Norman Lasuca is the first Filipino suicide bomber. See Michael Joe Delizo News ABS-CBN, ‘Pinoy Suicide Bomber a Battered Child, Ran Away from Home’, *ABS-CBN News*, July 11, 2019, sec.

News, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/11/19/pinoy-suicide-bomber-a-battered-child-ran-away-from-home>.

²⁰⁴ Abu Talha was Abu Sayyaf’s bomb expert and financial conduit. He served as the liaison between local and foreign terrorist groups. See Richard Falcatan, ‘ISIS Liaison to Abu Sayyaf Killed in Sulu Clash’, *Rappler*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/isis-liaison-abu-sayyaf-killed-sulu>.

²⁰⁵ “Indonesian Couple with Ties to JAD behind Jolo Church Attack: Police,” *The Jakarta Post*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2019/07/24/indonesian-couple-with-ties-to-jad-behind-jolo-church-attack-police.html>.

²⁰⁶ Including the two suicide bombers in 2020, only three out of nine suicide bombers are local Filipinos. The total number of suicide bombers in Mindanao is small and the assessment is not a projection of future trends. See Kenneth Yeo, ‘Suicide Terrorism in the Sulu Archipelago’, *RSIS Commentaries*, CO19248, no. 248, December 12, 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpytr/suicide-terrorism-in-the-sulu-archipelago/#.XhVCpEczZPY>.

²⁰⁷ IS Sulu is an abbreviation used to differentiate the factions within Abu Sayyaf.

²⁰⁸ “Suspected Indonesian Suicide Bomber, 2 Others Nabbed in Jolo —Military,” *GMA News*

later identified as Rezky Fantasia Rullie (alias Nana Isirani or Cici), believed to be the widow of the Indonesian terrorist, Andi Baso, who had been killed in a skirmish with the AFP in August 2020.²⁰⁹ The authorities also arrested two other female terrorists, Inda Nurhaina and Fatima Sandra Jimlani, who were the wives of Abu Sayyaf terrorists, Ben Tatoo and Jahid Jam respectively.²¹⁰

These two incidents also signal the increasing role of women in local terrorist networks' kinetic operations.²¹¹ Previously, women's participation in terrorism in the country and broader region had traditionally been limited to non-combat operations, including as financiers, smugglers, and recruiters. Until her arrest in 2017, the face of women's participation in terrorism in the Philippines was Farhana Maute²¹², mother of the deceased Maute brothers responsible for the Marawi siege, who held much influence in Mindanao due to her wealth and political connections, which she used to finance terrorist operations.

In assessing the motives behind the 2020 Jolo suicide attack, an activist from a Filipino non-governmental organisation (NGO) claimed it was likely a revenge attack against the AFP for the perpetrators' slain spouses.²¹³ The attack also reinforced the involvement of kinship ties in terrorist networks around the Philippines and the

wider region. The revenge motive could also have been directed at the AFP due to the incapacitated leadership of IS Sulu. Prior to the suicide bombing, the AFP had gravely injured Hajan Sawadjaan, the former leader of IS Sulu, in a gunfight at Patikul.²¹⁴

Leadership Transitions

Until recently, Sawadjaan had been both the leader of IS Sulu and *de facto* emir (leader) of IS groups in the Philippines. The 61-year-old had been largely focused on defending his outfit against the AFP's attacks. Sawadjaan is suspected to have died after suffering from a severe injury after a gunfight with the AFP in July, with jihadists subsequently mourning his passing on social media.²¹⁵ Two months later, AFP claimed his nephew, Mundi Sawadjaan, had taken over leadership of IS Sulu.²¹⁶ Mundi Sawadjaan was also the mastermind of the double suicide bombing in Jolo that killed 15 people.²¹⁷ In another blow to terrorist networks in the country, Furuji Indama, leader of the IS Basilan faction, was also reported to have been killed during a gunfight on September 9, 2020.²¹⁸

There is some evidence pointing to a merger between IS Sulu and the main Abu Sayyaf faction led by Radullan Sahiron. IS Sulu has likely been weakened significantly due to the ongoing AFP-led assaults against their

Online, 10 October 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/regions/759268/indonesian-suicide-bomber-nabbed-in-jolo-military/story/>.

²⁰⁹ "Indonesian Suicide Bomber Arrested in Jolo," *Rappler*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/indonesian-suicide-bomber-arrested-jolo>.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Amalina Abdul Nasir, "Female Suicide Bombers: Urgent Deterrence Needed," *RSIS Commentaries*, CO20167, no. 167, September 4, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CO20167.pdf>.

²¹² Raju Gopalakrishnan and Manuel Mogato, "The Mautes of the Philippines: From Monied Family to Islamic State," *Reuters*, June 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-matriarch/the-mautes-of-the-philippines-from-monied-family-to-islamic-state-idUSKBN19E0A9>.

²¹³ Amina Rasul Bernardo, "Women and Violent Extremism," in *Cross Border Terrorism: Challenges and Solution*, Webinar, Pusat Kajian Radikalisme

dan Deradikalisasi, September 28, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ktLBF_bxgg.

²¹⁴ Ellie Aben, "Philippine Military Says Abu Sayyaf Leader Still Alive," *Arab News*, July 11, 2020, <https://arab.news/67c29>.

²¹⁵ "Filipino IS Supporters Mourn Alleged Death of Abu Sayyaf Leader," *Site Intelligence Group*, July 20, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/filipino-is-supporters-mourn-alleged-death-of-abu-sayyaf-leader.html>.

²¹⁶ "8 Abu Sayyaf Militants Yield in Sulu, Says Military," *ABS-CBN News*, September 23, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/23/20/8-abu-sayyaf-militants-yield-in-sulu-says-military>.

²¹⁷ "Philippine Military Kills 7 Abu Sayyaf Suspects in High Seas Shootout," *BenarNews*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine-seven-killed-11032020130816.html>.

²¹⁸ Darwin Pesco, "Abu Sayyaf Subleader Furuji Indama Dead, Military Claims," *The Manila Times*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/10/30/news/latest-stories/abu-sayyaf-subleader-furuji-indama-dead-military-claims/789034/>.

stronghold over the last two years. After the reported death of Hajan Sawadjaan, there were subsequent reports of surrendered Abu Sayyaf members who claimed to be serving under the leadership of both Mundi Sawadjaan and Radullan Sahiron.²¹⁹ This indicates the possibility of Sawadjaan having settled on an alliance with Radullan Sahiron prior to his demise, to increase the waning militant strength of IS Sulu.²²⁰ More broadly, the ongoing series of military operations conducted in Patikul, Sulu, has led to multiple leadership decapitations in the IS-aligned Abu Sayyaf Sulu group. On September 28, 2020, a sub-leader and bomb-maker cousin of Mundi Sawadjaan was killed in an armed assault.²²¹

Moreover, shortly after Mundi Sawadjaan and Radullan Sahiron were forced to abandon their post and flee to Basilan or Zamboanga to escape heavy military crackdowns in the wake of the 2020 Jolo suicide bombing,²²² local militant social media channels named Abu Amara, the grandson of Hatib Sawadjaan, as his successor as the leader of IS Philippines. Amara, however, was also subsequently killed in a sea clash in November.²²³ Additionally, in the aftermath of the death of Furuji Indama²²⁴, surrenderees claimed that Pasil Bayali has taken over the leadership of IS Basilan.²²⁵

Capitalising on a weakened IS Sulu, the IS-aligned leader of BIFF – Commander Kagi Karialan – in August declared himself the leader of jihad in Southeast Asia.²²⁶ Commander Karialan has appealed to his sympathisers to bear arms and join his cause. Despite the declaration, he has not been recognised by IS media platforms or the AFP. On December 3, 2020, 50 BIFF members launched an attack on a police station at Datu Piang setting a police patrol vehicle on fire and firing at nearby houses.²²⁷ For the most part, however, the BIFF has neither increased the intensity nor frequency of its attacks on militant networks.

Threat of Radicalisation

The AFP has made significant strides in weakening the military capabilities of terrorist groups over the past year. But they now have to increase their attention towards winning the hearts and minds of the communities ravaged by the ongoing armed conflict in Mindanao. The constant gunfights between AFP and the pro-IS forces have forced many civilians to flee their homes, resulting in a high number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).²²⁸ Following on from the months long IS-linked Marawi siege in 2017, which left a trail of death and destruction on the civilian population, the continued grievances of the IDPs over their inadequate living conditions

²¹⁹ "8 Abu Sayyaf Militants Yield in Sulu, Says Military," *ABS-CBN News*, September 23, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/09/23/20/8-abu-sayyaf-militants-yield-in-sulu-says-military>.

²²⁰ No report has clearly indicated that the Sawadjaan faction has joined forces with Radullan Sahiron. However, the AFP has often claimed that the leaders of the IS-aligned Abu Sayyaf faction are Radullan Sahiron and Mundi Sawadjaan. See "8 Abu Sayyaf Militants Yield in Sulu, Says Military"; Francisco Tuyay, "Sawadjaan's Aide Caught; Cousin Dies in Firefight," *Manila Standard*, September 29, 2020,

<https://manilastandard.net/news/national/335430/sawadjaan-s-aide-caught-cousin-dies-in-firefight.html>

²²¹ Martin Sadongdong, "Cousin of ASG Top Bomb Maker Mundi Sawadjaan Killed in Sulu Clash – Military," *Manila Bulletin*, September 28, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/09/28/cousin-of-asg-top-bomb-maker-mundi-sawadjaan-killed-in-sulu-clash-military/>.

²²² "Philippines: Alert Raised as Bombing Suspects Escape Jolo Island," *BenarNews*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/jolo-escape-08292020120647.html>.

²²³ "Philippine Military Kills 7 Abu Sayyaf Suspects in High Seas Shootout," *BenarNews*, November 3,

2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/seven-killed-11032020130816.html>.

²²⁴ Roel Pareño, "Westmincom Confirms Death of Abu Sayyaf Leader Furuji Indama," *Philstar*, October 30, 2020,

<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/10/30/2053429/westmincom-confirms-death-abu-sayyaf-leader-furuji-indama>.

²²⁵ Teofilo Garcia, "3 Abu Sayyaf Bandits Yield in Basilan," *Philippine News Agency*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1120725>.

²²⁶ "BIFF Commander Claims Leadership of Jihad in Mindanao, Calls for Recruits," *SITE Intelligence Group*, August 19, 2020,

<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/biff-commander-claims-leadership-of-jihad-in-mindanao-calls-for-recruits.html>.

²²⁷ Bong S. Sarmiento, "IS-Linked Militants Attack Town in Philippines," *Asia Times*, December 4, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/12/is-linked-militants-attack-town-in-philippines/>.

²²⁸ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Protection Cluster Philippines, "Mindanao Displacement Dashboard," *Relief Web*, June 2019, <http://www.protectionclusterphilippines.org/?p=1880>

as well as being uprooted from their home regions have yet to be effectively addressed.²²⁹ Experts agree that delays in rebuilding Marawi could create conditions for IS to again recruit into its networks and sow discord.²³⁰

Rebuilding efforts around Marawi only recommenced recently. The government and various NGOs initially focused their efforts on reconstructing places of worship²³¹ and public housing²³². Foreign aid from countries such as Japan has also assisted in the construction of 50 permanent shelters.²³³ IDPs also receive aid for their daily sustenance from the government.²³⁴ However, lockdown measures enforced to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted these recent rebuilding efforts.²³⁵ Compounding the slow rebuilding efforts is the Philippines' economic slump as a result of the global pandemic²³⁶, which enhances the risk of radicalisation among vulnerable people, including youth. A popular hypothesis in international studies relates to the "youth bulge"²³⁷, wherein regions with high

proportions of young people, such as in the Philippines, can under circumstances of high youth unemployment and poor governance²³⁸ be more susceptible to political violence and social unrest.

Additionally, heightened internet usage during the coronavirus-induced lockdowns²³⁹ imposed in the Philippines has provided individuals more opportunities to consume terrorist propaganda online.²⁴⁰ This usage of the internet – including on various gaming platforms²⁴¹ – is likely to have been exploited by terrorists for recruitment. Some analysts have also claimed that IS forces in the region more generally, have doubled down on their recruitment efforts during the pandemic through the internet.²⁴² While internet connectivity in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao region is limited, terrorist groups are expected to capitalise on the socio-economic grievances beyond BARMM to direct collective action against the authorities.

²²⁹ Geoffrey Maitem and Richel V. Umel, "Philippine NGO: Delays in Rebuilding Marawi Fuel IS Recruitment," *BenarNews*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/philippines-militants-02182020151058.html>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ellie Aben, "Three Years after Marawi Siege, Philippines to Start Rebuilding 31 Mosques," *Arab News*, July 25, 2020, <https://arab.news/zx4q9>.

²³² Bong Lozada, "Government to Start Rebuilding Marawi Mosques 3 Years after Siege," *Inquirer.Net*, August 29, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1328766/government-to-start-rebuilding-marawi-mosques-3-years-after-siege>.

²³³ Richel V. Umel, "50 Permanent Shelter Units for IDPs to Be Built in Marawi," *MindaNews*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2020/07/50-permanent-shelter-units-for-idps-to-be-built-in-marawi/>.

²³⁴ Apipa P. Bagumbaran, "Marawi IDPs Continue to Receive Livelihood Assistance," February 27, 2020, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1035387>.

²³⁵ Buena Bernal, "COVID-19 Hampers Rebuilding Efforts in Marawi City," *Channel News Asia*, May 23, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/covid-19-hampers-rebuilding-efforts-in-marawi-city-video-12763758>.

²³⁶ Anna Malindog-Uy, "COVID-19 Impacts In The Philippines," *The ASEAN Post*, July 12, 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/covid-19-impacts-philippines>.

²³⁷ Lionel Beehner, "The Effects of 'Youth Bulge' on Civil Conflicts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April

13, 2007, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/effects-youth-bulge-civil-conflicts>; Moamen Gouda and Marcus Marktanner, "Muslim Youth Unemployment and Expat Jihadism: Bored to Death?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 10, 2019, pp. 878–97.

²³⁸ Adesoji Adelaja and Justin George, "Is Youth Unemployment Related to Domestic Terrorism?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 5, 2020, p. 22.

²³⁹ Miguel R. Camus, "Internet Usage Surges as People Stay Home," *Inquirer Business*, April 4, 2020, <https://business.inquirer.net/294150/internet-usage-surges-as-people-stay-home>.

²⁴⁰ Joby Warrick, "Covid-19 Pandemic Is Stoking Extremist Flames Worldwide, Analysts Warn," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/covid-19-pandemic-is-stoking-extremist-flames-worldwide-analysts-warn/2020/07/09/5784af5e-bbd7-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html; Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, and Countering Violent Extremism," *United Nations Security Council*, June 2020, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CTED-Paper%E2%80%93The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism.pdf>.

²⁴¹ "This Is Not a Game: How Steam Harbors Extremists," *Anti-Defamation League*, April 2020, <https://www.adl.org/steamextremism>.

²⁴² Noah Lee et al., "Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines," *BenarNews*, September 23, 2020.

The Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Act

One of the most contentious bills introduced in the Philippines is the Anti-Terrorism Act which was passed on July 3 2020.²⁴³ The Anti-Terrorism Act replaced the more restricted Human Security Act (HSA). Unlike the HSA, the Anti-Terrorism Act gives the authorities more powers to address terrorism and actions that are deemed to abet terrorist activities.

The Anti-Terrorism Law is intended as an improvement on the HSA to allow authorities to better deal with the growing terrorist threat. Key amendments to the law include the ability to make arrests without warrants and additional powers granted to the authorities to hold detainees for up to 14 days without the daily compensation clause of P500,000 (US \$10,335), a highly restrictive clause that was previously mandated under the HSA.²⁴⁴ The new anti-terror bill has been criticised by some human rights activist groups, who cite the expanded definition of terrorism and denial of freedom of expression contained in the bill as points of concern.²⁴⁵ On their part, the authorities have assured that the anti-terror bill will not be used against political opposition, leftist groups, and other government detractors. As of now, the Anti-Terrorism Act has not been used for any prosecutions.

Outlook

Overall, the frequency of terrorist attacks has decreased significantly from 2019 to 2020 in the Philippines. Multiple factors, including the COVID-19 travel restrictions, relentless military assaults as well as leadership decapitations and militant surrenders, have significantly weakened the operational capacity of various militant networks and consequently, contributed to a reduction in orchestrated terrorist attacks in the restive

Mindanao province. Due to the militants' weakened state, the possibility remains they could become more indiscriminate and desperate in their future activities. In October 2020, members of the Abu Sayyaf group deviated from their *modus operandi* of attacking military targets and resorted to attacking civilians, likely out of desperation for food and other basic resources.²⁴⁶ According to the spokesperson of the military's Western Mindanao Command, this could be a result of a demoralised ASG that has lost support from the local population.²⁴⁷ Although it is not unusual for factions of the ASG to engage in extensive criminal activities, poor economic conditions could worsen the group's depravity.

The reduction in violence and weakening militant networks present the AFP and the government with a unique opportunity to work towards achieving lasting peace for the conflict-ridden region. The AFP should capitalise on this by pivoting from purely kinetic counterterrorism operations that have a short-term impact, toward PCVE initiatives that have greater prospects for bringing about a lasting political solution for the region. Initiatives such as the rebuilding of Marawi city and provision of necessities to impoverished communities, among others, can go a long way toward deterring vulnerable individuals from joining terrorist groups. In this respect, the government should also address the youth bulge and other legitimate grievances of disaffected populations in the regions which are susceptible to terrorist infiltration. More investment in the education of the local population, through building vocational institutes in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao for example, could also spur greater youth employment and future economic growth, which can be powerful drivers for peace and stability in the restive region.

²⁴³ Raul Dancel, "Duterte Signs Controversial Anti-Terror Law in the Philippines," *The Straits Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/duterte-signs-controversial-anti-terror-law-in-the-philippines>.

²⁴⁴ Rommel C. Banlaoi, "The Philippines' New Anti-Terrorism Law: Fighting Terrorism With Justice - Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, June 5, 2020, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/05062020-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law-fighting-terrorism-with-justice-analysis/>.

²⁴⁵ Julie McCarthy, "Why Rights Groups Worry About The Philippines' New Anti-Terrorism Law," *NPR*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law>.

²⁴⁶ "Civilian Killed in Abu Sayyaf Attack in Sulu – Military," *CNN*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.cnn.ph/regional/2020/10/6/civilian-killed-patikul-sulu-abu-sayyaf.html>.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

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MALAYSIA

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic political crisis, Malaysia continues to face security challenges from terror networks attempting to radicalise Malaysians at home and abroad. Over the past year, extremist networks have shown signs of regrouping and stepping up online recruitment in Malaysia. Apart from the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, political, racial and religious fissures, extremists' disinformation and recruitment campaigns and returning foreign fighters have significant security implications for Malaysia.

Domestic Threat Environment

Extremist groups are adapting quickly to exploit conditions of uncertainty and local grievances to advance their goals during the COVID-19 global crisis. During the General Debate of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2020, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin warned²⁴⁸ about the resurgence of terrorism across the globe.

²⁴⁸ "Muhyiddin: UN Members Must Stay Cautious of Terrorism Possibility during Covid-19," *Malay Mail*, September 26, 2020,

www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/26/muhyiddin-un-members-must-stay-cautious-of-terrorism-possibility-during-cov/1907088.

²⁴⁹ "Malaysia's Covid-19 reproduction number highest in South-east Asian region on September 15, according to UK model," *The Straits Times*, September 21, 2020,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysias-covid-19-reproduction-number-highest-in-south-east-asian-region-on-sept-15>.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ "Unemployment rates recovering as Malaysia reopens economy amid Covid-19 pandemic," *The Straits Times*, September 28, 2020,

The terrorist threat compounds the vulnerabilities of states that are already overstretched dealing with the health crisis and the economic fallout from the pandemic.

Malaysia recorded the highest COVID-19 reproduction number²⁴⁹ in Southeast Asia in September 2020.²⁵⁰ As Malaysia continued to impose its COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) till end of 2020, the country would require resources and implement an effective legal mechanism to continue efforts to curb the spread of the virus. The MCO has been extended three times since its first inception in March. Just two months after the implementation of the MCO, the country's unemployment rate went up to 5.3%.²⁵¹ The prolonged economic stagnation and recovery period provides an opportunity for violent extremist groups to expand their support base by exposing real and imagined inadequacies in the Malaysian government's responses, and undermining people's trust on the government and institutions.²⁵² If left unchecked, Malaysia's ongoing MCO may provoke local tensions and disenchantment amongst certain segments of the country's population. As has been the case in other parts of the world, extremists in Malaysia are likely to ramp up efforts in the cyber domain to remain relevant as restrictions on movements hinder their physical operations.

Security analysts in Southeast Asia have warned that extremist groups are continuing their recruitment campaign in Malaysia²⁵³ during the MCO by indoctrinating supporters through online platforms such as Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp. Private messaging applications tend to be the preferred and convenient mode for communication among extremist groups.²⁵⁴ Between March and

<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/unemployment-rates-recovering-as-malaysia-reopens-economy-amid-covid-19-pandemic>.

²⁵² Harris Zainul, "In Malaysia's Covid 'infodemic', Crime Is All Too Easy," *The Interpreter*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/debate/coronavirus-pandemic>.

²⁵³ "Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines," *Benar News*, September 23, 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesia/SEA_ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html.

²⁵⁴ "AFP, Facebook to team up to crush terrorism online," *Manila Bulletin*, September 23, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/09/23/afp-facebook-to-team-up-to-crush-terrorism-online/>.

May of 2020, propaganda videos showcasing the Islamic State (IS) terror group's battlefield achievements in Syria and Iraq and calls for revenge attacks on countries that helped defeat the group territorially were released. IS has often utilised social media channels and encrypted messaging communication platforms to engage Malaysian youths in local schools, colleges and universities for recruitment.²⁵⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic has also created conditions for extremists to easily propagate their propaganda, disinformation and conspiracy theories online. Over 249 investigations relating to COVID-19 fake news were carried out as of April 2020.²⁵⁶ Authorities also refuted 243 pieces of false information on the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵⁷ According to a study by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies in Malaysia²⁵⁸, extremists' misinformation campaigns on the pandemic are focused on inaccurate data on government policy, false reporting on the number of COVID-19 cases as well as the number of deaths and the extent of community spread of the virus. Malaysia would need to stay vigilant of extremist groups who will exploit this period of uncertainty by sowing discord and mistrust amongst Malaysians through the spread of false information with malicious intent. As the government was grappling with controlling the infections, false information blaming Chinese Malaysians and Chinese nationals

and other communities were also spread online.²⁵⁹

Terrorism-related Offences and Arrests

The number of individuals arrested and convicted of terrorism offences in Malaysia did not significantly increase last year. There were also no major terrorist attacks or plots in the country in 2020. The number of arrests on terrorism related charges in Malaysia, including foreign nationals, stands at 547 with no reported arrests in 2020.²⁶⁰ There were no reported arrests for the most part of 2020 when the country was under a lockdown. Although there is a lack of "overt activities," it is believed that low-profile recruitment has been continuing which is a major concern for Malaysian authorities.²⁶¹

An INTERPOL-led operation codenamed 'Maharlika III' was conducted from 24 February to 20 March 2020 in the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (BIMP) region. Over 180 individuals were arrested for various offences, including terrorism.²⁶² The INTERPOL operation was originally aimed at disrupting the influx of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) from joining the Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). However, only one suspected member of the ASG was captured in the operation. Most arrested were members of criminal organisations. Notwithstanding this, the operation saw the seizure of more than US\$1 million worth of firearms, handmade

²⁵⁵ Ahmad El-Muhammady, "The Role of Universities and Schools in Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism: Malaysian Experience," in *Combating Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, October 31, 2018, https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism_El-Muhammady.pdf/86c33d0c-53eb-4d6d-bf90-9aa528c95785.

²⁵⁶ "Ismail Sabri: 249 investigations launched over Covid-19 fake news," *Malay Mail*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/30/ismail-sabri-249-investigations-launched-over-covid-19-fake-news/1861738>.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ "Malaysia's Covid-19 Fake News Targeted Government Action, Community Spread: ISIS," *CodeBlue*, September 3, 2020, <https://codeblue.galencentre.org/2020/09/03/malaysia-covid-19-fake-news-targeted-government-action-community-spread-isis/>.

²⁵⁹ Murni Wan Mohd Nor, "Put an End to Online Hatred," *New Straits Times Online*, October 23, 2020,

<https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2020/10/634791/put-end-online-hatred>.

²⁶⁰ The arrest count was 519 as reported by Malaysian Home Minister Muhyiddin Yassin in August 2019. The number has been updated to 547 after 16 terror suspects were arrested on 10 July 2019 and between 14 September and 25 September 2019, and another 12 LTTE suspects were arrested between 10 October and 12 October 2019. The updated statistics on the number of arrests relating to terror offences have been reflected in Remy Mahzam, "Malaysia Threat Assessment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* Vol 12 Issue 1, p.18, January 2020.

²⁶¹ "Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines," *Benar News*, September 23, 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesia/SEA_ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html.

²⁶² "Hundreds arrested in crackdown on terrorist routes in Southeast Asia," *Interpol*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Hundreds-arrested-in-crackdown-on-terrorist-routes-in-Southeast-Asia>.

explosives, drugs and illicit goods. The operation also underscored the strategic importance of securing travel routes and continued regional cooperation amongst the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in combating terrorism.

IS Returnees from Syria

More than 50 Malaysians, consisting of men, women and children who joined IS since 2013, remain in Syria and could be returning to Malaysia.²⁶³ Potential returnees are expected to include battle-hardened jihadists. Among the Malaysians who are still under detention in Syria, nine had sought assistance to return to Malaysia. 27 Malaysians, comprising 10 adults and 17 children, are held in the al-Hol camp, while nine are detained in Al-Hasakah prison and one in Idlib province in Syria.²⁶⁴ The whereabouts of the 19 other Malaysians, including eight children, in the theatre are still unknown.²⁶⁵

Maritime Security

The porous borders of the east Malaysian state of Sabah will continue to be exploited by the IS-linked ASG. The tri-border region between southern Philippines, East Malaysia and Eastern Indonesia, due to a lack of a strong security infrastructure and festering local conflicts, has been prone to lawlessness, including cross-border terrorism, smuggling and kidnappings. The ASG is notorious for its kidnap-for-ransom activities in the region. In January 2020, the region experienced a spate of kidnappings. The ASG kidnapped eight Indonesians off the

waters of Sabah, three of whom were later released.²⁶⁶

Due to the ease of smuggling and infiltrations, a key security issue dominating the discourse of Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia is further strengthening the border security in the tri-border region. To this effect, the Royal Malaysia Police and the Malaysian Armed Forces signed a Strategic Cooperation Agreement Note on 7 October 2020 on the implementation of Operation Cegah Pati Daratan, a joint exercise aimed mainly at securing the waters off East Malaysia bordering the Philippines and Indonesia.²⁶⁷ According to the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCom), the main enforcement authority for the Malaysia security area that spans the east coast of Sabah, from Kudat to Tawau, an integrated Army-Police operation could help curb the movement of cross-border terrorists and criminals and reduce the threat to Malaysia from terrorist groups based in Southern Philippines.²⁶⁸

Other Extremist Groups

In 2019, the authorities had also arrested 12 individuals, including two Malaysian Tamil lawmakers,²⁶⁹ suspected of alleged links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But all charges were dropped early last year as none of the arrested could be convicted for terrorism.²⁷⁰ The LTTE was a rebel group that fought the Sri Lankan state to establish an independent Tamil homeland for the island's minority Tamil population.²⁷¹ Members of the LTTE's military wing and thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war.²⁷² Although the LTTE is

²⁶³ "56 M'sians still held in Syria for alleged terrorism," *Malaysia Kini*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/508960>.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ T.N. Alagesh, "Bringing Home Malaysians Held In Syria Could Be Tough". *New Straits Times*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/561088/bringing-home-malaysians-held-syria-could-be-tough>.

²⁶⁶ "Indonesians Abducted Near Sabah Were Taken By Abu Sayyaf," *New Straits Times* January 19, 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/557946/indonesians-abducted-near-sabah-were-taken-abu-sayyaf>.

²⁶⁷ "Police, Armed Forces To Tighten Border Control In Sabah," *Malay Mail*, October 8, 2020,

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/08/police-armed-forces-to-tighten-border-control-in-sabah/1910664>.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Jo Timbuong, "Malaysian Bar: Authorities Need to Explain Why 12 Were Charged over LTTE Links," *The Star Online*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/21/malaysian-bar-authorities-need-to-explain-why-12-were-charged-over-ltte-links>.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Nisha David and Noah Lee, "Malaysia Drops LTTE-Related Charges Against 2 Lawmakers, 10 Others," *BenarNews*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-terrorism-02212020143517.html>.

²⁷² Ibid.

currently defunct, the Tamil nationalist cause appears to enjoy some level of sympathy from Tamil nationalists within diaspora Tamil communities around the world, including in Malaysia. In Malaysia, where the LTTE is still designated as a terrorist organisation, there was an unsuccessful effort to delist the group last year.²⁷³

Another external ethno-nationalist insurgent group with a presence in Malaysia is the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) which also operates in some countries in the region. The ARSA, which claims to fight for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, is believed to have ties to the estimated 100,000 Rohingya refugees currently residing in Malaysia. Increasingly, the ARSA has been active on social media and evidence is surfacing of its activities and support from Rohingya refugees in the region. While the exact support level and connections the ARSA has with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is unclear, there are signs that the former has a following in the Rohingya diaspora in Malaysia. Visible on YouTube are two channels created by Rohingyas in Malaysia. The channels ROHINGYA MALAY KELAS²⁷⁴ and Rohingya ARSA Supporters²⁷⁵ give us a glimpse of the support ARSA has and continues to receive from the Rohingya community in Malaysia.

Malaysia has also surfaced a funding trail for radical training of Bangladesh-based Rohingya refugees. For example, a report by the German public international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* (DW) in February 2020 stated that the Bangladeshi terrorist group, Jamaat-ul Mujahideen of Bangladesh (JMB), had funnelled US\$117,000 through Saudi

Arabia and Malaysia for the training of 40 Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.²⁷⁶

Responses

Malaysia's counter-terrorism operations have been largely successful in capturing or killing terrorists and thwarting a number of potential attacks. It has also improved its position in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) for the past two years, as the number of deaths from terrorism globally declined for the third year in a row. Additionally, the country appears successful in building cooperative counter-extremism efforts within the Muslim community and establishing a flexible legislation system to review and act upon cases of suspected terrorism.

The Malaysian government announced on 12 October 2020 that it is setting aside RM1.8 billion for its Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy (MCSS) 2020-2024 to improve the country's cyber security preparedness.²⁷⁷ Among other threats, the MCSS highlighted combatting the terrorist threat, particularly the use of the internet and social media platforms for terrorist propaganda and recruitment, as a priority area.²⁷⁸ The objectives of the strategy included, "raising awareness among the public; and preventing radicalisation and terrorist recruitment and fund-raising activities through digital platforms such as social media and web portals."²⁷⁹

In June 2020, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) had organised the second consultation with Malaysian criminal justice practitioners to explore the potential threats and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁸⁰ The meeting was aimed at

²⁷³ Ashman Adam, "Court Dismisses Taxi Driver's Bid To Remove LTTE From Malaysia's Terrorist List," *Malay Mail*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/09/17/court-dismisses-taxi-drivers-bid-to-remove-ltte-from-malaysias-terrorist-li/1904074>.

²⁷⁴ "ROHINGYA MALAY KELAS," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChadQL_QL2o_wY2GOcq4COXA/featured.

²⁷⁵ "Rohingya ARSA Supporters," *YouTube Channel*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAZM702DOD_04tGDkwu8aAPA.

²⁷⁶ "Is Pakistani Intelligence Radicalizing Rohingya Refugees?" *DW*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-pakistani-intelligence-radicalizing-rohingya-refugees/a-52364548>.

²⁷⁷ Janice Tan, "Malaysia Pours RM1.8Bn Into National Cybersecurity Strategy," *Marketing-Interactive.Com*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.marketing-interactive.com/malaysia-pours-rm18bn-into-national-cyber-security-strategy>.

²⁷⁸ "Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy," October 13, 2020, p 38, <https://asset.mkn.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/MalaysiaCyberSecurityStrategy2020-2024.pdf>.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ "UNODC Supports Malaysia in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism and Addressing Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in the Context of COVID-19," United Nations : Office on Drugs and Crime, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/terrorism/latest-news/2020_unodc-supports-malaysia-in-preventing-

identifying legal and policy measures to address strategies in relation to the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and their families. Emphasis was placed on the advantages of involving local communities and civil society organisations as well as strengthening the role of women and youth in initiatives aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism²⁸¹.

Malaysia is one of the few countries that has committed to repatriate its foreign fighters from Syria. The government will allow its nationals to return under the condition that they comply with enforcement measures and participate in a month-long rehabilitation programme. The last known publicly available number of returnees was as of March 2019; Malaysia then had actively repatriated 11 of its citizens from Syria. So far, eight men had been charged and convicted in court whereas returning women and children have undertaken a mandatory rehabilitation programme.

Challenges Ahead

The presence and activities of multiple terrorist and extremist groups signal the need for an effective counter-terrorism strategy that involves all-round vigilance by enhancing security through a whole of nation and whole of society approach. With the world still grappling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian security landscape will continue to evolve as terror groups take their campaign to the cyberspace. Such developments will need to be monitored very closely, particularly given that IS has mastered the art of spreading its extremist propaganda, managing its operational cells,

receiving funds and recruiting new cadres using various online platforms.

Another major challenge for the country is in dealing with Malaysians who joined IS in Syria. Malaysia would have to counter efforts by IS to strengthen its ideology and influence among women and children held in the Syrian camps.²⁸² The group is attempting to convince its Malaysian supporters in Syria that IS will once again establish its so-called Caliphate and that the conflict is not yet over.²⁸³ Other pertinent issues include the threat from lone-wolf terror cells and the challenges of policing the porous border of the eastern state of Sabah comprising Tawau, Lahad Datu and Semporna, which is an important transit point for Indonesian IS members to reach the conflict hotspots in the Philippines. The route is most likely to gain militants' attention in the wake of the Indonesian government decision to not repatriate Indonesian nationals who joined the IS in Syria.²⁸⁴

Tensions in France arising from the reproduction of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad and President Emmanuel Macron's emphatic defence of freedom of expression²⁸⁵ have already spilled over to several Muslim-majority countries, including Malaysia. Several Muslim groups in Malaysia, including the Islamist party PAS, Gerakan Pembela Ummah, moderate group Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), and Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia (ISMA) had called for a nationwide boycott of French goods and services²⁸⁶ in response to France's pledge to defend secularism and tackle radical Islam. Various other Muslim-majority countries have also called for a French products' boycott while anti-French

[and-countering-violent-extremism-leading-to-terrorism-and-addressing-returning-foreign-terrorist-fighters-in-the-context-of-covid-19.html](https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/ideological-campaign-01302020151027.html).

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Nisha David, "Malaysia: IS Extremists Campaigning to Keep Fighters in Syria," *BenarNews*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/ideological-campaign-01302020151027.html>

²⁸³ "Bringing home Malaysians held in Syria could be tough," *New Straits Times*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/561088/bringing-home-malaysians-held-syria-could-be-tough>.

²⁸⁴ "Indonesia says it won't repatriate nearly 700 ISIS fighters from Syria," *The Defense Post*,

February 12, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/02/12/indonesia-repatriate-700-isis-fighters/>.

²⁸⁵ "Macron says he understands Muslims' shock over Prophet cartoons," *Al-Jazeera*, October 31, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/31/france-s-macron-cartoons-came-from-free-and-independent-news>.

²⁸⁶ Kenneth Tee, "Ummah calls for nationwide boycott of French goods, services after Macron's 'anti-Islam' comments," *Malay Mail*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/11/01/ummah-calls-for-nationwide-boycott-of-french-goods-services-after-macrons-a/1918364>.

protests have taken place too.²⁸⁷ In an effort to prevent the situation from being exploited further by radical elements, the Malaysian government's response to the situation is very critical.

Outlook

The terrorist threat in Malaysia will continue to be internationally inspired and regionally coordinated with occasional instances of home-grown cells and radicalisation. As the COVID-19 crisis deepens, more online activities from extremist groups can be expected as their activities in the physical domain become untenable. The threat landscape in Malaysia is also very much linked to Islamist terrorist developments in the region and around the world. A whole-of-society approach is required to prevent the narrative of Islam being under siege from taking root among segments of the Muslim community. Related to this, the presence of overseas Muslim migrants, some persecuted in their home countries, such as the large Rohingya diaspora living in Malaysia, need to be closely monitored so that Malaysia does not become a launch-pad for terrorist activities in their countries of origin.

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MYANMAR

Western Myanmar saw an intensification of violence in 2020 with several major clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and government forces in the Rakhine State and bordering southern Chin State. The Myanmar government's designation of the AA as a terrorist group and exclusion of the Rakhine State from a nationwide unilateral ceasefire announced in May has led to further militarisation of the conflict, with little room for a political solution in the near term. The conflict escalations also created new uncertainties for the safe repatriation of more than a million Rohingya refugees currently residing in neighbouring Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the Rohingya insurgent group the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's (ARSA) activities also increased over the past year along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border areas. However, in terms of operational capability, it remained a low-level threat compared to the AA. It remains uncertain how the newly re-elected government, will manage the various conflicts on the western front and advance the national reconciliation process, amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and pervasive majoritarian sentiments among the Bamar Buddhist majority.

Arakan Army (AA)

Though the AA has frequently clashed with the Myanmar military in the Rakhine State since November 2018, these skirmishes intensified in 2020. The escalating violence also spilled over into the bordering Chin State. The AA, who recruit from the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist majority, are fighting for greater autonomy for the impoverished state. The urgency of the group's push for self-determination for the Rakhine people is further reflected in its rallying cry "Arakan Dream 2020", which articulates a desire to restore the Kingdom of Mrauk U, an independent Rakhine kingdom lost to Burmese conquest in 1785, to its former glory.²⁸⁸ In the past year, the AA, one of more than a dozen ethnic minority insurgencies in

²⁸⁷ "Huge Bangladesh rally calls for boycott of French products," *BBC News*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54704859>.

²⁸⁸ Min Zaw Oo, Ne Lynn Aung and Morgan Michaels, "Annual Peace and Security Review

2020," *Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security*, https://mips-mm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/20200707_MIPS_Annual_Review_2020.pdf.

the country, launched several significant offensives, exerting control over strategic locations such as military outposts. Its use of guerrilla tactics, which have inflicted significant military and civilian casualties, has evoked a fierce armed response from the Myanmar military.²⁸⁹ In some instances, the navy and air force have also been mobilised to support the army-led operations. The AA is estimated to have around 7000-8000 well-trained fighters in its ranks.

On February 6, 2020, the AA launched an offensive to “take control of the Myanmar military’s Meewa hilltop outpost” in Paletwa Township in Chin State.²⁹⁰ The township is strategically important, not only due to its close proximity to key infrastructure projects such as the India-financed Kaladan Multi-Model Transit Transport Project, but also given it contains Myanmar’s international borders with Bangladesh and India. In all, nearly 20 villages were abandoned, as many civilians fled to urban areas. Two jet fighters were also utilised by state forces in skirmishes near Tin Ma village to the east of the Kaladan river.²⁹¹ For its part, the AA claimed it had detained 20 soldiers, including a battalion commander, in the fighting.²⁹²

Subsequently on February 29, five civilians were killed, and at least eight others injured in clashes between Myanmar forces and the AA near Mrauk-U town, according to media reports. Located at the centre of northern Rakhine, Mrauk-U Township is a stronghold

of the rebels, which draws broad support from the local population.²⁹³ An ethnic Rakhine nongovernmental organisation estimated at least 18 civilians were killed, and 71 injured in fighting during the month of February alone. However, the actual casualties could be much higher, as the government’s mobile internet blackout around the area has slowed information-gathering.²⁹⁴ In October, both the AA and government forces engaged in days of fierce fighting for control over a strategic hill in Rakhine State’s Rathedaung Township. Myanmar military’s ground, air, and naval forces conducted several joint operations during these skirmishes.²⁹⁵

For many ethnic Rakhine, peace prospects are moot following the mounting violence and little compromise in a crisis that has worsened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mistrust of the government pervades, while there is a growing belief among the local populace that the AA is likelier to deliver change in the electoral system, which many view as stacked in favour of the military and the country’s majority Bamar population.²⁹⁶ Besides the local communities, the AA also enjoys backing from a segment of the Rakhine diaspora around the world, who raise funds for the group’s activities.²⁹⁷ However, the AA has also been accused of endangering civilians, intimidation and abductions.²⁹⁸ In the run up to the November 2020 election, the rebels kidnapped three National League

²⁸⁹ David Scott Mathieson, “The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State,” *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report, November 2020, p. 1

https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/20201102-the_arakan_army_in_myanmar_deadly_conflict_rises_in_rakhine_state-sr.pdf.

²⁹⁰ Min Aung Khine, “20 Villages Abandoned as Rakhine Rebels Attack Myanmar Army Outpost,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/20-villages-abandoned-rakhine-rebels-attack-myanmar-army-outpost.html>.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Oo, Aung and Michaels, “Annual Peace and Security Review 2020,” *Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security*.

²⁹⁴ “Myanmar: Civilians Caught in Surge of Fighting,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/04/myanmar-civilians-caught-surge-fighting>.

²⁹⁵ “Myanmar Military Calls in Jets to Attack Arakan Army in Rakhine State Mountains,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 14, 2020,

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-calls-jets-attack-arakan-army-rakhine-state-mountains.html>.

²⁹⁶ Kyaw San Hling and Emily Fishbain, “In Myanmar’s Rakhine State, trust in armed group grows as election hopes fade,” *The New Humanitarian*, November 4, 2020,

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/11/04/Myanmar-Rakhine-Arakanese-conflict-government-peace>.

²⁹⁷ “Observer on the Arakan Army’s appeal beyond Myanmar’s borders,” Channel NewsAsia, YouTube video, July 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=1ojYAHE9jwo>.

²⁹⁸ Oo, Aung and Michaels, “Annual Peace and Security Review 2020,” *Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security*.

for Democracy (NLD) candidates. Voting in much of the state was subsequently cancelled over security concerns.²⁹⁹ In addition, the group also allegedly extorted food grains from residents in Paletwa Township in Chin State.³⁰⁰

The escalating clashes have raised fears of a growing humanitarian crisis in the Rakhine State. According to the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, over 30,000 people were forced from their homes in the Kyauktaw, Rathedaung, and Mrauk-U townships between September and October 2020. Over 226,000 people around the state have so far been displaced since fighting between the Myanmar military and the AA broke out in 2018.³⁰¹ There has also been reports of mass resignations of local administrators in Rakhine and Chin States. In Myebon Township, Rakhine State, fifty-nine out of sixty-five township administrators resigned in June after three of their colleagues were arrested by law enforcement under suspicion of aiding the AA. A similar spate of resignations took place in Paletwa, while Chin bureaucrats claimed to be fearful of being targeted by the AA.³⁰² When the Myanmar government subsequently shut down polling stations in most parts of the state, citing concerns over possible fighting between government troops and the AA, it was estimated that up to two-thirds of the state's population was unable to vote. These actions would prompt accusations that voting

was only being allowed to go ahead in areas where the NLD had greater support.³⁰³

Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)

Rakhine State is also known for the brutal counter-insurgency campaign launched by the military which has affected large sections of the Muslim Rohingya minority in the area. The year 2020 saw an uptick in the ARSA insurgents' activity along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. ARSA, also known as Harakah al-Yaqin, claims to be fighting for the Rohingya Muslim minority's rights, and has remained active on social media throughout the year. Several of the incidents linked to the rebels in the past year occurred in or around the Maungdaw Township, and mostly involved small-scale attacks on border security forces and the police. At least four such incidents were reported in April 2020 alone. For example, on April 5, ARSA snipers shot at Myanmar border petrol guards, injuring two of them.³⁰⁴ Days later on April 8, the Myanmar military reportedly seized ammunition and military equipment from a temporary ARSA camp near the village of Kha Maung Seik in Rakhine State's Maungdaw Township.³⁰⁵ On April 15, two policemen were also killed in a sneak attack involving ARSA fighters in the same location.³⁰⁶ Two weeks later on April 29, two alleged ARSA fighters were also found dead in the area, with improvised landmines, related materials, and drugs found in their possession.³⁰⁷

²⁹⁹ Tan Hui Yee, "Suu Kyi's NLD confirmed as winner of election," *The Straits Times*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/suu-kyis-nld-confirmed-as-winner-of-election>.

³⁰⁰ Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, "Chin State NGO Accuses AA of Extorting Rice from Hungry Villagers in Western Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/chin-state-ngo-accuses-aa-extorting-rice-hungry-villagers-western-myanmar.html>.

³⁰¹ Min Aung Khine, "Myanmar Military Calls in Jets to Attack Arakan Army in Rakhine State Mountains," *The Irrawaddy*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-calls-jets-attack-arakan-army-rakhine-state-mountains.html>.

³⁰² Mathieson, "The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State," *USIP Special Report*, November 2020, p.1 <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/20201102-the-arakan-army-in-myanmar-deadly-conflict-rises-in-rakhine-state-sr.pdf>.

³⁰³ Shoon Naing, "War, not politics: Troubled election deepens tension in Myanmar's Rakhine," *Reuters*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election-ethnic/war-not-politics-troubled-election-deepens-tension-in-myanmars-rakhine-idUSKBN27S2CB>.

³⁰⁴ Sai Wanna, "Military Says ARSA Preparing Big Attack in Rakhine," *Myanmar Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.mmimes.com/news/military-says-arsa-preparing-big-attack-rakhine.html>.

³⁰⁵ Thiha Lwin, "ARSA Insurgents Shoot, Injure Two Myanmar Border Guard Police Officers," *The Irrawaddy*, May 4, 2020, [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arsa-insurgents-shoot-injure-two-myanmar-border-guard-police-officers.html#:~:text=NAYPYITAW%E2%80%94Tw o%20policemen%20were%20wounded,Myanmar%20military%20\(or%20Tatmadaw\)](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arsa-insurgents-shoot-injure-two-myanmar-border-guard-police-officers.html#:~:text=NAYPYITAW%E2%80%94Tw o%20policemen%20were%20wounded,Myanmar%20military%20(or%20Tatmadaw)).

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

A further two incidents were reported in May 2020. On May 2, two policemen were wounded in a surprise ARSA insurgent attack on a Border Guard Police patrol along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in Rakhine State.³⁰⁸ A few days later, Myanmar's security forces seized food suspected to have been stashed by ARSA rebels near Kha Maung Seik village in Maungdaw Township. According to military sources, ARSA was allegedly "entering and leaving the border area bringing in supplies."³⁰⁹ Given the long and porous nature of the border, such movements cannot be ruled out. The military had also speculated that ARSA could carry out a "significant attack" ahead of Myanmar's 23 May submission of the first report to the International Court of Justice, which detailed the steps taken by the government to protect the Rohingya Muslim minority against further persecution.³¹⁰ However, the purported attack failed to materialise. ARSA's current force strength is hard to determine, although it is believed to possess around 300 fighters.

Meanwhile, across the border in Bangladesh, ARSA has also been linked to an increasing number of kidnap for ransom cases, in addition to other criminal activity. The group is allegedly attempting to establish dominance over the various gangs involved in the area's lucrative drug trafficking trade. In October 2020, ARSA allegedly engaged in a gang-fight with the "Munna gang," a Rohingya camp-based criminal group named after a drug baron.³¹¹ However, ARSA has denied responsibility for the latest violence and blamed other criminals as seeking to cast aspersions on the group.³¹² While ARSA's current threat capabilities remain

ambiguous and questionable, the group has the potential to destabilise the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderland. The overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf make monitoring and surveillance of these camps difficult.

Since 2017, at least 730,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh following deadly violence in Rakhine State. With fresh influxes of refugees more recently, it is estimated that up to 1.1 million Rohingya refugees are now in Bangladesh, mostly impoverished and housed in makeshift refugee camps. Though Bangladesh is keen to relocate some of the refugees to a nearby island with better and newly-built infrastructure³¹³, it has so far not been able to convince them to move voluntarily. This is given continued concerns among the Rohingyas of being denied access to basic rights, services and livelihood opportunities. In October 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees demanded that an assessment be made to evaluate the safety and sustainability of life on the make-shift island before relocation begins.³¹⁴ The repatriation process has also come to a standstill due to a continued lack of political will within the Nay Pyi Taw government, which has reportedly been delaying taking back the Rohingyas, citing factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's recently concluded national election.³¹⁵

Meanwhile, days prior to Myanmar's November general election, the hard-line Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu voluntarily surrendered to the police in Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon.³¹⁶ An arrest warrant had previously been issued for the

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Wanna, "Military Says ARSA Preparing Big Attack in Rakhine," *Myanmar Times*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/military-says-arsa-preparing-big-attack-rakhine.html>.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ At least eight Rohingya criminal gangs are operating in Bangladesh.

³¹² Ruma Paul, "Gang war erupts in Rohingya refugee camps, at least eight killed, thousands flee," *Reuters*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-rohingya-idUSKBN26T1Z1>.

³¹³ Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan, "Bhashan Char: Superior to Cox's Bazar but Rohingyas, UN not yet convinced", *Dhaka Tribune*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya>

[-crisis/2020/10/17/bhashan-char-superior-to-cox-s-bazar-but-rohingyas-un-not-yet-convinced](https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2020/10/17/bhashan-char-superior-to-cox-s-bazar-but-rohingyas-un-not-yet-convinced).

³¹⁴ Ershad Komol, "Bangladesh may relocate 500 Rohingyas to Bhashan Char next month," *The New Age*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/119721/500-rohingyas-likely-to-be-relocated-to-bhashan-char-next-month>.

³¹⁵ "Bangladesh wants immediate Rohingya repatriation," *Kyodo News*, August 22, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/08/26e06c410295-bangladesh-wants-immediate-rohingya-repatriation.html>.

³¹⁶ "Myanmar fugitive monk Wirathu hands himself in to face sedition charges," *Reuters*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-myanmar-election-monk/myanmar-fugitive-monk-wirathu->

firebrand monk, on charges of sedition. Wirathu, a nationalist Buddhist monk, had for a time enjoyed significant clout over large sections of the Bamar Buddhist majority, following the country's transition from military rule in 2011. In several incendiary speeches and sermons given over the years, he had regularly targeted Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority.³¹⁷ While his arrest is a positive development, the Burmese-Buddhist majority's targeting of the Rohingya Muslims is unlikely to abate. Myanmar's 2020 election saw Rohingyas almost completely excluded from participating,³¹⁸ prompting fresh fears that the results will "amplify disaffection with electoral politics among minorities and in turn stoke the country's numerous armed conflicts"³¹⁹ Members of the ultra-nationalist Buddhist group Ma Ba Tha were seen visibly campaigning for the military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)³²⁰ prior to the recent elections, while the military and USDP's continued use of race and religion card during the campaigning further illustrated that the politicisation of Buddhism in Myanmar will persist.³²¹

Responses

Since gaining independence from the British in 1948, Myanmar has been bedevilled by

clashes between government forces and insurgent groups in border areas seeking greater autonomy from the central government.³²² In recent decades, the government has sought to negotiate various ceasefire deals with several groups, although a comprehensive political solution has thus far proved elusive. Many groups such as the AA have rejected attempts at a settlement, instead continuing their armed struggle in the northern and western parts of the country.³²³

On March 23, the government formally designated the AA as a terrorist organisation under a 2014 counter-terrorism law, the second group to be accorded the designation. The ARSA was the first.³²⁴ Later in May, when the Myanmar military announced a unilateral ceasefire around the country, to more effectively address the worsening coronavirus outbreak and also enhance peace prospects, the Rakhine State would be excluded, on the basis the pact would not cover areas where government-declared terrorist groups are active.³²⁵ The formal designation of AA has meant the military could continue its counter-insurgency campaign, citing the risks posed by "terrorist" groups in the area.³²⁶

[hands-himself-in-to-face-sedition-charges-idUKKBN27117T.](https://www.todayonline.com/world/myanmar-fugitive-monk-wirathu-hands-himself-face-sedition-charges)

³¹⁷ "Myanmar fugitive monk Wirathu hands himself in to face sedition charges," *TodayOnline*, November 2, 2020,

<https://www.todayonline.com/world/myanmar-fugitive-monk-wirathu-hands-himself-face-sedition-charges>

³¹⁸ For details see, Wai Wai Nu, "Myanmar Went To the Polls for the Second Time Since the End of Military Rule but the Election Was Not Free or Fair," *Time*, November 12, 2020,

<https://time.com/5910739/myanmar-election-rohingya/>; also see Matthew Smith, "For Myanmar's Elections to Be Free and Fair Rohingya Must Get the Right to Vote," *Time*, July 27, 2020, <https://time.com/5872096/myanmar-2020-national-election-rohingya-vote/>

³¹⁹ "Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election," *International Crisis Group*, Briefing No. 163/Asia, October 22, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b163-majority-rules-myanmars-second-democratic-election>

³²⁰ Khin Moh Moh Lwin, "Ma Ba Tha nationalists hold pre-election rally to 'protect national religion'," *Myanmar Now*, November 8, 2020, [https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ma-ba-tha-](https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ma-ba-tha-nationalists-hold-pre-election-rally-to-protect-national-religion)

[nationalists-hold-pre-election-rally-to-protect-national-religion](https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/military-usdp-play-nationalism-card-ahead-myanmars-election.html)

³²¹ San Yamin Aung, "Military and USDP Play Nationalism Card Ahead of Myanmar's Election," *The Irrawaddy*, October 23, 2020,

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/elections/military-usdp-play-nationalism-card-ahead-myanmars-election.html>

³²² "Myanmar officially brands Rakhine rebels a terrorist group," *Associated Press*, March 24, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/0d4de21a7d7e03dc1c1e0476c8a1a417>

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Officially designating the Arakan Army as a terrorist group allows it to be termed illegal. See: "Myanmar Govt Declares Arakan Army a Terrorist Group," *The Irrawaddy*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-govt-declares-arakan-army-terrorist-group.html>

³²⁵ Nyein Nyein, "Myanmar Army Extends Unilateral Nationwide Truce, Excluding Rakhine State," *The Irrawaddy*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-army-extends-unilateral-nationwide-truce-excluding-rakhine-state.html>

³²⁶ Min Aung Khine, "Myanmar Military Calls in Jets to Attack Arakan Army in Rakhine State Mountains," *The Irrawaddy*, October 14, 2020, [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-](https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-calls-in-jets-to-attack-arakan-army-in-rakhine-state-mountains)

The upsurge in clashes in Rakhine State has mirrored the brutal scorched earth campaign by the military against the Rohingya Muslim minority in 2017. This time around, human rights observers have accused government troops of carrying out indiscriminate firing, targeting civilians,³²⁷ as well as undertaking torture of those in custody. In a broader sense, some Myanmar observers reason that in its fight against insurgent forces in Rakhine State, the government has largely failed to win over significant swathes of the local population,³²⁸ in part due to the military's lack of experience and general orientation toward utilising more sophisticated counter-insurgency strategies in its operations. Meanwhile, the less organised and poorly armed ARSA has been less active in recent years, although government forces have continued search operations in northern Rakhine State, to weed out remnants of the rebel force and curtail its possible resurgence.

Separately, the government has made little progress in expediting the repatriation process for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. While the military's counter-insurgency operations to weed out the AA rebels as well as the country's recent election have been cited as factors in these delays, a broader lack of political will pervades. Going forward, building a durable peace in western Myanmar will require a comprehensive solution that addresses the local people's various security, humanitarian and political concerns. To speed up the repatriation process for the Rohingya refugees, Myanmar also needs to cooperate more closely with Bangladesh by, for example, initiating military-to-military communication hotlines and joint fact-finding patrols in the border area, to help stem cross-border criminal

activity, including the trafficking of humans and drugs, which are mutual security concerns for both states.

Outlook

The insurgencies in western Myanmar will persist and may become more militarised. In the short term, the military will likely seek to re-assert territorial superiority and operationally weaken the AA rebels through the sustained use of force. Still, the AA's strong social networks within the Rakhine population, access to finance and sophisticated weapons, and tactical collaborations with other ethnic armed groups, point to it remaining a formidable adversary. In the near term, it is likely the Myanmar army will continue to deploy its well-known "four cuts strategy"³²⁹ that aims to cut off food, funds, intelligence and community support for the rebels operating in the conflict areas. The November poll has provided the government and the ethnic armed groups with a fresh opportunity to reassess their positions in the country's peace process. For one, the state's counter-insurgency campaigns need to be recalibrated to prioritise the protection of civilians. This should be complemented with greater political dialogue between the state and the various rebel groups operating in Rakhine State, as it has attempted with other ethnic armed groups around the country.³³⁰ The worsening economic conditions in the area are likely to only exacerbate the people's grievances further, meaning a decisive approach will be required to improve livelihoods and bring about a lasting political solution.

Aside from the AA, Myanmar's Rohingya crisis will continue to pose security

[military-calls-jets-attack-arakan-army-rakhine-state-mountains.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/villagers-injured-10302020183035.html).

³²⁷ "Nine Villagers Injured by Artillery Blasts in Myanmar's Rakhine Conflict," *Radio Free Asia*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/villagers-injured-10302020183035.html>.

³²⁸ "Guerrillas with attitude: An ethnic militia with daring tactics is humiliating Myanmar's army," *The Economist*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/04/16/an-ethnic-militia-with-daring-tactics-is-humiliating-myanmars-army>.

³²⁹ James Barklamb, "Under cover of Covid-19, conflict in Myanmar goes unchecked," *The*

Interpreter, May 8, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/under-cover-covid-19-conflict-myanmar-goes-unchecked>.

³³⁰ Since 2012, Myanmar's various ethnic armed groups fighting for equality and self-determination have been in peace talks with the government. Half of the country's 20-some non-state armed groups have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and are moving towards political dialogue to build a democratic federalist union. For details see, Nyein Nyein, "Myanmar Govt Declares Arakan Army a Terrorist Group," *The Irrawaddy*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-govt-declares-arakan-army-terrorist-group.html>.

challenges specific to the northern portion of Rakhine State bordering Bangladesh. Unlike the AA, however, ARSA does not enjoy popular support and lacks the capacity to carry out large-scale attacks. But ARSA still retains a guerrilla presence along the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderland and may occasionally carry out hit and run operations on border guards and police. If the Rohingya repatriation process continues to stall, ARSA could regain strategic significance and bounce back. A key area to watch out for is ARSA's links to transnational criminal activities and possible infiltration by jihadist networks, although such a prospect remains moot for now.³³¹

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THAILAND

Don Pathan

While a tentative but rare ceasefire announced at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic had briefly raised hopes for an enduring peace in Thailand's insurgency-stricken deep south, Malay-Muslim militants and Thai security forces continued to engage in limited conflict for much of 2020. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN's) signing of a "Deed of Commitment" with Geneva Call in March, in which it committed to protecting children in conflict in line with international

human rights norms, was widely viewed as an attempt to raise the movement's international profile. Yet, it has so far failed to put the country on a path to peace. The appointment of a new Army commander in October, following an annual military shuffle, could give the stalled peace process a new impetus. However, it remains unclear how the anti-regime protests, that have bedeviled the Thai capital Bangkok, could impact the government's security response and, in turn, peace prospects for the slow-burn Southern Thailand conflict.

BRN's Humanitarian Commitment

Violence in Thailand's restive southern provinces continued to simmer in 2020, despite brief hopes a rare ceasefire announced on April 3, 2020 by the BRN, the long-standing insurgent movement that controls the vast majority of the separatist combatants in Thailand's Malay-speaking South, would be a precursor to a more permanent halt in hostilities. A month earlier, the BRN had appeared to abandon years of operating in the shadows, by signing the Deed of Commitment with Geneva Call (an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) that works with non-state actors around the world to abide by the Geneva Convention) which regulates the conduct of armed conflict.³³² Although non-binding, the commitment is basically a public commitment by the BRN to protect children and embrace humanitarian principles and international norms in their ongoing clashes with the Thai security forces.³³³ Over 7,000 people have died in the conflict in the country's south, since a separatist insurgency pushing for greater autonomy for the region's Malay-Muslim minority was revived in 2004.³³⁴

The BRN's decision to sign the agreement with Geneva Call was not just for public

³³¹ In early November 2020 several pro-Islamic State Telegram channels reportedly claimed that ARSA has pledged allegiance to IS and declared a new outfit named Katibah al Mahdi fi Blad al Arakan. There was, however, no official acknowledgement from IS. Authenticity of this so-called pledge of allegiance could not be confirmed and also does not conform with the prior actions of Ataulh, the leader of ARSA.

³³² "Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani Commits to Greater Protection of Children," Geneva Call, March 24, 2020, <https://www.genevacall.org/barisan-revolusi-nasional-melayu-patani-commits-to-greater-protection-of-children/>.

[nasional-melayu-patani-commits-to-greater-protection-of-children/](https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/far-south-view/brownie-points-04072020145240.html).

³³³ Don Pathan, "Southern Thai Rebels Score Points with COVID-19 Ceasefire," *BenarNews*. April 7, 2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/far-south-view/brownie-points-04072020145240.html>

³³⁴ Hannah Beech, and Ryn Jirenuwat. "15 Killed in Southern Thailand in the Worst Violence in Years," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/world/asia/thailand-violence-insurgency.html>.

consumption. It was also an effort by BRN's so-called political unit to show the group's elders and the rebels' powerful military wing, who have traditionally held dominating positions, that they could enhance the organisation's international profile. For their part, Thai government officials at the operational level in the far South and Bangkok quietly welcomed the move, although the senior army top brass expressed concern that the efforts to heighten BRN's international profile could serve to legitimise the conflict in the eyes of the international community.³³⁵ The Army's long-held view has been that the southern conflict is a criminal issue, and the BRN and other insurgencies in the area do not have legitimate grievances. Such attitudes, however, contradict the government's position, which supports the idea of face-to-face talks with all the long-standing separatist movements. Divisions between the civilian and military arms of the state have long impeded the advancement of the peace process for Thailand's far South.

Increased Military Operations and BRN's Unilateral Ceasefire

The BRN's public commitment in January 2020 to protect children in the conflict appears to have had little effect on the Thai army's attitude towards the movement. Military forces still undertook multiple search and destroy operations in the months following, in an effort to weaken the BRN insurgents. In February, the military launched a long-range reconnaissance patrol to uproot and destroy militant cells at the foothills of a Narathiwat province mountain. The operation resulted in the death of five BRN militants.³³⁶ The following month, Thai security forces carried out relentless attacks in Ta Se, a

swampy subdistrict in Yala province with armed helicopters, fan boats, and soldiers on foot patrols. The operation went on for nearly two weeks and resulted in the death of four separatist combatants and a government soldier.³³⁷ Two officials were also injured in the gunfight. A game changer came on March 18 when insurgents set off a powerful car bomb that shredded the enormous sign next to the entrance of the multi-agency Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC), injuring at least 25 people, mostly civilians and journalists.³³⁸ A smaller bomb had been detonated earlier that morning in the courtyard just metres away from the entrance, although no casualties had been reported.

According to Artef Sohko, president of The Patani, a local political action group that advocates Malay-Muslims' right to self-determination in the region, the SBPAC, a government entity that oversees the administration of the Malay-Muslim majority provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala,³³⁹ represented a high value and symbolic target for the insurgents, given their "urgent" desire at the time to attract public attention to the worsening conflict situation, and compel the Thai side to de-escalate their operations.³⁴⁰ Following this attack, the Thai Army decided to retreat from Ta Se and devise a new strategy focused on area domination. Going forward, instead of persisting with active search and destroy operations to weed out insurgents, the Army would instead maintain a tightened security grid on the ground.³⁴¹ On April 3, two weeks after the SBPAC car bombing, the BRN would universally pledge to cease all its activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, partly to ensure public health officials and aid workers could go about their work, assured of their personal safety while

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Don Pathan, "Thai Rebels Pay a Price for Coming above Ground," *Asia Times*, June 23, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/thai-rebels-pay-a-price-for-coming-above-ground/>

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ "Bombs Injure 25 outside SBPAC in Yala," *Bangkok Post*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1880565/bombs-explode-in-front-of-sbpac-in-yala-many-injuries>

³³⁹ "18 injured as 2 roadside bombs rock Thai south," *The Straits Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/18-injured-as-2-roadside-bombs-rock-thai-south>

³⁴⁰ Interview with Artef Sohko, President of The Patani, a local political action group that advocates rights to self-determination for the people for the Patani region, October 10, 2020.

³⁴¹ Wassana Nanuam, Ayub Pathan, "Southern clash to hurt peace talks," March 20, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1882385/southern-clash-to-hurt-peace-talks>. Don Pathan, the author of this assessment, also spent the following three weeks after the incidents talking to military intelligence officers, BRN operatives on the ground and Yala residents about the clashes in Ta Se sub-district.

on the ground.³⁴² Artef Sohko indicated the decision came after a series of consultations between BRN and Patani Malay leaders on the ground, who suggested that a unilateral ceasefire would portray the movement in a more positive light. The declaration would also be in line with the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's call in March 2020, for a halt in global conflicts on humanitarian grounds, in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus.³⁴³

By this time, the Army had already pulled back from the Ta Se operation and repositioned itself in strategic locations, playing the waiting game against an enemy whose rules of engagement had just been drastically altered. Having only recently emerged from the shadows, the BRN was now clearly seeking to project the image of an insurgent force intent on peace, and also looked to seize the conflict's moral high ground through international engagement and its unilaterally declared ceasefire. Barely a month would lapse, however, when on April 29, a small team of BRN operatives attempting to slip past a security unit in Nong Chik district in Pattani province, found themselves pinned back in a fierce gunfight.³⁴⁴ Three militants were shot dead in the melee.³⁴⁵ Fearing that the combatants would retaliate in kind, BRN immediately released a statement that "strongly condemned the actions of the RTG (Royal Thai Government)", which it framed as having "failed to respect the hardships faced by the people of Patani (the Malay Muslims historical homeland) during the COVID-19 outbreak."³⁴⁶ This only reiterated, the BRN concluded, that "the RTG does not care

about the humanitarian needs of the people of Patani."³⁴⁷ The Thai Army reacted indifferently to the BRN's statement and continued to cast the violence in the far South as criminal activity. The military also described its operation in Nong Chik as a pre-emptive strike, alleging the BRN cell involved had been on their way to carry out an attack. BRN sources dismissed this claim, saying their members were merely passing through the area.³⁴⁸

On May 3, three days after the gunfight in Nong Chik district, gunmen on a motorbike drove up to two Paramilitary Rangers in Pattani's Sai Buri district and fired at close range, killing one and severely wounding the other.³⁴⁹ Local media and government officials were quick to point out that the two Paramilitary Rangers had been returning to their base having performed COVID-19 related duties at a village in the district, when attacked.³⁵⁰ This time around, BRN leaders would maintain their silence,³⁵¹ although foreign and local observers labelled the attack as an act of revenge.³⁵² For the BRN, to declare that their combatants had acted on their own volition would be tantamount to admitting there were fissures in the movement's chain-of-command.

Status of Peace Negotiations

Keeping the public and much of the Thai security apparatus in the dark about their intentions and violent activities has long been a trait of the BRN. BRN officials have also continually reiterated that the conflict in the Pattani region is not yet at the stage where its leaders are comfortable enough to engage

³⁴² Aedao Harai, "Patrol officer killed in Narathiwat attacks," *Bangkok Post*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1873749/patrol-officer-killed-in-narathiwat-attacks>.

³⁴³ Interview with Artef Sohko, President of The Patani, a local political action group that advocates rights to self-determination for the people for the Patani region, October 10, 2020.

³⁴⁴ Mariyam Ahmad, Nontarat Phaicharoen, "Bloodshed Returns to Insurgency-hit Thai Deep South after Month of Inactivity," *BenarNews*, May 04, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/new-attacks-05042020183411.html>.

³⁴⁵ Don Pathan, "Thai Rebels Pay a Price for Coming above Ground," *Asia Times*, June 23, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/thai-rebels-pay-a-price-for-coming-above-ground/>.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Interview with BRN operative in Yala, one of the three southernmost provinces of Thailand that is part of a contested area between the separatists and the government.

³⁴⁹ "Ceasefire in Doubt After 4 Shot Dead in Pattani," *Khaosod English*, May 06, 2020, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/05/05/ceasefire-in-doubt-after-4-shot-dead-in-pattani/>.

³⁵⁰ Paramilitary Rangers are often called upon to provide security to public health and provincial officials

³⁵¹ Pathan, "Thai Rebels Pay a Price for Coming above Ground," *Asia Times*, June 23, 2020.

³⁵² "Ceasefire in Doubt After 4 Shot Dead in Pattani," *Khaosod English*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/05/05/ceasefire-in-doubt-after-4-shot-dead-in-pattani/>.

the public in an open and frank manner. This is in part due to a perceived lack of adequate legal and political protection for the movement's leaders and political representatives among a slew of rebel demands that has been long rejected by the Thai state.³⁵³ Further, while their struggle is essentially political in nature, the absence of adequate political representation in the BRN means the powerful military wing will continue to be the most assertive voice in determining the trajectory of the movement. For one, the military wing has never been fond of the idea of direct negotiations with the Thai state, until its various demands were met. Many also view the embracing of international norms, such as International Humanitarian Law, as counterproductive. In 2019, relentless pressure to get the BRN's leaders to the negotiating table would be met with violent pushback.³⁵⁴

Between August and November 2019, however, BRN's military wing and secretive ruling council, the Dewan Pempinan Parti (DPP), would permit a motley crew of negotiators from its so-called political unit to enter into a series of face-to-face secret talks with members of Thailand's Peace Dialogue Panel – the government's negotiating team – in Indonesia and later in Germany.³⁵⁵ However, Malaysia, who for the past several years has been a key player in the peace process, would be sidelined during these supposedly secret talks. Instead, a Europe-based mediation INGO was asked to facilitate, during which a Terms of Reference (TOR) was produced, as a blueprint for future talks. The unsigned document identified Thailand and BRN as the only two parties who could select the facilitator and mediator

in future talks.³⁵⁶ There was no mention of a role for Malaysia in any capacity.

Yet when these secret talks became public knowledge, just days after the November 2019 Berlin talks, Bangkok would swing into damage limitation mode. To repair relations with Malaysia, the two sides hastily put together a gathering in Kuala Lumpur between BRN negotiators and Thai representatives on January 20, 2020. Following this, a press conference was called in which Bangkok, in another gesture of reconciliation toward Malaysia, would praise the role played by Malaysian officials in hosting the peace talks and attempting to bring about a conflict resolution. A follow-up summit was held in early March 2020, although further talks scheduled to take place in the Malaysian state of Kedah in November 2020, would be shelved amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵⁷

Escalating Rebel Attacks

In the past, the peace process has routinely faltered amid resurgent separatist attacks as well as the military's counter-insurgency operations. On the evening of March 6, a BRN cell in the remote district of Si Sakhon in Narathiwat province ambushed a police patrol truck, killing one officer and injuring two others.³⁵⁸ The police vehicle was also set on fire as the insurgents retreated into the woods. The attack took place just three days after the two sides had conducted face-to-face talks in Kuala Lumpur. A week later, on March 12, the Thai Army would launch its mass offensive in Yala's Ta Se. The BRN would counter this just days later with the car bomb attack in front of the SBPAC before, seemingly abruptly, declaring the unilateral ceasefire on April 3.

³⁵³ Rebooting the stalled peace process in the country's Deep South has long hinged not only on the level of violence, but also other factors such as whether Malaysia, in its role as facilitator, is able to iron out differences between Bangkok and the BRN as well as if the Thai state is prepared to compromise on its long-held opposition to accede to rebel demands. These include ensuring of adequate legal and political protection for insurgents. To date, however, the various rounds of talks have failed to produce a breakthrough.

³⁵⁴ A case in point was the spate of six small bombs that was symbolically set off at five different areas in Bangkok in August 2019 when foreign ministers of the ASEAN member states had convened. See: "Bombs Rattle Bangkok during Asean Summit," *Bangkok Post*, Aug 2, 2019,

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1723435/bomb-s-rattle-bangkok-during-asean-summit>

³⁵⁵ Don Pathan, "A New round of Negotiations in Thailand's Far South," *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-28/a-new-round-of-negotiations-in-thailands-far-south/>

³⁵⁶ Don Pathan, "Thai Rebels Pay a Price for Coming above Ground," *Asia Times*, June 23, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/06/thai-rebels-pay-a-price-for-coming-above-ground/>

³⁵⁷ Interview with a senior officer in the Royal Thai Army held in Bangkok on October 15, 2020.

³⁵⁸ "Patrol Officer Killed in Narathiwat Attacks," *Bangkok Post*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1873749/patrol-officer-killed-in-narathiwat-attacks>

Sources within the movement revealed that anger had been building up progressively following the April ceasefire announcement, with militants on the ground told to stand down against the Thai soldiers despite being aggrieved by the Army's continued operations in the south.³⁵⁹ Observers, like Asamadee Beraheng from The Patani, dismissed the claim by the Thai Army that their earlier strikes against BRN militants had been preemptive in nature. According to Asamadee, the strikes were not only provocative but meant to show that, in spite of the BRN's peaceful gestures, the militants would be made to pay a heavy cost.

In line with the BRN's past practice, there was no official announcement as to when the self-proclaimed ceasefire would end. While the Army's top brass was dismissive of the ceasefire - or any action to enhance BRN's international standing and legitimacy - soldiers on the ground were asking local interlocutors to urge the BRN, as early as May, to continue with their ceasefire indefinitely, so as to give the military space and greater resources to contend with the student-led protests against the Thai regime that erupted in January.³⁶⁰ But on June 17, a suspected insurgent, who had a three-year-old outstanding warrant for his arrest, drove up to a military checkpoint in a Pattani village and shot a soldier in the face.³⁶¹ State troopers would return fire and kill the apparent lone attacker. On the same day, a brief gunfight also ensued between the two sides in Pattani's Sai Buri district. Following a

hot pursuit, soldiers would be led to an insurgent makeshift camp where some survival gear, food as well as metal spikes, were discovered. In July and the months after, a series of further BRN-linked attacks that killed or injured Thai security personnel were also reported.³⁶² In attacks recorded on July 14 and July 15, bombs that weighed 20kg each had been used.³⁶³

This was significant as the bombs bore similar marks to past insurgent attacks, while investigators also found the word "Patani" inscribed at the location of the bombings. In subsequent attacks, militants also used IED bombs, seriously injuring paramilitary rangers and civilians.³⁶⁴ On July 15, for example, three paramilitary rangers were severely wounded, along with four villagers who suffered minor injuries, following a roadside IED bombing along a backroad that connects Sai Buri to Panare district in Pattani province. The rangers had been part of a six-man team patrolling the area on three motorbikes at the time of the incident.³⁶⁵ Later in October, a militant cell in Sai Buri district ambushed a unit of police officers patrolling on motorbikes in the backroad. Two suffered bullet wounds.³⁶⁶ Two hours later, when a Paramilitary Ranger unit arrived to inspect the area, an IED with a victim-activated pressure plate exploded after one of the government troops stepped on it. The explosion killed him on the spot and wounded three others in his unit.³⁶⁷

³⁵⁹ Interview with a BRN operative in Yala in October 2020, on condition of anonymity.

³⁶⁰ These boisterous rallies would be paused in mid-February, following the imposition of country-wide lockdowns to quell the spread of the coronavirus, only to resume months later.

³⁶¹ Mariyam Ahmad and Nontarat Phaicharoen, "Thai Negotiator Looks to Resume Southern Peace Talks as COVID-19 Subsides," *BenarNews*, June 19, 2020.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/peace-talks-06192020162527.html>

³⁶² On July 4, a fierce gunfight in Pattani's Panare district resulted in the death of one soldier and one separatist militant. Two government troops would also be wounded during this ambush. Also, on July 4, a local BRN cell in Narathiwat's Sungai Padi attempted to kill a group of soldiers outside an army camp. On July 8, a Paramilitary Ranger was shot dead as he was riding his motorcycle back to his base camp in Yala's Raman district. A week later, on July 14, a soldier was killed in an IED attack

along the road in Pattani's Mae Lan district where he and his 6-man unit were patrolling the route travelled by public school teachers.

³⁶³ Abdullah Benjakat, "Insurgents charged over Pattani bombings," *Bangkok Post*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1954027/insurgents-charged-over-pattani-bombings>.

³⁶⁴ "Thailand: IED Blast Targets Ranger Patrol in Mae Lan District (Pattani Province) July 12," *GardaWorld*, July 14, 2020,

<https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/359456/thailand-ied-blast-targets-ranger-patrol-in-mae-lan-district-pattani-province-july-12>

³⁶⁵ "Southern bandits plant bomb, wounded 7 officials," *Thairath Online*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/south/1890267>

³⁶⁶ "Policeman Shot Dead, Soldiers Wounded in Thailand," *Asia News*, October 9, 2020, <https://asianews.press/2020/10/09/policeman-shot-deadsoldiers-wounded-in-thailand/>

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

While most attacks using IEDs in the far South are detonated remotely with a mobile phone, devices that are triggered by pressure are rare. Even rarer, said one army officer interviewed, is the “on-off” button found on the device used in this particular incident. Investigators assume that it serves the same purpose as a safety button on a gun.³⁶⁸ While the remotely detonated IEDs deployed in Thailand’s far South typically require a line of vision to ensure that the target is within the kill zone, the BRN’s use of IEDs equipped with victim-activated pressure plates that can still kill indiscriminately in the October 2020 attacks, arguably represented a violation of the rule of war, said a Thai Army officer interviewed.³⁶⁹ Such indiscriminate acts of violence, according to political activists interviewed, could undermine whatever progress BRN has made recently in gaining legitimacy for its armed struggle.

Outlook

The BRN’s use of the peace negotiations, as well as the Deed of Commitment and the unilateral ceasefire, as a strategy to boost its public standing remains problematic as not all militants are convinced that the shared sense of mission essential to any insurgency, imbibed in this instance in the longstanding quest for independence for the south, has not been compromised. As some observers interviewed have noted, if some BRN combatants come to believe that their shared mission is being compromised by the group’s negotiators, it could very well trigger a splintering of the movement.³⁷⁰ In the past, the BRN had been quick to criticise other long-standing secessionist movements, such as the MARA Patani, for being prepared to come to the negotiating table with the Thais.³⁷¹ But the tables have now been reversed, and BRN leaders are struggling to find the right words and explanations to their fighters on the ground.

As for the Thai side, the appointment of a new army chief presents a fresh opportunity to seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The recently retired General Apirat Kongsompong was never a supporter of the peace talks. Instead, he believed in using the military’s might to crush the BRN, which he viewed as nothing more than a network of criminals. Essentially, for the talks to succeed and generate meaningful traction going forward, the Army and the Peace Dialogue Panel will have to cooperate and, more pertinently, deliver on whatever commitments are made with the BRN at the negotiating table. This was not the case during General Apirat’s term as the army chief, as operations on the ground appeared to suggest. The verdict is still out on the approach the recently appointed Army commander, General Narongphan Jitkaewtae, is likely to take, as far as future iterations of peace talks for the far South are concerned. But if the violence that followed the BRN’s April ceasefire declaration is any indication, creating the necessary conditions for fruitful negotiations remains a moot prospect in the near term.

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SINGAPORE

Singapore’s threat environment was marked by ongoing extremist and terrorist-related concerns in 2020. Security agencies were on heightened alert from early September 2020, following a series of terrorist attacks in France and other parts of the world. As part of the heightened security posture, the

³⁶⁸ Interview of a mid-ranking Thai Army officer in Bangkok responsible for monitoring the insurgency violence and tactics in the far South, October 12, 2020.

³⁶⁹ Interview of a mid-ranking Thai Army officer in Bangkok who makes regular visits to the conflict area in Thailand’s southernmost border provinces, October 12, 2020.

³⁷⁰ Interview with Artef Sohko, October 10, 2020.

³⁷¹ Over the last five years, the Thai state has held several rounds of talks with MARA Patani, a panel

representing southern insurgent organisations, although those negotiations failed to achieve a breakthrough, and BRN’s military wing largely stayed away from them. See “Thai Peace Negotiator Meets with BRN Rebel Delegates in Malaysia,” *BenarNews*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/peace-talks-01212020154917.html>

Internal Security Department (ISD) initiated investigations into several dozen individuals who sought to incite violence and sow social discord. While there were no indications of planned attacks in Singapore, the developments in Europe and Singapore illustrate that the threat of terrorism is still alive. Going forward, a variety of potential threats, ranging from the vulnerability of youth and migrant workers to radical ideas in cyberspace, spread of hate and disinformation during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and continued militant activity in the near region, will need appropriate counter-responses to mitigate its after-effects in Singapore.

Heightened Security Alert

The re-publication of caricatures depicting Prophet Muhammad by French magazine Charlie Hebdo in September 2020 sparked a spate of terrorist attacks in France. Subsequently, attacks targeting French and Western interests elsewhere were witnessed, including in Saudi Arabia and Austria.³⁷² Amid a palpable anti-France climate that had developed in several countries, there were also large-scale protests, calls for boycotts and an uptick in the spread of extremist and terrorist rhetoric online.³⁷³

In the wake of the terror attacks in France, Singapore went on heightened security alert, with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) announcing in November 2020 that 37 individuals were being “investigated for radical inclinations, inciting violence and stoking communal unrest”.³⁷⁴ Amongst them

was a radicalised Bangladeshi construction worker who was arrested under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for terrorist-related activities. In a statement, MHA said security operations were stepped up to pre-empt possible copycat attacks,³⁷⁵ and curtail other activities that could undermine religious and racial relations in Singapore.³⁷⁶

According to the MHA, most of the individuals had expressed support for the beheading of the French school teacher, Samuel Paty, and subsequent attacks in France and elsewhere.³⁷⁷ Some had incited violence against French President Emmanuel Macron, who had defended the cartoons.³⁷⁸ A few also made derogatory remarks against Muslims.³⁷⁹ Of the 37 individuals investigated, 23 were foreigners. As of 24 November 2020, 16 – 15 Bangladeshi and one Malaysian – were repatriated to their home countries, while the remaining seven remain under investigation.³⁸⁰ The Malaysian had intended to travel to Syria or Palestine to partake in armed violence.³⁸¹ The 14 Singaporeans being investigated comprised 10 males and four females, who were aged between 19 and 62 years old when they attracted security attention. In response to the situation in France, several had made social media postings which “incited violence or stoked communal unrest”.³⁸² Although there were no indications of planned attacks or protests in Singapore, the incident is a timely reminder that the threat of extremism and terrorism is still alive.

Radicalisation of Foreign Workers

³⁷² Ministry of Home Affairs Singapore, “Home Team Remains Vigilant Against the Threat of Terrorism,” MHA, July 10, 2019, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/home-team-remains-vigilant-against-the-threat-of-terrorism>.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Wong Pei Ting, “37 S'poreans, Foreigners Investigated for Radicalisation, Stoking Communal Unrest after France Terror Attacks; 1 Foreigner Arrested, 16 Others Deported,” *TODAYonline*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/37-sporeans-and-foreigners-investigated-radical-inclinations-inciting-violence-after>.

³⁷⁵ Lim Min Zhang, “16 Foreigners Deported after Security Investigation,” *The Straits Times*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/16-foreigners-deported-after-security-investigation>.

³⁷⁶ “Bangladeshi Nabbed for Terrorism Activities, among 37 Probed amid 'Heightened Alert' in Singapore,” *Yahoo! News*, November 24, 2020, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/bangladeshi-nabbed-terrorism-activities-37-probed-heightened-alert-singapore-085548896.html>.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Pei Ting, “37 S'poreans, Foreigners Investigated for Radicalisation, Stoking Communal Unrest after France Terror Attacks; 1 Foreigner Arrested, 16 Others Deported,” *TODAYonline*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/37-sporeans-and-foreigners-investigated-radical-inclinations-inciting-violence-after>.

³⁸² Ibid.

One of the foreigners under investigation is 26-year-old Bangladeshi national Ahmed Faysal, who was arrested and detained under ISA following investigations into terrorism-related activities.³⁸³ According to the MHA's statement, Ahmed Faysal, who came to Singapore in early 2017 to work, started consuming pro-Islamic State (IS) materials online and became radicalised. Drawn to the IS' mission to set up a global caliphate, he wanted to travel to Syria to fight for IS against the Syrian government.³⁸⁴ He also disseminated propaganda materials in English and Bengali on social media platforms which depicted the oppression of Muslims overseas and promotion of armed violence. Faysal had also set up various social media accounts using pseudonyms to encourage other Bengali Muslims to take up arms.³⁸⁵

In mid-2019, Faysal shifted his allegiance to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)³⁸⁶ and made monetary donations to a Syria-based organisation, knowing that it would benefit HTS' mission in Syria. In addition to IS and HTS, Faysal had also expressed support for the terrorist groups, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, and was willing to travel to Kashmir to fight against "perceived enemies of Islam".³⁸⁷ To prepare himself for armed jihad, he had also watched firearms-related videos online and bought folded knives which he intended to use to attack Hindus in Bangladesh.

Singaporean Involved in Overseas Conflict

³⁸³ Fabian Koh, "Bangladeshi Construction Worker, 26, Arrested under ISA for Terrorism-Related Activities: MHA," *The Straits Times*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/bangladeshi-construction-worker-26-arrested-under-isa-for-terrorism-related-activities-mha>.

³⁸⁴ Matthew Mohan, "26-Year-Old Bangladeshi Arrested under ISA Following Investigations into 'Terrorism-Related Activities'," *Channel News Asia*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/bangladeshi-isa-ahmed-faysal-terrorism-related-activities-mha-13628864>.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) is another militant group fighting to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Lim Min Zhang, "Singaporean Man Detained under ISA for Involvement in Yemen Civil War,

MHA announced in December 2020 that Sheik Heikel Khalid Bafana, a Singapore national, had been detained under the ISA since March 2019 for his involvement in the Yemeni civil war and "working for a foreign power as a paid agent" while living in the Middle Eastern country.³⁸⁸ Heikel migrated to Yemen in 2008 and set up Bafana Advisory, a firm which advised foreign companies on security risks and business opportunities. He started to assist one of the factions in the ongoing civil war and was also a "paid agent" of an unnamed foreign power. He collected intelligence on Yemen for the foreign power between 2012 to 2018. Heikel facilitated efforts to secure military arms, supplies and monetary funding to carry out military training. MHA described his dealings with the foreign power as clandestine in nature.

According to MHA, Heikel first came to the attention of the authorities when he made social media postings that alluded to his participation in the armed conflict. In 2017, he had volunteered to take up arms and fight alongside the faction he supported. In a statement, MHA reiterated "Singapore's stern stance against anyone who "supports, promotes, undertakes or makes preparations to undertake armed violence".³⁸⁹

Youth Radicalisation

In January 2020, a 17-year-old teenager was detained under the ISA for supporting the Islamic State (IS).³⁹⁰ He was the third teenager arrested under ISA and the youngest person held under the act.³⁹¹

Working for Foreign Power: ISD," *The Straits Times*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-man-detained-under-isa-for-involvement-in-yemen-civil-war-working-for-foreign>.

³⁸⁹ Navene Elangovan, "S'porean Detained under ISA for Involvement in Yemen Civil War; 3 Others Released from Detention," *TODAYonline*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/sporean-detained-under-isa-involvement-yemen-civil-war-3-others-released-detention>.

³⁹⁰ Tham Yuen-C, "17-Year-Old Secondary School Student Detained under Internal Security Act for Supporting ISIS," *The Straits Times*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/17-year-old-secondary-school-student-detained-under-internal-security-act-for-supporting>.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

According to reports, the teenager's radicalisation journey started in 2017 when he came into contact with pro-IS groups on social media via a foreign online contact. It was following this interaction that he gained access to extremist content online, which led him to believe that IS was a legitimate and "powerful" group fighting for Islam.³⁹² He considered IS' use of violence against its supposed enemies to be justified.³⁹³ The teenager also uploaded defaced pictures of Singapore's President Halimah Yacob on social media³⁹⁴, and called for her beheading by IS, given her status as head of state of Singapore, which he regarded as an "infidel" state.³⁹⁵

Despite repeated efforts by the authorities in the past three years to steer him away from the radical path, the teenager had remained staunch in his support of IS.³⁹⁶ He also continued to view and consume pro-IS materials online. To evade detection from the authorities and avoid raising suspicion, he would conceal his support for IS from his parents and others around him, including religious counsellors who tried to engage him. Even after the collapse of IS' so-called territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria in early 2019, the teenager continued to believe in the group's legitimacy. He also remained willing to assist IS in its online propaganda efforts and participate in other activities on behalf of IS.³⁹⁷

The case puts a fresh spotlight on the threat posed by online radicalisation and foreign influence in Singapore. Youth in particular are vulnerable and susceptible to the extremist narratives promoted by transnational terrorist networks such as IS. The latter's propaganda has often inaccurately depicted conflicts in the Middle

East and other parts of the world as ones that legitimise the oppression and persecution of Muslims. Against this backdrop, IS and its proponents have sought to position themselves as the voice and defender of Muslims around the world, including those in Singapore. In the local context, themes that incorporate IS' binary worldview of "us-vs-them," heroism, martyrdom and Muslim victimhood found in the group's messages, continue to appeal to some Singapore youth.³⁹⁸

COVID-19 Pandemic – Developments of Security Interest

In 2020, a few cases emerged in Singapore involving individuals who harboured intolerant and anti-social sentiments as the country grappled with the spread of the coronavirus. In the same year, several cases of racial insensitivity were also reported in Singapore. Such incidents, if left unchecked, could lead to the erosion of the inter-racial and inter-religious harmony that helps maintain Singapore's strong social cohesion, which helps to guard against extremist narratives.

In February, MHA announced it was investigating online posts by a former local religious teacher. In one post, Abdul Halim Abdul Karim had claimed that the coronavirus, which first emerged in China, was God's retribution against the Chinese for oppressing the Muslim Uighurs in the country's Xinjiang province³⁹⁹. In another post, initially accessible only to his Facebook friends, Halim had written that Chinese people do not wash their hands properly after defecating and were not as hygienic as Muslims, which he claimed caused the virus to spread.⁴⁰⁰ These comments were later

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ "17-Year-Old Secondary School Student Detained under ISA over Support of Islamic State," *Channel News Asia*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/mha-internal-security-act-detain-teenager-islamic-state-12417592>.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ "Update on Cases Under the Internal Security Act," Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore, July 10, 2019, www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/update-on-cases-under-the-internal-security-act.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Amalina Abdul Nasir, and Kenneth Yeo, "Southeast Asia's Teenage Extremists," *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/southeast-asias-teenage-extremists/>.

³⁹⁹ Alif Chandra, "Religious Teacher under Investigation by MHA, Muis for Post Saying Novel Coronavirus Was Retribution from Allah against Chinese," *TODAYonline*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/Religious-Teacher-under-Investigation-Mha-Muis-Racist-Post-Saying-Novel-Coronavirus-Was>.

⁴⁰⁰ Rei Kurohi, "Coronavirus: MHA Investigating Religious Teacher for 'Xenophobic, Racist' Posts," *The Straits Times*, February 7, 2020,

characterised by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam as “xenophobic” and “thoroughly racist”.⁴⁰¹ Following Minister’s statement, Halim posted a “public clarification and apology” on his Facebook page. While he apologised to those who were offended by his posts, he maintained that the postings were not racist. It was only in October 2020 that Halim posted an unqualified apology on his Facebook page.

In June 2020, the authorities also arrested a 19-year-old Polytechnic student, who had posted on Instagram of an alleged dream he had, in which he went on a “shooting spree in an office building and killed Muslims with an AR-15 assault rifle.”⁴⁰² He went on to detail the superior feeling the shooting spree would give him, and further expressed an eagerness to shoot anyone “that’s relatively brown or non-Chinese looking.”⁴⁰³

Although the above postings did not translate into acts of violence, they nevertheless required intervention from the authorities, given the clear intention to promote fear and division. Social psychology theorists have argued that such sentiments could lead to moral disengagement⁴⁰⁴ between diverse racial and religious communities⁴⁰⁵, such as in the context of Singapore.

www.straitstimes.com/singapore/coronavirus-mha-investigating-religious-teacher-for-xenophobic-racist-posts.

⁴⁰¹ Chandra, “Religious Teacher under Investigation by MHA, Muis for Post Saying Novel Coronavirus Was Retribution from Allah against Chinese,” *TODAYonline*, February 7, 2020.

⁴⁰² Ilyas Sholihyn, “TP Student Arrested after Posting Violent Fantasy Involving Gunning down Muslims on Instagram,” *AsiaOne*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.asiaone.com/digital/tp-student-arrested-after-posting-violent-fantasy-involving-gunning-down-muslims-instagram>.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Moral disengagement refers to the process where an individual, or group of people, distances themselves from normal ethical standards of behaviour and become convinced that new unethical behaviours are justified. As cited from Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996), when morally disengaged, one is “blunted by *dehumanization* that divests people of human qualities or attributes bestial qualities to them. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects.”

⁴⁰⁵ Albert Bandura, Claudio Barbaranelli, Gian Vittorio Caprara, and Concetta Pastorelli,

The year also saw a rare case involving an exclusivist, anti-social movement that originated overseas emerging in Singapore. In 2020, the first case of a women claiming to be a “sovereign”, who had also refused to abide by Singapore’s laws, was reported. “Sovereign citizens” is a movement that originated from the US in which adherents are “anti-government extremists who believe that even though they physically reside in a country, they are separate” or ‘sovereign’ from that country.⁴⁰⁶ In this regard, adherents share the terrorist following’s disregard for the law of the land.

In May 2020, Paramjeet Kaur, 41, refused to don a mask in public spaces on two occasions. She was also seen eating publicly, which violated safe distancing rules put in place during Singapore’s circuit breaker period.⁴⁰⁷ She also retaliated when approached by some members of the public and again, when approached by police officers for failing to wear a mask properly.

Although a Singapore citizen, she claimed that local authorities have no “contract” and “no say over (her)”.⁴⁰⁸ Her refusal to abide to any authority resurfaced later during court proceedings, where she remained nonchalant and did not offer any acknowledgement to what was said to her.

“Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency,” 1996, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, no. 2: 364–74.

⁴⁰⁶ Mike Wendling, “What Is the ‘Sovereign Citizen’ Movement?,” *BBC News*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53654318>.

⁴⁰⁷ Singapore’s circuit breaker period was in effect from April 7 to Jun 1 and was a less restrictive form of lockdown than was implemented in other parts of the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the circuit breaker started, a new Bill prohibiting social gatherings both in private and public spaces was passed by the Singapore parliament. Most workplaces were closed, schools moved to home-based learning, dining-in at eateries was not allowed and marriage solemnisations were also postponed. These measures were put in place to contain the spread of the coronavirus. A week after the commencement of the circuit breaker, the wearing of masks became mandatory in public places.

⁴⁰⁸ Shaffiq Alkhatib, “‘Sovereign’ Woman Faces Two More Charges,” *The Straits Times*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/sovereign-woman-faces-two-more-charges>.

Thus far, this has proved to be a one-off episode with little to no traction in Singapore.

Responses

Similar to other countries, 2020 saw a large proportion of Singapore's national resources being channeled towards abating the health crisis and economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Singapore has continued to take extremist influences seriously and taken concrete actions against those who were deemed to pose a security threat. Such actions include arresting radicalised individuals and investigating and prosecuting those who financed terrorism. In addition to punitive measures, the government has maintained social resilience as a key counterterrorism strategy, with able support from various community and religious groups, to keep extremist ideologies at bay.

To mitigate the threat of terrorism financing, the Monetary Authority of Singapore announced that it plans to stop the issuance of \$1,000 notes from 1 January 2021.⁴⁰⁹ This is a preventive measure taken to reduce the risk of terrorism financing which is usually associated with large denomination notes. In 2020, 36-year-old Singaporean Imran Kasim was also convicted under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act, after admitting to transferring funds to support the activities of IS.⁴¹⁰ He was the first Singaporean to be charged and second man convicted with terrorism financing.⁴¹¹ In 2014, Imran had channeled \$450 to a man named Mohamad Alsaied Alhmidan in Turkey to fund IS' publications. The donation was intended to support activities that help spread IS' propaganda and garner support for the terror

group. He also claimed to only recognise and accept Syariah law.⁴¹² Imran also made two attempts to travel to Syria to join IS and had planned to attack Singaporean soldiers "deployed in the global coalition against IS, or hold them as hostages to 'demand a ransom' from the Singapore Government to help boost the group's finances".⁴¹³ On January 14 2020, he was sentenced to 33 months in jail.⁴¹⁴

Outlook

Within the region, the resurgence of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) movement and the prospect of returning regional foreign fighters are particular concerns for Singapore. The potential reinvigoration of JI's regional network poses a credible threat to Singapore, which had neutralised the JI threat within its own borders in the early 2000s. The JI has been undergoing a process of regeneration and is actively expanding its network in Indonesia, recruiting new members, training fighters, and positioning itself to be economically self-sufficient.⁴¹⁵ The consolidation of JI's network and its renewed capacities are developments that bear watching, given the possibility the group may attempt to revive its networks around the region.

The prospect of foreign fighters from Singapore's neighbouring countries, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, who had travelled to the Middle East theatre to join IS and now seek to return home, also has implications for Singapore. The persistence of IS-linked networks across Southeast Asia coupled with the fluidity of cyberspace for online recruitment via platforms like Facebook and Telegram, will continue to

⁴⁰⁹ "Discontinuation of \$1,000 Note Issuance to Pre-empt Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing Risks," Monetary Authority of Singapore, November 3, 2020, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/news/media-releases/2020/discontinuation-of-thousand-dollar-note-issuance>.

⁴¹⁰ Lydia Lam, "Singaporean Man Jailed 33 Months for Financing Terrorism by Funding Islamic State," *Channel News Asia*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singaporean-imran-kassim-convicted-of-financing-terrorism-isis-12260764>.

⁴¹¹ Ahmed Hussein Abdul Kadir Sheik Uduman was charged in September 2019 and was the first to be convicted of terrorism financing in Singapore in October 2019. Imran Kasim was the first to be charged of terrorist financing in April 2019 but his

conviction took place in January 2020, making him the second individual to be convicted for terrorist financing activities in Singapore.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Louisa Tang, "'I Recognise Only Syariah Law': Singaporean Claims Trial after Admitting to Giving S\$450 to Isis," *TODAYonline*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/i-recognise-only-syariah-law-singaporean-claims-trial-after-admitting-giving-s450-isis>.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Amy Chew, "A Resurgent Jemaah Islamiah in Indonesia: Bad News for Malaysia and Singapore," *South China Morning Post*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3017465/why-resurgent-jemaah-islamiah-indonesia-also-bad-news-malaysia>.

present opportunities for returnees to radicalise and inspire attacks across the region, including in Singapore.⁴¹⁶

Terrorist groups such as IS have ramped up their recruitment efforts online during the ongoing pandemic.⁴¹⁷ Such indiscriminate online activities will continue to put vulnerable groups, especially youth, at risk of being lured into the terrorist fold. In addition, Singapore also needs to guard against other foreign inspired extremist movements that could attract local followers and seek to sow racial or religious discord.

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⁴¹⁶ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Colin P. Clarke and Samuel Hodgson, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters from Southeast Asia: What Happens Next?," *ICCT*, February 18, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-terrorist-fighters-from-southeast-asia-what-happens-next/>.

⁴¹⁷ Noah Lee, Tia Asmara, Ronna Nirmala, Mark Navales, and Shailaja Neelakantan, "Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines," *BenarNews*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesia/SEA-ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html>.

SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

AFGHANISTAN

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

In 2020, the security situation in Afghanistan remained volatile, despite the signing of the US-Taliban peace deal in February 2020 and start of an uncertain peace process to end the 'long' war. Engagement in a peace process, brokered by the United States, has not prevented the Taliban insurgents from carrying out incessant attacks and violence. The state of conflict has further been complicated by the Islamic State's Khorasan Province's intermittent but lethal attacks. Amid the desperation shown by the Trump presidency to pull its forces out of the country to project 'success', a peace process is seen as a way out of the present stalemate in Afghanistan. However, any precipitous international troop withdrawal could lead to a reversal of the fragile gains of the last nineteen years and embolden the terrorist networks to consolidate and expand their areas of operations. President-elect Joseph Biden is likely to face stark challenges if he follows a similar trajectory.

Trends

Deteriorating Security Situation

The euphoria surrounding the signing of the peace deal, notwithstanding, Afghanistan continued to be wracked by insurgent violence. The UN Assistance Mission in

Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented around 2,117 civilian deaths and 3,822 more injuries in the first nine months of 2020. The Taliban militants are responsible for 45 percent of the casualties and the government forces for 23 percent. The United States (US)-led international forces have caused two percent of the casualties.⁴¹⁸

Although the civilian casualties were 30 percent lower than the corresponding period in 2019, violence has continued unabated contrary to the expectations that the start of negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar would lead to a decrease in fighting. The Afghan security establishment, without providing the number of casualties among its own troops, claimed on November 14 that it has killed 1,100 insurgents, including more than 70 commanders, in the 25 days prior.⁴¹⁹

Threat Groups: Symbiotic 'Nexus'

The present-day Taliban-led insurgency is not a monolithic organisation of the 1990s. Following the initiation of military action by the U.S in response to the 9/11 attacks on the American homeland, the group relocated to the tribal areas in Pakistan and transformed into a composition of loosely affiliated and diffused units comprising multiple networks of anti-government armed groups; followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's radical group Hizb-e-Islami; the Haqqani network; Al Qaeda and its affiliates; narcotic traffickers; tribal militias; and self-interested spoilers in the Pakistani tribal areas.⁴²⁰ The Taliban's

⁴¹⁸ "Nearly 6,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan so far this year," *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/27/violence-continue-in-afghanistan-even-as-peace-talks-began-un>

⁴¹⁹ "Afghanistan's action against Taliban, more than 70 commanders, 152 Pakistani fighters killed," *Pledge Times*, November 15, 2020, <https://pledgetimes.com/afghanistans-action-against-taliban-more-than-70-commanders-152-pakistani-fighters-killed/>

⁴²⁰ While these groups may not all share the political goals of the Taliban, they do share a common

agenda in preventing or limiting the writ of the state authority forming a symbiotic 'nexus.' This inference was derived from interviews, briefings, and discussions with the government officials, security personnel, academia, media persons, and aid workers in various Afghan provinces from May 2007–August 2017. For further details on the insurgency, see Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, Arlington: RAND Counterinsurgency Study, Vol. 4, 2008; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into*

political wing and leadership known as the 'Quetta Shura' and the military commission known as the 'Peshawar Shura' wield considerable political and fighting power.

Despite reports of factionalism and divisions within the group following the death of its spiritual leader, Mullah Omar, the Taliban remains an able fighting force that has withstood the assault by the US-led international forces for nearly two decades. Amidst contested narratives and counter claims, the group is assessed to be controlling 75 districts, whereas the government forces are in control of 133. Claims over the rest of the 187 districts are contested.⁴²¹ In February 2020, the US President Donald Trump claimed that the Taliban are tired of fighting, which has driven the group to the negotiating table. The fact, however, remains that the group is sensing an opportunity for itself as the US prepares to pull out its 4,500 forces from Afghanistan. It is negotiating from a 'position of strength' and is under little pressure to compromise with the Afghan government's negotiators, whom it wants to project as weak and divided. Its leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada's message on the *Eid-ul-Adha* Islamic festival, extolled his followers, saying that the group is "on the threshold of establishing an Islamic government" after two decades of fighting.⁴²²

The Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) continues to remain entrenched in Afghanistan. The Afghan authorities have periodically arrested key leaders of the group and have asserted that the group is on the verge of collapse.⁴²³ However, the group's

potential to carry out intermittent attacks remains undisturbed and it has managed to carry out several high-profile attacks which included a prison break in the eastern city of Jalalabad in August⁴²⁴ that led to the escape of hundreds of ISKP prisoners; an explosion using a sticky bomb in the western Herat province in July; an attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul killing 25 persons in March; a gruesome attack on a maternity hospital in Kabul that killed 24 women, children and babies in May and a suicide attack on a memorial ceremony held in honour of an ethnic Hazara political leader in March that killed 32 persons, again in Kabul. ISKP claimed responsibility for the mortar attacks in Kabul on November 21 which killed at least eight people and injured 31 others.⁴²⁵ These attacks could be the part of the group's worldwide battle of attrition directed at demonstrating its ability to regroup despite multiple setbacks.

In September, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that al Qaeda (AQ) has fewer than 200 fighters in Afghanistan.⁴²⁶ Underplaying the actual strength of the group could be a strategy adopted by the Trump administration directed at portraying its marginal threat to American interests and, thereby, justify moves to reduce the presence of American troops. Both al Qaeda central and its South Asian franchise al Qaeda in Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) are widely speculated to be present not just in the eastern provinces, in the proximity of the Afghan-Pakistan border, but also in the western provinces of the country, bordering Iran. On November 10, Afghanistan's

Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, London: Penguin, 2008, pp. 240–61; Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "Taking stock of the Afghan Conflict: External-Internal Dimensions," in V. Krishnappa, Shanthie Mariet D'Souza and Priyanka Singh, eds., *Saving Afghanistan*, (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2009), pp.113-4.

⁴²¹ Claims over the rest three districts are unverifiable. "Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan," *Long War Journal*, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

⁴²² "Taliban declares cease-fire in Afghanistan for Eid, as pressure builds for peace talks," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-taliban-eid-cease-fire-peace-talks/2020/07/28/f2a33c98-d0e1-11ea-826b-cc394d824e35_story.html.

⁴²³ Ahmad Sultan, and Rafiq Sherzad, "Afghanistan's president claims victory over Islamic State," *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-islamicstate-idUSKBN1XT1UQ>.

⁴²⁴ "Islamic State claims prison raid in eastern Afghanistan," *Long War Journal*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/08/islamic-state-claims-prison-raid-in-eastern-afghanistan.php>.

⁴²⁵ "Islamic State Claims Deadly Kabul Rocket Attack," *Voice of America*, November 22, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/islamic-state-claims-deadly-kabul-rocket-attack>.

⁴²⁶ "Mike Pompeo: Fewer than 200 al Qaeda members remain in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/2020/sep/15/mike-pompeo-fewer-200-al-qaeda-members-remain-afgh/>.

National Directorate of Security announced the killing of Mohammad Hanif, a veteran AQIS leader of Pakistani origin, during a raid in Farah province.⁴²⁷ Previously in October, Abu Muhsin al-Masri alias Husam Abd-al-Ra'uf, an Egyptian national said to be the group's number two leader, had been killed by the Afghan forces in Ghazni province.⁴²⁸ In spite of the Taliban's promise to the U.S of severing ties with al Qaeda, relations between both groups remain intact.⁴²⁹ According the United Nations, al Qaeda 'can inflict devastating harm to the peace process if not controlled.'⁴³⁰

In 2017, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that 20 terror groups are operating in the country and have their bases in Pakistan. Apart from the Taliban, al Qaeda and the ISKP, the list includes the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jaish-e-Mohammad, among others. Apart from these, there are a few Chechen and Uyghur groups, and the Uzbek group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).⁴³¹ This indicates the growing nexus between the terror groups and the possibility of Afghanistan re-emerging as a crucible of terror.

Security Force Capabilities and Casualties

Between 2001 and 2019, the US lost 2,441 soldiers fighting in Afghanistan. While the United Kingdom lost around 445 soldiers, another 1,144 belonged to a large number of countries that had sent troops to deal with the threat posed by the Taliban-al-Qaeda

combine.⁴³² Over the years, one of the missions of the international forces has been to enable the Afghan security forces to lead the war against the insurgents. At best, a partial success has been achieved.

The actual strength of the Afghan National Defence and Security Force (ANDSF), according to a report by Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), is 281,548, of which 182,173 belong to the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Air Force and 99,375 belong to the Afghan National Police (ANP).⁴³³ However, between 50 and 70 percent of police positions in a handful of provinces were "ghost soldiers."⁴³⁴ The SIGAR report indicates alarming personnel shortfalls in Kandahar, Zabul, Helmand, and Uruzgan provinces of the country. Problems of large-scale attrition, poor training, and lack of motivation afflict the ANDSF. They have indeed been able to register some stunning successes against the insurgents in the past years. However, such successes, on most occasions, have largely been due to the US air support. In the absence of US air power, the ANDSF will not be able to hold territory against Taliban onslaughts particularly in the rural areas making vast areas amenable to Taliban control.

Fledgling Peace Process

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of arduous negotiations, the Taliban and the US inked a peace agreement seeking to bring the nearly two decades-long war in

⁴²⁷ "Veteran Al Qaeda leader killed in western Afghanistan," *Long War Journal*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/11/veteran-al-qaeda-leader-killed-in-western-afghanistan.php>

⁴²⁸ "Key Al-Qaeda leader killed in Afghanistan," *Economic Times*, October 25, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/key-al-qaeda-leader-killed-in-afghanistan/articleshow/78856536.cms>

⁴²⁹ Secunder Kermani, "Al-Qaeda still heavily embedded within Taliban in Afghanistan, UN official warns," *BBC News*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54711452>

⁴³⁰ "Al-Qaeda poses serious threat to Afghan peace process: UN official," *ANI News*, November 14, 2020, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/al-qaeda-poses-serious-threat-to-afghan-peace-process-un-official20201114135506/>

⁴³¹ "20 Terrorist Groups Fighting Against Afghan Government," *Tolo News*, 26 February 2017, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/20-terrorist-groups-fighting-against-afghan-government>

⁴³² "From the 2001 fall of the Taliban to 2020 Afghan peace talks," *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/12/from-the-2001-fall-of-the-taliban-to-2020-afghan-peace-talks>

⁴³³ Report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, April 30, 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr-section3-security.pdf>

⁴³⁴ "The US still doesn't know how many Afghan security forces actually exist, surprising no one," *Task & Purpose*, August 3, 2020, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/afghanistan-troop-levels-sigar-report>

Afghanistan to an end. The agreement had four key elements: a Taliban guarantee that it will not allow foreign armed groups to use Afghanistan as a launchpad to conduct attacks, the complete withdrawal of the US-led forces, an intra-Afghan dialogue and a ceasefire.⁴³⁵ While the Taliban never declared a ceasefire, the intra-Afghan dialogue took several months to fructify depicting a lack of 'consensus' and disunity among the Afghan political elite. The Afghan government, which was not a party in the initial stages to this externally mediated deal, reluctantly agreed to take it forward. Hesitantly it released 5,000 Taliban prisoners, after a four-day *loya jirga* (grand assembly) attended by 3,200 delegates approved the process.⁴³⁶ The actual talks between the Afghan government representatives and the Taliban began in September.⁴³⁷

On December 2, the Afghan government and Taliban representatives said they have reached a preliminary deal, which allowed negotiators to move on to more substantive issues, including talks on a ceasefire.⁴³⁸ It remains to be seen whether the future talks will actually move forward, addressing the distrust and divergent world views of the different stakeholders. While the US is clearly in a hurry to pull out its troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban are using the peace talks to buy time in achieving its goal of re-establishing an Islamic Emirate. The Afghan government, increasingly weakened by the day, still holds on to the idea of a republic, in which the insurgents are supposed to swear their allegiance to the constitution and seek popular mandate to come to power.⁴³⁹ That, however, is only a hope, which seems to be

diminishing given that the Taliban have not indicated any such signs. The constitution which has been rejected in its current form by the Taliban will be a major subject of negotiation.⁴⁴⁰

The peace process with the Taliban has brought a plethora of Afghan elite together. The unity, however, is extremely fragile. Divided along ethnic lines, they have divergent ideas about the integration of and power sharing with the insurgents. It is unlikely that in the event of a failure of the peace process, such unity will hold. President Ashraf Ghani's position also remains weak after he received a fractured mandate in the much delayed and bitterly contested Presidential elections in September 2019 that went unresolved for months. His main contender Dr. Abdullah too claimed victory and announced a parallel inauguration ceremony in February 2020. Abdullah had to be pacified through a power sharing agreement, which saw him being named the leader of the Afghan government's negotiating team with the Taliban. President Trump's manoeuvrings have also weakened President Ghani's position, while legitimising the Taliban as a credible negotiating partner.⁴⁴¹ In addition to the Taliban, Ghani faces opposition rival power brokers within Afghanistan and even within the government who are not hesitant to defect or switch allegiances.

Not only have the Taliban rejected the idea of announcing a ceasefire, they have also reneged on their promises of cutting their links with al Qaeda. The Taliban spokesperson has said that it is unrealistic to announce a ceasefire 'unless the peace

⁴³⁵ Mujib Mashal, "Taliban and US Strike Deal to Withdraw American Troops from Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/asia/us-taliban-deal.html>

⁴³⁶ "Afghan loya jirga approves prisoner release," *The Hindu*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/afghan-jirga-approves-prisoner-release/article32310894.ece>

⁴³⁷ Dan Haverty, "Afghan Peace Talks Begin; Japan's Ruling Party Elects New Leader," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/14/afghanistan-leaders-meet-as-peace-talks-get-underway/>

⁴³⁸ "Afghan gov't, Taliban announce breakthrough deal in peace talks," *Al Jazeera*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/2/afghan->

[govt-taliban-announce-breakthrough-deal-in-peace-talks](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/2/afghan-govt-taliban-announce-breakthrough-deal-in-peace-talks)

⁴³⁹ Gulabudin Ghubar, "Afghans Have Clear Stance On Islamic Republic: Ghani," *Tolo News*, August 5, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/nation-has-clear-stance-islamic-republic-ghani>

⁴⁴⁰ Barnett R. Rubin, "Constitutional Issues in the Afghan Peace Negotiations: Process and Substance," Special Report, *United States Institute of Peace*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/constitutional-issues-afghan-peace-negotiations-process-and-substance>

⁴⁴¹ "Trump Makes a Bad Situation Worse in Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/trump-leaving-biden-mess-afghanistan/617229/>

negotiators discuss the main reason behind the war.⁴⁴² According to media reports, a large number among the released 5,000 prisoners have returned to the battlefield.⁴⁴³ The Taliban announced a three-day ceasefire for *Eid-al-Adha*, a Muslim festival marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, starting July 31. However, between the signing of the peace deal and the ceasefire announcement, 3,560 Afghan security forces had been killed in fighting.⁴⁴⁴ Fighting resumed immediately after the ceasefire and has not shown any signs of abating.

At one level, the US has been a major beneficiary of the peace process so far. Not a single American soldier has been killed in Afghanistan since February 2020. However, the scale of continuing violence has been too intense to ignore. On October 19, the US chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad warned that distressingly high levels of violence could derail the ongoing peace talks. The Taliban reacted by pointing at the US air strikes in Helmand province and saying, 'all responsibility and consequences from continuation of such actions shall fall squarely on the shoulders of the American side.'⁴⁴⁵

Implications of the US Troop Withdrawal

Under the terms of the February 2020 agreement between the US and the Taliban, the last of 4,500 American troops, and 6,100 other NATO forces, are expected to leave, conditions permitting, by May 2021. Conditions for a full withdrawal from Afghanistan are likely to remain unfavourable for the foreseeable future. It is unclear, however, if the US policy would change

under a new American Presidency. President-elect Biden has spoken in favour of keeping a small, intelligence-driven, counter-terrorism force in Afghanistan.⁴⁴⁶ That could potentially derail the peace process which is based on the US promise of a complete withdrawal. Even if Biden wants to continue only a long-term counter-terrorism presence, the remaining troops will need resources to protect themselves and prevent a government collapse.⁴⁴⁷ The dangers of being sucked into an escalating conflict also remains high.

However, sticking to the pathway identified by the Trump administration, especially when the Taliban have made no secrets of their end goal, could also potentially mean abandoning Afghanistan. The repercussions of such action could indeed be wide-ranging and catastrophic for Afghanistan and the region. Under heavy Taliban military pressure and without air power support, the ANDSF are likely to cede much of the countryside to insurgents, falling back almost entirely to defending major urban areas. With fighting escalating, some Afghan power brokers may try to defect and strike separate deals with the Taliban. Most Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara commanders will take up positions to block Taliban advances into their areas of control. This will prevent the Taliban from consolidating power nationally. However, the growing competition among ethnic militias in the north, the Taliban attempting to expand its presence and the operations by al-Qaeda and the ISKP could result once again in spiralling violence and chaos – a throwback to the 1990s. Rapidly deteriorating security and economic conditions could lead to mass exodus of people into neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.

⁴⁴² "Taliban Won't Agree To Ceasefire Unless The Reason Behind War Is Discussed, Says Spokesperson," *Business World*, September 17, 2020, <http://www.businessworld.in/article/Taliban-won-t-agree-to-ceasefire-unless-the-reason-behind-war-is-discussed-says-spokesperson/17-09-2020-321397/>.

⁴⁴³ "Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁴⁴ "Taliban announce three-day ceasefire in Afghanistan for Eid al-Adha, starting Friday," *Reuters*, July 28, 2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-ceasefire/taliban-announce-three-day-ceasefire-in->

afghanistan-for-eid-al-adha-starting-friday-idINKCN24T1YQ.

⁴⁴⁵ "US envoy warns new violence threatens Afghan peace process," *The Hindu*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-envoy-warns-new-violence-threatens-afghan-peace-process/article32891061.ece>.

⁴⁴⁶ "US withdrawal rattles Afghan allies and adversaries alike," *AP News*, November 19, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawals-counterterrorism-islamabad-0a552eb4eaf31754271a890acb622c42>.

⁴⁴⁷ Trump Makes a Bad Situation Worse in Afghanistan, *The Atlantic*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/trump-leaving-biden-mess-afghanistan/617229/>.

As Afghanistan traverses through a difficult transition period, the weakening of the Afghan state's political fabric and military position will have important consequences for the country's regional relations. Neighbouring powers would revert to their hedging strategies, which will result in arming their proxies or coming to terms with the Taliban. The level of insecurity and escalating violence across the country will, as in the 1990s, create a constituency, particularly in the rural areas, who would support the Taliban not due to preference but out of compulsion and battle fatigue to put an end to fighting. This will empower Taliban and affiliated terror groups to once again find a base in Afghanistan and carry out their activities with grave consequences for the region and the world.

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⁴⁴⁸ For details see Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, available at:

<https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2019-web.pdf>;

Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, available at: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>

⁴⁴⁹ Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "CTTC chief: Militancy in Bangladesh now organizationally weak," *Dhaka Tribune*, August 21, 2020,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/21/cttc-chief-militancy-in-bangladesh-now-organizationally-weak>.

BANGLADESH

Despite a gradual improvement in Bangladesh's Global Terrorism Index ranking,⁴⁴⁸ the threat of terrorism persisted and evolved in 2020. Although, the authorities claimed that terrorist groups have become organisationally weaker, their online activities somewhat accelerated amid the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁴⁹ The number of terrorist attacks in 2020 was slightly higher compared to 2019. The year saw at least four terrorist attacks (all by Islamic State) causing one death and 10 injuries, whereas in 2019 the country witnessed three attacks in which 5 persons were injured. In 2020, at least 60 percent of the victims were police personnel. Terrorists reorganised and changed their recruitment and operational tactics, particularly with a wider use of online platforms. Terrorists also expressed their intention for a jailbreak to release their members.⁴⁵⁰ Though Bangladeshi authorities thwarted several attacks by pro-Islamic State (IS) sleeper cells, several small-scale attacks were claimed by IS and publicised on its official media channels. Developments in 2020 also indicate an evolving pattern of domestic radicalisation, and highlight the diaspora linkage to terrorism in Bangladesh.

Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Groups

The IS-linked or affiliated terrorist groups' ideological resonance in Bangladesh continued throughout 2020.⁴⁵¹ However, while the year saw an increased number of attacks by the Neo-JMB, the pro-IS offshoot of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh,⁴⁵² the

⁴⁵⁰ Abdullah Alif, "Heightened security in prisons after jailbreak threat by militants," *Dhaka Tribune*, September 15, 2019,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/09/15/security-beefed-up-at-prisons-over-jailbreak-threat-by-militants>.

⁴⁵¹ The group's propaganda materials were circulated through the Wire and Telegram social media channels and the contents were also shared through various apps such as TamTam, Riot.im, Hoop, ICQ etc.

⁴⁵² Iftekharul Bashar, "Islamic State Ideology Continues to Resonate in Bangladesh," *Middle East Institute*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-ideology-continues-resonate-bangladesh>.

group's organisational structure had weakened as many of its key leaders have been neutralised over the last few years. In July, the Bangladeshi authorities issued a threat alert based on specific intelligence that IS decided to announce its official franchise in Bangladesh, the "Bengal Wilayat."⁴⁵³

On February 28, Neo-JMB targeted police with a remote-controlled IED in the south-eastern port city of Chattogram.⁴⁵⁴ Two policemen, a child, and two passers-by were injured in the attack.⁴⁵⁵ The attack is believed to be plotted and financed by a Bangladeshi citizen living in Dubai, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁴⁵⁶ Neo-JMB also tried to subvert the sectarian and communal peace in the country by plotting an attack against the Shah Jalal Dargah, a famous Sufi shrine, in Sylhet, but it was foiled by the law enforcement agencies. Similarly, on July 31, Neo-JMB's militants attacked a Hindu temple with a home-made bomb in a northern district, Naogaon, but no one was hurt.⁴⁵⁷

In 2020, Neo-JMB changed its operational tactics to evade detentions. A recent investigation discovered that the group resorted to lone-actor terrorism to carry out attacks⁴⁵⁸, in which lone-actor operatives are also guided in bomb-making through an online "manual." The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of Bangladesh police came to know about the outfit's new approach after arresting five suspected Neo-JMB members from Sylhet in

August 2020.⁴⁵⁹ The change in strategy has the advantage of remotely turning new recruits into potential attackers within a shorter period. Furthermore, even if some were caught, the rest of the network, especially the handlers, will remain unaffected.

The Neo-JMB also made some changes to its internal organisational structure in late 2020. In early September, the group announced its new chief, Abul Abbas Al-Bangali, and made changes to its *Majlish-e-Shura* (the executive council). The new chief and most members of the new Shura reside outside the country.⁴⁶⁰

With these changes, it is not clear if the Neo-JMB has split because its former leader Abu Mohammad and his followers have become inactive on encrypted social media channels. Bangladeshi authorities suspect that Abu Mohammad and his followers might have created a separate wing.⁴⁶¹ The leadership changes were not unexpected as Abu Mohammad and his team were not seen to carry out high-profile attacks. The new team is possibly a part of Neo-JMB's effort to reorganise the group.⁴⁶²

Developments in 2020 also bring into sharp focus the transnational linkages of the Neo-JMB. For instance, in April, a Bangladeshi national was arrested in Afghanistan for his link to the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) who reportedly masterminded the March attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵³ Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo JMB rising again?" *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/neo-jmb-rising-again-1969081>.

⁴⁵⁴ Mohammad Jamil Khan and FM Mizanur Rahaman, "New Neo JMB cell behind remote bomb," *The Daily Star*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/new-neo-jmb-cell-behind-remote-bomb-1875493>.

⁴⁵⁵ Uttam Sen Gupta, "Dubai migrant plotted attack on Chattogram traffic police box: officials," *bdnews24.com*, August 22, 2020, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/08/22/dubai-migrant-plotted-attack-on-chattogram-traffic-police-box-officials>.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ "Neo-JMB killed Sohel, claims CTTC," *Prothom Alo English*, September 14, 2020, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/neo-jmb-killed-sohel-claims-cttc>.

⁴⁵⁸ "New JMB resorts to single attack tactics," *Dhaka Tribune*, August 25, 2020,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/militancy/2020/08/14/new-jmb-resorts-to-single-attack-tactics>.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo JMB rising again?" *The Daily Star*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/neo-jmb-rising-again-1969081>; The organisational names of the new Shura members are Abu Ahsan Al Bangali, Abu Ruham Al Bangali Abu Amer Al Bangali, Abu Adnan Al Bangali and Abu Dujana Al Bangali.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ "Afghanistan NDS arrest two aides of Kabul Gurudwara attack mastermind Aslam Farooqui," *Zee News*, April 12, 2020, <https://zeenews.india.com/world/afghanistan-nds-arrest-two-aides-of-kabul-gurudwara-attack-mastermind-aslam-farooqui-2275801.html>.

According to Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security, the arrestee, Mohammad Tanweer was in-charge of the ISKP's Information Technology unit and had played a key role in organising secure communications for the ISKP leaders.⁴⁶⁴ Tanweer is wanted in Bangladesh for his involvement in a foiled plot to bomb an event attended by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2017.⁴⁶⁵ Another arrest in August in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka showed that Neo-JMB raised funds from IS-inspired militants in the Philippines, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, France and Afghanistan.⁴⁶⁶

Neo-JMB's recruitment saw both continuity and change in 2020. Interrogation of the detained militants provided insights into a diversification of the recruitment pool. While the group continued to recruit women, it has also started recruiting teenagers. In February, Bangladeshi authorities arrested the purported chief of the group's female wing from Dhaka. The arrestee herself had been recruiting female members online for a long time. Earlier, the law enforcement authorities had arrested many operatives recruited by her. She was also linked with top Neo-JMB leaders, including Islam Al Hindi, Abu Dujana, and Abu Mohammed, through the internet.

A deposition given by ten militants to a court showed that Neo-JMB targets the lesser-educated youth from rural areas for recruitment.⁴⁶⁷ The group had targeted frustrated teens from insolvent families in rural areas. This was an expansion of Neo-JMB's original target pool (since 2014) of mostly affluent and educated urban youth. This trend might be indicative of Neo-JMB's intention of replenishing its cadres and, at the

same time, penetrating into rural communities.⁴⁶⁸

Al Qaeda-linked Groups

Ansar al Islam (AAI)

Ansar-al-Islam, also known as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), the key Al Qaeda-centric group in Bangladesh, was mainly active in the online domain. Bangladeshi authorities had been able to foil several attacks by the group. For example, in February, the CTTC arrested five suspected AAI cell members who were planning to attack a Hindu temple in Dhaka. The cell was created online through a Telegram channel and was directed by Nazmul alias Usman Gani alias Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, a Kuwait-based Bangladeshi expatriate.⁴⁶⁹ Nazmul was one of the masterminds behind the attempted murder of actor and producer Khijir Hayat Khan in 2018 for making allegedly anti-terrorist films.⁴⁷⁰

In March, Bangladeshi authorities also detained Abu Kaiser alias Rony, who had served a prison sentence in the UAE for a terrorism-related offence and was deported to Bangladesh.⁴⁷¹ During the interrogation, police also discovered that Rony was the AAI co-ordinator and collected funds, including crypto currencies, for the organisation through a cloud-based messaging app, Telegram, and other online chat groups. During his stay in Dubai, he also tried to buy explosives online to help his followers in executing attacks.⁴⁷²

The central theme of AAI's campaign has structured around the *Ghazwatul Hind* or the eschatological last battle of the Indian subcontinent, which will supposedly make

⁴⁶⁴ "Afghanistan releases details of 2 held ISIS leaders, hailing from Bangladesh, Pakistan," *Khaama Press*, April 12, 2020.

<https://www.khaama.com/afghanistan-releases-details-of-2-held-isis-leaders-hailing-from-bangladesh-pakistan-04644/>.

⁴⁶⁵ Kamran Reza Chowdhury, "Suspected Bangladeshi IS Member Caught in Afghanistan, Officials Say," *Benar News*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-04152020190400.html>.

⁴⁶⁶ "Neo-JMB member held in Dhaka's Bashabo," *The Daily Star*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/neo-jmb-member-held-dhakas-bashabo-1952389>.

⁴⁶⁷ Komol Dey, "Abaro purono dharay phirche nobbo-JMB," *Shomoy News*, October 23, 2020, <https://m.somoynews.tv/pages/details/243100>.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ "5 Ansar-al-Islam members held in Dhaka," *Dhaka Tribune*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/02/10/5-ansar-al-islam-members-held-in-dhaka-2>.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "CTTC arrests Ansar-al-Islam coordinator," *Dhaka Tribune*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2020/03/12/cttc-arrests-ansar-al-islam-coordinator>.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

Muslims victorious.⁴⁷³ The AAI has also produced, translated and circulated propaganda materials on various issues about the Muslim world as well as Muslim minorities. Most significantly, the group has exploited the issue surrounding the republication of the controversial Charlie Hebdo cartoon of Prophet Muhammad in France and called for revenge.⁴⁷⁴

In 2020, AAI maintained contact with militants in different countries.⁴⁷⁵ AAI had promoted extremist propaganda through various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Messenger, Whatsapp, etc., and eventually recruited young people by meeting them in person afterwards.⁴⁷⁶ The group reportedly uses remote parts of the country for training its cadres.⁴⁷⁷ Most of AAI/ABT members are followers of Jasimuddin Rahmani, a Bangladeshi radical Islamist and the group's spiritual leader. Though Rahmani is in prison, his speeches and sermons are still available on social media, especially on YouTube.

AAI maintains a robust online presence as evident from its online statements and publications of the group's Bengali Journal *Al Balagh*. The group is reportedly using protective software and mobile phone applications to contact senior leaders.⁴⁷⁸

Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)

⁴⁷³ Iftekharul Bashar, "Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 2020), p. 47.

⁴⁷⁴ Al Hikmah Media's translation of AQIM "Statement Regarding the Sinful French Campaign To Offend the Honour of the Prophet Muhammad - May Allah's Prayer and Peace Be Upon Him," October 31, 2020, <https://archive.vn/QJkgY>.

⁴⁷⁵ "Top Ansar al-Islam militant gives confessional statement," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/2020/05/01/top-ansar-al-islam-militant-gives-confessional-statement>.

⁴⁷⁶ "Ansar Al Islam militant held," *Dhaka Tribune*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/09/30/ansar-al-islam-militant-held>.

⁴⁷⁷ "4 Ansar Al Islam members held in city," *UNB*, October 11, 2019, <https://unb.com.bd/category/bangladesh/4-ansar-al-islam-members-held-in-city/30310>.

⁴⁷⁸ "5 Ansar al-Islam militants apprehended," *Dhaka Tribune*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/07/27/5-ansar-al-islam-militants-apprehended>.

⁴⁷⁹ Iftekharul Bashar, "Bangladesh's Long Road Ahead in Countering Terrorist Fundraising," *The*

Currently, JMB is involved in various crimes like robbery⁴⁷⁹ and it is also suspected to have been involved in kidnapping for ransom cases.⁴⁸⁰ In recent years, the group has become more India-focused. The group's India chapter is active and its networks have created inroads in West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand and Karnataka states of India.⁴⁸¹ Though Indian authorities have arrested many associates of the group's leader Salahuddin Salehin, whose whereabouts are unknown, the geographic proximity and trans-border kinship ties makes JMB a common threat to both India and Bangladesh. In May, Bangladeshi authorities arrested around 17 JMB members who were planning to travel to Saudi Arabia via India.⁴⁸² The arrestees were followers of Syed Mostaq bin Arman, a JMB leader who has actively used the COVID-19 pandemic in his propaganda materials, describing it as a sign of the End of Times, and urged his followers to prepare for the final battles.⁴⁸³

Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B)

Though HuJI-B was quiescent for a long time, it came under the spotlight following the arrest of its leader Mohammad Atiqullah in 2019 after his return from the Middle East.⁴⁸⁴ Since its inception in 1992 by returnee Bangladeshi fighters from Afghanistan, the

Diplomat, September 15, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/bangladeshs-long-road-ahead-in-countering-terrorist-fundraising/>.

⁴⁸⁰ Authors' interview with a Bangladeshi security professional, February 2020

⁴⁸¹ "Kolkata Police team nab JMB operative, second such arrest in 10 days," *Hindustan Times*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kolkata-police-team-nab-jmb-operative-second-such-arrest-in-10-days/story-6agwn1kHaU59uBUxbFzKL.html>.

⁴⁸² Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "17 JMB members arrested on their way to Saudi Arabia," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/05/17-jmb-members-arrested-on-their-way-to-saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁸³ "Court sends 17 JMB members on jihad mission to jail," *The Daily Star*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/17-jmb-members-jihad-mission-arrested-police-1899688>.

⁴⁸⁴ Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "HuJI-B fails to regroup as members disperse to other outfits," *Dhaka Tribune*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/militancy/2020/08/20/huji-b-fails-to-regroup-as-members-disperse-to-other-outfits>.

group has carried out several attacks, including some high-profile ones.⁴⁸⁵ The group reportedly disintegrated following the arrest of its key leaders, and successive attempts at reunification have failed. The group is still trying to revive its old brand and network and increase its activities by exploiting the Rohingya crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other Threat Groups

Bangladeshi authorities continued a country-wide crackdown on Allahr Dal, a grassroots-based extremist group proscribed for collaborating with JMB in the past; later, it broke away. The group aims to establish Sharia-based governance through armed struggle by overthrowing the country's incumbent government.⁴⁸⁶ The group is led by Matin Mehdi who was arrested in 2006 for his links to the JMB's country-wide bomb-blasts in 2005; he is currently serving a life sentence.⁴⁸⁷ Members of Allahr Dal continue to operate despite his imprisonment.

In late 2019, the outfit had planned to attack a prison van scheduled to transport Matin, which was foiled by the Bangladeshi authorities.⁴⁸⁸ The group intended to carry out terrorist attacks in the country, including against state and religious figures, damage state property, and create disorder.⁴⁸⁹

Rohingya Crisis

South-eastern Bangladesh saw an exasperating deterioration of security. In October, the refugee camps in south-eastern Bangladesh saw a major clash between two

rival Rohingya armed groups fighting to establish supremacy in the area.⁴⁹⁰ It is unclear whether these groups have any linkage with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in Myanmar or are operating independently. While some of these groups claim to be part of ARSA, the latter has denied it. Most of the groups are involved in various crimes, including drug trafficking, gun-running, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, robbery, and human trafficking.⁴⁹¹

At least 1.1 million Rohingya refugees who fled persecution in Myanmar are currently living in Bangladesh, mostly in the designated camps and unregistered settlements in Cox's Bazar. Following unrest in October, Bangladeshi authorities have deployed additional forces to maintain security in the Rohingya camps. In October, Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested two gun-makers and seized locally-made weapons in a raid at a gun-making factory in Cox's Bazar. According to RAB, the arrestees were manufacturing and supplying weapons to Rohingya robbers for a long time.⁴⁹²

Diasporic Radicalisation Among Bangladeshi Nationals

At least 20 cases of radicalisation (16 in Singapore, two in the US, one in the UAE and Kuwait each) within the overseas Bangladeshi diaspora were detected in 2020.⁴⁹³ The cases highlight the need for an increased vigilance on the transnational aspects of radicalisation as this might potentially implicate Bangladesh's internal security.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ "Allahr Dal proscribed for threat to public security," *UNB*, November 6, 2019, <https://unb.com.bd/category/bangladesh/allahr-dal-proscribed-for-threat-to-public-security/33637>; The group's vision is to prepare leaders from the grassroots to the central level. The organisation used to receive financial help from various individuals, including members working in or running businesses, who provided a percentage of their monthly income to the group. The group has propaganda and operations wings, and had also recruited retired or dismissed army officers.

⁴⁸⁷ "13 militants held from meeting," *The Daily Star*, May 25, 2008, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-38082>.

⁴⁸⁸ Kamran Reza Chowdhury, "Bangladesh Bans Allahr Dal Militant Group after Thwarting Terror Plots," *Benar News*, November 6, 2011,

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-11062019180157.html>.

⁴⁸⁹ "4 suspected members of Allahr Dal held,"

Dhaka Tribune, December 12, 2019, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2019/12/12/4-suspected-members-of-allahr-dal-held>.

⁴⁹⁰ Abdul Aziz, "4 killed in clashes in Cox's Bazar Rohingya camp," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/10/06/four-killed-in-clashes-in-cox-s-bazar-rohingya-camp>.

⁴⁹¹ Author's interview with a Bangladeshi journalist, September 2020.

⁴⁹² "Gunmaking factory busted in Cox's Bazar, 2 held," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2020/10/02/rab-detains-two-in-cox-s-bazar>.

⁴⁹³ For details on the cases in the UAE and Kuwait, see the sections on Neo-JMB and AAI.

At least 15 of the cases detected in Singapore were related to support for the beheading of French teacher Samuel Paty, and the subsequent attacks in France and elsewhere, or inciting violence against France or French President Emmanuel Macron for the French government's defence of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. All 15 were deported to Bangladesh after investigation. In a separate case, Singapore authorities also arrested and detained a 26-year-old Bangladeshi worker. The arrestee Faysal Ahmed reportedly became radicalised in 2018 after imbibing online IS propaganda and wanted to travel to Syria to fight alongside the group against the Syrian government. However, in mid-2019, Faysal shifted his allegiance to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), another militant group fighting to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria. He donated funds to a Syria-based organisation so as to benefit the HTS cause in Syria. Faysal also actively shared violent propaganda on social media using accounts created under fictitious names. Apart from IS and HTS, Faysal had also expressed support for other terrorist groups including the Al-Qaeda and Somalia-based Al-Shabaab. As per investigations, Faysal believed that Muslims are duty-bound to engage in armed jihad to help fellow Muslims who are oppressed. Apart from Syria, he was also willing to travel to Kashmir to fight against the perceived enemies of Islam. To prepare himself for armed jihad, Faysal watched online firearms-related videos. He even bought foldable knives, which he claimed he would use for attacks against Hindus in Bangladesh.⁴⁹⁴

In November, a Bangladeshi couple, Shahidul Gaffar and Nabila Khan, both residents of Pennsylvania, US, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support and resources to IS. The couple provided financial support to Nabila's brothers [I.K. and J.K.] who had travelled to Syria from

Bangladesh to join IS. The couple discussed the brothers' travel plans in detail with each other, as well as with the brothers and other family members, as early as September 2014. Nabila sold some of her gold jewellery and Ghaffar wired the money through international money transfers several times.⁴⁹⁵ The couple face a maximum possible sentence of five years' imprisonment, a US\$250,000 fine, and three years' supervised release.⁴⁹⁶

Responses

Bangladesh's response to terrorism and extremism has continuously improved, especially since the 2016 attack on Holey Artisan Café. In 2020, some key features of the state response included: a) increased online vigilance by law enforcement agencies; b) scaling up security in the key prisons, including forming a striking force to prevent or respond to jailbreaks; and c) continued co-operation with regional and international partners.⁴⁹⁷

In 2020, Bangladeshi authorities arrested at least 199 militants of various groups and initiated judicial proceedings to prosecute them. Of these, 58 were from AAI, 72 from JMB, 39 from Neo-JMB, 29 from Allahr Dal, and one from Hizbut Tahrir.⁴⁹⁸ Several pro-IS sleeper cells were also discovered and neutralised.

However, some key policy areas require attention. Firstly, combating terrorism financing, particularly as terrorist groups are reportedly diversifying their funding sources. Secondly, the prosecution and conviction of the arrested militants. Thirdly, ensuring proper and timely investigation of terrorism-related cases. There remains a concern that despite arrests, some militants are getting bails from the courts, allowing terrorists to circumvent the criminal justice system, particularly due to lapses in investigation. Finally, as much of the preventing and

⁴⁹⁴ "Home Team Remains Vigilant Against the Threat of Terrorism," *Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore)*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/home-team-remains-vigilant-against-the-threat-of-terrorism>.

⁴⁹⁵ "Bangladeshi Husband and Wife Plead Guilty to Conspiring to Provide Material Support to ISIS," *US Department of Justice*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edpa/pr/bangladeshi-husband-and-wife-plead-guilty-conspiring-provide-material-support-isis>.

[husband-and-wife-plead-guilty-conspiring-provide-material-support-isis](https://www.justice.gov/usao-edpa/pr/bangladeshi-husband-and-wife-plead-guilty-conspiring-provide-material-support-isis).

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ "Jail authorities on high alert after threats of prison break," *The New Age*, September 15, 2020, <https://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/jail-authorities-on-high-alert-after-threats-of-prison-break/57423>.

⁴⁹⁸ Author's compilation based on media reports January 1-November 25, 2020.

countering violent extremism (PCVE) outreach by the government and civil society organisations has stopped due to the COVID-19 situation, there is a need for more online-based engagement.

Outlook

The developments in 2020 indicate that 2021 will be substantially different, tactically more hybridised and challenging. In the short-term, terrorist groups' reorganisation might increase their operational capability, possibly resulting in more attacks. Prisons and critical infrastructure might be the potential targets. Under a new command structure, Neo-JMB is likely to take a more aggressive posture. However, the group's internal factionalism and mistrust, and the human intelligence gathering capability of the Bangladeshi agencies may limit its expansion. Meanwhile, AAI's residual capability and its online propaganda activities might drive it to regain influence in Bangladesh. Though the old-JMB poses a relatively lesser threat, its linkages in India is something to monitor. Bangladesh will also need to respond to the changing demographic character of terrorist recruitment. As more women and teenagers are being lured to terrorism, a more robust gender and age-specific PCVE policy is needed. The transnational or diasporic linkages of terrorist groups will also require more attention as these might replenish the local terrorist entities in Bangladesh with financial or other logistic support. Though terrorist groups have increased the use of online communication platforms, they have also become increasingly cautious. As a result, they are continually issuing alerts for their members on how to operate below the security radar. This is likely to make counterterrorism strategies even more difficult in 2021. While focusing on terrorist groups, Bangladesh must also take into account fringe groups like Allahr Dal and others that have the potential to jeopardise the country's peace and security.

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INDIA

The COVID-19 pandemic and Hindu extremism dominated India's threat landscape in 2020. The interplay of these two factors reinforced existing trends of Islamophobia in India. Despite the elimination of several leaders and cadres of Kashmiri militant groups, the militant threat in Kashmir persisted. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's unilateral revocation of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status and the subsequent decision to allow non-residents to purchase properties in Kashmir also fueled the militants' recruitment drive. Furthermore, Kashmiri militant groups have tried to capitalise on the deepening communal schisms in the Indian society for recruitment and relevance. Though the coronavirus contagion hurt the left-wing extremist groups financially, it also gave them respite from counter-insurgency operations on account of security forces' redeployment in relief efforts.

Threat Landscape

Insurgency in Kashmir

In 2020, Kashmiri militancy remained subdued, with a decline in major attacks and militant casualties, due to the aggressive counter-insurgency operations of the Indian state.⁴⁹⁹ According to government data, in the first half of 2020, as many as 118 militants were killed in counter-insurgency operations, resulting in a 48 percent decline in militant recruitment.⁵⁰⁰ Among those killed was Riyaz Naikoo, the chief of Hizbul Mujahideen, a prominent militant secessionist group.⁵⁰¹ The

⁴⁹⁹ Azaan Javaid, "Is Kashmir militancy beginning to ebb? Last decade trend shows it could be another false dawn," *The Print*, July 06, 2020, [https://theprint.in/statedraft/is-kashmir-militancy-](https://theprint.in/statedraft/is-kashmir-militancy-beginning-to-ebb-last-decade-trend-shows-it-could-be-another-false-dawn/455013/)

[beginning-to-ebb-last-decade-trend-shows-it-could-be-another-false-dawn/455013/](https://theprint.in/statedraft/is-kashmir-militancy-beginning-to-ebb-last-decade-trend-shows-it-could-be-another-false-dawn/455013/).

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ "Riyaz Naikoo: Hizbul Mujahideen Kashmir militant killed by Indian forces", *BBC News*, May 06,

eliminations of key militant commanders, as well as suspension of the internet and telephone services, paralysed insurgent activities in the region.⁵⁰²

The difficulties faced by Pakistan-based Kashmiri militant groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jasir-e-Muhammad, also account for declining insurgent violence in Indian Kashmir. These groups, which rely on funding and support from Pakistani sources,⁵⁰³ have been affected by the slowing Pakistani economy as well as grey-listing of the country for a mediocre counter-terrorism financing record by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog for terrorism financing and money laundering.⁵⁰⁴

Hindu Extremism

Aided by political figures whose Islamophobic sentiments were amplified by mainstream media, several major incidents of Hindu extremism took place this year, such as the Delhi riots in February 2020 against the backdrop of the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests. Barring Muslims, the CAA provides Indian citizenship for undocumented Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian and Jain immigrants who fled

religious persecution from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh before the end of 2014.⁵⁰⁵ The CAA and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) have been criticised as forms of religious discrimination against Muslims by the BJP government.

In February, riots broke out after a BJP leader, Kapil Mishra, threatened actions against anti-CAA protestors if they did not clear the roads in Jaffrabad and Chand Bagh areas of New Delhi, the Indian capital.⁵⁰⁶ Following his statement, there were violent clashes between pro-government protestors, which included Hindu mobs, and anti-CAA protestors in New Delhi.⁵⁰⁷ As the riots escalated, the violence spread in the form of street fighting between Hindus and Muslims in parts of Delhi, leaving 50 people dead from both sides, mostly Muslims.⁵⁰⁸

In some cases, the anti-riot police and security institutions tasked with handling the communal clashes were accused of complicity with the Hindu groups.⁵⁰⁹ The pro and anti-CAA protests and Hindu-Muslim clashes dissipated by April 2020, likely because of the COVID-19 scare and related lockdown restrictions.

2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52556835>.

⁵⁰² Peerzada Ashiq, "Top Hizbul Mujahideen Commander Riyaz Naikoo Killed in Kashmir: Police," *The Hindu*, May 07, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/wanted-hizb-operational-commander-killed-in-kashmir-police/article31516607.ece>.

⁵⁰³ Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, "The Terrorist Who Got Away," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/magazine/ma-sood-azhar-jaish.html>.

⁵⁰⁴ Maroof Raza, "Pakistan's way around FATF," *Tribune India*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/pakistan-way-around-fatf-131958>.

⁵⁰⁵ "What Is CAA, Citizenship Amendment Act? What Is It and Why Is It Seen as a Problem? Everything You Need to Know," *The Economic Times*, December 31, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/et-explains/citizenship-amendment-bill-what-does-it-do-and-why-is-it-seen-as-a-problem/articleshow/72436995.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵⁰⁶ Sukirti Dwivedi and Shylaja Varma, "We'll Be Peaceful Till Trump Leaves," BJP Leader Kapil Mishra Warns Delhi Police," *NDTV.com*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/bjp-leader-kapil-mishras-3-day-ultimatum-to-delhi-police-to-clear-anti-cao-protest-jaffrabad-2184627>.

⁵⁰⁷ "Clash Erupts between Pro & Anti CAA Groups in Jaffrabad Area," *The Economic Times*, February 23, 2020, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/clashes-break-out-at-anti-cao-protest-in-jaffrabad/articleshow/74267029.cms>.

⁵⁰⁸ Jeffrey Gettleman, Suhasini Raj, and Sameer Yasir, "New Delhi Streets Turn Into Battleground, Hindus vs. Muslims," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/world/asia/new-delhi-hindu-muslim-violence.html?auth=login-google>; Sukirti Dwivedi and Swati Bhasin, "Delhi Man, His Son Saved Over 60 People During Clashes Over CAA," *NDTV.com*, March 08, 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/delhi-man-mohinder-singh-his-son-inderjeet-saved-over-60-people-during-clashes-over-cao-2191753>.

⁵⁰⁹ Vasudha Venugopal, "Northeast Delhi violence: Police biased, didn't stop riots, says Delhi Minority Panel," *The Economic Times*, 17 July 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/police-biased-didnt-stop-riots-delhi-minority-panel/articleshow/77007065.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cps.

⁵⁰⁹ Vasudha Venugopal, "Northeast Delhi violence: Police biased, didn't stop riots, says Delhi Minority Panel," *The Economic Times*, 17 July 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/police-biased-didnt-stop-riots-delhi-minority-panel/articleshow/77007065.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cps.

The second major set of events in 2020 took place against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. The already high anti-Muslim sentiments spiked during the pandemic with a social media campaign by the Hindu far-right groups vilifying Muslims.⁵¹⁰ In particular, the Tablighi Jamaat's annual gathering came under spotlight, after the government's announcement of a sudden lockdown. The announcement left a large number of Tablighi members stranded at the Nizamuddin Markaz mosque which subsequently emerged as one of India's first few major vectors of COVID-19.⁵¹¹ Muslim groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat⁵¹² and in some cases the general Muslim population were accused of not complying with the COVID-19 rules and to be deliberately spreading the virus.⁵¹³ This also led to various anti-Muslim conspiracy theories on social media, such as the so-called #CoronaJihad on Twitter that accused Muslims of engaging in a form of jihad by spreading the infections to India's Hindu majority.⁵¹⁴ Other conspiracy theories included ZameenJihad⁵¹⁵ and LoveJihad, an issue that has resulted in at least two states announcing laws in November banning alleged forced inter-faith marriages between Muslim men and Hindu women with the intent

to convert the latter to Islam,⁵¹⁶ despite the National Investigation Agency refuting such claims.⁵¹⁷

The pattern of attacks on minorities, particularly Muslims, by Hindu vigilante groups has been on the rise under the BJP's second term. These attacks are often referred to as "mob lynching" incidents and are usually targeted at Muslims based on mostly false accusations of cow smuggling or slaughter.⁵¹⁸ Hindu vigilante groups have been emboldened by the BJP's ascendance to power in India and the increase in their activities has been a cause for concern among India's religious minorities. While numbers are not yet available for 2020, there has been a steady increase of such incidents from 2018 (84 incidents) to 2019 (109) incidents, with more numbers expected.⁵¹⁹

Some Hindu nationalists' anti-Islamic sentiments on Twitter were received negatively by prominent United Arab Emirates-based figures leading to a backlash in the Gulf and the termination of job contracts of some Indians.⁵²⁰ This necessitated diplomatic interventions to assuage the sensitivities of the Gulf leaders.

⁵¹⁰ Apoorvanand, "How the Coronavirus Outbreak in India Was Blamed on Muslims," *Al Jazeera*, April 18, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/4/18/how-the-coronavirus-outbreak-in-india-was-blamed-on-muslims/>.

⁵¹¹ "Coronavirus: Islamophobia Concerns after India Mosque Outbreak," *BBC News*, April 03, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52147260>

⁵¹² The Tablighi Jamaat is a Sunni Muslim missionary and proselytising movement in India that aims to revive Islamic faith and traditional religious practices among Muslims.

⁵¹³ "Coronavirus Misinformation Fuels Hatred against India's Muslims," *The Straits Times*, May 06, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/coronavirus-misinformation-fuels-hatred-against-indias-muslims>.

⁵¹⁴ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories Targeting Muslims Spread in India," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-targeting-muslims-spread-in-india>.

⁵¹⁵ ZameenJihad also known as 'land jihad' is a conspiracy theory that alleges Muslims to be purchasing lands as a way of taking over parts of India and to use the land to construct mosques and madrassahs (religious schools).

⁵¹⁶ Rabindranath Choudhury, "Madhya Pradesh Assembly to bring 'love jihad' law, make it non-bailable offence," *Deccan Chronicle*, November 18, 2020,

<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/181120/madhya-pradesh-assembly-to-bring-love-jihad-law-make-it-non-bailabl.html>

⁵¹⁷ Love Jihad is a conspiracy theory that alleges inter marriages between Muslim men and Hindu women as a jihadist plot to convert Hindu women to Islam and, in some cases, send them to the Middle East for jihadist activities. The National Investigation Agency conducted investigations on several alleged cases and concluded that this is not true. "Love Jihad not defined in laws, no such case reported by central agencies: Govt tells Lok Sabha," *DNA*, February 05, 2020,

<https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-love-jihad-not-defined-in-laws-no-such-case-reported-by-central-agencies-govt-tells-lok-sabha-2812257>

⁵¹⁸ "Rule of Mob: On Mob Lynching in Several States," *The Hindu*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/rule-of-mob-on-mob-lynching-in-several-states/article32142678.ece>.

⁵²⁰ "3 More Indians in UAE Lose Jobs for 'Islamophobic' Social Media Posts," *The Hindu*, May 03, 2020,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/3-more-indians-in-uae-lose-jobs-for-islamophobic-social-media-posts/article31494062.ece>.

Similar incidents of Islamophobia were also flagged negatively in Canada.⁵²¹ These incidents demonstrate that such issues can spread beyond India's borders as well as create bilateral issues for the Indian government.

Jihadist Threat

In 2020, jihadist groups churned out multiple propaganda pieces targeting Indian Muslims. The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, for instance, brought out its new propaganda monthly magazine, *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of India), which has published at least nine issues primarily focusing on India, apart from other states in South Asia.⁵²² The magazine has commented extensively and sensationally on incidents of discrimination and persecution of Indian Muslims, the CAA and the Delhi riots.⁵²³

In retaliation against anti-Muslim sentiments and incidents in India, IS through *Sawt al-Hind* has called for lone-actor terrorism such as knife attacks, vehicular-ramming or any other weapons which are easily accessible.⁵²⁴ Various issues of the magazine have regularly targeted a number of prominent Indian political and security figures including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.⁵²⁵ While the magazine also discusses other South Asian countries, the narratives regarding the

'conquest of India' demonstrates its India-centric discourse.

In 2020, IS also highlighted the involvement of Indian nationals in prominent attacks outside of India, such as the attack on the Sikh temple in Kabul and the prison break in Nangarhar in March and August 2020, respectively.⁵²⁶ By doing so, the group was likely trying to correct its image as one that does not look down upon Indian recruits and simultaneously inspire more Indian Muslim radicals.⁵²⁷ However, the Indian government refuted IS' claims based on a DNA test on the bomber.⁵²⁸ IS' claims of Indian Muslim involvement might have been to exaggerate Indian Muslims' support for the group.⁵²⁹

Similarly, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) rebranded its monthly propaganda magazine *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* (Voice of the Afghan Jihad) to *Nawa-i-Ghazwat al Hind* (Voice of the Conquest of India).⁵³⁰ This was done in the context of the United States (US) negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban. In return, the Taliban, AQ's strongest ally in the country, promised that it would prevent the latter's affiliates from operating in Afghanistan. This was however, contradicted by multiple UN reports in June 2020.⁵³¹ Subsequently, AQ and AQIS termed the negotiations as a victory for the Taliban against the US and announced to change the geographical focus of its activities from Afghanistan to Kashmir and India.⁵³² Whether this translates to an actual presence

⁵²¹ Steven Zhou, "From India, Islamophobia Goes Global," *Foreign Policy*, July 01, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/india-islamophobia-global-bjp-hindu-nationalism-canada/>.

⁵²² "Terrorism Update Details - Ninth-edition-of-is-magazine-'the-voice-of-hind'-calls-for-jihad," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.satp.org/terrorism-update/ninth-edition-of-is-magazine-'the-voice-of-hind'-calls-for-jihad>
⁵²³ Telli Betul Karakan, "Reframing Islamic State: Trends and themes in Contemporary Messaging," *Danish Institute for International Studies*, June 2020, https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/3547031/Reframing_Islamic_state_DIIS_06_2020.pdf

⁵²⁴ "So, Annihilate the disbelievers", *Sawt al Hind* (Issue 2), March 25.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Abdul Basit and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Islamic State's India Dilemma," *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/islamic-states-india-dilemma/>.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Ananya Bharadwaj, "DNA test shows Kabul gurdwara bomber was Afghan, not Indian from Kerala's Kasargod," *The Print*, August 11, 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/dna-test-shows-kabul-gurdwara-bomber-was-afghan-not-indian-from-keralas-kasargod/479516/>

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Rezaul Lashkar and Aadil Mir, "Al-Qaeda's India affiliate hints at shifting focus to Kashmir," *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/al-qaeda-s-india-affiliate-hints-at-shifting-focus-to-kashmir/story-QgsOfxqfge17uwYfs13pJ.html>.

⁵³¹ "Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," *UNODC*, June 2020, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>

⁵³² Animesh Roul, "Al-Qaeda's South Asian Branch Gravitating Toward Kashmir," *Jamestown Foundation*, April 17, 2020,

in Kashmir remains to be seen given that most of the leaders of its Kashmiri affiliate, Ansar Ghazwat al Hind, have been eliminated.⁵³³

Left-Wing Extremism

Reportedly, the COVID-19 crisis could be crippling left-wing militant groups' ability to operate in the rural regions in parts of central and eastern India. The groups' finances have been affected as major economic activities have stalled and the militants have been unable to extort from local businesses and workers, which constituted a major component for their finances.⁵³⁴ The decline in economic activities for the most part of 2020 has led to the drying up of their financial sources.⁵³⁵

As such, Naxal activities in India were mostly limited throughout 2020 although many operatives tried to steal food and government handouts as a way of replenishing their forces.⁵³⁶ There have also been reports of efforts to revive left-wing militancy and activism in parts of the country where the threat was thought to have been neutralised.⁵³⁷

Responses

In 2020, the Indian army decapitated several Kashmiri militant leaders and their cadres.⁵³⁸

<https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaedas-south-asian-branch-gravitating-toward-kashmir>

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Sumit Bhattacharjee, "COVID-19 Fears, Illness Woes Force Maoists to Lie Low," *The Hindu*, July 09, 2020,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/covid-19-fears-illness-woes-force-maoists-to-lie-low/article32035684.ece>.

⁵³⁵ Rajbala Rana, "COVID-19: Impact on Left Wing Extremism in India," *IDSa*, April 28, 2020, <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/covid-19-left-wing-extremism-rana-siomon-280420>.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ S. Harpal Singh, "The Return of the Maoists in Telangana," *The Hindu*, August 08, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/maoists-are-making-a-comeback-in-telangana/article32298580.ece>.

⁵³⁸ Azaan Javaid, "Is Kashmir Militancy Beginning to Ebb? Last Decade Trend Shows It Could Be Another False Dawn," *The Print*, July 06, 2020, <https://theprint.in/statedraft/is-kashmir-militancy-beginning-to-ebb-last-decade-trend-shows-it-could-be-another-false-dawn/455013/>.

This proved effective in thwarting the militant threat, at the tactical level. However, at the strategic level, the government efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Kashmiri people had been inadequate. The downgrading of Kashmir to a union territory was a major blow to the idea of a semi-autonomous Kashmiri statehood.⁵³⁹ Additionally, the Indian government also placed Kashmir in a vice-like grip by shutting off high speed internet access for close to a year and imposing frequent lockdowns and curfews to cut off protests for fears that they could lead to insurgent mobilisation.⁵⁴⁰

However, despite the short-term gains that may have accrued over the year, since the abrogation of Article 370, there are some long-term risks from the government's moves. Crucially, the Indian government has not been able to fulfill its promises on employment, increasing tourism in the region, business investments and upliftment of communities in Kashmir.⁵⁴¹ These issues have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis and the ensuing lockdown across large parts of India in the middle part of the year.⁵⁴²

Other measures, such as the introduction of legislation that allows non-Kashmiris to secure their domicile in Kashmir, have led to widespread fears that the religious make-up of Kashmir will be altered, rendering Kashmiri Muslims a minority in the region.⁵⁴³ Finally,

⁵³⁹ Prabhash K Dutta, "Article 370: Can Jammu and Kashmir Regain Statehood? Possible Options," *India Today*, August 05, 2020,

<https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/jammu-and-kashmir-statehood-options-article-370-abrogation-1st-anniversary-1707862-2020-08-05>.

⁵⁴⁰ Justin Sherma, "Kashmir Internet Shutdown Continues, Despite Supreme Court Ruling," *The Diplomat*, August 21, 2020,

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/kashmir-internet-shutdown-continues-despite-supreme-court-ruling/>.

⁵⁴¹ Vijaita Singh, "No new government jobs in J&K a year after Article 370 move," *The Hindu*, July 29, 2020,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/one-year-on-after-special-status-revocation-no-new-jobs-in-jk/article32223097.ece>.

⁵⁴² Niha Dejjia, "Perpetual Silence: Kashmir's Economy Slumps Under Lockdown," *The Diplomat*, August 14, 2020,

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/perpetual-silence-kashmirs-economy-slumps-under-lockdown/>.

⁵⁴³ Raksha Kumar, "Here's Why Kashmiris Fear That a Demographic Change Is Imminent in the Region," *Vice*, August 05, 2020,

arbitrary detentions of many mainstream local politicians⁵⁴⁴ have shrunk the space for moderate pro-Indian voices in Kashmir. This could potentially validate the extremist narratives of Islam being under siege and those pre-disposed to violence.⁵⁴⁵

On the jihadist front, the Indian state continues to monitor threats and arrest individuals who are members of terrorist groups or engage in similar activities. In 2020, several terrorist plots were foiled, with arrests made by the National Investigation Agency. Recent successes included the detainment of operatives in Delhi (with explosives) and Bangalore (accused of developing apps for IS).⁵⁴⁶

The varied manifestations of Hindu extremism make it difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of the threat and the extent to which it poses a threat to religious minorities and the Indian state's secular ethos. The Indian state is reluctant to admit or end the extremist and violent activities of Hindu vigilante groups.⁵⁴⁷ The mainstreaming of Hindutva as a national ideology and it being increasingly seen and accepted as a legitimate expression of Indian nationalism has made it harder to implement an effective response to the Hindu extremist threat.

A common thread that runs through the threats covered in this assessment, barring Naxalism, is the issue of identity. Most of the groups involved view and perceive the actions of their opponents as threats to their identities, whether real or imagined. Kashmiri Muslims consider the provision of domicile certificates as a means to alter the demographics of the region and their regional identity. Similarly, certain proponents of Hindutva frame the presence of Indian

Muslims as a threat to their safety. Finally, jihadist groups point to the excesses of the Hindu nationalists and extremists to validate their ideological claims that there will be an eventual destruction of Muslims in India if their call to violence is not heeded.⁵⁴⁸

To reduce perceptions of threats to peoples' identities, the Indian government should assuage concerns and dispel any fake narratives and conspiracy theories which threaten people's identities and ways of life. It is also imperative that the government makes strong policy changes such as stimulating jobs and economic prospects while also engaging with different stakeholders across India.

Outlook

The rise of Hindu extremism and the mainstreaming of Hindutva perspectives into India's national politics add further complexity to India's threat environment. Jihadist groups on the other hand are likely hopeful of their revival and increasing popularity in India given the polarised political and communal atmosphere. How this plays out though is still dependent on many factors including government actions, the Indian Muslim community's reactions, and the growth of Hindu extremists. Kashmir similarly faces a subdued militancy given the various effects of the pandemic and stringent lockdown on the union territory. However, the resurgence of violence in Kashmir cannot be ruled out in future. It is important, therefore, for security forces and the government to re-ignite efforts to engage more constructively with the Kashmiri populace.

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https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xg87g3/kashmir-article-370-domicile-law.

⁵⁴⁴ Niha Masih, "Six Months into India's Crackdown in Kashmir, Three High-profile Political Prisoners Remain Held," *The Washington Post*, February 05, 2020,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/six-months-into-the-crackdown-in-kashmir-three-high-profile-political-prisoners-remain-in-detention/2020/02/05/b282dc4e-4762-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1_story.html.

⁵⁴⁵ "Why are Kashmiri politicians still in detention when other restrictions have been lifted?" *The Print*, March 05, 2020, [https://theprint.in/talk-point/why-](https://theprint.in/talk-point/why-are-kashmiri-politicians-still-in-detention-when-other-restrictions-have-been-lifted/376259/)

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⁵⁴⁶ "More explosives, ISIS flag recovered from house of arrested 'operative' in UP," *The Diplomat*, August 24, 2020,

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/more-explosives-isis-flag-recovered-from-house-of-arrested-operative-6567142/>.

⁵⁴⁷ Sudha Ramachandran, "India: Fanning the Flames of Extremism and Terror at Home," *Jamestown*, January 15, 2020,

<https://jamestown.org/program/india-fanning-the-flames-of-extremism-and-terror-at-home/>

⁵⁴⁸ Abdul Basit and Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Islamic State's India Dilemma."

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MALDIVES

Limited jihadist activity and terrorist attacks punctuated the Maldives' threat landscape in 2020, disrupting its relative peace and stability. The 2020 terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group are notable since the country witnessed no terrorist incidents in 2019.⁵⁴⁹ In 2020, the IS-inspired Maldivian militant groups engaged in arson attacks against government targets. Furthermore, a few knife attacks against foreign tourists were reported just before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a closure of the country's tourism industry. Keeping in view the spate of terrorist attacks in 2020 vis-à-vis a quieter 2019, there is a slight escalation of the terrorist threat to the Maldives which necessitates continued monitoring of threat groups and individuals.

⁵⁴⁹ "Maldives - United States Department of State," *The US Department of State*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/maldives/>.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Giriraj Bhattacharjee, "Maldives," *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. 18, No.44, April 27, 2020, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-volume-18-no-44>.

⁵⁵² Zunana Zaliif "Six Arrested in Counter-terrorism Operation," *Raajje.mv*, November 12, 2020, <https://raajje.mv/90444>.

Threat Landscape

The terrorist attacks in the Maldives in 2020, albeit not causing mass casualties, are significant when contrasted with 2019 where no reported terrorist incidents occurred.⁵⁵⁰ While Islamist radicalism is not new in the island nation, the attacks signify that radical groups were interested, and capable of engaging, in violence. The terrorist incidents witnessed in 2020 demonstrated the crude, low-end capabilities of the terrorists. 2020 saw at least four notable terrorist incidents that took place before the country went into its COVID-19 lockdown. The attacks consisted of arson or stabbing, the former targeted government-owned vehicles and the latter hit the tourists. Some of the attacks were subsequently featured and praised in IS' monthly English-language propaganda magazine, *the Voice of Hind*.⁵⁵¹

Those arrested or suspected of involvement in terrorist incidents were Maldivian citizens, some having combat exposure in the Syrian conflict and recently returned to the Maldives.⁵⁵² Others were believed to be IS supporters and linked to other jihadist groups which wanted to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁵³ Antecedent factors such as the permeation of Salafi jihadism, a volatile social environment that pushes youth towards drugs and crimes and limited economic opportunities could also have contributed to some of the youth turning to militancy.⁵⁵⁴

Two major arson incidents occurred in April 2020. In the first assault, speedboats, a sea ambulance and a dinghy were set on fire in the harbour of Mahibadhoo.⁵⁵⁵ This was also the first terrorist attack in the Maldives claimed by IS. However, the attack appeared to have been organised locally as a revenge against the Maldivian government for its

⁵⁵³ Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives," *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/islamic-state-terror-in-the-maldives-as-covid-19-arrives/>.

⁵⁵⁴ Ali Naaz, Aishath, "Recruitment Trends: Crime, Mental Health and Violent Extremism: The Maldives Story," *Strong Cities Network Summit*, July 12, 2018, <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Recruitment-Trends-Slides1.pdf>.

⁵⁵⁵ Shahudha Mohamed, "6 Vessels up in Flames in Mahibadhoo Harbour Fire," *The Edition*, 15 April 2020, <https://edition.mv/news/16144>.

crackdown on radical Islamist groups.⁵⁵⁶ In the second arson incident, a state-owned sewerage pump station on the Hithadhoo island was torched by an unidentified group of attackers.⁵⁵⁷ Although no one claimed responsibility for the arson attack, the IS' Voice of Hind propaganda organ congratulated the perpetrators for carrying out the "arson attack".⁵⁵⁸

The economy of the Maldives is mainly based on tourism and related sectors which contribute 28 percent of the country's gross domestic product. As the largest industry in the country, it is considered a lifeline of the Maldives' economy.⁵⁵⁹ In 2020, terrorist attacks were witnessed against tourists alongside social media campaigns by extremists calling for violence against tourists. A Telegram channel, "TouristWatchMv," set up in January 2020 churned out IS propaganda in the country and its members were believed to have been involved in stabbing the tourists.⁵⁶⁰

The attacks on tourists took place before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a closure of the country's tourism sector. In February 2020, for instance, one Australian and two Chinese nationals were stabbed.⁵⁶¹ The attackers later released a video in which they took responsibility and accused the Maldivian government of being anti-Islamic and "run by infidels."⁵⁶² Those involved in the attack were later arrested.⁵⁶³

The Maldivian government has since taken measures to revive the tourism industry, including relaxing COVID-19-related travel restrictions. Following these attacks, countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, whose nationals are frequent visitors to the Maldives, have issued travel advisories to their citizens.⁵⁶⁴ Terrorist attacks targeted at tourists are clearly intended to scare off foreign tourists. The tourism sector risks being seriously affected if the terrorist threat to tourists remains or grows.⁵⁶⁵

Although the number of Maldivians involved in global jihadist groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda is low, the Maldives contributed the greatest number of IS fighters per capita to the Syrian civil war.⁵⁶⁶ As the IS' territorial control in Iraq and Syria has shrunk, returning terrorist fighters could pose a grave internal threat to Maldivian society and government in the near future.⁵⁶⁷ The increased terrorist activities in 2020 come amidst the growing appeal of more exclusivist versions of Salafism which is gradually replacing the non-fundamentalist and tolerant Islamic traditions in the Maldives.⁵⁶⁸ In addition to contemporary terrorist influences, the Wahabi and Salafi teachings that originated from Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the last few decades have increased the appeal for a puritanical Islam and possibly contributed to the ingress of IS in the archipelago.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁵⁶ Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives."

⁵⁵⁷ "Eye on Extremism: Apr 28, 2020," *Counter Extremism Project*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.counterextremism.com/roundup/eye-extremism-apr-28-2020>.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ "Rapid Livelihood Assessment Impact of the Covid-19 Crisis in the Maldives, ASSESSMENT PHASE I," Ministry of Economic Development, Republic of Maldives, May 28, 2020, 15.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ "Maldives Stabbing: Australian and Two Chinese Injured in Attack Claimed by Isis Sympathisers," *The Guardian*, February 06, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/06/maldives-stabbing-australian-and-two-chinese-injured-in-attack-claimed-by-isis-sympathisers>.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ "Islamic State Claims Responsibility in Stabbing Incident Involving Three Tourists," Maldives, July 2, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Islamic-State-claims-responsibility-in-stabbing-incident-involving-three-tourists-49234.html>.

⁵⁶⁴ Kara Godfrey, "Is It Safe to Travel to the Maldives - Latest Advice following Terror Attack," *The Sun*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/travel/11004012/maldives-travel-advice-terror-attack/>.

⁵⁶⁵ It is important to mention that due to COVID-19, Maldives' tourism numbers dropped significantly. However, since the country opened its borders for tourism, the number of tourists rose up. This may have offset any negative effect that the IS attack would have caused. For more on numbers see: Feizal Samath, "Hopes persist even as Maldives tourism sees slow rebound," *BBC News*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.tgasia.com/2020/10/19/hopes-persist-even-as-maldives-tourism-sees-slow-rebound/>.

⁵⁶⁶ Giriraj Bhattacharjee, "Maldives."

⁵⁶⁷ "Six Arrested in Counter-terrorism Operation," *Raajje.mv*, November 12, 2020, <https://raajje.mv/90444>.

⁵⁶⁸ Sudha Ramachandran, "The Maldives: Losing a Tourist Paradise to Terrorism," *Refworld*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56a7913b4.html>.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

Responses

The Maldives, under the whole-of-society approach, has combined hard and soft approaches to counter the twin threats of extremism and terrorism. Under the hard approach, the law enforcement agencies are arresting terrorists.

The Maldivian government has launched a crackdown against jihadist networks, arresting suspected IS supporters along with raiding their hideouts. This offensive was initiated in the wake of the arrest of Mohammed Ameen, a preacher who was involved in facilitating the travel of would-be-jihadists to Syria and Iraq since 2015.⁵⁷⁰

Under the soft approach, the government is engaging with the Maldivian local actors with the perspective of better understanding the threat from a localised perspective. Additionally, the passage of the National Action Plan (NAP) 2020 to reduce extremist groups may further strengthen the counter-terrorism regime in the Maldives. The NAP aims to engage with civil society actors, improve gender equality, reduce the number of people in prisons, bring down gang violence (a potential pathway to terrorism) and improve job opportunities for youth.⁵⁷¹

The Maldives government has also engaged with multiple organisations and other governments to better counter terrorist groups in the country. For one, it secured funding of up to 2.5 million Euros from the European Union for two projects: i) to promote peace and tolerance among local populations, and ii) to increase the institutional capacity to respond to terrorism.

At the same time, the Maldives' police is collaborating with the UAE-based civil society group, Hedayah, the Interpol and other regional agencies on counter terrorism. Initiatives that arose from such collaboration include strengthening mainstream Islamic voices as countervailing forces against radicalism as well as improving measures to

help the rehabilitation and reintegration of foreign fighters in the Maldives.⁵⁷²

Outlook

In 2020, the Maldivian government had to deal with a slight uptick in terrorist attacks alongside addressing the serious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Even as its primary focus may be on rigorously mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the economic and health fronts (as with most countries globally), the government will need to continue to ensure that its security strategies remain intact in the current pandemic environment. Potential security gaps can be exploited by radical groups and sympathisers in the Maldives. Going by the 2020 attacks, it is clear that the Maldives remain of terrorist interest in general. The lauding of most of the terrorist attacks in the Maldives, in IS propaganda publications, indicates that IS has renewed its interest in the country. In this regard, it may try to leverage any returned Maldivian fighters or networks that facilitated these foreign fighters or exploit domestic grievances to grow its recruits and facilitate further attacks in the country in the coming times.

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⁵⁷⁰ Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives."

⁵⁷¹ "NCTC Newsletter Volume 40," *National Counter Terrorism Center*, July 2020,

https://nctc.gov.mv/publications/NCTC_Newsletter40.pdf.

⁵⁷² "NCTC Newsletter Volume 42," *National Counter Terrorism Center*, September 2020, https://nctc.gov.mv/publications/NCTC_Newsletter42.pdf.

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PAKISTAN

In 2020, the low incidence of terrorism and resultant killings in Pakistan continued. Pakistan's threat landscape was marked by shifting terrorist tactics, the reunification of Pakistani Taliban and re-emergence of Sunni-Shia tensions. The ex-FATA region, now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was the most-affected region followed by Balochistan province. The Baloch and Sindhi separatist groups forged an alliance against the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Despite promising progress on counter terrorist financing, Pakistan stayed on the Financial Actions Task Force (FATF)'s grey-list. Concerningly, the lack of political ownership of the National Action Plan (NAP) counter terrorism roadmap can potentially undermine Pakistan's hard-earned counter terrorism gains. Going forward, the outcome of the intra-Afghan negotiations and the manner in which the US withdraws from Afghanistan will have far reaching implications on Pakistan's militant landscape. The above-mentioned trends underscore the diverse, complex and chronic nature of Pakistan's militant landscape.

Threat Landscape

In Pakistan, the downward trajectory of terrorist incidents and casualties that started in 2015 continued in 2020. There was no substantial difference in the terrorist attacks and killings between 2019 and 2020. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal's open-source data, in the first ten months of

2020, as many as 254 terrorist attacks were witnessed accounting for 159 killings compared to around 259 attacks and 121 fatalities for the same period in 2019.⁵⁷³ This downward trend of terrorism in Pakistan is consistent with the overall decline of anti-state violence across South Asia.⁵⁷⁴ However, decreasing violence is not a robust indicator of improvement in the security. In fact, the underlying factors that contributed to the emergence and rise of terrorism, sans US withdrawal from Afghanistan, not only persist but seem to have worsened.⁵⁷⁵

Significantly, terrorism-related killings in 2020 were less than the total number of attacks, underscoring the less lethal and more discriminate nature of terrorism in Pakistan, primarily targeting the security forces. The most frequently used tactics by the terrorist groups, i.e. IEDs (72) and firing (82), further strengthen this observation. These guerrilla warfare tactics are used for ambushing and attacking the security forces.⁵⁷⁶ Though not conclusive, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s, the umbrella group of anti-Pakistan tribal militants, switch from indiscriminate to less discriminate target-selection is noteworthy. Ostensibly, TTP is not just trying to kill and terrorise, but is attempting to draw attention to its political messaging through selective violence.⁵⁷⁷

It is not unusual for terrorist groups to use a combination of terrorist, insurgent and guerrilla warfare tactics, because they not only attack civilians but police, military and government as well.⁵⁷⁸ These developing tactics underscore TTP's effort to evolve into an insurgency which is also evident from its localised narrative. Though, TTP neither holds territory, nor has public support.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷³ "Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Month Wise," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, retrieved on November 23, 2020, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/incidents-data/pakistan>.

⁵⁷⁴ Paul Staniland, "Political Violence in South Asia: The Triumph of the State," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 3, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/political-violence-in-south-asia-triumph-of-state-pub-82641>.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ Author's conversation with Muhammad Feyyaz, a post-graduate terrorism researcher at Queen's University Belfast, UK, November 14, 2020.

⁵⁷⁷ Charles Tilly, "Terror, Terrorism, Terrorists," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (March 2004), pp. 5-13; This observation is further strengthened by the fact that only two suicide attacks were reported in 2020

⁵⁷⁸ Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 5, (2014), pp. 2-17.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

The reorientation of TTP's operational tactics from indiscriminate to less discriminate violence coincides with the US exit from Afghanistan, forcing the terror group to re-evaluate the efficacy of indiscriminate targeting strategy. This also points to political savviness in the TTP's decision-making, i.e. recognising the importance of public support and limitations of violence in the quest of purported political goals.⁵⁸⁰

Primarily, three factors explain the decline in terrorism and resultant killings in Pakistan.

First, Pakistan's counter terrorism alliance with the US in the global war on terror (WOT) helped fueled terrorism in the northwestern tribal regions.⁵⁸¹ Now, Islamabad no longer supports the US-led war in Afghanistan; rather, it has been instrumental in brokering the US-Taliban deal in February 2020 and facilitating the intra-Afghan negotiations.⁵⁸² In fact, the incumbent Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI) government has consistently opposed the WOT and advocated negotiations with the Taliban.⁵⁸³ Arguably, TTP no longer views public support for the government as an endorsement of the latter's alliance with the US in the WOT, underscoring its evolving and nuanced political narrative.⁵⁸⁴

Second, the success of Pakistan's counter terrorism operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region has reduced terrorism.⁵⁸⁵ These operations have not only restored the government's writ but forced terrorist groups to relocate to Afghanistan. The success of counter terrorism operations is also evident from the fact that of the 37 active terrorist groups in Pakistan in 2015, only 10 were functional in 2019.⁵⁸⁶

Finally, border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran has deterred terrorist groups from launching attacks inside Pakistan. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, work on border fencing continued throughout 2020.⁵⁸⁷

Trends of Violence and Militancy

TTP's Reunification

TTP has reunified ahead of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This re-integration should be situated against the backdrop of covert decapitations of various TTP leaders and commanders in Afghanistan between February and June 2020.⁵⁸⁸ These secret eliminations were the quid pro quo that

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ "Global Terrorism Index 2020," *Institute of Economic and Peace*, November 2020, p.25, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1n2rvmkBKITSpU5E5Gfs1Ei4R0va6Fn_myrcTabGQdGyWXB8VhBoJybCg.

⁵⁸² Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan 'brokered' Afghan peace deal," *Express Tribune*, February 17, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2158273/pakistan-brokered-afghan-peace-deal>; "Pakistan's efforts made Afghan talks possible, says Bajwa," *Dawn*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1579768>.

⁵⁸³ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Pakistan must reject US aid and exit the war on terror, says Imran Khan," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/01/pakistan-must-reject-us-aid-and-exit-the-war-on-terror-says-imran-khan>; "Pakistan PM pledges support for Afghan peace in historic visit," *Al-Jazeera*, November 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/19/pakistan-pm-khan-headed-for-his-maiden-afghan-visit>.

⁵⁸⁴ Author's conversation with Muhammad Feyyaz.

⁵⁸⁵ "Decline in terrorism," *Dawn*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1525816>.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ben Farmer and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "Pakistan Builds Border Fence, Limiting Militants

and Families Alike," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/asia/pakistan-afghanistan-border-fence.html>.

⁵⁸⁸ Muhammad Feyyaz, "Rejoining the progenitor: pragmatically assessing the Pakistani Taliban reunification," *Academia*, August 30, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/43982296/Rejoining_the_progenitor_pragmatically_assessing_the_Pakistani_Taliban_reunification; In the first six months of 2020, at least five key TTP commanders have been killed in Afghanistan including, Khan Saeed Mehsud, Shehryar Mehsud, Sheikh Khalid Haqqani, Qari Saifullah Younis Peshawri and Azizullah aka Shamzai Baba in different parts of Afghanistan. For details, see Zia Ur Rehman, "Recent killings of Pakistani Taliban leaders in Afghanistan leave group crippled," *Andalou Agency*, February 19, 2020, https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2020/02/19/feature-01; Secunder Kermani & Sami Yousafzai & Ishtiaq Mehsud, "Kabul Taliban: Spies, militants and a mysterious assassination," *BBC News*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51356940>; "Mysterious death of key Pakistani Taliban leaders in Kabul raises questions," *Khama Press*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.khama.com/mysterious-death-of-key-pakistani-taliban-leaders-in-kabul-raises-questions-768689/>.

Pakistan would have demanded for assisting the US in reaching a deal with the Taliban

Since becoming TTP's chief in June 2018, Nur Wali Mehsud repurposed TTP's operational strategies from indiscriminate violence against civilians to targeted violence against Pakistani security institutions. He implemented strict organisational discipline by introducing a code of conduct and emphasising alliance building.⁵⁸⁹ Possibly, the revived code of conduct was instrumental in addressing the disagreements between different TTP factions and paved the way for their reunification.⁵⁹⁰ Consequently, in June, the Shehryar Mehsud group rejoined TTP in Afghanistan. Likewise, in August, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Hizb-ul-Ahrar, Amjad Farooqi group of the Punjabi Taliban and Saifullah Kurd group, a sub-group of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, pledged their oath of loyalty to Nur Wali.⁵⁹¹

TTP's reunification, evolving operational strategy and localised ideological rhetoric also highlight Al-Qaeda's continued influence over the former.⁵⁹² Both trends are consistent with Al-Qaeda's localised jihadist narrative and select use of violence. Al-Qaeda seems to have convinced TTP to desist from targeting civilians and was instrumental in "guiding TTP to a political recovery."⁵⁹³ Historically, Al-Qaeda has used its organisational capital over the local jihadist groups in the Af-Pak region to put up a joint front against the US in Afghanistan.⁵⁹⁴

Terrorist groups like TTP which imitate insurgent and guerrilla tactics, in addition to classical terrorism, without holding territory or public support, can be categorised as "proto insurgencies" or "hybridised terrorist groups."⁵⁹⁵ This is not unusual. Contemporary terrorist groups simultaneously use a variety of tactics falling within the extant understanding of terrorism, insurgency and guerrilla warfare tactics.⁵⁹⁶

Broadly, TTP has identified two objectives for its militant activism: a) opposing ex-FATA's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and waging an armed struggle against Pakistani military and paramilitary troops in the region. For the last two years, TTP has been publishing a propaganda magazine *Mujallah Taliban* to articulate its ideological position on various issues concerning the group

Ahead of the US exit from Afghanistan, TTP desperately needed a long-term strategic plan to avoid further fratricide and maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.⁵⁹⁷ TTP ideologically denounced the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP) to avoid being lumped with the latter in a post-US Afghanistan. A UN report in July indicated that about 6,500 Afghanistan-based Pakistani militants could join ISKP following the US withdrawal.⁵⁹⁸ Not only did TTP vehemently denounce the UN report, it also issued an ideological rebuttal of ISKP.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁸⁹ Amira Jadoon and Sara Mahmood, "Fixing the Cracks in the Pakistani Taliban's Foundation: TTP's Leadership Returns to the Mehsud Tribe," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 11, (December 2018), pp. 21-25, <https://ctc.usma.edu/fixing-cracks-pakistani-talibans-foundation-ttpps-leadership-returns-mehsud-tribe/>.

⁵⁹⁰ Author's conversation with Muhammad Feyyaz.

⁵⁹¹ Zeeshan Ahmad, "TTP regroup with JuA, HuA in Afghanistan," *Express Tribune*, August 19, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2260213/ttp-regroups-with-ju-a-hua-in-afghanistan>; Roohan Ahmad, "TTP Regroups under Noor Wali Mehsud," *SAMAA Tv*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.samaa.tv/news/pakistan/2020/08/pakistani-taliban-regroup-under-noor-wali-mehsud/>.

⁵⁹² Asfandiyar Mir, "Afghanistan's Terrorism Challenge: The Political Trajectories of al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State," *The Middle East Institute*, October 20, 2020, p.5, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistans-terrorism-challenge-political-trajectories-al-qaeda-afghan-taliban-and-islamic-state/>.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Karin Bulliard and Nawaz Khan, "Militant groups in Pakistan form united front," *Washington Post*, January 13, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/militant-groups-in-pakistan-form-united-front/2012/01/03/gIQAWEvMYP_story.html.

⁵⁹⁵ Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors."

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Anwar Iqbal, "6,500 terrorists still active in Afghanistan: UN," *Dawn*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1571172>.

⁵⁹⁸ Asfandiyar Mir, "Afghanistan's Terrorism Challenge: The Political Trajectories of al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State."

⁵⁹⁹ Author's conversation with Abdul Sayyed, a Sweden-based terrorism researcher of the Af-Pak region, November 15, 2020; ISKP is not only the ideological nemesis of Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban but the regional states like Iran, China, Russia as well as Central Asian states also desire its elimination from Afghanistan.

When the Taliban committed to the US to stop harbouring foreign militants in the February deal, TTP realised that it would no longer be feasible for it to be sheltered by the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan.⁶⁰⁰ In August, the Afghan Taliban demanded the TTP leadership to register its members with the former and follow a code of conduct to stay in Afghanistan.⁶⁰¹ It is in this context that TTP's gradual relocation to the ex-FATA region should be viewed.

TTP's reunification is unlikely to result in a dramatic increase of terrorism in Pakistan. However, the group's reunification signifies the resilient and persistent nature of terrorist groups in Pakistan. Religious-fundamentalist terrorist groups tend to live longer and are hard to eliminate as compared to ethno-national, left-wing or right-wing terrorist groups.⁶⁰² However, religious-fundamentalist terrorist groups' success ratio in achieving their stated objectives is significantly less than other types of terrorist groups.⁶⁰³

Given TTP's resilient nature and regenerative capacity in evolving and fluid operational environment, it cannot be tackled only through kinetic means. Rather, a more holistic view of these groups and their overall aims is essential in devising a condition-centric, instead of a group-centric, counter terrorism approach.

Alliance of Sindhi and Baloch Separatist Groups Against CPEC

In 2020, insurgent violence spiked in Balochistan after a lull between 2015 and

2019. The decline in the 2015-2019 period was due to internal divisions among Baloch militant groups, Pakistani security forces' effective counter insurgency operations and surrender of around 1,025 Baloch militants.⁶⁰⁴ In the 2015-2019 period, only 38 separatist attacks were witnessed resulting in 110 fatalities, while in the first seven months of 2020 at least 37 violent incidents resulted in 95 casualties, of which 75 percent are of the security personnel.⁶⁰⁵ Most attacks were in the Makran region where the CPEC projects are located. The resolution of BLA-BLF differences and BRAS-SRA alliance, among others, account for the relative surge in insurgent violence in Balochistan,

Strikingly, in July 2020, the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), a coalition of four Baloch militant groups namely the Baloch Liberation Front, the Baloch Liberation Army, the Baloch Republican Army and the Baloch Republican Guard, formed a trans-provincial alliance with a little-known Sindhi separatist group, the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), against CPEC. A statement issued after the BRAS-SRA alliance formation noted, "Sindh and Balochistan are equally affected by the expansionist and oppressive resolves of China. Through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, China aims to subjugate Sindh and Balochistan and occupy the coasts and resources from Badin to Gwadar."⁶⁰⁶ Pakistan alleges that India is behind this alliance against CPEC.⁶⁰⁷

In June, BLA carried out an attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSE) in Karachi with the help of SRA, which left seven people

⁶⁰⁰ Zia Ur Rehman, "Reunified Pakistani Taliban threatens China's Belt and Road," *Nikkei Asia*, September 8, 2020,

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Reunified-Pakistani-Taliban-threatens-China-s-Belt-and-Road>.

⁶⁰¹ Secunder Kermani, "Al-Qaeda still 'heavily embedded' within Taliban in Afghanistan, UN official warns," *BBC News*, October 29, 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54711452>; Tahir Khan, "Al-Qaeda Ready To Honour Afghan Peace Deal," *The Truth International*, December 2, 2020, <https://thetruthinternational.com/international-relations/al-qaeda-ready-to-honour-afghan-peace-deal/?fbclid=IwAR0wOkXPzJ4-Q38vR9gsHX9PJwHeKsgP6AWpI52AyrOBijTdg5oNE8Av4IE>.

⁶⁰² Khusrav Gaibullov, Dongfang Hou and Todd Sandler, "How do the factors determining terrorist groups' longevity differ from those affecting their

success?" *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 65, (December 2020), pp1-15.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Ashik KC, "Rising Organised Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?" *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/04/rising-organized-political-violence-in-balochistan-a-resurgence-of-baloch-separatism/>

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Adnan Amir, "Pakistani separatist groups unite to target China's Belt and Road," *Nikkei-Asia*, August 1, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistani-separatist-groups-unite-to-target-China-s-Belt-and-Road>.

⁶⁰⁷ "Pakistani PM says no doubt India was behind deadly attack," *Al-Jazeera*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/7/1/pakistani-pm-says-no-doubt-india-was-behind-deadly-attack>.

dead and as many injured.⁶⁰⁸ China has a 40 percent share of the PSE.⁶⁰⁹ The BLA's post-attack statement underlined that the attack was aimed at undermining the Pakistani economy and Chinese economic interests, in response to China's exploitative plans in Balochistan.⁶¹⁰

The BRAS-SRA alliance has provided Sindhi and Baloch separatist groups a common platform against a new target, i.e., CPEC, in addition to targeting Pakistani government and security institutions.⁶¹¹ This alliance might increase the operational outreach of Sindhi and Baloch separatist groups resulting in higher security costs for CPEC-related projects in Pakistan.

China's growing presence in the region is viewed as hegemonic ingress by local communities and marginalised ethnic groups.⁶¹² Baloch and Sindhi insurgent groups consider China a neo-colonial power which, in collusion with Pakistani military establishment, is robbing them of their resources and usurping their rights.⁶¹³ These ethnic grievances and mistrust towards the state in Balochistan and Sindh drive recruitment and separatist violence.⁶¹⁴

Sectarian Tensions

The multi-faceted sectarian conflict in

Pakistan witnessed some concerning developments. Some sectarian incidents discussed in this section are episodic which emerged against a particular backdrop. Nonetheless, they need to be discussed to ascertain whether they can persist to become trends.

Sunni-Shia tensions resurfaced in 2020 along with persistence of the intra-Sunni rift between Deobandi and Barelvi sub-schools of the Hanafi jurisprudence. The Deobandi-Salafist fault line, discussed below, and the neo-Barelvi group Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)'s participation in anti-Shia protests are new developments which require closer monitoring.

Sunni-Shia Tensions

In late August and September, massive anti-Shia protests erupted in Pakistan's major cities following the controversial remarks of a Shia orator Asif Raza Alvi against the first caliph, Abu Bakr.⁶¹⁵ Alvi left the country afterwards.⁶¹⁶ Though the mainstream Shia scholars and organisations distanced themselves from Alvi's remarks, the protests continued.⁶¹⁷ The mainstream Shia parties also demanded a probe into the matter since Alvi was banned from giving public speeches. During this turbulent period, a prominent Deobandi scholar Dr Maulana Adil was shot

⁶⁰⁸ Naimat Khan, "Sindhi, Baloch 'separatists' forming ties in Sindh, Pakistani officials say," *Arab News*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1703931/world>.

⁶⁰⁹ Nirupama Subramanian, "Why Balochistan Liberation Army, which targets Chinese interests in Pakistan, may have attacked Karachi stock exchange," *Indian Express*, July 1, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/pakistan-stock-exchange-attack-karachi-balochistan-liberation-army-6481916/>; In 2016, a consortium of Chinese companies, comprising of China Financial Futures Exchange Company Limited, Shanghai Stock Exchange and Shenzhen Stock Exchange, combined with Pak-China Investment Company Limited and Habib Bank Limited acquired the PSE shares.

⁶¹⁰ "Banned group BLA claims attack on Pakistan Stock Exchange building, all four gunmen killed," *Khaleej Times*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/world/pakistan/four-gunmen-killed-in-pakistan-stock-exchange-attack-police>.

⁶¹¹ Abdul Basit, "A New Wave of Terrorism in Pakistan," *The Nation*, July 14, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/14-Jul-2020/a-new-wave-of-terrorism-in-pakistan>.

⁶¹² Riaz Ahmad, Hong Mi and Lloyd W. Fernald, "Revisiting the potential security threats linked with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)," *Journal of International Council for Small Business*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, (April 2020), pp. 64-80.

⁶¹³ Hafeezullah Khan, "Regional Security Threats to CPEC: A Strategic Overview," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, Vol. 56, Issue 1, (January-June 2019), pp. 181-189.

⁶¹⁴ Hoshang Noraiee, "The Baloch nationalism in Pakistan: Articulation of the ethnic separatism after the end of the Cold War," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, (February 2020), pp. 72-85.

⁶¹⁵ "Asif Raza Alvi Zakir - Hazrat Abubakar (R.A) - Gustakhi in Shia Majlis Islamabad," *YouTube*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQD0JCxSD6A>.

⁶¹⁶ "Opp stages walkout as Alvi delivers speech," *Express Tribune*, August 21, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2260467/opp-stages-walkout-as-alvi-delivers-speech>.

⁶¹⁷ "Who allowed Asif Alvi to give a controversial speech in Islamabad despite the ban," *USWA TV*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/uswatv/videos/605519890127591>.

dead in Karachi, by two militants of the Iran-supported Shia militia, the Zainebiyoun Brigade,⁶¹⁸ further exacerbating the Sunni-Shia tensions.⁶¹⁹

In August, Pakistan also banned a little-known Shia outfit Khatam-UI-Ambia (KuA), an offshoot of proscribed Shia group Ansarul Hussain, involved in recruiting and sending Shia volunteers to Syria through Iran.⁶²⁰ The KuA operated in Kurram, Hangu and Kohat districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the last few months, Pakistani law enforcement agencies arrested several Shia militants for inciting sectarian violence and luring recruits to fight in Syria.⁶²¹ Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Quds Force is the primary recruiter, financier and handler of Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria.⁶²²

These developments have reawakened Sunni-Shia tensions in Pakistan. Against a rapidly changing geopolitical situation in the Middle East and growing proximity between Sunni Arab states and Israel, Pakistan could once again become the battleground for Iran-Saudi sectarian tussles.⁶²³ Particularly, any Saudi and US-backed Israeli misadventure in Iran before President Donald Trump leaves office would leave Pakistan in a catch-22 to balance its relations with sectarian archrivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia.⁶²⁴ The battle-hardened, Iran-trained Pakistani Shia militants, some of whom have returned from

Syria, potentially make this situation combustible.

Additionally, there are three incidents worth observing during 2020's Sunni-Shia tensions in Pakistan: i) the participation of Barelvi TLP in the anti-Shia rallies; ii) harassment of Shia individuals by Sunni vigilante mobs; and iii) registration of around 42 blasphemy cases against Shias.

First, hitherto, the Sunni-Shia conflict in Pakistan has been understood as a dispute between Sunni-Deobandis, Salafists and Shias. The Shia community in Pakistan is the second largest in the world after Iran.⁶²⁵ Despite different theological outlooks, Barelvi and Shia communities have lived in relative harmony in Pakistan. Barelvis, being a majority in Pakistan, have acted as a buffer between Deobandis and Shias, and overcome Deobandi opposition to Shias in Pakistan.⁶²⁶ However, with TLP jumping on the anti-Shia bandwagon, that buffer will gradually erode, which may redefine sectarian relations, if this dynamic persists, between Pakistan's Sunni groups and the Shia community to the detriment of intra-faith harmony.⁶²⁷

Second, in 2020, some Sunni vigilante mobs in Pakistan have harassed Shia individuals, forcing them to accept Sunni historical accounts of the first three caliphs.⁶²⁸ Shias

⁶¹⁸ Naimat Khan, "Police arrest two members of 'Iran-backed' Zainebiyoun Brigade in Karachi," *Arab News*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1774396/pakistan>.

⁶¹⁹ Faraz Khan, "Maulana Adil shot dead in Karachi," *The News*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/727800-maulana-adil-shot-dead-in-karachi>.

⁶²⁰ Iftikhar A. Khan, "Another militant organisation banned," *Dawn*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1576166>; Khatam-UI-Ambia is the reincarnation of Ansarul Hussain which was banned in 2016 for recruiting and sending Shia recruits from different parts of Pakistan, particularly Kurram tribal region, to Syria through Iran.

⁶²¹ Naimat Khan, "Senior member of Pakistani group fighting in Syria, Iraq arrested — Karachi police," *Arab News*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1626886/pakistan>.

⁶²² Hussain Haqqani, "Iran's Revolutionary Influence in South Asia," *The Hudson Institute*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.hudson.org/research/16472-iran-s-revolutionary-influence-in-south-asia>.

⁶²³ Muhammad Shoaib Malik, Waseem Ishaque and Syed Ali Shah, "Transformations in the Middle East:

Implications for Pakistan," *Global Political Review*, Vol III, No 1. (Spring 2018), pp. 85-93.

⁶²⁴ Michael Kugelman, "What the UAE-Israel Deal Means for India and Pakistan," *Asia-Dispatches*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/what-uae-israel-deal-means-india-and-pakistan>.

⁶²⁵ Ayesha Siddiqi, "Shia-Sunni rift on rise in Pakistan, but Imran Khan gov't's silence may be strategic," *The Print*, September 28, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/shia-sunni-rift-on-rise-in-pakistan-but-imran-khan-govts-silence-may-be-strategic/511942/>.

⁶²⁶ Jaffer A. Mirza, "The Changing Landscape of Anti-Shia Politics in Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, September 28, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-changing-landscape-of-anti-shia-politics-in-pakistan/>.

⁶²⁷ For TLP, which is keen to cultivate close ties with the Pakistani military establishment, anti-Shia politics provides it with an opportunity to outbid its Deobandi and Salafist competitors and negotiate with the state over greater power-sharing.

⁶²⁸ Anonymous, "Why are anti-Shia sentiments on the rise in Pakistan?" *Express Tribune*, September

also faced discrimination at workplaces, educational institutes and social media platforms for publicly displaying their beliefs.⁶²⁹

Finally, the decision of the anti-Shia Sunni radical groups to register blasphemy cases against members of Shia community marks a shift in the modus operandi from communal violence to subtle and structural discrimination by using legal instruments like the blasphemy laws.⁶³⁰ Blasphemy laws are often used to go after minority groups such as the Christian and heterodox Ahmadiyya communities.⁶³¹ This form of activism is not only within the legal boundaries but also allows Sunni extremist groups to survive in the system without resorting to terrorism.⁶³²

In July 2020, Pakistan's existing blasphemy laws were further augmented by the passage of the Tahaffuz-i-Bunad-i-Islam Bill (TBIB, Protecting the foundation of Islam), a legislation that specifically discriminates against Shias, in the Punjab assembly.⁶³³ The bill was passed after alleged complaints of insults being hurled at the first three Caliphs.⁶³⁴ Among others, the legislation makes desecration of Prophet Muhammad, his family and holy companions punishable by a five-year jail term and up to PKR 500,000 fine.⁶³⁵

Taliban-ISKP Fighting

In 2020, the Taliban-ISKP fighting resurfaced in Pakistan. Since losing territorial space in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar province due to Taliban's ground offensive, the ISKP

has targeted Taliban seminaries, scholars and commanders in Quetta and Peshawar (See Table 1).⁶³⁶ This brings into sharp focus an important but understudied dimension of the Af-Pak region's intra-Sunni militant conflict between Deobandi-Taliban and the Salafi-ISKP.⁶³⁷

Table 1: ISKP's Attacks Against Afghan Taliban in Pakistan (2015-2020)

No.	Year	Area	Tactic	Target
1	2015	Yakatoot, Peshawar	Firing	Maulana Khaista
2	2016	Khazna, Peshawar	Firing	Unknown
3	2016	Umrui, Peshawar	Firing	Maulvi Mir Ahmadi
4	Apr 2017	Yakatoot, Peshawar	Targeted Killing	Gul Hashmi
5	Apr 14, 2017	Yakatoot, Peshawar	Firing	Maulvi Daud
6	Apr 19, 2017	Khazna, Peshawar	Firing	Mufti Neem Mahmoodi
7	May 24, 2019	Pashtunabad, Quetta	IED	Mullah Hassan
8	Aug 16, 2019	Kuchlak, Quetta	IED	Maulvi Jamil
9	May 24, 2019	Pashtunabad, Quetta	IED	Qari Bahar Sahibzada
10	Jan 10, 2020	Quetta	Suicide bombing	Maulana Abdul Hakeem
11	Oct 2020	Dir Colony, Peshawar	IED	Shaikh Rahimulla Haqqani

Source: Data compiled from open source

On January 10, an ISKP suicide bomber targeted a madrasa in Quetta run by Sheikh Abdul Hakeem, an important Taliban figure and close aide of the Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada. Sheikh Hakeem

14, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97167/why-are-anti-shia-sentiments-on-the-rise-in-pakistan>.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ Roshan Noorzai, Arshad Momand, "Blasphemy Cases Against Shiite Community Surge in Pakistan," *Voice of America*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/blasphemy-cases-against-shiite-community-surge-pakistan/>.

⁶³¹ It is well established that in most blasphemy cases, the accused is subjected to protracted periods in detention and trials that risk the lives of the accused, their lawyers and judges at the hands far-right groups in Pakistan.

⁶³² "Shia Muslims take to Twitter to share how they faced harassment and hatred in Sunni-majority Pakistan," *OpIndia*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.opindia.com/2020/09/shia-muslims-narrate-their-ordeal-in-sunni-majority-pakistan/>.

⁶³³ "PA passes bill protecting foundation of Islam," *Dawn*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1570534>.

⁶³⁴ "A controversial law," *Dawn*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1571733>.

⁶³⁵ "Widespread criticism over rationale for new law to protect Islam," *Dawn*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1571343>.

⁶³⁶ For details see, Abdul Sayed, "Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis," *Terrorism Monitor (James Town Foundation)*, Vol. 18, Issue 21, November 20, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-khorasan-provinces-peshawar-seminary-attack-and-war-against-afghan-taliban-hanafis/>.

⁶³⁷ Shahzad Zulfiqar, "Taliban vs Islamic State," *The News*, January 19, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/599989-taliban-vs-islamic-state>.

narrowly survived the attack that left 15 people dead, mostly Afghan nationals.⁶³⁸ Currently, Sheikh Hakeem is leading the Taliban's negotiations with Kabul in Doha, Qatar.⁶³⁹ The Taliban's Quetta Shura resides in Kuchlak and other outskirt areas of Quetta. Similarly, in October a powerful bomb ripped through the Zubbairyah madrassa in Peshawar run by Taliban-affiliated religious scholar Shaikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani, a vocal critic and staunch opponent of ISKP's Salafi ideologues. Shaikh Rahim narrowly escaped the attack unhurt which left eight dead and 125 wounded.⁶⁴⁰

Following ISKP's territorial reversals in Nangarhar in 2019, several Pashtun Salafists met a delegation of the Taliban in Peshawar to pledge their loyalty and requested for protection while assuring their neutrality in the Taliban-ISKP fighting.⁶⁴¹ During their rule in Afghanistan (1996-2001), the Taliban never allowed Salafists to keep a parallel insurgent structure in Afghanistan; rather the latter remained part of the former in junior positions.

ISKP primarily consists of former TTP factions and members; however, the ISKP and TTP have never engaged in physical fighting. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), Al-Qaeda's South Asian franchise, has fought alongside the Afghan Taliban against ISKP in Afghanistan. However, TTP's ideological rebuttal could potentially change this dynamic.

⁶³⁸ Syed Ali Shah, "Blast inside Quetta mosque claims 15 lives, injures 19," *Dawn*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1527503>.

⁶³⁹ Mushtaq Yousafzai, "Afghan Taliban replace head of negotiating team," *The News*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/711248-afghan-taliban-replace-head-of-negotiating-team>.

⁶⁴⁰ Ahtesham Khan, "At least eight killed, 125 injured in Peshawar madrassa blast," *Express Tribune*, October 27, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2270073/at-least-seven-killed-70-injured-in-peshawar-madrassa-blast>.

⁶⁴¹ Abdul Sayed, "Islamic State Khorasan Province's Peshawar Seminary Attack and War Against Afghan Taliban Hanafis."

⁶⁴² "Pakistan: Surge in Targeted Killings of Ahmadis," *Human Rights Watch*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/26/pakistan-surge-targeted-killings-ahmadis>.

⁶⁴³ Sam Schechner and Noemie Bisserbe, "Paris Knife Attack Near Former Charlie Hebdo Office is Probed as Terrorism," *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2020,

Blasphemy-motivated Vigilante Killings

In 2020, blasphemy-motivated vigilante killings targeting members of the Ahmadiyya community surged in Pakistan.⁶⁴² Since the weaponisation of the blasphemy issue by TLP, impressionable and trigger-happy Sunni youth have engaged in lone-actor killings of alleged blasphemers.

The most high-profile case that brought the international media spotlight on this trend was the knife attack in front of former Charlie Hebdo office, Paris by a Pakistani migrant worker, Ali Hassan, who belonged to Dawat-e-Islami, a missionary Bareilvi organisation.⁶⁴³ He stabbed two employees of a television production company who were on a cigarette break.⁶⁴⁴ The perpetrator recorded and uploaded a video on his Facebook profile vowing to take revenge for the republication of blasphemous caricatures.⁶⁴⁵

In Peshawar, Pakistan, an American citizen of Pakistani origin was killed inside a courtroom in July, during the hearing of blasphemy case against him.⁶⁴⁶ In August, an Ahmadi trader was killed in Peshawar's Gulbahar area.⁶⁴⁷ Later, in November, a teenager gunned down an Ahmadi doctor and injured three of his family members in Punjab.⁶⁴⁸

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/paris-knife-attack-near-charlie-hebdo-ex-office-injures-two-11601033740>.

⁶⁴⁴ Rory Sullivan and Ivana Saric, "Paris knife attack suspect is of Pakistani origin, French authorities say," *CNN*, September 26, 2020.

⁶⁴⁵ Richard Lough, Asif Shahzad, "Paris knife attack suspect wanted to avenge Prophet cartoons: video," *Reuters*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-security/paris-knife-attack-suspect-wanted-to-avenge-prophet-cartoons-video-idUSKBN26J1O5>.

⁶⁴⁶ Seonder Kermani, "Pakistan blasphemy: Gunman shoots accused dead in court," *BBC News*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53582578>.

⁶⁴⁷ "Gunmen kill trader in Peshawar," *Dawn*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1574261/gunmen-kill-trader-in-peshawar>.

⁶⁴⁸ Imran Gabol, "Teenage boy guns down Ahmadi doctor, injures 3 others at their home in Nankana," *Dawn*, November 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1591426>.

The focus on blasphemy is common across these vigilante killings. The growing intolerance towards perceived blasphemy towards Prophet Muhammad could act as a catalyst for extremist recruitment in future. Following republication of caricatures by Charlie Hebdo, both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have tried to exploit the Muslim outrage on this issue.⁶⁴⁹

Responses

On the legislative front, Pakistan passed two bills, the Anti-Money Laundering (Second Amendment) Bill and the Islamabad Capital Territory Waqf Properties Bill, to strengthen existing countering terror financing and anti-money laundering laws.⁶⁵⁰ Despite this, FATF has retained Pakistan on its grey-list or the increased monitoring list until February 2021.⁶⁵¹ Likewise, FATF's Asia-Pacific Group has kept Pakistan on its enhanced follow-up list due to deficiencies on technical compliance.⁶⁵²

In February, a Pakistani court sentenced Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD)'s chief Hafiz Saeed to an eleven-year imprisonment on terror financing charges. Saeed was the first high-profile militant leader in Pakistan to get convicted for terrorist financing.⁶⁵³ Separately, in November, Saeed and his two

close aides, Zafar Iqbal and Yahya Mujahid, were sentenced to a collective ten-and-a-half-years prison (five-and-a-half each) on two cases of terror financing under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997.⁶⁵⁴ Saeed was given another six-month jail term for being a member of a banned group. Saeed's brother-in-law, another top JuD leader Abdul Rahman Makki, was handed down a six-month imprisonment in the same case.⁶⁵⁵ Such cases highlight a slow but gradual progress against the UN-designated terrorist groups and figures in Pakistan.⁶⁵⁶

Pakistan's border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran continued in 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic; the work is expected to be completed in early 2021.⁶⁵⁷ Of the 2,600-kilometre border with Afghanistan, 1,700 kilometres had been fenced.⁶⁵⁸ Meanwhile, of the 900-kilometre border with Iran, fencing of around 100 kilometres is near completion. Along the Pak-Iran border, as many as 1,000 border posts are also being built,⁶⁵⁹ with 400 posts and forts constructed already. The fencing work also includes border terminals, biometric systems and border posts.⁶⁶⁰ In April, Pakistan's Economic Coordination Committee approved additional funding of

⁶⁴⁹ Nilay Saya, "Blasphemy and terrorism in the Muslim world," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 29, Issue 6, (2017), pp. 1087-1105.

⁶⁵⁰ Amir Wasim, "NA passes two more FATF-related bills," *Dawn*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1576242>.

⁶⁵¹ Ayaz Gul, "Global Terror-Funding Watchdog Keeps Pakistan on Gray List," *Voice of America*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/global-terror-funding-watchdog-keeps-pakistan-gray-list>.

Pakistan has made progress on 21 of the 27 items of the agreed action plan. FATF's grey-list comprises countries that have underdeveloped mechanisms to tackle terror financing and agree to work with global watchdog to improve their shortcomings.

⁶⁵² Khaleeq Kiani, "Asia-Pacific Group keeps Pakistan on enhanced follow-up list," *Dawn*, October 12, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1584508>; The countries on enhanced follow up list are required to submit quarterly progress reports, instead of biannual.

⁶⁵³ Mubasher Bukhari and Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan jails Mumbai attacks accused Hafiz Saeed for terrorism financing," *Reuters*, February 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan->

[militant/pakistan-jails-mumbai-attacks-accused-hafiz-saeed-for-terrorism-financing-idINKBN2061F3](https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-militant/pakistan-jails-mumbai-attacks-accused-hafiz-saeed-for-terrorism-financing-idINKBN2061F3).

⁶⁵⁴ Imtiaz Ahmad and Rezaul H Laskar, "LeT founder Hafiz Saeed gets 10-year sentence in terror financing cases," *Hindustan Times*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-founder-hafiz-saeed-gets-10-year-sentence-in-terror-financing-cases/story-UjVsXCMrGbAUOfwTB7AmAl.html>.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁶ It remains to be seen if Pakistan will also prosecute Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi, the LeT's operational commander and the main architect behind the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

⁶⁵⁷ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Says Afghan Border Fence Nearly Complete," *Voice of America*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-says-afghan-border-fence-nearly-complete?amp=&s=08>.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Ayaz Gul, "COVID-19 Not Affecting Afghan Border Fencing, Pakistan Army Says," *Voice of America*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/covid-19-not-affecting-afghan-border-fencing-pakistan-army-says>.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

US \$ 18.6 million for the Pak-Iran border fencing.⁶⁶¹

NAP, a 20-point counter terrorism roadmap, whose implementation has slowed down since PTI came to power in 2018 requires immediate attention.⁶⁶² Various apex committees at the federal, provincial and district levels should be reconstituted and their coordination across various levels of policymaking and implementation should be improved.⁶⁶³ Some of the 20 points such as creation of Counter Terrorism Departments, operationalisation of the National Counter Terrorism Authority and constitution of military courts have been completed. Work on others like madrasa reforms, border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran and countering hate speech, among others, is ongoing.⁶⁶⁴

Outlook

Terrorism in Pakistan is evolving, which shape it is likely to adopt is not clear yet, but it will continue as a malevolent phenomenon vitiating internal security in 2021. The outcome of the intra-Afghan talks and the manner in which the US withdraws from Afghanistan will have far-reaching implications on Pakistan's threat landscape. Given TTP's reunification, the Sindh-Baloch separatist coalition and their switch to discriminate targeting, terrorism will persist in Pakistan. The republication of the Charlie Hebdo caricatures, the blasphemy-motivated vigilante killings in Pakistan, against the backdrop of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State's efforts to exploit this issue, will shape radicalisation among some segments of Pakistani society. To sustain Pakistan's hard-earned operational success against extremist and terrorist networks, the NAP needs to be re-evaluated and re-implemented with much-needed political ownership by the PTI government.

About The Author

⁶⁶¹ Naimat Khan, "Pakistan approves \$18.6 million to fence border with Iran," *Arab News*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1666561/world>.

⁶⁶² Mohammad Ali Babakhel, "An amended or new NAP?" *Dawn*, November 26, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1447735>.

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SRI LANKA

Almost two years on from the April 2019 Easter Attacks, in which nine suicide bombers attacked several churches, hotels and other venues across the island, Sri Lanka has witnessed a downgrading of the threat from terrorism. Law and order has largely been restored under the Gotabaya Rajapaksa-led government, which came to power over a year ago. However, security risks remain, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has provided ample space for extremists to exploit longstanding socio-political and economic discrimination against minorities, particularly Muslims, to recruit into their networks.

Current Security Environment

In April 2020, Sri Lanka marked the first-year anniversary of the Easter Sunday bombings, when the capital Colombo was hit by a wave of Islamic State (IS)-inspired suicide attacks carried out by a self-radicalised cell of Sri Lankan Muslims.⁶⁶⁵ An estimated 250 people perished and many hundreds more were wounded in the attacks, one of the worst terrorist incidents in recent history. More than a year on, however, the threat from IS-inspired Islamist terrorism appears to have been curtailed in Sri Lanka, at least in the near term. Following his elevation to power in late 2019, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse has assiduously set about rebuilding the security arms of the state, including the intelligence services, which were dismantled under the previous administration. Over the past year, the Rajapakse-led government has also sought

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ Abdul Basit, "Critical Evaluation of the National Action Plan," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 2 Issue 1, (June 2020), pp.68-92.

⁶⁶⁵ "Sri Lanka attacks: Easter Sunday bombings marked one year on," *BBC News*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52357200>.

to speed up investigations and prosecutions related to the Easter attacks.⁶⁶⁶

While order has been restored, Sri Lanka's conflict-ridden history suggests security risks are ever present. Firstly, sleeper cells of radical Islamic terrorists, some of whom may have gone underground to evade capture, continue to be active in Muslim-majority towns in the east of the country.⁶⁶⁷ Second, longstanding socio-political and historical grievances involving minority communities persist and found fresh expression during the COVID-19 pandemic, when anti-Muslim sentiments were stoked online and in some sections of the Sinhala-majority media, causing distress to local Muslims.⁶⁶⁸ Given that IS previously took advantage of communal tensions as well as violence against sections of the Muslim community, to spread its radical ideology and recruit into its networks, the government will need to pair more effective operational and intelligence capabilities with countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives to guard against future antagonism.

Persistent Risks

Last June, in testimony given to the Presidential Commission investigating the Easter attacks, A. Moulavi, a known associate of attack mastermind Zahran Hashim and currently in remand, revealed that some Muslim-majority towns continue to be hotbeds for extremist activity.⁶⁶⁹ In Kattankudy, where Zahran and many of his associates hailed from, up to 1,000 individuals are claimed to be surreptitiously partaking in radicalisation activities.⁶⁷⁰ Some, for example, spread their radical ideas through giving sermons in various mosques

and madrassas in the area. Many of these venues remain unregistered with the authorities.⁶⁷¹ It has also been claimed that the Kattankudy branch of the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), the local jihadist group set up by Zahran that was subsequently banned by the authorities following the 2019 attacks, now operates under different monikers, including the Darul Adar Addahwiya, Centre for Islamic Guidance and Quba mosque.⁶⁷²

While security forces continue to track "potential new radical networks"⁶⁷³, the majority of the Islamic terror cells that mushroomed around the country in the past few years have been dismantled. According to reports, an estimated 200 individuals linked to the Easter bombers are currently either detained in police custody on court orders obtained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act or remanded by the courts under the same law.⁶⁷⁴ Many face stiff and lengthy prison terms. To enhance counterterrorism efforts, the cabinet also approved a new 'National Intelligence Act' to regulate and empower the various intelligence services spread across the state apparatus.⁶⁷⁵ For the first time, a decorated military official has also been appointed to head the State Intelligence Service (SIS), the country's central intelligence agency. This followed widespread criticism of the agency's former head, amid significant lapses in intelligence and coordination between state agencies uncovered in the lead up to the Easter attacks.

Over the past year, the authorities' investigations have also narrowed in on a web of transnational financial transactions and networks linked to the Easter attackers,

⁶⁶⁶ "Blessed by Buddhist monks, Sri Lanka's new president prioritizes security," *Reuters*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics-idUSKBN1XS15E>.

⁶⁶⁷ "Zahran's followers still promote extremism," *Hiru News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.hirunews.lk/english/243356/zahrans-followers-still-promote-extremism-video>.

⁶⁶⁸ "Sri Lanka: Muslims face extra threat as coronavirus stirs hate," *Al-Jazeera*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/11/sri-lanka-muslims-face-extra-threat-as-coronavirus-stirs-hate>.

⁶⁶⁹ "Zahran's followers still promote extremism," *Hiru News*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.hirunews.lk/english/243356/zahrans-followers-still-promote-extremism-video>.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷² "Sri Lanka bans group suspected to be behind attacks; ringleader's relatives wounded," *Reuters*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-blasts-idUSKCN1S303Q>.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁴ "Key Suspect in Easter Sunday Bombings Arrested in Sri Lanka," *News18*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/world/key-suspect-in-easter-sunday-bombings-arrested-in-sri-lanka-2556219.html>.

⁶⁷⁵ "New Act to regulate and empower intelligence units," *Colombo Page*, January 15, 2020, http://www.colombopage.com/archive_20A/Jan15_1579073558CH.php.

amid strong suspicions the nine suicide bombers involved received financial and tactical support from foreign entities.⁶⁷⁶ Investigations have also shed more light on the command structure of the terrorist network spearheaded by Zahran, which is now known to have recruited from across the country. Reports indicate a 'supreme council' spearheaded by Zahran had been supported by sub-branches in Sri Lanka's nine provinces, each of which were run by appointed sub-leaders.⁶⁷⁷ In addition to aiding coordination efforts for the Easter attacks, these networks had also been tasked with recruiting followers and identifying new attack targets around the country.

COVID-19 and Stigmatisation of Muslims

Across the world, the enormity of the health crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has provided ample space for a new wave of hate speech and discrimination against vulnerable groups such as minorities, migrants and older people. In a May 2020 report, the United Nations (UN) identified a broad range of disparaging expressions, including scapegoating, stigmatisation and stereotyping, that "has emerged or been exacerbated as a result of the new coronavirus disease outbreak."⁶⁷⁸ This has been interlinked with the spread of disinformation and misinformation on COVID-19 related issues in cyberspace.⁶⁷⁹

In Sri Lanka, a country marred by decades-old ethnic and religious tensions between a Sinhala Buddhist majority characterised by scholars as a 'majority with a minority complex' and Tamil and Muslim minority groups⁶⁸⁰, the impact of the coronavirus has been felt in all too familiar ways. In April, a government policy that mandated cremations for coronavirus victims, including those from the Muslim community, caused significant anguish among sections of the community.⁶⁸¹ Having earlier agreed to continue to allow burials of COVID-19 victims who were Muslim, the government reversed its guideline on April 11, a step that led to accusations that the authorities were violating Islamic burial rights.⁶⁸² The Health Ministry reiterated that the standard procedure for disposing of bodies during the pandemic is cremation, although some prominent Muslim activists framed the move as the latest in a pattern of discrimination against Muslims by successive majority Sinhalese governments.⁶⁸³

The issue became a point of consternation amid nation-wide curfews imposed to stem the spread of the coronavirus, with sections of the Sinhala Buddhist media giving disproportionate attention to COVID-19 cases emanating from Muslim majority neighbourhoods. Anti-Muslim sentiment were also stoked on social media and online news platforms, with Muslims blamed for deliberately spreading the disease.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁷⁶ "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings Probe at Final Stages," *The Hindu*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankas-easter-bombings-probe-is-at-final-stages-say-police/article31878643.ece>.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ "United Nations on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech," *United Nations*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Since the end of civil war (1983-2002), Sri Lanka has experienced intermittent violence. At the end, the Sinhala Buddhist dominated government defeated the insurgent Tamil Tigers that emerged from the Tamil minority, which is overwhelmingly Hindu and makes up about fifteen per cent of the country. Muslim and Christian minorities, both of which make up about eight-to-ten per cent of the population, have also historically faced discrimination. See, "A Scholar Of Extremism On How Religious Conflict Shapes Sri Lanka," *New*

Yorker, April 22, 2019,

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/a-scholar-of-extremism-on-how-religious-conflict-and-terrorism-shapes-sri-lanka>.

⁶⁸¹ "Anguish as Sri Lanka Forces Muslims to Cremate Covid-19 Victims," *Al-Jazeera*, April, 3, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/03/anguish-as-sri-lanka-forces-muslims-to-cremate-covid-19-victims/>.

⁶⁸² "Sri Lanka: Muslims face extra threat as coronavirus stirs hate," *Al-Jazeera*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/11/sri-lanka-muslims-face-extra-threat-as-coronavirus-stirs-hate/>.

⁶⁸³ "Coronavirus funerals: Sri Lanka's Muslims decry forced cremation," *BBC News*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53295551>.

⁶⁸⁴ "Sri Lanka's Other COVID-19 Crisis: Is Parliamentary Democracy at Risk?" *International Crisis Group*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka>.

Misinformation about Muslims was also spread online, including claims that gatherings in mosques had violated curfew regulations. Such developments would contribute to a Muslim minority feeling “increasingly under siege.”⁶⁸⁵ They also fed into already established perceptions held by some among the Sinhala majority and even others within the Tamil minority, of local Muslims not respecting the laws of the land⁶⁸⁶ and being “careless and undisciplined by flouting social distancing and curfew laws.”⁶⁸⁷

Such proliferation of COVID-19-related hate speech has both short-and-long term implications for countries such as Sri Lanka.⁶⁸⁸ According to the UN’s report, targeted individuals and communities are more vulnerable to violence, as well as political and social exclusion, isolation and stigmatisation. This in turn not only exacerbates social and economic divisions, but can also aggravate the drivers of violent extremism. If not curtailed, such developments can trigger social unrest and communal violence.⁶⁸⁹

Need for Capacity Building

A multifaceted rehabilitation and disengagement programme, modelled on a similar initiative created a decade ago in the aftermath of the country’s civil war to deradicalise former Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) cadres, is currently being planned in Sri Lanka, as part of a national action plan for preventing and countering violent extremism and terrorism. The multi-agency initiative also includes mechanisms

[lanka/sri-lankas-other-covid-19-crisis-parliamentary-democracy-risk.](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf)

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁶ From this perspective, Muslims are alleged to apply their own laws to their community and openly flout laws that apply to the rest of the country. Examples of exceptionalism highlighted include the refusal by some Muslims to wear helmets when riding motorcycles and living by different laws when it comes to marriage and family. See, “Lanka’s COVID-19 Response Is Proof that Demonisation of Minorities Has been Normalised,” *The Wire*, May 30, 2020, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/sri-lanka-covid-19-demonisation-minorities>.

⁶⁸⁷ “Sri Lanka’s COVID-19 Response Is Proof that Demonisation of Minorities Has been Normalised,” *The Wire*, May 30, 2020, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/sri-lanka-covid-19-demonisation-minorities>.

⁶⁸⁸ “United Nations on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech,” *United Nations*,

for the monitoring of hate speech, and misinformation in cyberspace as well as enforcement to combat violence.⁶⁹⁰ Given that management of terrorism-related offenders can either mitigate or exacerbate security risks, Sri Lankan authorities have also looked to international collaborations to buffer its deradicalisation programmes against recidivism.⁶⁹¹ Such collaborations have, for example, sought to fortify security systems in facilities housing militants as well as ensure the provision of adequate infrastructure and training to staff in the prisons. These can go some way toward creating a conducive and structured environment for deradicalisation and disengagement efforts.⁶⁹²

However, Sri Lanka also requires community level initiatives that promote moderate forms of Islam which have increasingly been marginalised by more distorted variants in recent decades. In some areas, ground-up initiatives have begun to mushroom. For example, moderate Islamic scholars have attempted, through community-level study sessions, lectures and other interfaith dialogues, to take the lead in promoting moderate forms of the faith.⁶⁹³ Youth volunteers have also stepped forward as social media influencers to combat misinformation and hate speech online. They disseminate positive content as well as engage their communities in dispelling misconceptions and suspicions about other communities and government policies.

Curbing Radical Activities

May 11, 2020,

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Author’s interview with local security officials in May 2020.

⁶⁹¹ Amresh Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka’s Easter Attacks one year on,” *East Asia Forum*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/04/21/sri-lankas-easter-attacks-one-year-on/>.

⁶⁹² Ibid.

⁶⁹³ “Religious differences, no reason to wage war-Islamic scholar,” *Sunday Observer*, February 23, 2020, <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2020/02/23/news-features/religious-differences-no-reason-wage-war-islamic-scholar>.

Over the past eighteen months, the 1,669 registered *madrasas* (religious schools) and 317 Arabic colleges dotted around Kattankudy and other Muslim-majority towns around Sri Lanka have come under increasing scrutiny from national security forces.⁶⁹⁴ According to observers, these areas have become “battlegrounds between the new wave of religious leaders accused of preaching intolerance and an extremist brand of the faith and more moderate advocates.”⁶⁹⁵ Such fissures have created religious tensions and divisions both within and outside the Muslim community, and were effectively exploited by Zahran, the Easter attack mastermind, and his followers to build an expansive terrorist network that primarily targeted young and impressionable Muslim men. The danger remains that some extremist influenced individuals will continue to be easily swayed by the vicious ideology propagated by IS.

Under its national action plan to combat violent extremism, the government aims to put in place a more robust regulatory framework around which the curriculums of *madrasas* are regularly updated. A scheme to assess and recognise qualified religious teachers is also being planned, amid fears the spread of extremist ideology on the internet has contributed to radicalisation among some young Sri Lankans.⁶⁹⁶ These efforts should also be complemented by more far-reaching reforms involving the national education system in Sri Lanka, which is heavily ethnicised, and continues to dampen efforts to bring about inter-ethnic and religious harmony.⁶⁹⁷

Outlook

In Sri Lanka, while law and order has been largely restored, fear and mistrust still pervades among many Muslims today, and IS’ narratives will find resonance among impressionable young minds, particularly those aggrieved by perceptions of their community’s marginalisation by successive Sinhala majority governments. In addition to implementing more inter-faith harmony mechanisms in communities across the country, the authorities also need to remain vigilant to radical Islamist sleepers who may

have gone underground to evade capture following the Easter attacks. But ultimately, addressing the longstanding socio-political and historical grievances of the minority Tamil and Muslim communities is key to ensuring a genuine and enduring reconciliation, and guarding against the pervasive influence of transnational terrorist movements such as IS.

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⁶⁹⁴ “Sri Lankan Muslims pressured to curb rise of extremism,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 7, 2019.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁶ Amresh Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka’s Easter Attacks one year on.”

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

CENTRAL ASIA

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

There were no reported terror attacks in Central Asia (referring to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in 2020, although the threat of terrorism and radicalisation persisted in the region. The current jihadist threat to Central Asia can be categorised in three ways: i) threats associated with Central Asian nationals fighting in the Afghan and Syrian conflicts and the security implications posed by their potential return home or move to a third country to continue engaging in violent activities; ii) prospective attacks orchestrated by self-radicalised individuals or cells of supporters within Central Asia; and iii) radicalisation of members of Central Asian diaspora communities and their involvement in terror plots.

Central Asian fighters in Syria and Afghanistan

Official estimates indicate that up to 5,650 individuals from the region – 2,000 Tajik, 2,000 Uzbek, 850 Kyrgyz and 800 Kazakh nationals respectively – have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside jihadist groups to date.⁶⁹⁸ Some foreign newspapers and international organisations have also alluded to the potential presence of fighters

from Turkmenistan in the Syrian conflict, although officials in Ashgabat have refrained thus far from publicly addressing the issue.⁶⁹⁹

Based on observations of online materials released by Central Asian jihadists based in Syria and Iraq, it appears that large segments of Kazakh and Tajik operatives are fighting alongside IS, while Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationals appear to have mostly aligned themselves with Al Qaeda-linked groups.⁷⁰⁰ To date, an estimated 1,633 (29 percent) of the reported Central Asian nationals have been killed in battle, while another 1,715 (30 percent) individuals, comprising mostly women and children, have been captured (or surrendered) and placed in detention facilities across Syria and Iraq.⁷⁰¹ As far as is known, the remaining IS fighters from the region have either gone into hiding or are scattered across ungoverned parts of Syria and Iraq continuing fighting. Others have relocated to conflict zones elsewhere. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda-linked Central Asian groups remain active in the north of Syria.

In Afghanistan, Central Asian fighters continue to appear occasionally, with local authorities regularly referencing their presence. For example, in a November 2020

⁶⁹⁸ i) Tokhir Safar and Mumin Ahmadi, "Istochniki: v Sirii arestovany tadjikskiy «dzhikhadisty» Abu Dovud i Abu Usama Noraki," *Radio Ozodi* – RFE/RL's Tajik Service, 19 December 2019, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30332766.html>; ii) The figure on Uzbek fighters, was revealed by a counter-terrorism officer from Uzbekistan during an Interpol regional experts meeting held in Tbilisi, Georgia in September 2018. The stated figure constitutes the total number of Uzbek militants fighting in armed conflicts abroad, including the Iraqi-Syrian and Afghanistan theatres; iii) "Nuzhno li vozvrashat kyrgyzstantsev iz Sirii. Chto dumayut MID i eksperti?" ('Is it necessary to repatriate Kyrgyz militants from Syria. What do the Foreign Ministry and experts think?'), *Kaktus Media*, 1 June 2019, https://kaktus.media/doc/392271_nyjno_li_vozvrashat_kyrgyzstantsev_iz_sirii_chno_dymaut_mid_i_eks_perty.html; and iv) "Za rubezh vyekhlo svyishe 800 kazakhstantsev – posledovately destruktivnykh ideologii" ('Over 800 Kazakhstanis - followers of destructive ideologies traveled abroad'), *Khabar* 24, 6 November 2019,

<https://24.kz/ru/news/social/item/352893-za-rubezh-vyekhlo-svyshe-800-kazakhstantsev-posledovately-destruktivnykh-ideologii>.

⁶⁹⁹ There have also been occasional references to Turkmenistani fighters in other contexts – for example, Cypriot authorities reported to the UN they had captured a Turkmenistani national amongst a group of individuals "linked to either ISIL-or Al-Qaida-affiliated groups". See: "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, p.15, 23 July 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>.

⁷⁰⁰ This conclusion has been drawn by the first author based on his systematic monitoring and analysis of online extremist content in Central Asian languages.

⁷⁰¹ These figures have been compiled by the first author based on local newspaper reports. The data also shows that since 2019, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have separately repatriated a total of 1,003 of their detained citizens from Syria and Iraq. According to news reports a substantial number of these repatriated citizens were associated with IS.

address at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Leaders' Summit, Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) Director Jumakhon Giyosov informed that his organisation, a permanent body within the SCO that focuses on terrorist issues, had received intelligence of growing numbers of Central Asian fighters in northern Afghanistan.⁷⁰² A threat appeared to materialise just over a week later, when a Tajik-led Taliban cell in Badakhshan attacked a police station near the Tajik border, killing 19 Afghan policemen. Following the attack, the cell's leader made threatening comments in a propaganda video towards Tajikistan, suggesting the group may seek to launch attacks there too.⁷⁰³ Additional threats from Tajik fighters affiliated to the Taliban were also visible elsewhere in Afghanistan, with media reports in August identifying four Tajik nationals as members of a cell involved in an IS-claimed attack on a prison in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad.⁷⁰⁴

IS' External Operations Arm Has Weakened

IS-linked Central Asian nationals presently detained in Kurdish prisons include prominent Tajik members of the "Amniyat al-Kharji" (or "Emni") – IS' external operations arm dedicated to organising terrorist attacks outside of Syria and Iraq. In January 2020,

Tajik prosecutors revealed that two high-ranking Tajik IS militants, Parviz Saidrahmonov ("Abu Dovud") and Tojiddin Nazarov ("Abu Osama Noraki"), were being held in Syrian prisons, along with several other Tajik IS militants, following capture by Kurdish forces.⁷⁰⁵ The duo were wanted in Russia and Tajikistan respectively for their alleged links to a number of terror plots in both countries. Swedish authorities claimed the two militants are also part of a Syria-based IS attack network reported to be behind the 2017 Stockholm truck attack.⁷⁰⁶ Their extradition is still being sought.

There have also been conflicting reports on the fate of Gulmurod Khalimov, Tajikistan's former police special operations colonel, who defected to IS in May 2015, and was later promoted as the group's 'War Minister' in Syria.⁷⁰⁷ In August 2020, Tajikistan's Minister of Internal Affairs, Ramazon Rahimzoda Hamro, stated that some IS Tajik fighters who had returned home from Syria testified that Khalimov and his family had been killed in an air strike in Syria.⁷⁰⁸ However, the minister highlighted that without hard evidence, such testimonies were insufficient to officially declare Khalimov as dead. Tajik authorities had earlier alleged that Khalimov and some of his associates could have relocated to the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan.⁷⁰⁹ In October 2020, the United

⁷⁰² He spoke at the SCO Heads of State Summit held online on November 10, livestream recorded here: <https://eng.sco-russia2020.ru/video/20201110/1080285/Live-streaming-of-the-SCO-Heads-of-State-Council-Meeting.html> (he spoke at 2: 01).

⁷⁰³ "Afghan Taliban said planning to attack Tajikistan," *BBC Monitoring*, 11 December 2020; Andrey Serenko, "Tadzhikskiy talib anonsirovali perenos dzhikhada iz Afganistana na rodinu" ('The Tajik Taliban have announced the transfer of jihad from Afghanistan to their homeland'), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 11 December 2020, https://www.ng.ru/world/2020-12-11/100_afgan111220.html.

⁷⁰⁴ "Indian doctor suspected of having been Jalalabad prison car bomber," *Ariana News*, 5 August 2020, <https://ariananews.af/indian-doctor-suspected-of-having-been-jalalabad-prison-car-bomber/>.

⁷⁰⁵ "Genprokuratura: iz tyurem Sirii v Tadjikistan ekstradiruyut terroristov-verbovshchikov" ('Prosecutor General's Office: terrorist recruiters to be extradited from prisons in Syria to Tajikistan'), *Sputnik Tochikiston/Tajiki*, 28 January 2020, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/country/20200128/1030615883/tajikistan-syria-ekstradiciya-terroristy.html>.

⁷⁰⁶ Sirojiddin Islom, "Ozodlik tekshiruvi xulosalari Shved matbuotining bosh xabariga aylandi" ('The findings of an investigation conducted by Ozodlik grabs the headlines of the Swedish press'), *Ozodlik Radiosi*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.ozodlik.org/a/29032493.html>.

⁷⁰⁷ Amir Abdallah, "Former Tajikistan police chief appointed ISIS minister of war," *Iraqi News*, 5 September 2016, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/former-tajikistan-police-chief-appointed-isis-minister-war/>.

⁷⁰⁸ Avaz Yuldashev, "Glava MVD Tadjikistana: Gibel' eks-komandira OMON ostayetsya na urovne slukhov" ('Tajik Interior Minister: The death of the ex-OMON commander remains at the level of rumors'), *Asia-Plus*, 4 August 2020, <https://asiaplus.tj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20200804/glava-mvd-gibel-eks-komandira-omon-ostaetsya-na-urovne-slukhov>.

⁷⁰⁹ "Tadzhikskiy «igilovets» Gulmurod Khalimov zainteresovalsya situatsiyey v Gornom Badakhshane" ('Tajik IS militant Gulmurod Khalimov became interested in the situation in Gorno-Badakhshan'), *Fergana*, 11 January 2019, <https://fergana.agency/news/104222/>.

Nations Security Council (UNSC) announced the inclusion of Khalimov in its updated sanctions list, suggesting that official confirmation of his death remains elusive.⁷¹⁰

The possible loss of senior figures such as Saidrahmanov, Nazarov and Khalimov highlights the degree to which IS' core cadre of Tajik operatives appears to have been weakened. Nonetheless, the recent detention of Tajik nationals over IS-linked terror plots in countries such as Germany and Albania has shown that IS remains connected to its Tajik support base, and is still able to direct supporters to carry out attacks, including, for example by providing them with the necessary operational guidance through dedicated online tutorials or communications via encrypted Internet applications. Throughout the year, the group also continued to produce propaganda material aimed at its Central Asian constituency.

KTJ Stuck in a Rivalry Between HTS and HAD

Al-Qaeda-linked Central Asian combat units such as Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Katibat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) have remained active in Syria. Both groups, operating under the umbrella of the Al-Qaeda-linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) jihadist alliance, are predominantly made up of ethnic Uzbek fighters from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

In 2020, both KTJ and KTB were caught in the middle of escalating tensions between HTS, the dominant Islamist militant group in Idlib, and Hurras ad-Din (HAD), one of several other jihadist factions operating in the

area. HAD is currently Al Qaeda's main affiliate in Syria. In June 2020, KTJ's founder and former leader, "Abu Saloh", along with two accomplices, defected to Jabhat Ansar al-Din (JAD), a newly-formed jihadist faction closely aligned with HAD.⁷¹¹ Prior to 2016, when it formally severed ties with the global jihadist group, HTS' predecessor al Nusra Front had been regarded as the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, and they had fought together under the same umbrella. HAD and HTS have since fallen out.

Since HAD's inception, hardline elements have criticised HTS, arguing it had abandoned the Al Qaeda agenda, and was alienating itself further by showing a willingness to endorse the ceasefire agreements over Idlib put forward by Turkey and Russia. HAD and other Al Qaeda-linked factions have rejected the Idlib agreement, which they view as "a conspiracy of the occupiers".⁷¹² The accusation, it appears, has undermined HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani's authority and inspired some of the more hardline factions within HTS to break away from the group.⁷¹³

Abu Saloh's defection to JAD triggered a larger migration of fighters. Following in his stead, around 50 KTJ members defected to JAD.⁷¹⁴ Al-Julani would later respond to these defections by launching a manhunt for Abu Saloh and other defectors. Soon after, Abu Saloh and the other dissenting fighters were arrested and jailed by HTS in Idlib. Some media reports have speculated that Abu Saloh's defection might have occurred after the KTJ's new leadership accused him of stealing a significant amount of money from the *baytunal* (common budget) of the group.⁷¹⁵ Regardless of the true motive, Abu

⁷¹⁰ Bakhmaner Nadirov, "Zhiv ili net? Sovbez OON prodlii sanktsii v otnoshenii Gulmuroda Khalimova" ('Alive or not? UN Security Council extended sanctions against Gulmurod Halimov'), *ASIA-Plus*, 22 October 2020, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20201022/zhiv-ili-net-sovbez-oon-prodlii-sanktsii-v-otnoshenii-gulmuroda-halimova>.

⁷¹¹ Abu Saloh is the nom de guerre of Sirojiddin Mukhtarov, a Kyrgyzstan-born ethnic Uzbek.

⁷¹² Sirwan Kajjo, "Jihadists in Syria's Idlib Form New 'Operations Room'", *The Voice of America*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/jihadists-syrias-idlib-form-new-operations-room>.

⁷¹³ Rami Jameel, "HTS Leader al-Julani's New Strategy in Northwestern Syria," *Terrorism Monitor*,

13 October 2020,

<https://jamestown.org/program/hts-leader-al-julani-new-strategy-in-northwestern-syria/>.

⁷¹⁴ "Tahrir al-Sham arrests a leader of the Ansar al-Din Front. Who is Abu Salah the Uzbek," *Step News Agency*, 18 June 2020, <https://stepagency-sy.net/2020/06/18/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%87%d9%88-%d8%a3%d8%a8%d9%88-%d8%b5%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ad-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%88%d8%b2%d8%a8%d9%83%d9%8a/>.

⁷¹⁵ Viktor Mikhaylov, "V Siriyskom Idlibe arestovan odin iz liderov boyevikov iz TSA – Abu-Salokha" ('In the Syrian Idlib, one of the leaders of the militants from Central Asia, Abu Saloh, was arrested'), *Novosti Uzbekistana*, 23 June 2020, <https://nuz.uz/antiterror/1157170-v-siriyskom-idlibe->

Saloh's arrest was a significant coup for al-Julani. Had he gone unpunished, it could have inspired more defections from KTJ as well as possibly precipitated a fracturing of HTS. Later, al-Julani announced that Abu Saloh and his accomplices could be released, on condition they agreed to return to the HTS fold. Failing this, the HTS leader threatened to charge and punish Abu Saloh for a series of crimes, including embezzlement of group funds and property as well as apostasy.⁷¹⁶ His ultimate fate remains unknown.

Abu Saloh's arrest came as he was stepping back from a leadership role in KTJ. In April 2019, he announced his resignation as leader of the group "to focus on recruitment and fundraising following an injury in a terrorist operation".⁷¹⁷ At the same time, he has maintained a high degree of visibility online, continuing his radical preaching activities under KTJ's banner and endorsing Al Qaeda's ideology. Despite his present troubles, some of Abu Saloh's audio and video preaching materials still exist on the KTJ's website.

Following its recent leadership reshuffle, some new figures have emerged within KTJ's upper echelon. The group's online propaganda materials have introduced "Abdul Aziz" as a successor to Abu Saloh. While referencing his family name as "Khikmatov", a UN report disclosed that he had fought alongside the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Al Qaeda-linked Central Asian group fighting in Afghanistan, for close to two decades prior to joining KTJ in Syria.⁷¹⁸ It was later reported that Abu Saloh's role as the

group's key ideologue was taken over by Akhliddin Novkatiy (Navqotiy), who reportedly arrived from Turkey at the personal invitation of Abdul Aziz.⁷¹⁹ The "Navqotiy" name is synonymous with the southern Kyrgyz town of Novqat (or Nookat), hinting it could be his original birthplace. As the new ideological leader of the group, Navqotiy has appeared in a series of audio and video propaganda lectures.

KIB and Other Central Asian Groups in Syria/Afghanistan

KIB is assessed in UN reporting to have a total of 220 fighters in Syria, while about 70 fighters from its military wing are active in Afghanistan.⁷²⁰ In Syria, KIB together with other groups such as KTJ and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) have played a crucial role in defending HTS' territorial positions in Idlib from the Syrian government's offensives. KIB's Afghan wing, while known to operate under the umbrella of the Taliban, has maintained close contact with its central core in Syria.⁷²¹ It conducts militant operations against Afghan government forces in Faryab and Jowzjan provinces, where ethnic Uzbeks constitute a large portion of the indigenous population. According to data from the United Nations Monitoring Team, KIB's Afghan wing leader Jumaboi is reported to receive funding from the group's cell in Istanbul, Turkey via the *hawala* system.⁷²²

In July 2020, KIB released photos on its Telegram channel in which it claimed to have undertaken a joint operation with the Taliban that led to the capture of several Afghan government soldiers.⁷²³ Soon after, however,

[arestovan-odin-iz-liderov-boevikov-iz-cza-abu-saloha.html](https://riaafan.ru/1291658-siriya-novosti-7-iyulya-22-30-predotvrashchen-terakt-v-afrine-dzhulani-ozvuchil-svoi-usloviya-dlya-osvobozhdeniya-abu-salakh-a-uzbeki).

⁷¹⁶ "Siriya novosti 7 iyulya 22.30: predotvrashchen terakt v Afrine, Dzhulani ozvuchil svoi usloviya dlya osvobozhdeniya Abu Salakha Al'-Uzbeki" ('News from Syria, July 7 22.30: terrorist attack in Afrin prevented, Julani announced his conditions for the release of Abu Salah al-Uzbeki'), *RIA FAN*, 7 July 2020, <https://riaafan.ru/1291658-siriya-novosti-7-iyulya-22-30-predotvrashchen-terakt-v-afrine-dzhulani-ozvuchil-svoi-usloviya-dlya-osvobozhdeniya-abu-salakh-a-uzbeki>.

⁷¹⁷ "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, p.15,

20 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Viktor Mikhaylov, "Idlibskiy peredel ili kak grazhdane Kyrgyzstana i Uzbekistan raskololi v Sirii

mezhdunarodnuyu terroristicheskuyu organizatsiyu" ('Idlib redistribution or how citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan split an international terrorist organization in Syria'), 31 March 2020, *CSRT*, <https://crss.uz/2020/03/31/idlibskij-peredel-ili-kak-grazhdane-kyrgyzstana-i-uzbekistan-raskololi-v-sirii-mezhdunarodnuyu-terroristicheskuyu-organizatsiyu/>.

⁷²⁰ "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, p.15,

20 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

⁷²² Ibid.

⁷²³ Viktor Mikhaylov, "Ozhidayemye provaly v uzbekskikh etnicheskikh terroristicheskikh gruppirovkakh" ('Expected failures in Uzbek ethnic terrorist groups'), *Novosti Uzbekistana*, 24 July 2020, <https://nuz.uz/antiterror/1160924->

this claim was disputed by the Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, who countered that the footage circulated by KIB had been stolen from the Taliban's archive and falsified by "anti-peace elements for propaganda".⁷²⁴ It is difficult to interpret this divergence in claims. Notwithstanding KIB overall leader Abu Yusuf Muhajir's welcoming of the Taliban's peace agreement with the United States, which he described as "the great victory of the Islamic Ummah", some elements within KIB clearly oppose the pact.⁷²⁵ Other Central Asian groups based in Afghanistan include the IJU, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA). These groups continue operating under the banner of the Taliban, while receiving sanctuary, protection, and training from the movement in return. Their status, however, could be thrown into doubt if the Taliban follows through on its agreement to stop foreign groups from using Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks.

Terrorist Developments Within Central Asia

Despite the global shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorist activities have persisted in many parts of the world, including Central Asia. In 2020, Central Asian countries continued to foil attack plots and arrest several suspected jihadists. In October, Kazakh authorities revealed they had thwarted five terrorist attacks since the beginning of the year, resulting in the arrest of ten suspects.⁷²⁶ The foiled attacks included a reported plot by an IS supporter planning to target mass gatherings with

grenades during the Navruz spring festival in Almaty. Another reported plot involved an IS supporter planning to detonate an explosive device in the Kazakh capital of Nur-Sultan. Both plots were thwarted in March 2020.⁷²⁷

Uzbekistan saw a relative increase in arrests for terrorist recruitment and funding compared to 2019. Uzbek authorities in June 2020 arrested 15 residents in Surkhondaryo province, who were reportedly part of an extremist recruitment and fundraising cell linked to KTJ.⁷²⁸ The cell's ringleader was reportedly radicalised while working as a seasonal worker in Russia, and later recruited members from among his compatriots. While in Russia, the cell members regularly met up to listen to and discuss online audio and video propaganda preached by extremist ideologues such as Abu Saloh, Abdulloh Zufar, and Sodiq Samarqandiy. The suspects, all of whom were reportedly detained upon their return home, were allegedly planning to travel to Syria and had also sent money there to finance KTJ's activities.⁷²⁹

A similar case emerged in the Uzbek province of Jizzakh, where counterterrorism agencies arrested a group of 23 young men reportedly part of a virtual extremist cell linked to KTJ. The leader of the cell had reportedly been radicalised by extremist ideologies in Turkey and, in turn, began recruiting via the Odnoklassniki and Telegram social networks.⁷³⁰ Later, during two rounds of additional arrests conducted in Tashkent city and Tashkent Province, the police arrested a further 36 men, also with

ozhidaemye-provaly-v-uzbekskikh-etnicheskikh-terroristicheskikh-gruppirovkah.html.

⁷²⁴ Gulabudin Ghubar, "Uzbek Militant Group Claims it Conducted Operation with Taliban," *TOLOnews*, 9 July 2020,

<https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/uzbek-militant-group-claims-it-conducted-operation-taliban>.

⁷²⁵ "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, p.15,

23 July 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>.

⁷²⁶ "V Kazakhstane soobshchili o predotvrashchenii pyati teraktov s nachala goda" ('Kazakhstan reported on the prevention of five terrorist attacks since the beginning of the year'), *RT*, 16 October 2020, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/793267-kazakhstan-predotvrashchenie-terakty>.

⁷²⁷ i) "Spetssluzhby Kazakhstana predotvratili terakt v Nur-Sultane" ('Kazakhstan's special services

prevent terrorist attack in Nur-Sultan'), *RT*, 26 March 2020,

<https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/732030-kazakhstan-zaderzhanie-terrorizm>; ii) "V Kazakhstane spetssluzhby zaderzhali podozrevayemogo v podgotovke terakta" ('In Kazakhstan, special services detained a suspect preparing a terrorist attack'), *RT*, 14 March 2020, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/news/728393-kazakhstan-zaderzhanie-terakt>.

⁷²⁸ "Surkhondaryo va Jizzakh viloyatlarida noqonuniy guruhlar faoliyatiga chek qo'yildi" ('The activity of illegal groups have been eliminated in Surkhondaryo and Jizzakh provinces'), *Xalq so'zi*, 9 July 2020, <http://xs.uz/uzkr/post/surkhondaryo-va-zhizzakh-viloyatlarida-noqonuniy-guruhlar-faoliyatiga-chek-qojildi>.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

links to KTJ. They had reportedly planned to travel to Syria to fight for the group.⁷³¹

In August 2020, Tajik authorities revealed that in the first half of the year, the country's counterterrorism agencies had thwarted two terrorist plots by IS followers targeting police officers in the Rasht and Shakhriyav provinces.⁷³² Authorities used the opportunity of the announcement of the two plots to declare that over the year they had detained 274 people and detected around 900 extremism-related crimes.⁷³³

While similar cumulative data is hard to come by in the context of Kyrgyzstan, there was a steady pattern of terrorist related activity reported in the country throughout 2020. In February, authorities detained a 23-year-old Kyrgyz citizen who had returned home from abroad intent on recruiting others. The individual had allegedly failed previously to travel to Syria via an unnamed foreign country.⁷³⁴ In October, a foreign individual was arrested, having entered the country also reportedly with the intent to partake in radicalisation activities. He had previously served time for terrorism offences in another Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) country.⁷³⁵ Two others detained in the same month had reportedly undertaken robberies in the southwestern Jalal-Abad Province on behalf of an unnamed militant group. Both had previously fought in Syria for the same group, before returning to Kyrgyzstan.⁷³⁶

⁷³¹ "V Tashkente presekli deyatelnost' 11 uchastnikov terroristicheskoy gruppy" ('The activity of 11 members of a terrorist group has been crushed in Tashkent'), *RIA Novosti*, 30 June 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200630/1573707230.html>.

⁷³² "V Tadjikistane predotvratili dva terakta" ('Two terrorist attacks were prevented in Tajikistan'), *Sputnik Tochikiston/Tajiki*, 3 August 2020, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/country/20200803/1031674398/tajikistan-predotvratili-dva-terakta-2020.html>.

⁷³³ "V Tadjikistane za posledniye polgoda predotvratili dva terakta" ('Two terrorist attacks were prevented in Tajikistan over the past six months'), *Mir24.TV*, <http://tj.mir24.tv/news/103295>.

⁷³⁴ Mokrenko, Anastasia, "Propagandista terrorizma zaderzhali v Kyrgyzstane" ('A terrorist propagandist was detained in Kyrgyzstan'), *24.KG*, 5 February 2020, https://24.kg/proisshestviya/142685_propagandista_terrorizma_zaderjali_vkyrgyzstane/.

⁷³⁵ "Zaderzhan inostrannyi verbovshchik v ryady terroristov" ('A foreign terrorist recruiter was arrested'), *Kabar*, 3 October 2020, <http://kabar.kg/news/gknb-zaderzhan-inostrannyi-verbovshchik-v-riady-terroristov/>.

Overall, security risks to Central Asia persist, with authorities continuing to report detentions. While the full scope and nature of the terror networks and plots disrupted are rarely made public, strands of reporting repeatedly point to radicalisation taking place in Russia, the significance of social media and regular efforts to send money to Syria.

Central Asia Diaspora Radicalisation Abroad

There continue to be worrying signals of the expansion of a threat from Central Asians outside their home region. More particularly, Central Asian migrant and diaspora communities based in the Republic of Korea, Russia, Turkey, and other parts of Europe, continue to be a target for online jihadi propaganda and recruitment⁷³⁷. In the past year, plots featuring Central Asians were uncovered by authorities in parts of Europe and Russia.

In mid-April 2020, German authorities detained four Tajik nationals over an IS-linked terror plot to attack US military facilities and personnel stationed in the country.⁷³⁸ According to the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, the detainees and their ringleader, who has been in pre-trial custody since his arrest in March 2019, were in a regular contact with two senior IS militants in Syria and Afghanistan, from whom they had

⁷³⁶ "Zaderzhany chleny terroristicheskoy organizatsii – GKNB KR. Chto u nikh nashli" ('Members of a terrorist organisation were detained – the SCNS of the Kyrgyz Republic. What they found'), *Sputnik Kyrgyzstan*, 29 October 2020, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20201020/1050127498/kyrgyzstan-mto-terrorizm-zaderzhanie.html>.

⁷³⁷ The precise targeting of foreign diaspora in jihadist material is hard to trace. But it is clear that some members of the Central Asian diaspora are consumers of extremist material given the growing volume of overall arrests from these communities outside Central Asia. Security services have reported finding volumes of extremist material on their personal electronic devices.

⁷³⁸ "Festnahme fünf mutmaßlicher Mitglieder einer Terrorzelle der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Islamischer Staat (IS)“,“ An arrest warrant, the Office of the German Federal Public Prosecutor, 15 April 2020, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-15-04-2020.html>.

reportedly received instructions. While the attacks were not planned for the immediate term, the cell members had already ordered bomb parts online and were stocking up on firearms and ammunition in preparation.⁷³⁹ The reported plan was to target the US air base in Spangdahlem and the NATO AWACS air base near Geilenkirchen, potentially using remote-controlled drones or paragliders armed with explosives.⁷⁴⁰ Reports also suggested that the individuals had initially sought to return to Tajikistan to launch attacks, but had been re-directed to Europe by their external handlers.⁷⁴¹

The detainees were also accused of raising and channeling funds for IS' core operations in Syria. As part of these fundraising missions, they had reportedly partaken in a murder-for-hire operation in Albania and collected money from Chechens from France who were working on a construction site in Germany. The team deployed for the attempted contract killing operation in Albania had included two Russian-born Chechens from Austria.

All the suspects involved in the plot to attack the US air bases were Tajik citizens residing in Germany as migrants, although much remains unclear about their exact path towards radicalisation. It is believed that none had previously travelled to jihadist conflict zones. The said plot was announced shortly before authorities in Poland detained another

group of four Tajiks, reportedly also connected to IS. Along with a fifth individual, who was detained later, they were deported to Tajikistan in September.⁷⁴² The details of this group's suspected activities remain sketchy, though they were reportedly accused of recruiting others and potentially being linked to another extremist arrested by Polish authorities in December 2019.⁷⁴³ In October, an IS-linked Tajik national who had been granted asylum in Greece was arrested following an international search operation.⁷⁴⁴

As in recent years, Russia in 2020 saw a regular diet of arrests involving Central Asians reportedly plotting terrorist activity in the country. In October, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) disrupted a cell reportedly linked to KTJ which was planning terrorist attacks in Volgograd. The cell members, alleged to be in contact with others in Syria, were seeking to attack government buildings, military personnel residences, enterprises and a famous Motherland Calls statue, possibly using firearms and an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). According to the FSB, two members of the cell, who were migrants from an unnamed Central Asian country, were killed at the scene as they resisted surrender. FSB later arrested the other cell members in operations across Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ufa and Maikop, but did not disclose their

⁷³⁹ "Festnahme fünf mutmaßlicher Mitglieder einer Terrorzelle der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Islamischer Staat (IS)“,“ An arrest warrant, the Office of the German Federal Public Prosecutor, 15 April 2020, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/aktuelle/Pressemitteilung-vom-15-04-2020.html>.

⁷⁴⁰ i) Axel Spilcker, "Zugriff nach Hinweis vom FBI," *Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger*, 08 September 2020, <https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=e182b99c-42e8-46c0-92ab-ab1ea56e4a06&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A60SS-JCH1-JBR8-40RX-00000-00&pdoccontentcomponentid=360784&pdtteaserkey=sr0&pdtitab=allpods&ecomp=tzq2k&earg=sr0&prid=568b144a-b4d0-4fe1-977a-907dc44a0d5a>; ii) Matthias Gebauer, "Traum vom Fliegen," *Der Spiegel*, 18 April 2020, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5YPB-8SG1-DYJR-P2HN-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁷⁴¹ "Germany arrests IS suspects plotting attacks on US bases," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 April 2020,

<https://www.dw.com/en/germany-arrests-is-suspects-plotting-attacks-on-us-bases/a-53129563>.

⁷⁴² i) "Four Tajik Nationals Detained For Alleged Militant Recruitment In Poland," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 11 May 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/four-tajik-nationals-detained-for-alleged-militant-recruitment-in-poland/30605951.html>; ii) "Poland Deports Five Tajiks Suspected Of Terrorism," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 29 September 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/poland-deports-five-tajiks-suspected-of-terrorism/30863940.html>.

⁷⁴³ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "Deporting Muslim Immigrants Won't Make Poland Safer," *Foreign Policy*, 19 October 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/19/deport-muslim-immigrants-poland-counterterrorism-pis-islamist-radicalization/>.

⁷⁴⁴ Paul Antonopoulos, "Leading member of ISIS that was granted asylum status has been arrested in Greece," *Greek City Times*, 5 October 2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/05/isis-asylum-greece/>.

nationalities.⁷⁴⁵ Earlier in July, an IS-linked cell that reportedly included Central Asians was disrupted in Rostov-on-Don. The cell leader was killed in a shoot-out with authorities, with narcotics reported subsequently found alongside weapons.⁷⁴⁶

Most other arrests during the year were, however, of a smaller scale involving isolated individuals. For example, in October, the FSB in Moscow arrested a Central Asian planning an explosion in the city.⁷⁴⁷ Three months earlier, another individual was shot when he opened fire on officers trying to arrest him. He was reportedly planning a mass shooting in Moscow.⁷⁴⁸ These arrests, in addition to other arrests and attack plots foiled over the past year, reflect a persistent level of concern by Russian authorities of potential threats from radicalised members of the substantial Central Asian diaspora living within the country.

Responses

On 8 December, Uzbek authorities announced that they brought back 25 women and 73 children from Syria in the latest round of the “Mehr” (‘Kindness’) humanitarian rescue operation.⁷⁴⁹ However, other countries with similar plans have had to hold back such plans, largely owing to the global pandemic. For example, Tajikistan halted plans to repatriate a group of women and children (about 300) from Syria due to the

ongoing lockdowns and other challenges in dealing with the health crisis.⁷⁵⁰ In spite of this, the relevant governmental and non-governmental organisations in the three Central Asian states, namely Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, that in recent years have conducted large-scale repatriations, continued to offer the necessary material and social support for the repatriated women and children, to facilitate their reintegration into their respective communities. However, such efforts remain a work in progress given, as various experts have pointed out, transforming the extreme beliefs of some ideologically hardened repatriates has been notoriously slow.

Responses to terrorism have increasingly incorporated soft measures. Governments are tapping on civil society institutions as part of efforts to bolster their populations’ resistance against extremism. For instance, Kazakhstan announced increased funding for projects aimed at preventing online extremism,⁷⁵¹ while the government also announced that 13,000 pieces of material propagating extremism and terrorism had been blocked online.⁷⁵² In Uzbekistan, a police department in Tashkent launched a consultative centre in 2020 as a pilot project. Staffed with experienced religious clerics and theologians, the centre can anonymously arrange consultations for people who find themselves confused about specific religious doctrines – such as *jihad* – that are often

⁷⁴⁵ “Boyeviki pokushalis' na «Rodinu-mat'»: FSB predotvratila terakt” (‘Militants attempted to destroy the Motherland Calls statue: FSB prevented the attack’) *Gazeta*, 15 October 2020, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2020/10/15/13320667.shtml>.

⁷⁴⁶ Vusala Abbasova, “Russian Security Service Detains IS Cell In Rostov Region,” *Caspian News*, 14 July 2020, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/russian-security-service-detains-is-cell-in-rostov-region-2020-7-13-15/>.

⁷⁴⁷ “Terrorist attack reportedly thwarted in Moscow region as FSB arrests suspect & seizes ISIS flag (VIDEO),” 22 October 2020, *RT*, <https://www.rt.com/russia/504264-terrorist-attack-thwarted-moscow-region/>.

⁷⁴⁸ “Russia says it has foiled a militant attack in Moscow,” *Deutsche Welle*, 27 July 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-says-it-has-foiled-a-militant-attack-in-moscow/a-54331742>.

⁷⁴⁹ ““Mehr-3” operatsiyasi doirasida Suriyadan 25 nafar ayollar va 73 nafar bolalar yurtimizga olib kelindi” (‘As part of the “Mehr-3” operation, 25

women and 73 men were brought back to our homeland’), *Xalq so’zi*, 8 December 2020, <http://xs.uz/uzkr/post/mehr-3-operatsiyasi-doirasida-suriyadan-25-nafar-ayollar-va-73-nafar-bolalar-yurtimizga-olib-kelindi>

⁷⁵⁰ “Nearly 300 Tajik women and children ready to return home from Syria,” *Asia-Plus*, 28 July 2020, <https://asiaplus.tj.info/en/news/tajikistan/society/20200728/nearly-300-tajik-women-and-children-ready-to-return-home-from-syria>.

⁷⁵¹ Asel Sultan, “Countering Extremism in Kazakhstan: Where Do They Waste Millions?” *CABAR.asia*, 16 January 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/countering-extremism-in-kazakhstan-where-do-they-waste-millions>.

⁷⁵² Torgyn Nurseitova, “Boleye tsysyachi kazakhstanstsev poluchili tyuremnyy srok za terrorizm i ekstremizm” (‘More than 1,000 Kazakhstanis received prison sentences for terrorism and extremism’), *Zakon*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.zakon.kz/5049486-bolee-tyssyachi-kazahstantsev-poluchili.html>

misinterpreted and distorted by extremist groups.⁷⁵³

Regional governments also increasingly sought international collaborations in countering terrorism. During the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meetings, terrorism was mentioned as a source of mutual concern and, throughout the year, various UN bodies hosted workshops focused on the Central Asian experience. The Uzbek government is planning to host a large conference in 2021 reflecting on the experience of cooperating on a joint regional action plan for countering terrorism. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and UNDP have also collaborated with various youth organisations and civil society institutions around the region on training programmes, reflecting a desire among regional authorities to continue promoting their work related to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Central Asian governments have also conducted bilateral exchanges with numerous western states throughout the year, with many championing the region's particular approach to the repatriation of foreign fighters in Syria as a model to emulate.

However, varying perceptions in the west of the human rights records of some Central Asian states could complicate potential cooperation between the latter and the EU in particular. In Europe, the September repatriation of a group of Tajik nationals accused by Poland of involvement in terrorist activity followed attempts by lawyers to block the repatriations on the basis of human rights concerns that were upheld for some time. Earlier attempts by Sweden to deport Uzbeks who had served time for terrorism offences failed on this same count, suggesting a potential impediment in smooth EU-Central Asia cooperation in particular counter-terrorism objectives. All of these issues may become more significant going forward, given the numbers of Central Asians arrested in Europe linked to alleged terrorist activity and the need for greater regional cooperation to effectively manage such threats.

Outlook

The worrying prominence of Central Asian jihadists on the international jihadist scene will persist. While the biggest contingents of Central Asian fighters remain on battlefields in Syria and Afghanistan, the recent disruptions of terror plots and arrests in Europe, in particular, point to a rapidly evolving and expanding threat landscape. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this problem will be difficult to track, given the lack of access to real-time intelligence and data, although the common history of migrant labour that many of the radicalised Central Asians share, and the likely setbacks this workforce will experience in COVID-blighted economies, could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In the near term, Central Asian nationals are likely to remain a significant component of the global jihadist milieu, highlighting the importance of buttressing domestic responses and greater international cooperation in the regional security sphere.

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⁷⁵³ Navruz Melibaev, "Policy of Countering Terrorism and Extremism in Uzbekistan: How Did It Change Over the Past Few Years?" CABAR.asia, 4

May 2020, <https://cabar.asia/en/policy-of-countering-terrorism-and-extremism-in-uzbekistan-how-did-it-change-over-the-past-few-years>.

CHINA

China has continued to send members of the Uyghur and other Muslim minority communities to the so-called “re-education centres” as part of its counter-terrorism strategy. Beijing has also intensified a campaign of mass transfers of those discharged from such facilities to settle down and be employed in other provinces and cities across mainland China. Separately, the US State Department decision to remove the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from its Terrorist Exclusion List (TEL) has sparked renewed debate over the group’s activities, and it remains unclear how exactly this decision would affect Uyghur jihadist networks. The threat from Uyghur jihadist groups has continuously evolved mostly out of China, as they remain focused on battlefield operations in Afghanistan and Syria. China has also enhanced its security and surveillance capabilities in Xinjiang province.

Mass Resettlement of Uyghurs out of Xinjiang

There have been no reported cases of Uyghur-perpetrated violence in China and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) since February 2017.⁷⁵⁴ According to Chinese media reports, this has been achieved largely due to the implementation of “resolute de-extremism measures,” which the authorities largely characterise as a “vocational education and training programme”.⁷⁵⁵

Since December 2019, Xinjiang’s top authorities, including its governor Shohrat Zakir, have repeatedly emphasised that “all trainees” of vocational education and training centres had graduated and found jobs.⁷⁵⁶ After their release from such facilities, Uyghur and other minority workers have been employed both in and outside Xinjiang. However, in line with a new job placement scheme put in place by the central government in 2019, the intensity and scale of worker transfers out of Xinjiang has been considerably high. According to this new mechanism, local authorities in at least 19 provinces and cities across China have been obliged to facilitate the mass resettlement of Uyghurs and other minorities from Xinjiang in their respective provinces and cities, and employ them in accordance with the job allocation quotas.⁷⁵⁷ In spite of the myriad economic and practical challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the scheme has been progressively implemented, albeit with some disruptions.⁷⁵⁸

Despite the Chinese authorities’ insistence more recently that the re-education system in Xinjiang was being scaled back, some foreign research institutions, rights groups and governments have suggested otherwise, citing data drawn from a wide range of publicly available sources as well as satellite imagery analysis and eyewitness accounts. For instance, a report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in September 2020 observed that China has been expanding its network of “re-education camps, detention centres and prisons” in

⁷⁵⁴ Carrie Gracie, “‘All-out offensive’ in Xinjiang risks worsening grievances,” *BBC News*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39137420>.

⁷⁵⁵ Mu Lu, “Politicizing Xinjiang won’t help stamp out extremism in the West,” *The Global Times*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1203861.shtml>.

⁷⁵⁶ “CGTN Exclusive: A tour of a closed ‘re-education camp’ in Xinjiang,” *China Global Television Network*, December 30, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-30/CGTN-Exclusive-A-tour-of-a-former-re-education-center-in-Xinjiang-MQ7rursV3i/index.html>; Chun Han Wong,

“China Says Majority of Xinjiang Detainees Released, but Activists Question Claim,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-offers-rare-update-on-detainees-in-xinjiang-detention-camps-11564490302?mod=article_inline.

⁷⁵⁷ “China plans to send Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang re-education camps to work in other parts of country,” *The South China Morning Post*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3082602/china-plans-send-uyghur-muslims-xinjiang-re-education-camps-work>.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

Xinjiang, with at least 61 alleged “detention sites” showing signs of reconstruction and expansion between July 2019 and July 2020.⁷⁵⁹

A separate report released by the same institution in September 2020 assessed that more than 80,000 workers were moved out of Xinjiang from 2017 to 2019, to work in factories across China.⁷⁶⁰ While provinces and cities such as Hubei, Fujian, Shenzhen and Shaoguan have already started receiving and employing workers from Xinjiang, in other provinces, the process to resettle workers is expected to take longer.⁷⁶¹ For instance, the Bayin’gholin Mongol Autonomous Prefecture is preparing to receive and employ about 19,000 people at various construction sites over the next three years.⁷⁶²

China has defended its training and employment schemes as being helpful in addressing concerns around terrorism and extremism, as well as alleviating poverty among the Uyghur population by turning them into a skilled workforce.⁷⁶³ However, at the October 2020 meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 39 countries,

including France, Germany, and the US, denounced the Chinese approach and alleged that Uyghur minorities are working under coercive conditions.⁷⁶⁴

Based on these allegations and in an attempt to force China to alter its alleged treatment of some minority groups, the US in March 2020 imposed sanctions on three senior Chinese officials for alleged “human rights abuses targeting Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, including forced labor and arbitrary mass detention...”.⁷⁶⁵ In response, Chinese officials said Beijing would be taking “reciprocal measures” against the relevant US institutions and individuals for “egregious” conduct pertaining to Xinjiang-related affairs.⁷⁶⁶

The US Decision to Remove ETIM from the Terrorist Exclusion List⁷⁶⁷

On November 5, 2020, the US State Department removed the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from its Terror Exclusion List on grounds that the group no longer exists.⁷⁶⁸ The US’ prior decision to designate ETIM as a terrorist group in 2002

⁷⁵⁹ Nathan Ruser, “Exploring Xinjiang’s detention system,” *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, September 24, 2020, p.11, <https://cdn.xjdp.aspi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/25125443/documenting-xinjiangs-detention-system.cleaned.pdf>.

⁷⁶⁰ Vicky Xiuzhong Xu and Danielle Cave et al, “Uyghurs for sale,” *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

⁷⁶¹ “China plans to send Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang re-education camps to work in other parts of country,” *The South China Morning Post*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3082602/china-plans-send-uyghur-muslims-xinjiang-re-education-camps-work>.

⁷⁶² “Majority of 19,000 People to Be Placed in Jobs are Xinjiang Camp Detainees,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/jobs-08202020170719.html>

⁷⁶³ “China still expanding Xinjiang re-education camps, report says,” *The Straits Times*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-still-expanding-xinjiang-re-education-camps-report-says>; “Xinjiang: China defends ‘education’ camps,” *BBC News*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54195325>.

⁷⁶⁴ At the same meeting, in a dueling statement, a group of 45 countries defended Chinese policies in Xinjiang as measures taken within the legal

boundaries to fight terrorism and extremism and protect the human rights of all ethnic groups in the province. See: Edith M. Lederer, “Nearly 40 nations criticize China’s human rights policies,” *The Associated Press*, October 7, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-race-and-ethnicity-tibet-hong-kong-united-states-a69609b46705f97bdec509e009577cb5>.

⁷⁶⁵ “US imposes sanctions on senior Chinese officials over Uighur abuses,” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/10/us-imposes-sanctions-on-senior-chinese-officials-over-uighur-abuses>.

⁷⁶⁶ Daphne Psaedakis, Alexandra Alper et al, “China says it will hit back against new U.S. sanctions over Uighur rights,” *Reuters*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-xinjiang-sanctions-idUSKBN24A2GA>.

⁷⁶⁷ *The Terrorist Exclusion List*, or TEL, is one of four primary counterterrorism lists established by the US government, the others being: *the State Sponsors of Terrorism*, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO)*, and *Executive Order 13224*. Each list has its individual mechanisms, but they all serve to combat terrorism, punish terrorists and their supporters, and pressure changes in the behavior of designated states and groups. Retrieved from “US Programs and Policy”, p.150, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/20121.pdf>.

⁷⁶⁸ The U.S. State Department’s Public Notice:11252, published by the Federal Register,

had been viewed at the time as an attempt by Washington to secure Beijing's cooperation in its global fight against terrorism. Some analysts have claimed that by now "whitelisting" ETIM, the US may be seeking to weaken China's anti-terror rationale used to justify the crackdown in Xinjiang.⁷⁶⁹ In retaliation, China accused the US of double standards and compromising international cooperation on counterterrorism.⁷⁷⁰

While the US' decision to list and delist ETIM appears to have been driven by political considerations to some extent, there has long been international discrepancy over the group's existence and its potential links to jihadist-linked violence in Xinjiang. For example, some scholars and counterterrorism practitioners argue that ETIM and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), a Uyghur jihadist network which is currently active in Afghanistan and Syria, are the same entity operating under different monikers, while others have questioned the organisational cohesion within the two groups.⁷⁷¹

There is a consensus among scholars that the first Uyghur militant group emerged in the late 1990s when the earliest batch of Uyghur militants coalesced around the leadership of Hasan Mahsum, a notorious Uyghur militant from Xinjiang, along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. During the US-led counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan in

October 2001, these Uyghur militants participated in the Taliban's fight against the US and the coalition forces. After the killing of Hassan Mahsum in October 2003, the network declined and gradually became invisible. The TIP then emerged publicly in 2008, after it came out with an online statement threatening to attack the Beijing Olympics. However, there is confusion over which exact name the Hasan Mahsum-led Uyghur unit was using to identify itself.

The author's years of systematic review of online extremist materials in the Uyghur language has also shown that currently no Uyghur group, including TIP, refers to itself as ETIM. However, a number of online propaganda materials available on TIP's website in the Uyghur language have suggested that TIP and the Uyghur militant unit led by Hasan Mahsum in the late 1990s are the same group.⁷⁷²

Nature of Uyghur Militant Threat

There is no doubt that Uyghur militant groups, TIP being the largest, represent a potential threat to China's security and interests. Uyghur militants were, for example, linked to a terrorist attack in August 2016 against the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁷³ However, the threat from Uyghur groups has been largely evolving out of China – mostly in Afghanistan and Syria. It remains challenging to draw a

November 5, 2020,

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-11-05/pdf/2020-24620.pdf>, "US removes separatist group condemned by China from terror list," *Deutsche Welle*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-removes-separatist-group-condemned-by-china-from-terror-list/a-55527586>.

⁷⁶⁹ "US Drops ETIM From Terror List, Weakening China's Pretext For Xinjiang Crackdown," *Radio Free Asia*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/etim-11052020155816.html>.

⁷⁷⁰ Liu Zhen, "China accuses US of double standards as it drops ETIM from terrorism list," *The South China Morning Post*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3108846/china-accuses-us-double-standards-it-drops-etim-terrorism-list>.

⁷⁷¹ Sean R. Roberts, "Why Did the United States Take China's Word on Supposed Uighur Terrorists?" *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/10/why-did-the-united-states-take-chinas-word-on-supposed-uyghur-terrorists/>.

⁷⁷² In a May 2004 video, TIP claimed that before Hasan Mahsum founded the "East Turkistan Islamic Party", there was no armed group "dedicated to the protection of the Uyghur people." In the same video, Hasan Mahsum referred to his group as the "Turkistan Islamic Party," which appears to confirm the Uyghur unit that was founded and once led by Mahsum had multiple monikers, including ETIP and TIP. However, it remains unclear if ETIM was one of multiple names that TIP previously adopted, or whether it was in fact the Chinese government who started referring to Uyghur militants as ETIM. See the following link for the Chinese designation of ETIM as terrorist organisation: "Terrorist Activities Perpetrated by "Eastern Turkistan" Organizations and Their Links with Osama bin Laden and the Taliban," 29 November 29, 2001, retrieved from <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceee/eng/ztlm/fdkbzy/t112733.htm>.

⁷⁷³ Oved Lobel, 'Is Al-Qaeda's Syrian Affiliate Adopting Islamic State Tactics in Russia?' *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, July 4, 2017, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/7/5/is-al-qaedas-syrian-affiliate-adopting-is-tactics-in-russia>.

direct link between the TIP and the incidents that were launched by Uyghur militants in China.

Overall, the Uyghur-perpetrated violence in China can be broadly divided into two main categories. The first includes home-grown ethnic riots primarily fueled by the ethno-cultural and religious grievances of the Uyghur minority community towards state policies in Xinjiang. Such acts are often random and show no confirmed links to any organised militant entity.⁷⁷⁴ The most recent incident in February 2017 saw three Uyghur assailants conduct knife stabbings in Hotan Prefecture in Xinjiang.⁷⁷⁵ The second category involves acts of terror committed by active members and supporters of Uyghur jihadist groups, including the TIP. The Urumqi open-air market attack in May 2014 was the last known TIP-linked attack inside China.⁷⁷⁶

The US' removal of ETIM from its terrorist organisations list appears to have provided a fillip for TIP as evidenced by two online statements released by the group on its Uyghur language blogging website in early December 2020. In these statements, TIP stated that "the East Turkistan people have been happy" with the US decision and called on other countries to take similar steps to support the "oppressed Uyghur people".

At its territorial peak in 2014 and 2015, the Islamic State (IS) had a small group of Uyghur fighters under its command in Syria. IS' Uyghur militants have disappeared from the online domain since they last appeared in a propaganda video in the Uyghur language

in February 2017. Following IS' loss of its last territorial stronghold in Baghouz in March 2019, the whereabouts of IS' Uyghur fighters in Syria remain unknown. Although Uyghur fighters affiliated to IS have not carried out any attacks outside Syria and Iraq, Chinese citizens abroad have been affected in terrorism-related incidents involving other nationalities linked to IS. For instance, in February 2020, two Chinese nationals and an Australian were injured in a knife attack claimed by local IS sympathisers in the Maldives.⁷⁷⁷

Uyghur Jihadist Groups in Afghanistan and Syria

TIP's more active battlefields are in fact Syria and Afghanistan, where they are one of the largest contingents fighting alongside the Taliban and Al Qaeda affiliated groups. In July 2020, the United Nations Security Council assessed that TIP's Afghan branch, with about 500 fighters under its command, were active primarily in the Raghistan and Warduj districts of Badakhshan province as well as Kunduz and Takhar provinces.⁷⁷⁸ In Afghanistan, the group has reportedly collaborated with the Islamic Jihad Group, Lashkar-e-Islam and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.⁷⁷⁹ Online propaganda videos indicate that TIP continues to cooperate closely with the Taliban. Abdul Haq is reported to still be the leader of the group, despite some earlier reports that suggested he had died.⁷⁸⁰ Other key figures include Haji Furkan who was reportedly in charge of training Uyghur fighters, and Abu Salam, reported to be responsible for the group's online preaching activities.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁴ However, it should be noted that from a theoretical perspective, regardless if the perpetrator was a militant group or home-grown rioters, an attack assessed to have deliberately targeted innocent civilians in order to attain political, ideological and religious aims, can still be defined as "terrorist attack". See: Alex Schmid, "Terrorism - The Definitional Problem," *The Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1400&context=jil>.

⁷⁷⁵ Carrie Gracie, "'All-out offensive' in Xinjiang risks worsening grievances," *BBC News*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-39137420>.

⁷⁷⁶ Jacob Zenn, "The Turkistan Islamic Party in Double-Exile: Geographic and Organizational Divisions in Uighur Jihadism," *Terrorism Monitor*:

The Jamestown Foundation, September 7, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-turkistan-islamic-party-in-double-exile-geographic-and-organizational-divisions-in-uighur-jihadism/>.

⁷⁷⁷ "Maldives arrests three ISIS-linked suspects over stabbing of Chinese, Australian," *The Straits Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/maldives-arrests-three-suspected-to-be-linked-to-islamic-state-over-stabbing-of>.

⁷⁷⁸ "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, July 23, 2020, p.15, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁰ "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team," *United Nations Security Council*, p.15, 20 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid.

The February 2020 US-Taliban deal and the subsequent peace talks have elicited reactions from a wide range of jihadist groups, including TIP. In March 2020, TIP released an audio statement on its blogging site hailing the deal as a “victory” for the Taliban. This despite the deal requiring the Taliban to cut off ties with Al Qaeda and other foreign terrorist groups and not provide them with shelter in Afghanistan. TIP’s commendation of the deal indicates the group is not concerned about the possible implications to its status in Afghanistan.

In Syria, TIP operates under the umbrella of the Al Qaeda-linked Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) jihadist alliance. According to data from the United Nations Monitoring Team from July 2020, the group, under the command of Kaiwusair, controlled between 1,100 and 3,500 fighters in Syria.⁷⁸² However, no other details about Kaiwusair is publicly available. Most TIP fighters and their family members reside in the Jisr al-Shughur area of northwestern Idlib province.⁷⁸³

Throughout 2020, TIP along with HTS has participated in several skirmishes with Syrian government forces to protect their positions in Idlib and its surroundings. For instance, in February, TIP fighters stood up for the protection of the strategically important M4 highway, which links the cities of Aleppo and Latakia.⁷⁸⁴ In a propaganda video released in February 2020 on its Uyghur language blogging site, TIP featured its elite forces, which it described as “storm troops”. More than 60 fighters in military uniforms and balaclavas were shown training and fighting at an unknown location in Syria. Another video that came out in May showed nearly 30

Uyghur children of similar age attending training classes. Dozens of video and audio extremist materials released by the group throughout the year have highlighted the group’s increasing advancement in terms of propaganda content, graphics design and technological skills.

Additionally, the Uyghur diaspora community in Turkey has been one of the key sources of funding for the group in Syria.⁷⁸⁵ To further finance itself, TIP has also been involved in plundering and selling public utility installations such as metal pipes from the Sahl al-Ghab area in Hama countryside.⁷⁸⁶ Reports have also suggested that after TIP’s military losses in Syria, some fighters and their family members were seeking to migrate to Afghanistan through Turkey and Iran to join the group’s Afghan wing.⁷⁸⁷

Responses

At the domestic level, the Chinese government has employed a combination of several hard and soft measures to keep Xinjiang province free from violent incidents. In recent years, for example, China has worked to advance the capabilities of its counterterrorism tactical units. In July 2020, various units of the border police and military held a joint counterterrorism drill in four provinces, including Xinjiang.⁷⁸⁸ This followed earlier media reports about the establishment of a new special operations unit, titled “Mountain Eagle Commando,” within the People’s Armed Police (PAP), which deals with anti-terrorism missions particularly in Xinjiang.⁷⁸⁹

China has also relied on advanced technological surveillance methods, which

⁷⁸² “Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” *United Nations Security Council*, July 23, 2020, p.8, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>.

⁷⁸³ “Separate blasts in Syria’s Idlib kill 6 militants, Turkish soldier,” *Arab News*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1681011/middle-east>.

⁷⁸⁴ “Turkey-backed fighters recapture key town in Syria’s Idlib,” *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/25/turkey-backed-fighters-recapture-key-town-in-syrias-idlib>.

⁷⁸⁵ “Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” *United Nations Security Council*, p.16, 20 January 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>.

⁷⁸⁶ “HTS sells Zayzun thermal power station at public auction... Turkistan Islamic Party extracts

metal pipes from Sahil Al-Ghab area sabotaging the irrigation project and Idlib’s textile factory dismantled,” *SOHR*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/159238/>.

⁷⁸⁷ “Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team,” *United Nations Security Council*, p.8, 23 July 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/717>.

⁷⁸⁸ Holly Chik and William Zheng, “Drills put Chinese border police and soldiers to counterterrorism test,” *The South China Morning Post*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3091256/drills-put-chinese-border-police-and-soldiers-counterterrorism>.

⁷⁸⁹ Guo Yuandan, “New counter-terror force in Xinjiang,” *The Global Times*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162106.shtml>.

include facial recognition, iris scanners, DNA collection and artificial intelligence to predict suspicious behaviour.⁷⁹⁰ Since 2019, the China Global Television Network has also broadcasted a four-part English-language documentary titled “Tianshan: Still Standing”. The Chinese media explained that the documentary, while featuring first-hand footages of violent incidents that hit Xinjiang in recent years and testimonies from police and victims of attacks, serves to raise the population’s awareness against extremism and terrorism.⁷⁹¹

Outlook

Uyghur jihadists will continue to play an active role within the Syrian and Afghan conflicts fighting alongside powerful militant groups such as the Taliban and HTS. TIP’s congratulatory statement on the US-Taliban deal indicates continued linkages between the two militant organisations, which are unlikely to be affected by future political developments in Afghanistan. For now, as part of HTS’ jihadist coalition, TIP’s Syrian wing remains focused on the fight in Syria. Separately within China, it remains to be seen if Beijing’s re-education and job transfer schemes and many other ongoing projects will have the effect of scrubbing out the root causes of extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang.

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⁷⁹⁰ “Big data used to detain minorities in Xinjiang: US rights group,” *The Straits Times*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/big-data-used-to-detain-minorities-in-xinjiang-us-rights-group>.

⁷⁹¹ Chi Zao, “China releases documentary revealing truth behind Xinjiang terrorist attacks,” *People’s Daily Online*, June 19, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0619/c90000-9702328.html>.

THE MIDDLE EAST: BETWEEN COVID-19, CONFLICTS, JIHADIST THREAT AND PUBLIC DISCONTENT

Amin Saikal

In 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic's devastating effects on the Middle East, the region remained a zone of frenemies where geopolitical conflicts and rivalries, major power interventionism and jihadist operations persisted as dominant features. These variables, coupled with the costly human and economic consequences of the coronavirus, the prevalence of authoritarianism and growing public agitation for fundamental reforms in pursuit of the common good across the region, underpinned the Middle East's long-term structural instability and volatility. The regional landscape has largely been defined by competing interests, which have impeded the quest for improving state-society relations at the national level and promoting interstate cooperation at the regional level. Without changes in this paradigm, the Middle East is set to face more serious challenges as a source of major anxiety in global politics for the foreseeable future.

Spanning over four sections, this article first discusses the impact of the COVID-19 contagion on the Middle East, then it examines various inter and intra-state conflicts and their attendant internal and external factors. The third section looks at the activities of jihadist groups in the region, particularly those of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS), while the final section details public unrest in different parts of the Middle East on account of poor governance, endemic corruption as well as the lack of fundamental rights and freedom.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 contagion has inflicted a heavy human and economic toll on most of the states in the Middle East. Many of the regional regimes have struggled to cope with the crisis on the one hand, and to ensure a continued grip on their societies on the other. To understand this, it is important to shed some light on the onset of the virus in the region.

The Islamic Republic of Iran initially emerged as the epicentre of the coronavirus, experiencing a devastating first and second wave.⁷⁹² As of late August 2020, the official number of confirmed cases and deaths were about 358,905 and 20,643 respectively. However, external independent sources have estimated the figures to be much higher, given the unreliability of the Iranian reporting system and the country's dilapidated health care system.⁷⁹³ Meanwhile, the rest of the region's constituent states have not escaped the virus' savagery either. They have all been afflicted by the pandemic and struggled, though in varying degrees, to cope with the devastating effects of the phenomenon.

In the wake of plummeting oil prices, the conditions in the oil-rich states have been no less of a serious concern than in non-oil countries in the region in this respect. While Iran has been dealt more blows than other countries, due also to severe American sanctions, even the wealthy Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not escaped the contagion's devastating effects. In late August 2020, the Kingdom officially registered more than 300,000 confirmed cases and 3,600 deaths,⁷⁹⁴ and as part of its containment measures, Riyadh for the first

⁷⁹² Robin Wright, "How Iran Became A New Epicentre of the Coronavirus Outbreak," *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/how-iran-became-a-new-epicenter-of-the-coronavirus-outbreak>.

⁷⁹³ For details, see Zulfikar Ali, "Coronavirus: how Iran is battling a surge in cases," *BBC News*,

August 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/52959756>.

⁷⁹⁴ For the number of confirmed cases and deaths in the Middle East, country by country, see the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus chart, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

time closed the two holy sites of Islam – Mecca and Medina – to the customary annual pilgrimage by Muslims from around the world.⁷⁹⁵ It has also projected its budget deficit to rise to SR187 billion or 6.4 percent of the country's GDP in 2020.⁷⁹⁶

Conflicts

Notwithstanding the prevailing circumstances, the regional geopolitical conflicts and rivalries, major power interventionism, and anti-regime protests, which had swept through many Middle Eastern states before the outbreak of the pandemic, did not dissipate substantially. Yet, no dramatic drop in the operations of jihadist groups, most importantly the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, not to mention Al Shabaab, has transpired.

In 2020, the Syrian, Iraqi, Libyan, Yemeni, Sudanese and Algerian conflicts have persisted unabatedly, though in varying intensities, as have the Iranian-Saudi Arabian and Iranian-Israeli rivalries, US-Iranian confrontational postures, and Russo-American and Sino-American competition in the region. In an informal axis, Moscow, Tehran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, backed politically by China, have maintained their backing of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. They have empowered the Assad dictatorship to gain the upper hand in the conflict, but at very high human and material costs from which the Syrian people may not recover for generations, and a strategic loss for the US and its regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel in particular. Under President Donald Trump, the US has maintained its own interventionist behaviour. It has strengthened a policy of maximum pressure on Iran in order to tame the country's defiant Islamic regime according to the US geopolitical preferences. In addition to subjecting Iran to devastating sanctions, it

has boosted its military deployment in the Gulf, backed Israel more than any previous US administrations, and shored up an anti-Iran regional alliance, involving erstwhile foes: the conservative Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

Relations between Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially four of its member states – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and the Sultanate of Oman – have never had a better upward trajectory. In the footsteps of Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, the UAE formally concluded a peace agreement with Israel in August 2020 for establishing all-round ties, followed by Bahrain in September.⁷⁹⁷ Saudi Arabia and Oman have also made covert or overt moves towards possible normalisation of relations with the Jewish state, with Oman having already openly hosted a visit by then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2018.⁷⁹⁸

Qatar is the only Gulf Arab state that has not joined the GCC's anti-Iran chorus, partly because it wants to maintain good working relations with Iran in pursuance of an independent foreign policy. For this, it has been punished by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt which have imposed a blockade of the country since 2016, with Qatar's GCC membership being suspended.

In the face of a growing thaw in relations between Israel and Arab countries, and US pressure, Iran has found it expedient to maintain friendly relations with Qatar and Turkey, despite its differences with the latter in Syria, and to widen its strategic ties with Russia and China.⁷⁹⁹ In the process, the policy shift by Arab states towards Israel has seriously dented the Palestinian cause, which is strongly supported by Iran, Turkey and Qatar, and eroded the chances of a two-

⁷⁹⁵ "Coronavirus: Saudi Arabia bars international pilgrims for Hajj," *BBC News*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53140914>.

⁷⁹⁶ "Saudi cuts spending as deficit rises in 2020 budget," *Middle East Business Intelligence*, December 10, 2019, <https://www.meed.com/riyadh-sets-2020-budget-expects-significant-deficit-rise/>.

⁷⁹⁷ Steve Holland and Matt Spetalnick, "In break with past, UAE and Bahrain forge ties with Israel at White House," *Reuters*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-gulf-usa/in-break-with-past-uae-and-bahrain-forge-ties-with-israel-at-white-house-idUSKBN2660L1>.

⁷⁹⁸ "Israel's Netanyahu meets Sultan Qaboos in surprise Oman trip," *Al-Jazeera*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/26/israels-netanyahu-meets-sultan-qaboos-in-surprise-oman-trip/?gb=true>.

⁷⁹⁹ For details, see Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, Chs. 6-7.

state solution to the long-running Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Jihadist Landscape in 2020

As regional conflicts and rivalries, and outside powers' intervention, have persisted, especially in the wake of COVID-19, the arena has remained conducive for the violent jihadi groups to press on with their agendas.

In the war-torn and ethnosectarian divided Iraq, where Iran and the US have remained at loggerheads, the central government has proved to be incompetent and kleptocratic, and the society rebellious. This, plus a reduction in the US and allied counter-terrorism operations in Iraq in the wake of America's assassination of Iran's powerful General Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020,⁸⁰⁰ has availed IS once again with fertile grounds to regroup and strike targets, wherever and whenever feasible. For example, the group staged more than 650 attacks against varying targets in the country in the first three months of 2020 alone.⁸⁰¹ Although this was less than the 1,669 operations of 2019, it was nonetheless expected to rise substantially in the coming months. In one of its attacks in May 2020, the IS 'fighters staged a new offensive, killing at least 19 members of the Iraqi security forces, according to local media reports. The terrorists are also accused of burning crops and persecuting communities in parts of western, eastern and northern Iraq'.⁸⁰²

Similarly, despite the operational barriers by the Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah axis and Turkey, which has sought to carve a security zone along its border inside Syria, IS has remained very active in Syria. The group lost

its territorial control over large swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2018, but this has not extinguished its ideological and operational capability. It has managed to carry out numerous attacks on security forces, oil fields and civilian sites in Syria. In one of its operations in March 2020, it launched an extensive operation in 'government-held parts of Syria, from the central province of Homs ... to Deir el-Zour to the east, bordering Iraq'.⁸⁰³

Yemen has equally provided fertile space for jihadist operations. The Iran-backed Houthis have shown enormous resilience in the face of the Saudi-led Arab coalition operations against it. But the conflict has also enabled IS and Al Qaeda to carve strong niches, although as rivals to one another in the very complex power game involving numerous actors in Yemen. While fighting one another from July 2018 to early 2020,⁸⁰⁴ neither group has been able to strike a knock out, but have managed to add to the devastation of the Yemeni people and society.⁸⁰⁵

In Libya, where Egypt, backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has supported the renegade General Khalifa Haftar against the UN recognised and Turkish, Qatari and Italian supported government in Tripoli, IS and Al Qaeda have relied on local affiliates to execute operations against both government and Haftar forces, depending on the objectives of the day.⁸⁰⁶

In spite of its tight security, Iran has not been immune from terrorist attacks either. It has been subjected to several operations, which have been claimed by IS. One of its most daring attacks was on a military parade in the Iranian city of Ahvaz in September 2018,

⁸⁰⁰ "Q Qasem Soleimani: US kills top Iranian general in Baghdad air strike," *BBC News*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50979463>.

⁸⁰¹ For details, see Chloe Cornish and Asmaa al-Omar, "Isis operations increase in Iraq as coalition withdraws," *Financial Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/abbdcd29-fe66-4be2-b35e-efcfa536ce1>.

⁸⁰² Cornish and al-Omar, "Isis operations increase in Iraq as coalition withdraws."

⁸⁰³ See Qassim Abdul-Zahra et al., "ISIS extremists step up attacks as Iraq, Syria grapple with virus," *Military Times*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/05/03/isis-extremists-step-up-as-iraq-syria-grapple-with-virus/>.

⁸⁰⁴ For details, see Elisabeth Kendall, "ISIS in Yemen, caught in a regional power game," *Center for Global Policy*, July 21, 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-yemen-caught-in-a-regional-power-game/>.

⁸⁰⁵ Amin Saikal, "The kingdom botched war in Yemen," *Project Syndicate*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/saudi-arabia-futile-war-in-yemen-by-amin-saikal-2020-05?barrier=accesspaylog>.

⁸⁰⁶ For a detailed discussion, see "U.S. report: ISIS and Al Qaeda threats in 2019," *Wilson Center*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/us-report-isis-and-al-qaeda-threats-2019>.

killing 29 and injuring 53,⁸⁰⁷ and on the Iranian parliament and Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum in June 2017.⁸⁰⁸

Public Discontent

All the state and non-state actors in the conflict zones have sought to advance their contrasting agendas by either proxy or direct intervention. But the societal disaffection over poor governance, the lack of democratic rights and freedoms, little public accountability, widespread corruption, and poor living conditions have surged across the Middle East, from Iran to Lebanon to Algeria.

In addition to the 2009 mass demonstration over the disputed results of the presidential elections, which the authorities quelled through a massive crackdown, Iran has witnessed a series of public protests since December 2017. Although the government has coercively contained these protests, public anger has not been soothed. If anything, it has been compounded by the dual effects of the coronavirus and US sanctions. It is simply bubbling under the surface, with every prospect for more social unrest in store, especially once the public emerge from the havoc of the pandemic.⁸⁰⁹

The same is true in Iraq, where mass cross-ethnosectarian protests, which peaked from late 2019 and persisted intermittently into 2020, have made demands similar to those in Iran. They have also called for an end to rival Iranian and American interventionist activities in their country. In spite of having suffered terrible losses at the hands of the security

forces and a change of prime minister, the public's discontent threatens wider social unrest.⁸¹⁰

Since 2019, Lebanon has also been reeling from mass demonstrations, spearheaded by a younger cross-sectarian generation of Lebanese. The country has been governed by powerful and corrupt confessional elites, which also fought one another in a devastating civil war (1974-89), partly fuelled by rival regional actors (Syria and Israel in particular). As a result, the country has increasingly suffered from poor governance and endemic corruption, leaving its economy in tatters. In the wake of the massive explosion in early August 2020 that destroyed the Beirut port, the protests recently widened and intensified.

The explosion killed hundreds and injured thousands, along with displacing thousands living in the vicinity.⁸¹¹ Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who was appointed in early 2020 year to institute reforms to save Lebanon from bankruptcy, resigned, together with his entire government, shortly after the explosion.⁸¹²

The protests engulfing Algeria and the Sudan since early 2019 have been in pursuit of many demands similar to those mounted by their counterparts in the above countries. The resignation of the aged President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019 after twenty years of military-backed rule has made little difference in Algeria, given the ruling elite's resistance to any structural reforms that could muffle their historically privileged position. In the Sudan, the public protests finally caused the

⁸⁰⁷ Borzou Daragahi, "Iran mourns terror attack victims, as confusion swirls over Isis's claim of responsibility," *Independent*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-attack-terror-isis-responsible-military-parade-victims-dead-a8552596.html>.

⁸⁰⁸ "Iran attacks: IS hits parliament and Khomeini mausoleum," *BBC News*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40184641>.

⁸⁰⁹ For further elaboration, see Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "With brutal crackdown, Iran is convulsed by worst unrest in 40 years," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>; Robin Wright, "The anger and anguish fueling Iran's protests," *The New Yorker*, January 15, 2020, [https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-anger-and-anguish-fuelling-irans-protests)

[columnists/the-anger-and-anguish-fuelling-irans-protests](https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-anger-and-anguish-fuelling-irans-protests).

⁸¹⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Ranj Alaaldin, "The irresistible resiliency of Iraq's protesters," *Brookings*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/31/the-irresistible-resiliency-of-iraqs-protesters/>.

⁸¹¹ Arwa Ibrahim, Farah Najjar, Ted Regencia, "Second day of protests as anger over Beirut explosion grows," *Al-Jazeera*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/9/second-day-of-protests-as-anger-over-beirut-explosion-grows-live>.

⁸¹² Martine Chulov, "Lebanese government quits following Beirut port explosion," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/10/lebanese-pm-to-resign-after-more-than-a-third-of-cabinet-quits>.

toppling of the Omar al-Bashir's three decade-long dictatorship at the same time as Bouteflika. However, the best the protesters could achieve after much bloodshed in a security crackdown was to share power with the military in a transitional government for the purpose of democratisation, as uncertain as it may turn out to be.⁸¹³

Even Israel has lately not been above mass demonstrations. Many Israelis have had enough of the hard-line Prime Minister Netanyahu's corruption charges and mismanagement of COVID-19, as well as the political instability that has beset Israel for more than a year. Between April 2019 and April 2020, Israel held three parliamentary elections, all ending in political stalemate. Neither major parties, Netanyahu-led Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White, secured a majority to form a government. The two sides finally entered a shaky coalition, enabling Netanyahu to remain prime minister for eighteen months, with Gantz to serve in the position for the remainder of the three-year parliamentary term.

The political crisis, accompanied by severe social and economic strife and a confrontational situation with the Palestinians, leaves Israel with serious domestic challenges in the years ahead.⁸¹⁴ It is important to note that the US' unqualified support of Israel under an enduring strategic partnership has been critical to Tel Aviv's capacity to weather many challenges. In 2016, the US and Israel signed a new ten-year Memorandum of Understanding (2019-2028). Washington has accordingly undertaken to provide Israel US\$ 38 billion in military aid alone, bringing the total US assistance to a staggering US\$ 81 billion since Israel's creation in 1947.⁸¹⁵ Arguably, without this American aid, Israel would not have been in a position to be intransigent to reaching a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians by ending its occupation of their

territories since 1967 and to maintaining a strong strategic edge in the region.

Outlook

The COVID-19 savagery, regional conflicts and rivalries, violent extremism, authoritarianism, public grievances and protests, and major power interventionism have interacted favourably, not only to keep the Middle East on the boil, but also to define its direction as a strategically and economically significant and yet volatile region for the foreseeable future. At this stage, the region is far from morphing into a zone of peace, stability and security. This paradigm can change only if the very factors that underline the region's instability and volatility are addressed through structural reforms, reconfiguration of forces and cooperation at national, regional and international levels. Otherwise, the struggle between the forces of change that want reformist transformations of their societies in service of the common good, and those elements who are determined to preserve the status quo in support of their interests, are set to plague the region for the foreseeable future.

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⁸¹³ Mohammad Osman and Max Bearak, "Sudan's Omar Hassan al-Bashir is ousted by the military after 30 years in power," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/sudan-s-military-expected-to-announce-overthrow-of-president-following-months-of-popular-protests/2019/04/11/bedcc28e-5c2b-11e9-842d-7d3ed7eb3957_story.html.

⁸¹⁴ For a detailed discussion, see Moshe Maor et al., "When Covid-19, constitutional crisis, and

political deadlock meet: The Israeli case from a disproportionate policy perspective," *Policy and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 39, (2020), pp. 442-457.

⁸¹⁵ For a more comprehensive discussion, see *Congressional Research Service Report*, RL33222, 7 August 2019, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>.

THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS): MAINTAINING RESILIENCE IN A POST-CALIPHATE, PANDEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Despite losing its territorial holdings in March 2019, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group has remained resilient. IS' post-territorial insurgency has seen an upsurge of attacks in Iraq and Syria. Possibly, the spread of and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to Iraq and Syria have contributed to the marked increase in attacks. IS-affiliate groups outside of Iraq and Syria, especially across Africa, have also made great strides. These developments continue to bolster IS narratives of fortitude, resilience and endurance, while the pandemic has boosted the group's online propaganda. These narratives continue to be propagated on various social media and encrypted messaging platforms, despite efforts by technology and social media companies to clamp down on online jihadist networks and accounts.

Post-caliphate Insurgency

Throughout the first quarter of 2020, IS has sustained a steady but low level of operations in Iraq and Syria. Since losing large swathes of territory, the terror group has been operating from sparsely populated deserts and mountainous areas, particularly in the Anbar province and the Jazirah desert.⁸¹⁶ It has also been operating from largely ungoverned areas, spanning across parts of Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah ad Din, and Ninawa provinces, that both the central Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) claim.⁸¹⁷ In Syria, low-

level operations such as ambushes, IED attacks, and assassinations were directed mainly against the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) and Syrian Army targets, as well as local council heads, village elders and government buildings.⁸¹⁸

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to devastate countries around the world, IS remained unperturbed. In fact, it had taken advantage of the security vacuum left by the reduced military forces activities due to COVID-19 operations, escalating its insurgent activities in Iraq and Syria in the second quarter of 2020. Coinciding with the holy month of Ramadhan, which has always been a period of escalated violence for the group, IS launched deadly attacks in Iraq and Syria that include suicide bombings, assassination and night ambushes targeting the security forces.⁸¹⁹ In Iraq, amid US withdrawal from remote but key strategic posts and continuing political stagnation, there has been a marked increase in operational activities, especially in Kirkuk and Diyala provinces with near daily attacks.⁸²⁰ In Salah ad Din governorate, a coordinated IS attack at the town of Mekeeshfa in May left at least ten members of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) dead.⁸²¹

Meanwhile in Syria, the second quarter of 2020 saw IS' military operations primarily taking place in the country's northeast and central desert or Badiyah regions, which had largely been part of the IS' so-called caliphate.⁸²² Significant IS activities include

⁸¹⁶ Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, Issue 5, (May 2020), p. 15, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052020.pdf>.

⁸¹⁷ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," *The US Department of Defense*, January 1- March 31, 2020, p. 22, https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/lig_oir_q2_mar2020_gold_508_0513.pdf.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid, p. 50.

⁸¹⁹ Andrew Hanna, "ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic," *The Wilson Center*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>.

⁸²⁰ Charles Lister, "ISIS's Dramatic Escalation in Syria and Iraq," *The Middle East Institute*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/isis-dramatic-escalation-syria-and-iraq>.

⁸²¹ Arwa Ibrahim, "ISIL Attack Kills Hashd Al-Shaabi Forces in Iraq," *Al-Jazeera*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/2/isil-attack-kills-hashd-al-shaabi-forces-in-iraq>.

⁸²² Andrew Hanna, "ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic."

the April 9 attack in Homs province, where the terror group mounted a complex offensive, engaged in a two-day battle and briefly occupied several positions of the Bashar al-Assad regime before Russian jets repulsed the attack. This underlines the challenge of defeating IS when Coalition and partner forces have limited territorial reach, and IS has the ability and boldness to operate in parts of Syria under the regime's control.⁸²³ The group has escalated its attacks in southern Syria's Daraa and Suwayda provinces, claiming 19 attacks that include targeted killings, ambushes, and bombings.⁸²⁴ Much like in Iraq, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has not deterred IS from continuing its activities. Instead, COVID-19 has undermined the Syrian government's efforts to contain the jihadist threat emanating from IS safe havens in the Badiyah. IS elements operating from the Badiyah region frequently conducted raids or ambushes on pro-regime forces, and set up checkpoints to abduct alleged Syrian regime "intelligence agents."⁸²⁵

IS is struggling financially, due to lack of territorial control, and remains primarily focused on generating revenue, freeing IS families and detainees from displacement camps and detention facilities, and exerting greater influence on local populations.⁸²⁶ IS has therefore increased its extortion efforts especially in Northeast Syria since the Turkish incursion into the country in October 2019. The group has installed additional checkpoints and harassment of local businesses after Kurdish security forces focused their attention to the northern border.⁸²⁷ While the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) reported that the Coalition has been

successful in degrading IS funding, the terror group still has a reserve of funds, which was estimated to be US\$ 100 million in cash reserves.⁸²⁸ The group has been raising funds through private donations, extortion of commercial property, crowd-sourcing, and online appeals about the plight of women in the displacement camps.⁸²⁹

In terms of recruitment, IS has been targeting disaffected local Sunnis in Syria by exploiting their grievances, including the perceived political marginalisation and neglect, delays in the country's reconstruction plan and sectarian divisions.⁸³⁰ It has also attempted to use hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to increase its recruitment efforts. Furthermore, since the Turkish incursion, IS has focused on targeting local tribal leaders for assassinations, and intimidating the locals to influence and recruit among Arab populations especially in the northeastern region of Syria who are dissatisfied with the SDF's counter-IS measures.⁸³¹

Sustaining IS Narratives of Resilience

The escalation of IS activities in Iraq and Syria has fuelled the terror group's narratives of resilience. IS continues to publish its main propaganda materials, i.e. photographic reports, statements, videos and the Al-Naba' weekly newsletter. Although the volume of these materials has decreased, the group still publishes them regularly.

War of Attrition: Reinforcing 'Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad' (Remaining and Expanding)

Following IS' loss of its so-called caliphate in March 2019, its slogan of *baqiyah wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding)

⁸²³ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," *The US Department of Defense*, April 1- June 30, 2020, pp. 26-27, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/04/2002470215/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20APRIL%201,%202020%20-%20JUNE%2030,%202020.PDF>.

⁸²⁴ Ibid, p. 27.

⁸²⁵ Ibid, p. 28.

⁸²⁶ Ibid.

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

⁸²⁸ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," *The US Department of Defense*, July 1- September 30,

2020, p. 17,

<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Nov/03/2002528180/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20JULY%201,%202020%20-%20SEPTEMBER%2030,%202020.PDF>

⁸²⁹ Ibid.

⁸³⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues>.

⁸³¹ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," April 1- June 30, 2020, p. 29.

continued to hold relevance for the group and its followers. The *baqiyah* part of the slogan continued to be affirmed through IS' consistent production and dissemination of operational propaganda by the group's base in Iraq and Syria, and its affiliates around the world.

IS' spokesperson Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi, in an audio speech released in January 2020,⁸³² reiterated the narrative of endurance and resilience in the face of hardship and strategic setbacks. He reiterated the need for patience as the group wages a "protracted resistance," and called for a focus on "clandestine" activity to "spread influence" throughout the anti-IS Coalition's areas of operation. The statement was in line with the low-level activity under the resurgence model that IS adopted shortly before the fall of the physical caliphate in March 2019.⁸³³ In May 2020, Al-Qurasyi in his second audio speech of the year⁸³⁴ boasted of IS' staying power, once again. He mentioned IS' offensives in Iraq and Syria, highlighting the group's momentum there where the number of attacks had almost doubled since March 2020.⁸³⁵

To reinforce its *baqiyah* slogan, IS continued to assert its war of attrition narrative with the third and fourth series of "Battle of Attrition" campaign in May and July 2020, respectively. The self-proclaimed militancy campaign, which was first launched in June 2019, inspired violence by IS affiliates in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Somalia, West Africa and the Philippines. According to IS, the campaign in May had seen as many as 228 attacks in 12 'provinces,'⁸³⁶ while the one in July saw around 136 attacks in 11 'provinces'⁸³⁷ to

supplement and amplify the war of attrition narrative.

Since losing territories in Iraq and Syria, IS has reframed the caliphate as an overarching global state rather than one that is based solely in Iraq and Syria. Since mid-2019, there has been no acknowledgement of new wilayat. At any rate, IS found fertile ground in Africa for its effort to expand its presence across the continent, given that it has been consolidating its African affiliates even before its defeat in Baghuz.

COVID-19: Divine Retribution

The belief that disasters, natural or man-made, are God's retribution upon the *kuffar* (infidels), apostates, and polytheists is deeply held by extremists.⁸³⁸ This is especially so when these groups are alleged or known to have committed crimes against Muslims.

When the COVID-19 outbreak made headlines in late December 2019, the online jihadist community was abuzz with speculations and conviction that it was a divine retribution against China. In February 2020, IS asserted it was divine retribution against infidels, specifically China⁸³⁹ and Iran⁸⁴⁰ as well as the West.⁸⁴¹ This narrative not only reinforced anti-China and anti-Shiite sentiments, but also targeted the so-called Muslim hypocrites, infidels and disbelievers in general, which was reiterated in an IS audio speech by spokesperson Abu Hamzah Al-Qurasyi.⁸⁴² IS then issued self-styled Shariah guidelines for supporters on dealing with the epidemics.

⁸³² "Allah Destroyed Them, And A Similar Fate Awaits the Disbelievers," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, January 27, 2020.

⁸³³ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," *The US Department of Defense*, January 1- March 31, 2020, pp. 22-23, https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/lig_oir_q2_mar2020_gold_508_0513.pdf.

⁸³⁴ "And the Disbelievers Will Know Who Gets the Good End," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, May 28, 2020.

⁸³⁵ "IS Militants Step Up Attack Against Iraqi Security Forces," *BBC News*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52535842>.

⁸³⁶ "Battle of Attrition 3," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 236, May 29, 2020.

⁸³⁷ "Battle of Attrition 4," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 246, August 7, 2020.

⁸³⁸ William Avis, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Response on Violent Extremist Recruitment and Radicalisation," *K4D*, p. 8, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/808_COVID19%20and_Violent_Extremism.pdf.

⁸³⁹ "Indeed, the Vengeance of Your Lord is Severe," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 220, February 7, 2020.

⁸⁴⁰ "Lost are Those You Invoke Except for Him," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 223, February 28, 2020.

⁸⁴¹ "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmares," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 226, March 20, 2020.

⁸⁴² "And the Disbelievers Will Know Who Gets the Good End," *Al-Furqan Media Foundation*, May 28, 2020.

Essentially, IS' official line regarding the pandemic is two-fold. The first, which was highlighted at the start of the outbreak, concerned Muslims in general, advising them to continue exercising measures that would protect them from the virus. The second concerned the 'mujahideen,' in which they were encouraged to exploit the opportunities to continue and intensify operations and put pressure on their adversaries.⁸⁴³ IS, its affiliates and supporters have indeed taken advantage of the pandemic and ramped up attacks across Iraq and Syria, gone on the offensive in Africa and Southeast Asia, and nearly succeeded in carrying out attacks in Germany.⁸⁴⁴ Although these activities might not be entirely attributed to the pandemic, they demonstrated IS' opportunistic streak and its ability to adapt in a crisis situation.

Prison Attacks to Free IS Detainees

Attacking prisons and inciting prison riots are the cornerstones of IS' operational strategy. Jihadist groups target prisons as sites for attacks to free operatives and leaders from detention, restore their force size, and to score propaganda victories against their adversaries. To date, this narrative persists and has been increasingly amplified post IS' territorial defeat and during the ongoing pandemic. For instance, in the editorial of Al-Naba's 226th issue, it was heavily implied that the mujahideen should focus on freeing the ethnic Uyghurs from China's 're-education' camps and those in the Syrian refugee camps and detention centres.⁸⁴⁵

In August 2020, the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), the terror group's affiliate in Afghanistan, launched an attack on

Nangarhar central prison in Jalalabad. ISKP freed hundreds of prisoners.⁸⁴⁶ In the 246th issue of Al-Naba's editorial, IS lauded the attack and stressed on the importance of freeing prisoners.⁸⁴⁷ In October 2020, IS also claimed responsibility for an attack on a prison in the Democratic Republic of Congo, resulting in the release of at least 1,300 prisoners.⁸⁴⁸

Maintaining Presence through Online Extremist Propaganda

IS' post-territorial situation and physical presence would not diminish as long as its online and media propaganda efforts persist. The online environment enables IS to continue to recruit, inspire, and instruct potential followers to conduct attacks. Furthermore, it eliminates the need to travel to training camps, serving as a force multiplier for IS.

In the online sphere, pro-IS communities remain resilient and persistent in supporting IS media operations, from dissemination of official content to creating various kinds of media products. Given that, IS official media arms have produced significantly fewer media content, the pro-IS media entities and supporters online have filled the resultant void. A case in point is *the Voice of Hind*, an English language monthly magazine published by Al-Qitaal Media Centre, a pro-IS media channel, that focuses on India. One of its notable issues was a "lockdown special" edition that encouraged steps to "annihilate the disbelievers" including stabbing people with scissors. and expending

⁸⁴³ "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmares."

⁸⁴⁴ Alex Vines, "Why The Insurgency in Northern Mozambique Has Got Worse," *Chatham House*, April 1, 2020,

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/why-insurgency-northern-mozambique-has-got-worse>;

Abu Bakkar Jalloh, "Increased Terror Attacks in Africa Amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *DW News*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/increased-terror-attacks-in-africa-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53066398>; Rommel C. Banlaoi, "Threats of Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Philippines Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research*, August 10, 2020,

<https://pipvtr.org/2020/08/10/threats-of-violent-extremism-and-terrorism-in-the-philippines-amidst-the-covid-19-pandemic/>; Thomas Joscelyn,

"Germany Disrupts ISIS Plot Targeting US Military," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 22, 2020,

<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/22/germany-disrupts-isis-plot-for-us-military/>.

⁸⁴⁵ "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmares."

⁸⁴⁶ "Islamic State Group Claims Deadly Attack on Afghanistan Prison," *BBC News*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53633450>.

⁸⁴⁷ "O Soldiers of the Caliphate, Break Prisons...Break Prisons...", *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 246, August 7, 2020.

⁸⁴⁸ Mike Ives and Isabella Kwai, "1,300 Prisoners Escaped from Congo Jail After an Attack Claimed by ISIS," *The New York Times*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/world/africa/ngo-jail-attack-prisoners-freed.html>.

“less effort” by spreading COVID-19.⁸⁴⁹ Similarly, Al-Battar Media Foundation has designed and disseminated IS posters along with resharing audios and videos featuring key IS figures, strengthening the echo chamber of the pro-IS community.

There were other media entities such as Ash-Shaff Media and Iqra' Media Foundation that produced a mix of content based on nationality and language such as Indonesian, English, French, Russian, German, Spanish and Dutch. The content included regular news updates concerning IS and references to ongoing events and debates in the respective countries. This way, community members could relate more to cultural and national specificity and proximity, rather than ideas of the global caliphate with strong leadership.⁸⁵⁰

The virtual caliphate has emerged as an amplified version of IS' state-building project through the lens of its propaganda. However, the online environment is no longer merely a place for IS to amplify its brand but for IS followers and supporters, who with more agency, to form independent entities based on the original concept of the 'Islamic State'. This is made possible with the diversification of platforms and decentralised communication strategy where IS and its followers are active on various online platforms. Since the Europol removed terrorist propaganda on Telegram in November 2019,⁸⁵¹ IS and its supporters have further scattered and spread their activities on various other smaller encrypted messaging platforms such as Rocketchat, Hoop, and Threema. This spread could be due to increased activity, creativity, and

persistence among supporters and not necessarily the will of or directed from the IS leadership.⁸⁵²

Narratives of Resilience in Southeast Asia

To a certain extent, the above-mentioned IS narrative of resilience, has ripples and echoes in Southeast Asia as well. The group's war of attrition narrative continues to be reflected in the reported operations conducted by IS affiliates in the Philippines and Indonesia under its East Asia wilayah. IS-claimed operations conducted in the Philippines and Indonesia regularly feature in Al-Naba', with some operations counted as part of the Battle of Attrition campaign in May and August 2020.⁸⁵³ The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic initially saw increased anti-Chinese rhetoric as a result of the virus' origin in China.⁸⁵⁴ The anti-Chinese rhetoric and sentiments that IS had been exhorting, however, were not exclusive to the group but also rife among conservative Islamists in Indonesia.⁸⁵⁵ Meanwhile, IS' exhortations for supporters to conduct attacks amid the pandemic were only heeded by the IS-linked Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) or Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia. MIT's leader, Ali Kalora, asserted that the virus was an ally that will defeat the Indonesian authorities.⁸⁵⁶ In April 2020, MIT had killed two civilians whom they alleged to be spies and staged a botched attack on a police officer in Poso.⁸⁵⁷ While MIT seemed to be ramping up activities, it had not been able to inflict serious damage so far amid the pandemic. However, the fact that it continues to carry out attacks despite being the target of massive joint police-military operations since 2016,

⁸⁴⁹ “Down with the Believers,” *The Voice of Hind: Lockdown Special*, May 29, 2020.

⁸⁵⁰ Dr Michael Krona, “Revisiting the Ecosystem of Islamic State's Virtual Caliphate,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, October 21, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/21/revisiting-the-ecosystem-of-islamic-states-virtual-caliphate/>.

⁸⁵¹ “Europol and Telegram Take On Terrorist Propaganda Online,” *Europol*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-and-telegram-take-terrorist-propaganda-online>.

⁸⁵² *Op. cit.*

⁸⁵³ “Battle of Attrition 3,” *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 236, May 29, 2020; “Battle of Attrition 4,” *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 246, August 7, 2020.

⁸⁵⁴ Sidney Jones, “COVID-19 and Extremism in Southeast Asia,” *The Asia Pacific Journal Japan*

Focus, Vol. 18, Issue 15, (August 2020), p. 1, <https://apjif.org/-Sidney-Jones/5437/article.pdf>.

⁸⁵⁵ M. Rakhmat and W. Aryanshah, “Rising Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia,” *The ASEAN Post*, July 4, 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/rising-anti-chinese-sentiment-indonesia>.

⁸⁵⁶ “COVID-19 and The Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT),” *IPAC Short Briefing No.3*, April 28, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/Covid_19_and_MIT.pdf.

⁸⁵⁷ Cameron Sumpter and Jordan Newton, “Flurry of Violence in Poso Shows resilient Militancy and Community Support,” *Indonesia at Melbourne*, May 1, 2020, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/flurry-of-violence-in-poso-shows-resilient-militancy-and-community-support/>.

demonstrates the resilience of not only MIT as an Indonesian terror group, but also as an IS affiliate.⁸⁵⁸

Outlook

The threat from IS is ever-present, as the group remains opportunistic and adapts to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic by ramping up its online messaging and recruitment efforts. The detrimental effects of the pandemic would likely fuel and amplify IS' narratives of resilience and endurance, as well as its ideological outreach. The pandemic has caused increased economic hardships and growing social insecurity throughout the Middle East and Africa. This could set the stage for significant domestic unrest and deepen the potential for radicalisation, hence the possibility of affected countries and the international community at large facing a COVID-19-driven surge of extremism in the near future.⁸⁵⁹

IS' propaganda machinery will continue to peddle themes and narratives that demonstrate its resilience, adaptability and opportunistic streak, especially in a world still reeling from the pandemic. Online, the terror group's propaganda content continue to proliferate despite efforts to combat its spread.⁸⁶⁰ While an increased usage of social media and encrypted messaging platforms, such as the reported surge in Facebook usage during the pandemic lockdown, is concerning, not all of it can be attributed to online extremist activity.⁸⁶¹ However, the fact that people are spending more time online, could potentially increase their chances of interacting with the still-pervasive extremist propaganda, which can be persuasive to some vulnerable segments of society.

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⁸⁵⁸ Sidney Jones, "COVID-19 and Extremism in Southeast Asia."

⁸⁵⁹ Ilan Berman, "ISIS is Using the COVID Distraction to Re-arm and Regroup," *USA Today*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/08/28/isis-did-not-disappear-and-now-its-poised-rise-again-amidst-instability-column/5644397002/>.

⁸⁶⁰ Meili Criezis, "Telegram's Anti-IS Campaign: Effectiveness, Perspectives, and Policy Suggestions," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, July 30, 2020, [https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/30/telegrams-anti-is-](https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/30/telegrams-anti-is-campaign-effectiveness-perspectives-and-policy-suggestions/)

[campaign-effectiveness-perspectives-and-policy-suggestions/](https://gnet-research.org/2020/07/30/telegrams-anti-is-campaign-effectiveness-perspectives-and-policy-suggestions/).

⁸⁶¹ Lucas Matney, "The Lockdown is Driving People to Facebook," *Tech Crunch*, April 30, 2020, <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/29/the-quarantine-is-driving-record-usage-growth-at-facebook/>; Stewart Bell, "Coronavirus: UN Report Warns Pandemic Has Created Captive Audience for Terrorist Groups," *Global News*, June 25, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7106831/coronavirus-un-terrorist-groups/>.

RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: CHALLENGING EXTREMIST AND JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

Religious extremism, manifested in the form of jihadist propaganda and culminating in terrorism, has grown over the last fifty years and has worsened since 2014 when the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group declared the establishment of a 'caliphate'. Despite the demise of the 'caliphate', and military setbacks suffered by IS and long-standing terror outfit Al Qaeda (AQ), both have remained relatively resilient. Jihadist propaganda has continued to proliferate and thrive especially online, making its global spread challenging to clamp down. Thus, a vigorous effort remains necessary to counter the spread of extremist propaganda by debunking the distortion of religious doctrines and promoting new initiatives to strengthen the firewalls of the community.

The Trend Over the Last Fifty Years

The trend of religious extremism over the last five decades suggests that the problem will persist and become more complex and threatening. In the 1960s and 1970s, extremist groups like *al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah*⁸⁶² of Egypt were small fringe groups operating within national boundaries. Today, extremist groups such as AQ and IS are transnational jihadist movements with elaborate networks of supporters and bases around the world. Concepts like *jihad*, *jāhiliyyah*,⁸⁶³ *hijrah* and *takfir*⁸⁶⁴ promoted by extremists of yesteryears, are trumpeted by present-day violent Islamists who contemporise and infuse them with misrepresentations of current developments to promote messianic zeal and apocalyptic fervour among followers, and violence towards their enemies.

In the pre-Internet era, extremist ideology was spread through personal outreach by preachers and printed materials. Today, the same message is dispersed virtually and globally beyond small, secretive and remote clusters. Violent propaganda through social media remains potent and enduring despite attempts at prevention by governments and Big Tech.

In the early days of jihadist groups, their targets were principally Muslim liberals, reformers and leaders of 'apostate' regimes. Today, Christians, Jews, and 'Others' that include the US and its allies, are on the death list. The mode and scale of terror attacks have also escalated from stabbings and shootings to sophisticated large-scale bombings and coordinated strikes like the 9/11 aerial attacks. When deadly weapons and explosives are unavailable, and synchronised asymmetrical strikes proved unfeasible, opportunistic knife attacks and shootings are resorted to as seen recently in the UK, France and Austria.

Even the idea of establishing an Islamic state or reviving the caliphate -- once perceived as theoretical or a distant if not unrealisable utopia -- is now propagated as an objective to be pursued relentlessly. This was well manifested in the capture of vast swathes of territories in the Levant by IS from 2014 to 2017. Control and seizure of lands remain primary targets as seen in the Marawi siege in the Philippines in 2017, and control of sizeable areas of East and West Africa by al-Shabaab and Boko Haram respectively.

The Extremist Threat Remains

⁸⁶² An Egyptian group that excommunicated (*al-Takfir*) the government and Muslim society, and exiled themselves (*al-Hijrah*) in the desert practising complete isolation (*al-'Uzla*) from the society. See, Hayder Mili, "Jihad Without Rule: The Evolution of al-Takfir wa al-Hijrah," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, Issue 12, 2006.

⁸⁶³ S. Khatib, "Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Qutb," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3, 2002, p. 145-170.

⁸⁶⁴ Muḥammad Maḥfūz, *Al-Ladhīna ḡulimū: al-Tanzīmāt al-Islāmiyyah fī Miṣr* (Beirut: Riyāḍ al-Rīs, 1988), p. 94-95.

The leading proponents of extremist ideology today are the IS, AQ and their regional affiliates. Despite all odds, both IS and its rival AQ remain irrepressible, disseminating extremist propaganda and generating violence around the world through insurgency tactics, or facilitating or inspiring attacks. IS' calls for the resurrection of its fallen 'caliphate' or establishment of an Islamic state continue to be appealing to some.⁸⁶⁵

In the current climate, extremists are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their agenda in the belief that the attention of security forces is diverted elsewhere. While the pandemic has made cross border travel more difficult, should the pandemic lead to a severe global recession, countering terrorism and extremist narratives could prove to be challenging.⁸⁶⁶

The overall threat situation is compounded by the rise of Far-Right extremist groups and Islamophobic violence in the West, and the persistence of ethno-religious conflicts in various regions involving Muslim communities (e.g., Kashmiri clashes, Rohingya exodus from Myanmar, etc), exacerbating societal fault lines and bolstering extremist narratives. These developments have further aggravated the shared sense of enmity and grievance towards the US and the West in general among vulnerable quarters of the Muslim community.⁸⁶⁷

More concerning is that extremist preachers and activists continue to disseminate exclusivist ideas online and offline to indoctrinate their members and new followers. From a counter ideological perspective, a robust two-prong approach is necessary to counter the problem of extremist propaganda; firstly, by debunking

the distortions of key religious doctrines and secondly, by promoting new initiatives to inoculate the community.

Debunking the Misrepresentations of Religious Doctrines

To insulate communities from misinterpretations of religious texts, it is necessary to continue identifying and rebutting the key propaganda themes IS and other extremists harp on to sustain their influence and following. Foremost among its propaganda are its advocacy of armed jihad to establish the caliphate, and propagation of hatred of the 'Other'. IS has also lost no time in exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, weaving the deadly virus into its end of time narrative and broader Islamic eschatology.⁸⁶⁸

Armed Jihad to Establish the Khilāfa (Caliphate)

Waging armed jihad and establishing the caliphate are two enduring themes which IS and their affiliates have continued to peddle, and which have become the unifying platform for multiple violent extremist organisations. These groups propagate armed jihad as the only means to establish an Islamic state or caliphate, claiming that it is the only legitimate system of government based on the shari'a (Islamic law). In pursuit of this goal, violent extremists have carried out terrorist attacks around the world, with some success in the Levant between 2014 and 2017 and continuing armed struggles in several IS distant provinces.

Jihadists have also justified their terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare by citing Western military interventions or occupations of Muslim countries and support for un-Islamic or 'apostate' regimes. They draw inspiration from Islam's early military history,

⁸⁶⁵ "Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2368 (2017) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities," *United Nations Security Council*, July 23, 2020.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ For a deeper analysis of the aggressive, apocalyptic Islamic religiosity driving ISIS, see Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/whatisis-really-wants/384980/>. For a

counterargument that downplays the role of Islam as a motivation for ISIS, see Mehdi Hasan, "How Islamic Is Islamic State?" *New Statesman*, March 10, 2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/03/mehdi-hasan-how-islamic-islamic-state>.

⁸⁶⁸ Ahmad Saiful Rijal Hassan and Nur Aziemah Azman, "Islamic State's Visual Propaganda: Amplifying Narratives and Affecting Radicalisation," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 6, p. 13, (September 2020), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CTTA-September-2020.pdf>.

arguing that it is divinely justified to continue this legacy.⁸⁶⁹

To effectively debunk these propaganda lines, counter-ideology specialists would have to reach out to and convince vulnerable groups that the extremists have no religious justifications for waging armed jihad to establish an Islamic state or caliphate. Islam does not permit Muslims to wage a war of aggression.⁸⁷⁰ Islam also lays down strict rules of combat that forbid suicide bombings and attacks against civilians. The concept of jihad has essentially been manipulated and misrepresented from an act of self-defence to aggression, terrorism and indiscriminate violence.

Moreover, none of the verses in the Qur'an contains an imperative to establish an Islamic state or caliphate by way of jihad (warfare) even though *khilāfa*'s trilateral root *khā' lām fā'* occurs 127 times in the Qur'an, in 18 derived forms. The words *khalīfah*,⁸⁷¹ *khalāif*⁸⁷² or *khulafā*⁸⁷³ which are the closest to *khilāfa*, are mentioned in the Qur'an to denote "a vicegerent", "successors" and "inheritors" and not as a caliph of an Islamic state.

Counter-ideology texts would have to point out unequivocally that the caliphate is not a fundamental part of the Islamic faith. This position is well-established on religious grounds and supported by views of renowned scholars and clerics. There is no stipulation in the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the Prophet's tradition) on the type of government and state Muslims should establish. The desired system of government in Islam based on the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-*

sharī'ah) will always be one that involves consensus and ensures justice and equality. The type of government is inconsequential as what matters most is the realisation of these objectives.⁸⁷⁴

Hatred of the 'Other'

A considerable proportion of IS' propaganda and indoctrination programmes are calculated to persuade their readers and followers to hate non-Muslims and 'apostates' on the false premise that they are the 'enemies of Islam'. Articles such as 'The Kafir's blood is *halal* for you, so shed it', published in the first edition of IS' *Rumiyah* magazine, articulates this message clearly. IS turns hatred into violence by stirring the emotions of their followers and convincing them that spilling the blood of their enemies is permissible. Through many other similar messages, IS ingrains in the minds of its fanatical followers that they should kill non-Muslims wherever they meet them.

Phrases with keywords such as "Muslims", "Jews", "your enemy", "ummah" and "*khilafah*" are mentioned abundantly in IS' *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* magazines, and in sermons and statements of IS leaders. These are deliberately crafted to have the effect of drawing distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims and reinforcing the "us versus them" paradigm.⁸⁷⁵

To rebut, IS incitements of hatred and killings have no place in Islam whose emphatic values are peace, mercy and compassion.⁸⁷⁶ It is well established that fostering hatred towards the 'Other' is not in line with Quranic teachings regarding relations between

⁸⁶⁹ Shadi Hamid, and Rashid Dar, "Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism: A Primer," *Brookings Institution*, July 15, 2016.

⁸⁷⁰ Qur'an, 2: 190 & 193.

⁸⁷¹ Qur'an, 2: 30 & 38: 26. See also, Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Haqā'iq al-Tanzīl* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, 2009), 70-71 & 924.

⁸⁷² Qur'an, 6:165, 10:14 & 73. See also, al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 354-355, 458 & 470.

⁸⁷³ Qur'an, 7:69 & 74, and 27:62. See also, al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, 368, 370 & 787.

⁸⁷⁴ For more details, see, Mahfuh Halimi and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah, "Debunking Jihadist Ideological Misinterpretations and Distortions," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 1, p. 87-91, January 2020, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CTTA-Annual-Threat-2020.pdf)

[content/uploads/2020/01/CTTA-Annual-Threat-2020.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CTTA-Annual-Threat-2020.pdf).

⁸⁷⁵ "Chapter 4 Us vs Them: A New Recruit Proves His Worth and Gets Invited To A Secret Meeting," *The New York Times*, Sept 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/podcasts/caliph-hate-transcript-chapter-four-us-versus-them.html>. See also, "Achmad Fanani, Slamet Setiawan, Oikurema Purwati, and Maisarah Maisarah, "ISIS' Grammar of Persuasion of Hatred in the Article 'The Kafir's Blood Is Halal for You, So Shed It' Published in the Rumiyah Magazine," *Heliyon* 6, 2020.

⁸⁷⁶ For a discussion on this and the belief system of moderates and puritans, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 11-25.

different “nations and tribes”.⁸⁷⁷ Essentially, there is no inherent superiority of one nation or tribe over another since all belong to one human family. Its evolution into “nations and tribes” is to foster, and not diminish, their mutual desire to understand and appreciate the essential human oneness underlying their outward differentiations.

The Qur’an implicitly condemns all racial, national or tribal prejudice (*‘aṣābiyyah*).⁸⁷⁸ Instead, the Qur’an teaches Muslims to accept the differences and, when encountering anything that goes against their beliefs in life, to act with dignity, tranquillity, forbearance (*haunan*) and “peace” (*salām*).⁸⁷⁹

The End Times and the Coming of the Mahdi

IS and its supporters have been quick to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic for their propaganda. Firstly, they claim that the pandemic is divine retribution against China for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims.⁸⁸⁰ (The virus was first detected in China although there is dispute over its origins.) IS also gloated at the adverse impact of the pandemic on Shi’ites in Iran, and the ‘nightmare scenario’ the West is facing as a result of the virus.⁸⁸¹

Secondly, the coronavirus is propagated as a sign of the end of times. The pandemic will allegedly be followed by the occurrence of the *dukhon* or a hot cloud that will envelop parts of the earth for 40 days and nights. This will precede the coming of the *Mahdi*, the Islamic Messiah, and signals the imminent end of the world.⁸⁸²

Thirdly, for IS-linked entities in Southeast Asia, the corona outbreak in Indonesia is seen as an opportunity to conduct attacks because the Indonesian government is thought to be incapable of managing the pandemic.⁸⁸³ Attacks by IS supporters who are infected by the virus could take the form of deliberately infecting their perceived enemies, such as the police. Ali Kalora, the leader of the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT), told his supporters that COVID-19 is their “ally” that will help them defeat their enemies soon.⁸⁸⁴

IS propaganda regarding the pandemic can be roundly refuted. Claims that the pandemic is their “ally” to defeat their enemies is unfounded given that such an affliction (described as *fitnah* in the Qur’an) affects whole communities, even Muslims, without exception.⁸⁸⁵ Even the argument that the pandemic is retribution from God could be debated given how in similar circumstances in the past, Muslims did not blame anyone for the outbreak but instead, were advised to reflect on their religious duties and social responsibilities towards others as well as take preventive measures to contain the spread of the disease and save lives.⁸⁸⁶

As for future events close to end times such as the *dukhon* and the coming of the *Mahdi*, Muslims have long been encouraged to be optimistic and think positively regardless of end times or adverse circumstances.⁸⁸⁷ This was the approach the Prophet imparted when he said, “If the Final Hour comes while you have a palm-cutting in your hands, and it is

⁸⁷⁷ Qur’an, 49:13. See also, Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Shawkānī, *Fath Al-Qadīr Al-Jamī’ Baina Fanni Al-Riwāyah Wa Al-Dirāyah Min ‘Ilm Al-Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah, 2007), 1394.

⁸⁷⁸ Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 545 & 1289.

⁸⁷⁹ Qur’an, 25:63. For the commentary of the verse, see, Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 1645.

⁸⁸⁰ Nur Aziemah Azman, “Divine Retribution’: The Islamic State’s COVID-19 Propaganda,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/divine-retribution-the-islamic-states-covid-19-propaganda/>.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid. See also, Brian Glyn William, “Islamic State Calls For Followers To Spread Coronavirus, Exploit Pandemic and Protests,” *The Conversation*, June

25, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/islamic-state-calls-for-followers-to-spread-coronavirus-exploit-pandemic-and-protests-136224>.

⁸⁸² “Covid-19 and ISIS in Indonesia,” *IPAC Short Briefing No. 1*, April 02, 2020, p. 5.

⁸⁸³ Ibid., p 5-6.

⁸⁸⁴ “Covid-19 and the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia (MIT),” *IPAC Short Briefing No. 3*, April 28, 2020, 5. The MIT is suspected of being behind the Central Sulawesi attack on 27 November 2020.

⁸⁸⁵ Qur’an, 8:25. See also, Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 172 & 926.

⁸⁸⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*, vol. 7 (Cairo: Dar al-Hadīth, 1994), p. 74-76.

⁸⁸⁷ Abu Bakar al-‘Adni ibn ‘Ali al-Mashūr, *Al-Nubdhah Al-Sughrā* (Yemen: Maktab Tarem Al-Hadīthah, 2013), p. 61-64.

possible to plant it before the Hour comes, then you should plant it.”⁸⁸⁸

Promoting New Initiatives to Strengthen the Firewalls of the Community

To check the upward trajectory of religious extremism, it is necessary to devote more attention to the means of achieving greater religious tolerance and moderation. The following are some additional efforts to augment existing initiatives to counter ideological extremism and insulate the community.

Contextual Reading of Religious Texts

Religious extremism leading to terrorism in the modern era has been driven to some extent by the literal interpretation of certain texts of the Qur'an and Hadith (traditions of Prophet Muhammad). They are interpreted in the socio-economic and political context of 7th-century Mecca and Medina and are accepted as absolute and eternal commandments.

This approach needs adjustment as it is inappropriate to read all religious texts as a body of commandments to be adhered to literally, everywhere and forever. Textual literalism is unsuitable for addressing 21st century challenges faced by Muslim communities and Islamic law such as the increasingly plural and secular nature of modern societies, technological disruptions and extensive globalisation. Unlike in the past, today, peace and not war is the basis of interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities and states. Interpretation of Qur'anic texts on past hostile relations between them should therefore be interpreted contextually. Otherwise, they may perpetuate norms and values that undermine social cohesion and may even validate interpretations that advocate exclusivism, extremism and terrorism. As argued by Prof Abdullah Saeed, the Qur'an "carries with it the potential to be relevant to the new and emerging needs of Muslims in the contemporary context and has the capacity to accommodate new and changing societal circumstances as it did in the past".⁸⁸⁹ He

argues persuasively that "the contextualist reading of the Qur'an is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition", and that although the approach is under attack by "hard textualists," his sense is that there will be "an increased acceptance of this approach at both theoretical and practical levels by Muslims".⁸⁹⁰

Promoting Pluralism, inclusiveness, and inter-religious relations

For people of different ethnicities, religions, beliefs and lifestyles to coexist within the same society, it is necessary to instil shared values, and foster pluralism, inclusiveness and inter-racial and inter-religious harmony. Otherwise, the diversity and differences in society could devolve into mistrust and suspicion and end in open conflict as seen in many societies. Many Quranic texts specifically encourage friendly and cooperative relations with people of other faiths and give emphasis on peace and non-violence. Although extremists misinterpret and distort religious texts to promote hostility and conflict, societies will have to continue building bridges, sharing common space, and promoting dialogue, joint-activities, and acceptance of the 'Other', to eradicate fault-lines and build strong cohesive societies.

Strengthening Religious Establishment

To ensure that extremists do not subvert Muslim communities with extremist propaganda, it is necessary for the national religious authorities to have some degree of control and supervision over various local religious councils, mosques, religious schools, Quranic classes, and religious radio and television stations. In countries without religious authorities, community leaders should come together and cooperate to ensure that positions of influence are held by moderate and responsible Muslims. Religious authorities should take the lead in promoting the virtues of religious moderation and the pursuit of the "middle way" (Qur'an, 2: 143) in all spheres of life, including devotional commitments to God. They should also introduce measures to prevent unqualified and extremist preachers

⁸⁸⁸ Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad ibn Ismā'il al-Bukhari, *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad* (Cairo: Al-Matba'ah Al-Salafiyyah, 1375 AH), p. 126.

⁸⁸⁹ Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach* (Routledge, New York, 2014), p. 79.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 182-183.

from foisting extremist teachings on an unsuspecting audience. In Singapore, for instance, the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) is instituted to ensure that religious teachers are well qualified and hold views that are not inimical to social cohesion and inter-racial and inter-religious harmony.

Introducing New Narratives

Terrorists will continue to deceive and beguile their followers with false and misleading narratives, viz. Islam is under attack; Muslims are being oppressed; establishing an Islamic state through armed jihad is obligatory; and that Muslims should seek salvation by joining the jihadists as the end of times is near. These negative and wrongful exhortations would have to be resoundingly refuted and substituted with narratives that are positive, optimistic and forward-looking. Counter-ideology experts need to formulate new narratives which would include giving hope and confidence to people, placing greater emphasis on education, economic upliftment and technological achievements, and stressing that Islam emphasises peace and non-violence, and is compatible with modernity.

Conclusion

The initiatives enumerated above will not be enough to completely eliminate the trajectory of religious extremism but they will temper its upward movement by exposing the falsehoods of terrorist propaganda and marginalising the fringe radical ideas and misinterpretations of religious texts. More comprehensive initiatives are needed to diminish the threat of religious extremism and check the spread of violent ideology. These would include the resolution of local conflicts in countries where terrorists are active, ensuring good governance and concomitant improvements in socio-economic conditions, effective regulation of social media platforms, and developing a political culture that values peace, stability, law and order in the midst of considerable change and challenges.

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PERSISTENCE OF RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN THE WEST

Global events provided fertile grounds for already ascendant extreme right-wing ideology and violence to thrive and further metastasise in 2020. The global COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the November Presidential elections in the United States (US) and continuing anti-immigrant antipathy in Europe, all point to cleavages that are likely to continue to widen over the coming year. Fueled by an increasingly polarised global political discourse and growing dependence on easily manipulated social media, the problems currently remain most acute in North America, although a persistent roster of incidents, networks and plots across Europe, Australasia, and beyond, show how transnational the problem has become.

2020 Threat Landscape

Extremist Violence

In some ways, 2019 marked the current apex in extreme right-wing violence with the mass casualty attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand that claimed 51 lives and directly inspired at least six other shootings.⁸⁹¹ The broader global problem had simmered for some time, but the Christchurch shootings marked a high point of violence in recent years.⁸⁹² The year 2020 saw a continuance of this threat, with a multiplication of groups in the extreme right ideological camp. White supremacists, racists, anti-government militias, misogynists, anti-globalizers, and anti-vaxxers, amongst others, have sought to capitalise on the global social and political

upheaval to advance intolerant ideas and in some cases inflict violence. This growing fragmentation of the extreme right is a significant feature of recent years, with a growing chorus of groups espousing variations of intolerance that appear to be part of a spectrum of ideologies that makes up the modern extreme right-wing. Many have produced violent attacks that are conducted by lone actors or small groups without formal direction from a centralised leadership.

Globally, the number of attacks and plots appears to be sustaining, though there is some variance in different locations. According to a brief by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 67 percent of all domestic terrorist attacks and plots in the US between January 1 and August 31, 2020 were carried out by right-wing extremists, and the absolute number of 'violent far-right' attacks remained the same as in 2019.⁸⁹³ The 2020 Homeland Threat Assessment by the US Department of Homeland Security noted that White Supremacist Extremists (WSE) alone "remain[ed] the most persistent and lethal threat" in the country and accounted for approximately 40% of all terrorist attacks and plots recorded in 2019.⁸⁹⁴

This trajectory is not surprising given the potent mix of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and rising political tensions in the run up to the year-end US Presidential Election, among other concerns, have heightened security risks. The blend of issues has also shone a light on

⁸⁹¹ These include perpetrators such as William John Shutt, John Timothy Ernest, Patrick Crusius, Philip Manshaus, Stephan Balliet, and Filip Golon Bednarczyk. In each case, there is clear evidence that the individuals involved knew and praised Brenton Tarrant's terrible act.

⁸⁹² In terms of sheer volume of violence, Anders Behring Breivik's 2011 massacre in Norway marked an earlier high point that was in fact glowingly cited by the Christchurch murderer.

⁸⁹³ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Nicholas Harrington, Grace Hwang and James Suber, "The War Comes Home. The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, October 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-comes-home-evolution-domestic-terrorism-united-states>

⁸⁹⁴ "Homeland Threat Assessment," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, October 2020, <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/2020-homeland-threat-assessment> p.18.

how right-wing extremists, including WSEs, as well as other anti-government fringe groups such as the Boogaloo movement, QAnon,⁸⁹⁵ the Proud Boys, as well as various Patriot or militia groups, all coalesce over shared attitudes on the “legitimacy of the pandemic, lockdown orders and the role of the law enforcement and other government officials.” The result is a “militia-sphere” which has produced incidents of violence and aspirational plots.

There has been, for example, an attempted terrorist plot to blow up a hospital with COVID-19 patients⁸⁹⁶ and an attempt to derail a train in order to disrupt a medical ship that was being deployed to counter the virus.⁸⁹⁷ Some have attended anti-lockdown and BLM rallies as platforms to spread misinformation, sow social disorder, and incite or attempt violence,⁸⁹⁸ while others have orchestrated lethal attacks in the midst of chaos.⁸⁹⁹ Most recently, a cluster of

individuals identifying themselves as the Wolverine Watchmen planned the kidnapping of the Michigan state Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Some of the individuals involved had previous convictions for terrorism offences, while others were involved in an earlier plan to attempt an armed take-over of the state capital building in Lansing, Michigan.⁹⁰⁰

Europe has also faced a growing problem of extreme right violence. While definitional and reporting variance makes it difficult to draw exact statistics on right-wing violence and terrorism across the European Union (E.U.), the extreme right threat is a problem across Europe with variations from country to country.⁹⁰¹ For instance, Germany faced no less than 35 such events in 2019,⁹⁰² and last February saw a foiled mass casualty attack targeting mosques as well as the mass shootings at various shisha bars in Hanau,

⁸⁹⁵ Whilst not all Boogaloo adherents are white supremacists, some clearly are. Broadly speaking, adherents to this movement espouse the need to overthrow the government through armed action. QAnon adherents believe that there’s a “deep state” comprising Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and George Soros plotting a coup d’état against Donald Trump. This “deep state”, it is alleged, is also involved in an international child sex trafficking ring that works for the benefit of the global elite. For further reading on each group, please see Leah Sottile, “The Chaos Agents,” *New York Times*, August 19 2020 (for Boogaloo) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/08/19/magazine/boogaloo.html>, or Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, June 2020 (for QAnon) <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567>

⁸⁹⁶ Michael Kosnar and Phil Helsel, “FBI says man killed in Missouri wanted to bomb hospital amid coronavirus epidemic,” *NBC News*, March 26, 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fbi-says-man-killed-missouri-wanted-bomb-hospital-amid-coronavirus-n1169166>

⁸⁹⁷ “Train operator at Port of Los Angeles charged with derailing locomotive near US Navy’s hospital ship Mercy,” US Department of Justice Press Release, April 1, 2020 <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/train-operator-port-los-angeles-charged-derailing-locomotive-near-us-navy-s-hospital>

⁸⁹⁸ Anna Orso and Ellie Rushing, “White Supremacists and Other Extremist Groups Are Using Protests and a Pandemic to Amplify Their Message,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/white-supremacistextremists-reopen-rallies-black-lives-matter-protests20200613.html>

⁸⁹⁹ Maura Dolan, Richard Winton and Anita Chabria, “Suspect in Killing of 2 Bay Area Officers Tied to Right-Wing ‘Boogaloo’ Group, Prosecutors Alleged,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-16/suspects-charged-killing-santa-cruz-cop-and-oakland-federal-officer>

⁹⁰⁰ *United States of America v. Adam Fox, Barry Croft, Ty Garbin, Kaleb Franks, Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta*, Continuation of a Criminal Complaint, Case No. 1:20-mj-416-SJB, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdmi/press-release/file/1326161/download>; Kelly Weill, “Sixteen ‘Boogaloo’ Followers Have Been Busted in 7 Days,” *Daily Beast*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/with-the-gov-gretchen-whitmer-busts-16-boogaloo-followers-have-been-busted-in-7-days?ref=scroll>

⁹⁰¹ The EU TE-SAT report for instance reported six right-wing terrorist attacks and plots in 2019, whilst another independent report by the University of Oslo’s Center for Research on Extremism noted a total of 116 right-wing violent events in Western Europe in the same year. See European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020,” June 23, 2020, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>, p.18; Jacob Aasland Ravndal, Sofia Lygren, Anders Ravik Jupskås and Tore Bjørgo, “RTV Trend Report 2020. Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019,” 2020, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/rtv_trend_report_2020.pdf

⁹⁰² Ravndal et al., “RTV Trend Report 2020. Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe, 1990-2019,” p.8.

that took nine lives.⁹⁰³ More recently in November, German authorities charged a network of 12 who had been arrested in February for planning attacks on minorities and politicians.⁹⁰⁴

In France, President Emmanuel Macron has faced two disrupted 'ultraright' terrorist plots targeting him in 2017⁹⁰⁵ and November 2018,⁹⁰⁶ while a network targeting minorities and opposition politicians was disrupted in October 2017.⁹⁰⁷ In October 2020, a pair of Muslim women were attacked with knives under the Eiffel Tower by a pair of disgruntled women, who also called them "dirty Arabs."⁹⁰⁸ Separately, a psychologically troubled man wearing markers identifying himself as linked to the identitarian movement in France, attacked a passerby in Avignon on October 30.⁹⁰⁹ In the United Kingdom (UK), the proportion of prisoners with "far-right ideologies" has also increased significantly since 2018, from 33 to 44 in 2020.⁹¹⁰ Metropolitan Police Counter-terrorism lead Neil Basu has referred to the extreme right-wing as the fastest growing part of the terror threat that his officers face. New MI5 Chief Ken McCallum has also pointed out that "of the 27 late-stage terrorist

attack plots in Great Britain disrupted by MI5 and CT Policing since 2017, 8 have been right wing extremist."⁹¹¹ Elsewhere around Europe, the threat picture is highly varied. In some parts of Central and Eastern Europe, for example, migrants continue to be targets of regular abuse, and racist treatment and behaviour. In many countries, the line between violent groups and far-right political parties is also often blurred, complicating cross-continent data collection. Finally, the battlefield in Ukraine continues to be a draw for extreme right-wing fighters from around the world.

The wave of violent right-wing extremism has also reached the Oceania, most notably with the March 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting. Australia, while having not experienced right-wing violence in recent years, has recently reported an increase of violent right-wing extremist counter-terrorism caseload to about 40% in 2020.⁹¹² While Islamist terrorism remains the dominant threat, US President Trump's hyped up populist conservative politics have been appropriated to fit local context, with the President championed as a defender of "white identity." Narratives in Australia

⁹⁰³ *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, "German Far-Right Arrests Reveal Plot to Attack Multiple Mosques," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/17/german-far-right-arrests-reveal-multiple-mosque-attacks-plot>; Philip Oltermann and Kate Connolly, "Germany Shooting: Far-Right Gunman Kills 10 in Hanau," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/19/shooting-germany-hanau-dead-several-people-shisha-near-frankfurt>

⁹⁰⁴ "Germany charges 12 in far-right 'terror' plot: reports," *DW*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-charges-12-in-far-right-terror-plot-reports/a-55574323>

⁹⁰⁵ Chris Baynes, "Right-Wing Terrorist Plot to Kill French President Foiled," *Daily Mercury*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/right-wing-terrorist-plot-kill-french-president-fo/3196432/>

⁹⁰⁶ "Six Arrested over Far-Right Anti-Macron Plot," *Radio France Internationale (RFI)*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/20181106-six-arrested-over-far-right-anti-macron-plot>

⁹⁰⁷ "French Far-Right Plot to Attack Mosques, Migrants, Politicians Uncovered," *RFI*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20171018-french-far-right-plot-attack-mosques-migrants-politicians-uncovered>

⁹⁰⁸ "Two French Women Charged Over Racist Stabbing of Veiled Muslims," *Al Jazeera*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/22/two->

[french-women-charged-over-racist-stabbing-of-veiled-muslim](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/22/two-french-women-charged-over-racist-stabbing-of-veiled-muslim)

⁹⁰⁹ It is worth mentioning that outside the identitarian badge, the individual in question was not clearly understood to be launching a terrorist attack. See "Avignon: un homme armé abattu par la police, la piste terroriste écartée," *Le Monde*, October 30, 2020

https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/10/30/avignon-un-homme-arme-abattu-par-la-police-la-piste-terroriste-ecartee_6057835_3224.html

⁹¹⁰ U.K. Home Office, "Operation of Police Powers Under the Terrorism Act 2000 and Subsequent Legislation: Arrests, Outcomes, and Stop and Search. Great Britain, Financial Year Ending March 2020," https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/891341/police-powers-terrorism-mar2020-hosb1520.pdf p.18.

⁹¹¹ Address by MI5 Director General Ken McCallum, October 14, 2020, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-ken-mccallum-makes-first-public-address>

⁹¹² Paul Karp, "ASIO Reveals Up to 40% of Its Counter-Terrorism Cases Involve Far-Right Violent Extremism," *The Guardian*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/sep/22/asio-reveals-up-to-40-of-its-counter-terrorism-cases-involve-far-right-violent-extremism>

around COVID-19 responses have also echoed developments in Europe and the US, with race and anti-establishment views being woven into extreme right identities.⁹¹³ This has even reached outside the white Caucasian world with QAnon narratives being picked up in Japan, adapted to the local context but part of the global problem.⁹¹⁴

A final transnational element which is woven into this tapestry of the extreme right is the Incel (Involuntary Celibate) movement. Misogynist tendencies can be found amongst most of the groups that have been mentioned so far, but the Incel movement focuses in on them. The ideology, found mostly in online forums and communities, justifies violence against women and society as a revenge for men's inability to have sex or enter into a relationship with a female. In Europe and North America, there has been an uptick in violence by such individuals since 2018, with more than a dozen perpetrated by Incel adherents.

Ideological Confluence

Placing Incels within this context also highlights the complexity of the current extreme right. Made up of a spectrum of ideological groups, often their ideologies drift beyond traditional extreme right narratives. Incels, for example, are not uniformly right-wing (though many of those who appear

motivated towards violence show xenophobic tendencies). Questions also abound over whether the group should be classified as a terrorist movement, given that its adherents' acts of violence can be regarded as personal revenge attacks rather than aiming at an overarching political goal. While it can be argued that Incels mimic traditional terrorist modus operandi and that their misogynist ideological convergence with the extreme right-wing render them perhaps "simply another articulation of the modern extreme right,"⁹¹⁵ this has still faced criticism. This conflict is most visible in Canada, where authorities in Toronto opted to prosecute as an Incel terrorist incident a February attack where a teenager stabbed a woman.⁹¹⁶ By contrast, a 2018 car ramming attack in Toronto that killed 10 by an individual who admitted inspiration by Incel ideologies was not prosecuted as a terrorist incident.⁹¹⁷

Other cases are clearer cut. The Hanau shooter, for example, had clearly expressed racial hatred in targeting minority communities in Germany, although amongst the ideological materials he left behind, such as his 24-page manifesto, was clear evidence of Incel thinking, as well as anti-government QAnon-esque ideologies.⁹¹⁸ QAnon itself, a conspiracy theory which has both inspired terrorists and drawn sympathy from former President Trump and a growing roster of US Congressional candidates,⁹¹⁹

⁹¹³ Ibid.; Daniel Hurst, "US-inspired Rightwing Extremism an 'Insidious' Threat to Australia, Study Finds," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/oct/09/us-inspired-rightwing-extremism-an-insidious-threat-to-australia-study-finds>; Henry Storey, "Is Australia Taking the Threat of Right-wing Terrorism Seriously?" *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/is-australia-taking-the-threat-of-right-wing-terrorism-seriously>

⁹¹⁴ "QAnon's rise in Japan shows conspiracy theory's global spread," *The Straits Times*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/qanons-rise-in-japan-shows-conspiracy-theorys-global-spread>

⁹¹⁵ Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, "Incels and Terrorism: Sexual Deprivation as Security Threat," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentaries, October 6, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpytr/incels-and-terrorism-sexual-deprivation-as-security-threat/#.X4U7bmczblw>

⁹¹⁶ Simon Cottee, "Canada May Host the World's First Incel Show Trial," *Foreign Policy*, June 1,

2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/canada-mayhost-the-worlds-first-incele-show-trial/>

⁹¹⁷ Nicole Brockbank, "Alex Minassian Reveals Details of Toronto Van Attack in Video of Police Interview," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/alek-minassian-police-interview-1.5298021>

⁹¹⁸ Tobias Rathjen, the Hanau mass shooter, demonstrated inherent misogyny, QAnon-esque conspiracy leanings, as well as a twisted interpretation of Inceldom, where he blamed his inability to find a romantic partner on the government. See Blyth Crawford and Florence Keen, "The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race and Conspiracy Theories Are Fueling Global Far-Right Violence," *Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) Sentinel* 13, no. 3 (March 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CTC-SENTINEL-032020.pdf>, p.1-8.

⁹¹⁹ "What Is QAnon? What We Know About the Conspiracy Theory," *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-qanon-what-we-know-about-the-conspiracy-theory-11597694801>; Clare Foran, "GOP Candidate Who

has increasingly converged with the extreme right as well as right-wing politicians, but is not an entirely right-wing conspiracy. Part of the ideology is centred around a perceived Jewish ploy to replace the white race (adherents also believe that President Trump is a heroic figure fighting a cabal of pedophilic elites) which helps explain why the conspiracy theory fits with white supremacist narratives in particular.

Other parts of the extreme right connect actively with other terrorist ideologies for more opportunistic reasons. In September, the US Department of Justice announced charges against a pair of men who were part of the Boogaloo Bois group (a movement focused on an impending American Civil War) for offering their mercenary services to undercover FBI agents who were posing as members of Hamas.⁹²⁰ The men spoke of their common desire to overthrow the US government, as well as offering material support to the group.

The ideological confusion has been heavily influenced by current events. New strands of ideological conspiracies have also emerged as a result of the BLM movement, as well as propaganda linked to COVID-19, which has focused on racist, anti-Semitic, and other tropes, as well as more odd beliefs like the impact of 5G technology on infection rates.⁹²¹ Traditional figures of paranoia like George Soros or Bill Gates have been woven into these narratives, and the tensions have been exacerbated by the recent US election, leaving a confusing array of ideologies whose only clear fact is that they are increasing. The Anti-Defamation League's H.E.A.T Map

recorded 3346 incidents of white supremacist-related propaganda, compared to 2724 incidents in 2019, amongst which they included propaganda related to COVID-19, BLM and the election.⁹²²

Social Media Exploitation

An important component of the proliferation and confusion of ideologies is the ever-increasing penetration of social media and the internet into people's daily lives. QAnon, for example, is an ideology which has emerged from the ether, while Incels have been able to forge connections online. The past few years have seen a number of high-profile terrorist incidents involving individuals who appeared to be lone actors, but were later discovered to be active in online forums. Often, they have signaled their act or posted videos showing their attack on social media platforms or discussion forums. Providing a platform for individuals from around the world to gather and plot anonymously, the Internet has proven a particularly useful asset in helping fringe ideologies proliferate.

The anonymity offered by the Internet has also helped lower substantially the age of individuals involved in extreme right activity. This was highlighted in Europe during this past year with a number of teenagers convicted, uncovered or arrested in the UK for their involvement in extreme right online forums like Fascist Forge,⁹²³ the British Hand,⁹²⁴ or the Order of Nine Angels.⁹²⁵ Feuerkrieg Division, a now proscribed organisation, was revealed to have been led by a 13-year-old Estonian boy.⁹²⁶

Embraced QAnon Conspiracy Theory Wins Georgia Runoff, CNN Projects," *Cable News Network (CNN)*, August 12, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/11/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-georgia-runoff-qanon-conspiracy-theory/index.html>

⁹²⁰ "Two Self-Described 'Boogaloo Bois' Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas," *Department of Justice*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-self-described-boogaloo-bois-charged-attempting-provide-material-support-hamas>

⁹²¹ "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism," CTED, p.2.

⁹²² Anti-Defamation League (ADL), ADL H.E.A.T. Map, accessed 13 October 2020 <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map>

⁹²³ Daniel De Simone, "Harry Vaughan: House of Lords Clerk's Son a 'Neo-Nazi Satanist'," *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-54568916>

⁹²⁴ Patrik Hermansson, "Hitler Youths. The Rise of Teenage Far-Right Terrorists," *Hope Not Hate*, September 2020, https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HnH_Hitler-Youths-report_2020-09-v2.pdf

⁹²⁵ Daniel De Simone, "UK Nazi Satanist Group Should Be Outlawed, Campaigners Urge," *BBC*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51682760>

⁹²⁶ Michael Kunzelman and Jari Tanner, "He Led a Neo-Nazi Group Linked to Bomb Plots. He was 13," *The Associated Press*, April 11, 2020,

Over the past year, the heavy restrictions imposed on people's movement and employment in the wake of COVID-19 has exacerbated the spread of extremist ideas as people spend a growing amount of time online. For instance, Boogaloo-related chatter in various gun-rights and militia enthusiast communities as well as message boards catered to violent racial conspiracies has surged on both Reddit and 4Chan, with calls urging followers to amass arms in anticipation of a second civil war and fight against perceived civil liberties-violating lockdowns.⁹²⁷ Extremists are also using bots to spread misinformation on scientifically baseless conspiracy theories about the virus to fuel political polarisation.⁹²⁸ A number of terrorist suspects have been charged and arrested during this period, with evidence indicating they have further radicalised themselves as a result of spending an excessive amount of time online.⁹²⁹

Responses

Addressing the extreme right threat has proven deeply complicated for states. Given the bleed into the political mainstream that can often be found, the problem becomes very difficult to isolate and eradicate in the same way that violent Islamist ideologies can be targeted.⁹³⁰ While some programmes have been developed to deradicalise or grapple with at-risk individuals, efforts to deal with the underlying causes that leave people

prone to exploring such extremist ideologies remain elusive. Similarly, removing extremist content can be complicated by the fact that it echoes mainstream politicians' views, making it almost impossible to police for social media companies who have to be responsive to local sensitivities which will vary between jurisdictions.

Social Media Crackdown

Nevertheless, social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter have stepped up their bans on content, deployed more aggressive algorithms to take-down material, and expanded their efforts to focus not just on violent organisations, but also fake news that has proliferated on their platforms.⁹³¹ Recently, Facebook moved to ban all content and accounts promoting QAnon material, recognising the level of influence this movement has on swaying American voters' sentiment through misinformation.⁹³² The platform's more aggressive policies were showcased in the wake of the detention of a group of extremists planning to kidnap Michigan Governor Whitman, when it was revealed that Facebook had alerted the authorities to the group's online activities some six months prior to their arrests.⁹³³

One result of the such removals by social media companies is the migration of extreme right groups to other platforms. TikTok, for example, has become a particular target for

<https://apnews.com/article/7067c03e1af0b157be7c15888cbe8c27>

⁹²⁷ Joel Finkelstein, John K. Donohue, Alex Goldenberg, Jason Baumgartner, John Farmer, Savvas Zannettou and Jeremy Blackburn, "COVID-19, Conspiracy and Contagious Sedition. A Case Study on the MilitiaSphere," *The Network Contagion Research Institute*, <https://ncri.io/reports/covid-19-conspiracy-and-contagious-sedition-a-case-study-on-the-militia-sphere/>, p.5-6.

⁹²⁸ "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism," *CTED*, p.1.

⁹²⁹ This has been more clearly visible on the violent Islamist end of the scale with a number of cases in courts in Europe showing evidence of individuals having further radicalised during lockdown. See *BBC*, "Boy, 15, Found Not Guilty of Terror Plot," October 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-hampshire-54450013>; *The Catalan News Agency*, "Man Arrested in Barcelona for Allegedly Plotting Terrorist Attack," May 8, 2020, <https://www.catalannews.com/society-science/item/man-arrested-in-barcelona-for-allegedly-plotting-terrorist-attack>; Emily Pennink,

"Ilford Extremist Who Shared 'Attack, Attack' Video in Group Chat Found Guilty of Terrorism," *Ilford Recorder*, October 20, 2020,

<https://www.ilfordrecorder.co.uk/news/crime-court/royal-festival-hall-extremist-guilty-of-terrorism-1-6892474>

⁹³⁰ It should be noted this is something that is equally problematic in Asia, where far right political parties often appeal to an ethno-nationalist political base – for example, Hindutva in India's relationship to the ruling BJP Party, or the Myanmar government's relationship with Buddhist extremists.

⁹³¹ *CTED*, "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism," p.5.

⁹³² "Facebook Bans QAnon Conspiracy Theory Accounts Across All Platforms," *BBC*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54443878>

⁹³³ Kurt Wagner and Christian Berthelsen, "Facebook Approached FBI About Michigan Militia Six Months Ago," *Bloomberg*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-09/facebook-approached-fbi-about-michigan-militia-six-months-ago>

QAnon conspiracy theories and their followers, especially in the lead up to the November US Presidential Election. In June, videos with #wwg1wga, an acronym for “where we go one, we go all”, a QAnon slogan, garnered more than 100 million views to date. While TikTok has also joined other big social media companies in banning extremist content and hashtags largely related to QAnon (e.g., #wwg1wga or #qanon) is no longer searchable on its platform and have largely dwindled, QAnon adherents continue using TikTok to promote pro-Trump videos, QAnon conspiracy theories, COVID-19 and BLM disinformation. This habit of migrating across platforms is a common *modus operandi* amongst various extremist ideological camps.

What is more particular to the extreme right, however, and has raised issues the world over, is the occasional spill-over between parts of the extreme right's ideological edge, and mainstream political parties. The problem is a particularly acute one for online companies, as it can mean they find themselves having to block mainstream political organisations or leaders for posting material which falls foul of their community guidelines. For Twitter and Facebook this has meant controlling the output of the President of the US.⁹³⁴ The problem is one that is not exclusive to the west, however, with Indian politicians also regularly falling foul.⁹³⁵ This problem came into particular focus last year given the high-profile US elections but is likely to be a consistent issue with extreme

right, far right or populist politicians' output going forwards.

Managing Problems at Home

Governments have increasingly sought to proscribe extreme right groups, though this has so far been patchy rather than systematic. In 2020, the United States proscribed the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM),⁹³⁶ the UK Feuerkrieg Division (FKD) and Sonnenkrieg Division (SKD),⁹³⁷ and Germany Combat 18⁹³⁸ and Der Fluegel [which translates as ‘the wing’ and is a radical wing of the far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD)].⁹³⁹ There is a heated debate in the US about adding more of the constellation of extreme right-wing groups to lists managed by domestic security agencies like the FBI or DHS, but this has collided with the political discourse in the US where the Trump administration has preferred to repeatedly highlight the impact of extreme left-groups like Antifa. The administration's own security forces, however, seem divided on the menace of such groups, with a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) report not mentioning Antifa at all and instead focusing on white supremacists as the biggest threat faced by the United States.⁹⁴⁰

There is also a growing incidence of security forces being accused of extreme right biases or outright membership. While this is not a new problem, it gained new salience last year with a number of cases in Europe and North America. In June, the UK's Metropolitan Police charged a 21-year-old officer for

⁹³⁴ Jessica Bursztynsky, “Facebook, Twitter Block Trump Post That Falsely Claims Coronavirus Is Less Deadly than Flu,” *Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC)*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/06/facebook-removes-trump-post-falsely-comparing-coronavirus-and-the-flu.html>

⁹³⁵ Newley Purnell and Jeff Horwitz, “Facebook's Hate-Speech Rules Collide with Indian Politics,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg-11597423346>

⁹³⁶ Nathan A. Sales, “Designation of the Russian Imperial Movement,” U.S. Department of State, April 6, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-russian-imperial-movement/>; Arie Perliger, “The ‘Domestic Terrorist’ Designation Won't Stop Extremism,” *The Conversation*, June 29, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-domestic-terrorist-designation-wont-stop-extremism-141258>

⁹³⁷ “Proscribed Terrorist Organisations,” U.K. Home Office, July 17, 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/901434/20200717_Proscription.pdf

⁹³⁸ “Raids in 6 states as Germany bans ‘Combat 18’ neo-Nazi group,” *DW*, January 23, 2020 <https://www.dw.com/en/raids-in-6-states-as-germany-bans-combat-18-neo-nazi-group/a-52116504>

⁹³⁹ Joseph Nasr, “Germany Designates Radical Wing of Far-Right AfD as ‘Extremist Entity’,” *Reuters*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-idUSKBN20Z1SW>

⁹⁴⁰ Betsy Woodruff Swan, “DHS draft document: White Supremacists are greatest terror threat,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/04/white-supremacists-terror-threat-dhs-409236>

membership of banned extreme right-wing group National Action.⁹⁴¹ In the US, Private Ethan Meltzer was arrested and charged with membership of a Satanist-Neo-Nazi group, the Order of the Nine Angels (ONA), and planning an attack in advance of the group's ideology against his own unit.⁹⁴² Other disrupted extreme right-wing plots in the US were made up of cells which included veterans, including the cell planning to kidnap Governor Whitmer.⁹⁴³ In Canada, an undercover investigation led to the exposure of an Army engineer who was a reported member of The Base.⁹⁴⁴ Dramatically highlighting the severity of the threat in Germany, the country disbanded a company within the army's elite Special Command Forces (KSK) due to allegations of infiltration by right-wing extremists.⁹⁴⁵ In North-Rhine Westphalia, 29 police officers were dismissed for sharing Nazi imagery online, while a former officer and his wife in Berlin were charged with sending threatening emails to well-known figures of immigrant background.⁹⁴⁶ Germany's Military Counter-Intelligence Service has reported that it believes some 600 soldiers serving in the army have extreme right-wing sympathies.⁹⁴⁷

Outlook

While yet to achieve the gravitational power and structure of violent Islamist threats, there has been a steady patter of incidents linked to the extreme right over the past year, which points to a growing and globalising problem. For example, the expulsion by Ukraine of two American members of Atomwaffen division who were reportedly seeking to join the white supremacist Azov Battalion.⁹⁴⁸ This is not a new phenomenon, but its persistence suggests the beginning of a transnational movement of individuals built around practical potential terrorist training.⁹⁴⁹ This has also migrated to other battlefields. In October last year, the leader of the French extreme-right group Zouaves Paris, Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier, announced on social media that he had left to fight alongside the Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against Azerbaijan.⁹⁵⁰ The US' decision to proscribe the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) also came after reports of the group providing training to German and Scandinavian extreme right-wing terrorists.⁹⁵¹ Online, the links are clear, with groups regularly moving across borders and bringing together like-minded extremists

⁹⁴¹ Nadeem Badshah and Vikram Dodd, "Met Police Officer Charged with Belonging to Far-right Terror Group," *The Guardian*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/09/met-police-officer-charged-with-belonging-to-far-right-terror-group>

⁹⁴² U.S. Department of Justice, "U.S. Army Soldier Charged with Terrorism Offenses for Planning Deadly Ambush on Service Members in His Unit," June 22, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-army-soldier-charged-terrorism-offenses-planning-deadly-ambush-service-members-his-unit>

⁹⁴³ Meghann Myers, "Far-Right Groups Like the 'Boogaloo' and 'ONA' Continue to Attract Troops and Veterans," *Military Times*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/06/23/far-right-groups-like-the-boogaloo-and-ona-continue-to-attract-troops-and-veterans/>

⁹⁴⁴ "Far-Right Infiltration of Canada's Military Poses a Serious Threat, Says Winnipeg Reporter," *CBC Radio*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/ruth-bader-ginsburg-dead-at-87-the-far-right-in-canada-s-military-super-mario-at-35-and-more-1.5728537/far-right-infiltration-of-canada-s-military-poses-a-serious-threat-says-winnipeg-reporter-1.5728539>

⁹⁴⁵ "KSK: German Special Forces Company Dissolved Due to Far-Right Concerns," *Deutsche Welle*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/ksk-german-special-forces-company-dissolved-due-to-far-right-concerns/a-54386661>

⁹⁴⁶ "Germany Far-Right: Police Suspended for Sharing Neo-Nazi Images," *BBC*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54174393>

⁹⁴⁷ *AFP*, "Germany to Present Report on Far-Right Extremism in Police," *Bangkok Post*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1997487/germany-to-present-report-on-far-right-extremism-in-police>

⁹⁴⁸ Christopher Miller, "Ukraine Deported Two American Members of A Neo-Nazi Group Who Tried to Join a Far-Right Military Unit for 'Combat Experience'," *Buzzfeed News*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/christopherm11/ukraine-deports-american-neo-nazi-atomwaffen-division>

⁹⁴⁹ Tim Lister, "The Nexus Between Right-Wing Extremism in the United States and Ukraine," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 4 (April 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-nexus-between-far-right-extremists-in-the-united-states-and-ukraine/>, p.30-41

⁹⁵⁰ "Extrême droite: le patron des Zouaves Paris part combattre au Haut-Karabakh," *La Gazette*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.lagazetteaz.fr/news/politique/2975.html>

⁹⁵¹ Tyler Ong and Raffaello Pantucci, "From Fringe to Mainstream: The Extreme Rightwing in Europe," *Observer Research Foundation*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/fringe-mainstream-extreme-rightwing-europe-68848/>

together. An investigation into the group The Base uncovered the fact the group was led by an American living in St Petersburg, who was actively seeking to recruit UK and US teenagers.⁹⁵² The confluence of many of these links to Russia, as well as activity by Russian government actors online to stir up race as an issue during the US election, all points to a nexus which is worth watching given the potential geopolitical consequences.

A further worrying feature which requires close monitoring is the growing confluence of extreme right and violent Islamist ideologies online. Again, while not new, it is notable during this past year that a growing number of cases have been disrupted where extreme right networks openly praise or emulate violent Islamist group activity. Ethan Melzer, for example, had reportedly disclosed sensitive information to al-Qaeda, and praised the Islamic State's brutality.⁹⁵³ The case of the two Boogaloo Bois elements willing to provide material support for Hamas shows their ideological malleability. In Europe, extreme right online networks now regularly employ the same propaganda strategies as the Islamic State (IS) to recruit into their ranks, something that is unsurprising given their shared common enmity towards western governments. This confluence points to a potential danger worth monitoring going forwards, especially given the far more mature violent Islamist support networks that exist.

There is a perception in the analytical community that a major driver of the current surge in extreme right-wing violent activity is linked to the US Presidential Election and President Trump's sometimes ambiguous statements about extreme right groups in the US. This suggests that last year's presidential election might act as a breakwater (or accelerant) of the current problems. Yet, it is instructive to note that 2020 marked the 25th anniversary since the Oklahoma City Bombing in the US, an attack carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a US Patriot figure still venerated amongst the US' extreme right, libertarian and anti-

government movement. While things appeared to become more confrontational and aggressive during President Trump's tenure, it is not clear that the broader trajectory is linked to him. This suggests a problem which has rooted itself in western societies.

Finally, the problem of political bleed between the extreme right and far-right politics (and even mainstream right-wing politics in some contexts) is going to continue to make it very difficult for security forces to effectively deal with the problems of the extreme right. The proximity of ideologies and ideologues points to a problem which governments will struggle to legislate against and security forces will consequently find difficult to move against. This problem will likely only become sharper going forwards given the increasingly polarised political conversation in most western countries.

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⁹⁵² Daniel De Simone, Andrei Soshnikov and Ali Winston, "Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro Running US Militant Group The Base from Russia," *BBC*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>

⁹⁵³ U.S. Department of Justice, "U.S. Army Soldier Charged with Terrorism Offenses for Planning Deadly Ambush on Service Members in His Unit."

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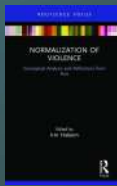
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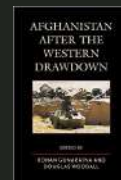
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