

## **ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT**

### **Global Threat Assessment**

#### **Southeast Asia**

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore

#### **South Asia**

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

#### **Central Asia**

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

#### **China**

Xinjiang Province

### **The Middle East: Jihadist Militancy, National And Intra-State Tensions, And State-Society Dichotomy**

### **Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda: Striving For Relevance And Dominance**

### **Radical Ideological Narratives Following The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan**

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## SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS

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

# GLOBAL THREAT ASSESSMENT 2021

## Introduction: The Return of the Taliban and Its Impact

In 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic entered its second year, the terrorism landscape also continued to occupy policy attention worldwide. Especially prominent was the US' "strategic failure"<sup>1</sup> in preventing the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, which essentially represented "a shot of adrenaline into the arm" of Islamist terror networks worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Given Al-Qaeda's (AQ) historic links with the Taliban, the former has arguably never been better positioned since Osama bin Laden's killing.<sup>3</sup> The Taliban takeover in Kabul also impacted the "geopolitical posture" of regional states, particularly neighbouring Pakistan, signalling a likely intensifying of its support for anti-India groups in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> Pakistani domestic militant and radical groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the radical Barelvi Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) were also emboldened vis-à-vis the Pakistani state itself. Significantly, TTP, "the deadliest Pakistani terrorist group" – maintaining political distance from both AQ and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – refocused instead on excising the "ex-FATA region from Pakistan" to "convert it into a self-styled theocracy," rather than transforming Pakistan itself into a "*Sharia* state."<sup>5</sup>

The Taliban's takeover also represented "an iconic moment for Central Asian groups," with the Syria-based Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) claiming that it "was achieved through a sustained patience and determined struggle."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Southeast Asian pro-

Taliban-AQ networks drew the lesson that "sheer perseverance in fighting a mighty enemy and divine intervention will likewise make them victorious" as well.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the Taliban victory on the Islamic State (IS) presented a more complex threat picture. At one level, it generally represented a symbolic win for all Islamist extremist networks worldwide, including IS, because it "resuscitated Islamist militants' belief in *jiḥād* to establish an Islamic state, and then a global Muslim caliphate."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, although AQ and IS are geopolitical rivals, they share an essentially similar ideological agenda, despite pursuing differing timetables and operational strategies. Hence, at times, it is "hard to differentiate between their operations," given "every attack that IS has executed equates to what al-Qaeda has also wanted," especially in the Levant.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in Afghanistan itself, IS appeared violently opposed to the Taliban and its AQ allies. IS responded to the Taliban victory by publicly questioning its Islamist legitimacy, charging the "new Taliban" is essentially in cahoots with the US. IS also declared itself "the only group fighting to establish a caliphate," thereby deserving of the support of global jihadists.<sup>10</sup>

The tension between IS and Taliban-AQ was replicated in other regions. For instance, the Indonesian jihadist network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) regarded the Taliban's return as vindication of its own longer-term strategy of "strategic patience" in gradually building up a solid base of community support, whilst engaging in *i'dad* (preparation) to ultimately create an Islamic state by force. Conversely,

<sup>1</sup> See Amin Saikal, "The Middle East: Jihadist Militancy, National and Intra-State Tensions, and State-Society Dichotomy," in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Sudha Ramachandran, "India," in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> See Abdul Basit, "Pakistan," in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> See Nodirbek Soliev and Raffaello Pantucci, "Central Asia," in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See Mahfuh Bin Haji Halimi, Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman and Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan, "Radical Ideological Narratives Following the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan," in this volume.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Saikal, "The Middle East."

<sup>10</sup> See Nur Aziemah Azman, "Underlying the Islamic State (IS) Propaganda: Striving for Relevance and Dominance," in this volume.

Indonesian IS supporters reacted negatively. That said, the Taliban victory is unlikely to motivate JI and IS supporters to plan attacks in Indonesia for now.<sup>11</sup> In the Philippines, the formerly AQ-linked Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) congratulated the Taliban on its victory, but “vowed to maintain the hard-fought peace achieved for the people of Mindanao.”<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, while assessing that “the threat from Islamist extremism and terrorism” remained “high” in 2021, Singapore identified “IS and its affiliated groups” as “the primary threat actor to the country and wider region.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Operational Issues and Challenges for Islamist Militants**

#### *Operational Spaces*

A Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, with its vast ungoverned spaces, could potentially relapse into an AQ “stronghold, attracting foreign fighters” as well as some disaffected “Taliban fighters.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the revival of suicide terrorism by the TTP in Pakistan in 2021 was “possibly linked” to the Taliban’s recapture of Kabul, “affording TTP more space and freedom of action to train and use suicide bombers for attacks in Pakistan.”<sup>15</sup> The notion that a Taliban-run Afghanistan may revert to a terrorist stronghold is reinforced by doubts concerning the Biden Administration’s plan for “over the horizon” drone attacks targeting the ISKP affiliate in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> ISKP has developed a stronghold in the eastern province of Nangarhar and “can turn out to be a melting pot of radicalised individuals from the region as well as anti-Taliban groups.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while the Taliban seem intent on targeting ISKP, its attitude towards AQ and other networks remains ambivalent, reinforcing the idea that Afghanistan may be “open for business” once again: Bangladeshi authorities thus reported that at least three Ansar al-Islam (AAI) members had travelled to Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> IS

meanwhile “continues to operate as a low-level and well-entrenched insurgency in rural areas” in Syria, exploiting the remoteness and vastness of the central Syrian desert as well as the mountainous terrain. IS remains similarly entrenched in northern and north-central Iraq, especially in rural areas, rugged mountain and desert regions.<sup>19</sup> IS possessed substantial funding to mount operations across the Middle East and beyond, whenever opportune.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Differentiated Impact of COVID-19*

Because the pandemic impacted counter-IS operations in Iraq, thousands of fighters who had been lying low amongst civilian populations re-emerged.<sup>21</sup> That said, the pandemic did not always have a salutary effect on militant networks. For instance, in India, the surrenders of Maoist insurgents were said to be partly attributable to “deaths and illnesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” while “the inability to access treatment for COVID-19 fuelled resentment among the lower cadres against the senior ranks.”<sup>22</sup> The pandemic-driven movement restrictions that hampered inter-state and international movements also “flattened the curve of terrorism” in Malaysia.<sup>23</sup> In Indonesia, the relatively low number of incidents in the past two years involving the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) was partly attributable to movement restrictions and higher costs associated with domestic travels due to the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Cross-Border and Transnational Links*

The continuing importance of cross-border and wider transnational links of Islamist terror networks was observed throughout 2021. Following the Taliban victory in neighbouring Afghanistan, infiltration of Pakistan-based militants into Jammu and Kashmir increased relatively, and massive arms caches were

<sup>11</sup> See V. Arianti and Unaesah Rahmah, “Indonesia,” in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> See Kenneth Yeo, “Philippines,” in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> See Kalicharan Veera Singam, “Singapore,” in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> See Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, “Afghanistan,” in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> Basit, “Pakistan.”

<sup>16</sup> D’Souza, “Afghanistan.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> See Iftekhar Bashir, “Bangladesh,” in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying the Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>20</sup> Saikal, “The Middle East.”

<sup>21</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>22</sup> Ramachandran, “India.”

<sup>23</sup> See Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass and Jasminder Singh, “Malaysia,” in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

recovered in areas near the Line of Control (LoC), the line that demarcates Kashmir into Indian and Pakistan administered parts, in September. Additionally, clashes between the militants and Indian security forces “were fiercely fought, signalling that militants were highly-trained and well-equipped.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, “the presence of interlinked cross-border communities, as well as relatively porous borders and linked economies” compelled Central Asian governments to regard the “overriding regional security concern” to be pro-Taliban Central Asian militant groups refocusing “their attention towards Central Asia, using Afghanistan as a springboard.”<sup>26</sup> In addition, the networking of Central Asian and Russian-speaking fighters in Syria and Iraq, and the ability of such networks to radicalise “elements of the Central Asian and Russian diaspora communities in Europe and Russia,” remained worrisome.<sup>27</sup>

In Bangladesh, the pro-IS Neo-Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB) network sought to establish a “militant sanctuary in the hilly area of Bandarban” so as to establish ties with militants in neighbouring Myanmar’s Rakhine State and “recruit new operatives.”<sup>28</sup> In Southeast Asia, long-used illegal smuggling maritime routes “like the Sabah-Sulu-Zamboanga and the Manado-Sangihe Island-Davao Occidental routes remained viable avenues for foreign fighters to smuggle themselves in and out of Mindanao.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Malaysian militants currently in conflict zones overseas remained a concern, as exemplified by the arrest of two Malaysian nationals following the Taliban takeover, who were alleged to have been fighting with ISKP in Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

## **An Evolving Spectrum of Attack Modalities and Targets**

### *Attacks by Organised Networks Against a Plethora of Targets*

In Pakistan, there was a notable uptick of attacks by TTP in 2021, with Pakistani

security forces bearing the brunt of these. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and firearm attacks were the two most frequently used tactics in 2021, with suicide bombings employed as well. Particularly notable was the “uptick in frequency and intensity of attacks on Chinese nationals and projects in Pakistan in 2021,” especially involving Baloch separatists angered by Chinese exploitation of the resource-rich region with little benefit for the “daily lives of local Baloch communities.” Hence, it is possible that “following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China could be the main target of Pakistani jihadist and insurgent groups.”<sup>31</sup> Organised IS attacks in Syria aimed at inflicting economic damage, such as attacking oil refineries in Raqqa and pipelines in Damascus. IS also attacked electricity towers in Iraq, while meshing “low-impact, guerrilla-type operations” with “sophisticated, multiple coordinated operations.”<sup>32</sup> In Indonesia, bombings appeared to be the preferred modus operandi employed by pro-IS militant groups in 2021. This seemed a departure from previous years, when stabbings and shootings appeared the preferred attack modality.<sup>33</sup> As in previous years, the Indonesian police remained the main target of organised terror networks.<sup>34</sup> The next common target was civilians, including Christians, as well as both Indonesian and mainland Chinese. Furthermore, farmers in Poso were often targeted by MIT, who perceived them as spies for the authorities.<sup>35</sup>

In Bangladesh, Neo-JMB appeared to target law enforcement agencies, churches, noted Hindu and Buddhist personalities, and workers of non-governmental organisations.<sup>36</sup> Neo-JMB sought to “train all its members in the production of IEDs,” as well as “chloroform bombs to target buses, classrooms and public places in its bid to kill silently.”<sup>37</sup> A notable tactical development in 2021 was observed in Jammu and Kashmir: the deployment of drones “for attacks on

<sup>25</sup> Ramachandran, “India.”

<sup>26</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>29</sup> Yeo, “Philippines.”

<sup>30</sup> Dass and Singh, “Malaysia.”

<sup>31</sup> Basit, “Pakistan.”

<sup>32</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>33</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

military installations.”<sup>38</sup> As drones are inexpensive, difficult to detect and expensive to intercept, they could become a preferred tactic of anti-India militant groups.<sup>39</sup>

### *The Continuing Threat of Lone Actors*

In 2021, the threat posed by lone actors persisted. While some incidents of lone-actor assassinations by TLP radicals in Pakistan have been “recorded in the last few years,”<sup>40</sup> Central Asian governments continued to “arrest suspected terrorists and self-radicalised individuals” in 2021.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, a lone-wolf AAI follower mounted a petrol bomb attack on a car belonging to a private university in September. The pro-AQ AAI “has been trying to promote lone-wolf attacks in Bangladesh since 2019.”<sup>42</sup> In Singapore, in the last two years alone, 14 of the 16 individuals detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) had been self-radicalised online, with “the majority” being IS supporters.<sup>43</sup> The threat of “lone-wolf suicide bombings” was also observed in Mindanao, where “multiple arrests were made against prospective suicide bombers” linked to the Abu Sayyaf Group’s (ASG) Sulu faction throughout the year.<sup>44</sup> In Indonesia, officials worried about the call by IS “for more lone-wolf attacks amid COVID-19.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Role of Women, Families and Youth**

In recent years, women, families and youth have assumed greater operational importance in Islamist terror networks. This remained the case in 2021. In Syria, for instance, ideologically indoctrinated pro-IS women within the Al-Hol refugee camp formed *hesba* (religious policing) units, violently imposing IS ideology upon “former IS fighters’ wives” who had denounced IS and were seeking to return to their countries of origin.<sup>46</sup> Women also featured as actual combatants. The pro-IS Sulu faction in

Mindanao appeared to have “groomed female suicide bombers,” many “reportedly the wives, widows or daughters of slain ASG leaders and fighters.”<sup>47</sup> In Sri Lanka, an enquiry into the April 2019 Easter Sunday attacks found that the pro-IS ringleaders had radicalised “17 female local operatives into becoming suicide attackers.”<sup>48</sup> In Bangladesh, the pro-AQ AAI tried to “strengthen its female wing” to support its organisational activities and online social media work. In contrast to the IS Sulu faction, AAI employed women in non-violent activities, such as marrying “male members to create family units that would promote the outfit’s secrecy and efficiency.”<sup>49</sup> Women and their immediate family units also remained important in Indonesia, being directly involved in terror attacks, which were harder to thwart given “the activities of kin networks are typically shrouded in greater secrecy.”<sup>50</sup>

Youth were also targeted by Islamist extremists in 2021. The pro-IS Neo-JMB Bangladesh “started recruiting children and teenagers into its ranks,” mostly from “Ahle Hadis/Salafi-dominated villages.”<sup>51</sup> In the Syrian refugee camps, “the radicalisation of youths and children by their pro-IS mothers” was flagged as a concern, as “IS ideology is filling in the gap in the children’s education” and laying the foundations for future trouble.<sup>52</sup> Youth have also been targeted by the Extreme Right (see below) in Europe as well, possibly because “the push online” due to pandemic-related restrictions has “provided a ripe environment” for “very young people” to be “drawn towards extremist plotting,” if not actual violence as yet.<sup>53</sup>

### **Role of Ideological Ecosystems**

The importance of ideological ecosystems propagating violent extremist narratives persisted in 2021. Such ecosystems included, amongst other elements, interconnected networks of social media and

<sup>38</sup> Ramachandran, “India.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Basit, “Pakistan.”

<sup>41</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia.”

<sup>42</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>43</sup> Singam, “Singapore.”

<sup>44</sup> Yeo, “Philippines.”

<sup>45</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

<sup>46</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>47</sup> Yeo, “Philippines.”

<sup>48</sup> See Amresh Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka,” in this volume.

<sup>49</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>50</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

<sup>51</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>52</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>53</sup> See Kyler Ong and Raffaello Pantucci, “Extreme Right-Wing Violence in the West: In Remission?” in this volume.

print *platforms*, strategic influencers or *persons*, as well as certain extremist organisational, educational and religious *places*.<sup>54</sup>

### Propaganda Platforms

In 2021, IS online propaganda platforms reaffirmed that the terror group was “*baqiyah* (remaining) and, to some extent, *tatamaddad* (expanding),” not just in Syria and Iraq, but elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> IS emphasised the importance of its “supporter (*munasir*) networks,” regarding them “to be on par with, or even more important than, combat jihad.”<sup>56</sup> This defiant narrative of IS resilience and expansion was pushed by the IS ideological ecosystem, including affiliated news platforms such as the Amaq and Nashir agencies, as well as social media platforms including *inter alia*, Telegram, Rocket Chat and Hoop Messenger.<sup>57</sup>

In South Asia, IS-Hind, the Indian IS affiliate, made extensive use of its *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of India) platform to “stir Indian Muslim insecurities” over an increasingly hinduized India. AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) likewise remained very active online via its own platform, *Nawai Ghazwat-ul-Hind* (Voice of the Conquest of India).<sup>58</sup> Central Asian “jihadist groups” continued to “exploit online platforms, such as Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter” to reach and radicalise diaspora communities.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), with a presence in both Afghanistan and Syria, maintained “a very strong online presence” on its Uyghur-language platform, which was linked to other platforms such as Telegram and Flickr.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, militant groups operating on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) “resorted to social media and other propaganda activities to gain sympathy and support from the Rohingya community,

especially among the diaspora.”<sup>61</sup> In Mindanao, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) became more operationally prominent in 2021, developing “a significant presence” on social media platforms, circulating “videos to recruit bombers” and issue threats.<sup>62</sup> In Malaysia, apart from open platforms like Facebook, encrypted platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp tended to be “popular domains of choice” for IS-linked cells.<sup>63</sup>

### Places

Places or spaces where Islamist extremism is extensively incubated in the minds of followers also proved significant in 2021. For instance, while the radical Bareilvi TLP “has successfully mainstreamed its ideological narrative” using *inter alia*, “madrassa-mosque networks” in Pakistan,<sup>64</sup> the pro-AQ AAI in Bangladesh dominated the Qawmi madrassa network, exerting influence through an organisation called the Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI). The HeI, which supports the violent Islamisation of the country and promotes hate speech against Hindus, has transformed the Qawmi network into a worrying place where extremist ideas are disseminated.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the Islami Mahad, a little-known Rohingya Islamist outfit, active both in Rakhine state as well as in Bangladesh, competes with ARSA for influence through “its network of 130 madrassas in the camp areas.”<sup>66</sup>

In Malaysia, places associated with the Hizb ut-Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) attracted attention. In September 2020, the Johor state religious authorities banned HTM as its activities were deemed likely to cause “disharmony and public mischief.”<sup>67</sup> While HTM was not assessed to pose a significant physical security threat, “its ideology” was regarded as similar “to other violent Islamist groups” and could potentially “serve as a precursor to violence in certain cases.”<sup>68</sup> Hizb ut-Tahrir has been “designated an extremist and

<sup>54</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, “Countering the Threat of Islamist Extremism in Southeast Asia,” *The Straits Times*, July 19, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ramachandran, “India.”

<sup>59</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia.”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> See Iftekhar Bashar, “Myanmar,” in this volume.

<sup>62</sup> Yeo, “Philippines.”

<sup>63</sup> Dass and Singh, “Malaysia.”

<sup>64</sup> Basit, “Pakistan.”

<sup>65</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>66</sup> Bashar, “Myanmar.”

<sup>67</sup> Dass and Singh, “Malaysia.”

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



terrorist organisation” and banned in “Russia and all Central Asian countries.”<sup>69</sup>

### *Persons*

The importance of strategic extremist influencers or *persons* was equally obvious. In Syria, the Central Asian KTJ leaders Khikmatov and Akhliddin Novkatiy were “hardline Salafi-jihadist” persons “who constantly preach before KTJ fighters and their families,” reinforcing the importance of armed jihad, while the Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) leader “Abu Yusuf Muhajir” actively engaged in “jihadi preaching activities.”<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, running the aforementioned Hel entrenched within the Bangladeshi Qawmi madrassa network were a group of influential pro-AQ persons called *Manhajis*. The *Manhajis* held key positions within Hel, thereby strongly influencing the ideological trajectory of the Qawmi madrassa system.<sup>71</sup> There were “at least a dozen pro-AAL” persons, basically social media-savvy “clerics” who were actively “spreading hate speech against religious minorities,” that have been regarded as “a key factor behind the attacks on Hindu minorities in 2021.”<sup>72</sup> The role of strategic persons was also evidenced in Sri Lanka, where it was ascertained that the 2019 Easter Sunday attackers had taken inspiration from Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, “the one-time emir” of the pro-IS Neo-JMB in Bangladesh, who had also masterminded the July 2016 Holey Artisan Café attack in Dhaka.<sup>73</sup>

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, TLP strategic persons such as its founder (late) Khadim Hussain Rizvi politicised “the Bareilvi identity along narrow sectarian lines,” promoting hate speech in the form of “blasphemy radicalism” that potentially endangered the Ahmadiyya and Christian minorities.<sup>74</sup> The role of hate speech by influential persons was similarly seen in Malaysia, where officials worried that the “propagation of divisive rhetoric along racial and religious lines” by elements of “the political class” did not “auger well for the

country’s multi-religious and multi-racial society.”<sup>75</sup>

### **The Evolving Extreme Right Threat**

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,” while the Far Right can be regarded as referring to the “political manifestation of the extreme right.”<sup>76</sup> Certainly, the relatively close nexus between Extreme Right social movements and Far Right political entities continued to be a distinct feature of White Supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremist movements in 2021.

#### *White Supremacist Extreme Right*

Such a nexus was clearly evinced in the US, where the former Trump administration’s “rhetoric had previously allowed right-wing extremism to thrive.”<sup>77</sup> Trump’s “refusal to condemn the far right when called to, and seeming support for extremist groups with right-wing leanings” such as the Proud Boys, “arguably gave them a boost” – which in turn “resonated globally.”<sup>78</sup> That said, apart from the 6 January 2021 Capitol Hill riot in Washington, DC, that involved some 800 people, amongst them a number of “identifiably right-wing extremists,” seeking to support Trump following his November election defeat, large-scale acts of violence emanating exclusively from the Extreme Right was limited in 2021. Arrests of individuals allegedly linked to the Extreme Right continued primarily in the US, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific, mostly Australia. Much of the violence in this case was driven by anger against government lockdown measures and vaccination-related policies. It is important to underscore that the White Supremacist Extreme Right represents a broad range of ideological strains.<sup>79</sup> In any case, the 2021 Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report identified this category of Extreme Right ideology as a matter of

<sup>69</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka.”

<sup>74</sup> Basit, “Pakistan.”

<sup>75</sup> Dass and Singh, “Malaysia.”

<sup>76</sup> Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 288.

<sup>77</sup> Ong and Pantucci, “Extreme Right-Wing Violence in the West.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.



“emerging concern” following the arrest of the very first “far right extremist” in the state in January 2021.<sup>80</sup>

### *Buddhist Extreme Right*

In 2021, worrying signs of the further mainstreaming of Buddhist extremist-fuelled anti-Rohingya Muslim sentiment was apparent in Myanmar. Four months after the military coup in February, the exiled National Unity Government (NUG) issued a new policy on the Rohingyas, promising to end human rights abuses and grant them citizenship. Unsurprisingly, while the proposed policy was rejected “by the Myanmar junta, Buddhist nationalists and the Rakhine ultranationalist lobby,”<sup>81</sup> even “most among the country’s Bamar-Buddhist majority” also “appeared unwilling to grant concessions to the minority Rohingya community.”<sup>82</sup> Observers cautioned that the issue will energise the military junta’s Buddhist nationalist/extremist base, particularly elements from the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (formerly known as Ma Ba Tha). Ominously, some former members of Ma Ba Tha reportedly joined a “shadowy pro-junta paramilitary network known as Pyusawhti,” that issued death threats against some civilians.<sup>83</sup> The continuing spread of Buddhist extremist tropes was also apparent in Sri Lanka, where calls to outlaw the Buddhist nationalist group, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or Buddhist Power Force, whose “incendiary rhetoric and cultivation of anti-Muslim violence had arguably contributed to the radicalisation of some Muslims in the country,” went unheeded by the authorities.<sup>84</sup>

### *Hindu Extreme Right*

In India, Hindu extremism remained a concern in 2021, as Hindutva organisations and activists continued to target Muslim and Christian minorities. Though large-scale violence was avoided, there were “innumerable incidents of Hindu mobs

physically attacking Muslim individuals,” including Muslim men seeking to wed Hindu women.<sup>85</sup> If allegations of “love jihad” and “corona jihad” were used in previous years to justify anti-Muslim violence, these were joined by the newer anti-Muslim tropes of “narcotics jihad” and “land jihad.”<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, over 300 instances of Hindutva mob attacks against Christians across 21 states were reported in the first nine months of 2021. Inflammatory, anti-Muslim state-level electoral speeches by certain Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) elements in 2021, intimating, for instance, that opposition party support for Muslims in Bengal, would turn that state into a “mini-Pakistan,” helped foster a climate of intolerance that was conducive to anti-Muslim violence.<sup>87</sup> While the state adopted an “iron-fist approach” towards the Maoist insurgency, the Kashmir militancy and global jihadism, it basically “ignored Hindutva extremism,” as violent Hindutva extremists who had “uploaded their violence online to terrorise entire communities” were largely left alone.<sup>88</sup>

### **State Responses: A Mix of “Hard” and Soft Measures**

Given the challenging transnational terrorism and extremism landscape in 2021, how should governments and other relevant stakeholders respond? While a more comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this assessment, in essence, the examination of 2021’s extremist trends suggests that a blend of *hard, short-term* and *softer medium to longer-term* approaches to comprehensively deal with the full spectrum of the threat is needed.<sup>89</sup>

### **Hard Measures**

#### *Legislation*

In 2021, states continued to adopt a suite of law enforcement/coercion-oriented “hard measures” to cope with an ever-evolving terrorism and extremism threat. Legislation

<sup>80</sup> Singam, “Singapore.”

<sup>81</sup> Bashar, “Myanmar.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Gunasingham, “Sri Lanka.”

<sup>85</sup> Ramachandran, “India.”

<sup>86</sup> For more details see Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> 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), 306.

was an example. While the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) worried about how the Taliban's return in Kabul would potentially increase "the evolving money laundering and terror financing risk environment" in the Af-Pak region, Pakistan made some effort to address such issues, including enacting legislative amendments to ensure international cooperation.<sup>90</sup> A possible legislative misstep was Islamabad's removal of the TLP's terrorism designation, raising fears that this would "enable TLP to mainstream its radical agenda" and "undermine PCVE efforts in the country."<sup>91</sup> Potentially more constructively, in Singapore, responding to concerns that race relations might have been strained during the pandemic, a Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act was mooted to preserve inter-racial harmony through "persuasion and rehabilitation" of offenders to develop "a better understanding of the racial group they offended." Parliament also passed the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act in October, empowering the government to neutralise covert foreign disinformation efforts aimed at *inter alia*, destabilising Singapore's multi-religious and multi-racial fabric.<sup>92</sup>

The Sri Lankan government introduced new legislation under the Prevention of Terrorism Act to empower it to detain suspects involved in acts of "violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony" and undergo rehabilitation for up to a year.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, potentially counter-productively, in March, the government announced its intention to ban wearing of the *burqa*, the cloth veil that covers Muslim women's faces and bodies, as it was a "sign of religious extremism." The purported ban targeting the island-state's Muslim minority drew international criticism that it contravened "international laws that protect religious beliefs and freedom of expression."<sup>94</sup>

### *Operational Capabilities and International Collaboration*

Effective operational capabilities of law enforcement and security forces, enhanced at times by international collaboration, remain important. In 2021, Central Asian governments maintained "heightened security measures," while also "working through international partnerships to disrupt militant networks."<sup>95</sup> In China, the relative peace in Xinjiang was attributed "in large part to the increasingly pervasive security blanket that exists across the region."<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, Pakistan's efforts to fence up the Pak-Afghan border to foil cross-border attacks by "TTP and its affiliated groups in Pakistan's tribal areas from their Afghan hideouts" faced limited success.<sup>97</sup> In Bangladesh, a potentially more salutary operational capability development emerged in 2021: the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of the Dhaka Police launched the country's first-ever data centre in September, providing increasingly needed "analytical and advisory assistance" to police on matters related to counter-IED operations.<sup>98</sup>

In Indonesia, the Detachment 88 counter-terror police conducted more large-scale arrests compared to 2020, while intensive operations against pro-IS groups like MIT resulted in the notable "decapitation of its leadership in September."<sup>99</sup> The Philippines military also attained significant success, retaking "major terrorist strongholds in Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Sur" in February, disrupting militant groups' "logistics and recruitment" – and partially explaining the relatively "high level of terrorist surrenders."<sup>100</sup>

In East Malaysia, ongoing Malaysian Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) operational initiatives to weed out illegal immigration into Sabah yielded success. Kuala Lumpur will also establish several new military outposts in the eastern Sabah region, as part of a "security fencing" exercise to better protect vulnerable areas. Meanwhile, INTERPOL will also be setting up an office in Malaysia in 2022, "to crack down on biological threats emerging on the dark web."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Basit, "Pakistan."

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Singam, "Singapore."

<sup>93</sup> Gunasingham, "Sri Lanka."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, "Central Asia."

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Basit, "Pakistan."

<sup>98</sup> Bashar, "Bangladesh."

<sup>99</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, "Indonesia."

<sup>100</sup> Yeo, "Philippines."

<sup>101</sup> Dass and Singh, "Malaysia."

## Prison Systems

Strong and secure prison systems remain important as well. After all, the “narrative of freeing captives by carrying out attacks on prisons and inciting prison riots has been one of the cornerstones of IS’ operational strategy.”<sup>102</sup> Significantly, the 270<sup>th</sup> issue of the IS platform *Al-Naba’* included a list of prisons in IS provinces in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Central Africa, Khorasan (Afghanistan and Tajikistan), and East Asia (Indonesia and the Philippines).<sup>103</sup>

Certainly, in the Indonesian case, the numerous arrests of Islamist extremists, while making the country safer, may nevertheless “inadvertently also strain the judicial system and swell the population of terrorist inmates in many already overcrowded Indonesian prisons.”<sup>104</sup> Institutional challenges appear to afflict the Bangladeshi prison system as well. It was reported that “leaders and operatives of four local militant outfits” were running “an online business from behind bars to collect funds,” supported by some jail staff “who also gain financially.”<sup>105</sup>

## Soft Measures

### *Building Community Resilience to Extremist Ideology*

In 2021, the importance of fostering medium to longer-term community resilience to extremist ideology of all stripes remained apparent. This was the case with Singapore’s continued investment in the national SGSecure movement, aimed at strengthening the country’s multi-racial fabric against the physical and social fallout of a terror attack. The all-volunteer Muslim scholars of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) continued playing a strategic role through counselling of ISA detainees, reaching out to the public – including youth – while debunking the “extremist narratives” of IS online.<sup>106</sup> There is a particular need to construct a *counter-ideological* ecosystem to reframe the Taliban success in Afghanistan,

educating vulnerable communities worldwide – such as youth – that the “Taliban does not represent Islam globally,” that the “Taliban’s past brutalities against its own citizens, especially women and minorities, cannot be ignored,” and apocalyptic prophecies appropriated by Islamist extremists, such as the Black Banner narrative, is based on weak and unsubstantiated religious texts.<sup>107</sup>

### *Rehabilitation Programmes for Former Militants*

Rehabilitating individual violent extremists remains crucial as well. In Central Asia, community-level programmes have been rolled out to “counter radicalisation,” while a “major effort deployed across the region” was the “de-radicalisation and reintegration of those repatriated from Syria,” an ambitious initiative that met with “varying degrees of success and commitment.”<sup>108</sup> In Mindanao, one reason for the relatively high level of surrenders recently has been “the attractive surrender packages offered by the government,” under which surrendering militants are enrolled in the government’s reintegration programme, which “provides grants for livelihood assistance, remuneration for firearms they return, and social assistance.”<sup>109</sup>

Challenges persist though. For instance, the terrorist recidivism rate in Indonesia remains above the global average of 2.9 percent. In addition, Indonesian deradicalisation programmes suffered from a lack of inter-agency coordination, although a new National Action Plan For Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism 2020-2024 (RAN-PE), enacted in January, aims to redress this issue.<sup>110</sup> In South Asia, Bangladesh’s deradicalisation programmes were “still ad hoc and insufficient compared to the quantum of radicalisation cases in the country,” though attempts are underway to improve the efficacy of such initiatives through greater “community ownership.”<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Aziemah, “Underlying The Islamic State (IS) Propaganda.”

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

<sup>105</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

<sup>106</sup> Singam, “Singapore.”

<sup>107</sup> Halimi, Sudiman and Hassan, “Radical Ideological Narratives.”

<sup>108</sup> Soliev and Pantucci, “Central Asia.”

<sup>109</sup> Yeo, “Philippines.”

<sup>110</sup> Arianti and Rahmah, “Indonesia.”

<sup>111</sup> Bashar, “Bangladesh.”

### *Addressing Long-Standing Structural Grievances*

Throughout the year, the limitations of an over-reliance on hard, coercive strategies proved apparent. In India, while the state's "security-centric approach to dealing with the Maoist insurgency" certainly produced tactical results, it also "alienated the local tribal population, impeding the state's intelligence gathering efforts and crippling security operations." Development projects in Maoist areas have "not benefited the locals," and "it is a matter of time" before the insurgency escalates again.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the "state's approach to the Kashmir militancy and global jihadist groups too has been overwhelmingly security-centric."<sup>113</sup> In the case of Xinjiang, Western observers have criticised the Chinese hard approach as a "system of coercion" that would ultimately aim to "thin out minority populations" in Xinjiang.<sup>114</sup>

In Thailand's Deep South, Islamist separatists publicly revealed their desire for "an inclusive peace process and a viable political solution to bring an end to the conflict" – identifying "the reduction of military operations" as a key demand.<sup>115</sup> In Mindanao, the "potential for radicalisation remains high" as "many people are still displaced from the battles between the various terrorist groups and the AFP."<sup>116</sup> In Myanmar, the military coup and ensuing violence rendered the disenfranchised and anxious Rohingya refugees, "languishing in squalid and overcrowded camps in south-eastern Bangladesh," ripe for radicalisation.<sup>117</sup>

### **Assessment**

Ultimately, the 2021 survey underscored the continuing imperative for states to address the longer-term underlying grievances that fuel violent extremism. In Pakistan alone, "Pashtun socio-political and economic grievances" in the ex-Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, the "political alienation and relative deprivation of local Baloch

communities," and the Barelvi "political disempowerment and marginalisation" have all empowered the extremist appeals of the TTP, Baloch separatists and the TLP respectively. In essence, then, Amin Saikal's comment on the MENA region arguably holds true for other regions facing violent Islamist threats as well:

weak or no viable central governments, internal conflicts fuelled by domestic and/or external imperatives, socio-economic disparities, sectarian divisions, poverty and unemployment (especially among young people) and ungoverned spaces benefited IS and Al Qaeda, both tangibly (recruits, organisational spread) and intangibly (propaganda narratives and ideological traction).<sup>118</sup>

Hence, while the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan occupied policy attention in 2021, it should not be allowed to obscure the fundamental importance of addressing the abovementioned structural weaknesses. Soberingly, it was noted as early as June 2020 that while both IS and AQ "had weakened, they remained capable of reconstituting within two years" – even before the return of the Taliban.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ramachandran, "India."

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> See Nodirbek Soliev and Raffaello Pantucci, "China-Xinjiang," in this volume.

<sup>115</sup> See Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "Thailand," in this volume.

<sup>116</sup> Yeo, "Philippines."

<sup>117</sup> Bashar, "Myanmar."

<sup>118</sup> Saikal, "Middle East." Similar diagnoses are found throughout the volume's country chapters.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

# SOUTHEAST ASIA

*Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore*

## INDONESIA

*Over the past year, the decentralisation of the Islamic State (IS)-aligned Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) terrorist network continued apace in Indonesia, in parallel with the proliferation of pro-IS independent cells and lone-actor attacks. The number of terrorist attacks and plots in Indonesia remained relatively stagnant in 2021, with at least six attacks and eight plots recorded, compared to seven attacks and eight foiled plots respectively in 2020. Whilst this reflects a continuous declining trend of attacks and plots compared to the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 terrorist landscape was particularly marked by aggressive counter-terrorism (CT) operations that hauled in more than three hundred terrorist suspects – the largest figure since 2018 – including key militant group leaders. In particular, sustained waves of arrests against members of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) reinforced the government's commitment to further decapitate the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked group. Overall, Indonesia still faces security threats, including from pro-IS groups, which remain inclined to conduct attacks around the country.*

### The Key Players

The terrorism terrain in Indonesia remains dominated by two jihadi camps, with local extremist networks broadly aligned with either IS or AQ respectively. The latter grouping has rejected the legitimacy of IS' caliphate in Syria and Iraq that was declared in June 2014. Groups and independent cells that support IS,

especially those affiliated with the JAD network and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT), retain a higher propensity to commit attacks in the country. Based on data from the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR)'s Southeast Asia Militant Atlas<sup>120</sup>, JAD-linked terror related activities – attacks, plots, training, and storing of weapons – only slightly decreased in 2021 compared to the previous year.

In 2021, JAD recorded at least nine militant-related incidents. Five were related to the use of explosive materials, and included two suicide bomb attacks and another suicide bombing plot in Makassar (the capital city of South Sulawesi) respectively. Another incident involved a stabbing attack, while the remaining three were linked to JAD's use of firearms (training, supply, storing). In comparison, in 2020, JAD had recorded at least eleven militant-related incidents. These consisted of four attacks, one plot, and six incidents, wherein JAD personnel were found to be in possession of bladed weapons and/or firearms.

By contrast, terror activities linked to the MIT group decreased significantly in 2021, compared to the previous year. In 2021, MIT conducted two attacks, using firearms and bladed weapons respectively. There was also a police raid, in which MIT operatives were found in possession of pipe bombs. A year prior, MIT had conducted eight attacks, while there were four police raids which led to the confiscation of Improvised Explosive

<sup>120</sup> Kenneth Yeo, Unaesah Rahmah, Yi Ling Lie and Raffaello Pantucci, "Southeast Asia Militant Atlas," International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School

of International Studies, 2021, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/southeast-asia-militant-atlas/#.YVPMPS8RpQI>.

Devices (IEDs), bladed weapons and firearms from MIT members.<sup>121</sup>

In addition, 2021 saw an independent (non-JAD) pro-IS group, named Anshar Daulah Gorontalo (ADG) based in North Sulawesi, plotting an attack,<sup>122</sup> which is a slight decline from 2020, when two independent pro-IS groups had planned attacks.<sup>123</sup> Additionally, a splinter cell of the Islamist group, Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defender Front/FPI),<sup>124</sup> was responsible for two attack plots in 2021,<sup>125</sup> while the year also witnessed two lone-wolf attacks compared to none in 2020.<sup>126</sup>

Overall, the number of attacks and attack plots in the past two years declined compared to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic years.<sup>127</sup> JAD's relatively stagnant terror

activities in 2020-2021, and the significant decline of MIT's terror activities in 2021, can be partly attributed to movement restrictions and higher costs associated with domestic travels due to the pandemic. Mainly, the authorities' requirement for a negative antigen rapid test (ART), or more expensive polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test,<sup>128</sup> meant travel from Java to Poso, Central Sulawesi – where MIT operates – by plane, for instance, would require an additional Rp 500,000 – Rp 900,000 (USD 35 – 63) per person.<sup>129</sup> Other modes of public transport similarly required an ART, that typically costs each passenger Rp 99,000 – 273,000 (USD 7-19). Such cost considerations, coupled with the health risk posed by testing positive for COVID-19, were significant

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> "7 Terduga Teroris yang Ditangkap di Gorontalo Berencana Serang Markas Polisi," *Detiknews*, February 4, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5361332/7-terduga-teroris-yang-ditangkap-di-gorontalo-berencana-serang-markas-polisi/2>.

<sup>123</sup> They were IS-inspired groups based in Bima (West Nusa Tenggara) named Mujahirin Anshor Tauhid (MAT) and Lampung (Sumatra) respectively.

<sup>124</sup> It remains unclear if the cell supported IS.

<sup>125</sup> "Terduga Teroris Zulaimi Agus Beberkan Alasannya Menjadi dan Pembuat dan Pengajar Bom Aseton Peroksida," *Tribunnews*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2021/04/04/terduga-teroris-zulaimi-agus-beberkan-alasannya-menjadi-pembuat-dan-pengajar-bom-aseton-peroksida>; "Yusuf Iskandar, Buron Teroris, Diringkus Densus 88," *Gatra.com*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.gatra.com/detail/news/511343/hukum/yusuf-iskandar-buron-teroris-diringkus-densus-88>.

<sup>126</sup> A man, going by the initials MI, stabbed a police officer in Palembang, South Sumatra. He claimed to be inspired by what he saw on the internet and wanted to become a terrorist. Police stated that he had a mental illness. Another lone-wolf case involved an IS-inspired woman Zakia Aini, who conducted a shooting at the National Police headquarter in Jakarta. See "3 Fakta Penusuk Polantas Palembang Ngaku Belajar Jadi Teroris," *Detiknews*, June 5, 2021, [https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5594924/3-fakta-penusuk-polantas-palembang-ngaku-belajar-jadi-](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5594924/3-fakta-penusuk-polantas-palembang-ngaku-belajar-jadi-teroris?single=1)

[teroris?single=1](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5594924/3-fakta-penusuk-polantas-palembang-ngaku-belajar-jadi-teroris?single=1); "Profil Zakiah Aini, Pelaku Penyerangan Mabes Polri yang Dukung ISIS," *Kompas*, April 1, 2021, <https://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2021/04/01/12364101/profil-zakiah-aini-pelaku-penyerangan-mabes-polri-yang-dukung-isis?page=all>.

<sup>127</sup> Unaesah Rahmah, "Indonesia," in "Annual Threat Assessment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (January 2021), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>. V. Arianti and Ahmad Sobirin, "Indonesia," in "Annual Threat Assessment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 1 (January 2020), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/CTTA-Annual-Threat-2020.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> "Simak! Aturan Terbaru Perjalanan di Dalam Negeri Saat PPKM," *CNBC Indonesia*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.cnbciindonesia.com/news/20210922095647-4-278178/simak-aturan-terbaru-perjalanan-di-dalam-negeri-saat-ppkm>; "Mulai Berlaku Hari Ini, Berikut Rincian Aturan Perjalanan Selama Masa PPKM Darurat," *Kompas*, July 3, 2021, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/07/03/09212931/mulai-berlaku-hari-ini-berikut-rincian-aturan-perjalanan-selama-masa-ppkm?page=all>.

<sup>129</sup> "Harga Tes PCR dan Rapid Antigen Terbaru, Ketahui Tarif Tertingginya," *Liputan 6*, September 3, 2021, <https://hot.liputan6.com/read/4648731/harga-tes-pcr-dan-rapid-antigen-terbaru-ketahui-tarif-tertingginya>.

barriers for the financially deprived pro-IS groups, which are mostly self-funded.<sup>130</sup>

Another factor was the continued intensive CT operations against pro-IS groups, backed by the revised Anti-Terror Law enacted in May 2018. For MIT, the group was weakened by being left with only nine personnel in early 2021, and the decapitation of its leadership in September 2021.<sup>131</sup>

Whilst the anti-terror police unit Detachment 88 also apprehended prospective MIT members who were enroute to Poso,<sup>132</sup> militants have largely been less inclined to travel to the area. Travel costs to Poso from Java or West Nusa Tenggara – the main regions where MIT militants have originated from – even prior to the pandemic were prohibitively more expensive compared to the intra-Java or Java-Sumatra travels conducted

by other pro-IS groups. For MIT combatants, issues around funding have been exacerbated by the fact that they can no longer rely on sponsorship from Indonesian IS fighters in Syria, such as back in 2015-2016.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, JI, the only local militant group that supports AQ and possesses a significant military capability, faced harsh police crackdowns in 2021, despite the group being less inclined to conduct domestic attacks in the past decade.<sup>134</sup> Police have targeted JI's various lucrative sources of financing, which had supplied income for the group for almost a decade. Since 2014, JI had generated a total of Rp 124 billion (USD 8.6 million) through its several charities, which conducted fundraising through *tabligh akbar* (religious mass gathering) mainly over the conflicts in Syria and Palestine; and cash donation boxes located across the country.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>130</sup> V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohmah, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorist Financing in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-terrorist-financing-in-indonesia/>; Alif Satria, "Escapades in Papua: Understanding JAD's Attempts in Indonesia's Easternmost Province," *The Diplomat*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/id-taliban-08232021182153.html>.

<sup>131</sup> "TNI dan Polri Baku Tembak dengan Kelompok Mujahidin Indonesia Timur," *BBC*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-56261554>; "Jejak Kesadisan Ali Kalora yang Kini Tewas Ditembak Petugas," *Detiknews*, September 19, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5730205/jejak-kesadisan-ali-kalora-yang-kini-tewas-ditembak-satgas>.

<sup>132</sup> "Densus 88 Tangkap 32 Orang Terduga Simpatisan MIT Sepanjang 2020," *Kompas.com*, December 4, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/12/04/06191891/densus-88-tangkap-32-orang-terduga-simpatisan-mit-sepanjang-2020?page=all>.

<sup>133</sup> V. Arianti and Nur Aziemah Azman, "The IS Threat in Indonesia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 11, no. 7 (September 2019), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CTTA-September-2019.pdf>.

<sup>134</sup> Under Para Wijayanto's leadership from 2009 to 2019, JI forbade its members to conduct

attacks in Indonesia. See 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/>.

<sup>135</sup> "BIN Ungkap Penggawa Jaringan Teroris Jemaah Islamiyah Muda-muda," *Detik News*, September 2, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5706284/bin-ungkap-penggawa-jaringan-teroris-jemaah-islamiyah-muda-muda>. As of now, Detachment 88 has arrested leaders of Syam Organizer, JI's charity body, in Yogyakarta and West Java. They have identified the other branches and plan to arrest the rest of the leaders in different provinces, see "Pimpinan Syam Organizer Jabar-Yogya Ditangkap, Cabang Lain dalam Bidikan," *Detik News*, August 16, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5684968/pimpinan-syam-organizer-jabar-yogya-ditangkap-cabang-lain-dalam-bidikan>. Other JI charities are Abdurrahman Bin Auf (ABA), Forum Komunikasi Aktivis Masjid (Mosque Activists Communication Forum/FKAM), One Care, HASI/Hilal Ahmar, and Perisai (Pusat Edukasi, Rehabilitasi dan Advokasi / Centre for Education, Rehabilitation and Advocacy). Perisai mainly provided legal advocacy for detained JI members. See "Yayasan One Care Bantah Terlibat Danai Kelompok Teroris JI," *Detiknews*, December 19, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5302139/yayasan-one-care-bantah-terlibat-danai>.



Another setback for JI was the further decapitation of its senior leadership, with the arrest of Abu Rusydan alias Thoriqudin in August 2021.<sup>136</sup> A key senior figure in JI, Abu Rusydan was part of a committee that oversaw and endorsed the selection of the new *amir* (leader).<sup>137</sup> Prior to his latest arrest, Abu Rusydan had previously served a three-and-a-half-year sentence in 2005.<sup>138</sup> During Para Wijayanto's leadership of JI, Abu Rusydan conceptualised, amongst others, JI's *i'dad* (military training) programme, recruitment, emergency policies, and sanctions for undisciplined members. Abu Rusydan was also the main proponent of the group's active involvement in the Syrian conflict.<sup>139</sup>

### Modus Operandi and Targets

In 2021, bombing attacks were the preferred modus operandi employed by terrorist groups in Indonesia. This was a departure from previous years, when

stabblings and shootings were the most preferred attack tactic.<sup>140</sup> Out of seven attacks recorded in 2021, only one involved the use of IEDs.<sup>141</sup> This was the suicide bombing conducted by JAD in Makassar in March 2021, which killed the two perpetrators and wounded 20 people.<sup>142</sup> The intention to employ IED attacks was also evident in the August discovery of 11 high explosive pipe-bombs belonging to MIT operatives in Poso.<sup>143</sup> This shift in attack preference, from stabblings and shootings to bombings, can be partially attributed to the latter tactic having a higher propensity to inflict greater casualties and damage, even as a lack of skills and access to bomb materials continue to deter many groups from deploying it.

Typically, terrorist networks source bomb materials directly online or at a physical chemical store.<sup>144</sup> But an individual supplier's role can also be vital, especially as many militants still resort to online

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kelompok-teroris-ji; "Polri: Abu Rusydan Bentuk Majelis Kasepuhan Bersama Para Senior JI," *Detik News*, September 14, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5722502/polri-abu-rusydan-bentuk-majelis-kasepuhan-bersama-para-senior-ji>.

<sup>136</sup> JI had already suffered a leadership vacuum since its long-time *amir* Para Wijayanto and several key JI leaders were arrested in mid-2019.

<sup>137</sup> The JI committee that would select a new leader is called *Majelis Kasepuhan* (The Senior Assembly) or also known as Lajnah Ihtiar Linasbil Amir (LILA), which was formed by Abu Rusydan and Siswanto (arrested in 2020). It consisted of JI's senior figures. See "Polri: Abu Rusydan Bentuk Majelis Kasepuhan Bersama Para Senior JI," *Detik News*.

<sup>138</sup> "Pengamat Sebut Jamaah Islamiyah Tak Mati Gara-gara Abu Rusydan Ditangkap," *Tempo*, September 13, 2021, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1505505/pengamat-sebut-jamaah-islamiyah-tak-mati-gara-gara-abu-rusydan-ditangkap>.

<sup>139</sup> JI trained a total of 96 members to be deployed to Syria. Sixty-six of whom made their way there. See "Densus 88 Ungkap Sejumlah Peran Sentral Abu Rusydan di Jamaah Islamiyah," *Tempo*, September 17, 2021, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1507095/densus-88-ungkap-sejumlah-peran-sentral-abu-rusydan-di-jamaah-islamiyah/full&view=ok>; V. Arianti and Nodirbek Soliev, "The Pro-Al Qaeda Indonesian Connection With HTS in Syria: Security

Implications," *Middle East Institute*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pro-al-qaeda-indonesian-connection-hts-syria-security-implications>.

<sup>140</sup> Rahmah, "Indonesia."

<sup>141</sup> Yeo, Rahmah, Liew, and Pantucci, "Southeast Asia Militant Atlas."

<sup>142</sup> "Korban Ledakan Bom di Gereja Katedral Makassar Bertambah Jadi 20 Orang," *Kompas*, March 28, 2021, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2021/03/28/191238078/korban-ledakan-bom-di-gereja-katedral-makassar-bertambah-jadi-20-orang>.

<sup>143</sup> "Polisi Musnahkan Bom Lontong Berdaya Ledak Tinggi Milik Teroris Poso," *Tempo*, August 29, 2021, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1500005/polisi-musnahkan-bom-lontong-berdaya-ledak-tinggi-milik-teroris-poso>.

<sup>144</sup> For example, see "Rakit Bom Sendiri, Terduga Teroris MA Beli Bahan Peledak via Online," *Detiknews*, September 23, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4718130/rakit-bom-sendiri-terduga-teroris-ma-beli-bahan-peledak-via-online/2>; "Teroris Terduga Sibolga Beli Bahan Bom di Toko Kimia Setempat," *Tempo*, March 16, 2019, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1185855/terduga-teroris-sibolga-beli-bahan-bom-di-toko-kimia-setempat/full&view=ok>; "The Surabaya Bombings and the Future of ISIS in Indonesia," Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, October 18, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2019353352/>

bomb-making tutorials,<sup>145</sup> in addition to seeking guidance on procuring the bomb ingredients. One particular supplier named KDW (initial) alias Abu Aliyah al-Indunisi, a JAD member, was arrested in June 2021.<sup>146</sup> He had sourced and supplied bomb ingredients for at least four terrorist cells from various groups in recent years. In 2021 alone,<sup>147</sup> Abu Aliyah had supplied the materials to Zulaimi Agus from FPI and Lukman HS, a JAD member who conducted the suicide bombing along with his wife at the Makassar church.<sup>148</sup>

Attacks using bladed weapons or firearms are the next preferred tactic employed by Indonesian militants. Several raids had also revealed some militants' intention to use a combination of both for attacks. As in the case of JAD's Makassar cell, some groups have trained their members in both sharp weapons and firearms.<sup>149</sup> Pro-IS group, ADG, also provided such training in

addition to plotting a bomb attack.<sup>150</sup> The militants' exposure to various types of weapons suggests a continuing intention by pro-IS groups to launch attacks using a combination of methods. In previous years, various pro-IS cells and individuals had employed attack tactics that combined stabbings with vehicle rammings, arson, or bombings. In some instances, stabbings were typically deployed when the bomb failed to explode.<sup>151</sup>

As in previous years, the police remained the main target for terrorist attacks in 2021. At least five attacks and plots targeted the police over the year.<sup>152</sup> The next common target was civilians, including Christians, Chinese (both Indonesian and mainland Chinese),<sup>153</sup> and farmers based around Poso. Firstly, while the JAD cell in Makassar bombed a church in March 2021, another cell in Papua had also plotted attacks on several churches.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>145</sup> For instance, the JAD member from Batang, Central Java, Maswandi, who was convicted in April 2021, learned how to make a bomb from video tutorials uploaded on terrorist Bahrin Naim's site. He had developed his skills in making bombs since 2018 and succeeded in creating a mobile detonator for his bombs. With his self-assembled bombs, Maswandi planned to attack Banser Nahdlatul Ulama (Nahdlatul Ulama's paramilitary wing called Multipurpose Ansor Front), Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth), the Chinese community and civil servants, but failed. See "Perakit Bom di Batang Divonis 5 Tahun Penjara," *Detik News*, July 1, 2021, [https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5627381/perakit-bom-di-batang-divonis-5-tahun-penjara?\\_ga=2.231731162.478447766.1631674136-987186980.1630658898](https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5627381/perakit-bom-di-batang-divonis-5-tahun-penjara?_ga=2.231731162.478447766.1631674136-987186980.1630658898).

<sup>146</sup> "Terduga Teroris JAD Bogor Berperan Pasok Bahan Baku Bom," *CNN Indonesia*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210615230428-12-654824/terduga-teroris-jad-bogor-berperan-pasok-bahan-baku-bom>.

<sup>147</sup> He had supplied bombs to militants for a few years. For example, he supplied bomb materials to Priyo Hadi Purnomo, who was arrested in 2016 and Wahyu Budi Nugraha, who was arrested in 2019. See "Eksklusif: Ini Dia Teroris 'Konsumen' Bahan Peledak KDW," *TvOne*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.tvonenews.com/berita/hukum/1290-eksklusif-ini-dia-teroris-konsumen-bahan-peledak-kdw>.

<sup>148</sup> "Eksklusif: Ini Dia Teroris 'Konsumen' Bahan Peledak KDW," *Ibid*.

<sup>149</sup> "Sebelum Ditembak Mati, Terduga Teroris Makassar Hendak Bom Bunuh Diri," *Liputan 6*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/4451382/sebelum-ditembak-mati-terduga-teroris-makassar-hendak-bom-bunuh-diri>.

<sup>150</sup> For instance, police confiscated six guns with 220 ammunitions and bladed weapons from the house of a terrorist suspect in Bangka Belitung. See "Densus 88 Antiteror Polri Tangkap Seorang Terduga Teroris Berinisial AS di Bangka Belitung," *Tribunnews*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2021/07/01/densus-88-antiteror-polri-tangkap-seorang-terduga-teroris-berinisial-as-di-bangka-belitung?page=2>.

<sup>151</sup> V. Arianti, "Analysing Use of Sharp Weapons in Terrorist Attacks in Indonesia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, no. 4 (April 2018), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CTTA-April-2018.pdf>.

<sup>152</sup> Yeo et al., "Southeast Asia Militant Atlas."

<sup>153</sup> In 2019, pro-IS militant Abu Rara discussed with a friend to attack mainland Chinese nationals who worked in a factory in Banten, a neighbouring province to Jakarta. See "IPAC Short Briefing No. 1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia," Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, April 2, 2020, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24204?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24204?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>154</sup> Satria, "Escapades in Papua."

Additionally, farmers in Poso were often targeted as MIT perceived them as spies who had provided information to the authorities.<sup>155</sup> Lastly, one attack plot that targeted ethnic or overseas Chinese interests was also recorded in 2021, with the perpetrators believing they controlled Indonesia's economy and industry.<sup>156</sup>

## Responses

Despite the ravaging impact of the ongoing pandemic around the country, Detachment 88 conducted more large-scale arrests in 2021 compared to the previous year. Between January and May 2021 alone, the agency arrested 217 individuals.<sup>157</sup> The half-year figure is close to the total arrests made in 2020, when 228 terrorist suspects were apprehended.<sup>158</sup> By December 2021, the authorities had arrested 370 suspects.<sup>159</sup> Significantly, leadership decapitations were a notable feature of CT operations in 2021, including the arrest of JI's senior adviser Abu Rusydan, and the

September 2021 killing of MIT's leader Ali Kalora. In this respect, it remains unclear when the ongoing joint military-police CT operation called Madago Raya, that aims to fully dismantle MIT, will end. At present, it is estimated that there are still four MIT members equipped with firearms and home-made bombs operating in the mountainous and forested terrain of Poso.<sup>160</sup>

Taken together, whilst the large haul of arrests is laudable, and arguably helps make the country safer, they may inadvertently also strain the judicial system and swell the population of terrorist inmates in many already overcrowded Indonesian prisons. The situation is reminiscent of 2018, when the police, prosecutors, as well as court and prison officials, were overwhelmed by the sheer number of arrested terrorists.<sup>161</sup> This time around, the potential backlog could potentially further derail the effectiveness of the government's deradicalisation programme.

<sup>155</sup> "Indonesian Police Allege MIT Militants Killed Poso Farmer," *Benar News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/farmer-killed-04202020134526.html>.

<sup>156</sup> "Penampakan Buron Teroris Serahkan Diri ke Polsek Setiabudi," *Detik News*, April 9, 2021, <https://news.detik.com/foto-news/d-5526301/penampakan-buron-teroris-serahkan-diri-ke-polsek-setiabudi>; "Cerita Teroris & Simpatisan FPI Ingin Ledakkan Pabrik Cina," *CNBC Indonesia*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20210403192951-4-235061/cerita-teroris-simpatisan-fpi-ingin-ledakkan-pabrik-china>.

<sup>157</sup> "Polri Tangkap 217 Tersangka Terorisme sejak Januari hingga Mei 2021," *Detik News*, June 16, 2021, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/06/16/13112651/polri-tangkap-217-tersangka-terorisme-sejak-januari-hingga-mei-2021>.

<sup>158</sup> Rahmah, "Indonesia."

<sup>159</sup> Alif Satria, "For Indonesia's Terror Groups, Taliban Victory Models Long-Term Success," *Benar News*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/id-taliban-08232021182153.html>; In August 2021, Detachment 88 arrested 53 members of JI in 11 different provinces including North Sumatra, Jambi, Lampung, Banten, West Java, Central Java and East Java. See "53 Tersangka Teroris Gagal Lancarkan Aksi Terror HUT ke-76 RI," *CNN Indonesia*, August 20, 2021,

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210820164329-12-683123/53-tersangka-teroris-gagal-lancarkan-aksi-teror-hut-ke-76-ri>; "Densus 88 Menyatakan Menangkap 370 Tersangka Teroris Sepanjang 2021,"

*Tempo*, December 24, 2021, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1516133/periode-januari-september-2021-densus-88-ringkus-315-terduga-teroris>.

<sup>160</sup> "Polri Ganti Nama Operasi Tinombala Jadi Madago Raya, Ini Artinya," *Kompas*, February 17, 2021,

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/02/17/14582431/polri-ganti-nama-operasi-tinombala-jadi-madago-raya-ini-artinya>; "Pesan Satgas Madago Raya untuk Sisa Anggota MIT: Menyerahkan Diri atau Tertangkap," *Kompas*, September 20, 2021, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2021/09/20/140948778/pesan-satgas-madago-raya-untuk-sisa-anggota-mit-menyerahkan-diri-atau>; "Polri memperpanjang Operasi Satgas Madago Raya hingga Tiga Bulan," *Antara News*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/2081498/polri-memperpanjang-operasi-satgas-madago-raya-hingga-tiga-bulan>.

<sup>161</sup> "Recent and Planned Releases of Indonesian Extremists: An Update," Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, August 10, 2018, <https://nysean.org/blog/2019/3/7/ipac-report-recent-and-planned-releases-of-indonesian-extremists-an-update>.

As of April 2020, there were over 50 terrorist recidivists among an estimated 850 terrorists who had been released from Indonesian prisons since 2002.<sup>162</sup> In 2021, there were at least an additional two recidivists.<sup>163</sup> Whilst this translates to an estimated 6 percent recidivism rate, the percentage is lower compared to 2013,<sup>164</sup> when data showed an 8.3 per cent recidivism rate among ex-terrorist inmates. Nonetheless, the terrorist recidivism rate in Indonesia remains above the global average of 2.9 percent.<sup>165</sup>

One of the greatest challenges in running the deradicalisation programme lies in identifying and separating prisoners who sincerely repent, from those who employ the *taqiyyah* tactic (pretending to have repented), by participating in the programme that requires them to pledge allegiance to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).<sup>166</sup> Such participation enables them to enjoy remitted sentences (up to one-third of a sentence can be commuted) as well as

access to other facilities such as entrepreneurship capital upon release.<sup>167</sup> In August 2021, a total of 50 terrorist inmates were granted remitted sentences. Eight of them were eligible for immediate release.<sup>168</sup>

Another major challenge in running the deradicalisation programme lies in the lack of collaboration among various government agencies.<sup>169</sup> The presidential decree on the National Action Plan For Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism 2020-2024 (RAN-PE), enacted in January 2021, is a milestone in Indonesia's CT policy. The action plan, through a whole of government approach in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), mandates better collaboration and coordination among ministries, institutions and local agencies. The decree outlines the involvement of 24 ministries and government statutory boards, as well as local governments in nationwide P/CVE efforts.<sup>170</sup> In its deradicalisation programme section,<sup>171</sup> the

<sup>162</sup> Noor Huda Ismail, "Indonesia: Perennial Issue of Terrorist Recidivism," *RSIS Commentary*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/indonesia-perennial-issue-of-terrorist-recidivism/#.YU3PIH0RUcQ>.

<sup>163</sup> Arif Budi Setyawan, "Keunikan Residivisme Mantan Napiter Kelompok JI (1)," *Ruangobrol.id*, September 10, 2021, <https://ruangobrol.id/2021/09/10/ulasan/keunikan-residivisme-mantan-napiter-kelompok-jamaah-islamiyah-1/>.

<sup>164</sup> Thomas Renard, "Overblown: Exploring the Gap Between the Fear of Terrorist Recidivism and the Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 4 (April 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/overblown-exploring-the-gap-between-the-fear-of-terrorist-recidivism-and-the-evidence/>.

<sup>165</sup> The study was based on 13 publications that cover a period between 1990 – 2018, and with a geographical focus on the US and certain countries in Europe. Two Asian countries included in this study were Indonesia and Malaysia (5.4 percent of recidivism rate in 2011). See *Ibid*.

<sup>166</sup> "Darwin Gobel and Residivisme Mantan Napiter," *PAKAR*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.radicalismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Darwin-dan-Residivisme-Mantan-Napiter.pdf>.

<sup>167</sup> "Saat 10 Eks Napiter dan Korban Terorisme Dapat Modal Buka Warung," *Detiknews*, November 30, 2018,

<https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-4324663/saat-10-eks-napiter-dan-korban-terorisme-dapat-modal-buka-warung>.

<sup>168</sup> "50 Napi Terorisme Terima Remisi, Napi Korupsi 214 Orang," *CNN Indonesia*, August 17, 2021,

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210817211147-12-681617/50-napi-terorisme-terima-remisi-napi-korupsi-214-orang>.

<sup>169</sup> Noor Huda Ismail, "Mengurai Sengkarut Deradikalisasi," *Majalah Tempo*, April 3, 2021, <https://majalah.tempo.co/read/kolom/162910/kolom-noor-huda-ismail-soal-peliknya-koordinasi-program-deradikalisasi-terorisme-di-indonesia>.

<sup>170</sup> "Dukung Pengesahan RAN PE, Kepala BNPT Apresiasi Sosialisasi Perpres No. 7 Tahun 2021 dalam Acara Kenduri Perdamaian," *BNPT*, January 29, 2021, <https://web.bnpt.go.id/dukung-pengesahan-ran-pe-kepala-bnpt-apresiasi-sosialisasi-perpres-no-7-tahun-2021-dalam-acara-kenduri-perdamaian>.

<sup>171</sup> Regulation of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 7 of 2021 on National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism That Leads to Terrorism 2020-2024,

RAN-PE aims to have an improved in-prison assessment mechanism in classifying the radicalism level of inmates. One proposal involves providing more training for prison wardens in handling terrorist inmates and a specialised approach for child inmates. In addition, the RAN-PE also aims for better coordination among various government agencies for the post-release reintegration programme for ex-inmates. A plan in the pipeline to further mitigate the risk of recidivism includes providing a temporary shelter for selected vulnerable ex-convicts to prevent them being re-recruited by their old networks, whilst also enabling their smooth reintegration into society upon release.

## Outlook

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which has restricted people's movement and increased associated travel costs, Indonesia's threat landscape in 2022 could exhibit at least three characteristics. First, the possible continuation of family terror cells and attendant attack plots. With the exception of 2020, family cells have been responsible for terror attacks in each of the last four years in Indonesia. In this respect, given that the activities of kin networks are typically shrouded in greater secrecy – attack planning in such instances is confined to the home – compared to a non-family cell, they can be harder to disrupt.<sup>172</sup>

Second, the strengthening of JAD's decentralisation push, continued emergence of pro-IS independent cells, and an increased likelihood of lone-wolf

attacks. In recent years, the decapitation of JAD's central and local leadership had already pushed the group's cells across the country to operate more independently.<sup>173</sup> In addition, independent pro-IS groups may continue to emerge and operate in specific territories, as evidenced by the Muhajirin Anshor Tauhid in Bima, another group (unnamed) in Lampung (2020), as well as ADG (2021). For these groups, having members living in the same city means a reduction in inter-city/province and inter-island travel costs, which aids their consolidation efforts. 2021 also saw two lone-wolf attacks, one involving a firearm attack by a 25-year-old woman named Zakia Aini at the National Police headquarter in Jakarta.<sup>174</sup> Given IS' call for more lone-wolf attacks amid COVID-19,<sup>175</sup> IS inspired independent cells situated in the same city, as well as lone-wolf individuals, may continue to harbour intentions to commit attacks.

Third, the remote possibility of militant groups and individuals travelling to Afghanistan for training or *hijrah* (migration) in 2022, following the Taliban's takeover. International travel generally remains restricted and potential combatants would incur significantly higher costs due to the COVID-19 travel requirements compared to domestic travel.<sup>176</sup> For JI, the continued leadership decapitation, loss of hundreds of personnel, and disruption of one of the group's main sources of income for almost a decade (charities), means a systematic deployment of cadres to Afghanistan is unlikely, like it did to Syria from 2012 to

<https://peraturan.go.id/common/dokumen/terjemah/2021/Perpres%207%202021%20English.pdf>.

<sup>172</sup> Since the 2018 Surabaya bombings, there were at least one plot and three attacks by married couples affiliated with JAD, namely: the pressure-cooker bomb attack on the Indramayu Police Headquarters in West Java (2018); the plot to attack several police stations in Sibolga (2019); the Jolo church bombing in the Philippines (2019); and the attack on Security Minister Wiranto in Serang, Banten (2019). See Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass and Unaesah Rahmah, "Women and Kinship Pivotal to JAD's Future Attacks in Indonesia," *Stratsea*, May 31,

2021, <https://stratsea.com/women-and-kinship-pivotal/>.

<sup>173</sup> Satria, "Escapades in Papua."

<sup>174</sup> "Profil Zakiah Aini, Pelaku Penyerangan Mabes Polri yang Dukung ISIS."

<sup>175</sup> Abdul Basit, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 3 (April 2020), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915444?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915444?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>176</sup> The costs can include pre-departure, on arrival, and post-quarantine PCR tests as well as quarantine fees in the country of destination.

2017. JI may also need several years to elect a new leader, rebuild the organisation and resume its overseas *i'dad* (military training) programmes.

In contrast to JI, which bore their members' departure and return costs, and provided them with training stipends in Syria, the travels of Indonesian pro-IS individuals and families to Afghanistan in recent years have been mostly self-funded.<sup>177</sup> Amid the ongoing pandemic related restrictions, ballooning international travel costs may deter some Indonesian IS supporters from joining Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan in 2022.

Another trend that may shape the terror terrain in 2022 pertains to the continued involvement of women in both combat and non-combat roles in local terrorist networks. Following no incidents involving women in 2020, last year signalled a revival of their participation as combatants in some groups. The country recorded two women attackers – Yogi Shafitri Fortuna (and her husband) who blew themselves up at the Makassar church, and Zakia Aini (the Jakarta attacker).<sup>178</sup> More women terrorist suspects were also apprehended in 2021.

At least three women linked to the JAD's operations in Makassar were arrested (one of whom was charged with recruiting the bomber couple) in 2021. Another had been charged with providing funding to the MIT.<sup>179</sup> By contrast, only two women were arrested for terrorism offences in 2020.<sup>180</sup>

Additionally, despite their contrasting responses to the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, both JI and IS supporters are unlikely to plan attacks in Indonesia for now, on the basis of being inspired by the Taliban. JI's response has been largely euphoric and may reinforce the group's pursuit of "strategic patience" in conducting long term *dakwah* (religious outreach). Concurrently it has also conducted *i'dad* (preparation) to wage armed jihad in the long-term, if sufficient support is garnered from the community.<sup>181</sup> On the other hand, whilst the Indonesian IS supporters' reactions towards the Taliban have been largely hostile<sup>182</sup> (most support ISKP's adversarial posture), their online discussions so far have yet to translate into calls for attacks in Indonesia.

Overall, pro-IS groups still have a higher inclination to commit attacks in Indonesia,

<sup>177</sup> Verdict of Muhamad Aulia, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No 269/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt Tim; Verdict of Sujadi Abdurrohman, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 307/Pid.Sus/2020/PN. Jkt. Tim.

<sup>178</sup> "Yogi Shafitri Fortuna Istri Lukman Terduga Pelaku Bom di Gereja Katedral Disebut Hamil 4 Bulan," *Sindonews*, March 30, 2021, <https://daerah.sindonews.com/read/380862/174/yogi-shafitri-fortuna-istri-lukman-terduga-pelaku-bom-di-gereja-katedral-disebut-hamil-4-bulan-1617076985>; "Profil Zakiah Aini, Pelaku Penyerangan Mabes Polri yang Dukung ISIS."

<sup>179</sup> The woman transferred Rp 20.2 million rupiah (USD 14,205). The latter also funded wives of terrorist detainees in Poso. See "Terlibat Jaringan Kelompok Teroris Poso, Seorang Wanita Ditangkap di Makassar," *Liputan 6*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/4620001/terlibat-jaringan-kelompok-teroris-poso-seorang-wanita-ditangkap-di-makassar>; "3 Perempuan Terduga Teroris Terkait Bom di Gereja Makassar Ditangkap, Ini Peran Mereka," *Tribunnews*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2021/03/31/3-perempuan-terduga-teroris-terkait-bom-di>

[gereja-makassar-ditangkap-ini-peran-mereka?page=3](https://www.gereja-makassar-ditangkap-ini-peran-mereka?page=3).

<sup>180</sup> Rahmah, "Indonesia."

<sup>181</sup> V. Arianti and Muh. Taufiqurrohman, "Taliban Rule Restored in Afghanistan: Security Implications for Indonesia," *New Mandala*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.newmandala.org/taliban-rule-restored-in-afghanistan-security-implications-for-indonesia/>; "The Impact of the Taliban Victory on Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah," Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, September 7, 2021; Jolene Jerard, "Taliban's Return in Afghanistan Cements Southeast Asia Extremist Strategy of 'Strategic Patience,'" *Channel News Asia*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/taliban-terrorism-al-qaeda-southeast-asia-2132656>.

<sup>182</sup> V. Arianti and Unaesah Rahmah, "What the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan Means for IS Supporters in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, September 15, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/what-the-taliban-takeover-in-afghanistan-means-for-is-supporters-in-indonesia/>.

compared to JI. Despite being leaderless for two years, JI has generally refrained from planning attacks with the exception of some rogue elements.<sup>183</sup> Notwithstanding this, a JI orchestrated attack could potentially be more lethal, as the group possesses superior military capability, in comparison to pro-IS groups.<sup>184</sup> As such, sustained CT operations against both pro-IS groups and JI are still needed, to disrupt potential plans and prevent them from building military capabilities.

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## PHILIPPINES

The Philippines has experienced a downgraded terrorist threat since 2020. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) made significant progress in early 2021 by retaking terrorist bases in Mindanao. Additionally, the government's COVID-19

policies impeded the movement of militants around the restive province which operationally crippled many terrorist groups. While a high number of terrorist surrenders was also observed across various terrorist factions operating in Mindanao, the potential for violence persists. Conditions for radicalisation are rampant across many communities, and the country's Presidential Elections in May 2022 could spark electoral violence and redirect vital security resources away from Mindanao.

## Trends

Terrorist activity declined significantly in the Philippines between the period of 2019 to 2021. Based on data from the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR)'s Southeast Asia Militant Atlas (See Figure 1), the number of successful terrorist incidents<sup>185</sup> dropped from 134 incidents in 2019, to 59 incidents in 2020, and 17 in 2021. Over this period, the most significant shift in the terrorism dynamic in Mindanao was the usurping of the Sulu faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). Both networks are aligned with the Islamic State (IS).

<sup>183</sup> The most recent foiled JI-linked plot coincided with Indonesia's Independence Day celebrations on 17 August 2021. See "Polri: Tersangka Teroris JI Rencanakan Teror Saat Hari Kemerdekaan RI," *Kompas*, August 20, 2021, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2021/08/20/17121781/polri-tersangka-teroris-ji-rencanakan-teror-saat-hari-kemerdekaan-ri>.

<sup>184</sup> Some JI members were trained by Al-Qaeda affiliate group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra

(JN)/Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in combat, operating a tank, artillery works, as well as bomb making. They also transferred their knowledge to their fellow JI members upon returning to Indonesia. See Arianti and Soliev, "The Pro-Al Qaeda Indonesian Connection with HTS in Syria."

<sup>185</sup> A successful terrorist incident is defined here as an attack that has injured or killed others apart from the terrorist themselves.



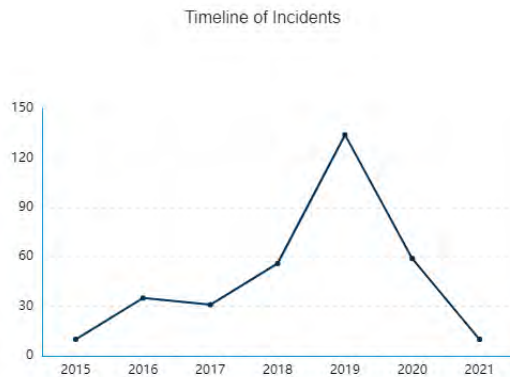


Figure 1: Successful Incidents in the Philippines<sup>186</sup>

## Group Updates

### Abu Sayyaf Group – Sulu Faction

Of the successful terrorist incidents recorded in 2021, the ASG's Sulu faction only launched one attack on 7 April, which resulted in the wounding of three ASG militants and two soldiers.<sup>187</sup> Besides this gun battle, the IS-aligned Sulu faction appeared to have also groomed female suicide bombers, although they were intercepted by security forces before launching attacks.

In February, the Joint Task Force-Sulu launched a counter-terrorism operation in Sulu Province, a traditional ASG stronghold, and arrested nine women, many reportedly the wives, widows or

daughters of slain ASG leaders and fighters. In the simultaneous raids, security forces seized bomb-making parts in some of the women's residences, which led them to conclude they were likely "potential suicide bombers."<sup>188</sup>

### Abu Sayyaf Group – Basilan Faction

In 2021, the military was also able to conduct counter terrorism operations against individuals from the ASG's Basilan-based faction. While their militant strength was depleted, the Basilan faction managed to pull off four improvised explosive devices (IED) roadside attacks at Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, and Lamitan in March,<sup>189</sup> April,<sup>190</sup> August,<sup>191</sup> and September<sup>192</sup> 2021 respectively. While ASG Basilan's past leader Furuji Indama was previously killed in a firefight with security forces, the group today may be led by Tawakkal Bayali or Pasil Bayali, although it remains unclear if they are the same person.<sup>193</sup>

### Maute Group/Dawlah Islamiyah

Separately the Maute Group, otherwise known as Dawlah Islamiyah, appeared to enjoy a slight resurgence in 2021. On 21 August 2021, skirmishes erupted between the military and 30 members of the Maute Group in the mountains of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte. The group is allegedly led by Abu Zacaria.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>186</sup> Retrieved from ICPVTR's Southeast Asia Militant Atlas.

<sup>187</sup> Roel Pareño, "5 Abu Sayyaf Soldiers Wounded in Sulu Clash," *PhilStar Global*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2021/04/09/2089876/5-abu-sayyaf-soldiers-wounded-sulu-clash>.

<sup>188</sup> Roel Pareño, "Abu Lader's Kin Held for Guns, Explosives," *PhilStar Global*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2021/02/24/2079909/abu-leaders-kin-held-guns-explosives>.

<sup>189</sup> Julia Alipala, "Blast Causes Minor Damage on Unfinished Bridge Connecting Basilan Villages," *The Inquirer*, March 31, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1413472/blast-causes-minor-damage-on-unfinished-bridge-connecting-basilan-villages>.

<sup>190</sup> Jr Teofilo Garcia, "2 Hurt in Basilan Roadside Bombing," *Philippines News Agency*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1136563>.

<sup>191</sup> "Blast From Improvised Bomb Injures 2 Soldiers in Southern Philippines," *BenarNews*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippines/philippines-abu-sayyaf-blast-08312021154527.html>.

<sup>192</sup> Julia Alipala, "Army Blames Abu Sayyaf for Basilan Bombing," *The Inquirer*, September 4, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1483441/army-blames-abu-sayyaf-for-basilan-bombing>.

<sup>193</sup> Jr Teofilo Garcia, "2 Construction Workers Hurt In Basilan Roadside Bombing;" Jr Teofilo Garcia, "3 ASG Bandits Killed in 2 Basilan Clashes," *Philippines News Agency*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1140447>.

<sup>194</sup> "Army Clashes With Maute Group Anew in Lanao Del Norte," *UNTV*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.untvweb.com/news/army-clashes-with-maute-group-anew-in-lanao-del-norte/>.

Nonetheless, the Maute Group's ability to mobilise militants has decreased significantly since the 2017 Marawi Siege due to the relentless military assaults against their strongholds.

### *Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters*

In contrast, the BIFF has become the most active group in conflict-ridden Mindanao, superseding the ASG aligned networks in Sulu and Basilan. In 2020, the leader of one of BIFF's factions, Commander Karialan, issued statements underlining his ambitions to become the "leader of jihad" in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>195</sup> This was followed by the circulation of BIFF's training,<sup>196</sup> operational<sup>197</sup> and recruitment<sup>198</sup> videos on social media.

It is unclear if the BIFF's recruitment efforts had compensated for the high number of surrenders the group, along with other terrorist organisations in Mindanao, have suffered since 2020.<sup>199</sup> On 8 May 2021, 20 BIFF members occupied a market in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao.<sup>200</sup> Their intentions

were ambiguous, however, and did not appear to be a display of force. Nonetheless, while no shots were fired, the BIFF's public presence in the market triggered fear among the town's residents. Further reports indicated the militants had looted food from the market.<sup>201</sup> This incident, coupled with the high fighter surrenders, may be indicative of the BIFF's growing desperation, due to its supply shortages and weakened operational state.

Additionally, on 29 October 2021, a key BIFF leader, Salahuddin Hassan, was killed by Philippines troops during a shootout in Maguindanao province.<sup>202</sup> Hassan's faction had notably been the only local group to renew its allegiance to IS, following the death of former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2019.<sup>203</sup> Officials subsequently characterised Hassan's death as dealing a heavy blow for terrorism in Mindanao, although militant activity in the area had largely declined prior to his demise.

### **Territorial Retreat**

<sup>195</sup> "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>.

<sup>196</sup> "BIFF Distributes Videos of Fighters in Weapons Training," SITE Intelligence Group, November 6, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/biff-distributes-videos-of-fighters-in-weapons-training.html>.

<sup>197</sup> "Video Document BIFF Operations, Interview Vows Continued Violence," SITE Intelligence Group, December 14, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/videos-document-biff-operations-interview-vows-continued-violence.html>.

<sup>198</sup> "BIFF Leader Issues Recruitment Videos, Declares Commitment to Killing Philippine Soldiers," SITE Intelligence Group, January 27, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/biff-leader-issues-recruitment-videos-declares-commitment-to-killing-philippine-soldiers.html>.

<sup>199</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Hungry and Tired: The Decline of Militancy in Mindanao," *The Strategist*, June

11, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/hungry-and-tired-the-decline-of-militancy-in-mindanao/>.

<sup>200</sup> "Military Declares Maguindanao Town Clear After Clash With Islamist Rebels," *ABS-CBN News*, May 9, 2021, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/08/21/islamist-rebels-storm-maguindanao-town-clash-with-state-troops>.

<sup>201</sup> "Over 100 BIFF Members Occupy Maguindanao Town Market," *Rappler*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/terrorist-attack-datu-paglas-maguindanao-may-8-2021>.

<sup>202</sup> "Overall Emir of Daulah Islamiyah-Philippines Neutralized in Maguindanao," *Kalinaw News*, October 29, 2021, [https://www.kalinawnews.com/overall-emir-of-daulah-islamiyah-philippines-neutralized-in-maguindanao/?amp&fbclid=IwAR2ZFpGm\\_eiHua1-38W3m9S9GXHrSvwmNiEkRXIFurPyPM5aA-LZZ6UzY](https://www.kalinawnews.com/overall-emir-of-daulah-islamiyah-philippines-neutralized-in-maguindanao/?amp&fbclid=IwAR2ZFpGm_eiHua1-38W3m9S9GXHrSvwmNiEkRXIFurPyPM5aA-LZZ6UzY).

<sup>203</sup> Greg Cahiles, "Analyst: Salahuddin Group May Also Sow Terror in Other Parts of Mindanao," *CNN Philippines*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/8/31/salahuddin-hassan-terrorist-group-threat-in-other-parts-of-Mindanao-.html>.

Besides the reduction in successful attacks by terrorist groups in Mindanao, other indicators reinforced the decline of terrorism in the territory. Firstly, major terrorist strongholds in Sulu, Maguindanao, and Lanao del Sur were retaken by the military in February 2021.<sup>204</sup> This is a significant milestone as terrorist groups have occupied these rugged terrains for over a decade. The military's retaking of these territories disrupts the terrorist groups' operational and organisational functions – impeding logistics and recruitment.<sup>205</sup>

There is a terrorist-territory-tribe nexus (T3 Nexus) in Mindanao. The relationship between terrorist groups and their territory is largely influenced by their tribal or ethnolinguistic heritage.<sup>206</sup> Hence, terrorist groups in Mindanao have rarely conducted attacks outside their arbitrarily defined territory for expansionist purposes.



Figure 2: Terrorist Hotspots in Mindanao<sup>207</sup>

As shown in Figure 2, terrorist groups have a clear area of operations. Fighters in the ASG faction based in Sulu (blue highlighted) are primarily of Tausug

descent,<sup>208</sup> while the ones based in Basilan (green) are of Yakan descent.<sup>209</sup> The BIFF (orange) operates in the Maguindanao region, with their members primarily from the Maguindanao clan.<sup>210</sup> The Maute Group, or Dawlah Islamiyah, (black) is based in Lanao del Sur or Lanao del Norte, the homeland of the Maranao clan.<sup>211</sup>

## Terrorist Surrenders

Beyond the physical impact of territorial denial, militants also experienced psychological setbacks. In 2020 and 2021, there has been a high level of terrorist surrenders in Mindanao. Based on ICPVTR's records, there has been 333 militant surrenders around the area (See Figure 3). Causes cited for desertion are the absence of leadership, starvation, fatigue, and lack of income.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Yeo, "Hungry and Tired,"

<sup>205</sup> Cristiana Kitnner, "The Role of Safe Havens in Islamist Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 3 (2007): 307-329, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546550701246791?journalCode=ftpv20>.

<sup>206</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Suicide Bombings in Mindanao," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, November 8, 2021, <https://icct.nl/publication/suicide-bombings-mindanao/>.

<sup>207</sup> Retrieved from ICPVTR's Southeast Asia Militant Atlas.

<sup>208</sup> Charles O. Frake, "Abu Sayyaf: Displays of Violence and the Proliferation of Contested Identities Among Philippines Muslims," *American*

*Anthropologist* 100, no. 1 (1998): 41-54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/682807>.

<sup>209</sup> "The Black & White Battle for the Southern Philippines," *On the Edge of Chaos*, February 1, 2018, <https://ontheedgeofchaos.blog/author/skgreenontheedgeofchaos/page/2/>.

<sup>210</sup> "One Dead in Maguindanao Clan Fight," *The Manila Times*, November 21, 2011, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2011/11/21/news/regions/one-dead-in-maguindanao-clan-fight/749554/>.

<sup>211</sup> Jonathan Head, "Maute Rebel Group: A Rising Threat to Philippines," *BBC News*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40103602>.

<sup>212</sup> Yeo, "Hungry and Tired."

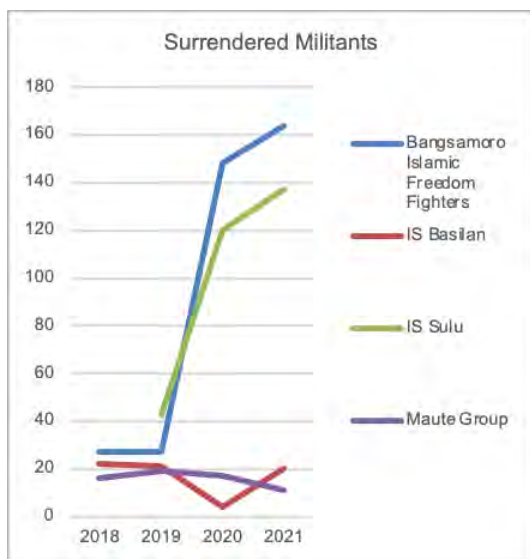


Figure 3: Surrendered Militants in Mindanao<sup>213</sup>

One reason for the high level of surrenders is the attractive surrender packages offered by the government. Surrendered terrorists are channelled to the government's reintegration programme, which provides grants for livelihood assistance, remuneration for firearms they return, and social assistance required for them to reintegrate into society.<sup>214</sup> Other forms of assistance include vocational education to support job seeking<sup>215</sup> and housing.<sup>216</sup>

However, these surrender packages were established as early as 2018 and cannot explain the recent surge in surrenders. In recent years, from the successive

leadership decapitations of the ASG's Sulu faction to the retaking of territory, the AFP has made significant operational gains over terrorist groups in Mindanao. In turn, this has created an unfavourable operational context for terrorists to pursue militancy.<sup>217</sup> Nonetheless, the motivations underpinning voluntary terrorist surrenders remain an underexplored area, for which more research is required.

### Impact of COVID-19

Besides the AFP's military gains, government measures adopted to curb COVID-19 also significantly impeded terrorists' operations. For example, travel restrictions enacted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 has made it difficult for foreign fighters to enter Mindanao through legitimate pathways. However, illegal routes like the Sabah-Sulu-Zamboanga and the Manado-Sangihe Island-Davao Occidental routes remain viable avenues for foreign fighters to smuggle themselves in and out of Mindanao.<sup>218</sup>

In 2021, reports indicated some ASG members had escaped from Sulu, Philippines, to Sabah, Malaysia, to seek refuge from the AFP and the Philippines National Police (PNP). Over the year, it was reported that a total of 15 ASG members were arrested<sup>219</sup> and seven

<sup>213</sup> Retrieved from ICPVTR's Southeast Asia Militant Atlas.

<sup>214</sup> Teofilo Garcia, "ASG Urged to Surrender, Avail of Gov't Reintegration Program," *Philippines News Agency*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1149629>.

<sup>215</sup> "139 Abu Bandits Surrender, to Get Livelihood Aid," *ABS-CBN News*, April 18, 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/18/18/139-abu-bandits-surrender-to-get-livelihood-aid>.

<sup>216</sup> Julie Alipala, "More Abu Sayyaf Members Surrender," *Inquirer*, December 17, 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1063794/more-abu-sayyaf-members-surrender>.

<sup>217</sup> Kumar Ramakrishna, "Content, Credibility, and Context: Propaganda Government Surrender Policy and The Malayan Communist Terrorist Mass Surrenders of 1958," *Intelligence and National Security* 11, no. 4 (1999): 242-266,

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02684529908432579>.

<sup>218</sup> Kenneth Yeo and Unaesah Rahmah, "Southeast Asia: Returning Foreign Fighters," *The Defense Post*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/06/23/asia-n-foreign-fighters/>.

<sup>219</sup> Ellie Aben, "Malaysia, Philippines Capture 8 Abu Sayyaf Militants in Sabah," *Arab News*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1856891/world>; Stephanie Lee, "Seven Abu Sayyaf Fighters Nabbed in Special Op May Be Charged in Sabah Before Deportation," *The Star*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/25/seven-abu-sayyaf-militants-nabbed-in-special-op-may-be-charged-in-sabah-before-deportation>.

killed<sup>220</sup> in Sabah during skirmishes with the Malaysian Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). These incidents show that transnational travels have not ceased completely, despite the pandemic induced travel restrictions.

Other COVID-19 measures, like government-imposed lockdowns, likely also impeded terrorist operations. Given they significantly limited the movements of the general population, as well as those of terrorists, this has rendered terrorist logistics vulnerable to being detected more readily. Secondly, lockdowns have reduced the number of people at places of congregation, offering fewer opportunities for terrorists to launch mass-casualty attacks.<sup>221</sup>

However, terrorist groups were still able to mobilise militants to launch assaults, including against the military. On 5 January 2021, BIFF members ambushed a town councillor as he was travelling on a dirt road at Barangay Lamud, Maguindanao.<sup>222</sup> The councillor survived the encounter. On 7 April 2021, an unknown number of gunmen from the ASG's Sahiron faction fought against the AFP at Talipao, Sulu.<sup>223</sup>

BIFF was also involved in a standoff with security forces at the Datu Paglas town market on 8 May 2021.<sup>224</sup> No civilians were harmed during the confrontation. On 21 August 2021, the Maute group also mobilised 30 militants in a battle against the AFP, in the mountains of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte.<sup>225</sup> Overall, these incidents illustrate that the nationwide lockdowns did not halt terrorist mobilisation completely, even as several groups were hampered by a lack of ammunition, which the authorities had recently attributed as a key factor in the general decline in terrorism.<sup>226</sup>

## US Withdrawal From Afghanistan

Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, some analysts argued that the group's return to power would 'boost the morale' of militant groups in Southeast Asia.<sup>227</sup> This is primarily due to the historical ties between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda (AQ), and its various international affiliates.<sup>228</sup> According to the SITE Intelligence Group, congratulatory messages were sent by AQ Central,<sup>229</sup> AQ

<sup>220</sup> "Malaysian Police Kill Suspected Philippine Militants," *Politiko*, May 18, 2021, <https://politics.com.ph/malaysian-police-kill-suspected-philippine-militants/>; Stephanie Lee, "Two Suspected Abu Sayyaf Militants Shot Dead in Sandakan," *The Star*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/20/cops-shoot-two-men-believed-to-be-abu-sayyaf-in-sandakan>.

<sup>221</sup> Iftekharul Bashar and Kenneth Yeo, "Global Health Security – Weaponising COVID-19: New Trend in Pandemic Era?" *RSIS Commentary*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/global-health-security-weaponising-COVID-19-new-trend-in-pandemic-era/#.YUKzPrgzZPY>.

<sup>222</sup> Edwin Fernandez, "Maguindanao Town Councilor Survives Ambush," *Philippines News Agency*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1126786>.

<sup>223</sup> Pareño, "5 Abu Sayyaf, Soldiers Wounded In Sulu Clash."

<sup>224</sup> "Military Declares Maguindanao Town Clear After Clash With Islamist Rebels."

<sup>225</sup> "Army Clashes With Maute Group Anew in Lanao del Norte," *UNTV*, August 26, 2021,

<https://www.untvweb.com/news/army-clashes-with-maute-group-anew-in-lanao-del-norte/>.

<sup>226</sup> Pareño, "5 Abu Sayyaf, Soldiers Wounded In Sulu Clash."

<sup>227</sup> Amy Chew, "Afghanistan: Taliban's Return 'Boosts Morale' if Militant Groups in Southeast Asia," *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3145856/talibans-return-afghanistan-boosts-morale-militant-groups>.

<sup>228</sup> Warren P. Strobel and Dustin Volz, "Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan Celebrated by Extremists on Social Media," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2021,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/extremists-celebrate-taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-on-social-media-11629192600>.

<sup>229</sup> "AQ Central Says Taliban Victory is Lesson for Jihadist, 'Masses' in Europe and East Asia to Break Free From American-Western Hegemony," SITE Intelligence Group, August 31, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aq-central-says-taliban-victory-is-lesson-for-jihadists-masses-in-europe-and-east-asia-to-break-free-from-american-western-hegemony.html>.

in the Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS),<sup>230</sup> and AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to the Taliban, following its victory.<sup>231</sup>

While there have been calls among militant networks to support the Taliban in Southeast Asia,<sup>232</sup> these appeals did not target groups in the Philippines specifically. This is largely due to the absence of AQ elements in Mindanao province. While the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was previously affiliated to AQ, it subsequently signed a peace settlement with Manila in 2014.<sup>233</sup> The MILF's spokesperson, Von Al Haq, congratulated the Taliban on its recent victory, but also vowed to maintain the hard-fought peace achieved for the people of Mindanao.<sup>234</sup> Essentially, it appears that mere support for the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan does not automatically translate to appeals for violence.

While the impact of the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan on the terrorism landscape in the Philippines has thus far been minimal, the US' withdrawal regardless raises important questions about its reliability going forward in leading global counter-terrorism efforts. Washington has been an important security partner for the Philippines for decades. The former

supports local forces with civil-military operations, information operations, and capacity building under the Foreign Internal Defense (FID) package.<sup>235</sup>

Along with the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which was signed in 1988 and makes it easier for US forces to move in and out of the country, Washington has assisted in counterinsurgency efforts in Mindanao province for over two decades. Bilateral ties have been more strained, however, under Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, who has consistently echoed anti-American sentiments during his tenure.<sup>236</sup> Duterte had also threatened to end Manila's military cooperation with the US in February 2020, although this threat was later withdrawn.<sup>237</sup> Going forward, the outcome of the 2022 Presidential Elections in the Philippines could significantly shape the future trajectory of US-Philippines security cooperation, including in the counter-terrorism sphere.

## Outlook

Despite the positive near term outlook in Mindanao, the Philippines government needs to be on guard against a number of ongoing security concerns. The potential

<sup>230</sup> "AQIS Congratulates Taliban on Afghanistan Conquest," SITE Intelligence Group, August 24, 2021,

<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aqis-congratulates-taliban-on-afghanistan-conquest.html>.

<sup>231</sup> "AQAP Again Praises Taliban, This Time With Audio Chant," SITE Intelligence Group, August 23, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/aqap-again-praises-taliban-this-time-with-audio-chant.html>.

<sup>232</sup> "Indonesian AQ-Aligned Media Unit Congratulates 'Real Victory' of Taliban, Encourages Jihadists to Emigrate to Afghanistan," SITE Intelligence Group, August 20, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/indonesian-aq-aligned-media-unit-congratulates-real-victory-of-taliban-encourages-jihadists-emigrate-to-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>233</sup> Subel Rai Bhandari, "Taliban Takeover Brings Cheers, Fears to SE Asia and Bangladesh,"

*Benar News*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/taliban-militancy-regional-security-08192021180223.html>.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Daniel J. O'Donohue, "Foreign Internal Defense," *Joint Publication* 3, no. 22 (12 July 2010), [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_22.pdf?ver=2018-10-10-112450-103](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_22.pdf?ver=2018-10-10-112450-103).

<sup>236</sup> Jon Emont, "The Limits of Rodrigo Duterte's Anti-Americanism," *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-china-united-states/506108/>.

<sup>237</sup> Jason Gutierrez, "Philippines Backs off Threat to Terminate Military Pact With U.S.," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/world/asia/philippines-military-pact-us-duterte.html>.

for radicalisation remains high in the region, as many people are still displaced from the battles between the various terrorist groups and the AFP. Many of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) live in poor living conditions,<sup>238</sup> which can be exploited for terrorist recruitment.

Moreover, there have been renewed attempts at recruitment and plotting attacks by militant groups. For example in August, Filipino IS-linked accounts called for prison raids to free captured militants.<sup>239</sup> There is precedence to this appeal. Prior to the 2017 Marawi siege, two prisons were targeted to increase militant strength.<sup>240</sup> However, a potential prison siege is harder to pull off now, due to the significant reduction in militant strength across all terrorist groups in the country.

The BIFF has also displayed a significant presence on social media. They have circulated videos to recruit bombers, targeted government assets,<sup>241</sup> and issued threats to assassinate President

Duterte.<sup>242</sup> Such appeals are consistent with the BIFF's modus operandi, as they had targeted politicians and government infrastructure previously. Hence, despite the high numbers of militant surrenders, these threats require continued monitoring.

The threat of lone-wolf suicide bombings also persists. ASG's Sulu faction has been actively incorporating suicide bombings as part of their modus operandi, due to the decline in militant strength.<sup>243</sup> In 2021, multiple arrests were made against prospective suicide bombers in the restive Sulu region.<sup>244</sup> In the face of further force depletion, ASG's declaration on social media in August for followers to continue to pursue martyrdom is relatively credible.<sup>245</sup>

Additionally, the Philippines Presidential Elections, expected to be held on 9 May 2022, also raises the spectre of violence. There is a history of vote-buying and election violence during prior national and local elections.<sup>246</sup> In the months leading up to the 2019 Philippines mid-term election,

<sup>238</sup> Reinna S Bermudez, Maria Camille Anne P Estonio and Hector Dominic D Aleman, "Displacements in the Philippines in a Post-COVID-19 World: A Recovery Focus," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 2020): 602-608, <https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/39/4/602/6076000?rss=1>.

<sup>239</sup> "Prison Raids to Free Muslim Fighters Promoted by Filipino IS-Linked Account," SITE Intelligence Group, August 6, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/prison-raids-to-free-muslim-fighters-promoted-by-filipino-is-linked-account.html>.

<sup>240</sup> Rambo Talabong, "DILG Confirms 2 Marawi Jailbreaks Freeing 107 Inmates," *Rappler*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/dilg-confirms-marawi-jailbreaks-freeing-107-inmates>.

<sup>241</sup> "Filipino IS-linked Accounts Call for Recruitment of Fighters and Bombing of Alleged Government Location," SITE Intelligence Group, September 7, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/filipino-is-linked-accounts-call-for-recruitment-of-fighters-and-bombing-of-alleged-government-location.html>.

<sup>242</sup> "IS/BIFF Supporter Justify 9/11 Attacks, Threatens to 'Slaughter' Philippine President," SITE Intelligence Group, September 15, 2021,

<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/is-biff-supporter-justifies-9-11-attacks-threatens-to-slaughter-philippine-president.html>.

<sup>243</sup> Quinton Temby, "Cells, Fractions and Suicide Operatives," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 1 (2019): 114-137, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26664207>; Kenneth Yeo, "Family Martyrdom: Examining Suicide Terrorism Trends in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat*, May 24, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/family-martyrdom-examining-suicide-terrorism-trends-in-southeast-asia/>.

<sup>244</sup> Pareño, "Abu Leader's Kin Held for Guns, Explosives."

<sup>245</sup> "Promoting the Pursuit of 'Martyrdom', Abu Sayyaf-Linked Account Calls for New Fighters, Provides Guidelines for Aspiring Jihadists," SITE Intelligence Group, August 11, 2021, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/promoting-the-pursuit-of-martyrdom-abu-sayyaf-linked-account-calls-for-new-fighters-provides-guidelines-for-aspiring-jihadists.html>.

<sup>246</sup> Sofia Tomacruz, "Threats, Vote-Buying in Bangsamoro Region on Eve of Midterm Polls," *Rappler*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/bangsa>



for example, at least 20 people were killed, and another 53 injured due to election-related incidents.<sup>247</sup> This time around, there are real concerns about election violence not only in Manila but also around Mindanao province.

Some reports have speculated that the Maute group is selling its services to politicians in the run up to the local elections – even as the precise nature of these services remain unclear.<sup>248</sup> Such practices are a source of financing for terrorist groups, and also serve to distract security forces from existing counter-terrorism operations in various parts of Mindanao. Overall, terrorism in Mindanao is down but not defeated. Although the AFP has made significant territorial and operational gains over terrorist groups in the province, particularly over the past two years, they must remain vigilant against evolving security threats.

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## MALAYSIA

*As the COVID-19 pandemic drags on, the terror threat in Malaysia has mostly declined. In 2021, Malaysia witnessed*

*terrorism-related incidents in Sabah, local arrests and the detention of Malaysian militants overseas. Recruitment campaigns and propaganda outreach efforts by terrorist and extremist groups also persisted over the past year, and continue to have security implications for Malaysia. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan is a point of concern, given it could boost the morale of local and regional militant networks, and fuel a fresh wave of recruitment and attack plots.*

## Trends

### Threat Environment

Terrorist activities in Malaysia have dipped largely due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Almost two years on since the first coronavirus case was reported in Malaysia, case numbers stayed high in several areas, with daily infection numbers peaking at between 5,000 and 10,000 cases. To mitigate the spread of the virus, the government imposed various lockdown measures, known as Movement Control Orders (MCO), on a number of occasions. These measures restricted the movement and activities of the general public and, in turn, largely disrupted terrorist activity in the country. There were no reported terrorism-related arrests in Peninsula Malaysia in 2021. However, there were close to 15 arrests in Sabah between May to September 2021. The country reported 7 arrests in 2020; 72 in 2019; 85 in 2018; 106 in 2017 and the highest being 119 in 2016 at the peak of the Islamic State's (IS) activity.<sup>249</sup>

In March 2021, Malaysian police revealed a 2020 plot by an IS sympathiser to kill then

[moro-region-threats-vote-buying-2019-philippine-midterm-elections](https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/election-fever-begins-lanao-del-sur).

<sup>247</sup> "At Least 20 Killed in Election-Related Violence Since December 2018," *Rappler*, May 13, 2019,

<https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/killed-election-related-violence-comelec>.

<sup>248</sup> Froilan Gallardo, "Election Fever Begins in Lanao del Sur, Maute Group Possible Threat," *Rappler*, September 13, 2021,

<https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/election-fever-begins-lanao-del-sur>.

<sup>249</sup> Amy Chew, "Malaysia's Coronavirus Lockdowns a 'Blessing in Disguise' for Reducing Isis Threat: Counterterrorism Chief," *South China Morning Post*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3117788/malaysias-coronavirus-lockdowns-blessing-disguise-reducing-isis>.

Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and other prominent politicians, including the Finance Minister, Attorney-General and the Religious Affairs minister.<sup>250</sup> The suspect, Wan Amirul Azlan Bin Jalaluddin, was reportedly the leader of a small local pro-IS cell known as Anshorullah At Tauhid.<sup>251</sup> Amirul, along with other cell members, was arrested in January 2020 and has remained in custody since then.<sup>252</sup> There were no other reported terrorist plots in 2021.

Pointing to the restricted movement orders imposed by the government, which has hampered inter-state and international movement, Malaysian Special Branch (MSB) Counter-Terrorism Director, Normah Ishak, stated it had “flattened the curve of terrorism” in the country.<sup>253</sup> She further noted that while there were a number of members of the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror group residing in Malaysia, they did not pose a security concern, as most had been rehabilitated and are unlikely to re-establish old networks.<sup>254</sup> Normah also stated that the release from prison in Indonesia of former JI leader Abu Bakar Bashir in January 2021, is unlikely to pose a significant security threat to Malaysia.<sup>255</sup> Additionally, Rohingya terror groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) continue to maintain a presence in

Malaysia. However, there was no reported activity from either group in 2021.

While the physical terrorist threat may have diminished to a certain extent, the threat in the online sphere remains significant for Malaysia. The government-imposed lockdowns have forced people to spend more time online, raising the likelihood of vulnerable individuals being exposed to radical ideologies in the cyber domain. Around the region, groups such as IS have increased their recruitment and radicalisation efforts through social media during the pandemic.<sup>256</sup> Apart from open platforms like Facebook, encrypted platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp tend to be popular domains of choice for these groups. MSB has also highlighted the likely presence of Al-Qaeda (AQ) elements in the country.<sup>257</sup>

After the March 2021 Makassar and subsequent Jakarta police headquarters terrorist attacks, a Malaysian woman, via social media, was reported to have called for more suicide attacks in the country. The woman had used several WhatsApp groups to spread pro-IS ideology and propaganda, including that of Aman Abdurrahman, the founder and leader of Indonesian pro-IS group, Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD).<sup>258</sup> IS sympathisers in Malaysia also made calls online for more powerful bombs to be used in terrorist

<sup>250</sup> Farik Zolkepli, “Lone Wolf Planned to Kill Several Top Leaders, Says Bukit Aman,” *The Star*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/03/25/lone-wolf-arrested-last-year-for-allegedly-planning-to-kill-several-top-govt-leaders-says-bukit-aman>.

<sup>251</sup> Farik Zolkepli, “Assassination Plot Involved Three People,” *The Star*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/03/28/assassination-plot-involved-three-people>.

<sup>252</sup> Hadi Azmi and Muzliza Mustafa, “Malaysian Police: Foiled IS Sympathizer’s Plot to Kill PM Mahathir Last Year,” *Benar News*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/my-is-plot-03252021174904.html>.

<sup>253</sup> Chew, “Malaysia’s COVID-19 Lockdowns Reduced Isis Threat.”

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Noah Lee, Tia Asmara, Ronna Nirmala, Mark Navales and Shailaja Neelakantan, “Southeast Asian Analysts: IS Steps Up Recruitment in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines,” *Benar News*, September 23, 2020, [https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/SEA\\_ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html](https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/SEA_ISIS-Threat-09232020163502.html).

<sup>257</sup> “Malaysia: Current and Emerging Threats,” Terrorism Analyst Training Course, Singapore, 2021.

<sup>258</sup> Arlina Arshad, “Malaysian Woman Spreading Extremist Ideology via WhatsApp,” *The Straits Times*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-woman-spreading-extremist-ideology-via-whatsapp>.

attacks<sup>259</sup> and the beheading of Indonesian national Paul Zhang who, in a YouTube video, had claimed to be the '26<sup>th</sup> Prophet', alongside making other offensive remarks regarding Islam.<sup>260</sup>

The threat posed by Malaysian militants currently in conflict zones overseas is another ongoing concern. Shortly after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August, the group claimed to have arrested two Malaysian nationals who were alleged to have been fighting for the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the IS' affiliate in Afghanistan.<sup>261</sup> The identity of the two individuals remains unknown.

Apart from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, Malaysian nationals were also found in other conflict zones, including Africa. In September 2021, a Malaysian individual was charged for his involvement with the AQ-linked Al Shabaab group in Somalia.<sup>262</sup> He had allegedly been a member of the group since 2009, and was suspected to have entered Somalia via Kenya, after completing his studies in Yemen.<sup>263</sup> This is the first known case of a Malaysian joining

an African militant group.<sup>264</sup> The case highlights the pull of non-conventional conflict zones outside the Middle East among Malaysian militants, and raises the prospect of other Malaysian jihadists being involved with other AQ-linked groups overseas, apart from IS.

There is also significant interest in Malaysia regarding the ongoing trial of two Malaysian terrorists currently held in Guantanamo Bay. Captured in 2003, the trial of Mohammed Nazir Lep and Mohd Farik Amin began on 30 August 2021 but had to be adjourned due to translation issues.<sup>265</sup> Both have been charged, alongside former JI leader Hambali, who is an Indonesian citizen, for their roles in the 2002 Bali Bombings and the 2003 JW Marriot Hotel bombing in Jakarta.<sup>266</sup> The Malaysian duo are also accused of concealing and facilitating the transfer of cash that had been sent by senior AQ operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to Hambali.<sup>267</sup> The money was meant for conducting more attacks. No new date has been set for the trial to resume.<sup>268</sup>

<sup>259</sup> Soo Wern Jun, "Report: Malaysian, Indonesian IS Supporters Call for More Violence After Terror Attack in Makassar," *Malay Mail*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/31/rapport-malaysian-indonesian-is-supporters-call-for-more-violence-after-ter/1962564>.

<sup>260</sup> Amy Chew, "Isis Supporters Want Indonesian Claiming to Be '26<sup>th</sup> Prophet' Beheaded for Insulting Islam's Prophet Mohammed," *South China Morning Post*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3130193/isis-supporters-want-indonesian-who-claimed-be-26th-prophet>.

<sup>261</sup> "Taleban Claims to Have Caught Two Malaysians Fighting for ISIS-Linked Militants in Kabul," *The Straits Times*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/taleban-claims-to-have-caught-two-malaysians-fighting-for-isis-k-in-kabul>.

<sup>262</sup> "Malaysian Man Sentenced to 15 Years' Jail for Assisting Al-Shabaab Terrorist Group," *The Star*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/09/24/malaysian-man-sentenced-to-15-years-jail-for-assisting-al-shabaab-terrorist-group>.

<sup>263</sup> Muzliza Mustafa and Noah Lee, "Malaysia Confirms Citizen Arrested in Somalia on Suspicion of Joining Al-Shabaab Militants," *Benar News*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysian-arrested-somalia-al-shabaab-09202021150928.html>.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Radzi Razak, "Courtroom Translation Hiccups Stall US Trial of Indonesian, Malaysian Militants behind Bali, Jakarta Bombings," *Malay Mail*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/08/31/courtroom-translation-hiccups-stall-us-trial-of-indonesian-malaysian-milita/2001778>.

<sup>266</sup> "Wisma Putra Following Trial of Malaysian Terror Suspects, Says Minister," *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/09/04/wisma-putra-following-trial-of-malaysian-terror-suspects-says-minister/>.

<sup>267</sup> Carol Rosenberg, "Three Guantánamo Detainees Charged in 2002 Bali Bombing," *The New York Times*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/guantanamo-bali-bombing.html>.

<sup>268</sup> "Guantanamo Terror Trial of 2 Malaysians Adjourns Amid Claims of 'Unfairness,'" *Free*

In September, Malaysian counter-terrorism officials also warned that the most significant terrorist-related threat the country faces stems from religious and ethnically motivated violent extremism, which could “spark ethno-nationalistic divisions that may lead to violence.”<sup>269</sup> In this respect, the propagation of divisive rhetoric along racial and religious lines by segments of the political class does not auger well for the country’s multi-religious and multi-racial society and nation building prospects, the official added.<sup>270</sup> The concern is that JI and IS-linked networks in the region, who have adeptly exploited racial and religious cleavages in the past, could seek to radicalise and recruit disaffected individuals around the country into their ranks.

#### *IS Returnees From Syria*

Currently, there are 56 Malaysian nationals known to be in Syria. Of these, 19 are men, 12 are women and 25 are children.<sup>271</sup> They are believed to be held in various camps in Syria, including Al-Roj and Al-Hasakah, and prisons in Idlib.<sup>272</sup> A total of 122 Malaysians left for Syria following the onset of that country’s civil war a decade ago. Of

these 16 individuals have been repatriated to Malaysia and 48 (42 men, 1 woman and 5 children) killed in Syria.<sup>273</sup>

Recruitment of Malaysians into Syria has largely dropped in recent years, following the deaths of high-profile Malaysian IS fighters and recruiters such as Muhammad Wanndy Mohamad Jedi, Fudhail Omar, Akel Zainal and Muhammad Nizam Ariffin.<sup>274</sup> The Malaysian militant landscape, which has traditionally been driven by charismatic individuals such as Wanndy, has remained leaderless since his death, which may explain the general drop in militant recruitment and activity in the country. However, the exact numbers and identities of Malaysians still actively involved in militant activities in Syria and other conflict zones remain unknown.

#### *Other Extremist Groups*

In September 2020, the Johor state religious authorities issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) against the Hizb ut-Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) group, prohibiting its activities and stating that the movement was *haram* (banned).<sup>275</sup> State police had initiated detailed investigations into 17

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*Malaysia Today (FMT)*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/09/01/guantanamo-terror-trial-of-2-malaysians-adjourns-amid-claims-of-unfairness/>.

<sup>269</sup> Amy Chew, “From Malaysia to the Philippines, What Are the Most Serious Terror Threats in Southeast Asia 20 Years after 9/11?,” *South China Morning Post*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3149728/malaysia-philippines-what-are-most-serious-terror-threats>.

<sup>270</sup> According to observers, the continued use of racial and religious rhetoric by some political leaders has helped to sow sentiments of Malay-Islamic supremacy and an “us-vs-them” narrative, that has contributed to political instability in the country. See Amy Chew, “Malaysia’s Biggest Threat for 2020 Is ‘Political and Terrorist Radicalisation’, Experts Warn,” *South China Morning Post*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3046491/malaysias-biggest-threat-2020-political-and-terrorist>.

<sup>271</sup> Zolkepli, “Lone Wolf Planned to Kill Several Top Leaders, Says Bukit Aman.”

<sup>272</sup> Nisha David, “Malaysia: IS Extremists Campaigning to Keep Fighters in Syria,” *Benar News*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/ideological-campaign-01302020151027.html>.

<sup>273</sup> “Malaysia: Current and Emerging Threats.”

<sup>274</sup> Farik Zolkepli, “Police: Terrorism Recruits on the Decline Since Wanndy’s Death,” *The Star*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/08/22/terrorism-recruitment-on-the-decline>; Zolkepli, “Lone Wolf Planned to Kill Several Top Leaders, Says Bukit Aman.”

<sup>275</sup> Nurul Amanina Suhaini, “Fahaman Hizbut Tahrir Difatwakan Bercanggah Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah - Tosrin,” *Berita Harian Online*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/09/30/36818/fahaman-hizbut-tahrir-difatwakan-bercanggah-ahli-sunnah-wal-jamaah>; Fahmi Yusof, “Hizbut Tahrir Haram, Kata Kerajaan Johor,” *Free Malaysia Today*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/bahasa/2020/09/30/hizbut-tahrir-haram-kata-kerajaan-johor/>.

reports lodged against the group, which included allegations of causing disharmony and public mischief.<sup>276</sup> The police further stated that counter-terrorism laws would be used against the group if “they crossed the line of national security and public order.”<sup>277</sup> HTM has been declared illegal in four other states, namely, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Negri Sembilan and Sabah.

HTM espouses a hardline, radical ideology that calls for the formation of a transnational Islamic Caliphate, and governance under sharia law. While HTM rejects violence and advocates for the takeover of the government by political means, it vehemently rejects secularism and democracy, and is anti-Western and anti-establishment in its outlook. Moreover, HTM does not rule out the possibility of using force to topple the democratically elected government.<sup>278</sup>

The group maintains a significant online presence, which it uses to disseminate its ideology. Recruitment of HTM members is primarily centred around students and academics from tertiary institutions and educated professionals.<sup>279</sup> While HTM does not pose a significant security threat at present, its ideology may, in similar vein to other violent Islamist groups, serve as a precursor to violence in certain cases, owing to its propagation of concepts such as jihad and an anti-Western outlook.<sup>280</sup>

<sup>276</sup> Ben Tan, “Johor Police Chief: 17 Reports Lodged Against Hardline Islamist Movement Hizbut Tahrir,” *Malay Mail*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/01/johor-police-chief-17-reports-lodged-against-hardline-islamist-movement-hiz/1908468>.

<sup>277</sup> “Action Will Be Taken Against HTM Followers if They Cross the Line - Police,” *Malaysiakini*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/544818>.

<sup>278</sup> Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass and Jasmin Singh, “Hizbut Tahrir in Malaysia: A Threat to National Security?,” *Middle East Institute*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hizbut-tahrir-malaysia-threat-national-security>.

<sup>279</sup> “Golongan profesional, penuntut universiti antara pengikut Hizbut Tahrir - Polis,” *Astro Awani*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.astroawani.com/video->

## Maritime Security

The eastern state of Sabah continues to be exploited by terrorists, smugglers and kidnappers as a hideout and transit point. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) from the Philippines, for example, has made use of the porous borders linking Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia. In 2021, there were three terrorism-related security operations reported. On 8 May 2021, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), in cooperation with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), apprehended 8 ASG suspects (two sub-leaders and six followers) in Beaufort, on the west coast of Sabah.<sup>281</sup> Eight women and 21 children were also arrested in the operation.<sup>282</sup>

The ASG members were believed to have fled to Sabah due to security operations carried out by the Filipino authorities in Sulu, a conflict-ridden island chain off southwestern Mindanao. They had reportedly intended to make Sabah a staging point for kidnapping activities and to facilitate the flow of foreign militants into Southern Philippines.<sup>283</sup> Slightly over a week later, Malaysian authorities shot dead another five suspected ASG members in

[malaysia/golongan-profesional-penuntut-universiti-antara-pengikut-hizbut-tahrir-polis-1869640](https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/10/01/johor-police-chief-17-reports-lodged-against-hardline-islamist-movement-hiz/1908468).

<sup>280</sup> Dass and Singh, “Hizbut Tahrir in Malaysia.”

<sup>281</sup> “8 Abu Sayyaf Suspects Arrested in Sabah,” *Rappler*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/abu-sayyaf-suspects-arrested-sabah-may-8-2021>.

<sup>282</sup> Ken Chang, “5 IS-Linked Filipino Militants Killed in Sabah Shootout, Malaysian Police Say,” *Benar News*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysia/an/my-ph-abusayyaf-05182021133228.html>.

<sup>283</sup> “Malaysia Captures Eight Abu Sayyaf Militants With Help From the Philippines,” *South China Morning Post*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3132998/malaysia-captures-eight-abu-sayyaf-militants-help>.

Beaufort.<sup>284</sup> The police also revealed that a local ASG cell had ramped up recruitment activities among undocumented migrants.<sup>285</sup>

In August, two ASG members, who were planning kidnap-for-ransom operations in the area, were shot dead in Sandakan.<sup>286</sup> An earlier operation in the same month saw the arrest of 11 Filipinos and 14 Indonesians, who were undocumented.<sup>287</sup> Seven of the 11 Filipinos were found to be members of ASG.<sup>288</sup> The incident highlights the continued threat posed by illegal immigrants linked to active terrorist networks in the Tri-Border Area (TBA), contrary to some reports which claimed that they went to Sabah only for economic gains.<sup>289</sup> Additionally, the entry of illegal immigrants from Indonesia continues to plague the ESSCOM.<sup>290</sup> Smuggling activities too persisted into 2021, with drugs and contraband being trafficked in<sup>291</sup> and out of<sup>292</sup> Sabah.

<sup>284</sup> Chang, "5 IS-Linked Filipino Militants Killed in Sabah Shootout, Malaysian Police Say."

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> "Two Abu Sayyaf Members Shot Dead in Sandakan Planned Kidnapping for Ransom," *Astro Awani*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/two-abu-sayyaf-members-shot-dead-sandakan-planned-kidnapping-ransom-315109>.

<sup>287</sup> Stephanie Lee, "Two Suspected Abu Sayyaf Militants Shot Dead in Sandakan," *The Star*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/20/cops-shoot-two-men-believed-to-be-abu-sayyaf-in-sandakan>.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Charles Ramendran, "Sabah a Safe Haven for Foreign Terrorist Fighters," *The Sun Daily*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/sabah-a-safe-haven-for-foreign-terrorist-fighters-BJ8308407>.

<sup>290</sup> Olivia Miwil, "Esscom Detains 21 Illegal Immigrants From Indonesia," *New Straits Times*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2021/05/694353/esscom-detains-21-illegal-immigrants-indonesia>.

<sup>291</sup> Juwan Riduan, "Sabah Police to Tackle Drug Trafficking, Prevent Sabah From Becoming Transit Point," *New Straits Times*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime>

## Responses

Overall, counter-terrorism operations in Malaysia have been successful in capturing or killing terrorists, and thwarting a number of potential attacks. In 2020, only seven arrests were made, with the decreased number of arrests primarily attributed to the closed borders and COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>293</sup> INTERPOL also announced that it will be setting up an office in Malaysia in 2022, to crack down on biological threats emerging on the dark web.<sup>294</sup> This is a positive development as it will assist Malaysia in investigating more complex cases related to terrorism.

In Sabah, the ESSCOM is seeking to strengthen security measures in Lahad Datu and Semporna, which are key entry points from Indonesia and Philippines.<sup>295</sup> An ESSCOM base will be opened in 2024 on Semporna Island.<sup>296</sup> Despite the various challenges, which have been accentuated by the ongoing pandemic,

courts/2021/06/697920/sabah-police-tackle-drug-trafficking-prevent-sabah-becoming-transit.

<sup>292</sup> Kristy Inus, "Esscom Seizes 920 Packets of Contraband Cigs Left at Tawau Riverside," *The Star*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/05/20/esscom-seizes-920-packets-of-contraband-cigs-left-at-tawau-riverside>.

<sup>293</sup> Muzliza Mustafa and Noah Lee, "Terror Arrests Drop in Malaysia Due to Pandemic, New Policing Approach," *Benar News*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysia/an/my-counter-terror-01152021181945.html>.

<sup>294</sup> Imran Ariff, "Interpol's Dark Web Task Force Comes to Malaysia," *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/06/29/interpol-s-dark-web-task-force-comes-to-malaysia/>.

<sup>295</sup> "EssCom to Enhance Security in EssZone to Prevent Cross-Border Crime," *The Sun Daily*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/esscom-to-enhance-security-in-esszone-to-prevent-cross-border-crime-BL7872276>.

<sup>296</sup> Olivia Miwil, "ESSCOM: Semporna Tourist Island to Have Forward Operating Base in 2024," *New Straits Times*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/01/654580/esscom-semporna-tourist-island-have-forward-operating-base-2024>.

initiatives by ESSCOM have yielded some success. These included two security operations, namely Ops Cegah Pati Daratan and Ops Benteng, which were initiated in 2020 to tighten border security and weed out illegal immigration.<sup>297</sup> ESSCOM also has been actively monitoring new points of entry from which illegals, terrorists and smugglers attempt to make their way into Sabah.<sup>298</sup> Since January 2021, 1725 illegals from the Philippines alone have been deported.<sup>299</sup>

Under the 12<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan, which aims to reduce income disparities and enhance development in impoverished parts of the country, the government also plans to establish several new control posts and military camps in the eastern Sabah region, as part of a “security fencing” exercise aimed at target hardening in vulnerable areas in the region.<sup>300</sup>

With regards to its citizens still in Syria, Malaysia says it will continue to maintain an open-door repatriation policy. Some individuals have expressed a willingness to return home, while others have rejected the government’s offer. A major challenge for the authorities is the fact that the Malaysian nationals are held in camps controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which the Malaysian government does not recognise diplomatically.<sup>301</sup> Given many of these camps have become hotbeds of radicalisation, these unrepatriated individuals could be further radicalised, and later attempt to slip into the country

covertly, or with forged identification, which poses a significant security threat.<sup>302</sup>

## Outlook

Malaysia has made significant progress in recent years in its counter-terrorism efforts. Still, there remains tell-tale signs that the threat of terrorism and extremism is far from over. For one, the arrest of Malaysian nationals in Somalia and Afghanistan illustrates that the threat posed by Malaysian fighters joining terrorist groups overseas persists. The situation around Sabah has also improved since the ESSCOM has channelled more resources and manpower to secure the area. But new challenges could be on the horizon, particularly when international borders begin to reopen as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, and more attempts at illegal entry into the area are made.

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has also excited sections of the Muslim community in Malaysia, as illustrated by the congratulatory message sent by the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), otherwise known as the Malaysian Islamic Party, to the Taliban.<sup>303</sup> For Malaysian authorities, the experience gleaned from the JI’s prior operations and subsequent security crackdown on the group in the early 2000s can be instructive in assessing the present security concerns relating to developments in Afghanistan.

Local jihadist groups have had historical ties to AQ, and in particular JI,<sup>304</sup> while

<sup>297</sup> “ESSCOM Identifies 10 Illegal Immigrant Landing Spots in Tawau,” *Borneo Today*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.borneotoday.net/esscom-identifies-10-illegal-immigrant-landing-spots-in-tawau/>.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> “Sabah Immigration Director: 1,725 Filipino Undocumented Migrants Deported From the State Since January,” *Malay Mail*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/05/22/sabah-immigration-director-1725-filipino-undocumented-migrants-deported-fro/1976192>.

<sup>300</sup> “Planned Esszone ‘Security Fencing’ to Get Boost From 12MP, Says Esscom Chief,” *Daily Express*, September 28, 2021,

<https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/178693/planned-esszone-security-fencing-to-get-boost-from-12mp-says-esscom-chief/>.

<sup>301</sup> Chew, “Malaysia’s COVID-19 Lockdowns Reduced ISIS Threat.”

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>303</sup> Shahrin Aizat Noorshahrizam, “PAS State Assemblyman Congratulates New Taliban-Led Government in Afghanistan,” *Yahoo*, August 18, 2021, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/pas-state-assemblyman-congratulates-taliban-061544652.html>.

<sup>304</sup> The country was an economic centre and transit point for JI and also a launching pad for



Malaysian jihadists also took part in the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. In the present context, the possibility that old militant networks may be reinvigorated, or new ones cultivated, with the Taliban takeover cannot be discounted. Thus, closer cooperation with the international community is also needed, in containing the continued threat posed by Islamist extremism from within Malaysia and abroad.

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### MYANMAR

*Amid the turmoil generated by the military's dramatic ousting of the Aung San Suu Kyi government, Western Myanmar's Rohingya crisis persisted in 2021. The ethno-nationalist Rakhine outfit, the Arakan Army (AA), took over most of the restive Rakhine state, and emerged as a key player in the security dynamics of Myanmar's westernmost frontier for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile across the border in Bangladesh, around 1.2 million Rohingya Muslims remain stranded in*

*refugee camps under squalid conditions. And with no solution in sight for their safe return to Rakhine state, Rohingya grievances have been exacerbated. For Myanmar, a convergence of factors ranging from long-standing ethnic grievances, mass displacements and economic setbacks, to the brutal military crackdowns and surging COVID-19 infections, has contributed to a grim security outlook. In addition to a comprehensive and time-bound roadmap to achieve a durable peace, the escalating security situation along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border necessitates closer monitoring and regional and multilateral cooperation.*

### Trends

In 2021, Western Myanmar's threat environment was characterised by three broad developments. First, the military (or Tatmadaw) seized power in a coup on 1 February and has violently put down anti-coup protests, killing hundreds of civilians.<sup>305</sup> Increasing clashes, between the military and a collection of armed militias that have sprung up across the country, also created new tensions and uncertainties. Second, the ethnic armed group, the AA, which has fought for greater autonomy in Rakhine state since 2018, asserted political control across much of the territory, that saw an exodus of a million Rohingyas to Bangladesh following a series of clashes in 2017.

Third, the coup and ensuing violence has made prospects for the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees, languishing in squalid and overcrowded camps in south-eastern Bangladesh, more challenging. This, coupled with the continued disenfranchisement, discrimination and threat of violence faced by the community in Myanmar, has arguably fostered a fertile environment for radicalisation. Against this backdrop,

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militants from within and neighbouring countries like Indonesia into Afghanistan.

<sup>305</sup> "Myanmar Army Clashes With Anti-Junta Militia in Major City, BBC News, June 22, 2021,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57567789>.

armed insurgent groups, including those with a jihadist agenda, have increased their activities with destabilising effects on the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderland and beyond.

### *Coup, Chaos and Communalism*

Myanmar's security landscape turned chaotic following the military coup in February.<sup>306</sup> The army ousted the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government, alleging widespread electoral fraud in the country's November 2020 general election, that the former won in a landslide. The Tatmadaw also detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior NLD leaders, in addition to declaring a year-long state of emergency. Military head Min Aung Hlaing assumed all state power during this period, in his capacity as commander in chief (he appointed himself as the Prime Minister in August).<sup>307</sup>

In the aftermath of the coup, security forces operating under the junta-backed State Administration Council (SAC) launched lethal crackdowns on anti-coup protestors and the broader civilian population, which triggered violent resistance around the country.<sup>308</sup> Newly organised resistance

forces, mostly drawn from local communities in some towns and villages, launched guerrilla styled attacks that inflicted significant casualties on the Tatmadaw and police, adding to the volatile mix in Myanmar where over 20 ethnic rebel groups have engaged in a low-intensity insurgency for decades.<sup>309</sup> To date, more than 1,100 civilians have been killed in the skirmishes, according to the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, a human rights group that has been tracking the situation.<sup>310</sup>

In September, the National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (NUG), comprising a group of deposed lawmakers, opponents of the coup and representatives of various ethnic minority groups that seek recognition as the legitimate government of Myanmar, launched a "people's defensive war" against the ruling junta, urging the public to revolt.<sup>311</sup> The NUG had earlier announced the formation of a People's Defense Force (PDF), to unify the various local militia groups and anti-coup demonstrators.

However, the extent of this influence remains unclear, and the NUG has also largely failed to convince the existing rebel groups, who have waged a long running

<sup>306</sup> Bill Chappell, "Myanmar Coup: With Aung San Suu Kyi Detained, Military Takes Over Government," *National Public Radio*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/01/962758188/myanmar-coup-military-detains-aung-san-suu-kyi-plans-new-election-in-2022>.

<sup>307</sup> "Fears of Another Long Dictatorship as Myanmar Coup Maker Appoints Himself PM," *The Irrawaddy*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/fears-of-another-long-dictatorship-as-myanmar-coup-maker-appoints-himself-pm.html>.

<sup>308</sup> In response, security forces have launched indiscriminate attacks in civilian zones, using artillery, airstrikes and helicopters. See "Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup," International Crisis Group, June 28, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b168-taking-aim-tatmadaw-new-armed-resistance-myanmars-coup>.

<sup>309</sup> "Myanmar Violence Escalates With Rise of 'Self-defense' Groups, Report Says," *Voice of America*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-myanmar-violence-escalates-rise-self-defense-groups-report-says/6207546.html>.

<sup>310</sup> Over two hundred thousand civilians have also been displaced from their homes, mostly in ethnic minority areas, as they flee military air strikes and heavy-weapon attacks. For details see Thet Swe Win, "The Coup United the People Of Myanmar Against Oppression," *Al-Jazeera*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/1/the-coup-united-the-people-of-myanmar-against-oppression>.

<sup>311</sup> "Myanmar's Shadow Government Launches 'People's Defensive War' Against the Military Junta," *CNN*, 8 September, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/07/asia/myanmar-nug-peoples-war-intl-hnk/index.html>.

struggle against the Myanmar military in different regions over autonomy, ethnic identity and economic resources, to form a military alliance. This is despite several ethnic armed groups, including the Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Liberation Army, expressing support for the resistance movement.<sup>312</sup> Nonetheless, the NUG said in an October statement that more than 1,560 junta soldiers had been killed and 552 others injured since the call to arms was made.<sup>313</sup> The junta-backed SAC has declared the NUG illegal and a terrorist organisation.<sup>314</sup>

The emergence of local resistance forces in some areas, such as north-western Myanmar and Kayah State, is fundamentally altering the complexion of Myanmar's larger conflict map. Before the coup, many of these regions had not experienced violence in decades. Analysts say the unrest has been facilitated by the ready availability of guns in many households, given a strong hunting tradition, as well as access to trafficking networks who use north-western Myanmar (including Kachin and Shan states) as a conduit for transporting weapons destined for insurgent groups in north-eastern India.<sup>315</sup>

Meanwhile in June, the NUG issued a new policy on the Rohingyas, promising to end human rights abuses and grant them citizenship.<sup>316</sup> Although some NUG supporters welcomed the new stance, most among the country's Bamar-Buddhist majority appeared unwilling to grant concessions to the minority Rohingya community. Locals in Rakhine State were also unhappy at not being consulted and questioned the NUG's authority for issuing the policy.<sup>317</sup>

The proposed policy was also rejected by the Myanmar junta, Buddhist nationalists and the Rakhine ultranationalist lobby. On 12 June, junta spokesman Major-General Zaw Min Tun declared it a "time bomb" that would "destroy" other recognised major ethnic groups, or "national races."<sup>318</sup> While his comments failed to gain wider traction, there remains a risk the issue will energise the Tatmadaw's nationalist base, particularly elements from the hardline Buddhist group, the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (formerly known as the Ma Ba Tha).<sup>319</sup> According to reports, some former members of the group have since reportedly joined a shadowy pro-junta paramilitary network known as Pyusawhti (also spelled as Pyu Saw Htee).<sup>320</sup> Among other activities, the

<sup>312</sup> In some cases, these groups have provided sanctuary or military training to fleeing dissidents.

<sup>313</sup> "Myanmar Resistance Claims Rising Junta Casualties, Destruction of Telecom Towers," *Radio Free Asia*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/resistance-claims-10082021155939.html>.

<sup>314</sup> "Myanmar Junta Designates Shadow Government as 'Terrorist' Group," *Deutsche Welle*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-junta-designates-shadow-government-as-terrorist-group/a-57473057>.

<sup>315</sup> "Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup."

<sup>316</sup> Discrimination and violence against the largely stateless Rohingya Muslim minority have been a source of controversy both within Myanmar and internationally. See Rebecca Ratcliffe, "Ousted Myanmar Politicians Call for Rohingya to Join Fight Against Junta," *The Guardian*, June 4,

2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/ousted-myanmar-politicians-call-for-rohingya-to-join-fight-against-junta>.

<sup>317</sup> "The NUG's Rohingya Policy: 'Campaign Statement' or Genuine Reform?" *The Frontier Myanmar*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-nugs-rohingya-policy-campaign-statement-or-genuine-reform/>.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ma Ba Tha had been repeatedly accused of inciting anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar over much of the past decade.

<sup>320</sup> All of Pyusawhti's pages and accounts on social media stress the importance of *amyo* (race), *batha* (religion), *sasana* (the Buddha's teachings), and the military. Similar language has been commonly espoused by members of Ma Ba Tha. For details, see "The NUG's Rohingya Police."

network's members have issued death threats against civilians.<sup>321</sup>

### *Arakan Army Consolidates Power in Rakhine State*

Myanmar's military and the AA have observed an unofficial ceasefire in Western Rakhine state since November 2020, following almost three years of intensive fighting that has displaced more than 230,000 civilians.<sup>322</sup> In this time, nearly 1,000 others have been seriously injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots, and landmine explosions, including more than 170 children.<sup>323</sup>

With the junta continuing a major deployment of troops to suppress the pro-democracy resistance forces in other parts of the country, the AA has significantly expanded its administrative and judicial mechanisms across Rakhine state,<sup>324</sup> including in areas populated by Rohingya communities.<sup>325</sup> According to reports, apart

from the urban cities and major towns where there is a large military presence, the AA controls the rural and border areas, which comprise about 80 percent of the region, with hundreds of its members running these territories.<sup>326</sup>

On 11 March, the military, likely recognising the AA as one of the most significant threats to its grip on power, removed the group from its list of terrorist organisations.<sup>327</sup> Through this action, the Tatmadaw possibly sought to placate the AA's leadership and, in the process, enable the channelling of attention and resources to combat protests and uprisings in the state's major cities and towns.<sup>328</sup> For its part, unlike several other ethnic armed groups, the AA did not voice support for the anti-coup protests.

The rebel group's grip on power became more apparent in early August, when it announced that the people of Rakhine state could henceforth report all crimes and

<sup>321</sup> The Pyusawhti collective was allegedly formed with supporters of the military in the wake of the 1 February coup, with the aim of undermining anti-dictatorship forces with threats and violence. See "Pyu Saw Htee Members Surrender to Resistance Fighters in Yaw and Hand Over Weapons," *Myanmar Now*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/pyu-saw-htee-members-surrender-to-resistance-fighters-in-yaw-and-hand-over-weapons>.

<sup>322</sup> At least 200,000 people remain internally displaced by the armed conflict in Rakhine and southern Chin states. Many are unable to return to their homes, given the risks posed by, for example, unexploded landmines littered around the area. See "ULA/AA to Establish Its Own Judicial System in Rakhine State," *Myanmar Now*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state>.

<sup>323</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, "After Myanmar's Military Coup, Arakan Army Accelerates Implementation of the 'Way of Rakhita'," *The Diplomat*, April 14, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/after-myanmars-military-coup-arakan-army-accelerates-implementation-of-the-way-of-rakhita/>.

<sup>324</sup> "Myanmar Junta Offers COVID-19 Vaccines to Arakan Army," *The Irrawaddy*, September 22, 2021,

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/myanmar-junta-offers-COVID-19-vaccines-to-arakan-army.html>.

<sup>325</sup> Laetitia Van Den Assum and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, "Relief Agencies Should Push for Independent Access to Myanmar's Rakhine State," *The Diplomat*, September 10, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/relief-agencies-should-push-for-independent-access-to-myanmars-rakhine-state/>.

<sup>326</sup> "Interview: Junta Administration in Myanmar's Rakhine State 'Has Totally Collapsed', Says Former MP," *Radio Free Asia*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/rakhine-09292021154720.html>.

<sup>327</sup> "Withdrawal From Declaration as Terrorist Group," *The Global New Light Of Myanmar*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/withdrawal-from-declaration-as-terrorist-group/#article-title>.

<sup>328</sup> In addition, the Tatmadaw adopted several other confidence building measures, likely to improve relations with AA, including the resumption of mobile internet services in areas of Rakhine State and release of AA prisoners. See Robert Bociaga, "Myanmar at the Crossroads," *Asia Media Centre*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/opinion/myanmar-at-the-crossroads/>.

land disputes, as well as other legal issues, to its political branch, the United League of Arakan (ULA).<sup>329</sup> In a statement published on social media, AA deputy commander Brig-Gen Nyo Twan Aung stated that all legal cases, including violence, theft, and land disputes, could be referred to the ULA judiciary.<sup>330</sup>

But reports point to an uneasy truce between the Tatmadaw and AA rebels. For one, village communities in some areas said they were warned by military leaders that the rebels had not formed a legitimate government, and community complaints should be directed to Tatmadaw-run police or administrative departments instead.<sup>331</sup> In late August, reports also emerged of the junta reinforcing troops in Rakhine state, including in the Rathedaung and Buthidaung townships, as well as the capital Sittwe, although a resumption of fighting in the short term, while cannot be ruled out, appears unlikely.<sup>332</sup>

For Rohingya Muslims still living in Rakhine state, many have been caught between the AA and Myanmar military, as both jostle for position and influence over the territory.<sup>333</sup> Like the Tatmadaw, the AA has traditionally not recognised the Rohingyas as one of the ethnic groups in Bamar-Buddhist majority

Myanmar. However, as it seeks to consolidate its power, the AA has more recently struck a diplomatic and inclusive tone, with its leadership reportedly expressing interest in engaging the Rohingya community in its administration and law enforcement work around the state.<sup>334</sup> But beyond public expressions of intent, the AA has yet to take tangible steps to gain the trust of the Rohingyas, and it remains unclear how the group will position itself on the wider Rohingya issue going forward.

### *Increased Activities of Rohingya Armed Groups*

The activities of various Rohingya armed groups also increased significantly in 2021. Much of this uptick was visible in the Rohingya refugee camp areas in neighbouring Bangladesh, where the local host communities have reported increased crime rates and a deteriorating law and order situation. Many among the refugee populace also reported living in fear of the criminal elements operating in these camps. Despite authorities doubling the presence of security personnel, and relocating some Rohingyas from vulnerable areas,<sup>335</sup> incidents such as killings, kidnappings for ransom, drug

<sup>329</sup> "Arakan Army Eclipsing Government in Administering Myanmar's Rakhine State Amid Cease-fire," *Radio Free Asia*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/a-a-08232021210057.html>.

<sup>330</sup> Complaints can be submitted by victims, their relatives, or eyewitnesses to the ULA via email, the Russian social media platform VK, and the mobile app Telegram, the AA said. See "ULA/AA to Establish Its Own Judicial System in Rakhine State," *Myanmar Now*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state>.

<sup>331</sup> "Myanmar Military Tells Muslims Not to Contact Arakan Army," *The Irrawaddy*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-tells-muslims-not-to-contact-arakan-army.html>.

<sup>332</sup> "Arakan Army Eclipsing Government in Administering Myanmar's Rakhine State Amid Cease-Fire," *Radio Free Asia*, August 23, 2021,

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/a-a-08232021210057.html>.

<sup>333</sup> "Myanmar Military Tells Muslims Not to Contact Arakan Army," "Military Junta Attempts To Undermine AA Rule In Rakhine State," *Myanmar Peace Monitor*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/ns/military-junta-attempts-undermine-aa-rule-rakhine-state>.

<sup>334</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, "Arakan Army Seeks to Build 'Inclusive' Administration in Rakhine State," *The Diplomat*, August 31, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-look-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/>.

<sup>335</sup> Since December 2020, Bangladesh has moved as many as 19,000 refugees to a newly built housing complex and infrastructure in Bhashan Char island, off the mainland. There are plans to relocate more than 80,000 others from the overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar. Further, after months of negotiation, Dhaka and UNHCR on October 9 signed a memorandum that clears

trafficking, arms trafficking, human smuggling and rape, remained rampant in the camps and surrounding areas throughout the year. The shooting of a prominent Rohingya leader and rights activist Mohibullah by unidentified criminals in late September was a notable incident,<sup>336</sup> with his family blaming the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya armed group, for the killing.<sup>337</sup> ARSA, however, denied any responsibility for the murder.<sup>338</sup>

ARSA continues to operate with a degree of dominance in the Bangladesh-based Rohingya camps. In 2021, the group allegedly carried out several dozen killings in the camp areas, targeting fellow Rohingyas and members of the Bengali host community. However, ARSA has been increasingly put on the backfoot of late, following several operations by both Bangladesh and Myanmar authorities, and has resorted to social media and other propaganda activities to gain sympathy and support from the Rohingya community, especially among the diaspora. Some of the group's mid-level commanders have already been arrested. Further, local observers in Bangladesh noted that many

of ARSA's recruits who crossed over to Bangladesh in 2017 are fugitive criminals from Myanmar, and are trying to obstruct the Rohingyas' repatriation to Myanmar, in order to avoid arrest.<sup>339</sup>

Another armed group, the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which was founded in 1982, had frequently attacked security outposts in Maungdaw Township on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border, according to historical records.<sup>340</sup> Dormant since 2006, the group became active again in 2021. In March, RSO claimed to have killed 22 Myanmar soldiers in a pre-dawn raid on an army post in the western Rakhine state.<sup>341</sup> There was no official statement about the incident by the military, although it was instrumental in helping the group launch a comeback.

On 12 May, RSO again engaged with Myanmar border forces near Aung Chan Thar village. While initial reports released by the Myanmar side mistook RSO for ARSA, subsequent reports correctly named them as RSO. The Myanmar side claimed one RSO casualty, which was acknowledged by a subsequent RSO statement, which also (unconfirmed)

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the way for the U.N. agency to begin humanitarian operations on Bhashan Char. For details see "Rohingya Laud Deal to Allow UNHCR to Operate on Bhashan Char," *Radio Free Asia*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/bangladesh-rohingya-10192021152204.html>.

<sup>336</sup> "Rohingya Leader Mohibullah Shot Dead," *The Daily Star*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/rohingya-leader-mohibullah-shot-dead-2187421>.

<sup>337</sup> Following the killing, amid mounting tensions between various armed groups and the climate of heightened security, at least seven Rohingyas were killed by unknown assailants in a shooting-stabbing attack at an Islamic seminary in a refugee camp along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. See "Seven Killed in Rohingya Refugee Camp Attack: Bangladesh Police," *Al Jazeera*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/22/bangladesh-rohingya-refugee-camps-seven-killed-police>.

<sup>338</sup> ARSA The Army, "Words of Condolences for Respected #Rohingya Leader Mr. Muhibullah," Twitter, October 1, 2021, [https://twitter.com/ARSA\\_Official/status/1443841955000033283/photo/1](https://twitter.com/ARSA_Official/status/1443841955000033283/photo/1).

<sup>339</sup> According to media reports, in addition to ARSA, more than a dozen other armed groups are operating in the camps and surrounding areas. Though the exact number of groups is not known, estimates vary from six to 15. In addition to ARSA, other key groups are the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Islami Mahad, Nabi Hossen Group, Munna Group, Sukkor Group, Abdul Hakim Group, and Zakir Group.

<sup>340</sup> "Rohingya Armed Groups Active Again in Western Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rohingya-armed-groups-active-again-in-western-myanmar.html>.

<sup>341</sup> Sorwar Alam, "Rohingya Militants Said to Kill 22 Myanmar Troops," *Anadolu Agency*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/rohingya-militants-said-to-kill-22-myanmar-troops/2192747>.

claimed four Myanmar casualties. The RSO circulated the photograph of his military dress with the identity card attached. An M-22 gun and its ammunition were also found with the body of the RSO fighter.<sup>342</sup>

While the group had previously faced criticism for not providing evidence to back its claims, its willingness to wage a fight against Myanmar security forces is believed to have attracted significant support from among Rohingya youth living in Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere. The group, which operates in the border area near Bandarban and Cox's Bazar, has also become increasingly active on social media and has shared videos and photographs that show RSO fighters undergoing military training.

Separately, Islami Mahad,<sup>343</sup> a little-known Rohingya Islamist outfit, was also active in 2021, both in Rakhine state as well as in Bangladesh. However, its presence remains enigmatic, with the group's ideology being unclear. The group is active in the border camps, with its possible stronghold being Camp-21 (Chakmarkul Cox's Bazar) and Camp-22 (Unchiprang, Teknaf). The group has approximately 1,000 fighters, and its military unit named "Omar" is known to have carried out operations in Myanmar. Islami Mahad is also a strong opponent of ARSA, and competes with the latter for influence through its network of 130 madrassas in the camp areas.<sup>344</sup> Both groups are engaged in drug trafficking and extortion, as they jostle for dominance.<sup>345</sup>

Various reports have also indicated that Rohingya armed groups based in

Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district are raising funds via criminal activities, particularly by trafficking in drugs manufactured in Myanmar. A combination of land and sea routes is used to bring the drugs into Bangladesh with a significant portion of the funds generated allegedly spent to purchase arms from Myanmar. Overall, the growing financial capabilities of the Rohingya armed groups, intra-group rivalries, and competition for dominance are developments that require monitoring.

Operationally, Rohingya armed groups have killed several dozen persons in the camp areas in 2021, and are also engaged in robbery as well as arms, drug and human trafficking. According to reports, the camp areas have become a sanctuary for these groups at night.<sup>346</sup> The uptick in the Rohingya crime network's activity has generated concern, fear, and disgust within the host community, who are demanding the immediate repatriation of the Rohingya refugee population to Myanmar.

Several developments in 2021 also highlighted the vulnerability of the Rohingyas in the Bangladesh-based camps to recruitment by jihadist networks. In May, police arrested a suspected operative of banned militant outfit Hizbut-Tahrir (HT) in Cox's Bazar. He had been playing an active role in the IT arm of the militant outfit. Evidence of his involvement in the outfit's online conferences and campaigns was also uncovered. The operative had been working at Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), a reputed Non-Government Organisation in Bangladesh, as an assistant technical

<sup>342</sup> "Border Guard Force Kills One RSO in Rakhine," *Eleven Media Group*, May 14, 2021, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/border-guard-force-kills-one-rso-in-rakhine>.

<sup>343</sup> Also pronounced as Islami Mahas and Islami Mahazz.

<sup>344</sup> Raheed Ejaz and Abdul Kuddus, "ARSA Now Big Threat to Security in Rohingya Camps," *Prothom Alo English*, October 26, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/arsa->

[now-big-threat-to-security-in-rohingya-camps](#).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Sohel Mamun, "Nights Are Dangerous in Rohingya Camps," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 2, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/rohingya-crisis/2021/10/02/nights-are-dangerous-in-rohingya-camps>.

officer.<sup>347</sup> He possibly used his profession as a cover.

On 10 May 2021, Katiba al-Mahdi fi Bilad al-Arakan, a pro-Islamic State (IS) insurgent group also released the second issue of its English-language Arakan magazine through various encrypted Telegram channels. The largely unknown group claimed to fight for the Rohingyas, although there is no evidence of its presence beyond social media. Additionally, Bangladeshi pro-IS militants continued attempts to recruit and train youth from the Rohingya refugee community based in the country. In 2021, Bangladeshi law enforcement claimed the pro-IS Neo-Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-JMB) attempted to set up a den and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) training facility in the hilly area of Bandarban district (south-eastern Bangladesh) to establish links with militants, including from ARSA.<sup>348</sup>

A month later, Bangladeshi authorities arrested three local members of the banned militant group Ansar al-Islam (or AAI, the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent's Bangladesh branch) in Dhaka. Investigations revealed the arrestees had moved to the Myanmar-Bangladesh border during the peak of the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017 and, under the pretext of providing aid, were recruiting Rohingyas located in Cox's Bazaar to become AAI operatives. In addition to recruiting on the ground, as well as online, they had also partaken in terrorism fund-raising activities in Bangladesh and abroad, through the collection of charity and religious donations.<sup>349</sup>

<sup>347</sup> Abdul Aziz, "Suspected Hizb Ut-Tahrir Operative Held in Cox's Bazar," *Dhaka Tribune*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/05/21/suspected-hizb-ut-tahrir-operative-held-in-cox-s-bazar>.

<sup>348</sup> Shariful Islam and Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo-JMB Wanted to Make Den in Bandarban," *The Daily Star*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh>

## Outlook

Myanmar's worsening security situation, the growing influence of the AA rebel group in Rakhine state, and the increased activities of various ethnic armed groups, contribute to a challenging threat picture in the near term. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderland remains fragile and the situation could deteriorate further as the Rohingya armed groups operating there become bolder and jostle for influence. Looking ahead, the potential influence of jihadist interlocutors on sections of vulnerable Rohingya youth needs to be watched and appropriate responses adopted to prevent and counter violent extremism. The latter could include creating provisional pre-repatriation opportunities through camp-based education and vocational skill development. In this respect, the protracted Rohingya refugee crisis, which can morph into a regional security concern, appears to have become a key mobiliser for jihadist networks, and may represent a new front in the long-running armed conflict in Myanmar.

Amidst this milieu, a swift resolution to the humanitarian situation is required. The international community and regional partners must work with the relevant stakeholders in Myanmar, especially those in Rakhine state, to ensure the safe and voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh within a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, long-term peace prospects in the restive Rakhine state will hinge on addressing systemic biases against the Rohingyas and other minority groups.

[h/crime-justice/news/neo-jmb-man-wanted-arakan-connection-2128551](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/h/crime-justice/news/neo-jmb-man-wanted-arakan-connection-2128551).

<sup>349</sup> AAI's attempt to recruit Rohingyas was not a surprise, given that AQIS has long advocated for jihad to end the sufferings of the minority group. See "3 Men of Banned Ansar Al Islam Held for Trying to Recruit Rohingyas," *The Daily Star*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/crime/news/3-men-banned-ansar-al-islam-held-trying-recruit-rohingyas-2119293>.



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## THAILAND

*The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the health and economic crisis in many parts of Thailand in 2021, including in the largely impoverished and conflict-ridden Deep South. The Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front, BRN) separatist group scaled down its militant operations on humanitarian grounds so as to ease the situation in the south, which led to a significant decline in violence. Despite the short-term respite, the ongoing peace process has been hampered by border shutdowns that prevented dialogue parties from holding in-person talks – an essential precondition for the BRN. As the health situation improves, both the insurgents and Thai negotiators await the opportunity to kickstart discussions, in order to broker a substantive ceasefire and political solution for the decades-long conflict. At present, however, key grievances remain unaddressed, and the political process has yet to yield tangible results, meaning the possibility of an uptick in violence in 2022 cannot be ruled out.*

## Trends

### *Low-level Armed Conflict Amid COVID-19*

2021 marked the eighteenth year of the resurgence of the violent insurgency in Thailand's predominantly Malay-Muslim South. The conflict is essentially rooted in the annexation of Patani by Thailand (formerly known as Siam) in the early twentieth century. Since then, successive governments have pursued an aggressive assimilation policy, which has been roundly rejected by the region's Malay Muslim population on religious and cultural grounds.

An armed separatist movement had first emerged in the 1960s, seeking autonomy or independence for the Muslim majority region. Over subsequent decades, levels of violence in the Deep South have waxed and waned, with the 2004 re-escalation marking the deadliest phase of the separatist conflict. According to the Deep South Watch (DSW), more than 21,200 incidents have occurred since 2004, in which some 7,300 people were killed and 13,500 injured (as of November 2021). Since the launch of a formal peace process by Bangkok in 2013, Thai negotiators have directly engaged the BRN, a significant development given it is the key actor behind the current wave of the armed insurgency.<sup>350</sup>

Violent incidents and casualties have continuously declined over the last eight years, following the launch of the peace dialogue. From January to November 2021, there were 423 violent incidents recorded, leaving 104 dead and 169 injured. The scale of violence was by and large on par with the previous year, during

<sup>350</sup> For in-depth studies on the latest wave of armed resistance in southern Thailand and the BRN, see Duncan McCargo, *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Joseph Chinyong Liow and Don Pathan, *Confronting Ghosts: Thailand's Shapeless Southern Insurgency* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2010); Sascha Helbardt,

*Deciphering Southern Thailand's Violence: Organisation and Insurgent Practices of BRN–Coordinate* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2015); Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "Islam and the BRN's Armed Separatist Movement in Southern Thailand," *Small War & Insurgencies* 32, no. 6 (May 2021), 945-976, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2021.1915679?journalCode=fswi20>.

which 335 violent incidents occurred, leaving 116 dead and 161 injured.<sup>351</sup> The casualty figures, however, remain relatively low compared to the pre-peace dialogue period.

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic claimed more lives in the three southernmost provinces in Thailand than the violent insurgency. The COVID-19 infection rate, both nationally and around the Deep South, increased exponentially over the past year. Infection rates peaked in the third quarter, when more than 20,000 cases were recorded nationwide, placing severe strains on the public health system. The Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, the main theatres of violence, were among the 29 of 77 provinces declared as “dark red zones” between July-August 2021, during which maximum movement restrictions were imposed.<sup>352</sup> While infection rates in Bangkok and several regions slowed from October, new cases in the southernmost areas continued to rise.

Vaccination rates in Pattani and Narathiwat were relatively low compared to the rest of the country. The Patani, a Malay-Muslim civil society group, reflected that Malay Muslims in these areas refused to be inoculated on various grounds, including distrust of the government, and perceptions over the questionable quality

of the Chinese-made vaccines offered. Some Muslims also believed that taking the vaccination was against Islamic principles.<sup>353</sup> However, the worsening health crisis would later prompt more southern residents to get inoculated. As of early December, the vaccination rate in Pattani was about 703,185 (with 54.02 per cent of the population receiving their first dose) and in Narathiwat 773,185 (53.48 per cent). In Yala the rate was higher, with 649,639 doses administered (covering 61.62 per cent of the population). Nationally, about 96 million doses had been administered, with 68 per cent of the populace at least partially vaccinated.<sup>354</sup>

In 2021, the BRN maintained low-level operations, so as not to aggravate the already perilous situation for southern residents.<sup>355</sup> Earlier, in an attempt to raise its international profile and brandish its humanitarian credentials, the movement had declared a unilateral ceasefire on 3 April 2020.<sup>356</sup> Then, the BRN had stated that its commitment to a cessation in hostilities was made in accordance with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ appeal for a ceasefire in global conflicts, in light of the intensifying pandemic.<sup>357</sup> However, the ceasefire in southern Thailand was broken less than a month later, when three BRN fighters were killed by state security forces in Pattani’s Nongchik district on 30 April 2020.<sup>358</sup>

<sup>351</sup> Deep South Watch, 29 September 2021.

<sup>352</sup> Tan Tam Mei, “Thailand Expands COVID-19 Lockdown Zone, Says Measures Could Last Until End August,” *The Straits Times*, August 1, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thailand-extends-strict-COVID-19-measures-until-end-august>. According to various reports, between April and September 2021, there were more than 1,574,000 COVID-19 cases and 16,633 deaths nationwide. In Pattani, more than 21,500 people were infected with COVID-19, 297 of whom died. In Yala, more than 22,700 cases were recorded, and 182 deaths. In Narathiwat, 20,500 COVID-19 cases and 236 deaths were reported over the same period.

<sup>353</sup> “Weekly Summary of the Situation on the Ground,” The Patani Task Force on COVID-19, June 30, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3mnolQD>.

<sup>354</sup> Ministry of Public Health-Immunization Center, Mo Phrom application.

<sup>355</sup> Interview via video conference with a mid-level BRN member close to the political wing, October 1, 2021.

<sup>356</sup> “Declaration of BRN’s Response to COVID-19,” Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN), April 3, 2020, <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Thailand-BRN-Ceasefire-Text.pdf>.

<sup>357</sup> Diaspora Patani, “Pengistiharan genap satu tahun rundingan BRN dengan Kerajaan Thai,” February 15, 2021. For an English translation of the BRN’s statement, see Wartani Facebook page, <https://bit.ly/3ipAjrG>.

<sup>358</sup> “BRN Condemns the Actions of the Thai Military During the COVID-19 Crisis,” Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN), May 1, 2020. The BRN’s resumption of military operations was also recorded in The University of Edinburgh’s database, “Ceasefires in a Time of

While the BRN's military operations mostly targeted security forces and government agents, a few victims of violent attacks in 2021 appeared to be innocent civilians. A notable incident involved the brutal killing of three family members of a Buddhist merchant in Pattani's Sai Buri district on 24 April 2021. The merchant, who hailed from Hat Yai, his adult daughter and nephew, were shot dead and their pick-up truck set on fire, after motorcycle-borne gunmen opened fire on the vehicle, forcing it off the road. Authorities believed the incident was in retaliation to a case of *wisaman khattakam*, in which a suspected insurgent was shot dead by security forces in the nearby district of Yingo, Narathiwat two days earlier.<sup>359</sup> *Wisaman khattakam* is a Thai term referring to death under state custody, or at the hands of state officials who claim to have acted in the line of duty.

In recent years, there has been a recurring pattern of such retaliatory attacks, following the *wisaman khattakam* of BRN fighters, which the movement has justified on religious grounds. From January to August 2021, 11 cases of *wisaman khattakam* were reported, compared to 18 cases in 2020.<sup>360</sup> The Thai authorities appeared to be aware of these tit-for-tat attacks, as they commonly alert local residents of possible revenge attacks, soon after suspected insurgents are killed by security forces. More often than not, civilians bear the

consequences of such reprisals, of which they are often unaware.<sup>361</sup>

The April 2021 killing of the three Buddhist family members has also raised doubts over the BRN's commitment to observe humanitarian norms in the armed conflict. On 15 January 2020, the BRN had signed a "Deed of Commitment" with Geneva Call.<sup>362</sup> While the Deed of Commitment mainly focused on the protection of children from the effects of armed conflict, it also indicated that the signatory would determine "to protect the civilian population...from the effects or dangers of military actions, and to respect their right to life..."<sup>363</sup> While the signing of this commitment with an international non-government organisation working to protect civilians in armed conflict could serve to raise the BRN's legitimacy and international profile, the failure to ensure that its fighters on the ground honour the commitment could backfire on the movement.

In 2021, the BRN's Information Department also maintained a public presence through the circulation of three video clips on YouTube. In the first released on 13 March, Abdul Karim Khalid, the BRN's *de facto* spokesperson, stated the movement remained strong and steadfast in its long-running "struggle" for Patani *merdeka* (independence).<sup>364</sup> He also criticised various development projects implemented by the Thai authorities in the country's

COVID-19." See "Ceasefires in a Time of COVID-19," The University of Edinburgh," [https://pax.peaceagreements.org/static/COVID19ceasefires/?fbclid=IwAR19\\_Udy118nfe6Jb4EiuXC Tk\\_hp9f27FsXXuSw2M6P7aaqBmjpQOmB9A-Q.](https://pax.peaceagreements.org/static/COVID19ceasefires/?fbclid=IwAR19_Udy118nfe6Jb4EiuXC Tk_hp9f27FsXXuSw2M6P7aaqBmjpQOmB9A-Q.)

<sup>359</sup> Mariyam Ahmad and Matahari Ismail, "5 People Die in Spate of Violence in Thai Deep South," *Benar News*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/thai/family-killed-04262021170445.html>.

<sup>360</sup> Data obtained from Deep South Watch, October 2, 2021. The term *wisaman khatakam* is commonly translated into English as extrajudicial killing, which connotes the illegality of such action. However, *wisaman khattakam* could be regarded as lawful under Thai statutes, providing that security forces can prove that they acted in self-defence or in accordance with the law.

<sup>361</sup> Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, "Jihad for Patani: Islam and BRN's Separatist Struggle in Southern Thailand" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2020), 195–196.

<sup>362</sup> "Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call for the Protection of children from the Effects of Armed Conflict," 2020, Their Words, [http://theirwords.org/?country=THA&ansa=283&document\\_type=3&fbclid=IwAR20OjFu79R3TbeA9pE\\_S5RkEMo.](http://theirwords.org/?country=THA&ansa=283&document_type=3&fbclid=IwAR20OjFu79R3TbeA9pE_S5RkEMo.)

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> Patani refers to the ancient sultanate in the southernmost region before it was annexed by Siam, the old name of Thailand. The term used reflects the unforgotten historical legacy of the region.

Deep South, claiming they should serve the interest of the Pattani people rather than the “capitalists” and senior military officers.<sup>365</sup> Abdul Karim again affirmed the BRN’s commitment to the Pattani “struggle” in a second video uploaded in May to mark the end of Ramadan.<sup>366</sup> In another May 2021 video, the group also expressed international solidarity with the Palestinian people and ongoing efforts to “liberate the Palestinian land from the Israeli Zionist occupation.”<sup>367</sup>

### *State of Peace Negotiations*

The 2013 launch of a formalised peace dialogue by the Yingluck Shinawatra government represented the first time the Thai state held formal and publicly announced talks with a separatist group, with Malaysia as facilitator. While short lived, this dialogue significantly changed the dynamic of the conflict. Mainly, it pushed the BRN to reveal itself publicly for the first time, and begin communicating with the public through mainstream and social media. The movement though continues to remain secretive about its internal structure and operations.<sup>368</sup>

When General Prayut Chan-ocha became the country’s prime minister following a successful military coup in 2014, the BRN refused to take part in a military-led peace process. Hence, Mara Patani – an umbrella organisation of separatists who were

mainly based in Malaysia – would take its place as a dialogue partner.<sup>369</sup> Mara Patani, however, suffered from a serious legitimacy deficit due to its perceived lack of control and command over fighters on the ground. Over the next few years, the peace talks largely stalled; however, statistics show that annual fatalities have been on a downward trend since 2013. This largely accrues to the BRN’s shifting strategy to garner sympathy and support from the international community, rather than the success of counterinsurgency operations.

The country’s 2019 general election, which followed five years of military rule, and years of backchannel talks known as the “Berlin Initiative” brokered by a Europe-based organisation, paved the way for a new chapter in the peace dialogue in January 2020, with the BRN returning to the negotiating table. At the national level, Prayut, who won a second term in 2019, appointed Gen. Wanlop Rugsanaoh, who previously headed the National Security Council, to lead the Thai peace dialogue panel.

On the BRN side, the dialogue team was led by Anas Abdulrahman (aka Hipni Mareh), formerly the BRN’s head of political affairs, who was involved in the Berlin Initiative. Anas received his higher education in Indonesia and Egypt and was a former *ustaz* (religious teacher) at

<sup>365</sup> Information Department-BRN, “BRN Merayakan Ulang Tahun Ke-61,” YouTube, March 13, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG5NdEB5Mek>.

<sup>366</sup> Information Department-BRN, “Ucapan Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri 1441 H. Dan Selamatkan Patani Dari COVID-19,” YouTube, May 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8cse8pIIBa>.

<sup>367</sup> While BRN rarely comments on conflicts elsewhere in the Muslim world, it likely sees both its own cause and the conflict in Palestine as being rooted in oppression, colonisation and the claim for territory. See Information Department-BRN, “BRN Mendukung Sikap Komuniti Antara Bangsa dalam Mengakhiri Konflik Palestina-Israel,” YouTube, May 26, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdPM9rbj\\_HI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdPM9rbj_HI).

<sup>368</sup> For a detailed discussion on the peace dialogue in southern Thailand, see Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, “The Shifting Battleground: Peace Dialogue in Thailand’s Malay-Muslim South” in *After the Coup: The National Council for Peace and Order Era and the Future of Thailand*, ed. Michael J. Montesano, Terence Chong and Mark Heng (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), 148–153.

<sup>369</sup> Mara Patani (Majlis Syura Patani, Patani Consultative Council) comprised of four liberation movements – Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Patani Islamic Liberation Front – BIPP), Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement – GMIP) and a few BRN members.

Thamavitya Mulniti School in Yala province. Another notable BRN figure was Abdul Aziz Jabal, also known as “Achan Wahid” or “Wahid Haji-asae.” A former English teacher in a major private Islamic school in Narathiwat, Abdul Aziz was the first BRN representative to speak to outsiders in English. This indicated the BRN’s eagerness to communicate directly with the international community, beyond the Malay-speaking world. Notably, Abdul Aziz was close to Abdulloh and Deng Waekachi, the two key figures of the BRN’s military wing, BRN sources said. His engagement indicates the renewed peace dialogue had the blessing of the movement’s powerful military arm.<sup>370</sup>

Ahead of the January 2020 peace talks, the new Thai dialogue team had softened its stance by allowing national and international observers to attend the dialogue “in their personal capacity.”<sup>371</sup> Five independent observers in attendance included a politician, a diplomat and an academic.<sup>372</sup> Three years earlier, the BRN had called for a credible peace process with an impartial mediator and international observers in attendance.<sup>373</sup> Malaysia, however, has remained hesitant to involve other international actors, with its Special Branch opposing the participation of observers in the first meeting “until the last minute.”<sup>374</sup>

The renewed peace talks showed some initial promise,<sup>375</sup> although travel restrictions brought on by the pandemic

have subsequently curtailed the prospect for further in-person formal meetings, with the BRN uncomfortable to hold discussions via a video-conferencing platform. The BRN had proposed holding further talks in a third country, although this proposal was rejected by Malaysia. Internal lockdown measures also made it difficult for BRN members to travel and hold discussions with Malaysian facilitators.<sup>376</sup>

In February 2021, Abdul Aziz publicly revealed several important issues on the agenda with the Thai government, including the need for an inclusive peace process and a viable political solution to bring an end to the conflict. To mark the first anniversary of the revived peace talks, Abdul Aziz made a rare public appearance on YouTube to provide a progress update (or the lack thereof). He stated that the technical team met through video conference on 3 February to discuss preparations for the third official round of talks. Both parties discussed: 1) conflict resolution through a range of political or administrative solutions in accordance with the aspirations of the local population; 2) the reduction of military operations; and 3) the involvement of civil society groups, NGOs, religious figures, political figures, and community leaders in the negotiation process, adhering to the concept of inclusivity that had been previously agreed upon.<sup>377</sup>

A source in the Thai dialogue team revealed that both sides met virtually twice

<sup>370</sup> Author’s personal communication with a senior BRN member, January 21, 2020. There is no serious questioning of BRN representatives’ mandate this time around. Thus far, Mara Patani has not been involved in this process.

<sup>371</sup> Wanlop Rugsanaoh, press conference at the Thai Government House, January 31, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1097177053950194>.

<sup>372</sup> Interview with a Thai officer directly involved in the peace dialogue, Bangkok, February 14, 2020.

<sup>373</sup> Press release, BRN, April 10, 2017, <https://telegra.ph/BRN-STATEMENT-10-APRIL-2017-04-09>.

<sup>374</sup> Interview with a Thai officer directly involved in the peace dialogue, Bangkok, February 14, 2020;

Interview via video conferencing platform with a mid-level BRN member close to the political wing, October 1, 2021.

<sup>375</sup> Both sides had also managed to hold another round of talks on 2-3 March 2020 in Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>376</sup> Interview via video conferencing platform with a mid-level BRN member close to the political wing, October 1, 2021.

<sup>377</sup> Diaspora Patani, “Pengistiharan genap satu tahun rundingan BRN dengan Kerajaan Thai,” Youtube, February 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8ZSNrX27qo>.

in 2021, and the BRN submitted a 10-page document to the Thai side in May. The document laid out its proposal for a ceasefire, which included the contours of a consultative mechanism and possible political solutions. On the latter issue, BRN proposed the establishment of an autonomous “Patani Darussalam,” in which the Patani people had the right to design their own education and economic systems. In addition, their Malay language and identity were to be officially recognised and preserved.<sup>378</sup>

Abdul Aziz’s statement is significant for two reasons. First, it indicates the BRN was prepared to enter negotiations with Bangkok over a new governance model for Patani/southern Thailand, short of outright independence. This has long been a point of contention for the BRN as well as its sympathisers, particularly Malay Muslim activists advocating for self-determination. Since the BRN opted to take part in the peace dialogue within the framework of the Thai constitution, as indicated in the “General Consensus on the Peace Dialogue Process” signed in Kuala Lumpur on 28 February 2013, some activists have been vocal against the movement’s involvement in the talks, on the grounds that it amounted to a reversal on the sacralised struggle to reclaim their Patani homeland. However, a senior BRN member interviewed portrayed the movement’s struggle as seeking incremental success. Accepting some form of self-governance does not necessarily mean forgoing the fight for *merdeka* (independence), he explained.<sup>379</sup>

Second, the expression of the need for inclusivity means that the BRN is willing to engage other stakeholders in the process. From this perspective, for a peace process to be successful and a peace agreement to be sustained, it is crucial to include as many stakeholders as possible. In sum, the BRN’s proposal to the Thai dialogue team offers a good starting point for discussions

on a range of substantive matters, even as the process has yet to yield tangible results, and momentum has stalled due to the pandemic.

## Outlook

There are at least three key factors that could affect the progress of the peace dialogue and the conflict situation in the Deep South in the near future. First, the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the peace talks, as the dialogue parties were unable to hold in-person formal meetings for nearly two years. The peace process is not high on the Thai government’s list of priorities, as it continues to grapple to contain the far reaching economic and social impact of the pandemic. However, with indications that the pandemic could be entering an endemic phase, the dialogue parties could soon resume face to face talks.

Second, “hawks” on both sides could still seek to derail the process. On the Thai side, opinions are divided on whether and how Bangkok should proceed with the peace dialogue. Some former and current hawkish military commanders are sceptical of the approach taken by Gen. Wanlop, which is seen as being too soft on the BRN. Any further moves by Wanlop and his negotiators that fail to secure support from the government and other relevant state agencies could hinder the process. In the same vein, some BRN members, particularly those in the military wing, previously expressed strong objection against the movement’s engagement in the talks. While the current BRN dialogue team appears to command buy-in from the military wing, there remains a possibility that some elements could seek to play the role of a spoiler.

Third, the broader political climate in Thailand remains unconducive to forge a consensus on an array of political solutions for the long-drawn conflict. Mainly, the

<sup>378</sup> Telephone interview with a Thai officer directly involved in the peace dialogue, October 4, 2021.

<sup>379</sup> Interview with a senior BRN member, September 18, 2016.

military's domination of Thai politics continues to pose a challenge, with the Gen. Prayut-led government appearing reluctant, for now at least, to make any political concessions. At the same time, the growing anti-establishment movement led mainly by Thai youth, which has been responsible for major protests around the country in the past year, has the potential to alter the trajectory of the national political landscape for decades to come. In turn, this could have a significant bearing on the peace process in the Deep South.

The anti-military forces are unlikely to defeat the pro-establishment camp in the next general elections, expected to be held in 2022. In this regard, it is nearly impossible for other political parties to compete with the military-dominated Palang Pracharath Party, or other new pro-establishment parties, in forming the government as the latter continue to have the backing of the 250-member Senate in the appointment of a new prime minister.<sup>380</sup> Over the longer term, however, the success of the peace dialogue will be inextricably linked to the trajectory of national politics and the larger democratisation process in Thailand.

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### SINGAPORE

*The threat of terrorism in Singapore was assessed to be "high" <sup>381</sup> in 2021 by Singapore authorities, mainly due to the continued uncovering of self-radicalised individuals and the potential for external events to influence vulnerable individuals in Singapore. A June report published by the Internal Security Department (ISD) reiterated that Islamist terrorism and self-radicalised individuals are among the main security threats faced by Singapore.<sup>382</sup> The Taliban's sudden takeover of Afghanistan also prompted fresh concerns of a potential uptick in extremist and terrorist-related activities in the region and Singapore. Additionally, some emergent strands of far-right sentiments and extremism also showed the potential to radicalise some at-risk individuals in Singapore. In addition to continued terrorist monitoring and deradicalisation efforts, the Singapore government has enhanced its security capabilities and updated its legal framework to address both the traditional threats and emergent strands of far-right extremism more effectively.*

<sup>380</sup> The 2017 Constitution drafted by a military-appointed committee allows senators to vote alongside the 500 members of the lower house to appoint a prime minister within the first five years after the promulgation of the charter. The recent constitutional amendment on electoral rules, which increases the number of constituency MPs from 350 to 400, reduces the number of party-list MPs from 150 to 100, and restores the two-ballot electoral system, is unlikely to change this political equation. See "Government's Charter Change Bill Sails Through 3<sup>rd</sup> Reading," *Bangkok Post*, September 10, 2021, [https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2](https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2179719/governments-charter-change-bill-sails-through-3rd-reading)

179719/governments-charter-change-bill-sails-through-3rd-reading.

<sup>381</sup> "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2021," Internal Security Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2021.pdf>.

<sup>382</sup> Hui Min Chew, "Self-radicalisation Main Terror Threat in Singapore; Far-Right Extremism An Emerging Concern: ISD Report," *Channel News Asia*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/self-radicalisation-main-terror-threat-singapore-far-right-isd-1948886>.

## Islamist Terrorism Threat Persists

As in recent years, Singapore's security agencies considered the threat from Islamist extremism and terrorism to Singapore to be "high" in 2021.<sup>383</sup> Global jihadist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) have proved resilient and adaptable, despite suffering leadership losses and operational setbacks. They continue to encourage their supporters worldwide to launch attacks. ISD noted that even as no credible or specific intelligence points to an imminent terrorist attack in Singapore, IS<sup>384</sup> and its affiliated groups remain the primary threat actor to the country and wider region. The Taliban's September 2021 takeover of Afghanistan, following the United States' military withdrawal, also sparked fresh concerns of a resurgence in terrorism-related activities around the region, particularly among AQ-affiliated networks with historical ties to the group. However, the rivalry between the Taliban and IS in Afghanistan has somewhat muddled the global threat picture. It remains unclear to what extent the former's victory will motivate both AQ and IS supporters around the region, including in Singapore.

### *Self-Radicalised Individuals*

In Singapore, the terrorism threat stems primarily from individuals self-radicalised by violent extremist material online. Since 2015, 44 such individuals have been dealt with under the Internal Security Act (ISA).<sup>385</sup> In the last two years alone, 14 of the 16 individuals issued with terrorism-related ISA orders had been self-radicalised online. The majority were IS supporters primarily inspired by the Syrian

conflict and the group's violent ideology. In 2021, other external developments, "including the import of foreign grievances," also had the potential to threaten communal harmony and security in Singapore.<sup>386</sup> In March 2021, the authorities announced a twenty-year-old full-time National Serviceman was detained under the ISA for planning a knife attack targeting Jews at a local synagogue and intending to travel to join the military wing of HAMAS in Palestine.<sup>387</sup>

Amirull Ali, who had been radicalised by the Israel-Palestine conflict, plotted to target three Jewish men at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue in Singapore, who he assumed served national service in Israel and therefore would have engaged in alleged atrocities against Palestinians. He made very detailed plans, including procuring an attack weapon and studying the human vascular system to identify spots to target to inflict death upon stabbing. Further, Ali conducted recce trips to the synagogue to identify an ambush spot to carry out the attack. His self-radicalisation likely resulted from the consumption of extremist propaganda, online research on the plight of Palestinians, and discussions with a foreign contact.<sup>388</sup>

### *Concerns Over Radicalisation Among Foreign Domestic Workers*

Although there were no new cases reported of foreign domestic workers being radicalised in 2021, such incidents in past years continue to give cause for concern. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has renewed concerns that radicalised individuals from various segments of Singapore society may be inspired to travel

<sup>383</sup> "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2021," 2.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>385</sup> "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2021," Ministry of Home Affairs, June 23, 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2021/>.

<sup>386</sup> "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2021," 2.

<sup>387</sup> Aqil Haziq Mahmud, "20-Year-Old Detained Under ISA After Planning to Attack Jews at a Waterloo Street Synagogue," *Channel News Asia*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/20-year-old-nsf-detained-isa-planned-waterloo-synagogue-attack-318246>.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.



to take up arms for militants there. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower put out an advisory in October 2021, cautioning that religiously insensitive or extremist sentiments could be expressed and spread online "that may incite violence or ill will among various communities."<sup>389</sup>

### *Terrorist Financing*

The Terrorism Financing National Risk Assessment, a multi-stakeholder report released in December 2020 highlighting efforts to combat issues around terrorism financing, identified IS, AQ and Indonesian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) as posing terrorist financing threats for Singapore.<sup>390</sup> The report also noted that IS is "predominantly" <sup>391</sup> the target terrorist organisation for the channelling of finances by radicalised individuals. In July 2021, Mohamed Kazali Salleh, a Singaporean businessman based in Malaysia, was repatriated to Singapore and sentenced to three years and ten months jail for providing funds totalling over S\$1,000 to a Syria-based IS militant on three occasions.<sup>392</sup> This also marked the first time an individual was "prosecuted in Singapore for financing the travel of an individual to a foreign country to train, or

become, a terrorist."<sup>393</sup> Kazali had also influenced and convinced another Singaporean, Hazim Syahmi Mahfoot, to take up armed violence to fight non-Muslims in a few overseas conflict zones.<sup>394</sup> Later in December, a Bangladeshi national, Ahmad Faizal, was handed 15 charges under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act for transferring \$900 through online platforms to the terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to fund its activities in Syria.<sup>395</sup>

### **Emergent Far-Right Beliefs**

Far-right extremism was also identified as an issue of "emerging concern" in the 2021 Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report.<sup>396</sup> While yet to gain significant traction in Singapore, the increased activities of extremist far-right groups overseas have been accompanied by the proliferation of far-right ideas online (on themes such as ethno-religious and anti-immigrant chauvinism), which have found resonance among some regional hardline groups. If allowed to proliferate, such narratives could exacerbate racial and religious cleavages in societies around the

<sup>389</sup> In its advisory, the ministry also asked "employers of foreign domestic workers to remind them not to engage in terrorism-related activities" in response to the developing situation in Afghanistan. See Vanessa Paige Chelvan, "MOM Sends Advisory on 'Terrorism-Related Activities' to Maid Employers in Wake of Afghanistan Crisis," *Channel News Asia*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/maids-domestic-workers-mom-advisory-terrorism-afghanistan-2225231>.

<sup>390</sup> "Terrorism Financing National Risk Assessment 2020," Monetary Authority of Singapore, 2020, 4, [https://www.mas.gov.sg/-/media/MAS/Regulations-and-Financial-Stability/Regulatory-and-Supervisory-Framework/Anti\\_Money-Laundering\\_Countering-the-Financing-of-Terrorism/TF-NRA/Terrorism-Financing-National-Risk-Assessment-2020.pdf](https://www.mas.gov.sg/-/media/MAS/Regulations-and-Financial-Stability/Regulatory-and-Supervisory-Framework/Anti_Money-Laundering_Countering-the-Financing-of-Terrorism/TF-NRA/Terrorism-Financing-National-Risk-Assessment-2020.pdf).

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> Johannes Tjendro, "Singaporean Man Charged With Giving About S\$1,000 to Islamic State Militant in Syria for Terrorist Acts," *Channel News Asia*, July, 19, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sin>

[gaporean-businessman-terrorism-financing-isis-kazali-court-2049951](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singaporean-businessman-terrorism-financing-isis-kazali-court-2049951).

<sup>393</sup> Shaffiq Alkhatib, "S'porean Businessman Sentenced to 3 Years and 10 Months' Jail for Funding Terrorist Acts in Syria," *The Straits Times*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/sporean-businessman-sentenced-to-3-years-and-10-months-jail-for-funding-in>.

<sup>394</sup> Zakir Hussain, "Singaporean Businessman, Who Funded ISIS Fighter, and His Friend Detained under ISA," *The Straits Times*, February 15, 2019,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/two-radicalised-singaporeans-detained-under-internal-security-act-for-involvement-in>.

<sup>395</sup> Shaffiq Alkhatib, "Man Charged after He Allegedly Transferred Almost \$900 to Finance Terrorist Group," *The Straits Times*, December 23, 2021,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/man-charged-after-he-allegedly-transferred-almost-900-to-finance-terrorist-group>.

<sup>396</sup> Chew, "Self-Radicalisation Main Terror Threat in Singapore."

region and even inspire some to resort to violence, the ISD's report cautioned.<sup>397</sup>

Singapore reported its first case of far-right extremism in 2021, following the detention of a self-radicalised 16-year-old Protestant Christian teenager under the ISA in December 2020. The youth is believed to have been radicalised online and developed strong Islamophobic sentiments, following which he proceeded to make detailed plans to attack Muslims using machetes at two local mosques.<sup>398</sup> He is believed to have been motivated by the terror attacks on two mosques in Christchurch in 2019, as well as the Christchurch attacker Brenton Tarrant's manifesto. The teen also prepared a message and an unfinished manifesto of his own, which he intended to release after his attack. In the document, he expressed solidarity with Tarrant and other far right and anti-Muslim extremists worldwide.

### *Sovereign Citizen Movement*

Another potential emergent strand of far-right ideology in Singapore is anti-statist sentiments expressed by those claiming to be sovereign citizens. Such individuals claim that they are exempt from laws and consider the government illegitimate.<sup>399</sup> Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, sovereign citizens around the world have been observed to flout government measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>400</sup> Several cases have emerged in Singapore. For example, in May 2021, a 41-year-old Singaporean woman who claimed to be a sovereign citizen, was jailed for two weeks and fined \$2,000 for refusing to comply with the mask mandate and being a public

nuisance. Two months later, a British national, Benjamin Glynn, who also claimed to be a sovereign citizen and refused to wear a mask on a train, was sentenced to six weeks jail and subsequently deported.<sup>401</sup> While not violent, these individuals' actions and professed association with the Sovereign Citizen movement, a right-wing anarchist ideology, speaks to the possible growing appeal of fringe right-wing ideologies in segments of the society.

### **Responses**

Singapore has an array of hard and soft policy programmes and measures to deter terrorists and violent hate crimes as well as foster greater inter-racial and inter-religious harmony. Among hard measures are the enhanced police's counter terrorism capabilities, including the deployment of Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) and Rapid Deployment Troops (RDTs) in high density public spaces. The ERTs and RDTs are trained for rapid response to eliminate potential threats. Front-line police officers have also been equipped with better quality firearms.<sup>402</sup> In addition to better-trained security personnel and new weaponry, Singapore aims to foster social resilience and cohesion in the community to thwart the threat of terrorism and radicalisation through the SGSecure movement, a public-private-people sector initiative.

In tandem with government efforts, community organisations such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) play a leading role through providing religious counselling to ISA detainees and public outreach, in challenging extremist

<sup>397</sup> "Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2021," 7.

<sup>398</sup> Aqil Haziq Mahmud, "16-Year-Old Singaporean Detained Under ISA After Planning to Attack Muslims at 2 Mosques," *Channel News Asia*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/16-year-old-singaporean-detained-isa-planned-attack-2-mosques-435241>.

<sup>399</sup> David Sun, "Inside the Alternative Reality of 'Sovereign Citizens'," *The Straits Times*, August

23, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/inside-the-alternative-reality-of-sovereign-citizens-0>.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Hariz Baharudin, "Singapore's Approach to Security Threats Evolved After 9/11 Attacks," *The Straits Times*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-s-approach-to-security-threats-evolved-after-911-attacks>.

narratives and promoting religious moderation, tolerance and inclusivity. In recent years, given the vulnerability of young individuals to being radicalised by IS' ideology online, outreach efforts on social media have assumed particular importance. The RRG has a network of volunteer Islamic scholars and counsellors well-versed in social media and countering IS' online propaganda, and has a presence on YouTube and Facebook.<sup>403</sup>

In 2021, amid the tightened movement restrictions due to the pandemic, the RRG increased the use of social media in its countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Community engagement and awareness campaigns were also ramped up through online platforms, including social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.<sup>404</sup> For example, to debunk the spread of pandemic-related misinformation online that could potentially lead to extremism, RRG scholars produced advisory videos on a range of COVID-19 related topics, in addition to conducting online forums, webinars and other public engagements.

### *Legislative Updates*

As outlined above, Singapore's extremism landscape is diversifying. While some old threats remain, new and emergent strands of extremism (some of which are nebulous and cannot be clearly defined) muddy the threat landscape.<sup>405</sup> In 2021, several laws protecting Singapore's religious and communal harmony were also updated.

Though not directly intended to address terrorist threats, the laws will aid in curtailing various extremist activities that can lead to hate crimes, violence and terrorism, hence forming an important component of the government's toolkit in combatting the evolving threats.

First, Singapore will introduce the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act (MRHA) to encourage moderation and inter-racial harmony through a "softer approach" using "persuasion and rehabilitation" instead of just punitive measures.<sup>406</sup> In announcing the new law in his August 2021 National Day Rally Speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong referred to several high-profile racist incidents that took place in the year. The new law was announced amidst concerns that race relations in Singapore might have been strained during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from punishments for racial offences, the new law makes allowances for those who have caused offence to stop and make amends by developing a better understanding of the racial group they offended.<sup>407</sup>

Parliament also passed the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA) in October 2021. The new law will allow the Singapore government to "deal with covert attempts by hostile foreign entities to interfere in domestic politics," including engaging in disinformation campaigns and creating "discord and unrest" among Singaporeans and the wider society.<sup>408</sup> In the same month, the

<sup>403</sup> Shashi Jayakumar, "Deradicalisation in Singapore: Past, Present and Future," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2020, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ICSR-Report-Deradicalisation-in-Singapore-Past-Present-and-Future.pdf>, 21.

<sup>404</sup> Religious Rehabilitation Group's (RRG), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/RRGSG/about/>.

<sup>405</sup> "Shape-shifting Terrorism: The New Challenge," *The Straits Times*, September 09, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/shape-shifting-terrorism-the-new-challenge>.

<sup>406</sup> Linette Lai, "NDR 2021: New Law to Deal With Racial Offences, Promote Harmony Through Softer Approach," *The Straits Times*, September 19, 2021,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/national-day-rally-2021-new-law-on-racial-harmony-to-encourage-moderation-send>.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> Rei Kurohi "5 Things to Know About FICA, the Law to Counter Foreign Interference," *The Straits Times*, October 05, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/5-things-to-know-about-fica-the-law-to-counter-foreign-interference>.

Singapore Parliament also repealed the Sedition Act, a law first introduced 83 years ago to curb local opposition to British colonial rule. Addressing the issue, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam observed that key aspects of the Sedition Act had not been relevant to the contemporary Singapore context or are already being addressed in other laws. However, one crucial aspect of the Act “on ensuring social cohesion between different groups within Singapore” is not covered by other laws, and hence will be included in the amended Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code.<sup>409</sup>

## Outlook

As in previous years, Islamist terrorist groups and individuals radicalised by such groups and their ideologies constitute the biggest terrorist threat to Singapore. In this regard, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan could catalyse greater traction in online discussions and real-world activities of Islamist groups and radicalised individuals, including in the near region. The uncertain and volatile nature of the regional and international Islamist threat landscape and the possibility of a successful terrorist attack in the region that might slip through means that the terrorist threat to Singapore will remain high for the near future.

However, as discussed in the assessment above, the threat picture of Singapore is also muddled, diversified and evolving. Therefore, Singapore’s counter terrorist approach, while successful thus far, will need to be cognisant of extremisms that are non-Islamist or perhaps even non-religiously motivated. In this respect, sentiments, beliefs and extremisms associated with far-right ideologies, though none of which have significant traction in Singapore yet, is a growing area of concern. Singapore would need to continue to deny the space for far-right ideologies, which have the potential to

seriously harm social cohesion and inter-communal harmony from taking root in Singapore.

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<sup>409</sup> Tham Yuen-C, "Singapore Parliament Repeals Sedition Act After 83 Years," *The Straits Times*, October 05, 2021,

<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singapore-parliament-repeals-sedition-act-after-83-years>.

# SOUTH ASIA

## *Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*

### AFGHANISTAN

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

*In 2021, Afghanistan witnessed a swift and dramatic political change with the sudden collapse of the civilian administration led by President Ashraf Ghani. Following a largely bloodless victory, the Taliban captured power in Kabul on 15 August and, in less than two weeks, defeated a resistance group in the Panjshir valley. However, peace and stability continue to elude Afghanistan as the Taliban now “find themselves on the wrong side of an insurgency.”<sup>410</sup> The insurgent turned governing entity’s inability to dominate the country, govern it, and prevent several other terrorist groups to operate on Afghan soil are most likely to add to the continuation of instability and chaos. The compulsions of not cutting their ties with groups like AQ and incapacities to deal with a resurgent Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) could significantly impact the jihadist and militant landscape in the country. Apart from endangering regional security, such a state of affair, if unchecked, could potentially turn Afghanistan into a new theatre of terrorist melting pot in the near to medium term, and*

*a launchpad for global terrorism in the medium to long term.*

### Trends

#### AQ Reboot

In its February 2020 agreement,<sup>411</sup> the United States (US) sought to extract a promise from the Taliban not to allow the use of the soil of Afghanistan by groups like AQ for launching an attack against Washington and its allies. The Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid has rejected accusations regarding AQ’s presence in Afghanistan,<sup>412</sup> while repeating the group’s pledges that no attacks on third countries would be planned on Afghan soil. This denial is in stark contradiction with the findings of the United Nations (UN), whose reports<sup>413</sup> have pointed at the continuing links between the Taliban and AQ, as well as joint operations undertaken by both against the Afghan security forces in the days preceding the capture of power. Not surprisingly, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, AQ released a video featuring its chief Ayman al Zawahiri who hailed the US military’s withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years of war as a sign of victory.<sup>414</sup>

<sup>410</sup> “The Taliban find themselves on the wrong side of an insurgency,” *Economist*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/10/23/the-taliban-find-themselves-on-the-wrong-side-of-an-insurgency>.

<sup>411</sup> “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” *US Department of State*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

<sup>412</sup> “Taliban expand interim cabinet, double down on all-male team,” *Dawn*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1647593>.

<sup>413</sup> United Nations, “Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan,” June 1, 2021, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2021/486>.

<sup>414</sup> “Al-Qaida chief appears in video marking 9/11 anniversary,” *AP News*, September 12, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-afghanistan-taliban-islamic-state-group-79fc96bd028a31718e3c69fc6aba2a96>.

According to the UN, there could be 200 to 500 AQ cadres in Afghanistan. Reports from the field indicate that the Taliban have asked AQ to maintain a low profile and even initiated a registration system to monitor the presence of foreign fighters of the group in Afghanistan.<sup>415</sup> There is little evidence, however, that this would have translated into a permanent curb in AQ activities in any manner. Several ministers in the Taliban caretaker government including the Minister of Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, have shared close bonds with AQ till recently.<sup>416</sup> It is unimaginable that the Taliban would quickly snap the linkages developed through years of fighting together and sharing of common training facilities in the Af-Pak region. In the hands of the Taliban, the links with AQ is a strategic tool to be used in its negotiations with the international community.

The Taliban 'victory' in Afghanistan, therefore, could provide AQ a new opportunity to rebuild itself, leveraging on its continuing linkages with the Taliban, and also, by exploiting the vast ungoverned territory in the country. There is a clear possibility that Afghanistan, bereft of the US forces and their truncated intelligence gathering mechanism, could potentially lapse into an AQ stronghold, attracting foreign fighters as well as some of the Taliban fighters for whom the end of the Taliban-US war translates into a loss of purpose.

### *Resurgent ISKP*

While the regrouping of AQ belongs to the realm of possibility, violence perpetrated by ISKP had already registered a sharp

increase even prior to the Taliban's capture of power. In June 2021, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reported to the Security Council that attacks claimed or attributed to ISKP increased to 88 between March and June, compared with 16 during the same period in 2020.<sup>417</sup>

In post-15 August 2021 Afghanistan, ISKP's activity has spiked, signalling the prospect of its resurgence. It started with a suicide bombing near the Kabul airport on 26 August that killed 60 Afghan civilians and 13 US forces. Since then, ISKP has claimed responsibility for a number of subsequent attacks targeting minorities, activists, government employees, and personnel of the Afghan National Defence and Security Force (ANDSF) and some Taliban fighters. Prominent among these are two suicide attacks on mosques of the Hazara Shia minorities. On 8 October, in Kunduz's Gozar-e-Sayed Abad Mosque, an ISKP suicide bomber detonated himself killing 50 to 80 worshippers.<sup>418</sup> A week later, on 15 October, 40 people were killed as two suicide bombers opened fire and then blew themselves up in Kandahar's Bibi Fatima Mosque. On 2 November, ISKP fighters attacked a military hospital in Kabul, killing 25 people and injuring over 50. Among the killed was Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis, a commander of the Haqqani Network and head of the Kabul military corps.

The UN estimates ISKP to be 2,200 members-strong in Afghanistan. In a July 2021 report, independent UN experts informed the Security Council that ISKP has "strengthened its positions in and around Kabul" and has formed several

<sup>415</sup> "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan."

<sup>416</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Nancy A. Youssef, "In Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan, Al Qaeda-Linked Haqqani Network Rises to Power," *Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan-al-qaeda-linked-haqqani-network-rises-to-power-11629990056>.

<sup>417</sup> "High-Profile Attacks by Anti-Govt Elements Occurred Across Afghanistan Prior to Taliban Takeover: UN Report," *ANI News*, September 8,

2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/others/high-profile-attacks-by-anti-govt-elements-occurred-across-afghanistan-prior-to-taliban-takeover-un-report20210908230152/>.

<sup>418</sup> "IS-K Claims Responsibility for Afghan Suicide Bombing That Killed At Least 46 at Gozar-E-Sayed Abad Mosque," *ABC News*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-08/explosion-in-kunduz-mosque-afghanistan-kills-worshippers/100526382>.

sleeper cells. The group has also developed a stronghold in the eastern province of Nangarhar and the provincial capital of Jalalabad has seen regular bombings. Through its violence potential, the group can turn out to be a melting pot of radicalised individuals from the region as well as anti-Taliban groups. Media reports indicate that former members of the deposed Afghan civilian government including security forces personnel and intelligence service members, who are being hunted by the Taliban and are without a source of income, may be joining xISKP. The number of such defectors, the report said, is 'relatively small, but growing'.<sup>419</sup>

### *Jihadist Realignment*

The Taliban's capture of power has raised significant insecurities among the regional countries regarding not just the prospect of renewed ambitions of a host of terror and jihadist formations, but also the opportunities for regrouping such outfits may now find in Afghanistan, as the Taliban looks the other way. The source of such insecurity has much to do with the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020 that focuses mostly on AQ and IS, and not so much on the other terror formations within the Taliban-led insurgency or the jihadist groups, which enjoy operational proximity with the Taliban.

While Pakistan has reached a ceasefire agreement<sup>420</sup> with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an ally of the Taliban, India is deeply apprehensive of a heightened terror activity in Kashmir by groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-

Mohammad (JeM), who are known to collaborate with the Taliban. Unimpressed by the Taliban's promise that it does not intend to interfere in Kashmir, New Delhi has sought to evolve collective cooperation among regional countries against the threats of radicalisation, separatism, extremism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan. India has attempted to find a common cause with Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics who too are worried about the ramifications of renewed jihadist movements. In this regard, it hosted an eight-nation National Security Advisor (NSA)-level regional summit in New Delhi on 10 November.

Prior to the Taliban's capture of power, China moved in swiftly to extract a promise from the Taliban to stop the Uyghur militants, blamed by Beijing for the unrest in its western province of Xinjiang, from operating freely in Afghanistan. Signaling their growing ties with Beijing, a media report has indicated the Taliban have relocated cadres of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from Badakhshan province, near Afghanistan's border with China to other areas, including in the eastern province of Nangarhar.<sup>421</sup>

However, such measures could be highly inadequate in view of the possible shifts and realignments in the jihadist landscape in Afghanistan. ISKP, while claiming responsibility for the Kunduz Mosque attack, identified the bomber as an Uyghur Muslim. The group said that the attack targeted both Shiites and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uyghurs to meet demands from China.<sup>422</sup> It is not clear if the Taliban would ever deport

<sup>419</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, "Left Behind After U.S. Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/left-behind-after-u-s-withdrawal-some-former-afghan-spies-and-soldiers-turn-to-islamic-state-11635691605>.

<sup>420</sup> "Pakistan Government, Banned TTP Group Reach Ceasefire Agreement," *Al Jazeera*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/8/pakist>

an-government-banned-group-ttp-reach-ceasefire-agreement.

<sup>421</sup> Reid Standish, "Taliban 'Removing' Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan's Border With China," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-uyghurs-china/31494226.html>.

<sup>422</sup> "Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Afghanistan Mosque Attack, Identifies Executor as Uyghur," *India Today*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/islamic->

the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) cadres to China. However, ISKP may have already started securing loyalties of the former allies of the Taliban, for whom the latter has lost relevance. The net result of such tactical shifts could point at one direction, i.e., continuation of a spree of violence in Afghanistan which might spillover into the region and beyond.

### State Capacity

A spike in attacks by ISKP and the probable regrouping of a host of other jihadist organisations appear to be occurring in Afghanistan in the absence of an effective counterforce. Prior to the Taliban's takeover, the US troops and the erstwhile Afghan intelligence agency, the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), had registered significant successes against ISKP. One such operation had led to the arrest of an acting chief of the group, Mawlawi Abdullah aka Aslam Farooqui, in April 2020. ISKP's operational area had shrunk considerably. These gains seem to have been reversed.

Responding to the suicide attack by ISKP near the Kabul airport that claimed the lives of 13 US soldiers, President Joe Biden on 26 August said, "We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay."<sup>423</sup> Biden has also promised 'over the horizon' drone attacks targeting ISKP in Afghanistan. The US intelligence and

military community, however, differ on the ability to carry out such sustained operations and the effectiveness of such a strategy.<sup>424</sup> Such a strategy was employed against the Taliban and AQ for over two decades in the Af-Pak region, with minimal impact. In the absence of on-ground human intelligence, the drone attacks could even become more erratic and result in collateral damage.

On 29 August, the US carried out a drone attack targeting a vehicle that apparently contained an ISKP bomber and reportedly posed an imminent threat to troops at Kabul's airport. Ten people were killed in the strike. However, the attack that was termed as a "righteous strike"<sup>425</sup> by the US Chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Mark Milley, proved to be a major mistake that claimed the life of an employee of a US aid group, among others.<sup>426</sup>

The Taliban, engaged in an internecine war with ISKP for the past several years, have portrayed an over-optimistic picture of their capacity to engage with the group and defeat it. On one hand, they deny the IS' presence in Afghanistan. Their spokesperson has said, "The IS that exists in Iraq and Syria does not exist here."<sup>427</sup> According to him, ISKP is no more than 'some Afghans who have adopted the IS mentality'.<sup>428</sup> On the other, the Taliban has claimed that since August 2021, at least

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state-claims-responsibility-afghanistan-mosque-attack-1862668-2021-10-08.

<sup>423</sup> Ahmad Elhamy and Patricia Zengerle, Michael Martina, "Kabul Attacks Put Bitter Adversary Islamic State Back Into U.S. Sights," *Reuters*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/islamic-state-claims-responsibility-kabul-airport-attack-2021-08-26/>.

<sup>424</sup> Michael Hirsh, "U.S. Military Concedes It's Unready to Fight Terrorism From 'Over the Horizon,'" *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/30/over-the-horizon-counterterrorism-afghanistan-united-states-flying-blind/>.

<sup>425</sup> Yashwant Raj, "Drone Attack in Kabul Killed Civilians, Confesses America," *Hindustan Times*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world->

[news/drone-attack-in-kabul-killed-civilians-confesses-america-101631986525163.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/drone-attack-in-kabul-killed-civilians-confesses-america-101631986525163.html).

<sup>426</sup> "Times Investigation: In U.S. Drone Strike, Evidence Suggests No ISIS Bomb," *New York Times*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/asia/u-s-air-strike-drone-kabul-afghanistan-isis.html>.

<sup>427</sup> "Taliban Say No Al-Qaida or ISIS in Afghanistan," *Times of India*, September 21, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/taliban-say-no-al-qaida-or-isis-in-afghanistan/articleshow/86394394.cms>.

<sup>428</sup> "Anti-Taliban Forces Might Gravitate Towards ISIS-K in Afghanistan: Think Tank," *ANI News*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/anti-taliban-forces-might-gravitate-towards-isis-k-in-afghanistan-think-tank20211109113040/>.



600 members of ISKP including some of the group's senior leaders have been arrested across the country. It has also claimed to have neutralised 21 of ISKP's sanctuaries in the country.<sup>429</sup> The Taliban have rejected the US offer to conduct joint anti-IS operations, saying it is 'able to tackle IS independently'.<sup>430</sup> In view of the ongoing attacks by ISKP, such promises do not inspire much confidence.

A plethora of challenges confront the Taliban regime. These include managing its internal hardline versus moderate divisions; securing relief from the UN sanctions committee; gaining legitimacy, international recognition, financial and developmental assistance, and also, to rearrange its own fighters into a formal and structured military force. Its regressive world view and inability to control its own cadres from persecuting Afghans associated with the erstwhile civilian government continue to make the former insurgency an anathema for much of the international community. This can potentially affect the Taliban's capacity to pursue ISKP effectively. Worse still, the current counter-terrorism approach of the Taliban regime remains selective. While it is open to pursue ISKP and control groups like the ETIM, its approach towards AQ, LeT, JeM and the TTP etc. remains ambivalent.

## Outlook

It is certain that the Taliban regime's intent and capacity to deal with the threat posed by groups like ISKP is highly insufficient and requires the support of the international community. Prolonged reluctance to engage with the Taliban may backfire by emboldening either hardliners within the group or the jihadist organisations. While the international community is still grappling with the

difficulties of reaching a consensus on the terms that such engagement and the red lines that the new rulers of Kabul must adhere to, there is clear evidence of groups like ISKP gaining in strength within Afghanistan. AQ too will potentially exploit the available opportunities for regrouping. The logjam, that can translate into an advantage for terror groups within Afghanistan, needs to be broken sooner than later, in the interest of regional as well as global security. There is no doubt that the Taliban must adhere to international norms of governance. Achieving that would need unity of purpose and effort among the international community, which is lacking at the moment.

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## BANGLADESH

*Despite a decline in the number of terrorist attacks in 2021, recruitment and training activities of both the IS and AQ terrorist groups in Bangladesh continued unabated. Both transnational terrorist groups have largely adapted to the law enforcement response amidst the lingering COVID-19 pandemic. The IS-affiliated group, Neo-Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (Neo-*

<sup>429</sup> Harshit Sabarwal, "At Least 600 Islamic State Members Arrested in Last 3 Months, Claim Taliban," *Hindustan Times*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/at-least-600-islamic-state-members-arrested-in-last-3-months-claim-taliban-101636598059557.html>.

<sup>430</sup> Jon Levine, "Taliban Rejects US Help to Fight Islamic State Terrorism," *Washington Post*, October 9, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/10/09/taliban-rejects-us-help-to-fight-islamic-state-terrorism/>.

*JMB), has emerged out of leadership challenges which crippled it in the last couple of years. Throughout 2021, the terrorist groups in Bangladesh recruited individuals of diverse demographic profiles to avoid detection. The groups turned more towards cyber-space for recruitment and training for future attacks. Terrorism financing also remained incessant with an increase in criminal activities for fund-raising. During 2021, Bangladeshi terrorist groups' attempts to train and mobilise fighters to western Myanmar was also a significant development. As Bangladesh's threat landscape evolves, external developments such as the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan may also further energise local terrorist groups.*

## Trends

In 2021, the number of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh declined. During the year, there were two failed attacks compared to four successful ones in 2020.<sup>431</sup> The Bangladeshi authorities arrested around 130 terrorist suspects from various parts of the country. Though the number of terrorist attacks has plunged, the threat level has not, particularly as terrorist groups remain adaptable to law enforcement responses. Investigations by Bangladeshi authorities indicated an uptick in terrorist threat in 2021 due to increased recruitment and training activities of local groups aligned to IS and AQ networks. Bangladeshi militant groups linked to IS and AQ appear to have adapted to the operational environment shaped by Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies' responses. They have expedited their recruitment campaign, plotting of

attacks, training and fund-raising with increased use of online platforms.

Bangladesh also witnessed a deterioration of law and order in 2021 emanating from mob violence targeting the minority Hindu community<sup>432</sup> and a breakdown of security in the Rohingya refugee camps along its south-eastern border region.<sup>433</sup> Overall, Bangladesh saw a multiplicity of security challenges arising from the domestic and external threat environments which are likely to shape the country's threat landscape in 2022.

## Neo-JMB

Notwithstanding its military defeat in Syria and Iraq, IS remains a source of inspiration for Bangladeshi extremists belonging to Neo-JMB. Though Neo-JMB suffered heavy losses due to heightened counter-terrorism operations in the country in the last couple of years, the group has been able to reorganise its command structure. While Neo-JMB has not been visible in terms of terrorist attacks, its reorganisation and online training activities were noteworthy and indicated its operational intention and a gradual increase in capability.

For instance, a failed attack in May 2021 can be seen as evidence of the group's intent. The group placed a powerful remote-controlled Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in front of a traffic police post in central Narayanganj district adjacent to the capital Dhaka. However, it did not detonate due to the failure of a remote-control device which was defused by the police's bomb disposal unit.<sup>434</sup> In

<sup>431</sup> For details see Iftekharul Bashar, "Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (January 2021): 57-63, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>.

<sup>432</sup> "Violence, Vandalism in Several Districts," *The Daily Star*, October 16, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/violence-vandalism-several-districts-2199151>.

<sup>433</sup> Arafatul Islam, "Bangladesh: Gang Violence in Rohingya Refugee Camps Prompts Fear," *Deutsche Welle*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-gang-violence-in-rohingya-refugee-camps-prompts-fear/a-59631798>.

<sup>434</sup> "Planting Bomb in N'ganj Police Box: 2 Neo JMB' Men Arrested," *The Daily Star*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/planting-bomb-nganj-police-box-2-neo-jmb-men-arrested-2142941>.

successive operations, the authorities arrested members of the group's militant wing and recovered bomb-making manuals, explosives, and materials, including remote control devices from their possession.<sup>435</sup>

Neo-JMB remains focused on boosting its capabilities to carry out attacks, particularly in Dhaka. The group is currently led by Mahadi Hasan Jon, a Bangladeshi national reportedly based in Turkey.<sup>436</sup> Since Jon took the helm in late 2020, the activities of the outfit have increased. Jon's main focus has been to boost the strength of the Neo-JMB's militant wing and plot several attacks, particularly against government establishments. Jon has formed 16 Neo-JMB territories across Bangladesh and appointed 16 deputies in charge of these areas, including six in Dhaka. The outfit wanted to show its strength through successful operations which included building drones and attacking various important installations.<sup>437</sup> The outfit's target list includes law enforcement agencies, Christian missionary churches, noted personalities from the Hindu and Buddhist communities, and Non-Government Organisation (NGO) workers.<sup>438</sup>

Neo-JMB's present aim is to train all its members in the production of IEDs and carry out frequent attacks on targets to get more public attention.<sup>439</sup> According to Bangladeshi investigators, the group currently does not have adequate firearms

and is unable to procure them due to financial constraints.<sup>440</sup> Consequently, it has focused on IEDs as a more economical alternative. The law enforcement agencies believe that these IEDs are cost-effective, powerful and can cause mass casualties. The agencies suspect that the group will procure weapons when it has access to substantial funds enabling it to carry out full-scale operations. The group has imparted IED training to many of its members through online platforms. The training focuses on materials easily available in the market.

Neo-JMB has also created online cells to avoid detection by law enforcement agencies. Bangladeshi authorities have so far found at least three online training cells (named l'dad-1, l'dad-2, and l'dad-3). Under each cell or batch, at least 20 Neo-JMB operatives were trained in bomb-making. Law enforcement agencies have claimed that the group had plans to make chloroform bombs to target buses, classrooms and public places in its bid to kill silently.<sup>441</sup> Neo-JMB has also tried to build a militant sanctuary in the hilly area of Bandarban to establish links with militants in nearby Myanmar's Rakhine State and wanted to use the den to recruit new operatives.<sup>442</sup>

Neo-JMB has recently started recruiting children and teenagers into its ranks. In 2021, at least 25 teenage boys from the

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Muktedir Rashid, "Bangladeshi in Turkey Incites Extremism Here: CTTC Officials," *The New Age*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/143958/index.php>.

<sup>437</sup> Kamran Reza Chowdhury, "Bangladesh Police Arrest 3 Men Suspected of Planning Drone Attacks," *BenarNews*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/bangladesh-militants-arrested-08112021170542.html>.

<sup>438</sup> Shariful Islam and Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo-JMB Wanted to Make Den in Bandarban: Say Cops After Arresting Bomb-Expert Militant," *The Daily Star*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/neo-jmb-wanted-to-make-den-in-bandarban-2128551>.

me-justice/news/neo-jmb-man-wanted-arakan-connection-2128551.

<sup>439</sup> Shariful Islam, "Hunt On for Key Neo-JMB Bomb Expert," *The Daily Star*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/hunt-key-neo-jmb-bomb-expert-2140281>.

<sup>440</sup> Shahriar Hasan, "Nobbo JMB er mul shokti boma hamla," *Ajker Patrika*, July 15, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2YL42oj>.

<sup>441</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo JMB Planned to Make Bombs With Chloroform," *The Daily Star*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/neo-jmb-planned-to-make-bombs-chloroform-2151121>.

<sup>442</sup> Islam and Khan, "Neo-JMB Wanted to Make Den In Bandarban."

Narayanganj district went missing.<sup>443</sup> According to police sources, the boys were already working for the group; investigators indicated the missing boys were mostly from Ahle Hadis/Salafi-dominated villages.<sup>444</sup>

Neo-JMB is going through a financial crisis, resulting in its members raising funds through criminal means such as theft, robbery, and online banking fraud, etcetera.<sup>445</sup> The current chief of the group is also alleged to have sent money from Turkey through various channels.<sup>446</sup> Some reports also point to Neo-JMB's fund-raising activities in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.<sup>447</sup> In addition, the group is reportedly trying to use cryptocurrency for financing purposes as well.<sup>448</sup> The funds are used for supporting the members, organisational expenses as well as procurement of raw materials for IEDs.

#### *Ansar al-Islam (AAI)*

AAI, the Bangladesh chapter of AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), remained a key challenge for the local law enforcement agencies throughout 2021.<sup>449</sup> Bangladeshi

authorities arrested at least 92 alleged members of AAI in 2021, which is more than two-thirds of the total arrests of terrorist suspects in the year. Though AAI has maintained a low profile since 2016, its propaganda, recruitment, and financing activities have further increased in 2021.

The group was jubilant after the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan.<sup>450</sup> In July 2021, Bangladeshi authorities revealed that at least three AAI members had travelled to Afghanistan, while many others have expressed a similar desire in closed online groups.<sup>451</sup> In September, security agencies also arrested four youths who had planned to leave for Afghanistan, after carrying out planned attacks on police and border guards in Dhaka and north-eastern Sylhet region. The authorities also shared that another three AAI members are already in Afghanistan.<sup>452</sup> Officials in Bangladesh believe that with the military defeat of the IS in Syria and Iraq, many operatives of Neo-JMB, who follow the ideology of IS, might join AAI.<sup>453</sup>

On 18 September, a lone-wolf follower of AAI hurled a petrol bomb at a car belonging

<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "19 Joined Neo JMB From One Upazila: CTTC Says," *The Daily Star*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/19-joined-neo-jmb-one-upazila-2144191>.

<sup>445</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "August 17 Countrywide Series Blasts: JMB Now Banking on Other Groups," *The Daily Star*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/62bangladesh/crime-justice/news/august-17-countrywide-series-blasts-jmb-now-banking-other-groups-2153796>.

<sup>446</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Neo JMB Forms New Committee: Sources in CTTC Claim," *The Daily Star*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/neo-jmb-forms-new-committee-2123866>.

<sup>447</sup> Tipu Sultan, "Two of Three Militant Outfits Operate From Abroad," *Prothom Alo English*, July 2, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/two-of-three-militant-outfits-operate-from-abroad>.

<sup>448</sup> "Cryptocurrency to Finance Militancy," *The Daily Star*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/cryptocurrency-finance-militancy-2088941>.

<sup>449</sup> AAI is known to have collaborated with older AQ-centric groups such as the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). For details see, Mohammad Jamil Khan, "August 17 countrywide series blasts :JMB now banking on other groups," *The Daily Star*, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/august-17-countrywide-series-blasts-jmb-now-banking-other-groups-2153796>.

<sup>450</sup> "Afghanistane Emarat e Islamiyar bijoye mobarakbad o shuveccha barta," *An-Nasr Media*, August 19, 2021; "Afghanistane Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'alar prodotto bijoye Muslim ummahke ovinondon!" *An-Nasr Media*, August 31, 2021.

<sup>451</sup> "Militants Eying Move to Afghanistan": Cops Probing If Some Have Already Left," *The Daily Star*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/militants-eying-move-afghanistan-2137676>.

<sup>452</sup> "Militants Eying Move to Afghanistan."

<sup>453</sup> Shariful Islam, "Half Win Stares at a Full Loss," *The Daily Star*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/half-win-stares-full-loss-2121469>.

to a private university. The attacker learned how to make petrol bombs online. He was inspired by AAI's ideology, reading various extremist articles online and watching videos.<sup>454</sup> It is noteworthy that AAI has been trying to promote lone-wolf attacks in Bangladesh since 2019.

AAI has reportedly used online platforms, including Facebook for recruitment. The group reportedly has plans to recruit youth from secondary schools, madrassas, universities, Islamic political parties, and operatives of other militant groups.<sup>455</sup> Among the varied Bangladeshi madrasa networks, the group has a strong presence in the Qawmi madrassas. AAI reaches out to Qawmi madrasa students through an informal platform called Manhaji that operates within Hefazat-e-Islam (Hel), a platform for Qawmi madrassas.<sup>456</sup> The Manhaji members of Hel regularly reach out to the students through outreach sessions for indoctrination purposes.<sup>457</sup> On 28 March 2021, Hel activists attacked a

train in the eastern district of Brahmanbaria, injuring 10 people. The attack came as part of the protest against police actions on Hel's street protests in Dhaka. Hel also organised country-wide protests opposing Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh in March 2021.

Beyond the madrassas, AAI has undertaken some livelihood support projects in northern and central regions of Bangladesh targeting marginalised and downtrodden communities, providing them with cash and other support.<sup>458</sup> The group has also tried to recruit Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in the guise of distributing aid<sup>459</sup> and also through religious sermons in camps.<sup>460</sup> AAI is also trying to strengthen its female wing with at least 25 female operatives directly involved in its organisational activities, and another 300 female supporters connected with its online social media accounts.<sup>461</sup> According to Bangladeshi officials, although AAI has no

<sup>454</sup> "Failed Lone Wolf Militant Attack in Gulshan," *Prothom Alo English*, September 20, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime-and-law/failed-lone-wolf-militant-attack-in-gulshan>.

<sup>455</sup> Sheikh Sabiha Alam, "Ansar Al Islam Aims to Recruit Youth From Religious and General Education Background," *The Daily Star*, May 11, 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/ansar-al-islam-aims-to-recruit-youth-from-religious-and-general-education-background>.

<sup>456</sup> The *Manhajis* are described by Bangladeshi observers as a group of Islamist clerics believed to be pro-AQ; they support violent militant jihad in favour of their cause, i.e., Islamisation of the country. The *Manhajis* have strategically embedded themselves within the platform of orthodox madrassas known as the Hefazat-e-Islam (Hel), and tried to gain full control of the organisation. With some of the *Manhajis* securing key positions within the Hel, they have strongly influenced the country's Qawmi madrasa system which is controlled largely by the Hel. *Manhaji* clerics are also involved in spreading hate speech both (online and on the ground) against Bangladesh's Hindu minority.

<sup>457</sup> These 3-day sessions are called *Tarbiati majlis* (training sessions). These sessions are conducted unofficially and without approval from the madrasa authorities or parents. The training sessions usually take place far from the

madrassas. The *Manhajis* use social media to announce the dates and locations of the sessions. *Tarbiyati majlis* are possibly open for madrasa drop-outs as well. Some madrasa authorities have reported that the *Tarbiyati majlis* are brainwashing their students and turning them into militant supporters.

<sup>458</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Ansar Al Islam Targeting Non-Muslims, Transgender People for Recruitment: CTTC," *The Daily Star*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/non-muslims-transgender-people-their-new-target-2179881>.

<sup>459</sup> "3 Men of Banned Ansar Al Islam Held for Trying to Recruit Rohingyas," *The Daily Star*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/crime/news/3-men-banned-ansar-al-islam-held-trying-recruit-rohingyas-2119293>.

<sup>460</sup> "Ansar Al Islam Leader Arrested: He Tried to Recruit Rohingyas, Says Rab," *The Daily Star*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/ansar-al-islam-leader-arrested-2131876>.

<sup>461</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Ansar Al Islam Plans to Beef Up Its Female Wing," *The Daily Star*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/ansar-al-islam-eyeing-strong-female-wing-2167231>.

plan to use female members in violent operations, they are recruiting females to marry male members to create family units that would promote the outfit's secrecy and efficiency. AAI was also recruiting females to work for their social media section to lure new members and collect funds from the outfit's financiers.<sup>462</sup>

In August, Bangladeshi authorities arrested the first-ever female operative of AAI. The arrestee, a 19-year-old student, had disseminated content propagating extremism through Facebook pages. She also maintained accounts on several encrypted messaging platforms including Telegram and ChirpWire. She ran more than 15 channels in her Telegram accounts, which were followed by more than 25,000 accounts. She shared extremist content, bomb-making manuals, and attack strategies in these channels.<sup>463</sup>

While the leader of its military wing remains at large, AAI has a new spiritual chief, Sheikh Tamim al-Adnani, a former madrassa teacher. Not a new name in the country's online extremist domain, Tamim's sermons have been published on different platforms to draw potential recruits.<sup>464</sup> There are at least a dozen pro-AAI clerics who have been active on social media in spreading hate speech against religious minorities in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi observers believe that such hate speech was a key factor behind the attacks on Hindu minorities in 2021.

In 2021, Bangladesh saw two spates of mob attacks targeting the Hindus. On 17 March 2021, several hundred people from three villages carried out a fierce attack on the minority Hindu community in a village in Sunamganj, damaging 89 houses and eight Hindu temples. The attacks were allegedly led by Hel supporters following a Facebook post by a Hindu youth against Hel's then joint secretary general Mamunul Haque,<sup>465</sup> a key Manhaji figure. Again, in a series of attacks from 13 October to 1 November, at least seven Hindus were killed and several hundreds injured in mob attacks. At least 117 Hindu temples and makeshift worship arrangements, and 301 Hindu homes and business establishments, were also damaged across Bangladesh in these mob attacks.<sup>466</sup> The spate of attacks erupted following online rumours claiming that a volume of Quran had been desecrated by Hindus.

According to Bangladeshi authorities, the organisational activities of AAI appear strongest in the capital Dhaka and the port-city Chattogram. It also has bases in two south-western districts, Satkhira and Kushtia. The law enforcement agencies have pointed out that the group continues to get financial support from abroad and some businessmen in the country. The group reportedly has investments in the agro-processing sector, book publishing, e-commerce, clothing stores, and IT firms.<sup>467</sup>

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> "First-Ever Female Operative of Ansar Al Islam Arrested, Police Claim," *The Daily Star*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/first-ever-female-operative-ansar-al-islam-arrested-police-claim-2163711>.

<sup>464</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Ansar Al Islam: Regrouping by Stealth," *The Daily Star*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/ansar-al-islam-regrouping-stealth-2056053>.

<sup>465</sup> Md Serajul Islam, "Attack on Sunamganj Hindus: 89 Houses, 8 Temples Damaged," *Dhaka Tribune*, March 22, 2021,

<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2021/03/22/communal-violence-in-sunamganj-89-houses-8-temples-damaged>.

<sup>466</sup> "Communal Violence: Minorities Attacked in 27 Dists on Oct 13-Nov 1," *The Daily Star*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/communal-violence-minorities-attacked-27-dists-2223691>.

<sup>467</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Ansar Al Islam: Regrouping by Stealth," Police have traced a number of financial transactions involving AAI and found that it received around \$900 to \$1,100 from abroad through PayPal on several occasions.

## Responses

2021 saw continued counter-terrorism operations across Bangladesh. Various police units arrested approximately 130 terrorist suspects, recovered small arms and IEDs.<sup>468</sup> In light of the IED incidents in recent years, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police launched the country's first-ever data centre in September. The data centre provides analytical and advisory assistance to police personnel on the ground on matters related to IED disposal and investigation. The data centre has an archive of all types of explosives and IEDs used by militant outfits, political parties, or industrial explosions since 2000.<sup>469</sup>

Bangladesh's deradicalisation programmes are still ad hoc and insufficient compared to the quantum of radicalisation cases in the country. In recent years, Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have started some community engagement initiatives; however, there is room for improvement, particularly in terms of creating community ownership.

One area of concern has been the gap in the country's criminal justice and prison system. According to a 2021 report by the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), around 18 militants of different outfits, all accused in terrorism cases between 2000 and 2016, fled the country either after obtaining bail from the court or without ever being arrested. They are now living in 13 countries spanning North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>470</sup> The institutional weaknesses of the prison system are particularly concerning.

<sup>468</sup> Of 130 arrests, 92 are reportedly from AAI, 16 from Neo-JMB, 11 from JMB, 7 from Allah'r Dal and 4 from HuJI-B.

<sup>469</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Country's First Bomb Archive Goes Online," *The Daily Star*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/countrys-first-bomb-archive-goes-online-2166451>.

According to a media report based on police investigations, leaders and operatives of four local militant outfits are now operating an online business from behind bars to collect funds. Convicted leaders of the militant outfits launched the business allegedly with support from a section of jail staffers who also gain financially. The business profits are used to support the militants' families and bear the costs of their legal battles.<sup>471</sup>

## Outlook

In 2022, which is also an election year for the country, Bangladesh's counter-terrorism environment is likely to be challenging. Five challenges merit closer monitoring. First, the availability of online recruitment and training indicates the possibility that a higher number of people from diverse demographic backgrounds may be indoctrinated in the country (as well as within the diaspora communities) and mobilised for carrying out terrorist attacks. Unless checked effectively, this might also lead to a higher number of IED incidents including lone-actor attacks. Second, terrorism financing may take a more complex shape with militants turning to diverse strategies and tactics to circumvent the safeguards in the traditional financial system. An increased share of criminal activities including in the digital space is also likely emerge as a significant source of terrorist fund-raising in Bangladesh.

Third, unless extremist hate speech is checked effectively, the terrorist groups will continue to instigate more attacks on the country's religious minorities and exploit the unrest to reorganise themselves. Fourth, it is highly likely

<sup>470</sup> Shariful Islam, "PBI Report on Militancy: Suspects Slipped Out," *The Daily Star*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/pbi-report-militancy-suspects-slipped-out-2044933>.

<sup>471</sup> Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Militants Doing Business From Inside the Jail," *The Daily Star*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/militants-doing-business-inside-the-jail-2069861>.

Bangladeshi terrorists will draw inspiration from the Taliban victory in Afghanistan to renew their operational linkages and send members to train there. Fifth, the Rohingya crisis may further intensify and attract jihadist actors not only from the Rohingya community but also from mainland Bangladesh. Bangladeshi territory might be used for launching attacks on Myanmar. Above all, a key challenge for Bangladesh is to deny terrorists the ability to exploit religious platforms to disseminate their extremist messages. This will require the continued engagement of the community and ensuring that religious sermons are not exploited to incite hatred. Doing this is not going to be quick or easy and will require a national Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) strategy and a long-term action plan.

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### INDIA

*India in 2021 witnessed a slightly higher number of terrorist incidents compared to the previous year. As of 12 November, the country saw as many as 1,511 terrorism-*

*related incidents higher than 1,431 during the whole of 2020.<sup>472</sup> However, there was a slight dip in terrorism-related killings, which fell from 299 in 2020 to 264 in 2021.<sup>473</sup> An important new development in 2021 was that for the first time ever in India, Unidentified Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) were used in an attack on a military installation in Jammu.<sup>474</sup> The Maoist insurgency continued to decline in 2021. The area over which the rebels wield influence continued to shrink. Yet, their operational capacity to carry out massive attacks has remained, and they were able to inflict heavy losses on the security forces. As for Hindutva extremism, it continued unabated across India mostly targeting Muslim and Christian communities. The security situation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) began deteriorating in September following increased infiltration of militants from Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the accompanying encounters between security forces and militants near the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border between India and Pakistan in the former princely state of J&K. In October, militants targeted Hindus and Sikhs in the Muslim-dominated Kashmir Valley, triggering a flight of religious minorities from the region. The surge in violence in September raised concerns that the impact of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August and Pakistan's victory in the geopolitical game in that country was beginning to unfold in J&K.*

### Trends

#### *Hindutva Extremism<sup>475</sup>*

<sup>472</sup> "Data Sheet India: Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Year Wise," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/incidents-data/india>.

<sup>473</sup> "Data Sheet India: Yearly Fatalities," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/india>.

<sup>474</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Drone Attacks on Military Installation Rattle India's Security Establishment," *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/drone-attacks-on-military-installation-rattle-indias-security-establishment/>.

<sup>475</sup> A modern political ideology, Hindutva defines India as a Hindu *rashtra* (nation). It is an exclusivist ideology; Muslims and Christians, who Hindutva ideologues have described as "foreign races" as their *pitrabhu* (fatherland) and *punyabhu* (holy land) are not in India but in "far off Arabia or Palestine," are not deemed to be part of the Hindu *rashtra*. Violence against them is justified as it is in self-defence, i.e., to protect Hindu values and culture from centuries of assaults by Muslim invaders and Christian colonial rulers. For an analysis of Hindutva extremism, see Sudha Ramachandran, "Hindutva Violence in India:



Hindutva organisations and activists continued to target the minority Muslim and Christian communities in 2021. Although mob violence targeting Muslims on the scale of the pogrom in northwest Delhi in late-February 2020 did not happen in 2021, there were innumerable incidents of Hindu mobs physically attacking Muslim individuals. For instance, Muslim men were forced to chant *Jai Shri Ram* (victory to Ram, a Hindu deity), insulted and assaulted.<sup>476</sup> The targeting of Muslims by so-called *gau rakshaks* (literally protectors of cows, but essentially vigilantes in the name of cow protection) on the ground that they had eaten beef or were trying to smuggle cows, which are considered sacred by Hindus, continued.<sup>477</sup> Significantly, intimidation, humiliation and attacks on Muslims were recorded and the videos were uploaded on social media. Clearly, the violence was aimed not just at the immediate victims but at the larger Muslim community.

Muslim men getting into inter-faith marriages were targeted as well.<sup>478</sup> If allegations of 'love jihad' and 'corona jihad' were used in previous years to demonise and justify anti-Muslim violence, 'narcotics jihad' and 'land jihad' entered the Hindutva

lexicon in 2021.<sup>479</sup> Incidentally, the Catholic Church in Kerala, which had joined hands with the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella grouping of Hindutva organisations of which India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a part, in its campaign against 'love jihad,' also raised the bogey of 'narcotics jihad' in 2021.<sup>480</sup> Muslim women were not spared either. In 2021, dozens of Muslim women found they had been put up for sale online.<sup>481</sup> Some of the women in this list were vocal critics of the BJP government. This online sexualised violence was aimed at silencing them. It was also "clearly intended to provoke mass sexual violence against Muslim women."<sup>482</sup>

Inflammatory remarks and anti-Muslim speeches by BJP leaders increased in the run-up to elections, as communal polarisation of society often benefits the BJP electorally. In 2021, such speeches increased in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, which voted in state assembly elections. In Bengal, for instance, BJP candidates alleged that victory of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) would turn Bengal into a "mini-Pakistan," a

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Trends and Implications," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 4 (June 2020), 15-20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26918077.pdf>.

<sup>476</sup> Omar Rashid, "Muslim Man Assaulted, Forced to Chant Jai Shri Ram in Kanpur," *The Hindu*, August 12, 2021,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/muslim-man-assaulted-forced-to-chant-jai-shri-ram-in-kanpur/article35883370.ece>.

<sup>477</sup> Deep Mukherjee, "'Cow Vigilantes' Lynch MP Man Transporting Cattle in Rajasthan," *Indian Express*, June 15, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/cow-vigilantes-lynch-mp-man-transporting-cattle-in-rajasthan-7359292/>.

<sup>478</sup> "UP: Hindutva Group Stops Interfaith Marriage, Takes Couple to Police Station," *Scroll*, July 30, 2021, <https://scroll.in/latest/1001536/up-right-wing-group-stops-interfaith-marriage-takes-couple-to-police-station>.

<sup>479</sup> While 'love jihad' refers to Muslims allegedly forcing religious conversion through marriage, the term 'corona jihad' is used to accuse them of deliberately spreading the coronavirus. 'Land jihad' refers to Muslims allegedly forcing Hindus

to sell their property at low prices, while the term 'narcotics jihad' is used in relation to the sale of drugs to spoil the lives of non-Muslims.

<sup>480</sup> U. Hiran, "Bishop Warns Christians in Kerala Against 'Love and Narcotics Jihad,'" *The Hindu*, September 9, 2021,

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/bishop-warns-christians-in-kerala-against-love-and-narcotics-jihad/article36377244.ece>; "Now, BJP MLA Claims There Is 'Land Jihad' in Rajasthan Town," *Indian Express*, September 18, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/jaipur/now-bjp-mla-claims-there-is-land-jihad-in-rajasthan-town-7516698/>.

<sup>481</sup> Geeta Pandey, "Sulli Deals: The Indian Muslim Women 'Up For Sale' on an App," *BBC*, July 10, 2021.

<sup>482</sup> Alishan Jafri and Zafar Aafaq, "Unchecked Tsunami of Online Sexual Violence by Hindu Right Against India's Muslim Women," *Article-14*, May 21, 2021, <https://article-14.com/post/unchecked-tsunami-of-online-sexual-violence-by-hindu-right-against-india-s-muslim-women>.

jibe at the TMC's support for Muslims.<sup>483</sup> Hindutva violence against Muslims and their places of worship spread to new areas in 2021 like the state of Tripura in northeast India that had not seen communal violence for decades.<sup>484</sup>

Likewise, the Christian community was targeted as well by Hindutva extremists. Human rights groups claimed there were over 300 instances of mob attacks targeting Christians and vandalising churches from across 21 states, particularly in North India, in the first nine months of 2021.<sup>485</sup>

### *Kashmir Militancy*

There was a relative lull in violence in J&K in the first half of 2021.<sup>486</sup> Between January and June, around 61 terrorist incidents were recorded, compared to 102 incidents during the corresponding period last year.<sup>487</sup>

The militancy took a communal turn in early October 2021. While most of the civilians killed in terrorist acts in 2021 were Kashmiri Muslims, six Hindus and one Sikh – religious minorities in the Kashmir Valley -

were gunned down over a span of a fortnight in October. As in 1989-1990, when the targeted execution of religious minorities triggered an exodus of Pandits (Hindus) from the Valley, this time too, the targeted killing set off a flow of Hindus and Sikhs out of the Valley, albeit on a much smaller scale.<sup>488</sup>

Parallel to the possible communalisation of the Kashmir militancy was the attempt of militant groups to rebrand themselves as political groups fighting Indian 'occupation' of Kashmir rather than Islamist outfits waging jihadist militancy. Unlike the older groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), which had distinctly Islamic names, the raft of new groups like The Resistance Force (TRF), the Peoples' Anti-Fascist Front, United Liberation Front and Geelani Force that were active in 2021 sported names that are political. Claiming responsibility for the killing of Pandit pharmacist Makhan Lal Bindroo, the TRF denied the attack was motivated by religious considerations. It claimed that he was targeted for his affiliations to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the fount of Hindutva ideology.<sup>489</sup> However,

<sup>483</sup> Manisha Pande and Meghnad S., "Complacent TMC, Communal BJP: Nandigram's Muslims Have No Margin of Error," *NewsLaundry*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/03/31/complacent-tmc-communal-bjp-nandigrams-muslims-have-no-margin-of-error>.

<sup>484</sup> Samrat X, "Tripura Violence: With No Hindu-Muslim Riots in Decades, What Led to the Recent Attacks in the State?" *NewsLaundry*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/10/28/tripura-violence-with-no-hindu-muslim-riots-in-decades-what-led-to-the-recent-brutality-in-the-state>.

<sup>485</sup> Ankita Upadhyay, "Attacks on Christians on Rise Across India; 300 Cases Registered in 2021," *New Indian Express*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/oct/22/attacks-on-christians-on-rise-across-india-300-cases-registered-in-2021-2374374.html>.

<sup>486</sup> India and Pakistan agreed in late February to strictly observe the 2003 ceasefire along the LoC. With firing and shelling coming to a halt, the LoC was quiet. Infiltration of militants into J&K, which often happens under the cover of cross-LoC firing, came down too in this period. Additionally, during

this period, India was hit by a deadly second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic; lockdowns and restrictions on movement of people acted to constrain both mass protests and militant attacks during the first nine months of 2021.

<sup>487</sup> Manu Pubby and Rahul Tripathi, "Militancy in J&K Falls After Loc Peace, but Terror Infrastructure Across Border Intact," *Economic Times*, June 21, 2021, [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/militancy-in-jk-falls-after-loc-peace-but-terror-infra-across-border-intact/articleshow/83725115.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/militancy-in-jk-falls-after-loc-peace-but-terror-infra-across-border-intact/articleshow/83725115.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

<sup>488</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "Targeted Killing of Hindu Civilians Triggers Panic in Kashmir," *The Diplomat magazine*, Issue 84, November 2021, <https://magazine.thediplomat.com/#/issues/-MmrfUh8ZbWHrh3Jaw2q/read>.

<sup>489</sup> Bashaarat Masood, "He Lives On in Spirit: Valley United in Grief Over Pandit Businessman," *Indian Express*, October 7, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/srinagar/makhan-lal-bindroo-lives-on-in-spirit-valley-united-in-grief-over-pandit-businessman-7556808/>.

Indian security officials maintained that the new groups are mere fronts of terror groups like the LeT and JeM, set up to provide “an image makeover to the Pakistan orchestrated proxy war” in J&K.<sup>490</sup>

An important new development in J&K was the deployment of drones, which were hitherto used to drop narcotics and weapons in Punjab, for attacks on military installations. On 27 June, two explosive-laden drones crashed into the Indian Air Force station in Jammu, with one of them causing damage to the roof of an aircraft hangar.<sup>491</sup> Given that drones are inexpensive, “hard to detect, and expensive to interdict,” they could become a preferred option of anti-India militant and terror groups. Moreover, unlike major suicide attacks on Indian military targets that have been carried out by Pakistani nationals, drone attacks “do not need Pakistani nationals to be directly used. This lowers the risk of exposure (of Pakistani involvement) and international condemnation.”<sup>492</sup>

### *Jihadist Threats*

Of the seven non-Muslims killed in early October, one – a non-Kashmiri Hindu Street vendor – was gunned down by the Islamic State-Hind (IS-H), IS’ Indian affiliate. The jihadist group claimed responsibility for his killing. Unlike groups like the TRF, IS-H did not camouflage its religious motivations or agenda. In its magazine *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of India), it carried the photograph of the killing of the Hindu hawkker. Warning of more attacks, it published a photograph of Hindu deities

and a trident (an image associated with Hinduism), signalling that Hindus would be the target of its attacks.<sup>493</sup>

Indian Muslims have rarely responded to appeals to participate in jihadist campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria. Just a couple of hundred Indian Muslims at the most - a small number considering the large size of the Indian Muslim population - have joined jihadist groups in recent years.<sup>494</sup> This trend continued in 2021 with the number of Indian Muslims going abroad to participate in jihadist campaigns remaining small. However, their numbers are “growing” as the anger of Indian Muslims with an increasingly “Hinduised” India intensifies. Propaganda efforts to play on Muslim insecurities intensified in 2021. As in previous years, IS-H “tailored its propaganda material to stir Indian Muslim insecurities in 2021.”<sup>495</sup>

An article titled “Israel of South Asia” in the June 2021 issue of *Sawt al-Hind* focused on the plight of the Indian Muslim community. “The impure *mushrikeen* (polytheists) of India” have committed “the most crimes against Muslims and are the staunchest haters of Islam and Muslims,” the article said. Reminding readers of the violence during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat and the “ferocious campaign” unleashed on Kashmiri Muslims after the revocation of J&K’s autonomy in August 2019, the article labelled India as the “‘Israel’ of South Asia” and condemned the Maldivian government’s strong friendship with a “*kafir* (unbeliever) country.” “As Muslims, we all

<sup>490</sup> Interview with an Indian Security Official based in Srinagar, India, October 29, 2021.

<sup>491</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Drone Attacks on Military Installation Rattle India’s Security Establishment.”

<sup>492</sup> Praveen Swami, “First-Ever Drone Attack in India Marks Dangerous New Turning Point in Kashmir Terror,” *Money Control*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/current-affairs-trends/first-ever-drone-attack-in-india-marks-dangerous-new-turning-point-in-kashmir-terror-7094161.html>.

<sup>493</sup> Arvind Ojha, “Islamic State Khorasan Warns of More Attacks in Kashmir Amid Targeted Killings,” *India Today*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/islamic-state-khorasan-attacks-kashmir-targeted-killings-1866275-2021-10-18>.

<sup>494</sup> 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/>.

<sup>495</sup> Interview with an Indian Security Official based in Srinagar, India, October 29, 2021.

must be against the disbelievers," it says.<sup>496</sup>

As for AQ in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), in March 2020, it renamed its monthly Urdu-language magazine *Nawai Afghan Jihad* (Voice of the Afghan Jihad) as *Nawai Ghazwat-ul-Hind* (Voice of the Conquest of India) henceforth, signalling its shift in focus to India.<sup>497</sup> Yet, in 2021, its presence and influence in India "did not grow." It seemed "more active online than on the ground in India."<sup>498</sup>

### *Afghanistan's Impact*

Discussions on India's internal security were dominated by apprehensions over the implications of the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. Many argued it would have an "inspirational effect" on Kashmiri and jihadist groups active in India. For instance, HM's chief Syed Salahuddin said that "India too will be defeated by Kashmir's holy warriors in the near future." With "Pakistan's geopolitical stature" having grown with the Taliban capturing power in Afghanistan, a "hardening of its position on Kashmir" was to be expected, analysts said. This would embolden Pakistan to intensify support to anti-India groups in J&K.<sup>499</sup>

Such apprehensions gained credence when infiltration of militants increased, and massive arms caches were recovered in areas near the LoC in September.<sup>500</sup> Furthermore, attacks on religious minorities grew and encounters between militants and security forces were fiercely fought, signalling that militants were highly-trained and well-equipped. An encounter in Poonch in October, for instance, which extended for over a fortnight resulted in the death of nine Indian Army soldiers, the highest in a single encounter in recent years.<sup>501</sup>

However, it may be too early to attribute the surge in violence to developments in Afghanistan. Counter-terrorism experts say that there is not enough data to prove that violence did indeed surge post-August or to link it to developments in Afghanistan.<sup>502</sup> While it is a fact that targeted killings of religious minorities took place, there is little evidence to connect it to Pakistan. Rather, it is more likely that these are a response to the targeting of Muslims by Hindutva activists. Like their jihadist counterparts, the militant and terror outfits active in Kashmir would have seen opportunity in stirring communal trouble in India. They would have calculated that violence targeting Hindus in the Kashmir Valley would incite violence against Muslims in the rest of India, which would in turn

<sup>496</sup> "Article in Issue 17 Of ISIS Magazine Sawt Al-Hind Calls India the Israel of South Asia, Says: 'Mushrikeen [Polytheists] of India Are Included Among the Top Countries With the Most Crimes Against Muslims,'" *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch No. 9442, July 16, 2021, <https://www.memri.org/reports/article-issue-17-isis-magazine-sawt-al-hind-calls-india-israel-south-asia-says-mushrikeen>.

<sup>497</sup> Animesh Roul, "Al-Qaeda's South Asian Branch Gravitating Toward Kashmir," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol.18, issue 8, April 17, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/al-qaedas-south-asian-branch-gravitating-toward-kashmir/>.

<sup>498</sup> Interview with an Indian Security Official based in Srinagar, India, October 29, 2021.

<sup>499</sup> Aijaz Hussain, "With Taliban's Rise, India Sees Renewed Threat in Kashmir," *AP News*, September 14, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-religion->

[pakistan-india-afghanistan-1f0e2ef9002224eb7b1df132106a07a1](https://www.pakistan-india-afghanistan-1f0e2ef9002224eb7b1df132106a07a1).

<sup>500</sup> Snehes Alex Phillip, "Pakistan Changes LoC Strategy as Winter Approaches, Terror Launch Pads Full But Ceasefire Holds," *The Print*, October 11, 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/pakistan-changes-loc-strategy-as-winter-approaches-terror-launch-pads-full-but-ceasefire-holds/748959/>.

<sup>501</sup> Nazir Masoodi, "Bodies Of Soldiers Recovered After 48-Hour Op in J&K, Casualties Now 9," *NDTV*, October 16, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/massive-army-operation-in-j-ks-poonch-as-soldiers-go-missing-during-encounter-2577302>.

<sup>502</sup> Ajai Sahni, "Hysteria, Not Facts, Are Driving J&K Terror Analysis," *Times of India*, October 13, 2021, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/86996428.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst\\_prime](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/86996428.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst_prime).

deepen disaffection among Kashmiris. This would boost recruitment of fighters.

### *Maoist Insurgency*

The decline of left-wing extremism continued in 2021 as the geographic spread of areas under Maoist influence dropped from 96 districts in 2010 to 53 in 2020 and 41 in 2021. Also, the number of left-wing extremist incidents in India dropped from 665 in 2020 to 349 as of August 2021.<sup>503</sup> Likewise, there was a “sharp spike” in surrender of Maoists too, mostly coming from the Maoist -stronghold, Chhattisgarh. Government officials attributed the surrenders to absence of strong leadership, deaths and illnesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability to access treatment for COVID-19 fuelled resentment among the lower cadres against the senior ranks.<sup>504</sup>

In March, two back-to-back attacks on paramilitary personnel in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district, the epicentre of the current phase of the Maoist insurgency, signalled that although the insurgency is weakening, the rebels retain the capacity to carry out major attacks. On 23 March, they blew up a bus carrying security personnel in Narayanpur district, killing five and injuring 13. Then on 3 April, some 22 police and paramilitary personnel were killed and another 30 injured in a Maoist ambush in Sukma district in Bastar. It was the deadliest attack by the Maoists in four years and by any militant group in India this

year. It underscored the continuing deficiencies in the state's capacity to gather intelligence in areas of Maoist influence.<sup>505</sup>

### **Responses**

In 2021, the state persisted with its security-centric approach to dealing with the Maoist insurgency. While this has served to eliminate rebel commanders and fighters, it has alienated the local tribal population, impeding the state's intelligence-gathering efforts and crippling security operations.<sup>506</sup> While the government has undertaken development work in the Maoist areas, this has not benefited the locals. Mineral extraction has largely benefited the large corporations and ‘outsiders’ (mainly non-tribals) and infrastructure development too is security-centric. Importantly, the state is yet to initiate talks with the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which remains a banned organisation. Hence, although the Maoist insurgency is in decline, it is a matter of time before it escalates again.

The state's approach to the Kashmir militancy and global jihadist groups too has been overwhelmingly security-centric, with an array of police, paramilitary and military forces deployed to quell protests and eliminate terrorists. Reliance on bans, mass arrests and use of force continued through 2021. In response to the UAV attack on the Jammu air station, for instance, the government banned the use of drones in several districts in J&K.<sup>507</sup> It

<sup>503</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Union Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Cooperation Shri Amit Shah chairs review meeting in New Delhi on Left Wing Extremism, September 26, 2021.

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1758295>.

<sup>504</sup> Sana Shakil, “Steep Rise in Number of Maoist Surrenders, Officials Say Pandemic Among Reasons,” *New Indian Express*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2021/sep/12/steep-rise-in-number-of-maoist-surrenders-officials-say-pandemic-among-reasons-2357394.html>.

<sup>505</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Deadly Maoist Insurgents Strike Again in India, Exposing Security Flaws,” *The Diplomat*, April 6, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/deadly-maoist-insurgents-strike-again-in-india-exposing-security-flaws/>.

<sup>506</sup> Vinay Kaura, “India's Unsolved Maoist Terrorism Problem,” *The Diplomat*, May 3, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/indias-unsolved-maoist-terrorism-problem/>.

<sup>507</sup> Sunil Bhat, “After Rajouria And Srinagar, J&K's Baramulla District Also Bans Use of Drones,” *India Today*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jammu-air-base-drone-attack-baramulla-district-ban-sale-of-drones-1824733-2021-07-06>.

detained some 700-800 so-called “terrorist sympathisers” – many of them over-ground workers of the banned Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami – in the wake of the civilian killings in October.<sup>508</sup> Such moves may help the state manage the situation, but they have deepened Kashmiri alienation from the Indian state.

In June 2021, in a move that seemed an attempt at course correction, the BJP government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited leaders of 14 J&K political parties for talks in New Delhi.<sup>509</sup> However, the process proved a non-starter with the government taking no steps forward to restore J&K’s statehood which was revoked in August 2019, even as it persisted with the hugely unpopular process of delimiting constituencies followed by elections.<sup>510</sup>

In 2021, the state adopted an iron-fist approach towards the Maoist insurgency, the Kashmir militancy and global jihadism. But it ignored Hindutva extremism. Hindutva activists who attacked, lynched and killed, and uploaded their violence online to terrorise entire communities were not tried under terrorism laws. In most cases, no action was taken against them.

## Outlook

The outlook for India’s internal security situation in 2022 is bleak. Several states will be voting in state assembly elections in 2022. The electoral battle in Uttar Pradesh is likely to see the BJP stir communal passions to polarise society to win the support of the Hindu majority. Hindutva outfits can be expected to step up violent attacks on Muslims and Christians in the run-up to elections. Violence against

Muslims will be exploited by pan-Islamist groups in their propaganda publications. Recruits to Islamist terror groups may not have grown rapidly in the past but this cannot be taken for granted. Hence, the possibility of Indian jihadists carrying out attacks in the coming years cannot be ruled out. The BJP government’s pressing ahead with the delimitation exercise is bound to draw Kashmiri ire and attacks.

The implications of recent developments in Afghanistan for India’s internal security will become clearer in 2022. The possibility of Pakistan supporting acts of terror in J&K or other parts of India cannot be ruled out especially if the military and the beleaguered civilian government of Imran Khan wants to divert public attention away from its domestic woes.

## About the Author

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## PAKISTAN

*Developments in 2021 underscored the enduring nature of Pakistan’s complex and diverse threat landscape. Trends of militant and ethnic violence generally conformed to regional geopolitical developments. The US withdrawal and the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan had a rejuvenating effect on Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan*

<sup>508</sup> Neeta Sharma, “Over 700 ‘Terrorist Sympathisers’ Detained in J&K After Civilian Killings,” *NDTV*, October 10, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/over-700-terrorist-sympathisers-detained-by-security-forces-in-jammu-and-kashmir-after-recent-civilian-killings-2570756>.

<sup>509</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Prime Minister Modi Extends Kashmir An Olive Branch,” *The*

*Diplomat*, June 21, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/prime-minister-modi-extends-kashmir-an-olive-branch/>.

<sup>510</sup> Ali Ahmed, “Will the Centre Grab It?” *Money Control*, November 20, 2021, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/theres-a-political-opportunity-in-kashmir-will-the-centre-grab-it-7662811.html>.

(TTP). Pakistan's dichotomous policies of supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan, while militarily opposing TTP at home, seems to have run its course, compelling the former to negotiate with the latter. Islamabad also dithered at using force against the Barelvi radical group, Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), and instead signed yet another (secret) deal with it. Though the implementation of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)'s action plan, border fencing with Afghanistan and Iran as well as Intelligence Based Operations continued, a systematic approach in counter-terrorism (CT) and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) initiatives was lacking. On the contrary, the state's uncompromising attitude towards the secular and non-violent Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement was in sharp contrast to its appeasement of Islamist groups. Considering recent geopolitical developments and the corresponding violent-extremist trends, Pakistan needs to revise its CT and PCVE strategies.

## Trends

### Threat Landscape

In the first ten months of 2021, as many as 169 terrorist attacks were reported in Pakistan compared to 254 violent incidents witnessed over the corresponding period in 2020, registering a 33 percent decrease.<sup>511</sup> However, despite a slump in attacks, the resultant fatalities surged significantly to 321 from 159 killings, a 50 percent

increase.<sup>512</sup> More than half of these attacks have taken place since July 2021.<sup>513</sup> August, when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, was the most volatile month in Pakistan witnessing around 32 terrorist attacks, including two suicide bombings, which accounted for 149 killings.<sup>514</sup> Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces were the most volatile areas both in terms of number of reported terrorist attacks and fatalities.

Like 2020, Pakistani security forces bore the brunt of insurgent and terrorist attacks in 2021. That Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs, 78) and firings (68) were the two most frequently used tactics in 2021, further corroborate this trend.<sup>515</sup> Mostly, IEDs and firing are employed by terrorist groups to hit hard targets. This is part of Pakistani insurgent and terrorist groups' selective targeting strategy instead of using indiscriminate violence.<sup>516</sup>

Alarming, there was an uptick in frequency and intensity of attacks on Chinese nationals and projects in Pakistan in 2021, underscoring that following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China could be the main target of Pakistani jihadist and insurgent groups.<sup>517</sup> Separately in 2021, except for a grenade attack in Bahawalpur on a Shia mourning procession in August,<sup>518</sup> no sectarian attack was recorded in Pakistan.<sup>519</sup> This was in sharp contrast to September 2020's large-scale anti-Shia protests in Pakistan's major

<sup>511</sup> The data is compiled from Pak Institute for Peace Studies, an independent Pakistani think tank's monthly security reports.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> John Ruwitch, "Extremists in Pakistan Have Been Emboldened by the Taliban's Success in Afghanistan," *NPR*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/14/1055640617/extremists-in-pakistan-have-been-emboldened-by-the-talibans-success-in-afghanist>.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> For details see, Abdul Basit, "Pakistan," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (January 2021), 72-81, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf)

[content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf).

<sup>517</sup> Abdul Basit and Raffaello Pantucci, "Why Terrorists Will Target China in Pakistan," *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/why-terrorists-will-target-china-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>518</sup> Imran Gabol, "At Least 2 Killed, 59 Injured in Explosion During Ashura Procession in Bahawalnagar," *Dawn*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641566>.

<sup>519</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic Calendar, Shia Muslims bring out processions to mark the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain and his family members in the Battle of Karbala 680 AD.

cities, following a provocative speech by a Shia *Zakir* (orator).<sup>520</sup>

In 2021, five suicide attacks were also reported in Pakistan, indicating a potential revival of this trend which had become almost dormant.<sup>521</sup> The revival of suicide terrorism is possibly linked to the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan affording TTP more space and freedom of action to train and use suicide bombers for attacks in Pakistan.<sup>522</sup> TTP carried out four of the five reported suicide attacks.<sup>523</sup> A fifth attack was carried out by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) on 20 August, hitting a Chinese engineer's vehicle working at the

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Gwadar.<sup>524</sup>

Following the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, Pakistani militant and radical groups such as TTP and TLP have become more aggressive in their activism.<sup>525</sup> Developments in Afghanistan are potentially redefining the Pakistani state's relations with militant and radical groups, forcing the former to cede more space to the latter.<sup>526</sup> For instance, TTP celebrated the Taliban's victory as a great turning point in its so-called struggle for the creation of a self-styled theocratic state in Pakistan.<sup>527</sup>

<sup>520</sup> "Anti-Shiite Protest Rattles Pakistan's Karachi," *Arab News*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1732981/world>.

<sup>521</sup> According to some open data sources and infographics published by TTP's propaganda wing, six suicide attacks were reported in Pakistan in 2021. However, these claims are hard to verify.

<sup>522</sup> Abdul Syed and Tore Hamming, "The Revival of the Pakistani Taliban," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, Issue 4, (April-May 2020), pp. 28-38, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-revival-of-the-pakistani-taliban/>.

<sup>523</sup> TTP targeted Serena Hotel (22 April) and a patrolling van of the paramilitary Frontier Corps (September 5) in Quetta. The group also hit a bus of Chinese engineers working on the Dasu Hydro project in KP's Kohistan district (13 August) and the Pakistani security forces in South Waziristan's tribal district (13 September). The fifth suicide bombing was perpetrated by BLA hitting a private vehicle of a Chinese engineer working on CPEC in Gwadar, Balochistan (21 August). For details, see Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan Says Attack That Killed Chinese Was a Suicide Bombing," *Reuters*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/>; Ayaz Gul, "Suicide Blast Kills 4 Pakistan Troops, Injures 18," *Voice of America*, September 5, 2021, [https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch\\_suicide-blast-kills-4-pakistan-troops-injures-18/6219255.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_suicide-blast-kills-4-pakistan-troops-injures-18/6219255.html); Gul Yousafzai, "Two Killed in Suicide Bombing Targeting Chinese Nationals in Pakistan," *Reuters*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/>; "Pakistani Taliban Carried Out Suicide Blast at Hotel Hosting Chinese Ambassador, Five Killed," *South China Morning Post*, April 22, 2021,

<https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3130525/car-bomb-kills-4-pakistan-hotel-where-chinas-ambassador-was>; Saleem Mehsud, "Pakistani Taliban -TTP- Claim Responsibility of Suicide Attack in Tehsil Ladha Area of South Waziristan," *Twitter*, September 13, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/SaleemMehsud/status/14373564242343938>.

<sup>524</sup> Ghalib Nihad, "2 Children Killed in Suicide Attack on Vehicle Carrying Chinese Nationals in Gwadar," *Dawn*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641659>; In recent years, BLA's Majeed Brigade has trained Baloch militants as suicide bombers for attacks in Pakistan, something which they seem to have learnt and adopted from TTP, for details, see Farhan Zahid, "BLA's Suicide Squad: Majeed Fidayeen Brigade," *Terrorism Monitor*, James Town Foundation, January 25, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/blas-suicide-squad-majeed-fidayeen-brigade/>.

<sup>525</sup> Abid Hussain, "Violence Surges in Pakistan's Tribal Belt as Taliban, IS-K Go On Attack," *BBC News*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58891613>.

<sup>526</sup> Fahad Humayun, "5 Ways the Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan Will Hurt Pakistan," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/17/5-ways-talibans-takeover-afghanistan-will-hurt-pakistan/>.

<sup>527</sup> "Pakistani Taliban Leader Reacts to Afghan Gains After US Withdrawal," *CNN*, July 26, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/07/26/pakistan-taliban-leader-robertson-pkg-intl-vpx.cnn>; Najibullah Lalzoy, "Taliban Victory in Afghanistan Is Victory of Entire Muslims: TTP Leader," *Khama Press*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-victory-in-afghanistan-is-victory-of-entire-muslims-ttp-leader-46436/>.



In 2021, Pakistan's threat landscape was in flux, rendering it more complex and harder to predict.<sup>528</sup> Both militant and ethno-separatist groups were adapting their propaganda rhetoric, operational goals and tactics as well as strategic aims and alliances in line with the evolving geopolitical environment.<sup>529</sup> While the terrorism threat in Pakistan shows no sign of abating, the Pakistani state is confronted with the predicament of endlessly fighting TTP kinetically or negotiating with it and implicitly legitimising its extremist agenda.<sup>530</sup> The lack of viable alternative counter strategies and narratives reinforces the prevailing paradoxes compelling the state to persist with its dichotomous policies.<sup>531</sup>

#### *Reunification, Reinvention and Resurgence of TTP*

TTP, the deadliest Pakistani terrorist group, is on the rebound following a series of mergers. Most of these mergers took place last year but continued in 2021 as well. For instance, in October 2021, the Shehryar Mehsud Faction announced its inclusion into TTP.<sup>532</sup> Likewise, in August, Ustad Aslam Group of AQ pledged allegiance to TTP chief Nur Wali Mehsud.<sup>533</sup> Since July 2020, as many as ten militant groups and factions have pledged allegiance to TTP.<sup>534</sup> Of these,

three are former AQ affiliated groups, one faction of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, two from South Waziristan tribal district and three are former TTP affiliates (See Table 1).<sup>535</sup>

No.	Date	Name	Former Affiliations
1	Oct 2021	Shehryar Mehsud Faction	TTP
2	Aug 2021	Ustad Aslam Group	AQ
3	Dec 2020	Mauvli Aalim Khan Group	Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group
4	Aug 2020	Saifullah Kurd Faction	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
5	Aug 2020	Jamaat-ul-Ahrar	TTP-Mohmand Chapter
6	Aug 2020	Hizb-ul-Ahrar	TTP
7	Jul 2020	Hakeemullah Mehsud Group	TTP
8	Jul 2020	Amjad Farooqi Group	AQ
9	Jul 2020	Ustad Ahmad Farooq Group	AQ
10	Nov 2020	Commander Umar Azzam Group	TTP

Table 1: Mergers of Various Militant Factions into TTP Since July 2020<sup>536</sup>

<sup>528</sup> Adnan Amir, "Badly Needed Peace or More Terrorism: How the Afghan Taliban Will Shape Pakistan's Future," *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3145467/badly-needed-peace-or-more-terrorism-how-afghan-taliban-will-shape>.

<sup>529</sup> Abdul Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Discursive Shift From Global Jihadist Rhetoric to Pashtun-Centric Narratives," *Terrorism Monitor*, James Town Foundation, September 24, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-discursive-shift-from-global-jihadist-rhetoric-to-pashtun-centric-narratives/>.

<sup>530</sup> Abdul Basit, "Time for An Indigenous Pakistani Counter Terrorism Discourse?" *Tabadlab*, September 18, 2021, <https://tabadlab.com/time-for-an-indigenous-pakistani-counter-terrorism-discourse/>.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

<sup>532</sup> Bill Roggio, "Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) Consolidates Power in Tribal Areas," *Long War Journal*, October 17, 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/10/movement-of-the-taliban-in-pakistan-ttp-consolidates-power-in-tribal-areas.php>.

<sup>533</sup> Abdul Syed, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Latest Merger Enables Renewed Attacks in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, James Town Foundation, August 13, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistan-latest-merger-enables-renewed-attacks-in-pakistan/>.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> Bill Roggio, "Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan (TTP) Consolidates Power in Tribal Areas," *Long War Journal*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/10/movement-of-the-taliban-in-pakistan-ttp-consolidates-power-in-tribal-areas.php>.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

These mergers have increased TTP's operational capacity and organisational capability to carry out large-scale attacks in Pakistan, which the group demonstrated in 2021. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, TTP has positioned itself to continue its militancy in Pakistan.<sup>537</sup> The group's future trajectory would largely depend on how the Pakistani state deals with it.<sup>538</sup> Currently, TTP and the Pakistani state are engaged in peace talks, mediated by the Afghan Taliban (detailed discussion in response section).<sup>539</sup>

Keeping in view the evolving regional situation, TTP has been reinventing itself to continue its violent activism in Pakistan beyond the US withdrawal.<sup>540</sup> For instance, TTP has significantly recalibrated its ideological narrative to fully focus on Pakistan. Arguably, the group has made these adjustments not to be identified with global jihadist groups namely AQ and ISKP.<sup>541</sup> For instance in February 2021, TTP vehemently refuted claims made in a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) report that AQ was instrumental in the reunification of its various factions in 2020.<sup>542</sup> Likewise in July 2020, TTP denied the UNSC report's assertion that it could collaborate with ISKP in future. Instead, TTP termed ISKP a conspiracy of regional security agencies to malign jihadist movements in the region.<sup>543</sup>

Interestingly, while localising its ideological rhetoric, TTP has chosen to recast itself as an ethnic-separatist group to exploit Pashtun socio-political and economic grievances to possibly create inroads in the ex-FATA region, now merged with KP province.<sup>544</sup> In his July 2021 interview with CNN, TTP chief Nur Wali Mehsud, while celebrating the Taliban victory, took a separatist position to break the ex-FATA region from Pakistan and convert it into a self-style theocracy. Nur Wali's statement was a sharp departure from TTP's previous stance of converting the entire Pakistani polity into a *Sharia* state.<sup>545</sup>

### *The Return of TLP*

Barelvi radical group Tehreek-e-Labiak Pakistan (TLP) was back on the street with yet another long march in October.<sup>546</sup> During October's long march, TLP demanded expulsion of the French ambassador to Pakistan over French President Emmanuel Macron's support for satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo's decision to re-publish the blasphemous caricatures of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>547</sup> The group also demanded the release of its leader Saad Rizvi, who was arrested in April ahead of an expected long march,<sup>548</sup> and removal of terrorism ban. TLP called off its long march after it reached a "secret" deal with the Pakistani government on 31 October, with the latter accepting most of its demands except for expelling the

<sup>537</sup> Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Discursive Shift."

<sup>538</sup> Amira Jadoon, "The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2021, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr\\_494-the\\_evolution\\_and\\_potential\\_resurgence\\_of\\_the\\_tehrik\\_i\\_taliban\\_pakistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf).

<sup>539</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan, TTP Militants Agree on Complete Cease-Fire," *Voice of America*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-ttp-militants-agree-on-complete-cease-fire-6304928.html>.

<sup>540</sup> Amira Jadoon and Abdul Syed, "The Pakistani Taliban is Reinventing Itself," *9Dashline*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/the-pakistani-taliban-is-reinventing-itself>.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Discursive Shift."

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> "Pakistani Taliban Leader Reacts to Afghan Gains After US Withdrawal."

<sup>546</sup> Imran Gabol, "TLP Announces 'Long March' to Islamabad," *Dawn*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1653215>.

<sup>547</sup> "Banned: What Does TLP Want?" *Dawn*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1617844>.

<sup>548</sup> Asad Hashim, "Protests Across Pakistan After Far-Right TLP Leader Arrested," *Al-Jazeera*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/12/protests-across-pakistan-after-far-right-ttp-leader-arrested>.

French ambassador (discussion on deal's implications in response section).<sup>549</sup>

TLP emerged on Pakistan's religio-political landscape in 2016 following the hanging of former Punjab governor Salman Taseer's self-confessed assassin Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri murdered Taseer over false blasphemy charges.<sup>550</sup> TLP's founder Khadim Hussain Rizvi used Qadri as a symbol to politicise the Barelvi identity along narrow sectarian lines. Rizvi antagonistically framed the grievances of Barelvis' political disempowerment and marginalisation in comparison to the more powerful Deobandis, their rival Sunni sub-sect.<sup>551</sup> TLP has successfully channeled the Barelvis' collective outrage into a formidable political reality by offering redemption to its members by being self-appointed guardianship of Prophet Muhammad's honour and finality (of his prophethood).<sup>552</sup> In doing so, TLP has successfully mainstreamed its ideological narrative using social media and madrassa-mosque networks alongside normalising the use of vigilante violence against alleged blasphemers.<sup>553</sup> TLP uses street agitation and disruptive politics for its political objectives.<sup>554</sup> Some isolated incidents of lone-actor assassinations by

its members have also been recorded in the last few years.<sup>555</sup>

TLP's identity politics has taken blasphemy activism in Pakistan to a new level. Resultantly, blasphemy allegations have risen precipitously in Pakistan over the last two years. For instance, in 2020, 200 incidents of blasphemy accusations were recorded in Pakistan which rose to 234 cases by mid-October 2020 last year.<sup>556</sup> The troubling aspect of blasphemy radicalism is that most Pakistanis are followers of Barelvi Islam. Notwithstanding that not all Barelvis subscribe to TLP's ideological stance, blasphemy activism inevitably takes a majoritarian turn, making lives of religious minorities, particularly of the Ahmadiyya and Christian communities, difficult.<sup>557</sup>

### *Persistent Baloch Insurgency*

In 2021, Baloch insurgents continued their attacks against Pakistani security forces. Though the frequency of these attacks lessened following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, which disrupted Baloch sanctuaries and support networks, their lethality saw a calibrated rise.<sup>558</sup> The security forces bore the brunt of insurgent

<sup>549</sup> Iftikhar A. Khan, "Govt Accepts All but One Demands of TLP," *Dawn*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1654270>.

<sup>550</sup> Abdul Basit, "Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 21, no. 3 (August 2020), 374-389, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21567689.2020.1812395>.

<sup>551</sup> In South Asia, Barelvis and Deobandis are two sub-sects of Hanafi school of jurisprudence.

<sup>552</sup> Umair Javed, "Inequality and Ideology," *Dawn*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1619088/inequality-and-ideology>.

<sup>553</sup> Abdul Basit, "Barelvi Political Activism."

<sup>554</sup> Since its emergence on Pakistan's religious landscape, TLP has gained the notoriety of disrupting daily lives in the main cities by blocking the main highways.

<sup>555</sup> For details see, "Sunni Tehreek to TLP: The Rise of Barelvi Extremism," *YouTube*, April 20, 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGGsaffZme4>; Muhammad Imran, "Bahawalpur Student Stabs Professor to Death Over 'Anti-Islam' Remarks," *Dawn*, March 29, 2021,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1470814>; Severin Carell, "Man Who Murdered Glasgow Shopkeeper Asad Shah in Sectarian Attack Jailed," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/09/tanveer-ahmed-jailed-for-murder-glasgow-shopkeeper-in-sectarian-attack>.

<sup>556</sup> Zuha Siddiqui, "Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws Are Politically Toxic—and Often Lethal," *World Politics Review*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/30070/in-pakistan-religion-is-being-weaponized>.

<sup>557</sup> "When the Blood Starts: Spike in Ahmadi Persecution in Pakistan," *Al-Jazeera*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/26/ahmadi-persecution-pakistan-blasphemy-islam>.

<sup>558</sup> "Balochistan Attack," *Dawn*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644975>.

attacks in Balochistan. As outlined, there was also an uptick of violence against Chinese workers and projects in Balochistan.<sup>559</sup> The Pakistani government also reached out to Baloch insurgents for negotiations (discussion in response section).<sup>560</sup>

Since August, the Baloch insurgents faced assassinations and arrests of its leaders and operatives by the Taliban in Nimroz and Kandahar provinces, forcing them to relocate to Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province or Pakistan's Balochistan province.<sup>561</sup> Families of Baloch separatists living in Kandahar were also forced to vacate their houses. Alarmed by evictions, arrests and killings, Baloch separatist leaders in their statements urged the Taliban to be sympathetic to Baloch "refugees" in Afghanistan.<sup>562</sup> For instance, head of Baloch Republican Guard Mir Bakhtiar Domki said, "The Taliban should ensure the protection of Baloch refugees like a neighbor, instead of protecting the interests of Pakistan."<sup>563</sup>

Paradoxically, the CPEC projects in Balochistan have added to the sense of political alienation and relative deprivation of local Baloch communities, given the non-participatory nature of development.<sup>564</sup> For instance, while China is aggressively pursuing infrastructural development projects in Gwadar, the residents are

protesting for basic amenities and services. In September, protests erupted in Gwadar and Turbat districts over the "non-availability of drinking water, health services, education facilities and increasing unemployment in the new port city and other areas of Makran."<sup>565</sup> During the protests in Gwadar, the Provincial General Secretary of Jamat-e-Islami Balochistan, Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman Baloch, maintained, "Despite building the Gwadar Deep Sea Port, the people of Gwadar were still jobless and government has done nothing in this regard so far."<sup>566</sup> The mismatch and disconnect of CPEC projects with the daily lives of local Baloch communities have strengthened the insurgents' narrative that China is a neo-colonial power which, in collusion with the Pakistani establishment, is robbing them of their resources.<sup>567</sup>

## Responses

### *Peace Talks*

Against the backdrop of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan pegged on the Doha Agreement, Pakistan also opened peace talks with TTP.<sup>568</sup> Afghanistan's acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani is mediating these talks.<sup>569</sup> On 8 November, TTP and Pakistan announced a one-month ceasefire from 9 November to 9 December

<sup>559</sup> Reid Standish, "Attacks on Chinese Workers in Pakistan Raise Regional Security Questions for Beijing," *Gandhara*, July 30, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/chinese-workers-security-pakistan/31385180.html>.

<sup>560</sup> "PM Imran Says He Is Considering 'Talking to Insurgents' in Balochistan," *Dawn*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1633359>.

<sup>561</sup> Zia Ur Rehman, "Taliban Crack Down on Pakistani Militants Targeting Belt and Road," *Nikkei Asia*, October 15, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Taliban-crack-down-on-Pakistani-militants-targeting-Belt-and-Road>.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

<sup>564</sup> Shakoor Ahmad Wani, "The New Baloch Militancy: Drivers and Dynamics," *Indian Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 2021), 479-500,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/09749284211027253?journalCode=iqqq>.

<sup>565</sup> Mohammad Zafar, "Gwadar, Turbat Residents Protest for Basic Amenities," *Express Tribune*, October 1, 2021,

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2322767/gwadar-turbat-residents-protest-for-basic-amenities>.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan's PM Says Peace Talks Underway With Pakistani Taliban," *Voice of America*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-imran-khan-says-peace-talks-underway-with-pakistani-taliban/6253786.html>.

<sup>569</sup> Muhammad Saleh Zafar, "Kabul Mediating Between Pak Govt and TTP: Muttaqi," *The News International*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/908643-kabul-mediating-between-pak-govt-and-ttp-muttaqi>.

2021.<sup>570</sup> The one-month ceasefire was a precursor to a broader peace agreement, which would potentially end years of conflict if it succeeded. Between 2004 and 2009, not one of the nine peace agreements<sup>571</sup>, reached between successive Pakistani governments and jihadist groups in the ex-FATA region, succeeded.<sup>572</sup>

Given the diametrically opposite positions of both sides, the chances of the agreement's success, even if it is reached, are limited.<sup>573</sup> For instance, Pakistan expects TTP operatives to lay down arms, publicly apologise for terrorist acts, accept state's writ and live their lives according to the Pakistani constitution, which the latter considers un-Islamic.<sup>574</sup> Similarly, TTP has demanded the release of 100 prisoners as a pre-condition for the peace agreement.<sup>575</sup> TTP also wants to open a political office in a third country and expects reversal of the ex-FATA region's merger with KP and its replacement with a Taliban-style *Shariah* system. On the contrary, the Pakistani state is only willing to grant the militant group limited autonomy.<sup>576</sup> These are

irreconcilable positions and non-negotiable for both sides, minimising the chances of peace talks' success.<sup>577</sup>

At any rate, the Pakistani state maintains it is pursuing these talks to thin out TTP by offering amnesty and repatriation to reconcilable foot soldiers and then dealing with ideologically hardened elements kinetically at a later stage.<sup>578</sup> Presently, given the arrival of winter season, Taliban's insistence on giving "peace a chance" and the poor state of Pakistan's economy, a large-scale military operation seems unlikely.<sup>579</sup> Pakistani establishment believes, given the Taliban's dependence on Pakistan for availing the international humanitarian aid, the time is opportune to force TTP into an agreement on the state's term. There is tremendous pressure on TTP leaders from its foot soldiers to explore options for a return to their native areas in the ex-FATA region, given the difficulty of life in Afghanistan.<sup>580</sup>

Pakistan's decision to open talks with TTP, which is responsible for killing over 80,000 Pakistanis<sup>581</sup>, has eroded the national

<sup>570</sup> Rizwan Shehzad, "Govt, TTP Agree to Cease Fire," *Express Tribune*, November 8, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2328439/govt-ttp-agree-on-a-complete-ceasefire-fawad>.

<sup>571</sup> The Pakistani officials and TTP leaders met three times. Of these, two meetings took place in Kabul and one in Khost. Following the announcement of one-month ceasefire on November 8, both sides formed committees to carry the negotiations forward and convert them into a peace agreement.

<sup>572</sup> Daud Khattak, "Reviewing Pakistan's Peace Deals With the Taliban," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 5, Issue 9, (September 2012), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/reviewing-pakistans-peace-deals-with-the-taliban/>.

<sup>573</sup> Mariam Shah, "From Battleground to Table: Can Pakistan-TTP Talks Work?" *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/from-battleground-to-table-can-pakistan-ttp-talks-work/>.

<sup>574</sup> Muhammad Anis & Mumtaz Alvi & Mushtaq Yusufzai, "Parliamentary Leaders Briefed on Govt-TTP Talks," *The News International*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/907190-leaders-of-parliament-briefed-on-govt-ttp-talks>.

<sup>575</sup> "Pakistan Taliban Demand Prisoner Release as Condition for Talks – Sources," *Reuters*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-taliban-demand-prisoner-release-condition-talks-sources-2021-11-06/>; On November 22, Pakistani released 100 TTP prisoner, for details see Jamsehd Bhagwan, "Govt Releases Over 100 TTP Prisoners as Goodwill Gesture," *Express Tribune*, November 22, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2330584/govt-releases-over-100-ttp-prisoners-as-goodwill-gesture>.

<sup>576</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "TTP Wants 'Political Office' in Third Country," *Express Tribune*, November 20, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2330336/ttp-wants-political-office-in-third-country>.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Fahad Hussain, "PM Allowed Force Use, but Military Opposed It," *Dawn*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1657060/pm-allowed-force-use-but-military-opposed-it>.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> "80,000 Pakistanis Killed in US War on Terror: Report," *Express Tribune*, March 29, 2015,

consensus forged in the aftermath of the Army Public School, Peshawar massacre in 2014 to unequivocally fight terrorism.<sup>582</sup> Furthermore, the Pakistan government's secret negotiations, and decision to disclose their details to the public and other stakeholders through the media instead of giving a policy statement in the parliament, has polarised public opinion. Likewise, by agreeing to sit across the table with TTP, the Pakistani state is implicitly endorsing TTP's extremist agenda and giving it a semblance of legitimacy.<sup>583</sup>

Pakistan also reached a "secret" deal with TLP following the group's threat to bring another long march to the capital city of Islamabad. Eventually, the Pakistani state capitulated to TLP's demands of removing its proscription as a terrorist group, releasing its prisoners and its incarcerated leader.<sup>584</sup> In return, TLP dropped its demand of the French ambassador's expulsion, called-off its long march in a phased manner and pledged not to engage in agitational politics in the future.<sup>585</sup> Inevitably, the deal has strengthened TLP and implicitly endorsed its ideological narrative.<sup>586</sup> The removal of terrorism designation would allow TLP, which is a

registered political party in Pakistan, to contest the 2023 general elections. The deal would enable TLP to mainstream its radical agenda, grow its footprint and undermine PCVE efforts in the country.<sup>587</sup>

In July 2021, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan also showed his willingness to negotiate with Baloch insurgent groups.<sup>588</sup> He appointed Shahzain Bugti, the grandson of influential Baloch tribal elder, the late Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, as a focal person to reach out to angry Baloch groups.<sup>589</sup> However, no further progress was made on these negotiations.

### *FATF Compliance*

Since June 2018, Pakistan has made significant progress on FATF's 27-point action plan. However, in June this year, FATF gave Pakistan another 7-point action plan to address deficiencies related to money laundering.<sup>590</sup> So far, Pakistan has addressed four of the seven items of the second action plan, including checks on businesses and enacting legislative amendments to ensure international cooperation.<sup>591</sup> Taken together, according to FATF, Pakistan is compliant on 30 of 34

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/860790/80000-pakistanis-killed-in-us-war-on-terror-report>.

<sup>582</sup> Ahsan I Butt, "Imran Khan's Talks With the Pakistan Taliban Will Not Bring Peace," *Al-Jazeera*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/10/27/imran-khans-talks-with-the-pakistan-taliban-wont-work>; This consensus was enshrined in the National Action, the 20-page PCVE roadmap, for details see National Counter Terrorism Authority, "National Action Plan 2014," <https://nacta.gov.pk/nap-2014/2014/>.

<sup>583</sup> Munir Ahmed, "Pakistan Court Questions PM Over Peace Talks With Militants," *AP News*, November 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-pakistan-militant-groups-a3cf642c614f1cce37fb2831c9902bdc>.

<sup>584</sup> Kalbe Ali and Amir Wasim, "Government, TLP Ink Deal to End Impasse," *Dawn*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1655200>.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> "TLP and Govt Have the Same Objective but Our Methods Are Different: PM Imran," *Dawn*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1619131>; Ayesha

Siddiq, "Imran Khan's Secret Agreement With TLP Has Brought the Barelvi Jinni Out of the Bottle," *The Print*, November 3, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/imran-khans-secret-agreement-with-tlp-has-brought-the-barelvi-jinni-out-of-the-bottle/760968/>.

<sup>587</sup> Zahid Hussain, "State of Surrender," *Dawn*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1654312>.

<sup>588</sup> "PM Imran Says He Is Considering Talking to Insurgents in Balochistan," *Dawn*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1633359>.

<sup>589</sup> Ayaz Akbar Yousufzai, "PM Imran Khan Appoints Shah-Zain Bugti as Special Assistant On Balochistan Reconciliation," *The News International*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/860859-pm-imran-khan-appoints-shahzain-bugti-as-special-assistant-on-balochistan-reconciliation>.

<sup>590</sup> Rezaul H Laskar, "FATF Retains Pak on Its Grey List," *Hindustan Times*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/fatf-retains-pak-on-its-grey-list-101634841990164.html>.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

points of the two action plans.<sup>592</sup> However, in October, FATF retained Pakistan's "gray-status" on account of a lack of investigations and prosecutions against UN-designated terrorist groups' leaders and commanders.<sup>593</sup>

Concerningly, according to FATF, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan would potentially increase "the evolving money laundering and terror financing risk environment (in the Af-Pak region)."<sup>594</sup> On its part, Pakistan believes that it has made significant progress in a short period of time against terror financing and money laundering and deserves to be taken off the "gray-list." Pakistan alleges the US is using the FATF as a geopolitical tool to keep Pakistan under constant pressure on account of the former's defeat in Afghanistan.<sup>595</sup>

### *Border Fencing*

Pakistan has completed 90 percent of its border fencing with Afghanistan and expects the project to be completed by the summer of 2022.<sup>596</sup> The work on the Pak-Afghan border started in 2017 following repeated attacks by TTP and its affiliated groups in Pakistan's tribal areas from their Afghan hideouts.<sup>597</sup> Though the fence was instrumental in controlling the cross-border movement of people in the aftermath of the

US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, the purpose of deterring cross-border terrorist attacks has not been met.<sup>598</sup> To the contrary, the stationing of Pakistani troops in constructed posts and forts closer to the border fence has exposed them as easy targets for TTP.

Similarly, by July 2021, 46 percent of work on the border fencing with Iran was completed. According to the Pakistani government, the remaining work would be completed by August 2022.<sup>599</sup> The 959-kilometre Pak-Iran border starts at Koh-i-Malik Salih Mountain and culminates at Gwadar in the Gul of Oman. The border fencing aims to curb cross-border militancy, human trafficking and smuggling.<sup>600</sup>

### **Outlook**

Trends associated with 2021's threat landscape underscore the enduring nature of terrorism in Pakistan. By negotiating with TTP, Pakistan has compromised the national consensus forged to fight terrorism, undermining the hard-won counter-terrorism gains. The intervening internal and external variables, such as Pakistan's compliance with FATF's action plans and split views of political stakeholders, further complicate this situation. Instead of looking for negotiated

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

<sup>593</sup> Shahbaz Rana, "Pakistan Not Yet Off the FATF Hook," *Express Tribune*, October 21, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2325759/pakistan-not-yet-off-the-fatf-hook>.

<sup>594</sup> Financial Action Task Force, FATF Public Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/fatfgeneral/documents/afghanistan-2021.html>.

<sup>595</sup> "Data Exposes FATF Politicised Approach Targeting Muslim States Including Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, October 23, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2326083/data-exposes-fatf-politicised-approach-targeting-muslim-states-including-pakistan>.

<sup>596</sup> Muhammad Yousaf, "Pakistan Army Completes 90% of Fence Along Afghan Border," *AP News*, August 4, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-bd8165697772792b69d65c8509633cd9>.

<sup>597</sup> The border fence comprises two sets of chain-link fences which is 4 metres high and separated by a 2-metre space. The space is filled with concertina wire coils. Pakistan shares a 2,611-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan which has often been a source of tensions between the two neighbours. Afghanistan does not recognise the border on grounds that it has divided Pashtun families living on both sides and that the then Emir of Afghanistan Abdul Rehman signed it with British India under duress.

<sup>598</sup> Naveed Siddiqui, "UN Report Acknowledges Pakistan's Efforts Against Terrorist Groups, Warns of Threat Faced From TTP," *Dawn*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1606016>.

<sup>599</sup> Naimat Khan, "Pakistan Says Iran Border 46% Fenced, to Be Completed in a Year," *Arab News*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1893161/world>.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid.

settlements or kinetic solutions for eliminating terrorist groups, perhaps Pakistan needs to work on alternative strategies to progressively render terrorism irrelevant by reducing its appeal to achieve political goals. However, the ongoing talks or deals with radical groups strengthen the viability of terrorism as a strategy to achieve political ends.

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, terrorism in Pakistan has entered a new phase. Though terrorist and insurgent groups have adjusted their operational strategies and strategic goals, Pakistan has become a prisoner of its own conflicted regional policies. Also, Pakistan's terrorism woes are invariably linked to its identity crisis, i.e., whether Pakistan is an Islamic or a Muslim state. Without addressing this identity crisis, militant and radical movements such as TTP and TLP will recurringly (re)appear on Pakistan's political landscape to (re)define its identity in line with their narrow ideological agendas.

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## SRI LANKA

*Sri Lanka faced a reduced threat from terrorism in 2021, even as the ravaging*

*effects of the ongoing pandemic, led the authorities on 31 August to declare a state of emergency over chronic food shortages and a foreign exchange crisis. The government faced criticism over the slow progress of official investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks on several churches and hotels around the country. Proposed legislation targeting the Muslim minority, including the banning of face veils and closure of several hundred Islamic religious schools on national security grounds, also amplified pre-existing religio-political tensions.*

### Presidential Commission of Inquiry Findings

A Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCol), set up to shed light on the causes and background of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, in which nearly 300 people perished as near simultaneous suicide blasts ripped through three churches and three luxury hotels in Sri Lanka <sup>601</sup>, submitted its long-awaited report to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in February 2021.<sup>602</sup> While not made public, some details were discussed in Parliament in the months after, and also appeared in the media through official statements and press releases.

Speaking in Parliament in April, Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekara made reference to the report, when revealing that Naufer Moulavi, who is currently in remand on terrorism related charges, was the key mastermind of the terrorist attack.<sup>603</sup> According to the minister, investigations by local authorities and the US' Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) concluded that Naufer led the propaganda efforts, and recruited Zahran Hashim, a prominent radical local cleric, to spearhead the

<sup>601</sup> "Sri Lanka Catholic Church Faults Government's Bombing Probe," *ABC News*, August 14, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/alerts/sri-lanka-easter-bombings>.

<sup>602</sup> Headed by a Supreme Court judge, the PCol interviewed 457 witnesses as part of its investigations.

<sup>603</sup> "FBI Identified Naufer Moulavi as Easter Carnage Mastermind – Public Security Minister," *The Island*, May 20, 2021, <https://island.lk/fbi-identified-naufer-moulavi-as-easter-carnage-mastermind-public-security-minister/>.



operation.<sup>604</sup> The Islamic State (IS) inspired suicide bombings, which involved nine militants belonging to local Islamist extremist group, the National Thawheed Jamaat (NTJ), had been unprecedented in scale and devastation since 9/11.<sup>605</sup>

Earlier in January, the US Justice Department announced it had charged Naufer, along with two other Sri Lankan nationals, Mohamed Anwar Mohamed Riskan and Ahamed Milhan Hayathu Mohamed, with participating in the IS-linked attacks, in which five US nationals were also killed.<sup>606</sup> Each was charged with supporting a designated foreign terrorist organisation, while Naufer and Milhan were implicated in organising combat training for IS-linked militants.<sup>607</sup> As all three individuals are in custody in Sri Lanka, US prosecutors said it would support their prosecution in Colombo, while maintaining the US charges in the event they are freed.<sup>608</sup>

Minister Weerasekara also revealed a number of other details about the investigation report. Zahran, the operation's leader who blew himself up at the Shangri-La hotel in the capital

Colombo, was found to have taken inspiration from Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury. The latter had reportedly been the one-time emir of the IS' branch in Bangladesh, known locally as the Neo-Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (Neo-JMB).<sup>609</sup> A Bangladeshi Canadian, he was the mastermind of the July 2016 Holey Artisan Café attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh which killed 29 people.<sup>610</sup> Zahran had also radicalised 17 female local operatives into becoming suicide attackers. Five were killed in subsequent operations, while most of the others have either been charged with terrorism-related offences, or continue to be investigated.

To date, almost 700 people had been arrested in relation to the Easter attacks according to the authorities. Of these, 202 have been remanded, while a further 66 individuals continue to be held in detention pending investigations. A further 408 individuals have been released on bail, but continue to be monitored.<sup>611</sup> The PCol's report also alleged that a number of foreigners were involved in the bombings, and should face an ongoing criminal probe.<sup>612</sup> One individual cited was Luqman Talib, an Australian national of Sri Lankan

<sup>604</sup> Among other details, evidence extracted from his laptop and other documents, revealed Naufer had personally organised and led training camps between November 2017 and December 2018, including in Nuwara Eliya and Hambantota. See Saman Indrajith, "Hakeem Points Finger at Israeli Intelligence," *The Island*, May 20, 2021, <https://island.lk/fbi-identified-naufer-moulavi-as-easter-carnage-mastermind-public-security-minister/>.

<sup>605</sup> Amresh Gunasingham, "Easter Attacks in Sri Lanka," *RSIS Commentaries*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/easter-attacks-in-sri-lanka/#.YUgwqbgzZPY>.

<sup>606</sup> "US Charges Three Sri Lankans Over Role in 2019 Isis Easter Attacks," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/09/us-charges-three-sri-lankans-over-role-in-2019-isis-easter-attacks>.

<sup>607</sup> Riskan had allegedly helped to manufacture the IEDs used in the attacks, while Milhan reportedly executed a police officer in order to obtain a firearm, in addition to shooting an

informant and scouting locations for a separate terrorist attack. See Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> "US Charges 3 Sri Lankan Nationals for Role in 2019 Easter Attacks," *VOA News*, January 10, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/us-charges-3-sri-lankan-nationals-role-2019-easter-attacks>.

<sup>609</sup> "Sri Lanka Easter Bombings Investigation Calls for Former President to Be Prosecuted," *CNN*, February 24, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/24/asia/sri-lanka-easter-attack-report-sirisena-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>610</sup> "Tamim the Mastermind," *The Daily Star*, November 28, 2019, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/tamim-the-mastermind-1832971>.

<sup>611</sup> "Sri Lanka Parliament Debates Presidential Commission Report on Easter Attacks," *Colombo Page*, March 10, 2021, [http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_21A/Mar10\\_1615394675CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_21A/Mar10_1615394675CH.php).

<sup>612</sup> "Australian Professor Denies Links to Easter Sunday Terror Attacks and Threatens to Sue Sri Lankan Government," *SBS News*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/australian-professor-denies-links-to-easter-sunday-terror->

origin, who is accused of facilitating the travel of militants to Syria for arms training. He had denied the charges.<sup>613</sup> Sri Lanka's State Intelligence Service (SIS) was also collaborating with foreign counterparts to extradite individuals arrested abroad, who have participated in extremist activities in Sri Lanka, including funding propaganda activities.

The PCol's report also recommended that former President Maithripala Sirisena and several of his intelligence chiefs be criminally prosecuted for failing to prevent the Easter attacks.<sup>614</sup> It had previously emerged that prior warnings from foreign intelligence agencies about the risk of an attack had been ignored by the previous Sirisena administration. The report observed that on a "balance of probability," Sirisena had likely been informed by his intelligence chiefs about the warnings.<sup>615</sup> However, in addressing the issue in Parliament, Sirisena, now a ruling party legislator, categorically denied any prior personal knowledge of the intelligence warnings.<sup>616</sup>

### Curbing of Religious Freedoms

During the ongoing pandemic, some government measures perceived to be targeting the Muslim populace have deepened fissures along ethnic and religious lines in Sri Lanka.<sup>617</sup> On 13 March 2021, Minister Weerasekara announced that the government will ban wearing of the

burqa, the cloth veil that covers Muslim women's faces and bodies.<sup>618</sup> Citing national security concerns, he said the veil was a "sign of religious extremism" and directly impacted national security.<sup>619</sup>

Sections of the Sinhala Buddhist majority have for years demanded the banning of the burqa, claiming it goes against traditional Sri Lankan dress practices and culture. Two years ago, in the aftermath of the Easter attacks, the authorities temporarily banned the face veil under emergency laws. At the time, some Muslim women who wore the veil reported being harassed in public spaces, and were barred entry into some public spaces and commercial establishments. The move drew swift criticism for targeting Muslim women, many of whom had not only condemned the attacks, but also provided crucial evidence to state investigators.

Weerasekara also revealed the authorities were actively considering a proposal to shut down over 1,000 madrassas, or Islamic religious schools, for flouting national education policy guidelines. In this respect, some hardliners from the Buddhist sangha (or monastic community), as well as Sinhalese politicians, have vociferously blamed the Easter bombings on the proliferation of Middle East-funded religious schools in some Muslim-majority communities. They alleged such schools are spreading Salafi jihadist ideas that

attacks-and-threatens-to-sue-sri-lankan-government/ce96249b-4d46-4ffd-81fd-d5b4fa67caa7.

<sup>613</sup> Thaib had been arrested in Qatar last July and held for six months without charge, before being released earlier this year.

<sup>614</sup> "Probe Into Sri Lanka Attacks Finds Ex-President Should Face Charges," *The Straits Times*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/probe-into-sri-lanka-attacks-finds-ex-president-should-face-charges>.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid.

<sup>616</sup> "Sri Lanka President Vows Action Against Perpetrators of 2019 Easter Attacks," *The Hindu*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankan-president-vows-action-against-perpetrators-of-easter-attacks/article34238205.ece>.

perpetrators-of-easter-attacks/article34238205.ece.

<sup>617</sup> "Two Years After Easter Attacks, Sri Lanka's Muslims Face Backlash," *United States Institute of Peace*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/two-years-after-easter-attacks-sri-lankas-muslims-face-backlash>.

<sup>618</sup> "Sri Lanka Announces Burqa Ban, to Shut 1,000 Madrassas," *The Hindu*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-to-ban-burqa-shut-many-islamic-schools-minister/article34061652.ece>.

<sup>619</sup> "Sri Lanka to Ban Burqas and Shut Islamic Schools for 'National Security'," *CNN*, March 15, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/15/asia/sri-lanka-burqa-ban-intl-hnk/index.html>.

have contributed to the radicalisation of sections of Muslims.<sup>620</sup>

The proposed bans came in the wake of the furore from a year earlier, when at the onset of the pandemic, Sri Lankan health authorities mandated the cremation of COVID-19 victims, which is prohibited by Muslims, who bury their dead instead. Despite guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasising the safety of burials, the government justified the ban using unsubstantiated claims that COVID-19 victims could contaminate the groundwater, and hence contribute to the spread of the virus. It would maintain this position for nearly a year, before relenting following international pressure.<sup>621</sup>

The latest burqa ban targeting the island-state's minority Muslims, who make up 9 percent of the 22 million people in the country, similarly drew criticism from international quarters.<sup>622</sup> The United Nation's (UN) special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, said the ban was incompatible with international laws that protect religious beliefs and freedom of expression.<sup>623</sup> Domestically, the announcement of another potential burqa ban was viewed by many in the community as the latest in a number of controversial measures adopted or mooted by the government, under the banner of fighting extremism.

Following concerted domestic and international pressure, the government later stepped back from Weerasekera's

statement.<sup>624</sup> In a public statement, Foreign Secretary (FS) Jayanath Colombage clarified that the proposal was initially made based on recommendations in the PCol Report released earlier.<sup>625</sup> FS Colombage gave the assurance that the authorities will give sufficient time for consultations with all the relevant parties affected, including the Muslim community, in order for a consensus to be reached on the issue.<sup>626</sup>

### **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Revival Concerns**

Periodic concerns also persist over efforts from abroad to revive the LTTE separatist group, commonly known as the Tamil Tigers. The rebels had been militarily defeated by the former Mahinda Rajapaksa-led administration at the tail end of the 26-year civil war. While it remains unlikely the LTTE will re-emerge as a formidable insurgent movement, perceptions still linger among some Sri Lankan Tamils and sections of the diaspora, about the community being discriminated by the Sinhala-majority government.<sup>627</sup> According to security officials, such sentiments are being exploited by a network of former rebels and sympathisers abroad, intent on financing an extremist agenda among Tamils still residing in former conflict zones.

In this regard, the seizure by Indian Coast Guard personnel of large quantities of contraband drugs, AK-47 rifles and ammunition from a Sri Lankan fishing

<sup>620</sup> "Sri Lanka to Ban Burqa, Shut Down 1,000 Madrasahs."

<sup>621</sup> "Sri Lanka Moves to Ban Burqas and Close More Than 1,000 Islamic Schools," *ABC News*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-14/sri-lanka-to-ban-burqas-close-more-than-1000-islamic-schools/13246390>.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>623</sup> "Burqa Ban Just a 'Proposal', Sri Lanka Says After Criticism From Allies," *Reuters*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-islam-idUSKBN2B81T2>.

<sup>624</sup> "What Is Behind the Anti-Muslim Measures in Sri Lanka," *Al-Jazeera*, April 12, 2021,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/12/what-is-behind-the-anti-muslim-measures-in-sri-lanka>.

<sup>625</sup> "Sri Lanka Seeks 'Consensus' on Burqa Ban Amid Criticism," *Anadolu Agency*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/sri-lanka-seeks-consensus-on-burqa-ban-amid-criticism/2178361>.

<sup>626</sup> "Sri Lanka Announces Burqa Ban."

<sup>627</sup> For details see "Distrust Remains as Sri Lanka's Tamils Try to Honour Their Dead," *UCA News*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/distrust-remains-as-sri-lankas-tamils-try-to-honor-their-dead/92500#>.

vessel, intercepted off the south Indian state of Kerala in March 2020, has fuelled speculation in some Indian media “that an international drug and weapons trafficking racket” could be attempting to revive the LTTE.<sup>628</sup> While still at a preliminary stage, reports claim investigations by India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA) have uncovered that some of the Sri Lankan nationals arrested were in contact with formerly convicted LTTE cadres via social media, and had “coordinated in the exchange of illegal consignments.”<sup>629</sup>

### State Responses

In August, the government announced it had filed 23,270 charges under the country’s anti-terror law, against 25 people in connection with the Easter attacks.<sup>630</sup> According to a statement by the President’s office, the charges included conspiring to murder, aiding and abetting, collecting firearms and ammunition, as well as attempted murder.<sup>631</sup> The statement added that the Attorney General had also asked the country’s Chief Justice to appoint a special three-member high court bench to hear the cases in a speedy manner.

The announcement followed public demonstrations a month earlier, when hundreds of human rights activists and members of the Catholic clergy demanded

the authorities carry out its investigations in a more transparent manner.<sup>632</sup> The government, for its part, highlighted that nearly 700 people have been arrested so far in relation to the attacks, and reiterated it stands ready to initiate legal proceedings swiftly.<sup>633</sup>

Addressing concerns about the protracted nature of the Easter attack investigations, Minister Weerasekara explained the country’s Criminal Investigations Department (CID) had been unable to press charges or file indictments sooner against the alleged conspirators, due to the complexity and international nature of the incident, in which several foreign nationals also perished. The scale of the suicide bomb attacks had necessitated substantial cross border investigations and collaborations, involving international investigative teams including from the FBI and Australian Federal Police, which typically can take years to complete.<sup>634</sup>

Separately, the government gazetted a new set of regulations under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), that gives the authorities sweeping powers to detain suspects involved in hate crimes.<sup>635</sup> Going forward, potential offenders suspected of committing acts of “violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony” can be arrested and subsequently remanded at a

<sup>628</sup> “Probe Into Lanka Boat Intercepted With Drugs, Rifles, May Suggest LTTE Revival: Kerala, TN Officials,” *Indian Express*, August 31, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/probe-into-lanka-boat-intercepted-with-drugs-rifles-may-suggest-ltte-revival-kerala-tn-officials-7479234/>.

<sup>629</sup> “Sri Lankan Drug Seizure Accused Aids Revival of LTTE, Suspects NIA,” *The Hindu*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/sri-lankan-drug-seizure-accused-aids-revival-of-ltte-suspects-nia/article36220905.ece>.

<sup>630</sup> “Sri Lanka Files Charges Against 25 Easter Sunday Bombing Suspects,” *Al-Jazeera*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/12/sri-lanka-charges-easter-sunday-bombing-suspects>.

<sup>631</sup> “Sri Lanka Charges 25 People for Roles in 2019 Easter Sunday Bomb Attack,” *Associated Press*, August 11, 2021,

<https://www.cp24.com/world/sri-lanka-charges-25-people-for-roles-in-2019-easter-sunday-bomb-attack-1.5542507>.

<sup>632</sup> “Pressure on Sri Lankan Govt to Arrest Easter Attack Masterminds,” *UCA News*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pressure-on-sri-lankan-govt-to-arrest-easter-attack-masterminds/93400>.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>634</sup> “FBI Confirmed Maulavi Nufar Masterminded Sri Lanka Easter Attacks: Minister,” *Economy Next*, May 19, 2021, <https://economynext.com/fbi-confirmed-maulavi-nufar-masterminded-sri-lanka-easter-attacks-minister-82120/>.

<sup>635</sup> “Suspects Could Be Held for Up to 2 Years Under Sri Lanka’s Anti-Terror Laws,” *The Straits Times*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/suspects-could-be-held-for-2-years-in-sri-lanka-anti-terror-laws>.

rehabilitation centre to be “deradicalised” for up to a year.<sup>636</sup> The new laws not only target Islamic extremists, but can also apply to perpetrators from any other offending religious group or community.

In April, the government also banned 11 hardline Islamist organisations, including IS and AQ. In a gazette notification, President Rajapaksa said the move, also made under the PTA, would see individuals, discovered to have links with these groups, face jail time of up to 20 years.<sup>637</sup> Among the local groups banned were Muslim social and religious organisations, including the Sri Lanka Islamic Students Movement.<sup>638</sup> Some had prior links to the Easter Sunday attackers as indicated by reports.

An earlier special panel convened by former President Sirisena to probe the Easter Sunday attacks had called for the banning of both Islamic extremist as well as hardline Buddhist groups, which it said was responsible for instigating communal unrest in recent years.<sup>639</sup> Such groups often feed off each other’s words and actions. The panel had also recommended banning the Buddhist nationalist group, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) or Buddhist Power Force, whose incendiary rhetoric and cultivation of anti-Muslim violence had arguably contributed to the radicalisation of some Muslims in the country.

In his gazette notification, however, President Rajapaksa notably did not ban any Buddhist organisations. In September, several Muslim lawmakers had lodged a complaint with the country’s Criminal Investigations Department, alleging BBS general secretary Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera made inflammatory remarks against the Muslim community during a television interview, which they claimed could spark communal tensions.<sup>640</sup> The parliamentarians alleged that Gnanasara had blamed Islam for the 2019 Easter attacks. He had also publicly warned, without providing evidence, of the possibility of a similar terrorist attack in future.<sup>641</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

Broader efforts at reconciliation are urgently needed in Sri Lanka, given the stark ethnic and religious cleavages that continue to stymie long-term peace prospects.<sup>642</sup> In this respect, President Rajapaksa’s decision in June to pardon and release 16 former Tamil Tiger rebels, more than a decade after the long-drawn civil war ended, is a positive step.<sup>643</sup> This was the first time former LTTE fighters, have been pardoned by the Rajapaksa regime, which came to power in late 2019 on a stridently Sinhala Buddhist nationalist platform. Addressing a high-level UN General Debate panel in September 2021, Rajapaksa also committed to fostering “greater accountability, restorative justice,

<sup>636</sup> “What Is Behind the Anti-Muslim Measures in Sri Lanka?” *Al-Jazeera*, April 12, 2021.

<sup>637</sup> “Sri Lanka Bans Muslim Groups Before Easter Attacks Anniversary,” *Al-Jazeera*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/14/sri-lanka-bans-11-muslim-groups-ahead-of-attacks-anniversary>.

<sup>638</sup> “Sri Lanka Bans 11 Extremist Groups, Including ISIS and Al-Qaeda,” *The Hindu*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-bans-11-extremist-groups-including-isis-and-al-qaeda/article34315937.ece>.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>640</sup> “Seven Muslim MPs Lodge CID Complaint Against Gnanasara Thera for Spreading Racial Hatred Targeting Muslim Community,” *Asian*

*Mirror*, September 27, 2021, <https://asianmirror.lk/news/item/33540-seven-muslim-mps-lodge-cid-complaint-against-gnanasara-thera-for-spreading-racial-hatred-targeting-muslim-community>.

<sup>641</sup> “Muslims Complain About Hardline Sri Lankan Monk,” *UCA News*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/muslims-complain-about-hardline-sri-lankan-monk/94319>.

<sup>642</sup> “Two Years After Easter Attacks, Sri Lanka’s Muslims Face Backlash.”

<sup>643</sup> “Sri Lanka Pardons Suspected Tamil Tigers Convicted of Terrorism,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/24/sri-lanka-pardons-suspected-tamil-tigers-convicted-of-terrorism>.

and meaningful reconciliation” with the Tamil minority via domestic political institutions, in order to achieve lasting peace for the country.<sup>644</sup>

There is a dire need to improve the socio-economic conditions of minority groups in Sri Lanka. In many Muslim communities, for example, several students enrolled in madrassas hail from economically deprived families, and their access to a secular education at public or private schools is often hindered by economic and cultural factors, scholars note.<sup>645</sup> To address this, the government needs to invest in modernising the education system and consider at least partially financing Islamic religious schools, to neutralise the influence of potentially nefarious foreign funders.<sup>646</sup> It should also develop a state accreditation system for religious scholars, and entrust those with a better understanding of the religious and secular needs of their communities with the responsibility of organising the curriculum and other activities at religious schools.<sup>647</sup>

## Outlook

In the near to mid-term, transnational Islamist terrorist networks such as IS will seek to opportunistically exploit local tensions in Sri Lanka, to recruit into their ranks and further their agenda. IS-linked propaganda magazines in South Asia, such as the *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of Hind), continue to glorify the 2019 Easter Sunday

attacks, to attract followers from around the region. For example, in a May 2020 edition of the magazine, IS boasted about how the Sri Lankan militants involved “have ignited the flames of jihad by inflicting carnage on the Crusaders.”<sup>648</sup> With government sources indicating that a few hundred IS sympathisers exist in Sri Lanka, grievances among local Muslims remain susceptible to manipulation by IS and its regional networks.

The transnational dimension of the terrorist threat was also highlighted by the IS-inspired knife attack at a shopping mall in New Zealand in September, which involved a Sri Lankan national.<sup>649</sup> Media reports indicated the attacker, Ahamed Adil Mohamed Samsudeen, who was shot dead by police after stabbing seven people, hailed from Kattankudy, a Muslim majority town in eastern Sri Lanka that was also home to some of the Easter Sunday bombers. It is unclear if Samsudeen had any links to terrorist groups in Sri Lanka, although local authorities said this was being investigated.<sup>650</sup> Overall, the evolving threat environment in Sri Lanka will require appropriate countermeasures, and should be complemented by policies that address systemic issues of bias and discrimination against minority groups.

<sup>644</sup> Earlier in March 2021, the UN’s Human Rights Council had passed a resolution promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka. See “Gotabaya for Reconciliation Through Domestic Institutions,” *The Hindu*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/gotabaya-for-reconciliation-through-domestic-institutions/article36639269.ece>.

<sup>645</sup> Many drop out due to their parents being unable to pay the academic fees. In other instances, Muslim parents opt to send their children to madrassas in order to receive a religious education. See ARM Imtiyaz, “Rajapaksa Steps Up Sri Lanka’s Anti-Muslim Measures,” *East Asia Forum*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/22/rajapaksa-steps-up-sri-lankas-anti-muslim-measures/>.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid.

<sup>648</sup> “Islamic State’s Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka: Assessing the Government’s Response Two Years On,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, April 9, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-states-easter-sunday-attacks-in-sri-lanka-assessing-the-governments-response-two-years-on/>.

<sup>649</sup> “New Zealand Attacker ‘Brainwashed’ by Racial Neighbours, Mother Says,” *The Straits Times*, September 5, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/new-zealand-attacker-brainwashed-by-radical-neighbours-mother-says>.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid.

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# CENTRAL ASIA

## Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

*Despite the absence of recorded terrorist attacks over the last two years, countering terrorism and extremism remained a security priority for the five Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in 2021. This is primarily accrued to potential risks arising from the presence and activities of Central Asian jihadist groups in Syria and neighbouring Afghanistan, where the radical Taliban movement took power in August. In both theatres of conflict, Central Asian fighters continue to fight under the protection and control of bigger militant groups such as the Taliban, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Islamic State (IS). Another ongoing challenge is the exploitation by regional groups of online tools to radicalise, recruit and fund-raise both within the region and amongst diaspora communities scattered around Europe, Russia and beyond.*

### Militant Groups in Afghanistan

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has left Central Asia with a complex security dilemma along its border. While Afghanistan's strategic landscape may differ from the five Central Asian states in a number of ways, the presence of interlinked cross-border communities, as well as relatively porous borders and linked economies, also binds them together. The overriding regional security concern is Central Asian militant groups that had been fighting alongside the Taliban will take advantage of the situation to regroup and refocus their attention towards Central Asia, using Afghanistan as a springboard. This, alongside the possibility that the wider

militancy in Afghanistan might lead once again to an unstable state whose violence might overspill in other ways into the region, has put Central Asian authorities on alert.

For more than two decades, Afghanistan has sheltered various Central Asian militant groups. Currently, four Central Asian militant units, namely the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU or IJG) and the Afghanistan wing of Katibat Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) are known to be active there. All four groups operate under the protection and control of the Taliban and retain some ties among themselves. From the late 1990s to early 2010s, IMU, JA, IJU and two other Central Asian groups, Jund Al Khilafah and Jaysh Al Mahdi, which might not be active presently, had carried out some significant attacks in Central Asia from their bases in Afghanistan-Pakistan, while maintaining close links with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (AQ).

Over the past decade, the aforementioned Taliban-linked groups have not carried out an attack in Central Asia. Nor have there been many large-scale plots disrupted by local governments that were planned by them.<sup>651</sup> While this could partly be explained by the Central Asian states' increased capacity to prevent attacks, another significant factor could be the Taliban's prohibition of its foreign units to involve themselves in external operations or their sustained focus on fighting the Afghan National Army and western forces.<sup>652</sup> While there has not been much

<sup>651</sup> Attacks which have taken place have been linked elsewhere (for example, the 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek was linked to Central Asian and Uyghur militants in Syria).

<sup>652</sup> Further, it should be noted that sustained kinetic operations by the US-led international coalition has been another important factor in the decline of the militant threat in Afghanistan in the



public reporting around this, as the Taliban had been in protracted negotiations with the US government in recent years, they did start to issue edicts aimed at their foreign militant allies. For instance, in September 2020, the Taliban reportedly ordered the foreign groups operating from their territory to halt unauthorised travel and recruitment.<sup>653</sup> Other leaked messages from the Taliban to their commanders and other groups had contained instructions to refrain from using Afghan territory to plan or execute external attacks, while some also detailed punishments if these groups worked with foreigners without special permission from the central leadership.<sup>654</sup>

Before capturing Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban used these foreign fighters as foot soldiers in their offensives against the Afghan forces, the US-led coalition and jihadist rivals. This generated a lot of video and other visual content which the groups would actively promote to highlight their activities, further recruit, fund-raise and radicalise. However, since 2020, the Taliban has prohibited Central Asian groups from publishing online photo and video materials of their activities in Afghanistan.<sup>655</sup> As a result, their release of online propaganda materials has dropped precipitously. It is unclear how much this correlates with a cessation of activities, but it is likely part of an attempt by the Taliban to hide the presence of foreign fighters in Afghanistan.

Before the Taliban takeover, the IMU, with less than 700 fighters and their family members, were residing in the Afghan provinces of Faryab, Sar-e Pol and Jowzjan.<sup>656</sup> The group was reportedly experiencing financial difficulties after the Taliban reduced financial support to them in the wake of their former leader Usman Ghazi's defection to IS in 2015. Ghazi was killed by the Taliban as punishment in late 2015. The result of this clash was that the IMU would splinter into two factions: one comprising predominantly ethnic Uzbek militants (led by Jafar Yuldash, the son of Takhir Yuldash, the notorious founding leader of the group who was killed in 2009) and the other with mainly ethnic Tajiks (led by "Ilhom" alias "Usmoni Khon," Yuldash's former deputy). IMU has been significantly weakened in recent years by the loss of key leadership, the Taliban's pressure and ongoing internal fissures within the group. It remains unclear how close the respective factions are with the Taliban, though their continual presence in Taliban controlled areas in Afghanistan shows they are clearly still dependent on their support to some degree.

Unlike the IMU, JA remains a reliable partner of the Taliban. Made up mainly of ethnic Tajiks, the group is known as "the Tajik Taliban" in Afghanistan. Its leader, Muhammad Sharifov (alias "Mahdi Arsalan"), who is originally from Tajikistan's eastern Rasht Valley, is said to have at least 200 fighters under his command.<sup>657</sup> In July and August 2021, the Taliban relied on

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last decade as they had restrained the organisational capability of Central Asian groups, in addition to killing or capturing key jihadist leaders.

<sup>653</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (June 1, 2021), 18, <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>.

<sup>654</sup> Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson, "Taliban Narratives on Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan," Centre for the Study of Armed Groups Working Paper, September 2021, [https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Taliban\\_narratives\\_\\_13\\_Sept.pdf](https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Taliban_narratives__13_Sept.pdf).

<sup>655</sup> "Sovet Bezopasnosti OON: Taliban prodolzhaet pokrovitel'stvoval' tsentral'noaziatskim dzikhadistam," The Center for Studying Regional Threats, March 19, 2021, <https://crss.uz/2021/03/19/sovet-bezopasnosti-oon-taliban-prodolzhaet-pokrovitelstvovat-centralnoaziatskim-dzhixadistam/>.

<sup>656</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (June 1, 2021), 20.

<sup>657</sup> "Commander of Jamaat Ansarullah Radical Group Declares His Readiness to Invade Into Tajikistan," *Asia-Plus*, October 7, 2021, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20211007/commander-of-jamaat-ansarullah->

JA when it captured the northern Afghan provinces, including Badakhshan, which shares a common border with Tajikistan. The Taliban have placed Mahdi and his militants in charge of several districts in the northern region, and armed them with new military vehicles (including Humvees), weaponry and other equipment seized from the toppled Afghan civilian government. While expressing doubts over the seriousness of the threat these groups pose across the border, Tajik authorities have heightened security along their own borders. The Taliban has denied that the militants were planning to infiltrate Tajikistan.<sup>658</sup>

Separately, the KIB's Afghan wing, with about 25 to 150 fighters, was based mostly in Badghis. The group had reportedly received funding from its central core in Idlib through hawala methods to increase its operational capability.<sup>659</sup> KIB's leader Dilshod Dekhanov (alias "Jumaboi") has encouraged the Taliban leadership to bring together all Central Asian militant groups in Afghanistan under his command. Some factions, however, instead proposed the IJU's current leader, Ilimbek Mamatov (a Kyrgyz national who is also known as Khamidulla), as the overarching commander.<sup>660</sup> Overall, the fate of Central Asian groups in Afghanistan, and their potential unification prospects remains unclear since the Taliban returned to power.

### Militant Groups in Syria

In Syria, AQ-linked Central Asian combat units such as Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (KTJ) and KIB's central core have remained active. As in previous years, both

KTJ and KIB are part of the jihadist alliance of HTS, itself an evolution of AQ's former representative on the Syrian battlefield. There are no official updated numbers on the force strength of KTJ and KIB in 2021. However, relevant reports from 2020 and recent online propaganda videos featuring militant training sessions suggest both remain among the most prominent foreign militant groups in Syria, commanding hundreds of fighters.<sup>661</sup>

KTJ is still led by Khikmatov (alias "Abdul Aziz") and Akhliddin Novkatiy (Navqotiy), who serves as his deputy. Like KTJ's former leader, both figures are hardline Salafi-jihadist ideologues who constantly preach before KTJ fighters and their families and release recorded videos online. Mainly, their propaganda appears designed to emphasise the importance and legitimacy of conducting armed jihad in Syria.

In this light, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan represents an iconic moment for Central Asian groups. In August, KTJ posted a video on its Telegram channel congratulating the Taliban on its "victory," which it claimed "was achieved through a sustained patience and determined struggle." In a recent video, Khikmatov also claimed that "the fate of the state built by Morsi" in Egypt was a "reminder of realities that it would be impossible to build an Islamic state through political methods." For its part, KIB still operates under the command of "Abu Yusuf Muhajir," who also actively engages in jihadi preaching activities.

Amidst their ongoing dispute for supremacy in Idlib, HTS and Hurras ad-Din

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radical-group-declares-his-readiness-to-invade-into-tajikistan.

<sup>658</sup> "Tajikistan Concerned About Taliban Plots to Infiltrate From Afghanistan," *RFE/RL's Tajik Service*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-concerned-taliban-plots/31477716.html>.

<sup>659</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (June 1, 2021), 20.

<sup>660</sup> Prior to the Taliban takeover, the IJU had about 100 fighters active in Faryab and Kunduz provinces. See "2002 god. Prednovogodniy terakt," *AKIpress*, December 27, 2017, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:628918>.

<sup>661</sup> HTS has involved these groups mainly in frontline duties, running checkpoints and offensives against the Syrian army.

(HAD), AQ's current affiliate in Syria, had also jostled for control over the Central Asian fighters operating in the territory. As discussed in the previous year's reporting, this had ended with the arrest of KTJ's former leader, Abu Saloh, by HTS for attempting to defect to HAD. There has been some speculation about his subsequent fate. According to the United Nations' (UN) reporting, Abu Saloh was given the choice of declaring his affiliation to HTS or being convicted of theft.<sup>662</sup> Others speculated that HTS had considered deporting him to Russia, where he is suspected of masterminding the 2017 metro bombing in Saint Petersburg, if it could receive a substantive bounty in exchange.<sup>663</sup> Currently, his status is unknown.

Nearly three years after IS' territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq, Central Asian fighters have become nearly invisible. Whilst many detained IS women and children have been repatriated by their respective governments, the remaining IS fighters from the region have either gone into hiding or are scattered across ungoverned parts of Syria and Iraq and continued fighting. Some of those still at large have also opted to leave the battlefield to return home or relocate elsewhere. For instance in February 2021, Turkish security agencies in the city of Kilis detained Amanbek

Samat, a former IS militant from Kazakhstan's Atyrau region as he attempted to cross the border from Syria.<sup>664</sup> Kazakh authorities worked closely with their Turkish counterparts to extradite Amanbek, who was on Kazakhstan's most wanted terror suspect list.<sup>665</sup>

## Internal Challenges

In 2021, Central Asian countries continued to foil attack plots and arrest suspected terrorists and self-radicalised individuals. In the first half of the year, Kazakhstan had recorded 139 criminal cases related to terrorism and extremism, largely involving online radicalisation and the propagation of violence.<sup>666</sup> This marked a twenty percent increase over the same period in 2020. Most cases were observed in the southern provinces of Turkistan and Jambyl as well as Shymkent city. In January 2021 in Kyrgyzstan, security agencies arrested a Kyrgyz national for planning to attack a local military unit under the instruction of an unnamed international terrorist group, of which he was suspected of being a member.<sup>667</sup> Later in July, a Kyrgyz citizen who returned home from Afghanistan allegedly on the pretext of carrying out an attack was also detained.<sup>668</sup> Details around this case were not released, making it hard to assess any potential links to Afghan jihadist groups. However, reflecting local

<sup>662</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (February 3, 2021), 16, <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/68>.

<sup>663</sup> Charles Lister, "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Fight for Supremacy in Northwest Syria and the Implications for Global Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (September 2021): 1-105, <https://ctc.usma.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>.

<sup>664</sup> "Zaderzhan kazakhstanets, kotorogo nazvali odnim iz samykh razyskivayemykh terroristov," *Tengrinews*, February 20, 2021, [https://tengrinews.kz/world\\_news/zaderjan-kazakhstanets-kotorogo-nazvali-odnim-samyih-429572/](https://tengrinews.kz/world_news/zaderjan-kazakhstanets-kotorogo-nazvali-odnim-samyih-429572/).

<sup>665</sup> "KNB raskryl lichnost' samogo razyskivayemogo kazakhstantsa," *Sputnik*, March 2, 2021, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/society/20210302/16427658/>

KNB-raskryl-lichnost-samogo-razyskivaemogo-kazakhstantsa.html.

<sup>666</sup> "Chislo svyazannykh s ekstremizmom i terrorizmom prestupleniy vyroslo v Kazakhstane," *Tengrinews*, September 3, 2021, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/chislo-svyazannyih-ekstremizmom-terrorizmom-prestupleniy-447516/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/chislo-svyazannyih-ekstremizmom-terrorizmom-prestupleniy-447516/).

<sup>667</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane predotvratili terakt v voyskovoy chasti — GKNB," *Sputnik*, January 2, 2021, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/incidents/20210102/1050972720/kyrgyzstan-gknb-terakt-predotvraschenie-terrorizm.html>.

<sup>668</sup> "V Kyrgyzstane zaderzhan boevik, planirovavshiy sovershit' terakt," *24kg*, July 16, 2021, [https://24.kg/obschestvo/201365\\_vkyrgyzstane\\_zaderjan\\_boevik\\_planirovavshiy-sovershit\\_terakt/](https://24.kg/obschestvo/201365_vkyrgyzstane_zaderjan_boevik_planirovavshiy-sovershit_terakt/).

officials' concerns around the cross-border links of radicalised Kyrgyz, two individuals were arrested in October for their involvement in fund-raising believed to be linked to the January 2017 IS-linked shooting at an Istanbul nightclub.<sup>669</sup>

In August in Tajikistan, the Minister for Internal Affairs revealed the authorities had thwarted three attacks in the first six months of 2021 in Farkhor, Isfara and Vahdat districts. The foiled attacks were reportedly planned by members of IS and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The latter is banned in Tajikistan and designated an extremist and terrorist organisation.<sup>670</sup> The country also arrested 143 suspected members and supporters of other banned terrorist and extremist organisations, including IS, AQ, JA and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Uzbekistan in April, security authorities revealed they had thwarted two attacks in 2020, without providing further details.<sup>671</sup> Further rounds of arrests were also conducted across the country throughout 2021, disrupting several online recruitment and fund-raising cells particularly linked to KTJ.<sup>672</sup> In June, Uzbek authorities detained members of two separate support cells in Jizzakh and Samarkand for trying to travel to Syria to join KTJ and propagating extremism among residents in these

provinces.<sup>673</sup> In the same month, police also held another 20 individuals from Sirdaryo on suspicion of distributing 'extremist materials', while seizing extremist literature, a laptop, pistol, and sniper rifle.<sup>674</sup> As in previous years, no reporting was available from Turkmenistan.

## Diaspora Radicalisation

The networking of Central Asian and Russian-speaking fighters on the ground in Syria and Iraq and the ability of such networks to reach out and radicalise some segments of Central Asian and Russian diaspora communities abroad, particularly in Europe and Russia, remains a security concern. In March 2021, investigators in France revealed that Abdoullakh Anzorov, a Chechen immigrant who murdered the French schoolteacher Samuel Paty in a Paris suburb, was in direct contact in October 2020 with Farrukh Fayzimatov, an Idlib-based Tajik militant, through Instagram right before the murder. Fayzimatov is an active member of HTS who goes by the nom de guerre "Faruq Shami,"<sup>675</sup>

While it remains unknown what role (if any) Fayzimatov might have played in Paty's murder, Anzorov reportedly had regular discussions with him about jihadi topics. It also should be noted that Paty's murder

<sup>669</sup> <https://svodka.akipress.org/news:1736685>

<sup>670</sup> "MVD: v Tadjikistane udalos' predotvratit' tri terakta," *Sputnik*, August 4, 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210804/mvd-tajikistan-terakt-1041398103.html>.

<sup>671</sup> "SGB predotvratila 2 terakta v Uzbekistane v 2020 godu," *Gazeta*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/04/05/security-service/>.

<sup>672</sup> "V Syrdar'ye zaderzhany chleny terroristicheskoy gruppirovki "Katiba Taukhid val'-Dzhikhad,'" *Podrobno*, July 20, 2021, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/v-syrdare-zaderzhany-chleny-terroristicheskoy-gruppirovki-katiba-taukhid-val-dzhikhad-/>.

<sup>673</sup> "Zaderzhany 14 chelovek, podozrevayemykh v popytke primknut' k boyevikam v Sirii," *Gazeta*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/06/11/terrorism/>; "Jizzaxda Suriyadagi terrorchilik tashkiloti tarkibiga kirmoqchi bo'lgan shaxslar qo'lga olindi,"

*Daryo*, June 15, 2021, <https://daryo.uz/k/2021/06/15/jizzaxda-suriyadagi-terrorchilik-tashkiloti-tarkibiga-kirmoqchi-bolgan-shaxslar-qolga-olindi/>.

<sup>674</sup> "20 chelovek, podozrevayemykh v ekstremizme, zaderzhano v Syrdar'ye," *Gazeta*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2021/06/17/extremists/>.

<sup>675</sup> Thomas Chammah, "Assassinat de Samuel Paty : le dernier contact du tueur identifié en Syrie," *CNews*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.cnews.fr/videos/france/2021-03-09/assassinat-de-samuel-paty-le-dernier-contact-du-tueur-identifie-en-syrie>; "Posobnikom ubiytsy uchitelya vo Frantsii okazalsya urozhnets Tadjikistana," *Sputnik Tajikistan*, March 9, 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210309/urozhnets-tajikistan-soobschnik-terrorista-france-1032967527.html>.

came a month after Fayzimatov called for an attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo's offices, while expressing his own readiness to take part in it, in response to the republication of the controversial cartoon of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>676</sup> An HTS spokesperson claimed that they did not know Anzorov, but stopped short of condemning the murder.<sup>677</sup>

Despite allegations that Fayzimatov might have been killed in Idlib, recent videos discussing battleground events in Syria indicate that he is still alive and continues working for HTS as an important virtual jihadist propagandist and fund-raiser. Since 2016, Fayzimatov has produced hundreds of audio and video propaganda materials in Russian and Tajik. In July 2021, the US Treasury Department blacklisted Fayzimatov for providing financial and material support to HTS.<sup>678</sup> Through various online crowdfunding campaigns, Fayzimatov has apparently collected several thousand dollars in Bitcoin (BTC) and other cryptocurrencies transferred from multiple US, Russian, Asian and European exchanges.<sup>679</sup>

Like in recent years, Russian authorities in 2021 continued to investigate and arrest Central Asian migrants suspected of having links to terrorist or extremist groups. Most arrests involved cases of terrorism financing and recruitment as well as attack plots linked to members and supporters of

KTJ in particular. For instance in August 2021, Russian security services rounded up 31 suspected members of KTJ in a coordinated operation across Moscow, Yakutsk, Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk.<sup>680</sup> According to the Federal Security Service (FSB), the detainees were part of an "interprovincial structure of terrorists" that had transferred funds and recruits to Syria and called for committing terrorist crimes in Russia. However, it did not reveal how many of those detainees were from Central Asia.

Similar but smaller scale arrests of Central Asians in Russia with links to KTJ took place in February in Novosibirsk and Tomsk, in May in Kaliningrad, and in October in Moscow and Vladimir. Other frequent arrests involved members and supporters of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) within this migrant community. HT is a transnational pan-Islamist and neo-fundamentalist revolutionary group, which has been banned in Russia and all Central Asian countries and designated an extremist and terrorist organisation. Similar arrests involving HT-linked individuals are conducted regularly in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan.

In previous years, concerns had been raised about a segment of the Central Asian diaspora networks in Europe having possible links to terrorist networks in the Syrian and Afghan conflict zones. In 2021,

<sup>676</sup> "Kak spetssluzhby Ukrainy formiruyut rusofobskuyu povestku v siriyskom Idlibe," *RIA FAN*, December 3, 2020, <https://riafan.ru/1345935-kak-specsluzhby-ukrainy-formiruyut-rusofobskuyu-povestku-v-siriiskom-idlibe>. This came after a separate attempt in France by a young radicalized Pakistani who tried to kill two journalists outside Charlie Hebdo's old offices.

<sup>677</sup> Luc Mathieu, "Le Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, parrain syrien d'Anzorov?" *Libération*, October 23, 2020, <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6147-P9D1-JBW3-818W-00000-00&context=1516831>. It is worth noting that in other contexts, HTS has been linked to attacks which it has kept silent about – like the 2017 metro bombing in St Petersburg

which Russian investigators had linked to the group.

<sup>678</sup> "Counter Terrorism Designations; Syria and Syria-Related Designations and Designations Updates," July 28, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20210728>.

<sup>679</sup> "OFAC Sanctions Syrian-Based Terrorist Financier and Associated Bitcoin Address," *TRM Labs*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.trmlabs.com/post/ofac-sanctions-syrian-based-hayet-tahrir-al-sham-terrorist-financier>.

<sup>680</sup> Roman Shimaev, "«Osushchestvlyali perepravku rekrutov v zony boyevykh deystviy»: FSB zaderzhala boleye 30 terroristov v chetyrokh regionakh Rossii," *Russia Today*, August 25, 2021, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/article/899393-fsb-zaderzhanie-terrorizm-yacheiki-regiony>.

however, there were no major disruptions from this community. Previous cases, however, continue to work their way through the system, with police in Germany finally incarcerating a member of a Tajik cell detained in April 2020 for planning attacks on US military facilities, while posting charges against five of his associates.<sup>681</sup> In January, a Greek court also refused an extradition request by Tajikistan against a 27-year-old individual accused of being an IS member. According to reports, the Tajik national, who was initially arrested in Tripoli in November 2020, had claimed the extradition request was politically motivated as he was the persecuted brother-in-law of an IRPT member.<sup>682</sup>

The case reflects an ongoing issue between Europe and Central Asia involving aspects of cooperation on counter-terrorism, where European courts continue to accuse some countries in the region of alleged human rights abuses, which the latter have often refuted. Still in other areas, it is notable that Central Asian states are providing some European powers, Germany and France in particular, a great deal of support, including supporting their evacuation of nationals and others stranded in Afghanistan. Beyond Europe, countries in the region have developed bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation, including the extradition of terrorist suspects, with countries such as Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

## Responses

Broadly, state responses in Central Asia for managing extremism and radicalisation have stayed fairly constant. Governments maintain heightened security measures,

while also working through international partnerships to disrupt militant networks. Concurrently, community-level programmes have been rolled out to counter-radicalisation. A major effort deployed (to varying degrees of success and commitment) across the region is the deradicalisation and reintegration of those repatriated from Syria.<sup>683</sup> While no independent evaluations of these programmes exist, it is notable that no plot involving returnees has been publicly highlighted yet.

Over the past year, the major shift in the threat picture has been prompted by developments in Afghanistan. Despite shared concerns, the five Central Asian republics have adopted differing responses to the ground situation and the Taliban's return. Most in the region have viewed the Taliban's capture of power in Afghanistan as a new reality to contend with, and sought to develop pragmatic but cautious relations with the new authority in Kabul. For now, this pragmatic relationship has been confined to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, re-establishment of mutual trade and discussions on important security issues, including the Taliban's future relationship with Central Asian militants in territory under its control.

Beyond this, it will likely extend to an establishment of diplomatic relations only after international recognition of the Taliban-led government is attained. Ashgabat was one of the first capitals to engage with the new Taliban government, publicly meeting with them repeatedly long before Kabul fell. During the closing weeks of the Republic government, Turkmenistan faced clashes directly on its borders; as soon as the Taliban took over, they rapidly re-engaged and commenced talks about

<sup>681</sup> "Germany Charges Five Tajiks Over Islamic State Membership," *RFE/RL Tajik Service*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/germany-charges-five-tajiks-over-is-membership/31104482.html>.

<sup>682</sup> Yannis Souliotis, "Court Rejects Tajikistan's Extradition Request for Alleged Jihadist," *Ekathimerini*, January 1, 2021

<https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/261187/court-rejects-tajikistan-s-extradition-request-for-alleged-jihadist/>.

<sup>683</sup> Kanyngul Elkeeva and Farangis Najibullah, "Central Asia Struggles to Reintegrate Islamic State Returnees," *RFE/RL*, November 6, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-islamic-state-repatriation/31548973.html>.

restarting major infrastructure projects connecting Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

Tashkent sees shutting off economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan as something which will only risk greater instability.<sup>684</sup> The bigger question for Uzbekistan is the degree to which they will engage a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan into their vision for a greater Central Asia, which includes Afghanistan. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has placed great emphasis on his regional foreign policy initiative and, shortly before the fall of Kabul, hosted a large conference focused on Central and South Asian connectivity, with Afghanistan sitting at its core.

In contrast, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon has chosen to turn his country into the main home for opposition figures to the Taliban, hosting numerous elements from the Northern Alliance faction that used to dominate Kabul. Shortly after the Taliban's takeover, President Rahmon signed a decree which posthumously awarded the country's third highest honour, the Order of Ismoili Somoni, to Ahmed Shah Masood and Burhanuddin Rabbani, two dead leaders of the Northern Alliance who had fought against the Taliban and also played a role in Afghanistan's brutal civil war.<sup>685</sup> The awards have been followed by open and loud condemnation of the Taliban and a continuing willingness to back opposition groups.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have taken a more circumspect approach. While Kyrgyzstan in particular had suffered in the late 1990s from numerous large assaults by militants in the south with links to groups in Afghanistan, both countries have now established direct contact with the Taliban and largely accepted them as a new

reality.<sup>686</sup> Additionally, they seem keen to work both bilaterally and through regional structures like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to manage their responses.

Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan's responses have also been bolstered by external military support, including from Russia. In the weeks before Kabul fell, Moscow held joint military exercises near both countries' borders with Afghanistan. Russia has also sped up military sales, and sent military aid to the region. Mirroring its particular concerns, China undertook some limited joint exercises with Tajik Interior Ministry forces, and offered more support for Tajik border forces. China has also increased its diplomatic activity in Central Asia, though this reflects a wider range of concerns beyond just terrorism and extremism.

## Outlook

The fate of Central Asian militants in Afghanistan will largely depend on the commitment, ability, and approach taken by the Taliban in dealing with foreign militants in the country. So far, the discussion around foreign militants has focused on western fears about AQ's revival, the potential for the Taliban's implacable adversary, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), to export terrorist violence or how the Taliban are managing the Uyghur contingent wanted by Beijing, believed to be in Afghanistan. Whilst historically, the Uyghur group has been close to the Central Asian militants fighting alongside the Taliban, the latter could now seek to decouple them,

<sup>684</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Friend America Needs in Afghanistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-friend-america-needs-in-afghanistan-taliban-aid-diplomacy-uzbekistan-11635708869>.

<sup>685</sup> "Tajikistan Posthumously Awards Afghans Masud, Rabbani With One of Country's Highest

Honors," *RFE/RL Tajik Service*, September 2, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-masud-rabbani-awards/31440569.html>.

<sup>686</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Open Channels With the Taliban," *Qishloq Ovozi*, October 1, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-taliban/31487684.html>.

reflecting very different concerns in Beijing vis-a-vis Central Asia.<sup>687</sup>

In Syria, Central Asian fighters continue to play an active part in ongoing fighting, though it is not clear that their trajectory varies from that of HTS or the other remnant IS fighters on the ground. While the Central Asian governments continue to express a high degree of concern about the potential for terrorist violence to affect them, attacks are rare, and few indicators point to this changing soon. As in elsewhere, the spectre of foreign fighters returning home to launch terrorist attacks has not yet materialised, though they remain a concern for regional governments for the near to medium term.

The other key element involves the instances of Central Asians appearing in terrorist networks outside their region. While still an occasional occurrence, that Central Asian jihadist groups and ideologues continue to exploit – to varying degrees – online platforms, such as Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to post and disseminate their extremist materials underscores their connection with the increasingly diffused diaspora. Sometimes, this has manifested in attacks around the world, though the degree of direction involved is not always clear (for example, the Samuel Paty murder). Instead, the continuing presence and spread of extremist materials, inspiring segments of the Central Asian diaspora, provide another reason for security officials to be concerned about them.

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<sup>687</sup> So far, it is hard to gauge the Taliban's actions in this regard. Having won the war fighting alongside these militant groups, it may see little reason to betray them. There is also a danger in

rejecting one group, as the others will immediately fear a similar betrayal in future, potentially stirring tensions within Taliban ranks.



# CHINA

## Xinjiang Province

*For the fifth year in a row, China's Xinjiang province was free from acts of reportedly politically motivated violence in 2021. Authorities asserted that this cessation in violence has been a product of enhanced security measures implemented in combination with re-education and labour transfer policies. In the jihadist sphere, the threat of Uyghur militancy continues to draw attention. Mainly, this stems from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which still maintains ties to varying degrees with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria. The Afghanistan connection in particular has grown in salience since the Taliban takeover in Kabul, and will be Beijing's main point of focus with the new government for the immediate future.*

### Trends

It has been just under five years since there were any reported cases of politically motivated violence involving Uyghurs in China. The last reported incident was in February 2017, when three Uyghur assailants undertook a series of knife stabbings in Hotan Prefecture in Xinjiang, an event which was followed by large displays of security presence across the region. According to Chinese counter-terrorism authorities, Xinjiang has stabilised following the launch of the

“special campaign against violence and terror” in 2014, which has led to crackdowns on more than 1,900 violent and terrorist gangs, the arrest of over 14,000 suspects, and the confiscation of more than 2,000 explosive devices so far.<sup>688</sup> While it is difficult to assess these figures, it seems clear that China is keen to demonstrate it has a substantial threat it is fighting to keep under control. This crackdown builds on previous crackdowns which were conducted under the rubric of “Strike Hard” campaigns.<sup>689</sup>

The reasons for this cessation in violence in Xinjiang are hard to objectively analyse, but seem due in large part to the increasingly pervasive security blanket that exists across the region. This has two sides to it – on the one hand, a heavy security presence; on the other, widespread use of “re-education centres” and labour transfer policies within Xinjiang and other parts of China. While the implementation of the mass re-education programmes has been reportedly wound down, labour transfer policies appear to continue unabated.<sup>690</sup> For instance, by March 2021, 250,000 Uyghur and other minority workers from Xinjiang's Hotan Prefecture had reportedly resettled in other provinces under the ongoing state-run labour transfer scheme. Western governments and scholars have criticised this scheme as being a “system of

<sup>688</sup> “ETIM Is a Big Threat as It Keeps Sending Members to China to Plot Terrorist Attacks: Ministry of Public Security,” *Global Times*, July 16, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228823.shtml>.

<sup>689</sup> This is a term used by the Chinese government to characterise the ‘harder’ side of their response to dealing with instability and terrorism in Xinjiang. The term has been used a number of times over the years, but most recently in 2014 in the wake of a visit to the region by

President Xi Jinping. See “‘Strike Hard’ Campaign Aims to Restore Harmony in Xinjiang,” *Global Times*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/869084.shtml>.

<sup>690</sup> John Sudworth, “‘If the Others Go I’ll Go’: Inside China’s Scheme to Transfer Uighurs Into Work,” *BBC News*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-56250915>. There is also some dispute on whether the Xinjiang government is actually winding down its re-education camps.

coercion” that would ultimately aim to “thin out minority populations” in Xinjiang.<sup>691</sup> In response, Chinese authorities and researchers have denied allegations of forced labour transfers, insisting that such programmes are a voluntary element of the state’s poverty alleviation strategy in Xinjiang.<sup>692</sup>

There is also little evidence that the security blanket has been much lowered, especially with the recent appointment of Lieutenant General Wang Haijiang to take over as PLA commander in Xinjiang. Formerly in charge of Tibet, the implication was that his approach to suppressing minorities might be the reason for his move to Xinjiang (following a pattern set by current Xinjiang Party Chief Chen Quanguo who had previously served in Tibet and brought many of his policies with him). It is likelier, however, that General Wang was picked due to his experience managing volatile borders. Ultimately, it is not PLA forces that are responsible for internal security in China.

The need for a military commander with experience in managing potentially volatile borders that China shares was illustrated by the change in government in neighbouring Afghanistan, where Beijing continues to be concerned about the potential overspill of violence. This potential threat emanates both from across the small direct border China shares with Afghanistan, the parts of Tajikistan or Pakistan that are close to China which also share a border with Afghanistan, and most substantially, from Uyghur militant groups

who might use Afghanistan as a base to attack China or its interests at home or in the region. These concerns have escalated since the arrival of the Taliban-led government into Kabul.

### Uyghur Groups in Afghanistan and Syria

Afghanistan and Syria continue to shelter a large number of Uyghur jihadist fighters from Xinjiang. The vast majority are known to be fighting under the most prominent Uyghur militant group, TIP. TIP retains fighting units in both theatres of conflict. Since the very early days of its participation in the Syrian conflict, the Syria-based TIP has introduced itself as the “Turkistan Islamic Party’s branch in Sham [Syria],” while indicating Abdulhaq Damullam (or Abdul Haq al-Turkistani), the long-standing leader of the Afghanistan-based TIP, as their “bash emir,” or supreme (overall) leader.<sup>693</sup> United Nations reporting confirms that the two groups maintain direct, albeit limited, ties due to geographic distance and the difficulty of guaranteeing secure communication.<sup>694</sup>

In Afghanistan, TIP has been one of the Taliban’s closest foreign jihadist allies for nearly 25 years. Before the former’s capture of Kabul in August 2021, TIP had approximately 400 Uyghur fighters, gathered primarily in the Jurm district of the country’s north-eastern Badakhshan province, which shares a small border with Xinjiang via the mountainous Wakhan Corridor.<sup>695</sup> Before the fall of the Western-backed Afghan government, a contingent

<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

<sup>692</sup> Xie Wenting and Fan Lingzhi, “Xinjiang Workers Enjoy Full Freedom and Benefits Working in Guangdong, Academics Find Through 9-Month-Long Field Study,” *Global Times*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219241.shtml>.

<sup>693</sup> It should be noted that some sources including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) refer to the TIP’s Afghanistan-based core as the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM continues to be designated by the UNSC and several countries as an international terrorist

organisation. However, the U.S. Department of State and some scholars insist that the ETIM is not a real organisation, but just a mislabel used to describe Uyghur jihadists who fought in Afghanistan. As TIP’s Syrian branch and its core in Afghanistan currently identify themselves only as TIP, the authors use TIP in this article to refer to both branches.

<sup>694</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (July 21, 2021), 11, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/655>.

<sup>695</sup> United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring

of 1,000 fighters, including Uyghur militants, was under the command of TIP's deputy commander Hajji Furqan, or Qari Furqan, who has reportedly also served as a deputy commander in Al-Qaeda (AQ).<sup>696</sup> TIP fighters participated in several Taliban-run offensives and were reported by local officials as being highly effective fighters.<sup>697</sup> According to various reports, the group also facilitated the transit of fighters from Syria, along various routes, including via Vietnam and Pakistan toward Afghanistan.<sup>698</sup>

A potential resurgence of TIP, which China blames for many attacks at home, has been the latter's overriding security concern. Beijing has repeatedly urged the Taliban to sever its ties with the group. In response, the Taliban leadership has reassured that nobody would be allowed to use Afghan soil as a launchpad to carry out attacks against other countries. In September, the Taliban's spokesperson claimed that many TIP members had left Afghanistan after having been asked by the movement to do so.<sup>699</sup> Reports, however,

surfaced in October alleging that the Taliban relocated the Uyghur fighters from Badakhshan to other areas, including in the eastern Nangarhar province, suggesting that they are still residing in Afghanistan.<sup>700</sup> Various unverified reports suggest the Uyghur presence remains a point of tension between the Taliban and China.<sup>701</sup>

In Afghanistan, TIP is not the only terrorist group of concern to China. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), that is reported to have bases in Afghanistan from which it launches campaigns in Pakistan, are both organisations that have recently been linked to incidents involving China. Until now, ISKP has not much discussed China and the Uyghur cause.<sup>702</sup> This changed, however, on 8 October 2021, when ISKP claimed responsibility for an attack on a Shia mosque in Kunduz that killed nearly 50 and injured dozens. In its claim of responsibility, ISKP identified the suicide attacker as "Muhammad al-Uyghuri" without providing any details about his nationality.<sup>703</sup>

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Team (June 1, 2021), 19-20, <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>;

"Chinese Uighur Militants Operating Under Taliban Umbrella in Badakhshan," *KabulNow*, March 1, 2021, <https://kabulnow.com/2021/03/chinese-uighur-militants-operating-under-taliban-umbrella-in-badakhshan/>.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>697</sup> Tamim Asey, "China's Borderland Relations: Afghanistan," Young China Watchers Online Discussion, September 202, <https://www.youngchinawatchers.com/chinas-borderland-relations-afghanistan-with-tamim-asey/>.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid. Asev clearly made reference to the Vietnam/Pakistan route. The transit has been reported in the UN Monitoring Group's reporting, though there are also some dissenting views from Turkey suggesting this transit may not be taking place to the scale suggested. See "From Myth to Reality: A Look at the Flow of Fighters From Idlib To Afghanistan," *Independent Turkce*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/t%C3%B9Crki%CC%87yeden-sesler/efsaneden-ger%C3%A7ekli%C4%9Fe-i%CC%87dlibten-afganistana-sava%C5%9F%C3%A7%C4%B1->

[ak%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1-iddialar%C4%B1na](https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/t%C3%B9Crki%CC%87yeden-sesler/efsaneden-ger%C3%A7ekli%C4%9Fe-i%CC%87dlibten-afganistana-sava%C5%9F%C3%A7%C4%B1-).

<sup>699</sup> Wen Ting Xie and Yun Yi Bai, "Exclusive: New Afghan Govt Eyes Exchanging Visits With China; ETIM Has No Place in Afghanistan: Taliban Spokesperson," *Global Times*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1233876.shtml>.

<sup>700</sup> Reid Standish, "Taliban 'Removing' Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan's Border With China," *RFE/RL's Tajik Service*, October 5, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-uyghur-militants-afghan-china/31494094.html>.

<sup>701</sup> "China's Intelligence Chief Mounts Pressure on Sirajuddin Haqqani to Extradite Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan," *Sify.com*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.sify.com/news/chinas-intelligence-chief-mounts-pressure-on-sirajuddin-haqqani-to-extradite-uyghur-militants-from-afghanistan-news-national-vkjktfjhbehf.html>.

<sup>702</sup> Elliot Stewart, "The Islamic State Stopped Talking About China," *War on the Rocks*, January 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-islamic-state-stopped-talking-about-uyghurs/>.

<sup>703</sup> Although the bomber's nom de guerre ("Al Uyghuri") suggests that he could be an ethnic Uyghur, it does not mean that he was necessarily from Xinjiang. Despite the fact that a majority of

Rumours have circulated about his possible Turkish background and experience in Syria.<sup>704</sup> ISKP's use of the kunya "Al-Uyghuri" in reference to the attacker is also notable, given most Uyghur militants are usually identified as "Al-Turkistani." According to ISKP's statement, the attack targeted "both Shias and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uyghurs [from Afghanistan] to meet demands from China."<sup>705</sup> This explicit threat to China is something new from the group.

TTP is a more established group in some ways, though its attention has remained on Pakistan rather than Afghanistan. Recently, the group has shown an increasing interest in targeting Chinese personnel and officials.<sup>706</sup> A suicide bombing by the TTP in April targeted the Serena Hotel in the Pakistani city of Quetta, barely missing China's ambassador to Pakistan. Later in July, a car laden with explosives killed 12 Chinese engineers going to the Dasu hydroelectric power project in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Chinese and Pakistani officials claimed TTP and TIP to be behind the attack, though no official claim of responsibility was issued.<sup>707</sup>

In Syria, TIP remains one of the most powerful, well-organised and well-trained foreign units fighting under the umbrella of Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), AQ's

former Syrian ally. TIP commands between 1,500 and 3,000 fighters in the north-western Idlib province. In line with its apparent attempt to pivot away from the global jihadist agenda and transition into a locally-oriented revolutionary insurgency, HTS has been pressuring militant outfits under its control, including TIP, to de-prioritise or give up their external agendas and links especially with internationally designated terrorist groups such as AQ. This has apparently led to internal strife within TIP, particularly between lesser extreme (pragmatic) and hard-line elements. As a result, approximately 30 per cent of the group's fighters defected to Hurras al-Din (HAD), a faction established by veteran AQ loyalists as a counter to HTS in Syria, after the former started to distance itself from AQ.<sup>708</sup>

Amidst such developments, Ibrahim Mansur, who rose to become the leader of TIP's Syrian branch five years ago, defected from the group. Some extremist websites in Turkish claimed in September 2021 that Mansur was captured by police officers while applying for Turkish citizenship with a fake identity in Izmir. The website accused Mansur of committing a series of crimes (murder, robbery and others) in Turkey through TIP's hidden cells when he was leading the group. While it is unclear exactly why and how he stepped down as the group's leader, he might have been the target of HTS' pressuring campaign to subdue rivals and solidify its

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ethnic Uyghurs reside in Xinjiang, there are Uyghur immigrant communities in many foreign countries including Afghanistan.

<sup>704</sup> Saleem Mehsud, "Some interesting details about ISIS-K Kunduz suicide bomb Muhammed al Uyghuri-was Boxer; former soldier of Turkish Army; migrated to Khorasan with his elder brother to join ISKP etc; his elder brother killed in classes with Taliban in Khogyani district of Nangrahar, Afghanistan," Twitter, October 8, 2021, <https://twitter.com/saleemmehsud/status/1446762669713895428?s=12>.

<sup>705</sup> "Afghanistan: Dozens Killed in Suicide Bombing at Kunduz Mosque," *Al Jazeera*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/blast-hits-a-mosque-in-afghanistans-kunduz-during-friday-prayers>.

<sup>706</sup> Xin Liu, Hui Zhang and Yun Yi Bai, "TTP's Enmity Toward Pakistan Creates Risk for Chinese Projects: Analysts," *Global Times*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234606.shtml>.

<sup>707</sup> "Truth on Dasu Terror Attack Surfaces Amid Unanswered Questions, As China And Pakistan Step Up Security For Chinese," *Global Times*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231423.shtml>.

<sup>708</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (July 21, 2021), 11, <https://undocs.org/S/2021/655>.

dominance.<sup>709</sup> According to TIP videos, “Abu Umar,” also known by the moniker “Kawsar aka” (Kawsar brother), has replaced Mansur as the group’s leader.<sup>710</sup>

TIP has a very strong online presence. During the period under review (January to December 2021), it produced more than 60 extremist propaganda videos and 280 audios and released them on its Uyghur-language website, which serves as a primary distribution platform of its productions to other platforms such as Telegram and Flickr. However, the coverage of Afghanistan consists only a small percentage of the overall material on the website.

The Taliban’s capture of Kabul has been an iconic moment for TIP and many other jihadist groups across the world. A few days after the fall of the Afghan government, TIP issued a statement lauding the Taliban’s “victory” and the “restoration of the Islamic Emirate.” In a video released in September, TIP’s military commander Abu Muhammad (Zahid) was shown in a video talking to a group of about 50 Uyghur teenagers studying in a *madrasa* (Islamic school). He claimed that the “discipline, unity, patience to struggle and investment in education” have been key for the Taliban’s “achievement of victory.” He also explained that “an independent Islamic state in their homeland” could be achieved only through “armed struggle,” while framing TIP’s involvement in the Syrian war as a necessary military preparation for its fighters.

Dozens of audio materials released by the group contain translations of the work of Abu Musab Suri, a notorious AQ-linked

jihadist ideologue, and Abu al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, the slain head of the Sharia Committee of AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This illustrates TIP’s continued subscription to the AQ ideology, despite HTS’ public commitment to pivot away from its AQ past. At the same time, the presence of Abu Al Harith Al Masri, an influential jihadist ideologue within HTS, in several TIP videos, shows that HTS continues to see TIP as an important partner. Overall, TIP has been more visible in Syria than in Afghanistan, assisting HTS to run checkpoints, police some villages and conduct offensives against Syrian armed forces. It remains to be seen how the fracturing witnessed within the group will play out in the longer term, or how this will affect fighter transfers from Syria to Afghanistan.<sup>711</sup> What is clear, however, is that TIP continues to be an active force amongst the roster of international jihadist groups.

## Responses

It appears unlikely that China will seek to lighten its security presence or approach in Xinjiang. From Beijing’s perspective, this process is working, and has helped ensure that there is no violence being reported in the region. Few in China seem publicly unhappy about the approach that is being taken, with most Han Chinese, the ethnic majority, appearing to be largely willing to accept the authority’s narrative of counter-extremism being the primary motivation for the crackdown in the region. However, there is evidence that the Han Chinese in Xinjiang find the policies as oppressive as the Uyghurs (though it is not targeting them) and the overall environment in Xinjiang is reported as being highly oppressive for everyone.<sup>712</sup> While some

<sup>709</sup> HTS has a record of removing non-abiding commanders with corruption and criminality charges (framed or actual).

<sup>710</sup> UN reports identify him as “Kaiwusair.”

<sup>711</sup> “From Myth to Reality: A Look at the Flow of Fighters From Idlib to Afghanistan,” *Independent Turkce*, October 9, 2021, [https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/t%C3%B5Crki%CC%87yeden-sesler/efsaneden-](https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/t%C3%B5Crki%CC%87yeden-sesler/efsaneden-ger%C3%A7ekli%C4%9Fe-i%CC%87dlibten-afganistana-sava%C5%9F%C3%A7%C4%B1-ak%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1-iddialar%C4%B1na)

[ger%C3%A7ekli%C4%9Fe-i%CC%87dlibten-afganistana-sava%C5%9F%C3%A7%C4%B1-ak%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1-iddialar%C4%B1na](https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/t%C3%B5Crki%CC%87yeden-sesler/efsaneden-ger%C3%A7ekli%C4%9Fe-i%CC%87dlibten-afganistana-sava%C5%9F%C3%A7%C4%B1-ak%C4%B1%C5%9F%C4%B1-iddialar%C4%B1na).

<sup>712</sup> “‘The Atmosphere Has Become Abnormal’: Han Chinese Views From Xinjiang,” *SupChina*, November 4, 2020, <https://supchina.com/2020/11/04/han-chinese-views-from-xinjiang/>.

people in China have started to express anxiety about certain developments within their country,<sup>713</sup> this is not a widespread sentiment, and the authorities in Beijing are unlikely to change paths. The external pressure brought by international sanctions and condemnation only appears to feed a nationalist sentiment around the policies, even further reducing the desire by Beijing to change course.

Separately, there appears to be some Chinese trepidation about the potential for trouble from Afghanistan to impact the threat picture in China. This has been expressed in a number of different ways. In the first instance, there has been a more visible presence of Chinese intelligence within Afghanistan, reportedly focusing on trying to proactively disrupt perceived Uyghur threats in the country. This was sharply brought into focus in December 2020, when a network of Chinese intelligence agents was reportedly disrupted and ejected from the country.<sup>714</sup>

There was also an increase in commentary by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggesting that the US might be seeking to use Uyghur groups in Afghanistan to try to destabilise China.<sup>715</sup> And finally, the Chinese government sought to engage all sides in talks and highlighted concerns about militant Uyghurs in every format. This

included meetings with security officials with the old government in Kabul,<sup>716</sup> as well as with the Taliban.<sup>717</sup> Though, as reports in October uncovered, there were some 35 Uyghur militants in Afghan detention, when the former government fell, who were freed, illustrating Chinese problems with both the old government and the Taliban.<sup>718</sup> On their part, the Chinese press and expert community continue to publicly express concern about the potential for militant Uyghurs to use Afghanistan as a base of operations.<sup>719</sup>

## Outlook

TIP's (or other Uyghurs) fate in Afghanistan will depend on the Taliban's political will and ability to balance complex internal and external challenges. The current Taliban government in Afghanistan is highly focused on trying to gain international legitimacy, and so is incentivised to instruct militant groups in the country to not use it as a base to launch attacks elsewhere. However, the Taliban are also ideologically motivated and likely feel a certain degree of loyalty to TIP (amongst others), who have been fighting alongside them for over two decades. According to jihadi precepts, any unreasonable disavowal of existing oaths of allegiance would be viewed as a serious offence. The Taliban may therefore choose to settle the issue through informal but non-

<sup>713</sup> Darren Byler, "‘Truth and reconciliation’: Excerpts From the Xinjiang Clubhouse," *SupChina*, March 3, 2021, <https://supchina.com/2021/03/03/truth-and-reconciliation-excerpts-from-the-xinjiang-clubhouse/>.

<sup>714</sup> "10 Chinese Spies Caught in Kabul Get a Quiet Pardon, Fly Home in Chartered Aircraft," *Hindustan Times*, January 4, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/10-chinese-spies-caught-in-kabul-get-a-quiet-pardon-fly-home-in-chartered-aircraft/story-YhNI0zjmCImcj6T7TCCwVM.html>.

<sup>715</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 26, 2021," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 27, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1864659.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1864659.shtml).

<sup>716</sup> "Zhu afuhan dashi wang yi huijian a di yi fu zongtong sa li he pibo mei 'she jiang

shengming'," February 3, 2021, <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1850986.htm>.

<sup>717</sup> "Wang Yi Meets With Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 28, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1895950.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml)

<sup>718</sup> "Exclusive: Uyghur Jailbreak Complicates Taliban's Ties With China," *The Telegraph*, October 16, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2021/10/16/exclusive-uyghur-jailbreak-complicates-talibans-ties-china/>.

<sup>719</sup> "Will Afghan Taliban Honor Its Promise to China to Make a Clean Break With ETIM," *Global Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234477.shtml>.

aggressive methods – moving militants around as has already been suggested, ask individuals to leave or disarm them. Whether this will work, and how far they will go to enforce this is unclear. Any violent suppression may turn some TIP militants against the Taliban, or even lead them to join ISKP. The problem is that it is equally unclear whether a path of compromise will be adequate for outside powers like China that the Taliban are keen to cultivate to help gain greater international acceptance.

By claiming publicly to have mobilised a Uyghur fighter to launch its Kunduz mosque bombing and by portraying the attack as a retaliation for the Taliban's ostensible cooperation with China against Uyghurs, ISKP is giving a clear signal that it will have a more hands-on stance towards China. This is a direct challenge to evolving Taliban-China relations and helps bolster ISKP's narrative of being the leading anti-Taliban organisation in Afghanistan. In using this messaging, the group may be willing to position itself as a new protector of the Uyghurs after the Taliban's stated incentive to curb its ties with Uyghurs, so that it could recruit disaffected TIP militants and others to swell its ranks. In Syria, more pragmatic and less extreme members of TIP remain aligned with HTS, assisting this alliance to consolidate its local control. Although HAD, with its more global and extreme outlook, may keep attracting hardline Uyghurs, it will likely continue to focus on local priorities given pressure coming from both HTS and the Syrian government.

Overall, however, there remains little evidence that any of the many Uyghur factions has developed a capability to strike within China, though an increase in the targeting of Chinese nationals and messaging focusing on China going forward is likely, involving an ever-wider range of militant organisations.

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# THE MIDDLE EAST: JIHADIST MILITANCY, NATIONAL AND INTRA-STATE TENSIONS, AND STATE-SOCIETY DICHOTOMY

*In 2021, trends of instability and insecurity ranging from jihadist militancy to sectarian schisms and inter- and intra-state fissures to great power interventionism continued to persist, without worsening further, in the Middle East. While Iran and Saudi Arabia tried to dial down their tensions, hostility grew further between Tehran and Israel where hardliners have come to power in recent months. The growing Iran-Israel tensions would complicate the US efforts to extricate itself from the Middle East to focus on its rivalry with China and Russia. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan had a rejuvenating effect on the Middle Eastern jihadist groups, particularly those linked to the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ), providing them with a template to imitate. Despite receding from the global geopolitical spotlight, developments in the Middle East would continue to have their far-reaching implications for international peace and stability.*

## Trends

The Middle East region, stretching from Iran to Morocco, retained its status as an arena punctuated by violent extremism, and intra-state tensions and conflicts, national upheavals and major power interventionism in 2021. The US' "strategic failure"<sup>720</sup> and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan potentially widened the

space for militant jihadi clusters such as IS and AQ, especially in conflict-ridden Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. This occurred against a backdrop of the ongoing struggle between the forces of the status quo that dominated states' power structures and those societal forces that demanded fundamental reforms, as well as the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic. While a few promising trends appeared on the horizon for a relatively calmer Middle East, the situation nonetheless continued to evolve as worrisome on three fronts: jihadist militancy, the potential threat of Iran's confrontation with the US or Israel or both<sup>721</sup>, and state-society dichotomy.

## Jihadist Militancy

The threat level from violent jihadist networks, such as IS and AQ in particular, was not as high as during previous years. The groups were not able to cause profound disruption in the functioning of most of the Middle Eastern states. This was largely due to the vigilance of national governments and major powers, namely the US and Russia, despite their power rivalry. However, this did not mean that these networks could not prove to be ideologically and operationally resilient and active. In a congressional hearing in late September 2021, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark A. Milley, warned that

<sup>720</sup> As admitted by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley. See Gordon Lubold and Nancy A. Youssef, "Gen. Milley Calls Afghan Withdrawal Strategic Failure in Heated Senate Hearing," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/military->

[leaders-to-face-questions-over-afghan-withdrawal-evacuation-11632827812](https://www.wsj.com/articles/military-leaders-to-face-questions-over-afghan-withdrawal-evacuation-11632827812).

<sup>721</sup> Yochai Guisky and Ari Heistein, "Preventing a Miscalculation Between the US and Israel on Iran," *The Middle East Institute*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/preventing-miscalculation-between-us-and-israel-iran>.



the “strategic failure” of the US in Afghanistan “...will put a shot of adrenaline into the arm’ of the terrorist groups, enabling them to pose a threat to the US within a period of ‘six months to a year.”<sup>722</sup> In November, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West reaffirmed this point, maintaining that the US was “worried about the uptick in IS Khorasan Province (ISKP)’s growing footprint in Afghanistan and remained ‘very concerned’ about AQ.”<sup>723</sup>

War-torn Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya especially remained vulnerable to transnational jihadist threat. Variables such as weak or no viable central governments, internal conflicts fuelled by domestic and/or external imperatives, socio-economic disparities, sectarian divisions, poverty and unemployment (especially among young people) and ungoverned spaces benefited IS and AQ, both tangibly (recruits, organisational spread) and intangibly (propaganda narratives and ideological traction). These jihadi clusters, not to mention other similar entities, managed to regroup and recompose considerably even prior to the Taliban’s triumph in Afghanistan.<sup>724</sup> US intelligence reports indicate that while both IS and AQ had weakened, they remained capable of reconstituting within two years.<sup>725</sup>

In the case of IS, the territorial and military defeat of its self-styled *khilafat* (or Caliphate) by a combination of internal and foreign forces, led by the US, Russia and Iran in different alliances but with a common goal, constituted a serious blow to the group’s capabilities, but did not uproot it. For instance, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies’ 2020 report states, “The U.S. may have helped to break up the IS proto-state or “caliphate”...but it...scarcely defeated it.”<sup>726</sup> As per the report, despite its defeat, IS remained cohesive, with substantial funding to exploit opportunities not only in Iraq and Syria, but also across the Middle East and beyond, whenever opportune. While estimates of IS fighters vary, in January 2019, a US Defense Department inspector-general report gauged the number of its members as around 30,000. “In the first quarter of 2020 alone, 566 IS attacks were reported in Iraq.”<sup>727</sup> The group’s attacks in Baghdad in January and April 2021 highlighted its resilience and reach in Iraq.<sup>728</sup>

Despite massive Russian air as well as Iranian, Hezbollah and Turkish ground operations to stonewall IS, the group reportedly also managed to execute 126 attacks across Syria in the first seven months of 2020 – compared to 144 in

<sup>722</sup> For a detailed account, see Helene Cooper and Erick Schmitt, “Defence Chief Says He Advised Against Staying in Afghanistan ‘Forever,’” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2021; Brittany Bernstein, “Milley Warns Real Possibility of Al-Qaeda, ISIS Resurgence in Afghanistan by Spring,” *Yahoo News*, September 30, 2021, [https://news.yahoo.com/milley-warns-real-possibility-al-185132587.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ](https://news.yahoo.com/milley-warns-real-possibility-al-185132587.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ).

<sup>723</sup> Jonathan Landay and Humeysa Pamuk, “U.S. Says Worried About Increase in Attacks by ISIS-K in Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-says-worried-about-increase-attacks-by-isis-k-afghanistan-2021-11-08/>.

<sup>724</sup> Anchal Vohra, “The Middle East’s Jihadists Are Copying the Taliban Model,” *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/21/the-middle-east-jihadists-are-copying-the-taliban-model/>.

<sup>725</sup> For details, 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>.

<sup>726</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Real-World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues,” *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues>.

<sup>727</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Dent, “US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria,” *Middle East Institute*, October 2020, 4., <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-10/US%20Policy%20and%20the%20Resurgence%20of%20ISIS%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20%20.pdf>.

<sup>728</sup> For a detailed report, see Jeff Seldin, “Islamic Resilience as Ever in Iraq and Syria,” *Voice of America*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east-islamic-state-resilient-ever-iraq-syria/6208747.html>.

2019.<sup>729</sup> The group's terrorist strikes continued periodically into 2021. For example, on 18 September 2021, it claimed responsibility for an explosion in a major natural gas pipeline southeast of Damascus, causing a massive blackout in the capital and its surrounding areas.<sup>730</sup> The danger of IS' ability to cause increased havoc in Iraq and Syria and beyond persisted. It markedly franchised out of its original zone of operations. IS noticeably became active through affiliates in Egypt and Libya. In 2019-20, it carried out more than 134 improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against government positions in Egypt, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, and dozens of attacks against forces aligned with warlord Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen and even Iran were not spared, as IS affiliates under a variety of names subjected them to periodic attacks in 2019-2020,<sup>731</sup> and ISKP in Afghanistan, where it carried out 77 attacks in the first four months of 2021.<sup>732</sup>

AQ also managed to regain noticeable strength since the US dispersion of its leadership and main operatives from Afghanistan more than two decades ago. America's killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011 and his son and heir Hamza in the Afghan-Pakistan border region in 2019 seemed not to have seriously crippled the group.<sup>733</sup> They caused a major blow to its cohesion and organisation, but not to its ability to implant and activate cells in Middle Eastern conflict

zones. The group's main ideologue and nominal leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remained in hiding, with no confirmation of his whereabouts or death. However, he appeared in a video to mark the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, which coincided with the Taliban's thrust into power, urging his followers to carry on the struggle.<sup>734</sup> Given the group's links with the Taliban and shared ideological goal with IS, AQ has never been better positioned since Osama bin Laden's death.<sup>735</sup>

In Iraq and Syria, AQ maintained its close links with IS. It persisted with Al-Zawahiri's original shifting of a considerable amount of assets to the Levant to support the "Islamic State" in 2014. Essentially an offshoot of AQ, IS' slain leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was closely affiliated with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who founded the AQ-linked Islamic State of Iraq, and who was killed in an American bombing in 2006. In other words, AQ and IS have shared in many ways a common ideological agenda, although with a different timetable and operational approach.<sup>736</sup> Otherwise, it is hard to differentiate between their operations. Every attack that IS has executed equates to what AQ has also wanted. This is more so in the Levant than in some other parts of the Middle East, where AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa, and AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, run their own shows without reference to any centralised leadership.<sup>737</sup>

<sup>729</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>730</sup> "Islamic State Claims Syrian Gas Pipeline Attack," *Voice of America*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-claims-syria-gas-pipeline-attack-6234229.html>.

<sup>731</sup> "U.S. Report: ISIS and Al Qaeda Threats in 2019," Jack A. Kennedy, "Terrorism in Egypt: Examining the Data and What to Expect in 2021," *HIS Markit*, December 18, 2020, <https://ihsmarkit.com/research-analysis/terrorism-egypt-examining-data-what-to-expect-2021.html>.

<sup>732</sup> Nicole Sganga and Olivia Gazis, "What is ISIS-K, the Group That Claimed Responsibility for the Kabul Attack?" *CBS NEWS*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-k-terrorist-extremist-group-khorasan/>.

<sup>733</sup> "Hamza Bin Laden 'Killed in Air Strike,'" *BBC News*, August 1, 2019,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-49187315>.

<sup>734</sup> "Al-Qaeda: Ayman Al-Zawahiri Releases a Video on 9/11 Anniversary," *India Today*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/newsmo/video/al-qaeda-ayman-al-zawahiri-releases-a-video-on-9-11-anniversary-1852780-2021-09-14>.

<sup>735</sup> Rita Katz, "The Taliban's Victory Is Al Qaeda's Victory," *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/taliban-victory-afghanistan-al-qaeda-victory-911/>.

<sup>736</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Jihadis 2021: ISIS & al Qaeda," *The Wilson Centre*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/jihadis-2021-isis-al-qaeda>.

<sup>737</sup> For details, see "ACLED Regional Overview – Middle East (12-18 June 2021)," *ReliefWeb*, June

According to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) estimates, AQ commanded a cohort of some 400-600 operatives fighting in close coordination with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite President Joe Biden claiming that the US intervention had achieved its goal of ensuring that Afghanistan would not be used as a base for attacks on the US, in April 2021, an AQ operative promised that “war against the US will be continuing on all other fronts.”<sup>738</sup> It was also reported that, by then, the group had built cells in 15 of the 34 Afghan provinces, placing it in its strongest position since late 2001.<sup>739</sup>

### *Intra-State Tensions and Disputes*

The Middle East continued to be a zone of frenemies, rivalries and conflicts in 2021. The traditional Israeli-Palestinian dispute endured with deadly confrontational exchanges at the cost of hundreds of Palestinian lives and destruction of Palestinian property, but also with some Israeli casualties and damage. The most recent clash occurred in May-June 2021 between Israeli forces and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007.<sup>740</sup> In the absence of any peace initiative, the two sides remained prone to more clashes and even bigger confrontations.

Meanwhile, the danger of Israeli-Iranian hostilities morphing into a full-blown

confrontation escalated.<sup>741</sup> The election in June 2021 of hard-line cleric Ebrahim Raisi to Iran's presidency, who shares a common outlook with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, inserted a new catalyst into the scene, as did the election of new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Together with Biden's electoral success, this brought different players onto the scene. Dominant was the unresolved dispute over the July 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear agreement (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA).

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, had pulled out of the JCPOA in May 2018 and imposed crippling sanctions on Iran which he regarded as a regional menace. In retaliation, Iran folded back some of its commitments, installing more advanced centrifuges and accelerating uranium enrichment from 3.7 percent as permitted under the JCPOA to 60 percent by late 2021, putting the agreement on ventilator. Iran's most formidable regional foe, Israel, had vehemently opposed the agreement and the regional Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, had strongly argued against it from the start. However, the JCPOA's other signatories – Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China – wanted a revival of the deal, which they regarded as significant for regional and international security.<sup>742</sup> Biden too could see value in a renegotiated restoration of the JCPOA based on “mutual compliance.”

23, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/acled-regional-overview-middle-east-12-18-june-2021>.

<sup>738</sup> Daniel L. Byman, “Don't Expect an al-Qaeda Reboot in Afghanistan,” *The Brookings Institution*, May 4, 2021,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/04/dont-expect-an-al-qaida-reboot-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>739</sup> For details of this and AQ-Taliban links, see United Nations Security Council, Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2557 (2020) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan, S/2021/486 (June 1, 2021),

<https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>.

<sup>740</sup> “Israel Launches Air Raids on Gaza, First Since Truce With Hamas,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 15, 2021,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/15/israel-launches-air-raids-on-gaza-palestinian-security-sources>.

<sup>741</sup> Daniel Avis, “Understanding the Shadow War Between Israel and Iran,” *Bloomberg*, August 4, 2021,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-04/understanding-the-shadow-war-between-israel-and-iran-quicktake>.

<sup>742</sup> Amin Saikal, *Iran Rising: The Survival and Future of the Islamic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 215-224.

Raisi's predecessor, the moderate Hassan Rouhani, had responded positively to Biden's overtures for a settlement, resulting in six rounds of negotiations in Vienna from April to June last year between Iran and the other six signatories, although with the US indirectly. Both sides indicated progressively that the prospects for a settlement looked promising, but also pointing out that many difficult hurdles remained to be overcome. Tehran had reason to be distrustful of the US, given Trump's breaking of the agreement, and Washington remained apprehensive about Tehran's intentions. However, Raisi's political ascendancy changed the situation.

Raisi initially endorsed the continuation of negotiations but signalled a tougher approach. While reaffirming his long-standing distrust of the US and opposition to Israel as a Zionist and cruel occupier of the Palestinian territories, he ordered a reassessment of Iran's position, causing long delays in the negotiation process. Finally, under pressure from Washington, other signatories and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), whose inspection of Iranian nuclear facilities had been halted, Tehran agreed to restart negotiations at the end of November. As the future of the JCPOA hangs in the balance, with the two sides posturing whether the US should first lift all its sanctions or Iran should restore all its commitments, the change of guard in Israel made no difference to that country's stance against Iran.<sup>743</sup>

Israeli Prime Minister Bennett proved to be as right-wing and anti-Iranian as his predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu. He decried Raisi's election, saying that "A

regime of brutal hangmen must never be allowed to have weapons of mass destruction,"<sup>744</sup> despite Tehran's repeated claim that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes. Backed by the forces of the US right-wing, including many heavyweight Republicans, Bennett strongly urged Biden, along with other signatories, not to revive the agreement. He reiterated Netanyahu's warning that Israel would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear military capability.

The level of threat of a major Israel-Iran confrontation by either intention or miscalculation continued to remain high in 2021. The two protagonists sunk deeper into a shadowy war. Israel targeted Iranian forces and those of Iran's allies, Hezbollah and Bashar Al Assad's regime, in Lebanon and Syria respectively as well as Iran's nuclear scientists and facilities (through cyber-attacks) and tankers.<sup>745</sup> Iran hit Israeli or Israeli-related assets, including ships, wherever possible, along with backing Hezbollah and Hamas as formidable resistance forces to Israel.<sup>746</sup> Despite a firm desire by the Biden administration to avoid America's involvement in another war in the Middle East, in the event of it happening, Washington would find it obligatory to support the Jewish state under the US-Israel Strategic Partnership deal. Russia and China, with which Iran has forged close ties, can be expected to make a common anti-US cause with Iran as their close strategic friend.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry remained in place, but perhaps with less gusto since Riyadh severed ties in January 2016. The two sides' involvement in proxy conflicts in

<sup>743</sup> "Iran Nuclear Talks to Resume November 29 in Vienna, EU Says," *France 24*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20211103-iran-nuclear-talks-to-resume-november-29-in-vienna-eu-says>.

<sup>744</sup> "Iran Election: Israel PM Warns World of Ebrahim Raisi," *BBC News*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57541346>,

<sup>745</sup> Faranz Fassihi, "Blast in Tehran Near State Broadcasting Headquarters Rattles Iran," *The*

*New York Times*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/world/middle-east/iran-tehran-explosion-state-tv.html>.

<sup>746</sup> For an account of the two sides' actions against each other, see Amin Saikal, "Shadowy War Between Iran and Israel at Risk of Escalation," *The Strategist*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/shadowy-war-between-iran-and-israel-at-risk-of-escalation/>.

several parts of the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria and Yemen as well as the politically, financially and economically ravaged Lebanon, endured. Yet, their antagonism carried less potential for a direct confrontation than that of Israel-Iranian enmity, for two main reasons.

One was Biden's reversal of some of Trump's Middle East policy actions, which were premised on promoting an anti-Iran Arab-Israel front. Along with seeking the JCPOA's revival, Biden engaged in a recalibration of US relations with Saudi Arabia with an emphasis on human rights and democratic values. He rescinded US support for the Saudi-led Arab coalition operations against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, urged an end to the Yemen conflict and shunned the Saudi de facto ruler, Mohammad bin Salman, over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. He also played a role in the restoration of relations between Qatar and its Saudi-led blockers since 2016.<sup>747</sup>

The other was the US-Afghanistan debacle that alerted Saudi Arabia and some of the other US Arab allies in the region to guard themselves against being too dependent on the US. Raisi's call for a return to normal ties with Saudi Arabia and regional cooperation as a priority also helped.<sup>748</sup> However, this does not mean that they were about to restore all-round relations, given their deep-seated Sunni-Shia sectarian and geopolitical differences and divergent strategic outlooks.

Indeed, there were also many other inter-state tensions and disputes that stayed on course with a potential to lead to inter-state flare-ups in the region, for example, between Egypt and Turkey over Libya, Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara, or Egypt and Sudan over the Nile waters.

However, the chances of any of these developing into a major confrontation appeared slim. Yet, the same could not be said about another round of mostly localised Hamas-Israel confrontations.

### *State-Society Relations*

State-society dichotomy, rampant in many regional countries, also continued to stand out as a regional feature in 2021. All the states, including Israel, experienced polarisation between forces of the status quo, which supported incremental change as befitting their hold on power, and forces of change, which wanted a reformation of their states and societies. The resultant popular uprisings or "Arab Spring" that emerged in 2010 by no means petered out. They persisted to haunt the constituent states – from Iran and Iraq to Egypt, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria, although in varying intensity – as another major factor of instability. In addition, Israel's status as a nuclear state meant that the threat of nuclear proliferation remained constant. While Iran's denial of a military nuclear programme was not believed by its adversaries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates did not discount the possibility of having such a programme.

### **Outlook**

Multiple factors impacted stability and security in the Middle East, sustaining the region as an important source of international anxiety. The jihadist militant threat, national and inter-state tensions and disputes, with a possible US-Iranian or Israeli-Iranian confrontation, and the constant gap between state and society figured as the main troubling features. Just as much as the Biden administration wanted to reduce the US' involvement in the region in favour of focusing more on

<sup>747</sup> Amin Saikal, "Will Biden's Two-Pronged Approach to the Middle East Work?" *The Strategist*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/will-bidens-two-pronged-approach-to-the-middle-east-work/>.

<sup>748</sup> "Deepening Ties With Neighbors a Priority of Raisi's Foreign Policy," *Tehran Times*,

September 6, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/464786/Deepening-ties-with-neighbors-a-priority-of-Raisi-s-foreign-policy>.

China and Russia, the Middle East would not leave the US alone. If it materialises, a US-Iran rapprochement could cut both ways. On the one hand, it could insert a strategic buffer between the two regional foes. On the other, it could irritate Israel to the point of orchestrating a confrontation on its own. At any rate, while it is relatively discernible to analyse the past and present of the Middle East, reading the region's future has always been very risky, as its complexity has frequently defied predictions.

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# UNDERLYING THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) PROPAGANDA: STRIVING FOR RELEVANCE AND DOMINANCE

*Two years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Islamic State (IS) is weak but resilient as its affiliates continue to be active and adaptive. Despite challenges posed by COVID-19, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, disrupted international cooperation against terrorism and extremism, and a shift in priorities for nations around the world, IS is still a global threat. In Iraq and Syria, IS-claimed attacks have increased as the group operates as an entrenched insurgency. The Taliban's comeback and its dramatic takeover of Afghanistan, perceived as a historic victory, have further motivated IS to intensify its war against the former. With the Taliban back in power and IS battlefronts in Africa likely to expand, the risk of a jihadi resurgence, especially from IS, is near inevitable. Given these developments, IS propaganda is now boosted with narratives that underline its relevance and dominance in the global jihadist movement. Notwithstanding the dwindling number of IS official content, its online presence remains, owing to the efforts of its supporter networks.*

## IS as an Entrenched Insurgency

In Syria and Iraq, IS continues to operate as a low-level and well-entrenched insurgency in rural areas of these countries.<sup>749</sup> In Syria, despite facing challenges after losing much of its top leadership and territories, IS has preserved its organisational continuity and remained active in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Assad regime.<sup>750</sup> The terror group has largely conducted hit-and-run ambushes, assassinations, and IED attacks.<sup>751</sup> The assassinations of SDF elements and aligned tribal leaders in Hasakah and Deir al-Zour provinces continue to be part of its efforts to undermine public support for the SDF and create a permissive operational environment for IS.<sup>752</sup>

IS continues to utilise the central Syrian Badia (desert) as a sanctuary, allowing it to regroup rather undisturbed given the mountainous terrain and remote nature of the desert.<sup>753</sup> The Syrian regime and the Russian military have conducted ground operations and airstrikes to halt IS' further expansion in the Badia.<sup>754</sup> However, the operations have not made much progress in the southern Badia region or near the city of I-Sukhna in the eastern countryside of Homs.<sup>755</sup> This is because the Syrian

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<sup>749</sup> "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," The United States Department of Defense, April – June 30, 2021, 2, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/11/2002828689/-1/1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20QUARTERLY%20REPORT%20APRIL%2001,%202021%20-%20JUNE%2030,%202021.PDF>.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>753</sup> Shores Khani, "The Regrouping of ISIS in the Deserts of Syria," *The Washington Institute*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ regrouping-isis-deserts-syria>.

<sup>754</sup> "Operation Inherent Resolve," 15.

<sup>755</sup> Mohammed Hassan, "ISIS and the Assad Regime: Strategy and Counter-Strategy in Syria's Badia," *Middle East Institute*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-and-assad->

regime and its allies are mostly focused on securing control over supply routes connecting the desert region to major cities, especially between Damascus and Deir al-Zour.<sup>756</sup> Some areas in the desert region have no Syrian military presence, leaving IS with a massive area to retreat to and avoid confrontation with the former.<sup>757</sup>

Consequently, the number of hit-and-run ambushes against pro-regime convoys and isolated units has increased. For instance, on 1 June, IS attacked the headquarters and checkpoints of Iranian militia Liwa' Al-Quds in Al-Sukhna, killing three members.<sup>758</sup>

Furthermore, IS continues to recruit at humanitarian camps for displaced persons, where it enjoys relative freedom of movement and extensive influence.<sup>759</sup> At Al-Hol detention camp in Hasakah province, IS activities have been concerning. Home to an estimated 61,000 residents, mostly Syrian and Iraqi nationals,<sup>760</sup> the number of individuals sympathetic to IS is still unknown.<sup>761</sup> Since January, more than 70 people have been reportedly killed inside Al-Hol camp<sup>762</sup>, including 10 beheadings.<sup>763</sup>

Women inside Al-Hol who are still committed to the IS ideology are known as *al-muhajirat* (the immigrants). They have developed and exhibited contempt towards other women, mostly former IS fighters' wives who repented their links with IS and wanted to return to their countries of origins.<sup>764</sup> In retaliation, a group of pro-IS women have formed *hesba* (religious policing) units, forcefully imposing IS ideology and punishment on other women within the camp, including flogging, torture, food deprivation, burning of tents, and murder.<sup>765</sup>

To support other IS-related activities including recruitment, these women have also been raising funds, via social media, which would then be used to pay smugglers linked to IS cells in Syria and Iraq to transport families and individuals out of the camp.<sup>766</sup> Another matter of concern in the camp is the radicalisation of youths and children by their pro-IS mothers. In a way, IS ideology is filling in the gap in the children's education and priming them for eventual recruitment and training. There have even been reports that at least 30 children from the camp have been kidnapped by IS militants to be trained to potentially commit terrorist attacks in their home countries.<sup>767</sup>

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regime-strategy-and-counter-strategy-syrias-badia.

<sup>756</sup> Shores Khani, "The Regrouping of ISIS in the Deserts of Syria."

<sup>757</sup> Mohammed Hassan, "ISIS and the Assad Regime."

<sup>758</sup> Mohammed Hardan, "Is Islamic State Rebuilding in Syrian Desert?" *Al-Monitor*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/islamic-state-rebuilding-syrian-desert>.

<sup>759</sup> "Operation Inherent Resolve," 17.

<sup>760</sup> "UNICEF Urges Repatriation of All Children in Syria's Al-Hol Camp Following Deadly Fire," *UN News*, February 28, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1085982>.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid.

<sup>762</sup> Louisa Loveluck, "Syrian Detention Camp Rocked by Dozens of Killings Blamed on ISIS Women," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/09/19/syria-isis-al-hol-camp/>.

<sup>763</sup> Isabel Coles and Benoit Faucon, "Refugee Camp for Families of Islamic State Fighters Nourishes Insurgency," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/refugee-camp-for-families-of-islamic-state-fighters-nourishes-insurgency-11623254778>.

<sup>764</sup> John Saleh, "The Women of ISIS and the Al-Hol Camp," *The Washington Institute*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/women-isis-and-al-hol-camp>.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid.

<sup>766</sup> Ibid.

<sup>767</sup> Beatrice Eriksson, "A Visit to Northeast Syria Shows the Urgency for Governments to Repatriate Their Citizens, Many of Them Children, to Thwart ISIS," *Just Security*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/78064/a-visit-to-northeast-syria-shows-the-urgency-for-governments-to-repatriate-their-citizens-many-of-them-children-to-thwart-isis/>.



Meanwhile in Iraq, IS remains entrenched in rural areas and retains freedom of movement, particularly in rugged mountain and desert regions.<sup>768</sup> The group's activities have been mainly focused in Sunni-dominated provinces, such as Anbar, Ninawa, Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Diyala, as well as areas surrounding Baghdad and Mosul. IS has also maintained safe havens in isolated areas, utilising the mountainous regions in northern and north-central Iraq to conduct ambushes and IED attacks against the ISF, the Peshmerga, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).<sup>769</sup>

Additionally, IS has been able to exploit gaps in security coverage in disputed areas along the boundary that separates the Iraqi Kurdistan Region from the rest of Iraq.<sup>770</sup> This has enabled IS to use the porous border between Iraq and Syria to smuggle members and affiliates to safe havens it has established in rural and permissive areas.<sup>771</sup> Security gaps in urban areas such as Baghdad and Mosul created opportunities for IS to conduct attacks, such as those carried out in Baghdad in April<sup>772</sup> and July.<sup>773</sup> The group was also likely responsible for multiple attacks that targeted power pylons south of Baghdad, Diyala and Nineveh in January<sup>774</sup>, July<sup>775</sup> and August<sup>776</sup> respectively.

The security vacuum caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed IS to take advantage of the situation to reorganise and redistribute its forces. According to a Kurdish Security Forces (Peshmerga) commander, many counter-IS activities in Iraq such as joint raids with Iraqi forces and the SDF had been placed on hold during the pandemic, and that thousands of IS fighters who had been hiding among civilians after the group lost its territories had seized on the lull to emerge from hiding and begin operating in the mountainous region again.<sup>777</sup>

### IS Narratives

As IS remains focused on rebuilding its capabilities in Iraq and Syria, the group's propaganda arm continues with its media production, albeit less intensively. IS' propaganda continues to reinforce the resilience narrative, which surfaced in the aftermath of the loss of its physical "Caliphate" in 2019/2020. Supplementing this, however are narratives that emphasise the group's efforts to stay relevant and dominant in the global jihadi landscape.

*'Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad' (Remaining and Expanding): Revival in Syria/Iraq and Expansion in Africa*

<sup>768</sup> "Operation Inherent Resolve," 16.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid.

<sup>771</sup> Shores Khani, "The Regrouping of ISIS in the Deserts of Syria."

<sup>772</sup> "Car Bomb Kills Four in Baghdad's Sadr City – Police," *Reuters*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/car-bomb-kills-four-baghdads-sadr-city-police-2021-04-15/>.

<sup>773</sup> "Baghdad Bombing: 35 Killed in Attack on Packed Iraq Market," *Al-Jazeera*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/19/iraq-roadside-bomb-kills-10-in-baghdad>.

<sup>774</sup> Mina Aldroubi and Sinan Mahmoud, "ISIS Bombed High Voltage Power Lines Near Baghdad, Iraqi Military Claims," *The National*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/isis>

-bombed-high-voltage-power-lines-near-baghdad-iraqi-military-claims-1.1149352.

<sup>775</sup> Ibrahim Saleh, "Bomb Attacks Target 2 Power Transmission Towers in Iraq," *Anadolu Agency*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/bomb-attacks-target-2-power-transmission-towers-in-iraq/2302157>.

<sup>776</sup> Ibrahim Saleh, "Bomb Attack Targets Power Line in Iraq's Nineveh Province," *Anadolu Agency*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/bomb-attack-targets-power-line-in-iraq-s-nineveh-province/2328307>.

<sup>777</sup> Sophia Ankel, "7,000 ISIS Fighters in Iraq are Exploiting the COVID-19 Pandemic to Regroup in Key Areas, General Warns," *Business Insider*, February 27, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/report-covid-19-pandemic-syria-provides-cover-for-isis-resurgence-2021-2>.

Almost two years after the loss of its so-called caliphate, IS propaganda content continues to demonstrate and reaffirm that the terror group is *baqiyah* (remaining) and, to some extent, *tatamaddad* (expanding). IS' production of content related to its military operations not only demonstrates its resilience and continued presence but also its determination in reviving and rebuilding its capabilities in Syria and Iraq, and ensuring its expansion efforts elsewhere, especially in Africa.

IS propaganda has also showcased the group's tactical adaptability in destabilising the enemy and inflicting material and economic damage, such as attacking oil refineries in Raqqa<sup>778</sup> and pipelines in Damascus.<sup>779</sup> Iraq was also not spared from IS' "economic war." In July, IS claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on electricity towers,<sup>780</sup> resulting in debilitating power shortages at a time when Iraqis were suffering from a significant rise in temperatures.<sup>781</sup> In self-proclaimed IS provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk, Anbar, North Baghdad and Salahuddin in Iraq, the group's propaganda content showed that in addition to engaging in low-impact, guerrilla-type operations, it has also conducted sophisticated, multiple coordinated operations. For instance, in January, IS claimed responsibility for the double suicide bombing in a busy market in

the centre of Baghdad.<sup>782</sup> Similarly, IS fighters in Iraq also carried out frequent attacks against the PMF, the Iraqi authorities and tribes, whose chiefs have repeatedly been targeted by IS.<sup>783</sup> Likewise in May, IS detonated a vehicle bomb in the midst of a gathering of the government-aligned Tribal Mobilisation Forces in Anbar province, killing approximately 12 people.<sup>784</sup>

Meanwhile, having made the expansion in sub-Saharan Africa as one of its overarching priorities, IS has devoted more strategic direction and material assistance to the region. The group will likely encourage further investment of manpower and resources into its African affiliates.<sup>785</sup> The Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) succeeded in securing a foothold in Mozambique when it captured the port city of Mocimboa de Praia in Cabo Delgado province in August 2020.<sup>786</sup> Months later, ISCAP launched an attack on the town of Palma in northern Mozambique in March 2021, seizing control over the town for four days, killing dozens, and even beheading some of the victims.<sup>787</sup> Further escalating the violence, ISCAP's Democratic Republic of the Congo-based affiliate, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), claimed

<sup>778</sup> "Damaging the Al-Qatirji Oil Refinery in East Raqqa," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 296, July 23, 2021, 10.

<sup>779</sup> "Economic War...Soldiers of the Caliphate Cut Electrical Power in Damascus," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 305, September 24, 2021, 7.

<sup>780</sup> "Two Vehicles Belonging to Rafidite Forces Destroyed and Bombing of Seven Electrical Towers in Diyala," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 293, July 2, 2021, 7.

<sup>781</sup> Mustafa Saadoun, "Islamic State Suspected of Sabotaging Electrical Towers," *Al-Monitor*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/islamic-state-suspected-sabotaging-iraqi-electrical-towers>.

<sup>782</sup> "More Than 30 Rafidites Killed and 100 Injured in Two Suicide Attacks in the Heart of Baghdad," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 27, January 29, 2021, 10.

<sup>783</sup> "Online Jihadist Propaganda: 2020 in Review," *Europol*, August 13, 2021, 10,

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/online-jihadist-propaganda-2020-in-review>.

<sup>784</sup> "Operation Inherent Resolve," 14.

<sup>785</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Twenty Years After 9/11: What Is the Future of the Global Jihad Movement?," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (September 2021): 95 <https://ctc.usma.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-what-is-the-future-of-the-global-jihadi-movement/>.

<sup>786</sup> Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Islamic State in Mozambique," *Lawfare*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/islamic-state-mozambique>.

<sup>787</sup> "IntelBrief: Islamic State Attack in Mozambique Demonstrates Growing Terror Threat," *The Soufan Center*, March 31, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-31/>; "Soldiers of the Caliphate Seize Control Over the Strategic Town of Palma," [Infographic] *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 280, April 1, 2021, 12.

responsibility for its first suicide bombing in the country in late June.<sup>788</sup>

As for the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), it released a report claiming credit for an operation that led to the death of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, giving an account of the wide-spread campaign launched by ISWAP in May 2021 on the base of Abu Bakr Shekau's group in the Sambisa Forest.<sup>789</sup> IS propaganda regarding this front indicated that the group has been seeking to consolidate territory and attract fighters from other jihadi groups to join ISWAP under the guise of unity. This can be seen in IS' *Al-Naba'* editorial titled "Our Unity and Their Division in Africa."<sup>790</sup> The editorial highlighted the spread of IS in Africa and the fears of the West, specifically France, on this development and divisions among Western allies in the continent. It asserted the West and its allies have not found solutions to address the spread of IS in Africa.

#### *IS' Battle for Relevance vis-a-vis the Taliban/Al-Qaeda (AQ)*

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 inevitably underlined the intense rivalry between IS, particularly its Afghan affiliate, the IS Khorasan Province (ISKP), and the Taliban, which the former regards as part of AQ. Unlike other jihadist organisations such as Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), IS has been unsurprisingly critical of the Taliban's return to power. Days after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, IS responded to the event

with an editorial in *Al-Naba'* titled "In the end, they have raised Mullah Bradley."<sup>791</sup> The editorial argued that the Taliban's claim of victory is false and that it is part of a conspiracy with the US. In the editorial, IS asserted that the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan was coordinated with the US in accordance with the peace process in Doha. The editorial affirmed that the IS path is the right one compared to the Taliban because the "new Taliban" is in fact just a tool of the Crusaders in their war against IS. While the Taliban are now in power, IS argued that its ideology is not being realised, highlighting its failure to enforce the *shariah* as soon as it seized power. Another point highlighted in the editorial is the US' seeming double standards in their fight against jihadist groups. According to IS, the US does not see the Taliban as a threat to its interests in the country because the latter is merely a replacement for the former Afghan government. This narrative is essential for IS' media strategy in order to deny the Taliban's success in establishing an Islamic Emirate and maintain IS' claim that it is the only group fighting to establish a caliphate.

IS' attempt to sabotage the Taliban came more than a week after the latter's takeover of Afghanistan. ISKP launched multiple attacks on Kabul Airport amidst evacuation efforts by the US and NATO allies. On 26 August, two explosions hit the entry gates of Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport that killed at least 60 Afghans and 13 US troops.<sup>792</sup> Hours after the attack, ISKP released a statement claiming

<sup>788</sup> "Two Explosions Hit Congo's Eastern City of Beni," *Voice of America*, June 28, 2021, [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_two-explosions-hit-congos-eastern-city-beni/6207575.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_two-explosions-hit-congos-eastern-city-beni/6207575.html); "12 From the Congolese Army and its Militia Killed in Attacks in the Ituri Province, and the Mujahideen Conducted Their First Operation in the City of Beni," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 293, July 2, 2021, 5.

<sup>789</sup> "An Authentic Direction and Positions Bear Witness to the Destruction of the Innovation of the Kharijites in Nigeria and the Return of Thousands to the Group of Muslims," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 293, July 2, 2021, 10.

<sup>790</sup> "Our Unity and Their Division in Africa," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 293, July 2, 2021, 3.

<sup>791</sup> "In the End, They Have Raised a Mullah Bradley," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 300, August 19, 2021, 3; "Destruction of an Electrical Power Supply Tower Belonging to Ajil Oil Field," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 294, July 9, 2021, 9.

<sup>792</sup> Idrees Ali, Jonathan Landay and Humeysra Pamuk, "Pentagon Bracing for More Attacks After Troops Killed at Kabul Airport," *Reuters*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/explosion-outside-kabul-airport-casualties-unclear-pentagon-2021-08-26/>.

responsibility. On 30 August, ISKP launched a rocket attack on Kabul airport. The rockets were fired less than 48 hours before the US was due to complete its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>793</sup>

ISKP has also claimed several minor operations in mid-August in the north and north-eastern parts of Afghanistan.<sup>794</sup> While the Taliban takeover has had a significant impact on IS operations in the country, the attacks on Kabul airport show the continued threat posed by IS. ISKP will likely continue its efforts to sow panic and chaos, disrupt the Taliban and demonstrate the group's (in)capability in providing security to the population and governing the country according to its doctrine and ideology.

### *Freeing Prisoners*

The narrative of freeing captives by carrying out attacks on prisons and inciting prison riots has been one of the cornerstones of IS' operational strategy.<sup>795</sup> In fact, it has been consistently highlighted following the loss of IS' so-called caliphate and the imprisonment of many of its fighters. Freeing of prisoners has therefore remained a priority for IS as it could help the group to build up its ranks. This can be seen in the IS spokesman's audio speech released in October 2020 where he called on its fighters to work for the release of their incarcerated comrades.<sup>796</sup> Subsequently, the group succeeded in liberating its

incarcerated fighters from a prison in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>797</sup>

Further contributing to its freeing prisoners campaign, IS published an infographic in its 269<sup>th</sup> issue of *Al-Naba'* in January 2021.<sup>798</sup> The infographic featured a list of successful prison breaks in Iraq between 2004 and 2017. Following the release of the infographic, a pro-IS media entity known as War and Media released an eight-minute video that featured snippets of IS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurasyi's audio speech. The video reused footage from previous IS videos and featured Al-Qurasyi addressing the group's incarcerated fighters. Similar to the infographic's promise that captives are not forgotten, Al-Qurasyi assured the prisoners that they will soon be liberated, especially from prisons run by the SDF in Syria.

As part of the propaganda campaign that reminds Muslims of the plight of detained fighters, IS published a second infographic in its 270<sup>th</sup> issue of *Al-Naba'*.<sup>799</sup> The infographic included a list of prisons in IS "provinces" in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Central Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo), East Asia (Indonesia and the Philippines) and Khorasan (Afghanistan and Tajikistan). According to the infographic, IS fighters conducted raids on these prisons to liberate their fellow detained fighters between 2012 to 2020.

<sup>793</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Kabul Airport Comes Under Rocket Fire as US Afghanistan Evacuation Enters Final 48 Hours," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/30/kabul-airport-comes-under-rocket-fire-as-us-afghanistan-evacuation-enters-final-48-hours>.

<sup>794</sup> "Spy Killed and Three Elements from the Taliban Injured in Khorasan," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 300, August 19, 2021, 9.

<sup>795</sup> Nur Aziemah Azman, "The Islamic State (IS): Maintaining Resilience in a Post-Caliphate, Pandemic Environment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 3, no. 1 (January 2021): 109, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>.

<sup>796</sup> Abu Hamza Al-Qurasyi [Audio Recording], "So Narrate to Them Stories of the Past, So Perhaps They Will Reflect," *Al-Furqan Media Production*, October 18, 2020.

<sup>797</sup> 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/co-ngo-jail-attack-prisoners-freed.html>.

<sup>798</sup> "Prisons Whose Walls the Soldiers of the Islamic State Destroyed in Iraq – We Have Not Forgotten You," [Infographic], *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 269, January 14, 2021, 12.

<sup>799</sup> "Prisons Whose Walls the Soldiers of the Islamic State Destroyed in Iraq – We Have Not Forgotten You," [Infographic], *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 270, January 22, 2021, 12.

### *Promotion of and Encouragement for Supporter Networks*

IS has long adopted and maintained that doing media work, online and offline, is a form of jihad. This strategy and narrative have become key to overcoming the loss of IS' physical caliphate. As official IS propaganda content continues to decrease and other types of digital products such as video releases by IS provinces are becoming more limited, the group's official media feed of information is mostly sustained by the daily release of statements and its weekly newsletter. To boost official content, IS also relies on affiliated news agencies such as Amaq News Agency. Even so, the IS-affiliated Amaq News Agency that used to frequently issue short statements has recently appeared to produce longer reports documenting attacks that are considered relevant to IS, or short videos comprising raw and unedited operational footages. In addition to Amaq, IS also continues to rely on another news entity, the Nashir News Agency, to document and disseminate news and information about its operations.

While IS' online presence has suffered some setbacks following the November 2019 Europol crackdown on its online networks, especially to its organised propaganda distribution on Telegram, the group's online networks and supporters have endured into 2021. While attempts to rebuild their networks on Telegram had been difficult and less sustainable given the constant monitoring and disruptions by the media company, IS media outlets and pro-IS media entities have also decentralised their presence across multiple online platforms, including Rocket.Chat, Hoop Messenger, Tam Tam and Element. The sustained pressure from online disruption actions and investigations has, therefore, led IS and its online followers to rely on supporter (*munasir*) networks to ensure the continued dissemination of IS propaganda.

Recognising its significant role, IS released an editorial in its 289<sup>th</sup> issue of *Al-Naba'* titled "The Supporting Media (*Al-I'lam al-Munasir*)."<sup>800</sup> The editorial basically focused on the media activities of those who support IS but are not members of the group and are known as '*munasir*.'

Like its 2016 publication titled "Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid," the editorial underlined how IS' continuous incitement of activism, whether from offline operatives or online activists, has led to propaganda production and dissemination being considered to be on par with, or even more important than, combat jihad. As a result, the role of media activists or operatives is given the same, or sometimes, greater importance, as ground combatants.

### **Outlook**

As IS remains a threat in many parts of the world, the group also understands the importance and need to stay relevant and ensure its dominance and supremacy within the global jihadist landscape. Efforts to carry out its strategy of sustaining the group's notoriety, rebuilding influence among local populations and re-establishing the caliphate can already be seen in Syria and Iraq, sub-Saharan Africa, and Afghanistan.

IS' struggle for relevance and dominance is especially highlighted following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, which is seen among Islamist militants as a historic victory for Islam. Given the ensuing support and recognition the Taliban has garnered, IS' propaganda efforts to belittle the Taliban as an inauthentic Islamic force will persist in order to stem the threat to IS' relevance and dominance among global jihadist movements.

In order to facilitate the production and dissemination of IS narratives and messaging that affirm its relevance and

<sup>800</sup> "The Supporting Media (*Al-I'lam Al-Munasir*)," *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, no. 289, June 4, 2021, 3. It is important to note that in the vernacular of IS media propaganda, *al-i'lam al-munasir* generally

refers to content produced by pro-IS individuals and media entities that are not part of IS' official media structure (*al-i'lam al-rasmi*).

dominance, IS supporters have continued to direct efforts towards creating groups and channels on various and diverse platforms to ensure the availability of IS propaganda online. Due to the efforts of supporter (*munasir*) networks that help compensate for the decreasing number of official IS content, the group has managed to maintain an online presence.

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# RADICAL IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES FOLLOWING THE TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

*Various researchers have argued that a key factor that facilitates the adoption of Islamist extremist ideas and helps terrorist recruitment is socio-economic conditions such as poverty, social inequality, the education gap, and political instability. However, the role of radical ideology cannot be underestimated as another facilitator of extremism and terrorism. In this regard, radical ideology helps extremists legitimise the use of violence to further their agenda, justify others as their enemies, and promote their political and religious worldview. In the form of misinterpretations of religious texts, certain religious-political events and prophecies, radical ideology can trigger or encourage Islamist extremism. This article examines how, in 2021, an event and a prophecy have boosted the long-running ideological narrative of extremist groups in Southeast Asia, that is, victory comes with persevering with militant jihad. These are, respectively, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and the prophecy of the Black Banner of Khorasan.*

## **Taliban Takeover as Seen by Extremist Groups**

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rapid-fire takeover of the country by the Taliban, close to the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks orchestrated by Al-Qaeda (AQ), is deemed a momentous event by

jihadist circles. Some were reminded of key AQ operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the 9/11 mastermind, telling his Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) interrogator that there was no need to defeat the US militarily. Rather, AQ merely had to prolong the fighting. As one analyst observed, the US, with its battlefield successes in many theatres of conflict, would accelerate the pace of the "War on Terror" only to find itself burned-out and ultimately "defeat itself by quitting."<sup>801</sup>

As with its global counterparts, Islamist militant groups in Southeast Asia have long waited for the US to depart Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan has long been the operational theatre and sanctuary for AQ and more recently for Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), some Southeast Asia militants now aspire to take advantage of the US withdrawal by finding space to grow and establish *qaidah aminah* or a "secure base."<sup>802</sup>

The Taliban will need time to bring the whole of Afghanistan under their control. To establish a sustainable system of government, they will have to negotiate, deal with, and renegotiate between the centre and the local powers on the periphery.<sup>803</sup> Under such conditions, the possibility of ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan under the Taliban is not inconceivable.

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<sup>801</sup> Marc A. Thiessen, "Biden Is Making an Al-Qaeda Mastermind's Prophecy Come True," *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/15/biden-is-making-an-al-qaeda-masterminds-prophecy-come-true/>.

<sup>802</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Would-be Foreign Fighters Dreaming of Afghanistan," *Voice of America*,

September 10, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6222427.html>.

<sup>803</sup> William F. Wechsler, "Experts React: The US Withdrawal From Afghanistan Is Complete. What's Next?" *Atlantic Council*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-is-complete-whats-next/>

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan remains a work in progress, whose details are still largely mysterious. Since *sharia* (Islamic) law does not provide codified systems for the modern nation-state, such as commercial and administrative laws, the Taliban will need time and serious efforts and resources for the emirate to ably implement policies related to *sharia* law. As the *sharia* does not dictate how the Taliban should run the state, the only certainty about a functional emirate is that it cannot resemble the failed Islamic State (IS) model of the caliphate. The Taliban would need to contemporise the interpretation of the *sharia* laws to meet the expectations of a modern nation-state.<sup>804</sup> For a start, *sharia* laws do not restrict women from working and most certainly ensure their rights to education. It remains highly unclear how the Taliban, still retrogressive in its core thus far, will address *sharia* laws which encourage women to be an active part of society and contribute to the nation's progress.

Notwithstanding its governance challenges, in decisively taking over Afghanistan a second time around, the Taliban's military, political and ideological "triumph" over the West in general and the US, in particular, represents a strategic shift in contemporary international relations. It has disproved the early predictions in the 1990s about the imminence of "the end of history." The twenty-year Afghan crisis, that began with the 9/11 attack, has seemingly ended with the abrupt American withdrawal.<sup>805</sup> More importantly, it has resuscitated Islamist militants' belief in *jihad* to establish an Islamic state, and then a global Muslim caliphate.

## Ideological Impact in Southeast Asia

Within the Southeast Asian militant sphere, the Taliban's takeover has further manifested the IS-AQ divide, which finds its source in the global competition between the two terrorist outfits. In the Afghanistan context, the Taliban's emirate ideal focuses on the Afghan nation-state, unlike IS' caliphate, which has a global agenda. Even the Taliban's protection of the Shia communities is fundamentally at odds with IS, who considers them outside the fold of Islam. ISKP, an IS affiliate, had fought the Taliban even before the US withdrawal. As seen by its attacks in August 2021 onwards, ISKP will continue to challenge the Taliban in a bid to show its supremacy and shore up its boast that it remains the true defender of the Islamic Caliphate.

This sense of rivalry is also played out in the radical landscape in Southeast Asia. Within the region, extremist groups are either supporters or affiliates of Taliban-AQ (T-AQ) or IS. They differ in their interpretations of Islamic doctrine and ideology, causing disagreement and hostility even as they share the same objective of establishing an Islamic state.

Around the region, there has been little open support for the Taliban takeover from Islamist groups. In the Philippines and Malaysia, Islamist groups have generally maintained a safe distance from openly expressing support for the Taliban. Online support, however, was more prevalent, especially from pro-T-AQ groups and individuals. In Indonesia, social media and private online chat groups of several militant and conservative groups have celebrated the

<sup>804</sup> Andrew Jeong, Jennifer Hassan, Ellen Francis and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "The Taliban Says It Will Rule Under Sharia Law. What Does That Mean?" *The Washington Post*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/19/sharia-law-afghanistan-taliban/>

<sup>805</sup> Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabanco, "What Afghanistan Teaches About the Art of the Possible," *Geopolitical Monitor*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/what-afghanistan-teaches-about-the-art-of-the-possible/>



Taliban takeover.<sup>806</sup> There were also attempts to improve the Taliban's image by introducing more acceptable narratives that appeal to the hearts and minds of the masses. For example, a former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member, Abu Tholut,<sup>807</sup> provided five explanations to whitewash concerns about the Taliban.

Firstly, by highlighting that unlike the IS, the Taliban are not a *salafi-jihadi* organisation and movement. Instead, they are *Ahl as-Sunna wa'l-Jamā'a* (ASWAJA) or the people of the *Sunna* and the Community whose Islamic creed is based on the Asharite-Maturidite school.<sup>808</sup> Secondly, by projecting Taliban leaders positively unlike many Afghan leaders who left the country during the crisis. According to Abu Tholut, the Taliban achieved this victory because of its *tarbiah bil qudwah* (education by example).<sup>809</sup> Thirdly, by dismissing the Taliban's past brutality with another narrative of how they were merely following the code of conduct outlined by the Qur'an in enjoining good and forbidding evil which, in the Afghan context, was the Mujahideen government which did not implement Islamic law. Fourthly, by showcasing the Taliban's graciousness through the amnesty granted by Mullah

Hibatullah Akhunzada to their enemies.<sup>810</sup> Lastly, recasting the decision to work with a non-Muslim state like China as pragmatic and acceptable in Islam. To strengthen the narrative, Abu Tholut cited the Prophet's alliance with the polytheist tribe of Khuzaah.<sup>811</sup>

Buoyed by the Taliban takeover, the pro-T-AQ camp has revelled in two ideological narratives to shore up their militant aspirations. While not new, these two narratives have been refreshed in some form:

#### i) *Taliban Jihad, Islamic Victory*

Euphoric supporters or affiliates of T-AQ see the Taliban takeover as an inspiration for their hopes of establishing an Islamic state within their own territories. Security analysts have warned that events in Afghanistan could encourage militant Islamists elsewhere to take up arms to topple their governments. This is especially the case when the takeover is woven into a narrative of jihadist success by the T-AQ supporters and affiliates, whereby sheer perseverance in fighting a mighty enemy and divine intervention will make them victorious.<sup>812</sup>

<sup>806</sup> Nivell Rayda, "Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan Could Embolden Indonesia's Terror Groups, Inspire More Recruits: Experts," *Channel News Asia*, August 21, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/taliban-takeover-afghanistan-could-embolden-indonesias-terror-groups-inspire-more-recruits-experts-2137422>.

<sup>807</sup> He is a former JI member who had earlier fought alongside the Taliban after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. He headed the JI territorial division that oversaw Indonesia's Sulawesi and Kalimantan provinces, the state of Sabah in Malaysia, and Mindanao. After his release from jail for the second time in 2019, he was invited to speak to Muslim activists at seminars and discussions - some of which were sponsored by the government - as part of a campaign against the ideology of IS. See, Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "9/11, 20 Years On: Ex-JI Leader Abu Tholut Now Says He Opposes ISIS," *The Straits Times*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/911-20-years-on-ex-ji-leader-abu-tholut-now-says-he-opposes-isis>.

<sup>808</sup> Boombox Zine, "Apa Akidah Taliban? Tanya Jawab," YouTube, September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhhuuqNpsJzU&t=186s>.

<sup>809</sup> KSTV Kajian Semarang TV, "Sejarah Panjang dan Hikmah Kemenangan Taliban," YouTube, August 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GQjyaceJtA>.  
<sup>810</sup> Ibid; Ahmed-Waleed Kakar, "Taliban, the Next Generation," *Newlines Magazine*, August 30, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/taliban-the-next-generation/>.

<sup>811</sup> Hendri Official, "Taliban Dibantu China, Bagaimana Kita Menyingkapinya?," YouTube, September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acRevPEpj1Y>.

<sup>812</sup> For example, the Indonesian group Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS), that has not committed any violence, has shown its affinity with the Taliban. On August 17, JAS congratulated the Taliban for its "victory in freeing Afghan soil from the clutches of the American coloniser and puppet government." See Arlina Arshad, "Taliban

It is noteworthy that IS' declaration of a caliphate in June 2014 was the group's most successful propaganda in attracting many young Muslims to take part in resurrecting an Islamic caliphate. In this regard, the narrative of the Taliban "victory" could be transformed by militants as a triumph of Islam. Such a narrative could be an attractive lure to win over recruits; it also helps to avoid a lengthy indoctrination period for would-be militants.

## ii) *The Black Banner of Khorasan Prophecy*

Consequent to the takeover, the Black Banner (also referred to as Flag) prophecy which was manipulated significantly by the IS in their heyday has resurfaced among regional militants. There have been discussions on social media and chat groups on whether the Taliban are the Black Banner that the Prophet alluded to in the *hadith* (reports of the teachings, deeds, and sayings of the Prophet), and if they are the Al Mahdi army.<sup>813</sup> According to the *hadith*, the army will emerge from Khorasan with the Al Mahdi and be victorious and finally restore the glory of Islam. Previously, other than IS, which was exclusively associated with the Black Banner prophecy, other jihadist groups such as the Taliban, AQ, AQ's Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), Chechen jihadist fighters, and Muslim political movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) have also used it for their own jihadist or propaganda purposes.

Given how successfully it was used by IS in the past to entice radicals and

sympathisers to join them, the narratives built upon this prophecy continue to be a potent concoction for indoctrination, inviting the gullible and vulnerable segments of Muslim society to sympathise, support, or even be members of jihadist groups.

## Ideological Counter-Response

In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the renewed vigour of the above ideological extremist narratives requires an effective riposte.

Firstly, there is a need to educate community segments who are vulnerable to simplistic radical narratives, such as youth, that even if the takeover is considered a "victory," it is the Taliban's alone and cannot be accorded to Islam. The Taliban does not represent Islam globally, with its diverse schools of thought and 1.8 billion adherents. Moreover, the Taliban's past brutalities against its own citizens, especially women and minorities, cannot be ignored, particularly as they have not yet displayed an authentic change in how they view or treat the latter. The current euphoria with the Taliban's "victory" cannot be a reason to forget.<sup>814</sup>

Secondly, there must be continuing efforts to educate Muslim communities on the complex but necessary process of how *hadiths* should be interpreted so that radical misinterpretations do not prevail over moderate, inclusive narratives. In relation to the Black Banner narrative which appears in several *hadiths*, it is imperative

Victory in Afghanistan May Spur Militants in S-E Asia," *The Straits Times*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/taliban-victory-in-afghanistan-may-spur-militants-in-s-e-asia>.

<sup>813</sup> Wakoz Reza Gautama, "Heboh, 2 Ustaz Ini Sebut Taliban pasukan Akhir Zaman yang diramalkan Rasulullah SAW," *suaralampung.id*, August 20, 2021, <https://lampung.suara.com/read/2021/08/20/081000/heboh-2-ustaz-ini-sebut-taliban-pasukan-akhir-zaman-yang-diramalkan-rasulullah-saw?page=all>; Anonymous\_2024@Anonymous\_2024, "Sepetinya

Taliban Yang di maksud pasukan Imam Mahdi.! Pasukan panji Hitam dari timur.!", Twitter, August 16, 2021,

[https://twitter.com/anonymous\\_2024/status/1427211329077579778](https://twitter.com/anonymous_2024/status/1427211329077579778).

<sup>814</sup> KOMPASTV, "Mantan Pimpinan Jamaah Islamiyah Sebut Dunia Harus Terus Awasi Taliban," YouTube, August 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXPggrp1rB8>; "Afghan Taliban," National Counterterrorism Center, September 20, 2021, [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/afghan\\_taliban.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/afghan_taliban.html).

that the Muslim community be made aware that it is based on weak symbolism, or unsubstantiated narrations.<sup>815</sup> For example, the prophecy is preceded by “the caliph’s sons killing one another,”<sup>816</sup> which has not happened yet. Furthermore, Khorasan today includes northeastern Iran, northwestern Afghanistan, and southern Turkmenistan.<sup>817</sup> The *hadith* itself did not link Khorasan to Afghanistan, Iran, or Turkmenistan. It is, therefore, impossible to determine where the Al Mahdi will appear because the *hadith* does not define it. It is unacceptable to also conclude that it refers to a particular group because the Prophet did not specify the flag carrier. Therefore, theologians involved in countering extremist ideology should emphasise to their brethren the serious error of dwelling on something without definitive proof according to Islamic authentication processes.<sup>818</sup>

## Conclusion

The return of the Taliban to power and the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan have proved to be milestone events in influencing the recent ideological narratives of Islamist extremists in the region. For some avowed militant groups and individuals, the Taliban takeover and the Black Banner of Khorasan prophecy are potent blueprints underpinning their jihadist activities. The effort to counter such misinterpreted ideological narratives requires specialists who are able to promote the well-established essentials of knowledge and beliefs that are the true pillars of Islam. Such radical interpretations must be outrightly rejected when they go against mainstream Islamic thought and

rulings supported by evidence and agreed upon by a consensus of scholars.

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<sup>815</sup> Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis From Hadith Studies,” in *Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Religious Scholars*, eds, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Rohan Gunaratna (Singapore: Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association, 2021), 24-29.

<sup>816</sup> See the chapter on “The Appearance of the Mahdi,” in Muhammad Ibn Yazid Al-Qazwini,

Sunan Ibn Majah, *Matba’ah Dar Al-Ihya’ Wa Al-Qutub Al-Arabiah*, Book 36, *Hadith 4084*, 1367.

<sup>817</sup> Shauqi Abu Khalil, *Atlas Al-Hadith Al-Nabawi Min Al-Kutub Al-Sihah Al-Sittah* (Damascus: Dar Al-Fikr, 2005), 160.

<sup>818</sup> “Do not follow what you have no ‘sure’ knowledge of. Indeed, all will be called to account for ‘their’ hearing, sight, and intellect,” *The Qur’an*, 17:36 (Translated by Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran).

# EXTREME RIGHT-WING VIOLENCE IN THE WEST: IN REMISSION?

*Against the backdrop of persistent political and societal polarisation, particularly in the West, violence linked to the extreme right has declined, or at least remained static, during the past year. Since the events in Washington DC on 6 January, there were no major large-scale acts of violence linked exclusively to the extreme right compared to the previous year. However, smaller scale violence has manifested in other forms, e.g. clashes between law enforcement and COVID-19 protestors, anti-immigrant groups across Europe in particular, and occasional disrupted plots. There continues to be an ideological fluidity within some of these events, driven by an overriding anti-establishment sentiment, with the extreme right often one of a number of the ideas along the spectrum articulated through a particular incident. This was most apparent during former US President Donald Trump's failed re-election bid, which played against the backdrop of COVID-19 measures globally, and generated a confusing new set of conspiracy theories. Finally, the continuing discovery of extreme right-linked radicalisation within security forces globally, while not a new phenomenon, continues to pose a substantial risk.*

## Threat Landscape Prior to 2021

There has been a degree of constancy and, in some instances, change regarding the extreme right terror threat in the last two

years. This is both in terms of the scale and frequency of violence and the ideological inspirations behind the violence. In terms of the global picture, 2019 marked an apex of extreme right-wing violence, with the deadly Christchurch mosques attack in New Zealand marking a particularly heinous high point. In 2020, violence continued globally to less dramatic effect (one study showed only two incidents in western Europe,<sup>819</sup> though EUROPOL's data during the same period showed only one incident), in part, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions which impacted terrorist capability across the board.<sup>820</sup>

However, 2020 was also the apex of several ideological trends which played out against the backdrop of the world trying to grapple with the new reality of COVID-19 (that echoed across ideological spectrums), the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (which provided an angry counter-point for the extreme right to react to), and the highly-charged US presidential election that polarised the US society (but also further afield) along nationalistic lines, fostering a "militia-sphere" with international links. This attention seemed to push the American "militia-sphere" in particular into a series of incidents of violence and plots in the US.<sup>821</sup> This was echoed in Europe, particularly Germany, which recorded the highest levels of extreme right crime in 20 years.<sup>822</sup> It also

<sup>819</sup> Madeleine Thorstensen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Stable Trends in Unstable Times: Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe in 2020," *Center for Research on Extremism*, September 31, 2021, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2021/stable-trends-in-unstable-times-right-wing-violence.html>.

<sup>820</sup> Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, "Persistence of Right-Wing Extremism and

Terrorism in the West," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 13, no. 1 (January 2021): 118, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf>.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>822</sup> Laurenz Gehrke, "Germany Records Highest Level of Right-Wing Extremist Crime in 20 Years," *Politico*, May 4, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-records->

appeared to resonate, though to a lesser degree, in other parts of the world due to the sheer volume of noise generated by the increasingly polarised American political discourse.

## 2021 Threat Landscape

### *Decline in Terrorist Incidents*

Apart from the 6 January Capitol Hill riot in Washington, DC, that saw some 800 people, among whom an unclear number were identifiably right-wing extremists, storm the US Capitol in support of former president Donald Trump following his failure to get re-elected, large-scale acts of violence emanating exclusively from the extreme right were limited in 2021.<sup>823</sup> Arrests of individuals suspected of terrorism offences linked to right-wing extremism continued primarily in the US, Europe, and Asia-Pacific (mostly Australia

with sporadic and random cases elsewhere). Much of the violence in the last year was in the form of clashes between law enforcement officials and COVID-19 protesters against government lockdown measures and, more recently, against the implementation of vaccination mandates and “vaccine passports.”<sup>824</sup>

In Europe, ongoing police disruptions and protests continue to point to a diffused problem. There have been reports of violent groups in Germany targeting migrants<sup>825</sup> and synagogues.<sup>826</sup> Continuing disruptions in the UK’s Midlands region are also linked to extreme right-wing plotting.<sup>827</sup> A particularly disturbing disruption in France involved a 26-year-old who was arrested for making pipe bombs with uranium dust.<sup>828</sup> A rare plot in Poland saw two individuals charged for planning to attack a mosque.<sup>829</sup> A plot disrupted in Italy saw a network of 12

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highest-level-of-right-wing-extremist-crimes-in-20-years/.

<sup>823</sup> Apart from the case of Nathaniel Veltman, who rammed into a Muslim family in London, Ontario, Canada. Veltman has been discovered to be a follower of Brenton Tarrant, the right-wing extremist gunman responsible for the 2019 Christchurch mosques shootings. See Andrew Russell, Stewart Bell and Mercedes Stephenson, “EXCLUSIVE: London Attack Suspect Was Inspired by New Zealand Mosque Shooter, Sources Say,” *Global News*, November 10, 2021, <https://globalnews-ca.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/globalnews.ca/news/8361038/london-attack-suspect-inspired-new-zealand-mosque-shooter/amp/>.

<sup>824</sup> Even so, it is imperative to highlight that both the January 6 Capitol riot and the COVID-19 protests run the gamut of all sides when it comes to the ideological adherence of those involved. See Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists,” *The Atlantic*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895/>; “‘It’s Almost Like Grooming’: How Anti-Vaxxers, Conspiracy Theorists, and the Far-Right Came Together Over COVID,” *The Conversation*, September 21, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/its-almost-like-grooming-how-anti-vaxxers-conspiracy-theorists-and-the-far-right-came-together-over-covid-168383>.

<sup>825</sup> “Germany to Increase Controls as Far-Right Activists Target Polish Border,” *France 24*, October 24, 2021,

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211024-germany-to-increase-controls-as-far-right-activists-target-polish-border>.

<sup>826</sup> Oliver Towfigh Nia, “Germany Arrests 4 for Alleged Terror Attack Plot on Synagogue,” *Anadolu Agency*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/germany-arrests-4-for-alleged-terror-attack-plot-on-synagogue/2366479>.

<sup>827</sup> “Three People From Keighley Charged With Right Wing Terrorism Offences,” *ITV News*, May 14, 2021,

<https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2021-05-14/three-people-from-keighley-charged-with-right-wing-terrorism-offences>; “South Yorkshire Man Charged With Terrorism and Drugs Offences,” Counter Terrorism Policing, April 24, 2021, <https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/south-yorkshire-man-charged-with-terrorism-and-drugs-offences/>.

<sup>828</sup> Mitchell Prothero, “Neo-Nazi and KKK Fanboy Built Pipe Bombs With Uranium From eBay,” *Vice*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgxjxd/neo-nazi-and-kkk-fanboy-built-pipe-bombs-with-uranium-from-ebay>.

<sup>829</sup> “Polish Far-Right Extremists Charged Over Terror Plot on Mosque,” *Kafkadesk*, January 8, 2021, <https://kafkadesk.org/2021/01/08/polish-far-right-extremists-charged-over-terror-plot-on-mosque/>.

arrested for reportedly planning to attack a NATO base.<sup>830</sup> As disturbing as these disruptions and incidents were, there was no major extreme right-wing terror attack, and it is unclear how linked (if at all) any of these incidents were. It was also not clear from available data that there had been a surge in detentions worldwide, with the various plots disrupted seeming to be part of a broader trend than a spike.

The reasons behind this are unclear at this stage. It is likely to some degree that the heavy COVID-19 restrictions imposed across Europe have made the operating environment harder. At the same time, the push online that has taken place during this period has theoretically provided a ripe environment for ideologies to spread. It has certainly helped develop the problem of very young people being drawn towards extremist plotting, with MI5 Chief Ken McCallum reporting his service had investigated a 13-year-old who later pled guilty.<sup>831</sup> The anonymity of the online world has lowered the threshold for youth involvement. But while reporting on the very young being involved in plotting has continued, it has not translated into actual violent actions, suggesting other factors may be at play.<sup>832</sup> Finally, it may be that increased security force attention that has followed the surge in focus on the extreme right in the past few years may be yielding results. This increasing attention was highlighted in Australia, where the

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reported that almost half of its “onshore priority counter-terrorism caseload” involved “ideologically motivated violent extremists, such as racist and nationalist violent extremists.”<sup>833</sup> This was an increase from the previous year, where the agency reported that the extreme right accounted for around 40 per cent of its workload.<sup>834</sup> In the US, security officials made public pronouncements about the escalating nature of the domestic, extreme right-leaning terrorist threat and its focus by security forces.<sup>835</sup>

A further explanation might be found in the end of the Trump presidency. The administration’s rhetoric had previously allowed right-wing extremism to thrive. In this respect, Trump’s refusal to condemn the far right when called to, and seeming support for extremist groups with right-wing leanings such as the Proud Boys or conspiracy movements such as QAnon, arguably gave them a boost. This in turn resonated globally.<sup>836</sup> However, the Proud Boys and QAnon have since suffered internal fractures following the election of Joe Biden. The former group feels betrayed by Trump’s denouncement of the 6 January riot (which they claimed was incited by him). The latter is increasingly disillusioned by the “storm” that never came. This conspiracy has served as the ultimate linchpin to QAnon’s core belief that Trump will eventually bring down the shadowy

<sup>830</sup> Hannah Roberts, “Italian Neo-Nazis Were Plotting to Bomb NATO Base, Police Say,” *Politico*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italian-neo-nazis-were-plotting-to-bomb-nato-base-police-say/>.

<sup>831</sup> Dan Sabbagh, “MI5 Investigated Far-Right Terror Suspect Who Was 13 Years Old,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/jul/14/mi5-investigated-rightwing-terror-suspect-who-was-13-years-old>.

<sup>832</sup> For example, rather than actual extremist ideology-inspired terrorism, the very young could simply be playacting online lives. But further research is still required to conclusively assess the factors underpinning the involvement of the very young.

<sup>833</sup> “ASIO Annual Report 2020-21,” Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 2021, 4,

<https://www.asio.gov.au/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report%202020-21%20WEB.pdf>.

<sup>834</sup> Paul Karp, “Asio Reveals Up to 40% of Its Counter-Terrorism Cases Involve Far-Right Violent Extremism,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/sep/22/asio-reveals-up-to-40-of-its-counter-terrorism-cases-involve-far-right-violent-extremism>.

<sup>835</sup> Mark Hosenball, “White Supremacist Groups Pose Rising U.S. Threat, Garland Says,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/white-supremacist-groups-pose-rising-us-threat-garland-says-2021-05-12/>.

<sup>836</sup> “Germany Shooting: What We Know About the Hanau Attack,” *BBC News*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51571649>.

cabal,<sup>837</sup> leading to a few disillusioned QAnon supporters no longer “trust(ing) the plan.”<sup>838</sup> Trump's removal and increasing de-platforming from both mainstream media outlets and social media have reduced his reach outside his core audience, somewhat turning down the heat on the anger and polarisation he stirred.

That is not to say that the highly-charged nationalism powered by anti-immigrant sentiments and white supremacism is no longer a threat. On the contrary, according to the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research's (ICPVTR) monitoring of social media accounts of right-wing extremist channels and groups, violent rhetoric against immigrants in the Western hemisphere remains rife. A case in point is the May 2021 border crisis between Spain and Morocco, which saw some 8,000 African migrants crossing into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which share a border with Morocco.

This episode garnered widespread attention on Spanish social media, as Spaniards blame the government for the “invasion,” call for the deaths of immigrants, and cast accusations on African immigrants, particularly Moroccans, for any criminal acts by foreigners with darker skin tone reported in mainstream media. While chatter as such may be regarded as harmless white noise – habitual of the extreme right's empty threats that often dominate its online platforms and discourse – it points to an underlying seething anger of government betrayal based around xenophobic and

racist sentiments towards immigrants that provide a ripe environment for extreme-right groups to thrive. While there has been less evidence of actual attacks, the extreme right's agitational rhetoric persists.

### *Ideological Confluence*

An additional element that has exacerbated the extreme right has been its ability as an ideology to appropriate and repurpose the language of others. This includes initially antagonistic ideologies which are co-opted to fit the extreme right worldview, justify their extremist actions, and exploit anger, distrust, and alienation to converge on a mutual enemy. All of this is done to galvanise extremist behaviour and sometimes violence.

In some instances, this confluence can play out in organised actions, like during the 6 January Capitol Hill riot or in various protests against COVID-19 measures worldwide. In both cases, strands of the extreme right as well as other ideologies can be found. The anti-vaccine movement has provided fertile ground for extreme right conspiracy theories to thrive. Some segments have reacted negatively to COVID-19 restrictions, including some on the left, leading to odd fusions with left-wing countercultures.<sup>839</sup> In Australia, but also elsewhere, recent mob action in September against the trade union's decision to mandate vaccination for workers in the construction industry led to protests involving a wide gamut of far-right nationalists, anti-vaxxers, libertarians, and trade unionists to the most obscure

<sup>837</sup> Camila Domonoske, “The QAnon ‘Storm’ Never Struck. Some Supporters Are Wavering, Others Steadfast,” *National Public Radio*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/inauguration-day-live-updates/2021/01/20/958907699/the-qanon-storm-never-struck-some-supporters-are-wavering-others-steadfast>.

<sup>838</sup> QAnon adherents generally believe that there is a plan to bring down the shadowy cabal ruled by a Jewish-dominated world government and elites, and that Donald Trump himself is executing this plan. Based on ICPVTR's

monitoring of QAnon social media channels and groups, hints of disillusionment have emerged in the QAnon camp and some members are increasingly frustrated that nothing has come to fruition to rescue the people from Covid-19 restrictions.

<sup>839</sup> George Monbiot, “It's Shocking to See So Many Leftwingers Lured to the Far Right by Conspiracy Theories,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/22/leftwingers-far-right-conspiracy-theories-anti-vaxxers-power>.

conspiracy theorists.<sup>840</sup> Across Europe, COVID-19 demonstrations were often an amalgamation of different movements motivated by different ideologies. Whereas some movements merely seek increased individual autonomy on medical freedom, others are fueled by more extreme left- and right-wing elements. But it is often the right-leaning element that appears dominant in the violence. A shared sense of anti-establishmentarianism often drives such groups, with the left-right element sometimes getting lost in between.

Web 2.0 has also made it easier for the flow of Western extreme right rhetoric to other parts of the world where such a narrative typically does not have traction. While still very uncommon, Western extreme right ideologies and conspiracy theories have been seeded in parts of Asia, where selective beliefs are being repurposed to fit local contexts. In Singapore, for instance, the arrest of a 16-year-old led to the disruption of an attempted copycat attack of the Christchurch terrorist attack by Brenton Tarrant. The boy reportedly planned to attack Muslims at two local mosques on the second anniversary of the March 2019 Christchurch mosques shooting.<sup>841</sup>

Lastly, the 2020 CTTA Annual Threat Assessment had highlighted the uptick in violence by men with incel-leaning ideology since 2018 and the connection of this misogynistic subculture within the tapestry of the extreme right.<sup>842</sup> This confluence was particularly visible in the case of

Tobias Rathjen, who carried out a mass shooting in January 2020 in Hanau, Germany, against the minority community. While his motivation can be pegged as a blend of white supremacism and anti-immigrant nativism, there was clear evidence of his espousal of anti-government QAnon and incel thinking in videos and messages he published around the attack.<sup>843</sup>

The occasional violence that has emerged out of this largely benign and non-violent movement mimics the traditional terrorist modus operandi, making a case for its inclusion within terrorist studies.<sup>844</sup> In August 2021, Jake Davison went on a shooting rampage killing five people in Plymouth, UK.<sup>845</sup> While not much is known of his exact motive, there are clear hints of his incel thinking and right-wing libertarian tendencies, including his pro-Trumpism and gun-right advocacy.<sup>846</sup> However, it is also notable how this case was exceptional with few other overt incel cases reported during 2021, feeding into the overall analysis that the violent expression of the threat picture is reduced (or at least static) in 2021.

### *Conspiracies Chasing Meanings*

The extreme right has once again proven their adeptness at adjusting their narrative and conspiracy theories to fit new realities and sustain their worldview. For example, following the failure of Trump's re-election campaign, the QAnon movement's credibility among its adherents was dealt a

<sup>840</sup> Josh Roose, "It's Almost Like Grooming': How Anti-Vaxxers, Conspiracy Theorists and the Far-Right Came Together Over COVID," *ABC News*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-22/how-antivaxxers-conspiracy-theorists-far-right-melbourne-protest/100481874>.

<sup>841</sup> Koh, "Teen Detained for Planning."

<sup>842</sup> Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, "Persistence of Right-Wing Extremism," 121.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid.

<sup>844</sup> Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, "Incels and Terrorism: Sexual Deprivation as Security Threat," *RSIS Commentary*, October 6, 2020,

<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CO20176.pdf>.

<sup>845</sup> Matthew Weaver and Steven Morris, "Plymouth Gunman: A Hate-Filled Misogynist and 'Incel'," *The Guardian*, August 13, 2021, <https://amp.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/13/plymouth-shooting-suspect-what-we-know-jake-davison>.

<sup>846</sup> "Plymouth Shooting Suspect Jake Davison Who Killed Five Was A 'Loner' and Had Gun Permit," *Agence France-Presse*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3144873/plymouth-shooting-6-dead-including-gunman-who-opened-fire>.



blow, as the prediction that Trump would prevail and continue to bring the “cabal” down was quashed. Instead, new theories emerged to explain Trump’s defeat, claiming that “[s]ometimes you must walk through the darkness before you see the light.”<sup>847</sup> In a bid to sustain support and boost morale, QAnon members online have been observed to continue to re-share prior mysterious and interpretative “drops” published by Q.<sup>848</sup> QAnon members treat the “drops” like prophetic gospels to explain obscure new happenings that tie them to the QAnon’s overarching belief that the plan is still in place and that the “Storm” and “Day of Reckoning” when the cabal will be defeated will eventually arrive.

Likewise, COVID-19 conspiracy theories promulgated by the extreme right have also changed, as a shift in strategy was warranted when governments moved from lockdown restrictions to implementing vaccination requirements affecting the day-to-day lives of the people. At the start of the pandemic, conspiracies were focused on peddling the virus as either fake, a biological weapon, or a form of population control through measures including nationwide lockdowns. By the second half of 2021, there was a proliferation of anti-vaccination conspiracies taking centre stage. Regardless of the shift, what was retained is a deep strain of anti-Semitism that advances the extreme right agenda that a Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG)

is colluding with Western governments for world domination.<sup>849</sup>

Disturbingly, however, cases have demonstrated deep roots behind them, with the case of anti-vaxx conspiracy theorist and soldier Jurgen Conings revealed to be the tip of a larger extreme right conspiracy in Belgium. His case also illustrated the danger from the extreme right in infiltrating western security forces. There was a considerable security force (current or former) present during the 6 January Capitol riot, with senior figures of the Proud Boys also members of security forces.<sup>850</sup> The recent sentencing of two members of the neo-Nazi white nationalist group, the Base, also revealed the involvement of former military servicemen.<sup>851</sup> The insider threat picture since 2020 from former (or serving) military personnel amongst the extreme right has not changed.<sup>852</sup>

In Europe, the issue remains a major problem, especially in Germany, which saw the disbandment of an elite wing of the armed forces in 2020 due to its extreme right connections. Last year, a battalion of the military’s honour guard was suspended for a similar association.<sup>853</sup> Whilst not exactly the same, a similar degree of tension between civilians and soldiers was apparent in France, where open letters from allegedly semi-retired and active French soldiers warned of a civil war due to the government’s “concession” to Islamism.<sup>854</sup> Recently, a former local

<sup>847</sup> Laurence Arnold and Daniel Zuidijk, “What’s Become of QAnon Since Trump’s Defeat?” *Bloomberg*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-06-14/what-s-become-of-qanon-since-trump-s-defeat-quicktake>.

<sup>848</sup> “Intelligence Drops,” <https://qalerts.app/>.

<sup>849</sup> “ZOG,” Anti-Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/zog>.

<sup>850</sup> Sarah Sidner and Marshall Cohen, “Disproportionate Number of Current and Former Military Personnel Arrested in Capitol Attack,” *CNN Analysis Shows*, *CNN*, February 4, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/31/us/capitol-riot-arrests-active-military-veterans-soh/index.html>.

<sup>851</sup> “Two US Neo-Nazis From ‘The Base’ Jailed For Terrorist Plot,” *BBC News*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59085935>.

<sup>852</sup> Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, “Persistence of Right-Wing Extremism,” 124-125.

<sup>853</sup> “Germany Suspends Soldiers in Military Guard Over Far-Right Allegations,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-suspends-soldiers-in-military-guard-over-far-right-allegations/a-59451421>.

<sup>854</sup> “French Soldiers Warn of Civil War in New Letter,” *BBC News*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57055154>.

politician and far-right conspiracy theorist in France was also charged, amongst other terrorist acts, for plotting a coup against the government and recruiting soldiers to facilitate the act.<sup>855</sup> Such open rebellion highlights a significant homegrown problem that Western nations have faced over the last decade following the migrant crisis in Europe.

## Outlook

As nations emerge from COVID-19 lockdowns and establish a new normal, ongoing COVID-19 mandates are likely to provide more ammunition to the extreme right and its anti-establishment narratives. The underlying and omnipresent issues of racism and nativism that have provided the extreme right with great sustenance have calmed down but not gone away. As Western nations continue to grapple with the political polarisation of sensitive issues such as immigration, the “us versus them” partisanship will continue to wedge an ever-wider gap between the extremes and unravel already fragile social fabrics. Those that fall in between will feel the exponential push and pull force from either side, aided by Web 2.0 as a content-sharing vehicle. Complicating the extreme right threat picture further will be how effective the governments are in stemming the influence of extreme right ideology in youth and the security forces, in particular. Governments in the West are increasingly putting their security forces under the microscope, making arrests and disbanding segments tainted by right-wing extremism. A proactive approach of weeding out extremists during the recruitment process,<sup>856</sup> however, should also be thrown into the mix.

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<sup>855</sup> “Rémy Daillet: Conspiracist Charged Over Alleged French Coup Plot,” *BBC News*, October

28, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59075902>.

<sup>856</sup> “ASIO Annual Report 2020-21,” 38.

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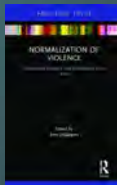
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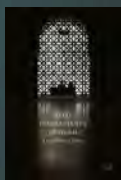
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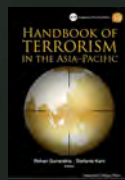
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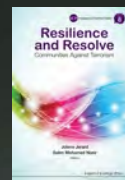
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