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## The rise of Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh

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### Introduction

On 1 July 2016, the traditionally tolerant and secular nation of Bangladesh catapulted to international headlines in the wake of the deadliest single terrorist attack the country had experienced in decades. With five pro-Islamic State (IS) terrorists storming into the Holey Artisan Bakery, a popular restaurant located in an upscale neighbourhood in the capital city of Dhaka, the 12-hour siege ended with the death of 20 hostages, 18 of which were foreigners.<sup>1</sup> Although the IS claimed responsibility for the attack, there was no evidence to prove that the organization had directly aided or abetted the perpetrators, despite some reports claiming that the perpetrators had been in contact with the terrorist outfit.<sup>2</sup> International concern over the attacks prompted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, which had previously denied the presence of transnational Islamist terrorist organizations in the country, to launch a massive counter-terrorism operation in order to suppress any terrorist movements within the country. Three years after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, Bangladesh has evanesced from international headlines and the radar of Western governments, despite the variegated history of Islamist terrorist violence and several sporadic attacks on non-Muslim minorities, as well as against Sufis, Ahmedis, liberal and secular social activists and foreigners. Regardless of the deepening political and social polarization taking place within the South Asian country, alongside with the intensifying threat posed by Islamic State's and Al-Qaeda's interests in Bangladesh, both local and international authorities have paid little attention to the potential hazards caused by such brewing Islamist violence.

This paper explores whether Bangladesh could potentially become a future source of Jihadi manpower alongside the possible ramifications on other nations in the South Asian region. In order to assess the evolving threat posed by rising Islamist violence, this paper begins by outlining the Islamist terrorist milieu in Bangladesh by briefly describing both local and transnational Jihadist groups that are currently operational in the country. Thereafter, the

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<sup>1</sup> Kugelman, Michael & Ahmad, Atif. "Why Extremism Is on the Rise in Bangladesh." *Foreign Affairs*, July 27, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-07-27/why-extremism-rise-bangladesh> (assessed October 20, 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Animesh Rou, executive director of the New Delhi-based Society for Study of Peace and Conflict, said Bangladesh's Islamist groups now "appear to be in regular contact" with IS, but mentioned that there was not enough evidence to prove the terrorist organization was providing "direct, material support" to militants in South Asia. See Al-Mahmood, Syed. "Bangladesh Attack Marks Tactical Shift in Islamic State Militants." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2016. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/terror-attack-on-bangladesh-cafe-leaves-20-dead-1467455938> (assessed October 28, 2019)

paper explores the current demography of terrorist recruits in Bangladesh, underlining the role of social media in facilitating the process of radicalization. This is followed by an overview of the current counter-terrorism initiatives undertaken by the government, followed by an observation of how the deepening political polarization has facilitated the blossoming of Islamist terrorist groups within the nation. To end with, the paper analyses the wider ramifications of religious fundamentalism for both Bangladesh and the region of South Asian.

The argument that this paper will put forth is that in order to further avoid potential home-grown terrorism and possible recruitment by transnational terrorist organizations, Bangladesh's government cannot remain in a posture of denial vis-à-vis the presence of IS and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) on its soil. Instead, Sheikh Hasina's government must primarily begin by improving governance, the spirit of democracy and the rule of law, by putting aside the growing struggle for political power therewith enabling necessary counter-terrorism efforts to receive adequate attention.

### From 'Success Story' to the Rise of Islamist Terrorism

Western nations have traditionally perceived Bangladesh as a 'success story' of a moderate, secular, Muslim democracy.<sup>3</sup> As Dan Mozena, the then United States (US) Ambassador to Bangladesh, stated in March 2014: "*Bangladesh is a moderate and generally secular and tolerant – though sometimes this is getting stretched at the moment – alternative to violent extremism in a very troubled part of the world*"<sup>4</sup>. While religiously fuelled terrorism in Bangladesh may not be as lethal as in Pakistan or Afghanistan, Mozena's assumption is, as a matter of fact, based on weak empirical grounds. According to statistics derived from the Global Terrorism Database maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), around 944 terrorist attacks have been recorded between 2000 and 2015.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the perpetrators of the majority of the attacks remain unknown or were attributed to political parties, 114 were executed by verifiable Islamist terrorist groups.<sup>6</sup> During recent years Bangladesh has experienced a creeping Islamism which has manifested itself in numerous terrorist attacks, often claimed by both local and

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<sup>3</sup> Fair, Christine C. "Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know." *Foreign Policy Essay*, January 28, 2018. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/political-islam-and-islamist-terrorism-bangladesh-what-you-need-know> (assessed October 25, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> Gowen, Annie. "Bangladesh Military Strength: Current Military Capabilities and Available Firepower for 2016 Detailed." (recited in Fair, Christine C. "Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know.", *supra* note 1)

<sup>5</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. "Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say". *Religion and Politics*, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Between 2003 and May 2017, the government proscribed seven militant organizations: Shahadat-e-al Hikuma (February 9, 2003), Jama'atul Mujahedein Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrat Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) (on February 23, 2005), Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami (HUJI) (October 17,2005), Hizb ut-Tahrir (October 22, 2009), Ansarullah Bangla Team (May 25, 2015), which claims to be the Bangladeshi chapter of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).<sup>6</sup>

transnational Islamist terrorist organizations. Although identifying terrorist organizations in Bangladesh is challenging due to the absence of reliable data and constant name changing undertaken by the groups, press reports suggest that approximately 20 terrorist outfits are currently active inside the country, in contrast to law enforcement agencies which claim the number is much smaller, namely 12.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of Islamist terrorist groups in Bangladesh dates back to the late 1980s, when approximately 3,000 Bangladeshis reportedly left for Afghanistan to join the US and Saudi-sponsored anti-Soviet Jihad.<sup>8</sup> As Bangladesh was receiving approximately 15% of its bilateral development assistance aid from the United States in the 1980s, Bangladeshi authorities were lenient on their nationals travelling to and from Afghanistan to wage Jihad.<sup>9</sup> Equipped with the knowledge of insurgent warfare and Jihadist ideology acquired from the Afghan Taliban, Bangladeshi returnees were determined to establish their own Islamist terrorist groups in their homeland.

One of the earliest examples of such groups is the Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), formally founded in 1992 with funds from Al-Qaeda<sup>10</sup> and led by three Afghanistan veterans – Mufti Abdur Rouf, Mowlana Abdus Salam and Mufti Abdu Hannan Sheikh.<sup>11</sup> With the aim of transforming Bangladesh into an Islamic State, the HuJI-B carried out some of the earliest Islamist terrorist activities in the country; for instance, responsibility over the 1993 death threat against the feminist author Taslima Nasreen has been attributed to HuJI-B. Following the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, HuJI-B established strong links with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Pakistani-based terrorist outfit, and at the peak of its operations in 2004, the group claimed that up to 15,000 members had been recruited from Madrassas (Islamic religious schools) in Bangladesh and Pakistan, although that number has not been properly verified.<sup>12</sup> The group's most notorious attack included the August 2004 grenade attack during an election rally meant to assassinate the then opposition leader and Chief of the Awami League party, Sheikh Hasina.<sup>13</sup> Due to imprisonments and the killing of key leaders

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<sup>7</sup> Riaz, Ali & Parvez, Saimum. "Bangladeshi Militants: What Do We Know?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 7 (2018): 946.

<sup>8</sup> Riaz, Ali. *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web*. (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. "Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say", *supra* note 5, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Hasan, Mubashar. "Geopolitics of political Islam in Bangladesh." *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, no 64.

<sup>11</sup> "Who are the militants?" in Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (eds.), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (Oxford, 2011), 71-90

<sup>12</sup> Ramachandran, Sudha. "PART 2: Behind the Harkat-ul Jihad Al-Islami." *Asia Times Online*, 10 December 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Rana, Muhammad (translated by Saba Ansari). *A to Z of Jehadi organizations in Pakistan*. (Lahore: Mashal Books, 2005): 263.

and prosecution led by the Bangladeshi government since 2016, reports suggest that the infrastructure of the terrorist entity has been considerably damaged.<sup>14</sup>

The country's earliest experiences with religiously fuelled violence peaked on 17 August 2005, when Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an indigenous, Bangladesh-based terrorist group, synchronised 459 bomb blasts in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts in order to push the nation to adopt Sharia Law.<sup>15</sup> Opposed to the State's current political system and democracy, the JMB aims to replace the Bangladeshi State with an Islamic State based on Sharia Law. Reportedly formed in 1998 in the Jamalpur district, the JMB began recruiting, training, raising funds, and mobilizing members across the Northern and Southern regions of the country. The group has been linked to recent instances of violence such as the attack against an Italian Catholic priest in Dinajpur at the end of 2015.<sup>16</sup> According to some reports, members of the JMB have collaborated with LeT, whereby members have commuted to Pakistan to receive LeT training.<sup>17</sup>

Bangladesh's Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (BJI), Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, aims to transform the nation into an Islamic country. Since 2001, the party has received international scrutiny due to its alleged involvement in several terror attacks against religious minorities, as well as against Awami League political activists and liberal activists in Bangladesh. Evidence suggests that the party's student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) or Jamaat-Shibir, has also played a role in the aforementioned attacks. For instance, prior to the general elections in 2014, Hindu minorities in the northern part of Bangladesh were targeted in numerous attacks, which were attributed to Jamaat-e-Islami.<sup>18</sup>

Another central Islamist group is the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), established in 1998, which has close ties with Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). According to Christine Fair, Ali Hamza and Rebecka Heller, Researchers at Georgetown University, the two outfits have virtually been the same since they came under the leadership of Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiquer Rahman, also known as '*Bangla Bhai*'.<sup>19</sup> The terrorist outfit espouses the ideals of the Taliban and aims to eradicate any activities operated by left-wing groups,

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<sup>14</sup> The Economic Times. "Terror Trail-III: The missing pieces of Kerala & Bangladesh." *The Economic Times*, May 09, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/terror-trail-iii-the-missing-pieces-of-kerala-bangladesh/articleshow/69245694.cms?from=mdr> (assessed October 27, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. "Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say", *supra* note 4.

<sup>16</sup> *BBC News*. "Bangladesh Hindu Priest Beheaded 'by Islamic State', February 21, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35626237> (assessed October 25, 2019)

<sup>17</sup> BIPSS. *Local drivers and Dynamics of Youth Radicalisation in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Institute of Peace and Security Studies, October 2017), 28.

<sup>18</sup> Kumar, Sanjay. "Islamic Fundamentalists Terrorize Minorities in Bangladesh." *The Diplomat*, January 15, 2014. <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/islamic-fundamentalists-terrorize-minorities-in-bangladesh/> (assessed October 25, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. "Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say", *supra* note 4.

such as the Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) in the north-western region of Bangladesh.

Another entity of concern is Hefazat-e-Islami, which Alexandra Stark, pre-doctoral research fellow at the Belfer Center's Middle East Initiative, argues to be “*an alliance of teachers and students associated with radical madrasas and with Jel.*”<sup>20</sup> This tightly-knit coalition of a dozen or so several Islamist organizations allegedly has ties to more than 25,000 Madrasahs in Bangladesh<sup>21</sup> and further connections to the Afghan Taliban.<sup>22</sup> Hefazat-e-Islami drew international attention in February 2013 when its members participated *en masse* in demonstrations supporting the murder of a young, secular blogger.<sup>23</sup> The group further came to the fore when it launched its 13-point charter of demands, including the enactment of an anti-blasphemy law with provisions for death penalty; exemplary punishment to all bloggers and others who “*insult Islam*”; and cancellation of the country’s women development policy.<sup>24</sup> As manifested, secular writers and bloggers appear to be high up on the ‘*hit list*’ of Islamist terrorist organizations. For instance, the Al-Qaeda affiliated and banned Ansarullah Bangla Team (which has also called itself Ansar al-Islam and Ansar Bangla) was suspected of direct involvement with the murders committed in 2013.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned local Bangladeshi organizations, there are several regional Islamist terrorist groups that also operate in the country. Fair, Hamza, and Heller particularly identify Pakistani-based LeT, which has executed several attacks in both Bangladesh and India, yet is most notoriously famous for its November 2008 attack on several targets in the Indian city of Mumbai.<sup>26</sup> Mufti Obaidullah, a Bangladeshi national, who was associated with the LeT and had previously fought in Afghanistan four times – in 1988, 1990, 1991, and 1992 – was arrested in 2009 by government authorities after having spent almost 14 years teaching in local Madrasahs with a fake identity.<sup>27</sup>

Two transnational Islamist terrorist groups, the IS and AQIS, have also become increasingly active on Bangladeshi territory. IS formally announced its presence in Bangladesh in November 2015, with the publication of an article titled ‘*The Revival of Jihad in Bengal*’ in its English language magazine ‘*Dabiq*’, including an interview with Sheikh Abu al-Hanif, allegedly the leader of IS operations in the country.<sup>28</sup> The group aims to replace Bangladesh’s current

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<sup>20</sup> Stark, Alexandra. “Bangladesh on the Brink: Between Terrorism and Democracy.” *The Diplomat*, 2015. [www.thediplomat.com/2015/09/bangladesh-on-the-brink-between-terrorism-and-democracy](http://www.thediplomat.com/2015/09/bangladesh-on-the-brink-between-terrorism-and-democracy)

<sup>21</sup> Mustafa, Sabir. “Hefazat-e Islam: Islamist coalition.” *BBC Online*, May 6, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22424708> (assessed October 27, 2019)

<sup>22</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. “Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say”, *supra* note 4, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Mustafa, Sabir. “Hefazat-e Islam: Islamist coalition,” *supra* note 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Fair, Christine C., Hamza, Ali. & Heller, Rebecka. “Who Supports Suicide Terrorism in Bangladesh? What the Data Say”, *supra* note 4, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> BIPSS. *Local drivers and Dynamics of Youth Radicalisation in Bangladesh*, *supra* note 17, 27.

government with an Islamic State and implement IS' strict interpretation of Sharia Law. IS recruits in Bangladesh are mostly drawn from existing local terrorist groups, although some experts suggest that the organization is increasingly targeting youth with a mainstream educational background by means of disseminating propaganda on social media.<sup>29</sup> IS has taken responsibility over various attacks on foreigners, homosexuals, secular and liberal bloggers, Sufis, Ahmadis and those belonging to religious minorities. Despite the various attacks claimed by IS, Bangladesh's government has persistently continued to deny the presence of IS on its soil and has preferred to cast blame on the 'neo-JMB'. The 'neo-Jamaat-ul Mujahideen' faction – which refers to itself as Islamic State Bangladesh – was thought to be under the leadership of a Canadian-Bangladeshi, Tamim Chowdhury, until his death in August 2016 in an alleged extrajudicial killing.

Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was founded in late 2014, when Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced in a video message the creation of a new branch which vowed to raise the flag of Jihad, return to Islamic rule, and empower the Sharia of Allah across the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>30</sup> While the group seeks to operate across the South Asian region, its leadership is based in Pakistan, and all of its successful attacks have been carried out either in Pakistan or Bangladesh.<sup>31</sup> There is little information available vis-à-vis the exact relationship between AQIS and the Al-Qaeda core, although experts suggest that al-Zawahiri's direct involvement in choosing AQIS' senior leadership implies of a relatively close connection between the two entities. Experts suggest that AQIS appears to be competing for influence and resources with IS in their contesting attempts of retaining a stronghold over South Asia. It is interesting to note that with the growing dominance of IS and AQIS, the demography of terrorist recruits appears to have altered significantly.

### New breed of terrorists

The demography of terrorist recruits in Bangladesh has significantly changed in the course of the past decade. Ali Riaz, Professor at the Political Science Department at the Illinois State University, argues that while recruits in Bangladesh traditionally generated from the global agenda of fighting "an 'atheist' Communist system [Soviet Union]", are currently in the process of establishing a so-called global Caliphate by joining transnational organizations such as IS.<sup>32</sup> A study conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) noted that the key focus of most terrorist outfits 'is to radicalize, recruit and use the youth for

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<sup>29</sup> Bashar, Iftekharul. "ISIS, AQS and the Revival of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 7, no. 6 (2015): 19

<sup>30</sup> The New York Times. "Al Qaeda Opens New Branch on Indian Subcontinent." *The New York Times*, September 5, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/05/world/asia/al-qaeda-announces-new-branch-on-indian-subcontinent.html> (assessed October 26, 2019)

<sup>31</sup> Faber, Pamela G & Powell, Alexander. *Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study* (CNA, 2017): 13.

<sup>32</sup> Riaz, Ali. "Who are the Bangladeshi 'Islamist Militants'?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 1 (2016). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/485/html>

*carrying out terror attacks*<sup>33</sup>, however, it appears that recruitment mechanisms have transformed into advanced and low-profile operations that also target individuals from affluent and secular backgrounds. The profile of the five attackers attests to this; the fact that the perpetrators belonged to affluent families and held degrees from Bangladesh's prestigious universities undermined the *"long-held misconception that militants are produced by religious educational institutions, namely madrasas, and they tend to come from poor families"*.<sup>34</sup> Whereas past recruitment typically took place in religious educational institutions, such as Madrasas, reports indicate that mainstream educational institutions are similarly being used for recruitment purposes; an intelligence report published in 2016 revealed that 21 educational institutions had been placed under surveillance by the Bangladeshi authorities due to suspicion of extremist activities.<sup>35</sup> Although the presence of fundamentalist ideologies in educational institutions is not a novel phenomenon in the country, the absence of attention paid by the society to their activities has enabled recruitment processes to proceed.

It is noteworthy to underline that experts detect disparities in the recruitment patterns employed by different terrorist organizations. Fair recalls that: *"[O]ver the course of several trips to Bangladesh, I have learned that AQIS tends to recruit poorly educated young men from seminaries (madaris), whereas IS attracts better educated, affluent young men"*.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Iftekharul Bashar, Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, identifies a specific target in IS' recruitment strategy – whereas past recruitment by terrorist entities chiefly occurred in rural and sub-urban areas, contemporary recruits are predominantly urban youth with secular educational backgrounds.<sup>37</sup> Reports further suggest that IS has been successful in recruiting young individuals who have no prior record of engagement in violence.<sup>38</sup> Another interesting recruitment pattern is the organization's ability to attract young females, exemplified by growing trends of female *'Jihadism'* in Bangladesh. Nazneen Mohsina, Research Assistant at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, argues that the *"role of female Bangladeshi 'Jihadists' have evolved from passive to active and from peripheral to central as suicide bombers and combatants"*.<sup>39</sup> Traditionally, Islamist groups in South Asia have avoided using women in their operations, however, the emergence of IS extremist

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<sup>33</sup> BIPSS. *Local drivers and Dynamics of Youth Radicalisation in Bangladesh*, *supra* note 17, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Riaz, Ali & Parvez, Saimum. "Bangladeshi Militants: What Do We Know?" *supra* note 7, 946.

<sup>35</sup> This report is based on an investigative report dated 21 September 2016 conducted by a prominent Bengali Daily News paper named the Kaler Kontho.

<sup>36</sup> Fair, Christine C. "Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know." *Supra* note 3.

<sup>37</sup> Bashar, Iftekharul. "ISIS, AQS and the Revival of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 7, no. 5 (2015).

<sup>38</sup> Bashar, Iftekharul. "Islamic State Ideology Continues to Resonate in Bangladesh." *MEI*, September 3, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Mohsina, Nazneen. "Growing Trends of Female 'Jihadism' in Bangladesh" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 9, no. 8 (2017), 7.

narrative revolving around the so-called Caliphate has significantly altered the perception of the traditional gender roles whereby women are increasingly encouraged to participate in ‘Jihad’ by acting as combatants, suicide bombers, recruiters, preachers and propagandists.<sup>40</sup>

The roles of internet and social media in the process of radicalization cannot be undermined: scholars and policymakers agree that online recruitment and available propaganda are key factors facilitating the radicalization of young individuals. Bangladesh’s rapid digitalisation, notably as a result of the Digital Bangladesh policy put forth in the Vision 2021 (the Awami League’s political manifesto for 2008 National Elections) has led to a substantial increase of Internet users in the country.<sup>41</sup> With propaganda materials available online, terrorist organizations such as IS have been highly successful in managing to attract and radicalize young individuals.<sup>42</sup> What is more, security and counter-terrorism experts believe that a new generation of Islamists terrorists, earlier linked to JMB or Ansar, now identify more directly with IS than with homegrown entities.<sup>43</sup>

### Counter-terrorism efforts

With the exception of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, despite the increase in sporadic attacks claimed by IS and Al-Qaeda throughout the country, Bangladesh’s government has generally insisted that neither of these terrorist groups have presence in the country.<sup>44</sup> Following the abovementioned attack, the Awami League-led government arrested approximately 11,000 suspected militants in 2016 as part of a crackdown on extremism as a response to domestic criticism and international concern. Yet, several counter-terrorism efforts appear focused on killing those suspected of involvement with Islamist terrorist networks, rather than disrupting or dismantling those networks and countering their influence. Odhikar, a Bangladesh based Human Rights organization, estimates that there have been as many as 2,000 killings since 2001 by the Rapid Action Battalion, the newly formed specialized counter-terrorism unit. The organization also estimated that at least 330 individuals, including suspected terrorists as well as opposition BNP and Jel members, have disappeared since the Awami League government came to office in 2009.<sup>45</sup> Since the 2016 attack, Dhaka metropolitan police’s Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit, instead of the Rapid Action Battalion, has been given the main responsibility for counter-terrorism initiatives; nevertheless, extrajudicial killings appear to dominate the strategy rather than intelligence operations.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> According to an estimate, the number of internet users in Bangladesh shot up from 93,261 in 2000 to 21,439,070 in 2016. <https://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/bangladesh/>

<sup>42</sup> Morstatter, Fred. “Measuring the Impact of ISIS Social Media Strategy.” *Department of Computer Science & Engineering Texas A&M University*. Retrieved from [https://snap.stanford.edu/mis2/files/MIS2\\_paper\\_23.pdf](https://snap.stanford.edu/mis2/files/MIS2_paper_23.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> ICG, “Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh,” *International Crises Group*, February 28, 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/295-countering-jihadist-militancy-bangladesh>

<sup>44</sup> Fair, Christine C. “Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know.” *Supra* note 3, 7.

<sup>45</sup> See generally “Bangladesh: annual human rights report 2016”; “Enforced disappearance 2009-2017 February (March 2017)

Bangladesh's long borders with India and Myanmar pose particular challenges vis-à-vis countering terrorism financing mostly through the flow of illicit funds. Often referred to as *"a trans-shipment point for drugs produced in both the 'golden triangle' of Southeast Asia and 'golden crescent' on Central Asia"*, Bangladesh's Jihadist groups have been successful in raising funds through drug trafficking. The country has been fighting a bitter war against drug trade, as explored in [EFSAS Commentary "Bangladesh's deadly War on Drugs"](#). As terrorism becomes increasingly intertwined with organized crime, the issue of profitable drug trade used for terrorism financing purposes in Bangladesh should require more urgent attention.

Reports suggest that in addition to depending on forged Indian currency from Pakistan, *"individuals as well as organizations from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular fund madrasas and mosques across Bangladesh, with some of the money apparently finding its way to Jihadist groups"*.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Islamist terrorist groups have been successful in using *Hundi* or *Hawala*, an informal domestic and international money transfer mechanism which has reportedly been used by the JMB. The government has taken certain measures to counter money laundering and terrorist financing: for instance, the 2009 Anti-Terrorism Act empowered Bangladeshi Banks to freeze accounts and other actions in order to curb criminal activity. The Money Laundering Prevention Act of 2012 and the 2013 amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Act added offenses to the list of money laundering and expanded the categories of reporting entities, while furthermore broadening the space for legal sanctions. The 2012 Mutual Legal Assistance Act aimed to strengthen international cooperation efforts. Additionally, Bangladesh is a member of the Asia Pacific Group on money laundering since July 2013.

The Bangladeshi government's efforts to counter terrorism financing have been met with approval by international institutions; in February 2014, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) removed Bangladesh from its *'grey list'* which includes *"jurisdictions with strategic AML [Anti-Money Laundering]/CFT [Combatting the Financing of Terrorism] deficiencies that have not made sufficient progress in addressing the deficiencies"*<sup>47</sup>; meanwhile, an October 2016 Asia Pacific Group Assessment reported meaningful improvement in compliance with international anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards.<sup>48</sup>

### Political polarization

Bangladeshi authorities may have adopted certain measures to destabilize local terrorist organizations, however, these efforts have been happening without taking into consideration

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<sup>46</sup> Crises Group Report. *The Threat from Jamaat-ul Mujahideen*; "Saudi Arabia is giving 20 million dollars for Bangladesh mosques". *BDNEWS24*, September 26, 2017.

<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/09/26/saudi-arabia-giving-20-million-for-bangladesh-mosques>

<sup>47</sup> FATF website, [www.fatf-gafi.org](http://www.fatf-gafi.org).

<sup>48</sup> "Anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures: Bangladesh", *Mutual Evaluation Report, Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering*, October 2016.

the background of contentious national politics which have actually accelerated the Jihadist resurgence.<sup>49</sup> Since the re-emergence of democracy in the early 1990s, Bangladesh has been interchangeably governed by the two main political parties – the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujib, and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Zia. During her terms as Prime Minister in 1991 to 1996, and again from 2001 to 2006, Zia’s regime demonstrated a pale imitation of her father’s policy vis-à-vis Islamization.<sup>50</sup> Md. Nazrul Islam, Professor of Political Studies, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology in Bangladesh, and Md. Saidul Islam, Professor of Sociology at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, argue that during Sheikh Hasina’s first term (1996 to 2001) her government “*demonstrated no inclination towards secularism and opposition to Islamization (...) the second term [2009 to 2014] (...) in coalition with the leftists parties, witnessed a major shift in its governance style – from acceptance of Islamization towards the process of secularization*”.<sup>51</sup>

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s administration’s preoccupation with suppressing political opposition and dissent has facilitated the creation and blossoming of Islamist terrorist organizations. In the aftermath of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016, Hasina did not hesitate to point a finger at her political opposition while condemning those who “*have resorted to terrorism after failing to win the hearts of people democratically*”; an implicit reference to the BNP.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, in spite of Sheikh Hasina’s supposedly secular reputation, she has restrained from openly condemning the killings of several liberal and secular activists and religious minorities and has even exerted blame on the victims for inciting terrorists due to their liberal writings.<sup>53</sup>

Some recent political developments have undermined Sheikh Hasina’s promise of eradicating possible religious fundamentalism and instead highlighted her underlying motivations of eliminating any political opposition. On 8 February 2018, under the Awami League government rule, Hasina’s main political rival and then-leader of the BNP, Khaleda Zia, was sentenced to prison for five years in the *Zia Orphanage Trust case*. On 30 October 2018, Zia received an additional seven years of rigorous imprisonment in the *Zia Charitable Trust corruption case*, whereby the High Court’s verdict stated abuse of power as Prime Minister. Both trusts were set up during her term as Prime Minister – the orphanage trust during her

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<sup>49</sup> International Crises Group. *Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh*. Asia Report No. 295, February 28, 2018, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Shehabuddin, Elora. *Reshaping the Holy: Democracy, Development, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

<sup>51</sup> Islam, Nazrul & Islam, Saidul. “Islam, Politics and Secularism in Bangladesh: Contesting the Dominant Narratives”, *MDPI Social Sciences*, 2018, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Fazli, Shehryar. “Bangladeshi Leaders Must Stop Politicizing Counterterrorism.” *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 7, 2016. <https://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/20160707-Deciphering-Duterte/Politics-Economy/Shehryar-Fazli-Bangladeshi-leaders-must-stop-politicizing-counterterrorism> (assessed October 25, 2019)

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

first term (1991-1996) and the other during her second term (2001-2006).<sup>54</sup> Speculation over conspiracy by the ruling Awami League emerged due to Khaleda's sudden imprisonment just months prior to Bangladesh's national elections in December 2018, which resulted in a leadership vacuum and the subsequent defeat of her BNP party.<sup>55</sup> As political uncertainty grows and democracy is undermined, some experts fear that Bangladesh is on the way of transforming into an autocracy unless Hasina is willing to build consensus with opposition parties.

Furthermore, the establishment of International Crimes Tribunal, a promise campaigned by Sheikh Hasina prior to the general election in 2008 to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide committed in 1971 by the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators, Razakars, Al-Badr and Al-Shams during the Bangladesh Liberation War, may have proven counterproductive in the government's fight against brewing religious violence. The post-2010 trials of individuals accused of war crimes perpetrated in the Bangladesh Liberation War has notably targeted the senior leadership of the largest Islamist party Jel, ultimately crushing the Islamist party and thereby undermining its close ally, BNP. The trials "*prompted criticism for violating due process, lacking transparency, and involving intimidation and harassment of defence lawyers and witnesses*"<sup>56</sup>, and were further criticized by international organizations, including Human Rights Watch. In particular, the 2013 death sentence of Jel leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee, a popular Muslim preacher, prompted wide mass protests and clashes with government forces which led to the death of hundreds of protesters. A report released by International Crises Group contends that Ansaru Islam (or Ansar) portrayed the incident as an attack on Muslim identity and used it as a means of recruiting "*urban, educated youth*" who perpetrated brutal attacks on several secular activists "*who had demanded harsh punishment for those prosecuted*".<sup>57</sup>

Although Bangladesh has made progress in building counter-terrorism initiatives and developing counter terrorism financing mechanisms, the Awami League-led government has more than often aimed at discrediting the opposition instead of building political consensus on the alarming threat of rising Islamist terrorism. Whereas Bashar argues that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration appears to have the political will to prevent further radicalization but simply lacks a well-articulated strategy<sup>58</sup>, Fair asserts that "[r]ather than

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<sup>54</sup> Liton, Shakhawat & Halder, Chaitanya Chandra. "Zia Charitable Trust Graft Case: Khaleda jailed for 7 years." *The Daily Star*, October 30, 2018. <https://www.thedailystar.net/politics/news/zia-charitable-trust-case-supreme-court-bangladesh-directs-dhaka-court-deliver-verdict-bnp-chairperson-khaleda-zia-1653295> (assessed October 28, 2019)

<sup>55</sup> Rafe, Rahat. "Could political talks help free Bangladesh's ex-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia?" *DW*, October 18, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/could-political-talks-help-free-bangladeshs-ex-premier-khaleda-zia/a-50885253> (assessed October 27, 2019)

<sup>56</sup> International Crises Group. "Countering jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh." *International Crises Group Report*, no. 295. February 28, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Bashar, Iftekharul. "The Evolving Threat in Bangladesh". *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 9, no. 3 (2017), 15.

addressing the actual international terrorist organizations in Bangladesh, Hasina has remained steadfastly interested in clinging to power at all costs”<sup>59</sup>. The politicisation of the counter-terrorism agenda will continue to aggravate the social polarization within the nation, further enabling Islamist networks to flourish instead of working towards their eradication.

### The future of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh

With political polarization reaching historical heights and local Islamist terrorist organizations forging links with transnational movements such as IS and Al-Qaeda, new forms of Islamist terrorism threaten the internal security and religious tolerance in Bangladesh.<sup>60</sup> While many security experts agree that IS and AQIS perceive Bangladesh as a new territory to expand or base their future operations in, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government continues to politicise the threat by arresting political rivals instead of focusing on efforts to disrupt the rise of Islamist terrorism. In addition, the government should also turn its gaze towards the on-going big power politics in the Middle East, especially the worrying phenomenon of IS regaining its strength in Iraq and Syria.<sup>61</sup>

The on-going conflict in Syria has undoubtedly brought a new resurgence in Islamist terrorism worldwide – while Western nations are pouring in energy to prosecute or strip those of citizenship who have left to wage Jihad, the threat of Jihadist returnees should be perceived as a key challenge to the Bangladeshi authorities. Approximately 50 Bangladeshi citizens were confirmed to have travelled to Syria to fight under the banner of IS, 10 of which have died according to a source from the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. Five to ten of those have returned to their native Bangladesh and are currently missing or placed in prison. In a documentary published by *France 24* in 2016, the media broadcast agency predicted that due to the conventional defeats experienced by IS in Iraq and Syria, radical ideologies might appear less appealing to the Bangladeshi youth.<sup>62</sup> However, according to various media outlets, including *The New York Times*, the terrorist organization is quickly “gathering new strength, conducting guerrilla attacks across Iraq and Syria, retooling its financial networks and targeting new recruits”.<sup>63</sup> With the death of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, it remains to be seen how IS and pro-IS terrorist groups will respond.

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<sup>59</sup> Fair, Christine C. “Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know,” *supra* note 3.

<sup>60</sup> International Crises Group. “Countering jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh,” *supra* note 49.

<sup>61</sup> Schmitt, Eric., Rubin, Alissa J. & Neff-Gibbons, Thomas. “ISIS Is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria”. *The New York Times*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/us/politics/isis-iraq-syria.html> (assessed October 26, 2019)

<sup>62</sup> FRANCE 24 English. “Bangladesh struggles to fight Islamic fundamentalists,” published November 24, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwJctH7iAX4&t=222s>

<sup>63</sup> Schmitt, Eric., Rubin, Alissa J. & Neff-Gibbons, Thomas. “ISIS Is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria,” *supra* note 61.

### A new Easter Attack?

Equally disturbing is the new revelation regarding the support for suicide bombings in Bangladesh. In a study conducted in 2017, Fair, Hamza and Heller discovered that there was widespread support for suicide bombings among Bangladeshis. Combined with religious fundamentalism, the ramifications could be deadly – in fact, the outcome could resemble the one of the Easter Sunday attacks experienced by Sri Lanka in April 2019. As explored in detail in [EFSAS Commentary “The real tragedy of the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka is that they could have been averted”](#) and [EFSAS Study Paper “A Decade on from the last Growl of the Tiger: Religious Terrorism and Sri Lanka’s new challenges”](#), the attacks that took place in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday highlighted the alarming possibility of Sri Lanka becoming a prospective hotbed for religious extremism. After two days following the attacks, IS claimed responsibility by releasing a video of what it claimed were the suicide bombers involved in the attacks. Given that some members of the National Thowheeth Jamath (NTJ) are believed to have cultivated links with IS and joined to fight under the flag of IS in Syria and Iraq, the finger of suspicion was indeed pointed in this direction. While it remains unclear to what extent IS was truly involved in the execution of the attack, the profile of the attackers alarmingly resembled that of the Holey Artisan Café attacks; some of them were well-educated people who came from wealthy backgrounds. Although casualties have fortunately remained limited in terrorist incidents in Bangladesh, IS has the potential to empower existing Islamist terrorist movements in the country with indoctrination, network capabilities and financing, all of which may manifest itself in more elaborate and deadly attacks.

### The Rohingya Crisis

The burgeoning question over the potential exploitation of Rohingya refugees by regional and transnational Islamist terrorist organizations is a pertinent one. The brutal military campaign led against the Rohingya in late 2017, following an attack on security personnel by the militant group, Arkan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA, also known as Harakah al-Yaqin) in the northern Rakhine State of Myanmar, forced around 600,000 Rohingyas to flee to neighbouring border areas of Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh.<sup>64</sup> The Awami League-led government’s response has included confinement of Rohingyas to refugee camps as well as diplomatic measures, including the November repatriation agreement, aiming to guarantee the possible return of the refugees to Myanmar.<sup>65</sup> Such attempts are unlikely to bear fruit given the uncompromising stance held by the Myanmar government.

The Rohingya influx may bear significant security ramifications for Bangladesh, while the issue of radicalization has remained outside of the debate. The involvement of Muslim ethnic

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<sup>64</sup> Bowden, Mark. “The current context to the Rohingya crises in Bangladesh,” *Humanitarian Practice Network*, October 2018.

<sup>65</sup> See Crises Group Asia Report No 292, *Myanmar’s Rohingya Crises Enters a Dangerous New Phase*, December 7, 2017.

Rohingyas in Islamist terrorist activities within Bangladesh is not a novel phenomenon. In the early 1980s, the Rohingyas established the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) as a response to the enormous military operation launched by the Myanmar military which drove approximately 200,000 Rohingya into Bangladesh.<sup>66</sup> With the explicit support of Bangladeshi Islamist groups like HuJI-B and the JMB, the Rohingya received training on the handling of bombs whereas the latter trained JMB in matters of arm usage. Riaz and Fair argue that *“this relationship, tacitly encouraged by the then Bangladesh government headed by Khaleda Zia, helped shape future relationships between various militant groups who use the hill tracts as their bases”*.<sup>67</sup> The Rohingyas became sources of recruitments for varying transnational Islamist organizations such as the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda, eventually leaving few terrorists behind in Bangladesh. Bashar argues that literature normally depicts refugee *‘Jihadist recruitment’* as a minor threat, yet Fair and Seth Oldmixon, Washington-based political communications consultant, argue that terrorist groups related to Jamaat-e-Islami have been actively recruiting Rohingya refugees. Both AQIS and IS have explicitly identified the Rohingyas in their media outlets as important loci of actions.<sup>68</sup>

In April 2019, Bangladesh accused Pakistan of interfering in its internal affairs and attempting to cause turbulence after Pakistan-based Al Khidmat Foundation allegedly organized a rally for Rohingya refugees in the Chittagong area.<sup>69</sup> The Al Khidmat Foundation is suspected to be supported by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and has links to the JeI. Other Pakistan-based terrorist entities, including the LeT, are also allegedly involved with the Rohingyas via their various *‘humanitarian’* front organizations.<sup>70</sup> The involvement of Pakistan in Bangladesh via indirect means unravels Pakistan’s intentions vis-à-vis recruitment of Rohingyas by its terrorist proxies, exposing the country’s malicious objectives in profiting from potential unrest in Bangladesh. That said, while the majority of Rohingyas will surely choose to focus on basic survival, potential exploitation by terrorist groups should be a genuine concern for Bangladeshi authorities.

### Wider ramifications for South Asia?

Given the rising trends of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh, other South Asian countries should not dwell in oblivion regarding potential spill outs into their sovereign territories. Taking into

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Riaz, Ali, & Fair, Christine C. “Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: Regional and Extra-regional Implications.” In *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 158.

<sup>68</sup> Fair, Christine C., & Oldmixon, Seth. “Think Again: Islamism and Militancy in Bangladesh, 2015.” <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/think-again-islamism-militancy-bangladesh-13567> (assessed October 27, 2019)

<sup>69</sup> Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. “Bangladesh accuses Pakistan of interfering in its internal affairs.” *The Economic Times*, August 29, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bangladesh-accuses-pakistan-of-interfering-in-its-internal-affairs/articleshow/70899944.cms?from=mdr> (assessed October 28, 2019)

<sup>70</sup> Fair, Christine C. “Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh: What You Need to Know.” *Supra* note 3-

account India's close geographical proximity to Bangladesh, Indian security planners should take notice of the on-going developments in Bangladesh. In addition to the threat of radicalization amongst Rohingyas, analysts point to the Jaipur and Assam bombings in 2008, observing that both attacks were implemented by Bangladeshi terrorist groups in cooperation with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agencies (ISI). Similarly, the Burdwan bombings have also been traced back to Bangladesh. An investigation conducted by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has revealed that JMB has spread its network in the Indian state of West Bengal where they have been known to operate.<sup>71</sup> Balasubramaniyan Viswanathan, analyst at the Toronto-based *Geopolitical Monitor*, asserts that "JMB has been involved in recruitment, radicalization, and training of Indian youths by organizing terrorist camps in certain Madrasas".<sup>72</sup> A report published by the *Journal of Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* further asserts that Pakistan may profit from current developments of Islamist terrorism in Bangladesh, as this keeps India's northeast unstable.<sup>73</sup> More recently, Malaysian authorities arrested three suspected IS terrorists which included a Bangladeshi national<sup>74</sup>, suggesting that Bangladeshi citizens may be currently recruited overseas. This underlines the possibility of a linkage between IS in Bangladesh and IS in Southeast Asia, an issue of which governments in both regions should take serious note and concern. The complex socio-political and socio-cultural narratives present in South Asia have rendered the region into a marketable fantasy for IS; as the influence of such terrorist entities become more prominent throughout the region, governments must invest in regional and international cooperation in order to stop the growing IS network and its influence.

## Conclusion

Although Bangladesh has remained free from any major attacks during the past year, the possibility of further Islamist terrorism remains. Even though both IS and AQIS have locked their sights on one of the world's largest Muslim countries, Bangladesh's government remains rooted in a posture of denial regarding their on-going activities on its territory. Equally disturbing, the rise of Islamist terrorist organizations has been accelerated by the political polarization kept intact by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration. While no direct correlation can be established between poisonous politics and rise of Islamist terrorism, political polarization has contributed to an increasingly divided Bangladeshi society which may in turn, in some degree, be culpable for the blossoming of religious violence. Hostile sentiments have developed between those embracing secularism and those emphasizing

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<sup>71</sup> Viswanathan, Balasubramaniyan. "The Revival of Jihad in Bangladesh: Is Islamic State at India's Doorsteps?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, November 30, 2015. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-revival-of-jihad-in-bangladesh-is-islamic-state-at-indias-doorsteps/>

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Sharma, R K. "Rise of Islamic radicalization in Bangladesh implications for the security of North-East India." *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* 19, no.1 (2015).

<sup>74</sup> Zolkepli, Fabrik. "Malaysian among three suspected IS militants arrested after anti-terror swoops." *The Star Online*, May 30, 2019.

Bangladesh's Muslim identity, further exacerbated by the current government's non-existent efforts to reconcile with opposition. Therefore, the Awami League led-government should begin by fully acknowledging the presence and threat posed by IS and AQIS, after which it ought to redress the acute politicisation that has enabled the re-emergence of Islamist violent movements and simultaneously hindered efforts to tame the threat they pose.

Regarding counter-terrorism measures, regional cooperation with neighbouring States ought to be on the forefront in the fight against growing Islamist terrorism; through means of establishing intelligence mechanisms and improving security measures, South Asian countries can, and should, collaborate in order to hinder future online radicalization and cross-border movement by transnational terrorist groups.

Current counter-terrorism efforts in Bangladesh have largely focused on the use of blunt force and suppression of political opposition, instead of attempting to tackle the root causes and processes of radicalization. It is particularly important for Bangladeshi authorities to scale up capacity in the cyber and digital domain, especially regarding social media networks, and to develop technical capabilities and expertise in order to monitor and counter religious fundamentalism online. The nation still lacks a dedicated counter-terrorism strategy which encompasses fair trial and rehabilitation for terrorists and building greater public awareness on issues related to counter-terrorism.

This can only be achieved against a background of good governance and democracy, where trust and tolerance amongst citizens prevails.

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