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Of late, countries in South and Central Asia are finding themselves increasingly under the grip of the threat of transnational terrorism in its various manifestations. This is due, primarily to, (1) the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and formation of Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), (2) the involvement of South and Central Asian militants in the Middle East unrests, particularly in Iraq and Syria, (3) the entrenched linkages between South and Central Asian fighters dating back to the 1980s, and (4) weaknesses in the domestic counter-terrorism policies of respective countries. The articles in this issue provide overviews of the terrorist threats confronting India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Central Asian region.

Pallavi Ade looks at the preparedness of India's security agencies in dealing with lone wolf terrorist incidents within the country, particularly when such attacks are increasing worldwide. Ade recommends that India needs to revamp its intelligence infrastructure and to put in place soft counter-terrorism measures such as terrorist rehabilitation and community engagement programmes, as bulwarks against the spread of extremist ideology.

Vikram Rajakumar examines the terrorist threat in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and argues that specific linguistic, cultural and geographical factors have thus far served to safeguard Muslims in Tamil Nadu from the influence of transnational jihadist ideology.

Iftekharul Bashar highlights the increased threat of militancy in Bangladesh with local militant outfits linking up with ISIS and AQIS. Bashar recommends a more pro-active and holistic counter-terrorism posture by the Bangladesh government to counter the threat effectively.

Sara Mahmood argues that as a strategy, decapitation efforts by the U.S. and Pakistan have not been effective in neutralising groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Mahmood recommends that kinetic means need to be supplemented by soft approaches to win the hearts and minds of the involved communities to prevent terrorist and extremist groups from radicalising and recruiting.

Hekmatullah Azamy makes an assessment of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) pledge of support to ISIS and its impact on the Afghan Taliban, given the rivalry between the Taliban and ISIS and the fact that, since its formation, IMU has always benefited from the Taliban's support.

Nodirbek Soliev examines the increasing involvement of Central Asian militants in Syria and Iraq, and its implication for the countries in the region.

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Lone wolf Terrorism: How Prepared Are India's Intelligence Agencies?

Pallavi Ade

Since its formation, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) has served as an inspiration for 'lone wolf' terror attacks in countries across the globe. India is not exempted from this threat. At the domestic level, to prevent and pre-empt radicalised individuals from becoming inspired by terrorist groups like ISIS and carrying out lone wolf attacks in the country, there is a need to enhance India's intelligence-gathering capabilities, particularly in the areas of human and cyber intelligence. It is also imperative to formalise the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) and National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), and to introduce community engagement programmes.

Introduction

The recent spate of attacks involving lone terrorists across the globe and the gratuitous spectacle which accompanies such attacks has brought the phenomenon of lone wolf terrorism into greater focus. This was seen in the media coverage during and after the December 2014 siege of Lindt Café in Sydney, Australia; following the January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo Magazine Headquarters in Paris, France; as well as in the aftermath of the May 2015 gun attack at the Prophet Mohammed cartoon contest in Garland, Texas. Lone wolf terrorism is not new, but its rise in recent times correlates with ISIS' calls to wage armed jihad in battlegrounds beyond Syria and Iraq (Dickinson 2015). Since then, the group has not only managed to attract a record number of fighters to wage jihad, but in addition, has also managed to wage virtual jihad through skillfully spreading its propaganda via the medium of cyberspace.

According to U.S. intelligence estimates, around 22,500 fighters from nearly 100 countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq (Hosenball and Herzkovitz 2015). Apart from ISIS' calls for Muslims to make hijrah (migration) to Syria, the group has also motivated and encouraged other radical Muslim individuals to wage jihad in their own countries.

In most instances, many lone wolf attackers are radicalised online, having established little to no contact with the terror groups they were inspired by. Through the internet, these individuals can learn about radical ideologies as well as acquire skills like bomb-making, without actually ever having to leave their house. In this regard, terrorist groups may play an "inspirational" role, influencing the radical ideology of such individuals and prompting terrorist sympathisers to carry out attacks. Such individuals can be termed "fanboys," or individuals who are attracted to a terrorist group's ideology, but for some reason, have not been able to join the group.

Terrorist groups may, retrospectively, stake claims for such lone wolf attacks in which they themselves play no real role in the attack's planning and execution (Ghosh 2015). ISIS had in fact staked claims for the 4 May 2015 gun attack in Garland, Texas but authorities found no evidence that the perpetrators had received training or operational support from the group (Windsor 2015). Staking claims for such attacks relieves groups from being involved in the planning and execution of the attacks, and gives them with the publicity of a far greater reach than their core areas of operations.

For the intelligence agencies, there is limited background information available on such attacks, including the individual or the group involved and the indoctrination and radicalisation process. It is difficult for governments to know when a lone wolf attacker may strike, therefore, this makes it particularly challenging for law enforcement agencies to prevent lone wolf terrorism.

The Lone Wolf Phenomenon in India

Until recently, India has been relatively immune from lone wolf acts of terrorism. However, of late, there have been a number of incidents of Indian Muslim youths becoming radicalised through the internet, turning into ISIS sympathisers and then either travelling to Syria to fight for the group, or

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becoming engaged in the group's propaganda back home. One such individual is Areeb Majeed, a Muslim youth from Kalyan in India's western Maharashtra state. Majeed had travelled to Syria with his three friends to fight for ISIS and was subsequently arrested in November 2014 on his deportation back to India from Turkey (Swami and Mengle 2014). Of the remaining three individuals, one of them, Sahim Farooq Tanki, is believed to be dead, while the whereabouts of the other two remain unknown (Bhalla 2015).

There is also the case of an individual from Bangalore named Mehdi Masroor Biswas, who ran a Twitter account with the username *@shamiwitness* in support for ISIS (Dev, Madhusoodan and Kumar 2014). Biswas' account had over 17,000 followers at the time of his arrest in December 2014.

According to the charges against Biswas, he had been responsible for "distributing... messages [and] organising hashtag campaigns for ISIS, encouraging tweets on popular ISIS-related hashtags, and utilising software applications that enable ISIS propaganda" (Dev 2015). Biswas had also allegedly communicated with British jihadists who were travelling to ISIS territory and offered his praises for those who had lost their lives as martyrs (A. Dev 2014). In October 2014, the Anti-Terrorism Squad of the Maharashtra state foiled a lone wolf bomb attack on American establishments, including a school in Mumbai, with the arrest of Anees Ansari – a self-radicalised, Mumbai-based software engineer

working in multi-national software company (S. Sharma 2015). Ansari was also indoctrinating an American youth – Omar Elhadj – to carry out a lone wolf attack in the U.S. (D'souza 2015).

Reality of the Threat to India

Of the nearly 22,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the number of Indian nationals is negligible. According to one news report, at least 11 have joined ISIS from India (Bhalla 2015). Another news report put the numbers between 20 and 30 (TNN 2014). Compared to India's nearly 180 million Muslims, this number is relatively insignificant. One reason for this could be that the Indian Muslim population is highly diverse and integrated in the Indian society as Muslims have resided in India for centuries, as compared to the communities in Europe and North America.

Nonetheless, there has been fringe but growing support for ISIS in India, as the Twitter account of Mehdi Biswas in Bengaluru and the waving of ISIS flags by some youths in Srinagar in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir indicated. In August 2014, 26 persons were arrested in Tamil Nadu for demonstrating in support of ISIS (Scott 2014). Finally, according to some reports, a youth from Tamil Nadu was a suicide bomber for ISIS in the Syria-Iraq theatres (TNN 2014).

The attraction to the radical ideology of terrorist groups such as ISIS appears to stem from a sense of alienation and resentment experienced by the Indian Muslims towards the Indian political system. The 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid by radical Hindu groups and the 2002 riots in Gujarat in which thousands of Muslims were killed contributed to the resentment and the perceived injustices felt by the Muslims in the aftermath of these events (Gupta 2011).

Many Muslims still feel that the Hindu fundamentalists who were involved in the events were never brought to justice, which added to their sense of alienation and grievances. This, together with the romanticism attached to jihad ('holy war') and the declaration of the formation of the "Islamic State" has been attracting few Indian Muslim individuals to empathise with terrorist groups like ISIS. The upwardly mobile Muslim youth, in the urban and semi-urban

“ There have been past instances where the educated Muslim youth, under the influence of radical propaganda, have joined terrorist groups in India, as was the case with a number of terrorists associated with the Indian Mujahideen (IM). ”

pockets of India, feel this sense of alienation more intensely as is evident from the profile of the Muslims who have joined ISIS or supported the group. They are educated, from middle-class families and seem part of the economically upward Indian population. Areeb Majeed was an engineering student; Anees Ansari was an engineer and Mehdi Biswas was an executive at a big multinational firm. Many of them seem well-integrated in the Indian society but for some reason have been attracted to radical ideology.

There have been past instances where educated Muslim youth, under the influence of radical propaganda, have joined terrorist groups in India, as was the case with the Indian Mujahideen (IM). These included IM leaders like Riyaz Bhatkal, who was a civil engineer, Mohammad Mansoor Asgar Peerbhoy, a computer engineer, and Abdul Subhan Usman Qureshi, who was a software professional. Terror groups have made efforts to appeal to this vulnerable segment from the Muslim communities. According to some estimates, there are nearly 270,000 individuals from India are regular viewers of ISIS' publications online, as was estimated by the group in its publication, *Dabiq* (Nalapat 2015). In addition, some ISIS videos have been translated into Urdu, Tamil and Hindi – a development which reflects the group's active interest at targeting Muslims in India (Daily News & Analysis 2014).

Preparedness of the Indian Intelligence Agencies

Indian intelligence agencies appear to have been encumbered by a number of setbacks. A case in point was when on 11 December 2014, a British TV channel, Channel 4, broke the story of Mehdi Biswas (also known by his Twitter account username *@shamiwitness*). Channel 4 was able to find him by tracking his online accounts and managed to obtain his contact information. This then led to the arrest of Mehdi Biswas by the Indian police.

The recent lone wolf arrests in India exposed the existing gaps in India's intelligence gathering and counter-radicalisation process. In India, intelligence agencies have typically relied on human intelligence when it comes to tracking terror activities. However, terrorists have moved on to cyberspace and it is within this unregulated cyberspace which authorities find difficult to monitor.

The first line of defence when it comes to cracking down on radical elements in the cyberspace is technical intelligence capabilities – monitoring social media, jihadist websites, emails and chat logs. However, as control of internet mechanisms remain based in the West, India has to seek coordination of Western intelligence agencies (Security Analyst 2015).

Moreover, the Indian intelligence agencies lack sufficient skilled manpower to conduct sustained intelligence-gathering on specific radical elements within a community. To be sure, human intelligence and surveillance on the ground remains inadequate as a source for pre-empting and preventing lone wolf attacks. Intelligence agencies almost always have to rely only on technical intelligence (Gokhale 2015). However, technical intelligence is not always substantive, or sufficiently comprehensive to track terrorists' movements, especially in the case of lone wolves who operate below the radar and are less visible as compared with terrorist organisations.

Furthermore, there remain gaps in the collation and analysis of intelligence inputs (Gokhale 2015). Specifically, such gaps pertain to the lack of coordination between various intelligence agencies, in regards to information sharing and communication. Inter-agency turf wars have also made it difficult to track surreptitious activities of lone wolves.

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Way Forward

The Indian government banned ISIS in February 2015 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (PTI 2015). According to some media sources, the security establishment is concentrating on counselling young men who have come under the influence of jihadi doctrine. Hence, India's security establishment is focusing on various efforts, such as surveillance of the cyber space for jihadi activities, and monitoring attempts by any India Muslim youths to travel to Syria and Iraq to prevent them from joining terrorist groups (Khanna 2014).

There is evidence to show that at least 20 such youths have been prevented from travelling to ISIS territory (Sen 2014). Security agencies have taken some other steps, including keeping a close eye on all people who may be drawn to ISIS through social media.

However, the intelligence bodies in India are highly decentralised, with no central authority to coordinate efforts of different security and intelligence agencies. This is precisely why there is an urgent need to establish the NCTC to serve as a single and effective point of control and coordination of all counter-terrorism measures. The NCTC was proposed by the previous government after the Mumbai attacks in 26 November 2008 as a separate body, dealing with terrorism matters.

It was subsequently scrapped by the government due to political opposition from state governments, on the basis that it interfered with the federal structure of the Indian state (according to India's federal structure, law and order are subjected under the state's control).

Parliamentary oversight for the intelligence agencies is also needed. However, agencies like the Intelligence Bureau (IB) (which deals with internal intelligence) and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) (which deals with collecting external intelligence), seem uncomfortable with the proposal, due to the fact that the agencies believe the parliamentary oversight would expose their methods, capabilities and source of information, proving detrimental for the agency's functioning (A. Sharma 2015).

There is a need to urgently revive the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) to connect databases of all the Indian intelligence agencies. According to some reports NATGRID might be functional soon (Sen 2015) and may be placed under the IB (Daily News & Analysis 2015).

There is also a need to strengthen the role of the Multi Agency Centre (MAC) under the IB and State-level MACs, also known as Subsidiary MACs. The MAC and SMACS are meant to ensure timely sharing of varied intelligence inputs which come from various agencies at the central and state levels.

Community engagement is considered an important element of de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation initiatives. Local Imams (leader of a mosque and Muslim community) and Ulemas (scholars of Muslim religious law), as credible voices of authority for Islam, need to speak on how Islamist terrorist groups propagate the wrong meaning of Islam. India has not yet officially launched such community engagement programmes.

However, media reports have speculated that the proposed anti-terrorism policy under the 'National Anti-Terrorism Framework' will focus on de-radicalisation programmes, through religious institutions and community leaders. It will also incorporate cyberspace in intelligence-gathering efforts (Sharma 2015).

“ Due to the lack of coordination between central and state authorities, the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) should ideally, serve as a single point of control and coordination on counter-terrorism measures. ”

Significantly, the government appointed former IB Director, Asif Ibrahim, as Special Envoy for Counter-terrorism and Extremism in the National Security Council Secretariat, amid mounting concerns on the issue of extremism in the country (Haider 2015). Prior to his appointment, there was no exclusive organisational body in the National Security Council (NSC) primarily focused on overseeing the government's counter-terrorism measures.

Conclusion

The face of global terror is changing. It is no longer just the organised terror groups that pose a threat but also educated individuals who do not fit the stereotypical terrorist profile. The immediate prospects of a lone wolf attack in India are not high, but it is a possibility, and thus the authorities should be vigilant.

There has been a sense of alienation among certain sections of the Muslim community, which has earlier manifested in these radicalised individuals joining groups like Indian Mujahideen. Armed with radical materials from the internet, such radicalised individuals can act on their own without ever joining a terrorist group.

The government needs to take steps to understand and address grievances of the community, and to reach out to the people, so as to help restore their level of trust and faith in the Indian political system.

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Tamil Nadu in the Shadow of ISIS

Vikram Rajakumar

Due to linguistic, geographical and cultural factors, Tamil Nadu state in southern India remained relatively impervious to the global threat of terrorism. However, of late, there have been signs of support by individuals for militant groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).

Introduction

Although Al Qaeda-linked jihadist factions had been operating in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan and parts of India in the past, thus far, specific linguistic, cultural and geographical factors have prevented the penetration of jihadist influences into South India's Tamil Nadu state. Of late, however, ISIS has gained some traction with its appeal to a segment of individuals in the state of Tamil Nadu. Since June 2014, ISIS has been stepping up its propaganda efforts to reach a transnational audience. This can be observed through ISIS' use of internet and social media tools to convey their messages in a number of Indian regional languages which include Hindi, Tamil and Urdu (India Today 2014).

The radicalisation of a number of individuals in Tamil Nadu has been a matter of concern for the country's internal security. In addition, due to a history of trade and migration by native Tamils into Southeast Asia, the local population in Tamil Nadu have built strong transnational networks with the Tamil communities concentrated in Southeast Asia. Hence, the potential for radical jihadist influences to spread through such networks and impact Southeast Asia's Tamil communities, and to alter the internal stability and security of the countries there, warrants particular attention for governments concerned.

Terrorism in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is located in the south of India, with a total population of 76 million people. An overwhelming 88% of the population are Hindus, and approximately 5.9% of the population in Tamil Nadu are Muslims (Census of India 2011). In spite of occasional tensions between various ethnic and religious communities of Tamil Nadu, the state is marked by relative peace.

The last two major conflicts that were caused by inter-ethnic tensions between the Hindu and Muslim communities took place more than a decade ago, during the Hindu-Muslim riots in 1993 and in 1998, both of which saw heavy casualties and damage to property. There have also been instances of social unrest, including strikes and small-scale rioting which relate to controversies from inter-religious marriages, disputes over land, or small-scale tensions between individuals from the Hindu and Muslim communities (Violence 2013). However, these episodes of social unrest occur sporadically across the country, and rarely occur in Tamil Nadu.

One of the reasons why Muslims in Tamil Nadu were spared from the threat of jihadism has been Tamil Nadu's linguistic isolation from most states in India. After India gained independence in 1947, there was an increase in anti-Hindi sentiment within Tamil Nadu in the 1950s and in the early 60s. The people of Tamil Nadu continued to hold strongly to their Dravidian cultural roots. Tamil Nadu's government at the time, led by the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) political party, institutionalised the use of Tamil as the state's official language and English as the second official working language (Russell 2013). Most of the terrorist propaganda circulated by terrorist groups originated from the north and northeast terrorist hotbeds of India, where Hindi is used as the main medium for communication. As a result, the predominantly English and Tamil speaking state of Tamil Nadu managed to remain relatively resistant to the radical and extremist ideologies.

In addition, both the militant struggles in Jammu and Kashmir as well as the northeast insurgency along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border remain localised and framed within the context of the concerned parties. It remains distinct and apart from the concerns of the people in Tamil Nadu. Moreover, the people of Tamil Nadu are fiercely loyal to the homeland in general, and to the

“ The sense of allegiance to the Tamil Nadu identity has served to inoculate the local population from the infiltration of terrorist and extremist influence... however, recent revelations of individuals from Tamil Nadu pledging allegiance to ISIS have challenged this perception. ”

culture of the state of Tamil Nadu in particular. This sense of allegiance to the Tamil Nadu identity has served to inoculate the local population from the infiltration of terrorist and extremist influences that stem from the transnational global jihadist cause.

ISIS' Impact in Tamil Nadu

However, recent revelations of individuals from Tamil Nadu pledging allegiance to ISIS have challenged this perception. In August 2014, police arrested Abdul Rahman and Mohammed Rinwan from the Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu on charges of distributing T-shirts with the ISIS emblem (Scott 2014). A photo showing 26 youths, including Rahman and Rinwan, clad in black T-shirts with the ISIS emblem and posing in front of a mosque at Thondi in Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu had surfaced on the Internet and was widely circulated on Twitter (Deccan Herald 2014). Although the other 24 youths were let off as they were found to have no connection with any terrorist outfit, the participation in the overt display of ISIS' symbols demonstrate the increased recognition and support that ISIS has received in Tamil Nadu.

In India, ISIS' impact was first revealed with a youth named Arif Majeed, who travelled to Syria in May 2014 from Kalyan in the state of Maharashtra. Arif had reportedly told his family that he was going to study, and next contacted them from Iraq, where he and his friends slipped away from a religious tour group and travelled to Mosul to join ISIS. In November 2014, Arif Majeed was deported from Turkey (The Times of India 2014b).

Police interrogations with Arif Majeed further revealed that there are between 50 and 80 Tamil Muslims who have made their way to Syria and Iraq and are presently living and fighting alongside ISIS (Nag 2015). In addition, in July and August 2014, radical Kashmiri youths were seen waving ISIS flags during a demonstration against the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. In August 2014, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) revealed that ISIS and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan are working in tandem and have managed to recruit around 300 Indian youth into both these outfits (The Times of India 2014a).

The rising interest in jihadism within some Tamil Muslim communities in the state of Tamil Nadu is rather unprecedented (The Times of India 2014c). An example is 37-year-old Mohammad Haja Fakrudeen, a Tamil Muslim and now a Singapore citizen. Fakrudeen travelled to Syria and joined ISIS in early 2014. Reportedly, he is now living in Syria with his wife Ayesha Siddika and their three children and fighting alongside ISIS. Prior to leaving Singapore to join ISIS in Syria, Fakrudeen was in constant contact with members of the community in Tamil Nadu (Yuen-C 2014).

Similarly, in March 2014, Singapore deported Gul Mohamed Maracachi Maraicar of Tamil Nadu for allegedly radicalising Haja Fakrudeen Usmal Ali, who went to fight in Syria. Investigations revealed that there were ongoing efforts by jihadis to recruit college students in Tamil Nadu's capital, Chennai (The Hindu 2014a). The increasing traction of ISIS' appeal in Tamil Nadu can be attributed to its well-orchestrated social media presence and elaborate propaganda, employing technology and the use of Islamic symbols to lure its target audience. Through ISIS' media wing, Al Isabah, the group has released content in the Tamil language. A video entitled, "Al Gurabha: The Chosen Few of Different Lands" released in July 2014 features Tamil subtitles. ISIS has also highlighted India as a

“ In August 2014, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) revealed that ISIS and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan are working in tandem and have managed to recruit around 300 Indian youth into both these outfits. ”

target in its grand plans; a map released by the outfit shows a large part of India forming a section of the Islamic province of Khorasan (The Times of India 2014d). In one of his speeches, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had also called for Tamil Muslims to join ISIS. His speech was later translated into Tamil (Olmstead 2014).

Responding to ISIS Influence in Tamil Nadu

The growth in support for ISIS and the formation of the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), has brought about an increased sense of insecurity in South India.

This is evidenced by the implementation of high-signature security protection measures, similar to those in airports, at important places of worship in the state such as the Madurai Meenaachi Sundareswarar Temple and the Tanjore Big Temple. Check posts have been set up on major highways and traffic junctions in the state for the police to conduct random checks on individuals and vehicles. Additionally, there has also been a tangible increase in security measures implemented in shopping malls, bus terminals and railway stations across the state.

The people of Tamil Nadu have also taken to mobilising community institutions to come up with ground initiatives in response to the increasing cases of radicalisation of Tamil Muslims. There have been a number of initiatives by civil society movements like the Tamil Nadu *Thowheed Jamath* (TNTJ) and the Islamiyah College.

The Tamil Nadu *Thowheed Jamath* (TNTJ) actively engages on social media to propagate the message that violence of any form is not tolerated in Islam. Furthermore, the TNTJ also holds talks and conferences regularly to promote the correct understanding of jihad that is depicted in the Quran (Social-peek.com 2014). On 15 February 2015, the Islamiyah College organised a prayer session in Vanniyambadi, Tamil Nadu, for approximately 100,000 Muslims. The prayer session was in response to growing concerns raised by Tamil Muslim leaders about the increasingly negative perceptions of the Muslim community and the reports of sympathisers and allegiances to the global jihadist cause within South India (Facebook 2015). However, as with the threat, these initiatives are fairly new, and it remains to be seen how effective these initiatives may be at mitigating the rise in extremist ideas.

Owing to linguistic, geographical and cultural factors, Tamil Nadu has managed to remain relatively isolated from the rest of India from of global jihadism. However, this may not last long. At the same time, the Tamil Nadu Muslim community's response and initiatives to mitigating the rise of extremist influence are exemplary. In the long run however, there is a need for sustained community outreach focused on vulnerable segments – particularly the disenfranchised youth inclined to becoming influenced by the radical ideologies of transnational jihadist movements like ISIS.

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ISIS, AQIS and the Revival of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

Bangladeshi militants are gradually scaling up their activities in the country as they are aligning themselves with transnational terrorist networks such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda's newly formed wing in South Asia, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Given the nature of the threat, Bangladesh needs to have a whole of government and community centric approach including arrest, investigation, prosecution, counselling, rehabilitation of terrorists and greater public awareness as part of its overall counter-terrorism strategy.

Introduction

After a decade of dormancy, Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh are showing signs of revival. Based on recent investigations by Bangladeshi authorities, militants from at least two banned outfits, namely Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), have revived their organisational capabilities and are preparing for attacks in the country including targeted assassinations involving individuals whom they consider apostates or obstacles to establishing an Islamic State in Bangladesh (The Dhaka Tribune 2015). The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and the launch of Al Qaeda's South Asia chapter, known also as Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have also led to increasing militant activism in Bangladesh.

ISIS' Growing Traction in Bangladesh

Rising Militancy

Since ISIS declared the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, Bangladesh has witnessed the emergence of pro-ISIS outfits, pledges of allegiances to ISIS by these outfits, and recruitment drives carried out both online and on the ground on behalf of ISIS. This attests to ISIS' rising influence in Bangladesh. Furthermore, many members of the existing local militant groups are supporting ISIS and recruiting fighters into the Syrian theatres. In addition, a new militant platform called Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK, otherwise known as the 'Soldiers of Monotheism and the Caliphate') in Bangladesh is believed to have recruited a number of Bangladeshi nationals to fight in Syria.

Bangladeshi Islamist groups have formed a new umbrella organisation under the rubric of the 'International Lions Force of Hindustan.' The aim of this organisation is to bring militants from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, under its banner. According to one report, in October 2014, a four-member team of ISIS from Syria visited the south-eastern port city of Chittagong and met with the leaders from several local militant groups, including JMB, Huji and Hizb ut-Tahrir, and ABT. Police investigations revealed that the local militant groups were working in concert to establish a state based on Sharia (Islamic law) in Bangladesh by 2020, with the help of ISIS (The Dhaka Tribune 2015).

Pledges of Allegiance to ISIS

The recent pledges of allegiance by Bangladeshi militants to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi are a significant indication of ISIS' impact in Bangladesh. In August 2014, an English language video entitled 'Muslims in Bangladesh Give Bayah to the caliph Ibrahim (Hafizahulla)' surfaced on YouTube, with five masked individuals declaring their allegiance to ISIS' leader.

In October 2014, another video surfaced over the internet, featuring a newly-emerged group called Jund al-Tawheed wal Khilafah (JTK). In the video, members of JTK are seen pledging their allegiance to Abu Bakar al Baghdadi. In the video, the members of the group also stated that they were seeking recruits from Bangladesh and expressed its intentions to raise funds for militant

“ Police investigations revealed that the local militant groups were working in concert to establish a state based on Sharia (Islamic law) in Bangladesh by 2020, with the help of ISIS. ”

activities in South Asia for establishing a new “caliphate” called 'Hind'. Furthermore, JTK called on all Bangladeshi Muslims to participate in armed jihad, and to contribute financially to the cause. The group also declared that it is making preparations for 'Ghazwatul Hind' or the 'Final Battle of Hind' in the Indian subcontinent, with an eye to establishing an 'Islamic State' encompassing Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Bangladeshi authorities suspect that JTK is the key platform for recruiting Bangladeshi militants bound for the Syrian battlefield.

ISIS Recruitment in Bangladesh

ISIS recruits in Bangladesh are mostly drawn from existing local militant groups, comprising returnees of the Anti-Soviet Afghan jihad. While ISIS cells in Bangladesh benefit from ties to their local parent organisations such as JMB and ABT, it is highly likely that they operate with some degree of autonomy. This enables ISIS cells to harness the combined expertise and networks of more than a dozen militant groups, with various levels of capability.

A majority of ISIS' recruits in Bangladesh are from mainstream educational backgrounds, often coming from educated and relatively wealthy families. Many of ISIS' newly recruited members are university graduates who are former members of existing militant groups. This reflects the emerging demography of Islamist militants in Bangladesh. It should be noted that prior to 2014, Islamist militants mostly recruited students who were less educated, and in most cases, from more radical madrasas.

Additionally, although only a few eventually make their way to Syria, many Islamist militants continue to stay in Bangladesh and aspire towards establishing ISIS' version of a caliphate in the country. With an overwhelming youth majority, and with social media applications fast penetrating the country, Bangladesh is witnessing the persistent trend of radicalisation.

Prior to 2014, local Islamist militant groups like the Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) extensively used the internet and social media networks to disseminate propaganda and to encourage individuals to oppose the state, which the militants perceive to be overly secular. ISIS has galvanised this sentiment in their overall propaganda campaign, and has used this in their favour to recruit radicalised individuals under their banner from the predominantly religious perspective of a Muslim *ummah* (community), which lies at the core of ISIS' transnational appeal.

ISIS Recruitment from the Bangladeshi Diaspora

Bangladeshi authorities believe that there are ongoing recruitment efforts by ISIS-linked radicals from among the Bangladeshi diaspora communities in Britain. Although there are no accurate figures available, a handful of Bangladeshis – mostly from its diaspora community – have joined ISIS (Bashar 2015). For instance, in September 2014, Bangladeshi authorities arrested Samiul Rahman a.k.a Ibn Hamdan, a British citizen of Bangladeshi origin, for allegedly recruiting Bangladeshis to fight in Syria. Hamdan, a Syria returnee himself, was believed to have recruited at least two individuals from Bangladesh to travel to Syria, and was planning to recruit dozens more. His intention was to send the recruits to Syria under the ostensible cover of the Tabligh Jamaat (an Islamic movement widely perceived to be driven by apolitical goals) and even had plans to recruit militants from Myanmar as well (bdnews24.com 2014).

Based on information received from Hamdan, Bangladeshi authorities arrested Asif Adnan and Fazle Elahi Tanzil for planning to travel to Syria. Asif Adnan and Fazle Elahi Tanzil were members of the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and also had relatively solid connections with the JMB. Also, Asif reportedly introduced Hamdan to the JMB so he could render support to the group by

“ With its brutal and spectacular attacks, ISIS has been able to project itself as a potent transnational terrorist movement among the disparate radical groups and individuals worldwide, and specifically, in Bangladesh. ”

recruiting Bangladeshi fighters to join the JMB and eventually prepare them for jihad in Syria (The Daily Star 2014). Local militants, in collaboration with some ISIS supporters from the Bangladeshi diaspora, are believed to be forming ISIS cells in Bangladesh and are recruiting Bangladeshi fighters for the Syrian theatre. These ISIS cells have a strong presence on social media with which they identify prospective recruits ready to travel to Syria to fight under ISIS' banner.

Competing with ISIS: AQIS in Bangladesh

With its brutal and spectacular attacks, ISIS has been able to project itself as a potent transnational terrorist movement among the disparate radical groups and individuals worldwide, and specifically, in Bangladesh. ISIS has evinced itself as capable of upstaging even Al Qaeda and its South Asia wing, AQIS. Nonetheless, AQIS poses a threat that is more deeply entrenched, due to Al Qaeda's longstanding and extensive regional networks across South Asia.

The formal announcement of AQIS' launch in September 2014 by Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman Zawahiri, is believed to be a strategic move by the group to keep its traditional ties relevant in South Asia, particularly at a time when ISIS is gaining traction in the region.

The emergence of AQIS will further regionalise the threat, particularly since the group has explicitly stated its aim to emerge as a common platform for Islamist militant movements in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

AQIS’ Competitive Edge: Local Knowledge and Networks in South Asia

At present, AQIS’ competitive edge vis-à-vis ISIS rests on the fact that the group members have a fairly robust local knowledge and networks across the South Asian region. Unlike ISIS, Al Qaeda has had a long history of engagement in South Asia dating back to the 1980s, a period which saw Al Qaeda and South Asian militants fighting together in Afghanistan. While ISIS focuses on holding and expanding territories in Syria and Iraq and recruiting fighters for these theatres, AQIS takes a keen interest in exploiting local grievances in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Since September 2014, Bangladeshi authorities have arrested a significant number of militants from groups linked to Al Qaeda. These include militants from Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkatul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) as well as other smaller outfits and cells with suspected ties to the AQIS.

On 15 May 2015, Ansar al Islam Bangladesh, believed to be a new AQIS affiliate outfit in Bangladesh, posted a Bengali message on its Twitter account titled, “Who’s Next?” The message contained a full listing of potential targets. The seven categories include: any male or female academic, actor, blogger, doctor, engineer, judge, politician or writer who insults the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and distorts Islam and its rulings (SITE Intelligence 2015).

On 27 May 2015, the group provided an English translation for the message. In the message, “Ansar al Islam Bangladesh” emphasised that it does not have an issue with atheist bloggers or bloggers from religions other than Islam, but only those bloggers whose postings are insulting to the Prophet. While the JMB and HuJI-B maintain a low profile in respect of their relationships with AQIS, the ABT has openly supported AQIS through its jihadist websites and e-books.

In May 2015, the Bangladesh government banned ABT (Bdnews24 2015). The ABT came under the detectives’ scanner about three years ago when the government was cracking down on

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other extremist groups. ABT’s chief Mufti, Jashimuddin Rahmani, who was arrested in 2013, is currently being tried for the murder of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. Given the compatibilities in their agendas, it is highly likely that the rise of AQIS will embolden JMB and HuJI-B to carry out attacks in the country. JMB and HuJI-B are two key militant groups that have carried out many spectacular operations from 1999 until 2005. JMB reportedly has a suicide bombing squad, and is equipped with the expertise to manufacture Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

Implications and Outlook

Both ISIS and AQIS threaten the security of Bangladesh. Moreover, ISIS’ rising profile among militants in Bangladesh coincides with a generational shift of the local militants. These younger members who have joined the groups are more open to the idea of fighting overseas and may see it as an opportunity to flaunt their bravery, and as a manifestation of their commitment to the cause of the Islamic State. As a group, ISIS has the potential to empower existing Islamist militant movements with the ideology, network capabilities, financing and most importantly, with its brand image.

While some militants in Bangladesh aspire to travel to Syria to join the fight against the Assad regime, many prefer to become a part of ISIS' global network, remaining actively engaged in armed jihad and to replicate ISIS' strategy on their home soil. At the same time, AQIS' extensive local contacts in Bangladesh cannot be discounted. Unlike ISIS, AQIS takes a direct interest in framing local grievances in the context of its cause. Therefore, despite ISIS' growing influence, it is likely that AQIS will continue to have its own niche of support.

Bangladesh's counter-terrorism response is currently at a critical juncture, and its preparedness to counter emerging threats remains under scrutiny. At the same time, operational responses alone are proving inadequate. It is particularly important for Bangladesh to scale up capacity in the cyber and digital domain, particularly on social media networks, and to build up technical capabilities and expertise for monitoring and countering violent extremism online. The country still lacks a dedicated counter-terrorism agency that can cover various critical areas like arrest, investigation, prosecution, counselling and rehabilitation of terrorists and building greater public awareness on counter-terrorism issues. It is also essential for the government to partner closely with the community and media organisations to overcome the appeal of virulent ideologies of global terrorist movements, and to strengthen the country's overall social resilience.

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Decapitating the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan: An Effective Counter-Terrorism Strategy?

Sara Mahmood

Decapitation has been employed as a counter-terrorism strategy by the U.S. and Pakistan to curb the threat of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, this has not been entirely effective at weakening the group, as attacks by TTP continue unabated. Two levels of analysis are presented in this article to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of decapitation, particularly with respect to the TTP: (1) the snake-head metaphor, and (2) the centrality of ideological mobilisation and the symbolic and ceremonial role of the leader. To deter support for and recruitment by TTP, a concerted strategy against TTP must also involve efforts to win the hearts and minds of the population.

Decapitation as a counter-terrorism strategy is being used by both the U.S. and Pakistan to deal with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), otherwise known as the 'Movement of the Pakistani Taliban'. TTP was formed in December 2007, under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud to enforce Sharia (Islamic Law) in the country. However, since its formation, the group has been responsible for large-scale attacks on government, military and civilian targets. While the Pakistani Army has been employing a mix of strategies – airstrikes, ground offensives and even peace deals to contain the group, the U.S. has been deploying drones, in an attempt to eliminate TTP's leaders. In counter-terrorism, decapitation is referred to as the removal of a terrorist organisation's top leadership through kinetic means such as catching, and placing under detention, or killing (Cronin 2011). This is based on the belief that neutralising the leader of an organisation will weaken the leader of an organisation and lead to the group's eventual demise.

In her book *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Audrey Kurth Cronin (2011) discusses the strategy of decapitation at length, stating that its effects are inconsistent. She adds that decapitation has led to the weakening of, or the precipitous disintegration of, a few groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA), while making others such as Hamas, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, otherwise known as FARC) even stronger.

Cronin argues that the killing of the group's leader will not necessarily weaken the group entirely. Particularly, in the case of TTP, the killings of Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud by the U.S. drone strikes were largely ineffective at reducing the capabilities, operations and the group's activities.

The Snake-Head Metaphor

Decapitation is defined as the act of removing the head from the body and is commonly associated with the death of a living entity. The term decapitation has been symbolically used in the context of counter-terrorism strategy to indicate that the leader represents the head of the organisation, without which, the entity would cease to exist.

On 5 August 2009, Baitullah Mehsud, the leader and one of the founding members of TTP was killed in a U.S. drone strike in the South Waziristan Agency (SWA), northwest of Pakistan. On 22 August 2009, Hakimullah Mehsud was made the leader of TTP. During the brief period when the group was without a leader however, TTP continued to carry out attacks, including suicide bombings and targeted killings.

Subsequently, on 1 November 2013, Hakimullah Mehsud was killed in another drone strike in the North Waziristan Agency (NWA). Following the death of Hakimullah Mehsud, a dispute occurred between the Mehsuds and the Punjabi Taliban over who would succeed Hakimullah Mehsud as successor. The Mehsuds are a Pashtun tribe with roots in SWA and had dominated leadership positions in the group since its inception. However, members of the Punjabi Taliban have been supplying highly trained and motivated fighters to the group.

“ ... in the case of TTP, the killings of Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud by U.S. drone strikes were largely ineffective at reducing the capabilities, operations and the group's activities. ”

While the Mehsuds felt that leadership should remain within their tribe, the Punjabi Taliban claimed that a particular member from their group named Mullah Fazlullah was a better fit (Al Jazeera 2014). Though, TTP broke into factions due to the differences over leadership.

On the surface, it could be argued that the policy of decapitation was effective for two reasons: firstly, disputes erupted over the potential successor of TTP, and secondly, shortly after this conflict, multiple factions with different leaders emerged out of an earlier and comparatively more unified TTP (Kim 2010). On the contrary, however, the threat issuing from the TTP increased for two reasons.

Firstly, like before, the group managed to appoint a new leader less than a month after the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud, thus ensuring that the loss of leadership through decapitation had little, if any, impact on group's activities. Secondly, the threat diversified. Rather than dealing simply with one group, the state now had to contend with multiple factions of TTP acting independently of each other.

Thus, in respect of TTP, the decapitation strategy is a misnomer, as elimination of the group's leadership did not bring about the group's downfall. In other words, decapitation further complicated the threat, as the government has had to deal with a hydra-headed serpent, i.e., multiple threats with multiple leaders emerging from its various factions.

Additionally, after Baitullah Mehsud's death, the group continued to carry out violent attacks, focusing more on sensitive government and civilian targets. Moreover, killing the leaders created martyr-figures, a source for which inevitably spurred radicalisation and recruitment (Sarupu, Langdon and Wells 2004).

Centrality of Ideological Mobilisation

While implementing the strategy of decapitation, authorities often fall into the trap of what is described as mirror-imaging. This implies a scenario where states view the enemy as a reflection of themselves, or as maintaining a rigid hierarchical structure primarily due to having a strong leadership in place (Cronin 2011).

When targeting TTP, the U.S. and Pakistan perceive the group in a similar manner, specifically regarding cutting out the leadership and causing the organisation's collapse. However, Cronin's terrorist triad and related argument explains the inaccuracy of this perspective.

The triad comprises of three factors: (i) the group's use of terror tactics, (ii) the government as the direct target, (iii) and the audience influenced by terror and violence (Cronin 2011). Cronin states that a most integral variable is the popular support of the group's cause, a critical variable which the U.S. and Pakistan have overlooked.

TTP primarily draws its support base from the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province in north-western Pakistan. The strength of support TTP receives in FATA and parts of KPK is associated with the extent to which the group's ideology resonates with its membership and supporters.

This support is intricately linked to ideological mobilisation, which is critical for the resiliency of groups like TTP. Ideological mobilisation is correlated with the idea that the group can use ideology as a means to justify its use of violence in support for achieving its goals. Therefore, it can be argued that, the failure of decapitation as a counter-terrorism strategy is due to the persistence and resilience of a particular group's ideology – in this case, TTP's – which has been internalised by the group's members and accepted by its supporters.

“ ...the failure of decapitation as a counter-terrorism strategy can be attributed to the persistence and resilience of a particular group's ideology – in this case, TTP's – which has been internalised by the group's members and accepted by its supporters. ”

When TTP was formed in December 2007, the founders of the group cited their three primary ideological motivations, the enforcement of Sharia in Pakistan, unity against coalition forces in Afghanistan, and the need for armed jihad against the Pakistani Army (Jamal and Ahsan 2015). For TTP, this ideological framework forms the basis of the association of and attraction for the members and supporters of the group.

Two additional dimensions of the centrality of ideology are worth mentioning here. First, the death of the leader can often result in a wave of retaliatory attacks. Killing the leader makes the ideological motivations stronger and leads to an increased spate of violence (Foreign Affairs 2006).

For TTP, the reinforced theme of revenge was evident after Baitullah Mehsud's death in 2009. According to the Global Terrorism Database from the University of Maryland, there were an average of 155 attacks carried out by TTP in 2009, and the number declined slightly to 150 in 2010 (Global Terrorism Database 2014).

Despite the slight drop in attacks, TTP was responsible – either by its own claim or attribution – for attacks on sensitive targets such as the United Nations (UN) World Food Programme in Islamabad in October 2009, the Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi in the same month, and the suicide bombing attack outside a senior government official's office in Mohmand Agency in July 2010 (Jamal and Ahsan 2015).

Similarly on 16 December 2014, the Fazlullah faction of TTP carried out a brutal attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar, one of the most deadly attacks in Pakistan, and the most violent attack by the group since its formation. In the attack more than 132 children were killed. In the wake of the attack, TTP cited the Pakistan Army's military campaign on its strongholds and families as the central motivation (The Diplomat 2014).

Second, frequent decapitation attacks by the U.S. on the TTP strongholds have hardened anti-U.S. sentiments not only among the members of the group but also within the general population, especially those that empathise with TTP's cause. Initially, the goals of the group were limited to implementing a radical version of Sharia within Pakistan while discrediting the legitimacy of the government. Targeting the U.S.' interests in Pakistan and U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan were rather peripheral to TTP's objectives until the group was exposed to decapitation.

Redefining Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Despite the counterproductive outcomes however, Pakistan and the U.S. continue to pursue decapitation as a strategy to counter TTP, in large part because the drone strikes and air strikes do not involve excessive manpower and huge losses of their respective military personnel. However, when TTP is continually being targeted through the said strategy, radicalisation as well as entrenched group motivations enabling the threat to fester and spread.

To be sure, TTP's core motivations relate not only to its primary goal of establishing a state based on Sharia, but (now) also retaliation for the killing of its leaders. Therefore, a counter-ideological framework is also necessary to target the reasons that drive the group for violence and attract future recruits.

“ ...TTP cited the Pakistani Army's military campaign on its strongholds and families as the central motivation. ”

David Kilcullen (2010) presents two approaches to counter-insurgency with reference to Iraq and Afghanistan; the enemy-centric and the population-centric approach.

The same strategies can be applied in the context of Pakistan for reasons that fighting TTP is not unlike the fight against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Afghan Taliban. However, states that overwhelmingly rely on decapitation appear too focused on an enemy-centric approach – the use of kinetic means to eliminate the leadership of the groups. This however risks collateral damages in terms of civilian casualties, destruction of properties including vital infrastructure and internal displacement (Kilcullen 2010).

In order to address the root cause that is driving individuals towards the ideology, a population-centric approach needs to be adopted. This approach is intertwined with winning the hearts and minds of the people who may either be classified as supporters, sympathisers, potential supporters and sympathisers or even those within the community who are affected by the conflict.

A population-centric approach would include community development efforts in the affected areas, which can even be extended to include combatants in the form of structured terrorist rehabilitation programmes.

Moreover, a counter-ideological approach with a high quality religious education programme, specifically targeting the rationale for perpetuating violence, could have a more long-lasting impact.

Presently, the counter-terrorism approach in Pakistan, as practiced by the country's security establishment and the U.S., represents over-militarisation. A decreased reliance on kinetic means and a shift to soft approaches are more likely to win over the hearts and minds of the affected population, and reduce the number of future recruits for terrorist groups.

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Will the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Trade the Taliban for ISIS?

Hekmatullah Azamy

Despite serious rivalries between the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and both the Afghan Taliban as well as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has declared allegiance to ISIS. Although IMU's show of support for ISIS may very well cripple its long-standing relations with the Taliban, there is also the possibility that IMU may be able to ameliorate the relationship between the Taliban and ISIS, or succeed in courting both the Taliban and ISIS, thereby increasing the risk of militancy in the region.

Introduction

With the imminent withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) in 2014, there is an overall perception that Islamist terrorism will intensify in the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and in the surrounding region. This is due in large part to the shifts in alliances, agendas and geographical focus of the militant groups in the region due to ISIS.

To date, the most significant Central Asian terrorist group, in terms of operational capabilities has been the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). IMU emerged in the late 1990s from earlier militant Islamist configurations created to oppose the Central Asian governments. Due to IMU's longstanding history of ties to the Afghan Taliban, as well as with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the declaration of allegiance by IMU to ISIS raises serious concerns.

So far, IMU's decision to side with ISIS has had no major impact on the former's relationship with the Taliban, but growing hostilities between the Taliban and ISIS will certainly place IMU in a Catch-22 situation in the near future. Members from the two rival groups, the Taliban and ISIS, have recently clashed in Afghanistan. In terms of IMU's relationship with both the Taliban and ISIS, there are three likely scenarios can be conceived.

IMU is projected to make attempts to mend the strained relationship and rivalry between the Taliban and ISIS. If IMU succeeds in doing so, it would consolidate the focus of both Taliban and ISIS in the region, thereby increasing the threat of militancy and undermining security in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Should IMU fail in its attempt, IMU is likely to split into pro-Taliban and pro-ISIS factions so as to maintain ties with the two. In a worst-case scenario, IMU could eventually make a clean and decisive break with the Taliban. Additionally, it could co-opt other militants, especially those that are frustrated with the Taliban and keen to switch their allegiances to ISIS.

IMU, Taliban and ISIS

Since its formation in the late 1990s, IMU has been able to gain the trust of the Taliban. This was due to the fact that IMU had supported the Taliban in their fight against the Northern Alliance (NA) forces during the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan. In return, the Taliban provided facilities like training camps for IMU's Central Asian fighters. Subsequently, IMU also supported the Taliban's resistance against America's post-9/11 campaign to topple the Taliban. This reciprocal relationship continued even in the wake of the collapse of the Taliban regime and even after IMU's co-founder, Juma Namangani was killed in November 2001 in Kunduz province while resisting the U.S.-led invasion. With the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, many members of the Taliban, IMU, and their associated groups moved to the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan.

While in FATA, IMU quickly developed ties with the Pakistani militants which enabled it to revive and recover. Since then IMU has continued to partner with both the Afghan Taliban and TTP in exchange of safe haven and other logistics. In fact, in 2013, IMU even formed a combined unit

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with TTP named Ansar al-Aseer with the aim of freeing TTP members held in Pakistani prisons (Roggio 2013). In Afghanistan, IMU has also been facilitating the trafficking of Afghan opium into the black markets in Central Asia on behalf of the Afghan Taliban (Siddique 2015). IMU's presence in the northern Kunduz and Baghlan provinces of Northern Afghanistan, bordering Central Asia's Tajikistan, has been a significant security concern in this regard.

In June 2014, when Pakistan launched Operation Zarb-e-Azb, a joint military offensive against various militant groups in North Waziristan Agency of FATA, IMU's fighters were forced to return to Afghanistan. Since the start of the Taliban spring offensive in 2015- codenamed Operation Azm - members of IMU fighting alongside local militants have been seeking footholds in the Badghis, Faryab, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces mainly due to the proximity of these provinces with the CARs.

Currently, there are between 5,000 and 7,000 Central Asians fighting under IMU, mostly in northern Afghanistan (Siddique 2015). In addition to well-developed ties with the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban, IMU and its offshoot, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), have both cooperated with transnational terrorist groups like Al Qaeda. In turn, Al Qaeda has supported IMU and the IJU financially and in terms of other logistics.

Despite this however, on 26 September 2014, IMU leader Usman Gazi declared support for ISIS (IHS Janes 2014). In March 2015, a Radio Free Europe report revealed that in a video posted online, an individual calling himself Sadulla Urgenji who claimed to be from IMU, announced that the group no longer views Mullah Muhammad Omar as leader of Taliban, as he has not been seen for about 13 years (Radio Free Europe 2015). Given the tense relationship between the Taliban and ISIS and given the fact that IMU has declared support for ISIS, there is a high chance that IMU will be caught in the middle of the two rival groups.

Taliban-ISIS Relationship: Implications for IMU

In late 2014, reports surfaced that ISIS has been making visible inroads into the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, which ISIS claims as its Khorasan province. The Taliban initially attempted to downplay the ISIS claim, though it was concerned about losing its fighters to ISIS (Azamy and Weir 2015). Recently, both the Afghan Taliban and TTP have begun to question the legitimacy of the group's brutal activities and the credibility of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the Caliph.

Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban even clashed with ISIS in several provinces of Afghanistan. In late May 2015, TTP rejected ISIS' so-called caliphate, and argued that there is little evidence in Islamic literature in support for such a caliphate (Joscelyn 2015).

In response, the Islamic State Khorasan group (ISK) released a video threatening Taliban and demanding that they either pledge allegiance to ISIS or be ready for the fight. In retaliation, in mid-June 2015, the Taliban sent out an open letter to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi warning ISIS to stay out of Afghanistan, asserting that the fight in the country should be "under one flag and one leadership," highlighting the tensions between the Taliban and ISIS (Sudarsan 2015).

The continuing hostility between the Taliban and ISIS has left IMU caught in the middle of the two adversaries. Since the start of Operation Azm in April 2015, the Afghan Taliban has shifted its focus to Afghanistan's northern region to maintain its supremacy, due to concerns about IMU-led foreign fighters gaining an upper hand there (Azamy 2015).

“ ... the Afghan Taliban has shifted its focus to Afghanistan's northern region to maintain its supremacy, due to concerns about IMU-led foreign fighters gaining an upper hand there. ”

However, IMU has continued to publicly work with the Taliban, which could be one of the reasons why IMU has not yet been assigned any major role in the ISK.

IMU likely views its future relations with ISIS in a more optimistic light than with the Taliban. Both IMU and ISIS share a common interest in radical Salafist and global jihad ideology. (Azamy and Weir 2015). The Taliban-IMU alliance on the other hand can be characterised as a relationship of convenience, based on reciprocal exchanges. Unlike IMU, members of the Taliban are followers of Deobandi sect and focus their militant activities mainly within Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the lack of any outcome of the peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government, as well as the continued ambiguity surrounding the status of Mullah Omar, are further push factors for IMU to side with ISIS. At the same time however, IMU at present cannot, break any of its ties with the Afghan Taliban, given the strategic importance that Afghanistan has for the group, as a sanctuary and as a base for operations.

Future of Taliban-ISIS-IMU Relationship

After losing its safe sanctuaries in Pakistan's FATA, Afghanistan remains a critical launch pad for IMU fighters to stage its activities in the broader region. To maintain these sanctuaries, the group has three possible options, which will also determine its relationships with the Taliban and ISIS in future.

The first possible scenario is one whereby IMU sees itself as a bridge between the two groups and try to mend the hostility between the Taliban and ISIS. Although this may seem challenging, IMU could serve as a mediator between the Taliban and ISIS, and may convince the two to put aside differences and compromise by working together. IMU's contributions to the Taliban's manpower, and IMU's facilitation of the Taliban's opium trade across Central Asia may be used as a form of leverage, enabling the group to influence the Taliban's views towards ISIS. As for ISIS, without having the Taliban on board, it would be next to impossible for the group to make significant gains in the Khorasan region – given that ISIS does not have its own manpower in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In this regard, IMU could also function as a deal broker between the Taliban and ISIS, facilitating meetings between the two and enabling them to move ahead. There are caveats to this, however, and an official alliance is unlikely to materialise – as both Mullah Omar and Abu Bakar al Baghdadi lay claim to the ultimate spiritual authority, and ISIS' younger leader, Abu Bakar al Baghdadi expects Mullah Omar to pledge allegiance to him. The Taliban would tolerate, and even cooperate, with ISIS if the latter agrees not to interfere in the affairs of the Taliban and remain as a guest in the Taliban's territory.

The other alternative would be for IMU to split up into pro-Taliban and pro-ISIS factions. Being an opportunistic organisation, IMU would be able to court both the Taliban and ISIS without compromising its own long-term agenda of establishing an Islamic State in Central Asia. Assuming that both factions will not fight each other, such an approach would allow IMU to continue enjoying safe sanctuaries in Taliban-controlled areas, while also becoming a recipient of tremendous ISIS support.

In the worst case IMU would be forced to make a clean break from the Taliban. If the relationship between ISIS and the Taliban continues to deteriorate and results in open hostility, IMU will likely be either forced to strengthen ties with ISIS and sever its ties with the Taliban or to make a clean break from ISIS. This would depend on the gains from either side, or the prospects of ISIS becoming stronger than the Taliban in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre. IMU and ISIS would then work jointly to recruit vulnerable Taliban members and influence the weaker, autonomous and semi-autonomous militant units.

“ After losing its safe sanctuaries in Pakistan’s FATA, Afghanistan remains a critical launch pad for IMU fighters to stage its activities in the broader region. ”

This would include the disenfranchised, pro-ISIS elements that are cooperating with the Taliban not out of allegiance but to counterbalance the larger anti-ISIS Taliban in Khorasan (Azamy and Weir 2015). The focus of IMU would then be on Afghanistan and the diversion of the flow of their fighters from supporting ISIS in the Middle East back into the northern part of Afghanistan. However, this remains an unlikely scenario, as ISIS would like to keep as many fighters as possible, even to seek more to hang on to its own territory in Iraq, Syria and in the broader Middle East. This outcome would also depend on ISIS' financial support for IMU. Currently, ISIS itself has not been seen to be supporting IMU in any material fashion.

Conclusion

The Taliban views ISIS as a threat, but it is still too early to predict if the latter would be able to overcome the well-established Taliban. If, however, the pro-ISIS alliance against the Taliban gains in strength, the Taliban may also begin to receive covert support of countries like Iran that see ISIS as a common threat. Meanwhile, rival jihadists groups like ISIS and Taliban are likely to realise that inter-group fighting would weaken them. IMU is carefully calculating possible outcomes of its decisions regarding ties with Taliban and ISIS to make the choice that will best serve the group's own interests. Among the three projected scenarios, the third scenario is least likely to take place, as much will depend on ISIS' willingness to invest in and empower IMU against an anti-ISIS Taliban as it makes inroads into Khorasan. IMU is more inclined towards choosing the first two scenarios, because both trajectories will serve IMU's jihad agenda.

Projecting the potential developments on the side of Taliban-ISIS relations and how it influences IMU's course of action regarding alliances in the region will enable security agencies to assess and anticipate the threat of militancy in coming months.

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Central Asia's New Threat Landscape: An Assessment

Nodirbek Soliev

The advent of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and its claim of establishment of a caliphate have created a new generation of Central Asian militants in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the rivalry between Al Qaeda Central and ISIS has led to splits among the Central Asian jihadist groups operating both in the Middle East and the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatres, introducing a complicated and polarised threat landscape to the region. This development looks likely to be further complicated by the prospect of the NATO-led International Security Force (ISAF) drawdown in Afghanistan.

Introduction

Countries in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are now facing spill over effects of the chaos and armed conflicts in the Middle East. The growing penetration of ISIS' ideological influence into Central Asia has led to an increase in the number of people volunteering to join the 'jihad' in Syria and Iraq. Based on official reports from the region, an estimated 1,700 Central Asians, comprising – 412 Tajik (ASIA-Plus 2015), 360 Turkmen (Regnum 2015), 352 Kyrgyz (AKIpress 2015), 300 Kazakh (Tengrinews 2014) and 200 Uzbek (UzDaily 2015) nationals – are now fighting there. Incidentally, the majority of these individuals are of Uzbek ethnicity, although they may be citizens of other Central Asian countries. For instance, eighty percent of Kyrgyz nationals fighting in Syria and Iraq are said to be ethnic Uzbeks (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2015). There are substantial Uzbek minorities in a number of countries i.e., about 2.9 million ethnic Uzbeks reside in Afghanistan, 1.1 million in Tajikistan, 680,000 in Kyrgyzstan, 500,000 in Kazakhstan and 350,000 in Turkmenistan. Considering the prevalence of ethnic Uzbeks across Central Asia and in Afghanistan, and the large number of Central Asian ethnic Uzbek fighters in Syria, there is the likelihood that there would be a growth in the number of

radicalised to join the fight in Syria and Iraq. Afghanistan, on the other hand, remains the traditional battlefield of Central Asian militants. The drawdown of Western forces in Afghanistan has created a favourable atmosphere for the resurgence of local and foreign militant entities including Central Asian groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict theatres.

To further complicate the situation, the February 2014 split between Al Qaeda Central and ISIS has led to a reconfiguration of the Central Asian jihadist groups in both the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan theatres. More significantly, in September 2014, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an Al Qaeda-linked transnational terrorist group based in tribal Pakistan for the past 13 years, pledged allegiance to ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Since the Pakistani military launched its 'Zarb e Azb' campaign in June 2014, IMU has lost sanctuaries in Pakistan and the group's members have since relocated into Afghanistan. Many of them are now seeking to regain a foothold particularly in Afghanistan's northern provinces, an area that borders close to Central Asia.

Finally, there is a possibility that Central Asian jihadists in Syria and Iraq and their compatriots in Afghanistan and Pakistan stand united in spite of geographical distance and may coordinate their efforts to conduct militant operations against Central Asian countries. This will likely lead to deeper linkages established between these local and region militants with existing transnational militant movements, namely, Al Qaeda or ISIS, and the use of Afghanistan as an easy gateway for infiltrating into the region. Either of these scenarios will pose significant challenges for the countries in the region in the long-run.

Threat in Afghanistan: IMU and IJU

IMU's pledge of allegiance to ISIS seems to be a strategic move to rebrand itself in order to attract fresh recruits from Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to elicit external funding from its supporters and sympathisers to expand its operations. Following the Pakistani army's operation 'Zarb-e-Azb,' IMU has experienced significant losses in terms of its sanctuaries in tribal Pakistan. Many of IMU militants have been forced to relocate into Afghanistan. This is also followed by a significant decline in the group's logistical supplies, funding and manpower, which has pushed IMU to

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undergo an operational and organisational transformation. As of 2014, IMU's strength is said to lie somewhere between 3,000 (CA-portal 2014) and 5,000 (12news.uz 2014). Although hundreds of the IMU militants were killed during operation 'Zarb-e-Azb', the group's leaders appear to have survived though their whereabouts remain unknown (Dawn 2014).

During this period however, some of its members appear to have left the group and travelled to Syria and Iraq. Between late 2014 and mid-2015, IMU expanded its pro-ISIS propaganda and recruitment activities among both Uzbek and non-Uzbek people across Afghanistan.

To this end, it has produced and published several propaganda videos in Uzbek and Dari, Tajik and Pashto languages. The publication of propaganda videos in non-Uzbek languages represents a significant development. At the same time, IMU has heightened its militant operations against the Afghan security forces in northern Afghanistan, including in Jowzjan, Badghis, Takhar, Kunduz, Badakhshan and Faryab provinces. Tajik security authorities expressed concerns about the deteriorating security situation, particularly in the three

Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces bordering Tajikistan, where 1,500 militants of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and also IMU and its Tajik affiliate Jamaat Ansarullah are said to be staged (ASIA-Plus 2015).

At present, IMU's relations with the Taliban is in limbo. In November 2014, the IMU's leader, Usmon Ghazi (also named Abdunosir Valiev) refuted claims about the existence of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar and IMU later criticised the Taliban for its willingness to participate in peace talks with the U.S. and Afghanistan governments. In an audio statement uploaded on IMU's website, Ghazi accused the Afghan Taliban of being a "commissioner" of the Pakistani government and also claimed that, instead of struggling to establish Sharia (Islamic Law) across Afghanistan, the Taliban has chosen to come to a "political agreement with the governments of the kuffar [infidels]". For this reason, the weakening of IMU's decades-long ties with the Taliban is likely due to the ongoing peace negotiations between the governments of Afghanistan and the U.S. with the Taliban.

Should negotiations succeed, it could lead the Taliban to disown its links with Al Qaeda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Reuters 2015). In addition, the Taliban may pledge to refuse IMU safe sanctuaries in Afghanistan (The Huffington Post 2013). This is most likely to affect the Taliban's support to IMU, including its presence in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the relationship between the Taliban and IMU will depend on the outcome of the peace negotiations. The future trajectory of Taliban-ISIS relations is another factor that will likely impact relations between the Taliban and IMU, although ISIS has so far withheld from commenting about IMU's newly proclaimed allegiance to ISIS.

At the same time, there have been some statements of support and allegiance for the ISIS from elements in the Afghan Taliban and TTP since 2014. In early 2015, these elements announced the establishment of ISIS' local affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, namely the Khurasan Shura. The Khurasan Shura has already started its recruitment and operational activities on behalf of ISIS in different parts of the two countries. Such pro-ISIS militants in Afghanistan seem to be offering shelter and protection to IMU's militants. This is in spite of the fact that IMU claims some of its members have dispersed in different areas in tribal Pakistan and are currently working closely with

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TTP. On the other hand, IMU's ties to TTP remain intact. Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is another Al Qaeda-linked Central Asian terrorist group that remains active in Afghanistan. IJU has been based in tribal Pakistan since its split from IMU in 2002 and remains close to the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda. IJU aims to establish a global Islamic caliphate through engaging in armed 'jihad' against the governments of Central Asian republics, as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the U.S. and Germany.

For instance, IJU cells, comprising predominantly German Muslim converts and European Turks, have plotted a number of attacks on the U.S., German and listed probable Uzbek targets in Germany in the past (Deutsche Welle 2015). Currently, IJU, together with Al Qaeda and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), are actively involved in the Taliban's offensive against the Afghan government, in what is better known as Operation 'Azm' ("Perseverance"), spanning across Afghanistan.

Central Asians with ISIS

Today, the extant threat posed by ISIS is likely gain momentum. A June 2014 map published by ISIS revealed that the group's ultimate plan is to further expand its territories in those areas under the rule of historical Arab caliphates from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries.

These areas include the Middle East, North Africa, mainland Spain, Iran, Russia's southern territories, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent (Daily Mail 2015). The emergence of ISIS, and the ongoing turmoil in Syria have inspired a general interest from Central Asian jihadists in that theatre, despite the Middle East not being a part of their traditional area of operations. A number of Central Asian groups are now active in Syria and Iraq and some Central Asian militants have taken on leadership positions in the fight against Bashar al Assad, either with Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (JN) or with ISIS.

Over the past two years, most Central Asian jihadists in Syria and Iraq have established and organised themselves into a number of independent combat units known as *kateebat* (battalion) or *jamaat* (group) on the basis of ethnicity, kinship or language. Although a majority of these units are based on a single dominant Central Asian ethnicity, they are also comprised of some Russian and Turkic-speaking people such as Chechens, Dagestani, Uyghurs and Tatars, and also Arabs. Previously, Central Asian jihadists were loosely organised under mainly Chechen militants.

The militant unit comprising Kazakh fighters is known as 'Kazakh Jamaat' (Ktk.kz 2014). The majority of Tajik jihadists have come together under a militant unit known as 'Tajik Jamaat'. The Kazakh and Tajik Jamaats have been fighting alongside ISIS and its military commander - Omar Shishani's Chechen Jamaat. Ethnic Uzbeks on the other hand have established Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB)/ Imam Al-Bukhari Battalion and Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ)/'Battalion for Monotheism and Jihad'. KIB and KTJ are operating alongside Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (JN). It is worth noting that JN and most of its allies, including KIB and KTJ, are now part of Jaish al Fatah ('Army of Conquest'), the new coalition of jihadists in Syria which has been fighting against Bashar al Assad since March 2015 (The Independent 2015). Additionally, some of these units have been established and commanded by hard-core veterans of the Taliban and Al Qaeda's affiliates (12news.uz 2015).

Supporting ISIS: Kazakh and Tajik Jamaats

As mentioned above, the majority of Kazakhs (Ktk.kz 2014) and Tajiks have been fighting

“ Over the past two years, most Central Asian jihadists in Syria and Iraq have established and organised themselves into a number of independent combat units... on the basis of ethnicity, kinship, or language... previously, Central Asian jihadists were loosely organised under mainly Chechen militants. ”

alongside ISIS in Syria. A video circulated by ISIS on the internet in October 2013 featured about 150 Kazakh jihadists, including young children, teenagers and women, and was most salient in terms of shedding light into the trend of families participating in 'jihad' (The Observers 2015).

On 22 November 2014, ISIS' Al Hayat media wing released another propaganda video entitled "Race towards Good" which featured Kazakh fighters and about 20 Kazakh children studying in a *madrassa* and receiving instruction at a training camp in Syria's northern city of Raqqa, ISIS fortress (Weiss 2014).

A number of notable individuals fighting for the ISIS are also of Kazakh and Tajik origin. Nusrat Nazarov (also known by his nom de guerre of Makhsumi Nusrat) from Tajikistan's Khatlon province commands Tajiks fighting under ISIS. Also, in August 2014, Syrian media reported that ISIS appointed an unnamed Tajik man as an 'emir' of Raqqa (Central Asia Online 2014), whom some believe to be Nazarov (Central Asia Online 2015).

A third individual of note is Col. Gulmurod Halimov, the commander of the Tajik Interior Ministry's Special Purpose Mobile Unit (Otryad Mobilny Osobogo Naznacheniya: OMON), who vanished in late April 2015. In a video uploaded on the internet by ISIS on 28 May 2015, Halimov claimed that he had joined ISIS (ASIA-Plus 2015).

Supporting Al Qaeda and JN: KIB and KTJ

Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB) – also the 'Taliban branch in Syria'?

Uzbek fighters founded Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB), or Imam Bukhari Jamaat as an independent jihadist unit in Syria in late 2013. Currently led by Salahuddin Haji Yusuf (A.K.A. Akmal Juraboev), KIB at present, is the most prominent among the Central Asian combat units in Syria and Iraq.

In October 2014, in a video statement uploaded on KIB's website, Salahuddin claimed that his group was authorised by the Taliban leadership and that it is a subsidiary branch of the Taliban in Syria. In the same video, about 80-90 masked fighters swore oaths of loyalty to Mullah Omar. Salahuddin claimed that he had fought for a long time in Afghanistan after he himself pledged allegiance to Mullah Omar in 1998. Furthermore, according to Salahuddin, before joining the jihad in Syria in 2013, he met with top Taliban leaders in Afghanistan such as Mullah Norullah Noori and Sirajuddin Haqqani. However, this was disputed in an online statement by IMU wherein it was clarified that Salahuddin had never met with Mullah Omar. In a statement issued on its website, IMU also blamed Salahuddin for "hijacking" the group's "hard work" in Turkey and Syria.

KIB is the first and currently only foreign jihadist unit which claims to represent the Taliban in Syria. On one hand, it has challenged Taliban's denial of its involvement in the Syrian war (Gulf Times 2014). On the other hand, however, KIB's allegiance to the Taliban could possibly be more symbolic in nature – a strategic move to project Salahuddin's legitimacy as the group's leader, and to unite dispersed Central Asian individuals and splinter cells in Syria. There are reports that, in the 2000s, Salahuddin was one of the key members of IMU in Saudi Arabia and the UAE where his main responsibility was fundraising and recruitment (12news.uz 2015).

“ Based on information gleaned from police interrogations of six Kyrgyz nationals upon their return from Syria, KIB is said to comprise of about 150 – 200 fighters of predominantly Uzbek origin. ”

However, after IMU's founding leader, Takhir Yuldashev was killed in a U.S. drone strike in the tribal areas of Pakistan in 2009, there was an internal dispute between Salahuddin and the new leadership of the group over financial issues, which led Salahuddin and about 50 militants to leave IMU and travel to Turkey in 2011. Aside from claiming to represent the Taliban in Syria, a number of videos released by KIB suggest that it has been actively fighting alongside JN.

KIB, together with the Chechen-led Jaish al Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMA), Ahrar ash-Sham and Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) have actively participated in Jaish al Fatah and JN's militant operations against the Syrian government forces in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo and Idlib.

In 2014, KIB released two videos of its training camps in Aleppo. Each video showed about 50 to 70 fighters practicing military drills, weapons and martial arts. Based on information gleaned from police interrogation of six Kyrgyz nationals upon their return from Syria, KIB is said to comprise of about 150 – 200 fighters of predominantly Uzbek origin (Kabar.kg 2015).

KIB disseminates propaganda mainly through its Uzbek language website and its media wing named "Al-Fath Studio". Al Fath Studio has produced many high-quality propaganda videos from the battlefield to showcase KIB's military strength and to attract new members.

Kateebat at Tawhidwal Jihad (KTJ)

The other pro-Al Qaeda Central Asian jihadist unit comprising members who are of Uzbek origin is Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), established in December 2014. Abu Saloh, whose real name is Mukhtarov Sirajidin, is the leader of KTJ. Abu Saloh is an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan's southern Osh province (Saraleva 2015). Most information about KTJ comes from videos produced by its media wing of Jannat Oshiqdari ('Lovers of Paradise'). The analysis of the contents of the videos suggests that KTJ is fighting alongside JN and KIB. In recent months, KTJ has actively participated in militant operations of Jaish al Fatah, a jihadist alliance comprised of JN, KIB, Chechen-led Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA) and Sayfullah Shishani's Jamaat. Jaish al Fatah has carried out militant operations in both northern and northwestern Syria, in Aleppo and Idlib, in strong opposition to the Syrian government forces.

KTJ's Uzbek-language website obtains its news and articles mainly from the IJU's official website, indicating that KTJ also may have ties to Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). Based on vVideos uploaded by the group, there is evidence to suggest that KTJ has about 50 to 100 fighters.

Implications to Central Asia

With the rise of ISIS, there has been a perceptible shift in the terrorist threat to Central Asia. The future security dynamics in the region will be determined by two major factors. The first is the effectiveness of the international community's response to ISIS. The second has to do with the unfolding developments in neighbouring Afghanistan.

As long as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq persist, the number of Central Asians travelling to join the civil war in those countries is likely to increase. It would also increase the risk of terrorist attacks by fighters returning home. Such attempts have already been evident. In January 2015, Kyrgyzstan's security services in Osh detained six Kyrgyz members of the IMU who had trained in Syria and were plotting a number of attacks in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The police seized an AK-S assault rifle, ammunitions and masks found in their possession (Kabar.kg 2015).

The threat from the current network of Central Asian militants in the Middle East and Afghanistan and Pakistan conflict theatres is likely to expand, posing formidable security challenges for both Central and South Asia in the near and the long-term. Geographically, Afghanistan also continues to offer a base for many Central Asian militants who could conduct attacks in Central Asian countries. Although these militants currently appear not to be in a situation to trigger the kind of chaos driven by ISIS in the Middle East, the likelihood that they will continue to indoctrinate and recruit individuals for their cause poses a critical challenge for the government of Central Asia.

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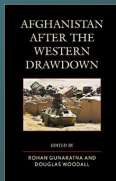
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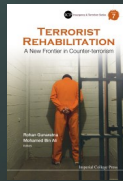


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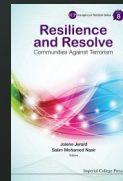
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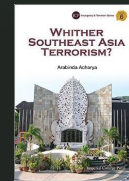
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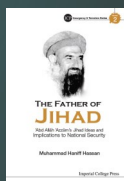
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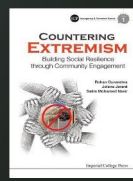
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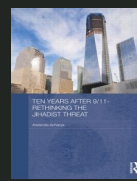
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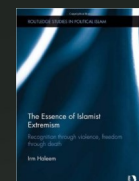
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