

ICPVTR 20th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL EDITION

Establishment and Evolution of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research

Rohan Gunaratna

Twenty Years of ICPVTR at RSIS: A Continually Evolving – and *Still* Relevant – Research Agenda

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Abdul Basit and Alif Satria



ICPVTR's 20th Anniversary Special Edition

2024 marks twenty years since the creation of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism (ICPVTR), which started as a research programme and subsequently morphed into a specialist centre. Consistent with this milestone, the current issue has examined four broad but interrelated terrorism issues: the role of think-tanks in fostering an awareness about terrorist threats, contemporary themes for future terrorism research, challenges of data gathering as well as the evolution of the threat landscape in South and Southeast Asia. As a leading counterterrorism think-tank in the region, ICPVTR has endeavoured to provide high-quality policy research and will continue diligently in this task in future as well.

In an era of great power competition, where terrorism and counterterrorism appear to have been deprioritised by certain authorities, the threat has become more diverse and complex. Despite being weakened religiously motivated terrorism persists, and the threat from violent ethno-nationalist wave, in the form of several far-right groups, is gaining ground. The emergence of new technologies, proliferation of violence in conflict areas, weaponisation of everyday life and the declining resources made available to address transnational jihadist threats by many states, leave enough gaps for terrorist groups to endure. The diffused and de-territorialised nature of terrorism, i.e., lacking a clear centre of gravity, makes it a potent threat.

Going forward, the international community will have to leverage the pre-existing counterterrorism partnership networks to monitor the threat and switch from a international community-led, partner-enabled strategy to a partner-led, international community-enabled counterterrorism framework. Given the shrinking ability of many states to meaningfully counter the diffused terrorism threat, it is crucial to invest in robust non-kinetic measures and expand counterterrorism partnerships to include social media companies, civil society organisations and the think-tank fraternity.

Against this backdrop, this issue has shone light on four distinct areas of terrorism, mentioned above, with a futuristic perspective to guide policy-makers and terrorism researchers about the threat's evolution. The first article by **Rohan Gunaratna** discusses the establishment of ICPVTR, before tracing how the Centre has evolved over the two decades since. Highlighting key milestones, initiatives and projects in the Centre's 20-year long history, the author, in his capacity as the founding head, explains how ICPVTR has remained dynamic in responding to an ever-shifting extremism landscape and building the necessary counter terrorism

capacities.

Next, another former ICPVTR head **Kumar Ramakrishna** outlines the trends and patterns in region-specific and global terrorism which have shaped ICPVTR's research agenda over the past 20 years. The author highlights in particular the shift towards lone-actor terrorism, as well as the evolving role of women and youth in violent extremism. Other increasingly visible themes examined include the proliferation of right-wing extremism, the phenomenon of so-called salad bar ideology and the counter terrorism challenges posed by emerging technologies, among others.

The third article by **Kenneth Yeo** and **Benjamin Mok** explores how terrorism research has evolved since the turn of the millennium in response to innovations in research methods, data gathering techniques, and emerging technologies. Beginning with a discussion on the issue of data scarcity, the authors then pivot to consider how nascent data-mining and data analysis techniques as well as emerging technologies such as generative Artificial Intelligence, have democratised access to information and enabled a broader range of perspectives in terrorism research.

Finally, **Abdul Basit** and **Alif Satria** examine the evolution of terrorism in South and Southeast Asia since the early 2000s, through the lens of major events such as the 9/11 attacks, the 2012 Syrian conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Taliban takeover and, more recently, the 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict. In doing so, the authors demonstrate how terrorism has persisted and diversified over the past 20 years, and discuss how the co-existence of religious and far right ethnonationalist terrorism is driving the present fifth wave of terrorism.

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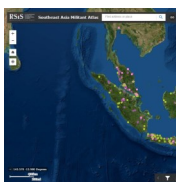
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SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



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>

Establishment and Evolution of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research

Dr Rohan Gunaratna

This article explores the impetus behind the founding of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) and traces the Centre's evolution over the past two decades through the phases of formation, development and consolidation.

Introduction

After Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s attacks on America's iconic landmarks on 9/11, the world was confounded with a new form of threat for which past counter terrorism responses were inadequate. Governments worldwide sought to confront a new wave of jihadist-linked mass fatality and mass casualty terrorist attacks.

Developing terrorism research, education and outreach capabilities in Singapore was identified as necessary to better understand and respond to the threat posed by transnational Islamist terrorism. Initiated as the Programme on Political Violence and Terrorism Research, a specialist centre was incubated within the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on July 15, 2002.

Singapore's then Minister for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng subsequently inaugurated the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) on February 20, 2004. On January 1, 2007, when IDSS evolved into an autonomous graduate school and policy-oriented think tank, ICPVTR became a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU.

Next, when the threat evolved with the proclamation of the Islamic State (IS) from June 29, 2014, the Centre's mission shifted to focus on monitoring both AQ- and IS-linked threat groups, networks, cells and personalities operating in the physical and virtual domains. In tandem, training and outreach programmes were developed, in part to better inform preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) strategies by researchers, policymakers and community stakeholders.

This article briefly examines the threat environment over the past two decades, ICPVTR's programmes in Singapore and overseas, and the Centre's impact and challenges throughout its various phases of evolution.

The Context

The origins of ICPVTR can be traced to events following the 9/11 terror attacks. Then, the world faced an unprecedented threat from Islamist terrorism. In parallel with AQ's attacks on some of America's iconic landmarks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, its operational leader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) had also planned to strike Western targets in East Asia, including in Singapore.¹

The global city-state of Singapore was thus not immune to this cascading threat. In late 2001, it was revealed that a joint AQ-Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operation, involving a network of Arab and Singaporean nationals, had planned to strike the United States (US), British, Australian and Israeli diplomatic missions in Singapore, as well as maritime and other targets in the country.² AQ had also trained a number of Southeast Asian militants, including some Singaporeans, in Pakistan's

tribal areas and in Afghanistan.³

After the Singapore plot and threat network were dismantled by the authorities, AQ and its regional partner JI remained revengeful. The new threat environment underscored the need for Singapore and countries in the region to rapidly build research capabilities to understand and counter the threats posed by extremism and its vicious by-product, terrorism. The AQ-funded JI subsequently mounted a series of devastating suicide bomb attacks in Bali on October 12, 2002, killing 202 people of over 20 nationalities, including 88 Australians and 23 Britons. These events, coupled with other mass casualty attacks in global cities like Madrid, London and elsewhere over the next few years, would serve to emphasise the importance of building new capacities.

The Genesis

Following the decision to build a specialist research centre, I was invited to join IDSS, initially to establish a database of extremist groups and personalities, teach on counter terrorism and advise relevant policymakers. When ICPVTR evolved into a specialist centre in 2004, the Centre's key focus was AQ, jihadist terrorism more broadly, and the geographical regions most associated with terrorist violence. The various databases developed by ICPVTR helped to inform regional decision-makers of the conditions, motivations and impacts of various threat actors, and to develop the appropriate countermeasures.

An early signature project was the Global Pathfinder (GP), a database and information repository that contained comprehensive profiles on terrorist groups, personalities and incidents.⁴ Another database focused on extremist publications of security interest. In its various iterations, this latter repository contained over 400 jihadist websites and extremist social media accounts. As the threat evolved, capabilities were also built to monitor online platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Formative Phase

At its inception, ICPVTR's long-term mission was to develop human resource capabilities through rigorous education, training, mentoring and supervision. Some key principles guided this vision. To wit, the Centre was to conduct research, training and outreach aimed at mitigating the threat posed by politically motivated violence. Additionally, it sought to strike a balance between being academically rigorous and policy relevant.

In its formative phase, the Centre spent much time on countering radical Islamist ideology. Even before the formation of ICPVTR, a counter ideology unit had already been established in September 2003, to rebut the extremist narratives that were gathering momentum. The counter ideology desk produced an easy-to-read Q&A booklet on jihad in 2007 for mass circulation,⁵ which was well received.

From the outset, the Centre's approach was to invest in building professional expertise in two sub-domains – counter terrorism and counter extremism. One example of this was training members of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a voluntary grouping of clerics involved in counselling terrorism detainees in Singapore. Their religious training was complemented by ICPVTR's extremism research and the strategic studies offered by RSIS.

In time, ICPVTR's focus increasingly turned overseas, apart from its domestic and regional research. To strengthen and expand its research output and reach, a culturally and linguistically diverse pool of analysts were recruited over the years from Southeast Asia, South Asia, Europe and Central Asia.

In addition to establishing itself as a leading regional hub for counter terrorism research, the Centre also began working with several governments and institutions to develop capacity-building programmes.⁶ Mainly, this involved investing in education and training for staff, including those in law enforcement, the military and intelligence. The Centre also supported other research centres

in countries dealing with counter terrorism and conflict issues, such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

Moreover, South Asia, particularly Pakistan and Afghanistan, had in the years following 9/11 witnessed a surge in terrorism as the region became a breeding ground for extremist ideologies and militant groups. There was as a result an urgent need for the establishment of robust research and operational capacities focused on understanding the root causes of extremism and regional dynamics, as well as effective counter terrorism strategies contextualised for the region. Various funding channels enabled ICPVTR to build a capacity programme in Afghanistan, a hotspot for global terrorist activities.

For instance, ICPVTR lent its expertise to the creation of the Afghan research outfit, the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS), in 2006, and to the development of a training programme on capacity development and conflict management. The founder of CAPS, Hekmat Karzai, had previously enrolled in the Master of Science in Strategic Studies programme at RSIS, and had also served a stint as Research Fellow with the Centre. Notwithstanding the operational challenges it faces with the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 2021, CAPS continues to offer insights on developments in the country and the region.

Developmental Phase

By 2007, ICPVTR had grown to become one of the largest counter terrorism research and education centres in the world.⁷ The centre had, figuratively speaking, developed a head, a heart and limbs. While the head of the centre was its information repository to support efforts to counter the more immediate operational threat of violence and terrorism, its heart reflected the far-reaching spirit of the staff. As no one is born a terrorist, the staff's community engagement initiatives and rehabilitation training were aimed at building government and partner capacity to wean away support from extremism and exclusivism.

Over the next decade, a number of training programmes, workshops and conferences⁸ were conceptualised and realised with various local and international partners to build national, regional and global capacities in counter terrorism. Functional capabilities were also developed in rehabilitation and community resilience, countering terrorist financing and money laundering, informatics and media, education, and legislative and developmental efforts.

In August 2007, ICPVTR launched the Counter Terrorism Leadership Programme (CTLP). This unique attachment programme allowed terrorism officials to work with and receive training and education from the Centre, while simultaneously sharing their own professional experience and domain knowledge with ICPVTR.

In 2008, ICPVTR initiated the annual Terrorism Analyst Training Course (TATC) – which it still conducts today – for security and private sector personnel from countries in the Asia-Pacific region. TATC brings together expert speakers to share their insights and observations on country-specific threat trends and topics such as cyber terrorism, terrorism financing, maritime terrorism and the crime-terror nexus, among others. The annual event remains the Centre's leading capacity-building and networking platform for counter terrorism analysts, researchers and law enforcement officials.⁹

As part of the Centre's community engagement and outreach efforts to educational institutions and grassroots organisations in Singapore, the Centre has engaged students, educators and grassroots personnel on issues related to terrorism and counter terrorism.¹⁰ ICPVTR has also conducted – and continues to till this day – several training programmes for the Home Team Academy (HTA) and its specialist training centres.¹¹ HTA provides centralised training to the Home Affairs Ministry, which is responsible for the security of Singapore.¹² Similar workshops have also been held for counter terrorism officers from the police, immigration, customs, prisons, narcotics and intelligence services.¹³

Notable national security experts and individuals who have been associated with the Centre through its various activities over the years include Major General Tito Karnavian, the Minister of Home Affairs of Indonesia who previously served, *inter alia*, as Chief of Police, Chief of the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and Chief of the Special Detachment 88 (D88) at different points of his career,¹⁴ as well as Maria Ressa, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize 2021, who was at one point a Senior Fellow at RSIS.¹⁵

Consolidation Phase

The persistence of several threat networks, including JI, regionally in Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines, consolidated ICPVTR's research and capacity-building efforts, which aimed to provide policy-relevant insights to benefit the region's research and security agencies working on counter terrorism.

At the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC) in Semarang, a joint initiative of the Australian Federal Police and the Indonesian National Police, ICPVTR assisted in the training of regional law enforcement and intelligence personnel. This included efforts to develop the first counter terrorism intelligence course for a regional intelligence outfit. ICPVTR also advanced its contributions to policymaking by providing assessments and conducting briefings for a number of government leaders and officials.

When the IS threat surged with the five-month Marawi Siege in 2017, US and Australian experts worked with ICPVTR to build the ASEAN "Our Eyes" Initiative (AOEI), a platform to encourage information exchange and cooperation among regional member states in the fight against radicalisation, extremism and terrorism.¹⁶ Launched in Bali on January 25, 2018, the six defence ministers of Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore signed the Joint Statement on AOEI on the sidelines of the annual ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM).¹⁷ In tandem with sub-regional collaborative efforts such as the Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP) and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) as well as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), the AOEI helped build the cooperation necessary to disrupt the movements of foreign terrorist fighters in the region.

On the research front, ICPVTR's publications record showcased its global impact and academic legacy. For many years, leading academic journals such as *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, had largely published the writings of notable scholars on the subjects of political violence and terrorism. As a centre based within the region, ICPVTR's publications and research offered an additional and useful Asian perspective to the existing scholarship on such issues.

ICPVTR also launched a new publication titled *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* (CTTA) in September 2009, as a platform for researchers and analysts to offer their insights and foresights on trends and other key issues emerging in their research areas. The CTTA has since grown to become one of the leading free publications in the region with a readership in the thousands.

Conclusion

The Centre emerged at a time when there was no other counter terrorism research and education entity in the region to conduct research in the post-9/11 world. As the terror threat has ebbed and flowed over the past two decades, ICPVTR has arguably played a significant role in serving Singapore, the region and the world, and has provided the specialist resources and assistance needed to enhance counter terrorism capacities, especially in Southeast Asia.

In the foreseeable future, the terrorist threat will remain high due to three reasons. First, the possible nexus between extremist entities and the politicisation of religion in the region. Second, the proliferation of online extremist and terrorist websites that aim to politicise, radicalise and mobilise. Lastly, the growing geopolitical fragmentation globally that will impact cooperation and collaboration in the fight against terrorism. ICPVTR will continue to play a role in monitoring,

assessing and neutralising potential threats as part of the larger security ecosystem.

About the Author

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² Elaine Lee, "Six Things You Should Know About ISD's Operation Against JI in Singapore," *Ministry of Home Affairs*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/home-team-news/story/detail/six-things-you-should-know-about-isd-s-operation-against-ji-in-singapore/>; Ministry of Home Affairs, *The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003), https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/default-document-library/ji-white-paper_english0eb936fc72de4ab1a0da64c798905535.pdf.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The integrated GP database contained field reports and materials collected from conflict zones, such as training videos and original documents recovered from AQ training camps in Afghanistan.

⁵ Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mohamed Bin Ali, *Questions & Answers on Jihad* (Singapore: MUIS, 2007), <https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/booklet-jihad-english.pdf>.

⁶ International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), *Report on a Workshop Organised by the FATA Secretariat Capacity Building Project* (Singapore: RSIS, 2010), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Report-1st-Strategic-Workshop-on-Rehabilitation-and-De-Radicalization-of-Militants-and-Extremist.pdf>.

⁷ Reflecting on ICPVTR's achievements, the 2007 RSIS Annual Review observed: "With 31 staff from nine countries, it has truly become an international centre. Almost half its staff are Muslims and, for the first time since the inception of the centre, foreigners outnumber Singaporeans, making up 58% of total staff strength." See S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), *A Review of 2007* (Singapore: RSIS, 2008), p. 32, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdf/RSIS%20Annual%20Review%202007.pdf>.

⁸ To build capacity, the Centre, for example, sent staff to the Philippines, Indonesia, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya and Saudi Arabia to understand rehabilitation efforts as well as assist in rehabilitation training in these countries.

⁹ "Terrorism Analyst Training Course 2023," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), July 24, 2023, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-event-article/rsis/terrorism-analyst-training-course-2023/>.

¹⁰ International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), *A Decade of Counter-Terrorism Research and Education: 2002-2012* (Singapore: RSIS, 2012), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/A-Decade-of-Counter-Terrorism-Research-and-Education.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. With its deep understanding of threat networks in Asia, ICPVTR has also been invited to partner with the UK, the US, Australia and Japan in running training courses for their law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

¹⁴ Tito's doctoral thesis, *Explaining Islamist Insurgencies: The Case of al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah and the Radicalisation of the Poso Conflict, 2000-2007*, was supervised by RSIS and published by Imperial College Press in September 2014.

¹⁵ Ressa was Author-in-Residence at ICPVTR while writing *From Bin Laden to Facebook*, published in 2013. She is currently the CEO and Executive Editor of the social news network *Rappler*.

¹⁶ Rohan Gunaratna, "ASEAN's Greatest Counter-Terrorism Challenge: The Shift from 'Need to Know' to Smart to Share," in *Combating Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Asia and Europe from Cooperation to Collaboration* (Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd and ICPVTR, 2018), pp. 111-128, https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/288192/Terrorism_Gunaratna.pdf/20fb5191-5289-d16e-a6c1-879a0442fbe4.

¹⁷ "Joint Statement by the ASEAN Defence Ministers on Countering Terrorism in ASEAN," ASEAN, February 8, 2018, <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/joint-statement-by-the-asean-defence-ministers-on-countering-terrorism-in-asean/>.

Twenty Years of ICPVTR at RSIS: A Continually Evolving – and *Still* Relevant – Research Agenda

Kumar Ramakrishna

This article explores the threat trends and patterns which have shaped and defined ICPVTR's research agenda over the past two decades, including the increasing role of women and youth in terrorism, the emergence of so-called salad bar ideologies, and the interplay between emerging technologies and violent extremism, among others.

Introduction

The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) was stood up in 2004, at the very time that transnational terror networks motivated by violent Islamist ideology were wreaking havoc in Southeast Asia. This was exemplified by the October 12, 2002 bombings of the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar in the Indonesian tourist island of Bali, an attack perpetrated by the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist network that killed 202 civilians. What was especially material for Singapore in particular was that the Bali bombings were a "Plan B". A previous joint AQ-JI plan to attack Western diplomatic missions and commercial interests as well as local government targets in Singapore, had been thwarted in December 2001.

The JI arrests in Singapore sent shock waves across the city-state, as evidence was unearthed that linked JI to the horrific AQ attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., just a few months earlier on September 11, 2001.¹ JI, set up in January 1993 by AQ-influenced followers of the older Darul Islam armed separatist movement in Indonesia, had established cells in neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore by the 1990s, in a quest to establish a modern Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara, or Southeast Asian caliphate, spanning southern Thailand to Australia, via armed jihad.² What was striking about the transnational terrorism threat at the start of the 2000s was that both AQ³ and JI – before they were each subjected to massive counter terrorist pressure – were at the time relatively well-structured, hierarchical transnational terror networks.⁴

From the Organised Threat Network to the Self-Radicalised "Bunch of Guys"

It could be said that while the organised threat network that the likes of JI and AQ represented grabbed the attention of counter terrorism analysts in and outside government in the early 2000s, by the middle of the decade, the combination of the impact of global counter terrorist operations as mentioned and in particular the rise of social media, had added a degree of complexity to the evolving threat picture. Violent Islamist extremist ideology transcended geographical barriers, becoming more easily disseminated worldwide through a combination of increasingly cheap smartphones and affordable internet broadband access. This led by the late 2000s to an animated and much-followed debate between two leading terrorism scholars.

Hoffman and Sageman argued over whether the centre of gravity of the global jihadist threat had metastasised from a centralised structure with AQ Central still calling the shots, or whether the increasing importance of internet-powered ideological dissemination had given rise to a "leaderless jihad"⁵ of semi-autonomous Islamist terror cells – Sageman's "bunch of guys" – carrying out attacks on their own worldwide.⁶ In the leaderless jihad paradigm, such cells shared the same ideology as AQ Central – but acted more or less independently. In any case, this trend towards decentralisation of the transnational terror threat received a further boost by the mid-2010s with the rise of the highly virulent AQ offshoot, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS).⁷ While IS, like AQ, had a core organisation, it made full use of rapidly developing social media platforms such as Facebook,

Twitter, YouTube and other popular ones to spread propaganda, fostering the worldwide self-radicalisation of vulnerable, especially young, individuals.⁸ This trend in turn compelled think tanks and security agencies to collaborate more closely with social media firms and religious/community leaders to better understand and respond to the increasingly obvious emergence of low-tech terrorism potentially perpetrated by so-called self-radicalised lone actors.⁹

The Increasing Salience of Youth Radicalisation

What appeared particularly salient by the 2010s was the importance of youth as targets for recruitment as self-radicalised lone actors. Terrorism researchers Berger and Stern in their book *ISIS: The State of Terror* (2015) affirmed that IS “actively recruits children” to engage in “combat, including suicide missions”.¹⁰ In Singapore, from 2015 onwards, tracking by local security agencies showed that self-radicalised individuals were the most significant terrorist threat in Singapore, with youth radicalisation in particular becoming more of a concern. Such a trend was reinforced by near-ubiquitous online IS propaganda that promoted the notion of low-tech terrorism, encouraging self-radicalised lone actors to use everyday objects such as knives to carry out terror attacks.¹¹ As a consequence, the counter terrorism research agenda in Singapore and the region began to take account of the factors that fostered youth susceptibility to violent radicalisation.

Hence, research has taken on an increasingly multi-disciplinary focus, with the stock aim of seeking to find better strategies for reducing youth psychological vulnerability to violent extremist appeals. A significant plank of such research has highlighted the importance of policy measures to foster stable families. Mental health professionals have warned about emotional deprivation in dysfunctional homes stunting the psychological maturing of young people. A related risk is that in their search for role models and “father figures” to fill their emotional void, they are left vulnerable to the lure of charismatic foreign extremist preachers. Research has also pointed out the importance of providing access for such youth, where relevant, to authoritative religious education promoting inclusivity rather than exclusivism, as well as facilitating their participation in peer networks fostering not just digital literacy, but healthy norms of masculinity.¹²

The Role of Women

At the same time, by the late 2010s – following apparent rethinking by IS ideologues in particular concerning the permissibility of women engaging in combat – an increasingly noticeable effect on evolving terror trends was observed: violent Islamist extremism was no longer an utterly male-dominated enterprise. Previously, as Winter has observed, jihadis “have coalesced around the view that women should not engage in combat, with exceptions under extenuating circumstances”; and that such a posture was “derived from a doctrine dating back to the early years of Islam, something that has been revisited and revised by Islamic and Islamist scholars many times in the years since”.¹³ Even IS in its early years argued that the “fundamental role” of “female Muslims” was to be “wives, child-bearers and homemakers”.¹⁴ However, possibly as a response to battlefield reverses and “territorial collapse”, by 2018, IS propaganda “had lifted the moratorium on female combatants”, asserting an “obligation on women to engage in jihad against the enemies”.¹⁵

Hence, the counter terrorism research agenda has further broadened to explore gender motivations and violent radicalisation. One key question in this respect is whether women and men are motivated differently when it comes to undertaking violent jihad. Some analysts argue that many women who become suicide bombers for IS have not merely experienced social discrimination, but also feel isolated and unwanted by a male-dominated, conservative patriarchal society.¹⁶ Personal crises, moreover, such as the death of close relatives, create the psychological preconditions for female radicalisation.¹⁷ Yet, other analysts have pointed to female radicalisation being encouraged as a result of the sense of empowerment created by the jihadist leadership’s acknowledgement of women’s roles in the caliphate.¹⁸ Going forward, it seems that the importance of women and youth in violent extremism is a research topic that would require careful analysis.

New Trends in Right-Wing Extremism

While the threat of violent Islamist extremism has occupied policy attention globally and certainly in Southeast Asia in the nearly two decades since the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States (US), the January 6, 2021 assault on the US Congress by a mob supporting controversial former US president Donald Trump, appeared symbolic of a wider, emergent trend in political- and religious-inspired violence across the world: extreme right movements, at times fomenting hate crimes, mob violence and even terrorism. In this connection, three types of extreme right movements have increasingly appeared to be of particular research interest: white supremacist, Buddhist and Hindu extremism. According to influential London-based think tank the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the extreme right comprises 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 represents the “political manifestation of the extreme right”.¹⁹

The key point for research purposes is that due to the process of mainstreaming, non-violent far right political figures and parties do appear ideologically related, albeit distantly, to the relatively more violence-prone extreme right. For example, the white supremacist conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement” – which posits a “white genocide” is underway in Western nations, perpetrated by non-white European migrants and minority out-groups like Jews, Hispanics and Muslims – is a driver of violent extreme right attacks such as the New Zealand mosque shootings in 2019.²⁰ However, such ideas have been increasingly mainstreamed into political discourse, with far right political parties in Europe, for instance, portraying themselves as the “defenders of European values, culture, and civilisation”, while slogans such as “Europe for Europeans” have been increasingly prevalent.²¹

Similarly, Buddhist extreme right figures and mass organisations that have been implicated in anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka have influenced far right-oriented political parties in those countries.²² A similar nexus can be seen in India, where the Hindu far right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has remained very much in sync with the broader extreme right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) social movement, characterised as “the holding company of Hindu supremacism”, or “Hindutva” ideology.²³ Going forward, a potentially important and rich research agenda for think tanks and academia is further teasing out how extreme right ideas once considered fringe are becoming increasingly mainstreamed into general political discourse globally. This seems especially pertinent given the electoral success, for example, of far right political parties in Europe in recent years.²⁴

Another potentially significant trend worth watching research-wise is the phenomenon of so-called mixed, unstable or unclear (MUU) ideology, where the ideological narrative of particular terrorists comes across as hard to categorise, as it seems to draw haphazardly upon elements from both Islamist and white supremacist extreme right narratives, for instance. That this cannot be ignored is attested to by the fact that in 2021 and 2022, the majority of referrals to the United Kingdom (UK) authorities were classified as MUU.

Similarly, in the US in 2020, the FBI Director warned the Senate Homeland Security Committee of the rise of what he termed a “salad bar of ideology”.²⁵ One suggestion is that social media has “facilitated the ease with which extremists can browse for an ideology which aligns with their underlying needs”.²⁶ In a sense, one should note that ideological fusion is not a new phenomenon. For instance, the Sri Lankan Buddhist extreme right monk Galagodaatte Gnanasara asserted in 2019 that his “ideology” was influenced by “Hindu right-wing group Shiv Sena, the British National Party, and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen – all of whom have made incendiary remarks on Islam and Muslims”.²⁷ In any case, this area of ideological cross-fertilisation deserves further research.

The Evolving Social Media Landscape and Violent Extremism

Without doubt, the emergence of social media by the mid-2000s, as alluded to earlier, has had a transformative impact on the violent extremism landscape globally and in Southeast Asia. For instance, since its emergence in mid-2014, IS has long promoted the concept of “cyber jihad”²⁸ and its online activists have readily embraced the increasingly “decentralised nature” of “pro-IS

online propaganda and community activities emerging within the expanding digital landscape”.²⁹ In recent years, social media firms have responded to the exploitation of their platforms by the likes of IS and its myriad affiliates. However, the target remains a moving one. For instance, while the volume of Islamist extremist material on Telegram has declined, it is still accessible online through the “creation of new private channels backed up by bot automation”.³⁰ Mainstream social media platforms run by Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok also remain “susceptible to infiltration” by jihadist influencers, despite efforts to purge such extremist material.³¹ Meanwhile, Islamist extremist communities maintain a “vibrant online ecosystem” ranging across several “small, less-regulated platforms” such as Hoop Messenger, TamTam, Rocket.Chat and Element, all characterised by “minimal content moderation”.³²

Social media has also been fully exploited by the extreme right. For instance, in recent times the white supremacist extreme right “online landscape” has seen the “continued traction of militant accelerationist platforms” like Terrorgram, a “loose network of white supremacist Telegram channels and accounts” associated with the white supremacist threat groups Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and The Base.³³ Terrorgram promoted “white supremacist and accelerationist ideologies, offering detailed instructions on how to carry out attacks”.³⁴ Online extreme right “communities propagation of conspiratorial and disinformation narratives” were also increasingly “more prominent on mainstream social media platforms, occasionally leading to violence”.³⁵ Going forward, it seems clear that the counter extremism research agenda will need to keep track of the rapid evolution of the social media space and the impact on the violent extremism landscape.

The Subtle Threat of Non-Violent Islamist Extremism

In recent years, analysts have noted a subtle blurring of lines between putatively constitutional, non-violent Islamist political parties/civil society groups and violent Islamist actors. For instance, the Bareilvi “radical group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is entrenched in Pakistan’s Bareilvi community, which is 60 percent of the population”.³⁶ On paper, the TLP “operates in the country’s mainstream politics, participates in elections” and formally “eschews violence”.³⁷ However, the TLP’s mainstream political participation provides “a semblance of legitimacy to its incendiary ideological rhetoric” – which has “undermined efforts to foster moderation, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity and harmony in Pakistan”.³⁸ This has prompted some observers to warn that over the longer term, the putatively non-violent TLP will arguably be “more dangerous” than violent Islamist threat groups.³⁹ In Bangladesh, a similar ideological and institutional porosity between certain Islamist parties and more violent groups was noted in 2023: for instance, elements of the violent Islamist threat group HuJI-B tried to “infiltrate politics by merging with Hefazat-e-Islam, an unregistered but influential Islamist group among Muslim students and teachers in local madrassas”.⁴⁰

Within Southeast Asia, at the current time, perhaps the most concerning example of the blurring of lines between violent threat groups and ostensibly non-violent, constitutional actors has been represented by the ever-evolving JI in Indonesia. In November 2021, Farid Ahmad Okbah, a preacher and chairman of the little-known Indonesian People’s Dakwah Party (Partai Dakwah Rakyat Indonesia/PDRI), Ahmad Zain An-Najah, a member of the *Fatwa* Commission of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), the nation’s top Islamic clerical body, and Anung al-Hamat, a university lecturer, were arrested. Investigations found that while Ahmad Zain was also a board member of a JI-linked charitable foundation, and Anung headed another foundation providing aid to arrested JI members, Farid was not just the PDRI chairman, but also a member of JI’s consultative council. These arrests suggested that JI seemed to be evolving into a truly hybrid model, adding an incipient political front to its active *dakwah* and currently latent armed jihad fronts. Importantly, JI members who infiltrate political parties like PDRI exercise the *tandzim sirri* principle – that is, their actual JI links are concealed. Hence, non-JI PDRI members were likely not even aware of the JI presence within their ranks.⁴¹

An Indonesian counter terrorism official moreover admitted in November 2021 that it was very possible that JI has “also infiltrated other religious organisations, even sports organisations and bike clubs”, and that since 2010, more than 30 JI-linked civil servants, police officers and military officials had been detained. All of them were reportedly “adept at concealing their true identity”.⁴² By some estimates, at

least 19 civil servants, eight police officers and five military officials were arrested between 2010 and May 2022 for their JI links.⁴³ In sum, JI – while generally keeping its violent potential in reserve – appears to be strategically adopting a more cost-effective “long-term strategy”, with the aim to subtly and gradually “change the Indonesian democratic system into a *shariah*-based one, and influence the policies of the respective government agencies”.⁴⁴ Looking ahead, therefore, the subtle but no less important threat of non-violent Islamist extremism – in the form of the blurring of lines between violent threat actors and ostensibly non-violent, peaceful and constitutional entities – bears close watching.

Emerging Technologies and the Evolving Violent Extremism Threat

Finally, it is clear that rapidly developing technologies remain a concern in the counter terrorism space. AI-generated deepfake videoclips on YouTube, for instance, can be exploited, not just by hostile state actors, but equally by terrorist networks, for the purposes of sowing disinformation among vulnerable communities with a view to fomenting social polarisation and conflict. This would create the very societal conditions that violent extremist groups seek to exploit for radicalisation and recruitment.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the spread of 3D printed guns based on readily available online designs,⁴⁶ as well as the potential for commercially available unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to be weaponised,⁴⁷ are also examples of emerging technologies that could act as force multipliers for religiously-motivated threat groups driven to mount mass casualty attacks on populations, both globally and in Southeast Asia. Hence, think tanks and academia focused on counter terrorism policy analysis would need to take careful heed of developments in this domain and their wider implications.

Conclusion

The 19th-century French novelist Alphonse Karr was reputed to have said that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”. On reflection, this aphorism seems to well apply to the evolving research agenda of ICPVTR since its founding 20 years ago. In 2002, scholars from the then Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies⁴⁸ argued that to deal with the “new”, religiously-motivated terrorism represented by AQ, it was important to not merely deal with the terrorist cells and leaders themselves, but at the same time, address the underlying political, economic, social and ideological causes that gave rise to the former in the first place.

It was suggested that while dealing with the physical threat required a hard, shorter-term kinetic approach, this had to be calibrated to ensure that it meshed well with a softer, longer-term approach aimed at addressing underlying grievances as well.⁴⁹ Twenty years on, it seems that this mixed approach arguably remains relevant, even as the threat, as this volume shows, has continued to mutate and take on newer forms.

In the final analysis, therefore, paraphrasing and adapting the views of General Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner and Director of Operations (1952-54) during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), in dealing with the ever-evolving threat of transnational terrorism, one does not really need to be constantly searching for new counter terrorism methods. One just needs to become much better at implementing the old, tried and tested ones.⁵⁰

About the Author

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From Gates to Grids: Future of Terrorism Research

Kenneth Yeo & Benjamin Mok

This paper discusses the evolving landscape of terrorism research in response to emerging technologies and shifting geopolitical dynamics. It discusses the gated access to information and how techniques of online data collection, advanced analytical tools and artificial intelligence have complemented researchers. Nonetheless, the study highlights the indispensability of collecting quality data, theoretical frameworks and contextual (area studies) knowledge in understanding the field.

Introduction

The future of terrorism studies depends on a healthy population of established scholars – that is to say, core researchers who achieve a certain level of acclaim through relevant and scientifically rigorous contributions to the field. Yet, in considering research production, the field is faced with a significant hurdle: data scarcity. Traditionally, primary data collection within terrorism studies has been dependent on research methods that feature high entry barriers, largely due to its reliance on access to detainees and confidential reports; such access is oftentimes restricted to a small circle of scholars.

This in turn can give rise to concerns regarding the accuracy and bias of the sources in question, especially given that they are gated from the wider community of researchers.¹ Yet, the primary data drawn from such research methods remains the gold standard within the field, for good reason. From a traditional standpoint, valuable contributions to the field are not possible without first attaining access to such primary data.

This is, of course, a false catch-22, common within not just terrorism studies, but many academic fields in general. Groundbreaking research has been penned by many emerging researchers, most of whom have impacted the field without the benefit of privileged access. Yet, we should not dismiss the hurdle as presented – the issue at its core remains relevant as without access to primary data, emerging researchers face significant challenges in establishing themselves, leading to a field characterised by a “miniscule” core of established researchers² and an inability to “attract new researchers and then hold onto them”.³ Furthermore, emerging researchers also find themselves unable to substantiate or expand on the “invisible college” of orthodox scholarship, an issue that has only in recent years been mitigated.⁴

What is worth examining, then, in the context of pondering the future of terrorism studies, is how some emerging researchers have navigated this hurdle and produced worthwhile contributions without privileged access, but instead with sophisticated and innovative techniques. Perhaps more importantly, it is then crucial that we consider how future generations of scholars might be empowered with such capabilities, via the opportunities of augmentation presented by cutting-edge developments such as generative artificial intelligence (AI).

At the same time, we caution against sensationalist approaches which, in the pursuit of augmented data collection and analysis capabilities, lose sight of the importance of primary data and knowledge in producing quality research. As such, we reject the false dichotomy which pits ‘traditional’ research methods against ‘new’ research methods – rather, we recognise that the two build upon one another to generate valuable contributions to the field.

This paper explores the dimensions of terrorism studies research, beginning with an overview of the current landscape and how it shapes the barriers faced by new entrants. Then, it examines the

techniques used by emerging scholars to circumvent these obstacles, focusing on data collation and analysis to carve out new niches within the field. The next section explores recent developments in generative AI and its potential to augment the conduct of large-N data analysis, further lowering the barrier of entry to research. Finally, it considers how, despite these technological advancements, the authenticity and accuracy of terrorism research remains inherently reliant on the knowledge drawn from primary sources. In doing so, the study hopes to equip emerging researchers not only with vital tools and techniques drawn from both innovators within the field and cutting-edge technological developments, but also with the wisdom of applying them judiciously.

Terrorism Studies: The Lay of the Land

The study of terrorism and counter terrorism has come a long way since the September 11, 2001 attacks. Academic evaluation of research methodology in the field, for instance, during this period was marked by criticism from key figures who would later become influential voices within the community, including Schmid and Jongman (1988),⁵ Hoffman (1992)⁶ and Crenshaw (2000).⁷ Ranstorp's (2009) survey of the field, which this article owes much of its insights to, noted that much of the pre-9/11 critique of the scholarship centred on an "over-reliance on recycled secondary sources and... academics being ensconced in ivory towers, instead of field research and talking to actual terrorists".⁸ At the same time, Silke's (1990-1999) examination of the scholarship revealed that the majority of articles were written by 'one-time authors', revealing the field's inability to hold on to emerging researchers.⁹

To view such critique as gatekeeping by key figures in the field would be a vast oversimplification, ignoring that the essentials of social science research – verifiable primary data and scientific rigour – are in fact necessary for quality research. Without these essentials, the field is left vulnerable to unverifiable claims and political agendas. This critique was reinforced in the post-9/11 era, in which the volume of contributions to the field rose significantly. Ranstorp, writing amidst this period, called to attention how the field had been affected by "the dominance of an 'invisible college of scholars'... and the frequency of one-time visitors to the field".¹⁰

Since then, perceptions of the field have shifted towards cautious optimism, highlighted by Morrison's (2022) work drawn from the analysis of interviews with guests from the *Talking Terror* podcast.¹¹ In response to Sageman's (2014) claim that terrorism research had stagnated,¹² Morrison instead argued that collective review has revealed a "surge of highly trained interdisciplinary researchers, coupled with greater access to data",¹³ as well as the development of a "more consistent community of researchers".¹⁴ He also highlighted Schuurman's (2018) work, which revealed that "the use of primary data has increased and appears to be continuing to do so".¹⁵ Similarly, Schmid's (2021) survey-driven review of terrorism research revealed that among 45 respondents, 14.9 percent viewed "primary data usage" as the key factor characterising "progress/achievements in the field" – the answer which received the highest consensus in response to the question.¹⁶ While both Morrison and Schuurman were careful in providing caveats to the abovementioned enduring problems, their evaluations nevertheless present a field that in recent years has moved towards mitigating these problems.

Barriers to Access Within Terrorism Studies and Their Impact

Yet, even in this era of cautious optimism, many emerging scholars have failed to overcome the hurdle – that is, inaccessible primary data. Access to such data is fraught with several challenges, which include but are not limited to the following. First, it is difficult to access privileged data and terrorist prisoners for interviews.¹⁷ Such access continues to be gatekept by government institutions¹⁸ and, in today's terrorism landscape, increasingly by social media platforms.¹⁹ Second, primary data that is accessible by some is rarely shared with all. Hegghammer (2014) characterised this issue as a situation in which "each person [is] collecting his own data, for different purposes, different lengths of time, and in different ways. And worst of all, we're not sharing".²⁰

While the development of online repositories such as the Global Terrorist Database (GTD) has come some way in dealing with this issue, it remains an issue of reasonable self-interest that – especially in environments where funding and practitioner demand decreases – researchers would be hesitant in pooling their primary sources and data. Furthermore, even if we set aside self-interest, it is common that much primary data access granted to established researchers is itself predicated upon confidentiality clauses and agreements. Third, as Berger (2019) noted, safety issues during field research remain a significant concern for researchers, in which they might be exposed to threats not only from extremists, but also from “governments in areas where extremist movements operate”.²¹ Mitigating such threats requires substantial funding, in the form of private security and threat assessments, again presenting an obstacle for emerging researchers, who likely face greater difficulties obtaining such funding than established researchers.

Apart from issues of data access, the Eurocentric focus of terrorism studies represents a different form of barrier faced by some emerging researchers. Facing difficulties due to English being the lingua franca of the field, as well as issues of familiarity regarding European- or United States (US)-based publishing platforms, emerging scholars in the Global South may at times find it difficult to establish themselves in the community. As such, scholars writing within critical terrorism studies have pointed out that the field “continues to perpetuate the reproduction of Eurocentric research and the exclusion of non-Western voices”.²² The loss of these indigenous voices and contributions from the Global South then hampers the addition of further nuance and rigour into existing discourses on terrorism research.²³

The potential consequences of these challenges are significant, and in some cases have been demonstrated through precedent within the field. While Morrison noted that his interviewees have observed an increase in “career terrorism researchers”,²⁴ quantitative research into this claim still needs to be conducted before it can be confirmed – a fact that Morrison himself alluded to.²⁵ As such, complacency remains a danger given that the abovementioned challenges may still stymie the growth of new researchers in the field, motivating them to find greener pastures elsewhere. Alongside the issue of retaining researchers in the field, there remain the issues of the “invisible college” and groupthink, in which the lack of valuable contributions by emerging researchers then leads to the ossification of knowledge. Ranstorp (2009) noted that the field has been subjected to a situation in which “mutually reinforced camaraderie is often valued over scientific scrutiny of methods, theory, and data”.²⁶

Emerging Scholars and Innovative Techniques

To circumvent the lack of access to primary sources, some emerging researchers have adopted sophisticated techniques. These innovative approaches, which can be categorised into online data collection and data analysis innovations, are compensatory measures which enable these researchers to carve out new niches and contribute valuable insights within the field. An example of emerging researchers who subsequently established themselves through such innovative techniques would be Jacob Shapiro, whose 2012 work alongside David Siegel²⁷ used complex game theory principles to explain why terrorist organisations continue to rely on “security-reducing” bureaucratic tools to manage operatives – a course of inquiry that eventually led to his book *The Terrorist's Dilemma* (2013).²⁸ Another example would be Amy Pedahzur, who with Arie Perliger used social network analysis methods in 2006 to highlight the role of local struggles and family groups in deciding terrorist networks’ use of suicide bombings in Palestine.²⁹

Online Data Collection

Emerging scholars are increasingly relying on online data gathering techniques to supplement or replace traditional methods of data gathering. While online data gathering in the current landscape necessitates that researchers sift through a vast expanse of rough data, much of which is simply noise in the context of most terrorism research questions, it does present the advantage of accessibility, allowing scholars to uncover and analyse primary data from publicly available sources, social media platforms and online forums.³⁰ Furthermore, such data specifically deepens research

into the sub-fields of online terrorist activity and radicalisation, a field that is relevant amidst an increasingly online global population.

For example, one of the key pieces of emerging scholarship examining online far right extremism was conducted by Rieger, Kumpel, Wich, Kiening and Groh in 2021.³¹ In their study, they employed advanced data trawling and scraping technologies, utilising various scrapers and publicly available online datasets, such as the Pushshift Reddit dataset, which “makes available all the submissions and comments posted on Reddit between June 2005 and April 2019”.³² While the Pushshift Reddit dataset was not specifically built for terrorism-related research, scholars have built datasets based on social media platforms to study terrorism-related trends. For instance, a 2019 dataset was compiled by Kayode-Adedeji, Oyero and Stella, comprising “150 mass media YouTube videos on Al-Shahab, Boko Haram and IS terrorist groups from 2014 to 2016”, in which the attached discussions were categorised into 13 sub-topics.³³ This dataset has proven invaluable in understanding terrorism-related rhetoric and narratives on mainstream online platforms, and assisting researchers in tackling underlying theoretical questions regarding ideology and outreach.

Other advanced data mining techniques have been deployed alongside the development of technology. For example, a 2019 article by Garcia-Retuerta, Bartoleme, Chamoso and Corchado presents an innovative method for identifying new terrorist propaganda videos built from fragments of older terrorist media, via “a web-scraping method for retrieving relevant videos and a Hash-based algorithm which identifies the original content of a video.”³⁴

Data Analysis Techniques

Beyond online data collection, many emerging researchers have also employed sophisticated data analysis techniques to dissect either publicly available data, or privileged data presented by other established researchers. Such analytical methods can unveil patterns that are not immediately apparent, offering a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of radicalisation, the spread of extremist ideologies and the operational tactics of terrorist groups.

For example, a 2018 study by Frissen, Toguslu, Ostaeyen and d’Haenens undertook an analysis of Quranic references in the Islamic State (IS)’s *Dabiq* magazine, providing a taxonomy of how religious texts are manipulated to fuel online violent radicalisation. This required the adoption of a funnel approach to accommodate a “broad contextual exploration of the surahs (chapters)” and a “more detailed textual examination of the ayat (verses) quoted in *Dabiq*” – as well as the use of various software such as NVivo and IBM SPSS Statistics.³⁵ Similarly, a 2019 study by Kling, Stock, Ilhan and Henkel provided an informetric analysis of strategic communications from IS. It adopted a mixed-method approach of content analysis via “coding categories of incitement, condemnation and rewards”, as well as the text-word method, “a knowledge representation method specifically suited for application on these non-scientific texts”.³⁶

The use of sophisticated data analysis techniques for terrorism studies research has also undergone evaluation from emerging researchers possessing technical knowledge regarding the techniques. For instance, a 2019 paper by Kumar, Mazzara, Messina and Lee analysed “the performance of classifiers such as Lazy Tree, Multilayer Perceptron, Multiclass and Naïve Bayes classifiers for observing the trends for terrorist attacks around the world”.³⁷ Such an endeavour allowed them to not only evaluate the accuracy of various commonly used classification models in the context of terrorism studies research, but also identify the situations in which each might be best deployed. Furthermore, their study presented further avenues for improvement and research with regard to data analysis techniques, noting that a central objective would be to increase the “sub-classification layers and attributes both in order to find more useful trends”.³⁸

The purpose of highlighting recent innovations in these techniques is twofold. First, it is to emphasise the fact that valuable terrorism studies research can in fact be conducted via open-source data, particularly in specific areas such as online terrorist activity and radicalisation. Second, most such studies rely on advanced technical skills, given that they comprise as much of the ‘hard’ sciences as they do of social science knowledge. This gives rise to a further quandary – not all

emerging researchers have the desire or the capacity to develop such advanced technical skills while undertaking terrorism studies research. This then leads us to a potential alternative: the augmentation of one's capabilities via generative AI.

Augmentation from Generative AI

Generative AI refers to a subset of AI technologies that can generate new content, such as text, images and code, which is similar to human-generated content. This is achieved through the use of algorithms and models that have been trained on large datasets of existing content. One of the key components of generative AI that can contribute to terrorism research is low- or no-code programming. Such developments significantly simplify the process of data analysis by minimising the amount of coding required, especially for analysts with rudimentary programming knowledge.

Low- or no-code programming empowers terrorism scholars by enhancing data analysis capabilities. Terrorism scholars could leverage the intuitive low- or no-code interface to clean, analyse and visualise data – making it easier to uncover trends without the need for complex coding. Beyond basic regression analysis, off-the-shelf generative AI tools often include functions like advanced data analysis packages, machine learning models, network analysis and natural language processing.³⁹ Scholars can leverage these advanced tools for more complex data analysis, enabling them to conduct deeper research on the intricacies of terrorist networks and to understand the underlying narratives within large volumes of textual data. This democratisation of data analysis tools allows for a broader base of researchers to contribute meaningful insights to terrorism research, fostering innovation and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries.

By simplifying the technical aspects of data manipulation and analysis, low- or no-code platforms ensure that scholars can focus more on the substantive aspects of their research. This shifts the focus of quantitative research from troubleshooting the syntax of programming languages to the comprehension of the conceptual and theoretical basis of each analytical method.⁴⁰ Generative AI can automate routine data processing tasks, allowing scholars to concentrate on interpreting results, drawing insights and making informed assessments about the direction of their studies. Consequently, quantitative analysis becomes less about the ability to code and more about the capacity to think critically about data and to apply the appropriate analytical frameworks that align with the objectives of the research.

This democratisation of sophisticated analytical tools through low- or no-code platforms significantly reduces the barrier of entry for terrorism research. Traditionally, the field has been somewhat inaccessible to those without a strong background in computer science or data analysis, limiting participation to a relatively small group of highly specialised researchers. However, by making powerful data analysis tools more user-friendly and accessible, a wider range of scholars – including those with expertise in political science, sociology, psychology and other related disciplines – can now contribute to terrorism research. This inclusivity not only enriches the field with diverse perspectives, but also encourages a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and combating terrorism.⁴¹

The Primacy of Quality Data

While AI and low- or no-code tools have made data analysis more accessible, their effectiveness is inherently tied to the quality of the data they process. Essentially, garbage in, garbage out remains a fundamental principle. Even the most sophisticated AI model cannot produce accurate, useful insights from flawed or biased data. This highlights the primacy of quality data: AI tools, no matter how sophisticated, cannot produce relevant and accurate data for analysis.⁴² Turning back to the critique levelled at the terrorism studies field in the post-9/11 era, we find that – despite technological developments – the central concept of prioritising quality data remains the same.⁴³ Quality data in research is paramount, particularly for scholarship in terrorism. Research emerging from terrorism studies has real policy implications. Therefore, the accuracy of data collected from studying terrorist behaviours has far-reaching consequences, influencing not only academic discourse, but also national security strategies, law enforcement practice and international

relations. Inaccurate or misleading data may distort analysis and misguide policies – this may be costly to lives and personal liberties.⁴⁴

Collecting and organising high-quality data in terrorism research continue to be a challenge. Data in terrorism research usually comes from three sources: field research, official sources and online open-source. Each of these sources comes with its own set of challenges and limitations. Field research data, while invaluable for its depth and first-hand insights, can be difficult to obtain due to access restrictions and security risks. Official sources, though authoritative, may be limited by classification, redaction or even political biases that could affect reliability. Online open-source data, despite its timeliness, accessibility and volume, presents challenges due to its overwhelming mass and needs to be verified to extract meaningful information.

To leverage AI tools for research effectively, data management and organisation in terrorism research are crucial. Hence, to maximise the capabilities of AI in terrorism research, the fundamentals of collecting relevant and accurate data remain crucial.

The Indispensability of Theoretical Knowledge and Regional Context

Besides quality data, researchers must still familiarise themselves with fundamental theoretical principles of terrorism and counter terrorism and their respective region-specific contexts (area studies). While AI tools can automate data processing and uncover patterns within large datasets, they cannot replace the nuanced comprehension of terrorism theories and the complex sociopolitical dynamics that influence terrorism.

These theories are crucial to comprehend because terrorism is a manifestation of deeper societal, political and ideological undercurrents. Theories within terrorism studies, such as the radicalisation process,⁴⁵ intra- and inter-group dynamics,⁴⁶ and the strategies of asymmetric warfare,⁴⁷ are fundamental frameworks for comprehending data analysis. Additionally, the sociopolitical context where terrorism occurs varies significantly from one region to another. The researcher's familiarity with the unique national and regional dynamics that may influence terrorism trends cannot be replaced by AI tools. Moreover, while the drivers of terrorism may share common characteristics, there are regional variations that warrant a more customised approach in evaluating the threat.

Conclusion

Terrorism research has evolved significantly, moving from an area dominated by gatekeeping and high entry barriers, to one that is increasingly accessible due to technological advancements. Emerging scholars now harness technology to collect data online and apply complex data analysis techniques, thus democratising access to information and enabling a broader range of perspectives within the field. The advent of AI's low- or no-code programming platforms represents a further step in this evolution, offering researchers powerful tools to employ advanced statistical methods with greater ease, thereby lowering the barriers to entry even further.

However, while these technological advancements have transformed the landscape of terrorism research, they do not negate the need for thorough data collection, nor do they replace fundamental theoretical and region-specific knowledge. The essence of effective terrorism research lies not just in the ability to process large datasets, but in the interpretation of those datasets within the appropriate theoretical and contextual frameworks.

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Evolving Global Geopolitics and Terrorism in South and Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future

Abdul Basit and Alif Satria

This study examines terrorism's evolution in South and Southeast Asia over the past two decades to decipher its trajectories in the era of great power competition. Specifically, it looks into terrorism's evolution during two gamechanging events, the September 11, 2001 attacks and the 2012 Syrian conflict, and three episodic triggers of terrorism, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taliban's 2021 Afghan takeover and the 2023 Hamas-Israel Conflict. Despite losing eminence, terrorism has persisted and diversified in the past 20 years. Presently, religious terrorism, despite being weakened, co-exists with far right ethnonationalist terrorism as the fifth wave of terrorism crystallises. The examination of South and Southeast Asia's threat landscapes reveals that global geopolitical developments have local consequences, and vice versa.

Introduction

As global geopolitics evolves from the era of the “global war on terror”¹ to the era of “great power competition”, terrorism has lost its pre-eminence.² However, terrorism has not only persisted, but it has also diversified and expanded.³ Hamas⁴ coordinated October 7 attack last year against Israel and the ensuing Hamas-Israel tensions provide a stark reminder of its potent threat.⁵ Whether the October 7 attack can shape future trajectories of terrorism, however, warrants further research.⁶ Hence, as global attention and resources move away from counter terrorism, it is critical to revisit terrorism's evolution and see how it currently manifests.

Terrorism and by extension terrorist groups do not operate in a geopolitical vacuum. Rather, they are by-products of sociopolitical and ethnic grievances, identity and ideological contestations, and economic marginalisation.⁷ Furthermore, there is also a strong interplay between terrorism and geopolitics as major geopolitical events often influence the way terrorist groups recruit, propagandise and fund-raise.⁸

Viewing the current terrorist landscape through Rapoport's “wave framework”, as the era of great power competition dawns, the fifth wave of terrorism where religious and ethnonationalist terrorism co-exist is crystallising.⁹ Broadly, the religious wave of terrorism persists, albeit weakened, while the ethnonationalist wave, spearheaded by several far right groups, has resurged.¹⁰ However, it remains to be seen whether this “dual co-existence” will become the norm in future terrorism waves.¹¹

Against this backdrop, this study examines terrorism's evolution in South and Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the shifting geopolitical sands of the past two decades. It categorises geopolitical developments into two broad categories: gamechangers¹² (9/11, the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State);¹³ and episodic triggers (the COVID-19 pandemic, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Hamas-Israel conflict). Using primary and secondary materials, it traces jihadism's evolution in the two regions by looking at the ebbs and flows of its five strains: global, classical, revolutionary, irredentist and sectarian.¹⁴

The Impact of Geopolitical Gamechangers on Terrorism

Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s 9/11 Attacks

The 9/11 attacks and the ensuing developments marked an evolutionary turning point for global terrorism, especially in South and Southeast Asia. In Afghanistan, it triggered a new wave of terrorism in the country with far-reaching implications.¹⁵ In the 1990s, irredentist and sectarian strains of terrorism dominated South Asia's terrorism landscape. Following 9/11, global and classic strains of jihadism ascended – with the former aiming to create a self-styled global Sunni caliphate and the latter aiming to force the United States (US)'s forces to leave the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁶

Characteristically, new aspects in jihadism in South and Southeast Asia were observed. First was the unprecedented scale and frequency of suicide terrorism.¹⁷ Following Pape's observation,¹⁸ suicide terrorism surged as the global war on terror escalated, especially in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.¹⁹ Second, post-9/11 terrorism was different in its structures, aims and goals. Unlike the erstwhile jihadists who drew attention to their grievances and causes through selected violence and sought reforms in the political system or concessions from the governments, AQ's aim was to overthrow the system altogether.²⁰

Third, this phase of jihadist militancy also brought into sharp focus the challenge of fragile states and their strong correlation with terrorism.²¹ The ungoverned spaces in different parts of Asia and Africa afforded safe havens to various jihadist groups – allowing them to evade counter terrorism pressure, regroup and re-strategise their violent campaigns. For instance, after being ousted from Afghanistan, AQ and the Taliban's remnants relocated to Pakistan's tribal areas and relaunched their violent campaigns after absorbing the setbacks.²²

South Asia also witnessed the emergence of new jihadist groups.²³ Notably, most jihadist militant groups in South Asia drew their guidelines from AQ's ideology and tactics, notwithstanding that many are Deobandis while AQ is an adherent of Takfiri-Salafism. AQ popularised the notion of Ghazwa-e-Hind to capture the imagination and win the loyalties of South Asian jihadists.²⁴ As a result, anti-state or anti-establishment agendas became the major driving force behind post-9/11 militancy in South Asia. Indeed, almost all South Asian groups became signatories to Osama bin Laden's global jihad declaration and respected AQ as the vanguard of jihadism.²⁵

Coupled with the presence of the old groups, South Asia thus became home to the highest concentration of local, regional and global jihadist groups in the world.²⁶

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, AQ's September 11 attacks had a polarising effect on the region's terrorism landscape. On the one hand, it became a catalyst which pushed other Southeast Asian terrorist organisations to align their strategic priorities with the global jihadist movement – as exemplified by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s 2002 Bali bombings, which AQ helped fund and inspire.²⁷ Notably, the attack was a stark departure from JI's operational priorities, which, up to that point, had largely focused on the Ambon and Poso sectarian conflicts.²⁸

Despite internal debate within the organisation, JI continued to conduct attacks targeting Western symbols, with various levels of financial support from AQ.²⁹ In contrast, other regional terrorist organisations moved away from aligning themselves with the global jihadist movement. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), for example, a Philippines-based group that had received AQ training and funding from the 1980s up until 2000, quickly saw their ties as a liability and distanced itself from AQ following the September 11 attacks.³⁰

The Syrian Conflict and the Rise of the Islamic State (IS)

With the onset of the Syrian civil war in the early 2010s and the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS), the classic strain of jihadism subsided, and sectarian and global strains dominated the jihadist landscape.³¹ Unlike AQ, which eschewed sectarian violence, IS greatly escalated the Sunni-Shia rivalry and successfully created a self-styled proto-caliphate between Iraq and Syria, a feat AQ never achieved.³²

The Syrian civil war and IS' rise combined had three effects on the evolution of terrorism in South and Southeast Asia. First, it resulted in an unprecedented rise of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Through IS' call for Sunnis to pledge allegiance (*bai'ah*) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and perform *hijrah* (migration) to the self-styled caliphate in the Middle East, over 30,000 FTFs from 53 different countries mobilised to Syria.³³ The bonds FTFs formed under IS-controlled territories, coupled with their linkages with like-minded individuals in their respective home countries, facilitated travels of more individuals to the Middle East as well as new waves of terrorist attacks. After IS' territorial defeat, some FTFs were repatriated to their home countries while 42,000-48,000 others, especially women and children, remain in north-eastern Syrian prison camps controlled by the Free Syrian Army.³⁴

Second, the developments during this phase revived jihadist attacks in the West. IS leveraged its network of FTFs to mount these attacks, and as a result eclipsed AQ as the leader of the global jihadist movement.³⁵ Attacks in the West together with the control of territories and the slick use of social media for propaganda earned IS the loyalties of more jihadist groups through *bai'ah*.³⁶ Third, IS revolutionised terrorist communication and recruitment using social media.³⁷ During this period, the battlefield expanded from the real to the cyber world, putting serious limitations on state-driven, top-down counter terrorism initiatives and underscoring the pivotal role of civil society and social media companies in mitigating the risks of violent extremism.³⁸

In South Asia, AQ largely held its ground against IS' growing appeal, barring the rise of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), IS' official franchise for the Khorasan region.³⁹ Initially, ISK comprised Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) breakaways. However, it grew to encompass rebel elements from the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and several Pakistani anti-Shia Sunni militant groups like Jandullah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ).⁴⁰ Through its multilingual social media propaganda and inclusive recruitment strategy, ISK created a niche appeal among South Asia's urban, educated middle and upper-middle classes.⁴¹ This is evident from the profiles of pro-IS militants involved in the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack,⁴² the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings⁴³ and the 2015 Safodra Goth attack,⁴⁴ along with radicals from the Maldives and South India.⁴⁵

IS' ideological and operational ingress in South Asia also differed significantly from AQ's influence. For instance, until 2012, jihadists from South Asia only travelled within the region and barely ventured outside. However, through IS' influence, South Asian jihadists, albeit in low numbers, began travelling to Iraq and Syria. Additionally, IS' inclusion of Deobandi militant groups also escalated pre-existing sectarian fault lines to a new level.⁴⁶ Consequently, almost all the major Sufi shrines across Pakistan were targeted by ISK, while the targeting of the Shia community expanded from Pakistan to Afghanistan.⁴⁷

ISK exploited the fact that the Taliban rarely engage in sectarian feuds with the Shias and positioned itself as the main anti-Shia militant groups in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ As regards propaganda, ISK also unprecedentedly challenged the Taliban's monopoly over South Asia's jihadist landscape.⁴⁹ Notably, ISK criticised the Taliban for being soft on Shias and for staying silent on China's repression of the Uyghur Muslims – making it difficult for the Taliban to show any leniency to the international community on several ideological positions it has taken in the past.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Southeast Asian groups' waning desire to align with global jihadism was reinvigorated with

the Syrian conflict in 2012 and the emergence of IS in 2014. This time, the realignment occurred more swiftly and extensively. Not only did the groups pledge loyalty to IS faster, but radical-minded Southeast Asians also displayed an unprecedented eagerness to travel to Syria and Iraq.⁵¹ By 2015, over 18 Indonesian terrorist organisations had pledged their allegiance to IS, with many becoming key avenues for sending Indonesians to fight in Syria.⁵² Groups, however, were not the only avenue of travel, as charismatic personalities also played a significant role – as exemplified by the case of Malaysia.⁵³

Additionally, IS' emergence also resulted in increased terrorist attacks in the region. Indeed, major Indonesian pro-IS groups became most active between 2015 and 2018. The Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, for instance, conducted multiple attacks each year from 2016 using female and family suicide bombers, as exemplified by the 2018 triple church bombing in Surabaya, East Java.⁵⁴ In the Philippines, pro-IS groups, led by Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute Group, used IS funds, fighting techniques and media strategies to capture and occupy the city of Marawi in 2017 for more than five months – resulting in the deaths of over 1,100 people.⁵⁵

The Impact of Geopolitical Episodic Triggers on Terrorism

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 on terrorism's evolution was varied across peaceful and conflict-hit states. In peaceful states, such as in the West, terrorism declined during the pandemic.⁵⁶ Contrastingly, in conflict-hit states, COVID-19's impact was twofold.⁵⁷ Conflict-hit states with strong governments mostly dealt with terrorist groups effectively, such as in India where the Maoist and Kashmiri insurgencies subsided. But conflict-affected states with weak governments, like Afghanistan, saw terrorism rise as they struggled in responding to the twin crises of health and security.⁵⁸ Regardless, jihadist groups across the ideological divide all tried to appropriate the pandemic into their propaganda narratives.⁵⁹

On the operational front in South Asia, the impact was varied. As mentioned, the Kashmiri and Maoist insurgencies went dormant in India due to strong government control. However, there was no pause in terrorist attacks or the Taliban's ground offensive in Afghanistan. In fact, COVID-19 also hastened the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and catapulted the Taliban back into power.⁶⁰ Similarly, ISK remained active, continuing its attacks against Afghanistan's Hazara Shias and launching a major attack on the Nangarhar jail in August 2020.⁶¹ Other militant groups like TTP and AQ quietly supported the Taliban's ground offensive in Afghanistan to expand the group's territorial control.

Southeast Asian groups' response to COVID-19 was also varied. In the Philippines, emboldened by the pandemic, groups were keen on sustaining attacks.⁶² In Indonesia, pro-IS groups incorporated COVID-19 into their propaganda and used it as a rallying cry to increase attacks.⁶³ Indeed, in the pandemic's early stages, the Mujahidin of East Indonesia, a Sulawesi-based pro-IS group, stepped up its operations and conducted four attacks within two months.⁶⁴ As governments' movement restrictions intensified and death tolls from the pandemic rose, however, Indonesian militants took a more "passive stance" and prioritised more inward-looking operations that benefitted members.⁶⁵

The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan

Indeed, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 was a pivotal movement in the evolution of militant jihadism.⁶⁶ Their victory not only provided inspiration to but also served as a template for like-minded jihadist groups such as Hamas,⁶⁷ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Al-Shabaab.⁶⁸ It also resurrected jihadists' belief in the ideological doctrine that with strategic patience and perseverance, the creation of a *shariah* state is possible.⁶⁹ However, these impacts mostly did not expand beyond affecting the groups' psychological and spiritual beliefs.⁷⁰ Following the Taliban's victory, groups like

Pakistan's TTP and Indonesia's JI have since become inward-looking – focused on toppling their respective governments through violent and non-violent means.

In South Asia, the impact was varied across regions: it was most pronounced in Pakistan, but impacted other countries like India and Bangladesh only marginally.⁷¹ Pakistan, for its own strategic myopia, suffered the most. Pakistan overlooked the long-standing ideological, ethnic and battlefield camaraderie between TTP and the Afghan Taliban, hoping the latter would help rein in the former.⁷² However, not only did the Taliban term TTP as Pakistan's internal matter and deny its presence in Afghanistan, they also refused to acknowledge the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as an internationally recognised frontier.⁷³ Instead, the Taliban's return to power actually rejuvenated TTP, as violence in Pakistan surged by 73 percent because of the Taliban's victory.⁷⁴

Moreover, the Taliban's offensive against ISK also pushed the latter's remnants to Pakistan, where, in a bid to stay relevant, they have carried out large-scale attacks.⁷⁵ It needs to be noted, however, that the Taliban have not fully succeeded in diminishing ISK's external attack capabilities.⁷⁶ Indeed, ISK's history shows it has resilient regenerative capacity. For instance, despite being weakened, ISK's external operations have remained intact, and the group has plotted/executed attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan and as far as Iran, Turkey and Europe.⁷⁷ Contrary to ISK, other less active groups like AQ and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) are lying low while ideologically rehabilitating and re-establishing old networks.⁷⁸

In Southeast Asia, the Taliban's takeover resulted in the revitalisation of groups' morale.⁷⁹ Their responses, however, never went beyond rhetorical support. Notably, Southeast Asia did not see an increase in terrorist activities caused by the Taliban's victory. This is understandable, as by 2021, Southeast Asian groups were suffering heavy membership losses due to mass arrests. In Indonesia, for example, the police arrested over 1,200 terrorist suspects between 2018 and mid-2021.⁸⁰ In the Philippines, the security institutions are also far better trained and far more vigilant than they were several decades ago, preventing groups from operating effectively.⁸¹ Hence, the Taliban's victory did not result in the exchange of resources, skills and knowledge which could have increased attacks in the region.⁸²

The Hamas-Israel Conflict Since Hamas' October 7 Attack

Despite Israel's occupation of Palestine always evoking strong sentiments from Muslims globally, the subject has never mobilised FTFs as the civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria did.⁸³ Indeed, both major global jihadist groups, AQ and IS, have their own mixed positions on Palestine – keeping in view their ideological differences with Hamas' embrace of democracy, territorial nationalism and Iran allyship. IS, for instance, labels Hamas as apostate for taking assistance from Iran, and while AQ praised Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades for the October 7 attack, it has also criticised Hamas' political wing.⁸⁴

Both groups' positions on the current Hamas-Israel tensions should be understood as a means to fuel fresh recruits and inspire attacks against their respective adversaries, while also highlighting their respective positions in the Middle East's evolving geopolitical landscape.⁸⁵ For instance, both IS and AQ believe that the path to Jerusalem's conquest goes through the establishment of a self-styled caliphate in the Middle East, where certain Arab monarchical regimes have supported Israel.⁸⁶ To achieve this, IS believes that instead of directly attacking Israel, targeting Jews living in the West would be more effective in cutting off Israel's support.⁸⁷ Likewise, AQ has also tried to profit from the Hamas-Israel war by broadening the conflict and mobilising jihadists to carry out attacks in the West.⁸⁸

At the regional level, groups' response to the conflict varied as they tried to frame the event within their respective strategic priorities and ideological frameworks. In South Asia, AQIS gave the most elaborate coverage of the Hamas-Israel conflict.⁸⁹ Notably, the group ranked Hamas' October 7 attack alongside

the 9/11 attack and the Taliban's 2021 victory, and urged Muslims to target Israeli interests and allies around the world – portraying itself as the champion of global Muslim resistance movements in the process.⁹⁰ Likewise, TTP also termed the October 7 attack as a great victory for Hamas while drawing a parallel with its own militant campaign against Pakistan and implying that steadfastness, as shown by Hamas, can overawe even the most powerful enemy.⁹¹ However, TTP's tone was cautious as it also went to great lengths in reassuring the world it is a Pakistan-centric group which poses no threat to the international community.⁹²

Similarly, the Taliban regime also adopted a circumspect position to the Hamas-Israel tensions – condemning Israel's disproportionate use of force while urging Muslim rulers and the international community to halt atrocities in Gaza and take action against Israel's war crimes.⁹³ This calculated response was aimed at showcasing itself as a responsible state and member of the international community, notwithstanding that no state has recognised its regime. ISK, on the other hand, incorporated the tensions into the framework of its ongoing ideological rivalry with the Taliban. ISK lambasted the Taliban for taking a soft stance on Palestine, accusing the latter of being the US' lackey.⁹⁴ ISK also criticised Hamas and its supporters, Iran and Qatar, while reinforcing IS' message that a self-styled Sunni caliphate is the only durable solution to the occupation of Muslim lands.⁹⁵

In Southeast Asia, groups gave largely muted responses to the conflict as they focused more of their attention on their respective domestic theatres. In the Philippines, while terrorist groups expressed sympathies with Hamas and the Palestinian people, no further actions were made as they are currently either too fragmented to launch an organised response or too focused on the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region and the Muslim Mindanao peace process.⁹⁶ Amongst Indonesian terrorist milieus, the Hamas-Israel conflict elicited a mixed, mostly online response. Indonesian pro-AQ sympathisers, for example, generally expressed strong backing for Hamas.⁹⁷ However, pro-IS communities on social platforms combined their hopes for a Palestinian victory over Israel with criticisms of Hamas, highlighting concerns about Hamas' failure to implement *shariah* in Gaza and its focus on territorial nationalism.

Conclusion

Bifurcating notable geopolitical developments of the past two decades into two broad categories of gamechangers and episodic triggers, this study examined their impact on terrorism's evolution in South and Southeast Asia. It is evident that the 9/11 attacks, which heralded the era of global jihadism, and the Syrian civil war, which saw the rise of IS, were gamechanging events that left indelible impacts on terrorism's evolution. On the contrary, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Taliban's Afghanistan takeover and the Hamas-Israel conflict were episodic triggers which mobilised violence and boosted terrorist propaganda temporarily, but were taken over by other events as the geopolitical climate evolved.

As global geopolitics enters the era of great power competition, however, it remains a moot point how terrorism will evolve. In this regard, two contrarian but equally compelling arguments exist. One argues that terrorism will be used as a proxy tool, as witnessed during the Cold War. The other upholds that the presence of apocalyptic groups like AQ and IS will discourage the US, Russia and China from using terrorist groups as their proxies. In fact, much like how the US and Russia previously cooperated with each other on nuclear non-proliferation to avoid mutually assured destruction, counter terrorism could offer them another window of cooperation. Nonetheless, below the threshold of national security, the possibility of using terrorists for sabotage and disruption remains open.

Additionally, while the current state of global terrorism's fifth wave sees the co-existence of both religious and far right ethnonationalist groups, it requires closer observation and more in-depth research to assess whether it will sustain in the future. If this co-existence does sustain, the challenge of reciprocal radicalisation is hard to rule out. Concurrently, as a plethora of far right groups in the West have developed a staunch anti-establishment attitude, several jihadist groups have also become

inward-looking. Hence, the revolutionary strain of terrorism is likely to dominate the future terrorism landscape. However, this does not mean other strains will become less relevant – they will likely co-exist, but in a less pronounced manner.

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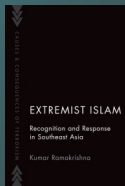
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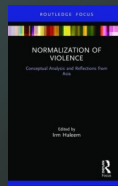


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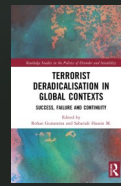
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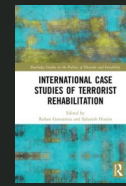
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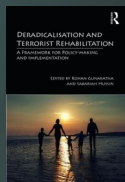
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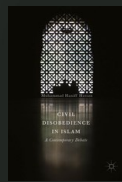
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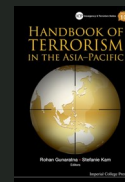
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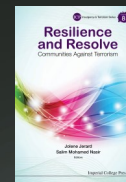
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