EBSCO HOST

Building a Global Network for Security

Evolving Global Threat Landscape Requires Continued Vigilance

Six months on from the Taliban's sudden takeover of Afghanistan, the global threat landscape has not been significantly transformed beyond an upsurge in jihadists' online propaganda replete with celebratory triumphalism. The United Nations Security Council's February 2022 report on Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) highlights no notable movement of jihadist militants from different parts of the world to Afghanistan to date. Thus, the notion surrounding Afghanistan's slide back into a hub of transnational terrorism seems exaggerated. At the same time, experts warn it remains premature to evaluate Afghanistan's potential as a terrorist sanctuary given various jihadist groups, particularly AQ, could take between twelve to eighteen months to revive and relaunch their activities. As such, while diplomatic engagement with the Taliban regime is necessary to avert Afghanistan's slide into a civil war, the international community needs to carefully monitor the trajectory of different jihadist groups still sheltered in the country.

On February 3, the global jihadist movement suffered a significant blow when US Special Operation Forces eliminated the reclusive IS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi in Syria's Idlib province. Though largely a ceremonial figurehead, unlike the charismatic personality of his predecessor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Qurashi's elimination still represents a major setback for the already embattled IS. Presently, IS' franchises in Africa and Asia are stronger than the core group based in Iraq and Syria.

Taken together, the emerging global threat picture is paradoxically static yet evolving, which is inspiring various jihadist groups ideologically without translating into an immediate tangible threat. The counter-terrorism and counter-extremism community needs to stay vigilant to carefully track the trajectory of global threats and respond pro-actively. This is even as we are presently witnessing an epoch in the evolution of global terrorism where there is more noise and less action as well as more groups but less terrorism.

Against this backdrop, the March issue of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA), comprising four articles, looks at some trends in radicalisation in Indonesia and Malaysia and the impact of broader violent extremist threats resulting from the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan for Malaysia and China respectively.

In the first article, **V. Arianti** and **Amresh Gunasingham** assess the state of youth militancy in Indonesia. The article identifies a range of neuropsychological, family and socio-economic factors in addition to the role of transnational Islamist movements to explain radicalisation among youth. According to the authors, the case study of Indonesia is instructive given youth perpetrators have featured prominently in recent terrorist plots and attacks in the country. In particular, the role of the family has been significant in enabling the transmission and perpetuation of radical sentiments to younger generations, and is situated within the wider social milieu in Indonesia where extremist and terrorist organisations thrive. Finally, while progress has been made in Indonesia's "soft" approach and civil society responses in rehabilitating and constructively engaging young perpetrators, several challenges remain.

Next, **Akil Yunus** discusses the challenges posed by and ongoing efforts in countering online radicalisation in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been a reduction in the physical activities of terrorist organisations in Malaysia, terrorist propaganda accentuated by conspiracy theories and racial and ethnically motivated violent extremism has been proliferating in the cyber domain. The article suggests that "hard" approaches will be insufficient; instead, it postulates that a multi-stakeholder "soft" approach involving government agencies, civil society, youth and media will yield better results in confronting extremist threats in the cyber space. Given the limitations in traditional "soft" approaches, the author emphasises "digital resilience" as a potential long term and sustainable solution to the problem of online radicalisation.

In the third article, **Stefanie Kam** examines China's principal security interests in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. The author notes that Beijing's main purpose in the post-US Afghanistan is to prevent the destabilisation of its Xinjiang province arising from the potential cross-border infiltration of the Turkestan Islamic Party. Furthermore, she notes that terrorist groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda, which have also targeted China in their propaganda in the past, also factor into China's security calculus. In view of the Islamic State of Khorasan's more assertive messaging targeting Beijing in the

October 2021 Kunduz attack, the intensity of the terrorist threat to Chinese interests would be shaped by the dynamics between the militant groups and Beijing.

Finally, **Mohd Mizan Aslam** examines the impact of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on the Malaysian and regional security landscapes. According to the author, in addition to motivating Malaysian fighters to travel to the Afghan theatre, the Taliban victory could potentially rekindle Al-Qaeda's association with Taliban-allied Southeast Asian jihadist groups such as the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The article suggests a possible increase in the militant activities of the pro-Taliban elements and sympathy from political entities in Malaysia that attempt to normalise Kuala Lumpur's diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Such developments, the author argues, could invite counter-attacks from rival IS-affiliated groups. In addition, the challenges posed by online recruitment, recidivism, and poorly governed areas in Malaysia and the wider region could continue to be exploited by extremist groups.

SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS

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

Youth Militancy in Indonesia: A Perennial Problem?

V. Arianti and Amresh Gunasingham

Synopsis

This article assesses the involvement of youth in militant activities in Indonesia. Both around the country and globally, vulnerable youth continue to be susceptible to radicalisation into violent extremism due to a range of neurological, psychological, family and social factors, which groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda have exploited for recruitment and attack planning purposes. While the Indonesian authorities have in recent years made some progress in countering the threat from youth militancy, significant challenges remain, including the lack of mechanisms that effectively identify at-risk youth and the persistent issue of family radicalisation and recruitment.

Introduction

Youth continued to feature prominently in terrorist plots and attacks directed or inspired by extremist groups globally in 2021, as the Islamic State (IS)'s vast body of online messaging, extremist narratives that justify violence and the opportunity to gain notoriety endured.[1] In Syria, the radicalisation of youth currently in various refugee camps has been flagged as a concern, as IS aims to spread its ideology and lay the foundations for future trouble.[2] Youth were also targeted by the Extreme Right in the West in recent years. In October 2021, German authorities arrested a 14-year-old accused of plotting violence at a synagogue or a mosque. In the same month, another 14-year-old was arrested in San Diego, US, on hate crime charges after being accused of punching a rabbi in the face.[3]

This article first assesses some widely accepted definitions of youth, in addition to briefly mapping out the landscape on youth militancy in Indonesia. The next section reviews some factors driving youth radicalisation. Often, youth recruitment is context specific to individual regions, although significant common factors include the predominant targeting of youth for recruitment by violent extremist groups, as well as the role of transnational movements, such as IS, in fostering radicalisation.[4] The case study of Indonesia is instructive, given that the country has witnessed a continuing trend of radicalised youth participating in militant activities in recent years.

Finally, some key initiatives adopted by the Indonesian authorities are assessed. While significant progress has been made in addressing youth radicalisation and recruitment in the country, significant challenges remain. These include challenges law enforcement could face in detecting and identifying youth perpetrators involved in plots or attacks.[5] Other challenges pertaining to

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[1] "Involvement of Minors in Terrorist Plots and Attacks Likely to Endure," *National Counterterrorism Center*, 29 November, 2018, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/jcat/firstresponderstoolbox/62us--Involvement-of-Minors-in-Terrorist-Plots-and-Attacks-Likely-To-Endure-survey.pdf.

[2] Kumar Ramakrishna, "Global Threat Assessment 2021," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14, 1, January 2022, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTTA-January-2022.pdf, 4.

[3] Farah Pandith and Jacob Ware, "Teen Terrorism Inspired by Social Media is On the Rise. Here's What We Need to Do," *NBC News*, March 22, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/teen-

terrorism-inspired-social-media-rise-here-s-what-we-ncna1261307.

[4] Iffat Idris, "Youth Vulnerability to Violent Extremism Groups in the Indo-Pacific," *Governance and Social Development Research Centre,* September 2018, https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/1438-Youth-Vulnerability-to-Violent-Extremist-Groups-in-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf.

[5] Given that oppressive CT operations globally have made committing terrorist acts increasingly difficult, the use of youth, including in suicide attacks, offers a potential tactical advantage, since youth can possibly better evade CT security measures designed principally to monitor the suspicious activity of adults. See Jessica Trisko Darden, "Tackling

Indonesia include tackling the ongoing issue of family radicalisation and recruitment, while the recent proliferation of lone-actor attacks and the ease of online radicalisation have further lowered the threshold for youth involvement in extremist plotting.[6] To confront these evolving threats, youth-targeted deradicalisation efforts in Indonesia will require renewed vigour.

Definitions of Youth and the Indonesian Context

Across national and institutional jurisdictions, the term "youth" is often interpreted differently.[7] The United Nations (UN), for example, defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24, while the African Union extends this definition up to age 35.[8] Meanwhile, in the US, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides a more expansive age range of between ten and 24 years for youth involved in violent activities.[9] In Indonesia, the authorities do not explicitly define an age category for youth involved in violence. There are also limited studies tracing the age of terrorist suspects and inmates in Indonesia, although anecdotal

accounts indicate an increase in youth participation in terrorist activity in recent years.[10]

Since 2018, at least eleven individuals aged between 12 and 18 (the age at which youth are punishable under Indonesian law for committing a crime) have been involved in attacks or attack plots in Indonesia.[11] Four were arrested, while another two were not.[12] The majority of the rest had been involved in the May 2018 East Java attacks (Surabaya churches, Sidoarjo and police headquarters bombings respectively), and were killed during the attacks.[13] The involvement of youth in jihadi operations in the country is also not new. In 2009, 17-year-old Dani Dwi Permana, then a member of the Al-Qaeda-aligned Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) splinter group led by Noordin Mohammad Top, conducted a suicide bombing at the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta. Later, in 2016, 17-year-old Ivan Ahmadi Hasugian stabbed a priest in Medan, North Sumatra, after failing to detonate a bomb.[14]

Statistics from the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) reveal that from 2000 to 2017, out of 1,800 arrested terrorists, sixteen were

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Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth," *American Enterprise Institute*, 2019, https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/report/tackling-terrorists-exploitation-of-youth/Tackling-Terrorists-Exploitation-of-Youth.pdf.
[6] Kyler Ong and Raffaello Pantucci, "Extreme Right-Wing Violence in the West: In Remission?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14, 1, January 2022, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTTA-January-2022.pdf, 128.
[7] Kumar Ramakrishna, "Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis," *E-International Relations*, February 11, 2016, https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/11/understanding-youth-radicalization-in-the-age-of-isis-a-psychosocial-analysis/.
[8] Ibid.
[9] "Preventing Youth Violence," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, September 10, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/fastfact.html.
[10] Alif Satria, "Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism," The Virtual Forum Series Adapting to COVID-19: Indonesia, the United States and the Indo-Pacific, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies Indonesia*, YouTube video, August 3, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6JO6WPwNjA.
[11] Publicly available data does not specifically classify youth as those in the 12-18 age parameter, as defined by Indonesia's Juvenile Court (enacted in 2012) and the Law on Child's Protection (2014). As

such, the actual number of juvenile terrorist offenders could be higher, especially considering the police sometimes do not publicly reveal the age of certain terrorist suspects. The law also mandates that trials of youth be conducted behind closed doors and court documents be kept confidential, which makes verifying records harder. The data may also exclude those who are eventually released without charge.
[12] They were not arrested due to Indonesia's restorative justice approach in dealing with youth offenders, which prioritises juveniles' rehabilitation and reconciliation with their respective families over prosecution or imprisonment.
[13] The four arrested were: 1) JA, 14 years old (Bali); 2) MN, 17 years old (Kebumen, Central Java); 3) AF, 17 years old (Makassar, South Sulawesi); 4) F, 16 years old (Batam). Died in the attacks: 1) YF, 17 years old (Surabaya, East Java); 2) FH, 16 years old (Surabaya); 3) FS, 12 years old (Surabaya); 4) MD, 15 years old (Surabaya); 5) LAR, 17 years old (Sidoarjo, East Java). Not arrested: 1) AR, 15 years old (Sidoarjo, East Java); 2) RAL, 12 years old (Banten).
[14] "Perilaku Ivan, Pelaku Bom Medan, Berubah Sejak 2 Tahun Lalu," *Tempo*, August 29, 2016, https://nasional.tempo.co/read/799772/perilaku-ivan-pelaku-bom-medan-berubah-sejak-2-tahun-lalu/full&view=ok; "Pengebom Hotel JW Marriott Lahir 17 Agustus," *Tempo Interaktif*, August 17, 2009, https://metro.tempo.co/read/192962/pengebom-hotel-jw-marriot-lahir-17-agustus.

children or teenagers.[15] Another BNPT study from 2017 also stated that 11.8 percent of terrorists apprehended by the authorities were aged below 21.[16] In addition, many Indonesian youth who travelled with their parents to join IS in Syria and Iraq since 2014 remain stranded in various refugee camps in the theatre. An Institute for Policy Analysis and Conflict (IPAC) report estimated that by 2021, the number of Indonesian youth (between 10 and 18 years old) in the Al-Hawl and Al-Roj camps in Syria had swelled to ninety-seven, amidst delays (partly attributable to pandemic-related travel restrictions) in the government's repatriation programme.[17]

Drivers of Radicalisation

Globally, the manner in which youth are radicalised by terror groups varies across contexts. In some instances, youth are trafficked, kidnapped or forcibly recruited. Others voluntarily join terror groups.[18] Research into youth's engagement in violent extremism highlights the importance of their psychological vulnerability to indoctrination and socialisation into terror groups. Theories offered by scholars include neurological aspects such as the identity formation process and youth's vulnerability during this process. Among the multitude of factors cited to explain

youth receptivity to extremist narratives include the presence of a group-based identity; perceptions of exclusion; social and cultural grievances; the promise of economic stability; the prospect of fame and glory; the impact of families;[19] and the wider social environment.[20]

Groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda actively target youth with familial, psychological and social problems in their recruitment messaging, although the relative importance of these factors varies according to the individual and local contexts.[21] In terms of the roles of youth in these movements, in earlier decades, they were primarily designated as messengers, guards and porters.[22] In recent years, however, IS has more commonly employed youth cadres in a range of support, recruitment and combat roles (including as suicide bombers).[23] From IS' perspective, the recruitment of youth is strategic: youth are viewed as the future, and are vital to securing the movement's long-term stability.[24]

The Indonesia Case Study

In Indonesia, the threat landscape has long been divided into two camps. On one end, JI has a long-term goal to establish an Islamic state and hence forbids members from orchestrating attacks in Indonesia for the time

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[15] "16 Anak Terlibat Terorisme dan Radikalisme Sejak Tahun 2000," *Suara.com*, April 19, 2018, https://www.suara.com/news/2018/04/19/170418/16-anak-terlibat-terorisme-dan-radikalisme-sejak-tahun-2000?page=all.

[16] "Deretan Anak Muda di Bawah Usia 30 Tahun yang Menjadi Pelaku Terorisme," *Tempo*, April 2, 2021, https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1448400/deretan-anak-muda-di-bawah-usia-30-tahun-yang-menjadi-pelaku-terorisme/full&view=ok.

[17] Of the ninety-seven youths cited by IPAC, twenty-two were married or widowed girls. Meanwhile, twelve boys (aged 18 and below) had been imprisoned in Kurdish prisons by 2019, with this number expected to increase as some of them are transferred to such facilities from refugee camps upon reaching adolescence. In the Philippines, at least three Indonesian teenagers have joined the pro-IS Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). See "Extricating Indonesian Children from ISIS Influence Abroad," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict,* June 30, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep36329?refreqid=excelsior%3A3e8421e3e9155e86f1479f8182fcca37.

[18] Trisko Darden, "Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth," 4.

[19] The environment fostered by adult figures, such as parents, largely determines how openly a child

embraces the terrorism cause, scholars note. If extremist Islamic values are persistently inculcated in a child during his upbringing, he is more likely to embrace involvement in groups such as IS, once he is either targeted by IS recruiters or encouraged to join by an adult figure or kinfolk. See Kara Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate: The Systemic Recruitment, Training and Use of Children in the Islamic State," *Drake University*, 2016, https://www.drake.edu/media/departmentsoffices/international/nelson/2016%20paper,%20Children%20in%20ISIS,%20K.%20Anderson.pdf.

[20] Trisko Darden, "Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth."

[21] Ibid.

[22] Mick Mulroy, Eric Oehlerich and Zack Baddorf, "Begin with the Children: Child Soldier Numbers Doubled in the Middle East in 2019," *Middle East Institute*, April 14, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/begin-children-child-soldier-numbers-doubled-middle-east-2019.

[23] Ibid.

[24] In this respect, youth play an active role in IS' strategy, unlike other terror groups that traditionally did not advertise their recruitment of children and in fact sought to hide the practice. See Anderson, "Cubs of the Caliphate."

being. At the other end of the spectrum are groups that prioritise domestic attacks planning, such as the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Eastern Mujahidin Indonesia/MIT) networks, and rogue JI splinter cells. Differences in their overarching strategic aims are also reflected in how both camps have targeted and deployed youth. JI tends to hold back their younger cadres from partaking in military training or gaining combat experience until they have obtained the equivalent of a senior high school qualification from a JI *pesantren* (an Islamic boarding school), which is usually achieved at around 17 years old. Conversely, IS in Syria and Iraq and their support groups and cells in Indonesia have not hesitated to immediately deploy children and teenagers for attacks or military training.

The Family Factor

In the Indonesian context, recent studies indicate that in all the major entry points into militant groups (namely, religious study circles, local conflict dynamics, kinship and schools), the social bonds forged play a significant role in binding and vetting recruits as they radicalise, including in instances of online radicalisation.[25] The family's influence is particularly significant, and extremist parents have generally tended to raise their children on the path toward militancy.[26] According to BNPT, in 2018 alone, as many

as 1,800 children of 500 adult terrorist detainees were identified as vulnerable to radicalisation due to factors such as an absent father and desire for revenge.[27] Additionally, data from C-Save, an Indonesian NGO consortium that has assisted in the rehabilitation and reintegration of IS deportees, suggest that, as of 2018, there were around 98 IS deportee children, most of whom were turned away by Turkish authorities following failed attempts to reach Syria with their parents.[28] Another potentially vulnerable category is the offspring of the militant groups' members and sympathisers who remain free.[29]

Nicolò Scremin also highlights the indirect influence that families may exert on at-risk youth.[30] In this respect, he cites a range of personal factors that can increase the vulnerability of youth to the social media appeals of groups such as IS, including "ill-treatment in the family, divorce, an absent father, loss of a close relative, an impetus for revenge or spiritual and material rewards for family members".[31] In Indonesia, children of terrorist inmates and suspects and youth deportees from the Middle East theatre appear to be primarily radicalised by factors such as an absent father, who may have either been incarcerated, passed away or spent long periods away as part of militant groups in Indonesia or overseas.

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[25] See Julie Chernov Hwang and Kirsten Schulze, "Why They Join: Pathways into Indonesian Jihadist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6 (June 2018); Satria, "Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism."

[26] Noor Huda Ismail, "Indonesian Mother Forgives Teen Suicide Bombers Who Killed Her Sons: 'They Were Victims, Too'," *South China Morning Post*, September 12, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3148156/indonesian-mother-forgives-teen-suicide-bombers-who-killed-her.

[27] Kemenag: Mantan Teroris Percayakan Sekolah Negeri untuk Anaknya," *Antara News*, August 30, 2019, https://www.antaranews.com/berita/1037184/kemenag-mantan-teroris-percayakan-sekolah-negeri-untuk-anaknya.

[28] C-Save, an Indonesian NGO consortium that assists in the reintegration of IS deportees into society, had handled 230 individuals, 43 percent of whom are children. See Mira Kusumarini, "Penanganan Deportan ISIS, "Bukan Pemenjaraan, tapi Rehabilitasi," *Tirto.id*, May 30, 2018, https://tirto.id/penanganan-deportan-isis-bukan-pemenjaraan-tapi-rehabilitasi-cLn2.

[29] Hundreds of thousands of IS sympathisers are believed to reside in Indonesia. Additionally, there are up to 6,000-7,000 members of the JI network. See Muh Taufiqurrohman, "Insight 2021/2022 – S1E21: 20 Years After 9/11: Indonesia," *Channel News Asia*, September 17, 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/watch/insight-20212022/20-years-after-911-indonesia-2183746; Nurhadi Sucahyo, "Densus 88 Klaim Jamaah Islamiyah Mulai Melemah," *VoA Indonesia*, October 13, 2021, https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/densus-88-klaim-jamaah-islamiyah-mulai-melemah/6268531.html.

[30] Nicolò Scremin outlined four levels of analysis on family influence on radicalisation: the individual, organisational, familial and environmental. See Nicolò Scremin, "Family Matters: A Preliminary Framework for Understanding Family Influence on Islamist Radicalisation," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, November 8, 2020, DOI:10.1080/1057610X.2020.1841242.

[31] According to Scremin, while family circumstances are insufficient in explaining why Islamist radicalisation occurs, they are nevertheless important and provide a fertile breeding ground for it. Ibid.

Children who have grown up in the absence of both their fathers and mothers – typically, the pro-IS parents – represent another vulnerable group. Others may have also endured the traumatic experience of witnessing their fathers' arrests, which potentially contributes to the passing down of a legacy of revenge to the offspring.[32] An example of this was the series of shootings targeting police officers in Solo in 2012 by 19-year-old Farhan Mujahid, who had been motivated to seek revenge for the arrest of his stepfather Abu Umar the year prior.[33]

In the case of Dani Dwi Permana, the 2009 JW Marriott Hotel bomber, neurological aspects such as a "tumultuous biological, cognitive, social and emotional transition",[34] together with personal grievances and triggering events,[35] disillusionment over socio-economic inequalities and the role of a charismatic recruiter,[36] contributed to his radicalisation. Dani had been troubled following his parents' divorce a few years prior. His mother and three of his siblings had moved to Kalimantan (Borneo) island whilst his father was imprisoned on theft charges. Due to these circumstances, Dani spent the majority of his time alone in Bogor (a suburb of Jakarta) as his older brother worked full time in the capital city, and he sometimes went without electricity for days due to unpaid bills. These circumstances likely led him to seek

refuge at a nearby mosque, where he was recruited to become a suicide bomber by Saefudin Zuhri, alias Saefudin Jaelani.[37]

Role of Terrorist Groups and the Wider Social Milieu

The family's influence on radicalisation can also be understood through the role played by Islamist terrorist groups and the manner in which they recruit and proselytise. According to Scremin, the terrorist organisation may not only become a family substitute for youth in search of a sense of belonging, but also, through *dakwah* (proselytisation), shape the social environment from which they emerge.[38] Considering the family is a subset of the larger community, shedding light on the relationship dynamic between a militant group and its immediate social environment is an important precursor in understanding why some families support their kinfolk's involvement in terror activities under certain conditions as compared to others.[39]

In the Indonesian context, local militant groups have cultivated an immediate supportive environment for the children of its adult members through the provision of social and educational services, even as JI- and IS-affiliated networks have adopted contrasting approaches. JI's welfare service (*khidmah*), which has long been embedded in each of the group's subdivisions,[40] encompasses

[32] Khairul Ghazali, "Insight 2021/2022 – S1E21: 20 Years After 9/11: Indonesia."

[33] "Beginilah Keterkaitan Teroris Solo dengan Jaringan Lama," *Kompas.com*, 4 September 2012, https://lifestyle.kompas.com/read/2012/09/04/21520547/beginilah.keterkaitan.teroris.solo.dengan.jaringan.lama.

[34] Ramakrishna, "Understanding Youth Radicalization in the Age of ISIS: A Psychosocial Analysis."

[35] Adrian Cherney, et al., outlined factors that drive youth radicalisation in the Australian context. Namely, poor educational achievement, mental health problems, active engagement with online social media, exposure to other radicalised networks and associates, personal grievances and triggering events. See Adrian Cherney, Emma Belton, Siti Amirah Binte Norham and Jack Milts, "Understanding Youth Radicalisation: An Analysis of Australian Data," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, 15 September, 2020, DOI:10.1080/19434472.2020.1819372.

[36] Youth can also be vulnerable to being recruited by charismatic adults, as in some cases of youth radicalisation in Australia. Ibid.

[37] In addition to Dani, Zuhri had also targeted a number of other youths who frequented the mosque,

but the latter were not radicalised. See "Dani Dwi Permana Menghilang Sejak Awal Juni", *Tempo*, August 8, 2009, https://metro.tempo.co/read/191538/dani-dwi-permana-menghilang-sejak-awal-juni/full&view=ok; "Kapolri Ungkap Kiat Teroris Rekrut Bomber", *Viva.co.id*, September 3, 2009, https://www.viva.co.id/berita/nasional/87596-kapolri-ini-cara-teroris-merekrut-bomber.

[38] Scremin, "Family Matters," 5.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Under the leadership of Para Wijayanto, JI formally incorporated a specific deputy structure in 2016, which coordinated the group's existing welfare service (*khidmah*) that was already embedded in each of JI's divisions and subdivisions. JI's welfare service is known as the welfare for families and *Muslimah* (female Muslims) (Kesejahteraan Keluarga Khidmad Muslimah, or K3M), and is aimed at providing a strong family foundation for JI members as a pillar of the community and *ummah*. A former JI *amir*, Adung (alias Asep), served as the K3M Deputy and was directly accountable to JI *amir* (leader) Para Wijayanto, the longest-serving JI leader (2009 – 2019) so far. See, for instance, Verdict of Para Wijayanto, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 308/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt. Tim.

extensive social support to members and their families, including facilitating member children's travel expenses to and from *pesantren* and subsidising home rental costs for members from low-income families.[41] JI also has a dedicated educational division called Forum Komunikasi Pondok Pesantren (Pesantren Communication Forum, or FKPP), which oversees a network of forty affiliated *pesantren*.[42] These schools have indoctrinated children of members as well as other Muslim children, and provide a fertile recruitment ground for future cadres.[43]

Unlike JI's coordinated approach, IS' provision of supporter services is largely ad-hoc, reflecting the latter's highly decentralised structure. The decentralised pro-IS movement in Indonesia proffers social services to its members via charities that, among others, facilitate "family visits to prison and inmates' trip to their hometown upon completion of their sentences. It also sponsors families' healthcare and education expenses, while capital is also provided for setting up

businesses".[44] IS supporters also administer dozens of home-based schools, mostly based in Java. They brand the schools as *Rumah Qur'an* (RQ), which literally means Qur'anic House, hijacking the increasing popularity of mainstream RQ schools in Indonesia that offer *tahfidz* (memorising the Qur'an) programmes to attract more students.[45] The authors' online observation suggests that the number of pro-IS RQ schools has noticeably increased in the past year.[46]

In the past decade, as IS and its supporters have increasingly targeted Indonesian youth in their social media propaganda, online radicalisation has reinforced radicalisation through *pengajian* (Islamic study sessions), schools and in-person contact.[47] A 2018 study by the Pusat Pengkaiian Islam dan Masyarakat (Centre for Study on Islamic Society, or PPIM) at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) in Jakarta, suggested that around 58 percent of teenagers gathered religious knowledge online, as opposed to learning via teachers,

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[41] JI has also provided entrepreneurship capital for ex-inmates as well as legal advocacy assistance for arrested members and their families.

[42] "The Impact of the Taliban Victory on Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, September 7, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep36328?refreqid=pub-view%3A11ade0bc3d5ab9c3b934b7e328057eb1. The number of JI-affiliated *pesantren* varies between fourteen and sixty-seven. Research by PAKAR, an Indonesian NGO that studies terrorism in Indonesia, indicated that JI had directly managed only fourteen to seventeen *pesantren*. The higher figure of JI-affiliated *pesantren*, gleaned from a Detachment 88 source, may include *pesantren* that are run by JI members but are not directly under the control of JI's central command. See Kombes Pol MD Shodiq (Director of Identification and Socialisation of Indonesia's Anti-Terror Force Detachment 88), "Diskusi Publik Daring 'Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah Dahulu, Kini dan Dimasa Mendatang'," *Kajian Terorisme SKSG UI Official*, YouTube video, October 12, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NkqLHyY04E.

[43] Around ninety-six of the best graduates from these *pesantren* were selected to travel to Syria for military and combat training from 2012 to 2018. Meanwhile, the rest of JI's *pesantren* students and teachers serve as JI's support base.

[44] The decentralised pro-IS network in Indonesia consists of JAD, MIT, Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK) and various independent cells. In the last few years, JAD-affiliated charities include Baitul Mal Ummah, Anfiqu Center, RIS Al Amin and Khatibah (replaced in 2017 by Fastabiqul Khoirot-Uma Nami, which is affiliated to JAD-Bima in West Nusa

Tenggara); while Aseer Cruee Center, Gubuk Sedekah Amal Ummah and Baitul Mal Al Muuqin are affiliated to JAK. The decentralised nature of pro-IS charities also means the number of charities fluctuates over the years, with many being short-lived, partly due to arrests and internal conflicts. See V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman, "Extremist Charities Spread in Indonesia," *East Asia Forum*, March 17, 2020, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/03/17/extremist-charities-spread-in-indonesia/; "The Decline of ISIS in Indonesia and The Emergence of New Cells," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, January 21, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28849?refreqid=pub-view%3A40fb46a1e5c6f70a8829cd6d2be6d560.

[45] V. Arianti and Ahmad Saiful Rijal, "Pro-IS Home-Based Schooling in Indonesia," *RSIS Commentary*, August 28, 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CO20164.pdf.

[46] Schools affiliated to militant groups also provide psychological comfort for the children of terrorist inmates, who may otherwise experience bullying and stigmatisation if left in mainstream schools following their parents' publicised arrests. See Khariroh Maknunah, "Penanganan Anak Dalam Tindak Pidana Terorisme," *C-Save, http://csave.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Penanganan-Anak-Dalam-Tindak-Pidana-Terorisme.pdf?x96255*; Idznursham Ismail, "Preventing the Radicalisation of Former Terror Inmates' Children in Indonesia," *Stratsea*, August 13, 2020, https://stratsea.com/preventing-the-radicalization-of-former-terror-inmates-children-in-indonesia/; Ghazali, "Insight 2021/2022 – S1E21: 20 Years After 9/11: Indonesia."

[47] Idris, "Youth Vulnerability to Violent Extremism Groups in the Indo-Pacific."

books or Islamic study sessions. This number has likely increased amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as more people spend a larger amount of time online.[48]

Nurshadrina Khaira Dhania, the Indonesian teenager who influenced her family to join IS in Syria and Iraq in 2015, was primarily radicalised on social media, particularly Facebook. Dhania grappled with online "peer pressure", having been exposed to and influenced by streams of teenagers from the US, UK and other countries migrating to Syria and Iraq to join IS.[49] Another youth, Ivan Ahmadi, the Medan attack perpetrator, was also primarily radicalised online. He was inspired by the IS-linked church attacks in Northern France in July 2016.[50]

Government and Civil Society's Responses

The Law no. 11 Year 2012 of the Juvenile Court System in Indonesia guides how the government should handle youth below 18 who have committed offences, including those related to terrorism. The law outlines a "soft" approach in dealing with youth perpetrators, prioritising rehabilitation and reconciliation with their respective families over imprisonment. This may explain why a 16-year-old boy who was arrested in 2020 in Poso, Central Sulawesi, while en route to join MIT, was subsequently returned to his parents instead of being charged.[51] Separately, a 12-year-old girl instructed by her father to conduct a knife attack – together with her parents – on the then Coordinating Minister for Security Wiranto and his entourage in Banten in 2019 was not arrested.[52] She was eventually rehabilitated in a Ministry of Social Service shelter in Jakarta.[53]

The law also mandates that children aged between 12 and 18 years be tried in a separate court for juveniles, and imprisoned at a specialised penitentiary for children (LPKA) if their sentences span more than seven years, or housed at a juvenile rehabilitation centre (LPKS ABH) if their sentence falls under this benchmark. By 2016, however, due to limited penitentiary capacities, close to 60 percent of youth inmates below 18 (including terrorist inmates) were still housed in adult penitentiaries.[54] A 2020 study by Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian, a civil society group engaged in preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts, revealed that this practice has led to the further radicalisation of some child terrorist inmates. This mainly accrues to some adult terrorist inmates exercising greater influence over minors residing within the same prison compound.[55]

The Indonesian government in 2018 also amended the country's Anti-Terror Law to increase sentences by up to a third for terrorist perpetrators who involved children in a terror act.[56] The presidential decree on the National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Extremism 2020-2024 (RAN-PE), enacted in January 2021, also stipulates specific clauses

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[48] "Radikalisme, Remaja, dan Internet: Kekerasan yang Ditularkan Melalui Layar", *VoA Indonesia*, August 25, 2021, https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/radikalisme-remaja-dan-internet-kekerasan-yang-ditularkan-melalui-layar/6015385.html.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Amalina Abdul Nasir and V. Arianti, "Christian Far-Right: Copying Jihadist Extremism?" *RSIS Commentary*, March 15, 2021, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CO21045.pdf.

[51] "Remaja Asal Padang Ditangkap Ketika Hendak Bergabung dengan Kelompok Santoso," *Berita Satu*, September 30, 2016, https://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/389605/remaja-asal-padang-ditangkap-ketika-hendak-bergabung-dengan-kelompok-santoso.

[52] Verdict of Syahrial Alamsyah alias Abu Rara, West Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 475/Pid/Sus/2020/PN. Jkt. Brt.

[53] Adi Briantika, "Mabes Polri Izinkan Abu Rara Jenguk Anaknya dengan Syarat," *Tirto.id*, October 25, 2019, https://tirto.id/mabes-polri-izinkan-abu-rara-jenguk-anaknya-dengan-syarat-eknE.

[54] The government's ongoing efforts to address this issue include establishing more juvenile rehabilitation centres in cities across the country. In 2016, for instance, the government established six LPKS ABH in Nganjuk (East Java), Padang (West Sumatra), Pesawaran (Lampung), Padang Lawas (North Sumatra), Parigi Moutong (Central Sulawesi) and Subang (West Java). See "Mensos Resmikan Enam LPKS ABH," *Antara News*, August 13, 2016, https://www.antaranews.com/berita/578544/mensos-resmikan-enam-lpks-abh

[55] Maknunah, "Penanganan Anak Dalam Tindak Pidana Terorisme."

[56] Law No. 5 Year 2018 on Amendment on Law No. 15 Year 2003 on the Enactment of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 1 Year 2002 on Countering Terrorism to Become a Law. The law also spells out a multi-pronged deradicalisation strategy that encompasses identification and assessment, rehabilitation, re-education and social reintegration.

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for a customised rehabilitation programme catering to child terrorist inmates.[57]

As for civil society responses, an initiative by Ruangobrol.id has involved local community leaders actively engaging the families of terror convicts (comprising women and children) to reduce their dependency on violent extremist groups.[58] Another initiative by AMAN Indonesia empowers the wives and children of terrorist inmates by providing entrepreneurial training and educational activities, respectively.[59] Similarly, Yayasan Prasasti Perdamaian's initiatives have also targeted several youth terrorist inmates.[60]

Conclusion

In sum, terrorists and violent extremists will continue to exploit ongoing pandemic-related socio-cultural restrictions to recruit into their ranks. And given that youth have spent an unprecedented amount of time online since the onset of COVID-19, an uptick in their involvement in terrorist activities in the near term cannot be discounted. As such, in addition to drastically improving content moderation online, targeted intervention measures that can, for example, pre-emptively detect vulnerable youth are required. In the Indonesian context, there is a need to develop and coordinate deradicalisation programmes for youth at the local level, which will necessitate closer inter-agency coordination and the government working in tandem with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) well-versed in such initiatives.

Additionally, disengagement programmes targeting at-risk youth should be intensified in schools and tertiary institutions, while accessibility should also be improved for child inmates to continue their education inside prison and upon release.[61] Further, amidst complexities in regulating both formal and informal Islamic schools that propagate violent Islamist ideologies,[62] the government should seek to enhance disengagement efforts by facilitating school transfers for children of recalcitrant terrorist inmates, away from pro-IS or JI-run establishments.[63] In doing so, the authorities may consider partnering with multiple *pesantren* that teach moderate and peaceful Islam, with the aim of making these schools more accessible to children of terrorist inmates and deportees who live in various cities across the country.

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[57] Annex of Presidential Decree (Perpres) No. 7 Year 2021 on RAN-PE.
[58] Rosyid Nurul Hakim, "Empowering Indonesian Communities for Effective Reintegration of Terrorists and Their Families," *Stratsea*, August 1, 2021, https://stratsea.com/empowering-indonesian-communities/.
[59] "Membendung Radikalisme di Kalangan Milenial," *Universitas Islam Indonesial*, August 5, 2021, https://www.uii.ac.id/membendung-radikalisme-di-kalangan-milenial/.
[60] Khariroh Maknunah, "Perkawinan Anak di Lingkaran Kelompok Teroris," Webinar PAKAR-SeRVE-Komnas Perempuan Series #13, *Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalization Studies*, YouTube video, July 22, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIfeT3_Wl-E.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs, which oversees *pesantren*, lacks the legal powers to close down registered schools, even if teachers and administrators have been found to be involved in

terrorism. Similarly, the authorities cannot shut down informal schools (those not registered with the Ministry) that preach extremism. Several schools in the latter category have ceased operations of their own volition, such as when there were no administrators to run the schools because of arrests or due to pressure from the local community. See V. Arianti, "Participation of Children in Terrorist Attacks in Indonesia: A Possible Future Trend," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10, 11, November 2018, 4-7.
[63] To quell the nefarious influence of radical family members or revenge motives, Detachment 88 has initiated the transfer of schools for some children of prominent terrorists. For instance, in late 2021, the agency moved the son of deceased MIT leader Ali Kalora away from Poso (a group stronghold), and is currently sponsoring his studies at a school in Jakarta. See, for instance, Kombes Pol MD Shodiq, "Diskusi Publik Daring 'Al Jamaah Al Islamiyah Dahulu, Kini dan Dimasa Mendatang'."

Countering Online Radicalisation during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Malaysia

Akil Yunus

Synopsis

The COVID-19 pandemic has stymied the physical operations of terrorist networks, but they have been quick to capitalise on worldwide lockdowns to intensify online radicalisation and recruitment activities. Existing violent extremist narratives and propaganda continue to spread openly on social media, and have been adapted around mis/disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories about the virus. Similarly, violent extremist groups have exploited the upsurge in online hate speech and xenophobia to further fuel communal tensions and attract new followers. Malaysia has recognised the need for multi-stakeholder approaches in tackling online radicalisation - involving not just state agencies, but also civil society, youths, and the media. One such idea is to develop digital resilience at the community level to more effectively curtail online susceptibilities to violent extremism.

Introduction

With the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (IS) and decapitation of its key leadership by 2019, the group has become even more reliant on online messaging and recruitment activities to stay relevant. The group's ideology and aspirations continue to be popular on social media platforms and threaten to produce a fresh generation of recruits and sympathisers. IS' survival is largely dependent on these remote foot soldiers, who self-radicalise online through engagement with propaganda materials and are then driven to plan and launch localised attacks. Recent terror incidents involving so-called lone wolf actors such as the New Zealand mall attack[1] and the beheading of a history teacher in France[2] demonstrate the real-life consequences of online radicalisation. Despite sustained efforts to curb this threat, including investments in counter-messaging initiatives and stricter Internet regulations, terrorist activity in cyberspace is almost impossible to monitor and eradicate completely.

In recent years, governments have started exploring preventive strategies that not only address the immediate threat posed by terrorist activities, but also tackle the key drivers of violent radicalisation online and offline. Recognising that socio-economic vulnerabilities and communal grievances are among the factors that increase a nation's susceptibility to violent extremism (VE), multi-stakeholder or whole-of-society approaches have been touted as holistic solutions to achieve long-term outcomes such as community resilience and social cohesion.[3]

In the Malaysian context, these efforts have manifested in a number of ways. In 2021, the government introduced a new National Security Policy 2021-2025[4] and launched a

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[1] Joe Burton, "New Zealand's latest terror attack shows why ISIS is harder to defeat online than on the battlefield," *The Conversation*, September 4, 2021, https://theconversation.com/new-zealands-latest-terror-attack-shows-why-isis-is-harder-to-defeat-online-than-on-the-battlefield-167336.

[2] Anna Triandafyllidou, "What does Samuel Paty's tragic murder teach us?," *OpenDemocracy*, November 16, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/what-does-samuel-patys-tragic-murder-teach-us/.

[3] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications," *UNDP*, February 27, 2020, https://www.undp.org/publications/strengthening-social-cohesion-conceptual-framing-and-programming-implications.

[4] "National Security Policy (Malay version)," *National Security Council (NSC)*, July 7, 2021, https://asset.mkn.gov.my/web/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/08/DASAR-KESELAMATAN-NEGARA-2021-2025.pdf.

10-year National Unity Blueprint.[5] Both policies provide fresh opportunities and implications for preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Similarly, the Ministry of Home Affairs has taken the lead in drafting the country's National Action Plan (NAP) on P/CVE.

Malaysia has so far avoided mass casualty attacks, unlike some of its regional neighbours. However, it remains vigilant towards the influence of online VE propaganda and the presence of IS-affiliated radical networks such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Sabah, which are indicative of the group's expansionist ambitions in the region. The country's sole IS-related attack - a grenade bombing at the Movida nightclub in Puchong, Selangor state in 2016[6] - was orchestrated entirely online by IS militant Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi (who was killed subsequently in a drone strike a year later in Syria), before it was executed by two of his followers.

In 2019, then Home Minister Muhyiddin Yassin warned of a reinvigorated IS threat following the death of former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and noted that Malaysia was particularly concerned with the threat posed by returning foreign fighters, online radicalisation and lone wolf actors.[7] In current times, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a curveball to counter-terrorism and P/CVE efforts, as violent extremists have shown equal adaptability to the "new normal".

COVID-19: Impact on Violent Extremism

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[5] Syed Jaymal Zahid, "PM Muhyiddin launches long-term blueprint for Malaysian unity," *Malay Mail*, February 15, 2021, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/02/15/pm-muhyiddin-launches-long-term-blueprint-for-malaysian-unity/1949846.
[6] "Malaysian police confirm nightclub blast first successful attack by ISIS on Malaysian soil," *The Straits Times*, July 4, 2016, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysian-police-confirm-isis-elements-behind-nightclub-blast.
[7] Bernama, "M'sia not ruling out possibility Isis shifting operations to Southeast Asia - Muhyiddin," *MalaysiaKini*, Nov 27, 2019, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/501437.
[8] Peter Stubley, "Coronavirus: Isis tells followers not to travel to Europe for attacks because of outbreak," *The Independent*, March 15, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/coronavirus-isis-europe-spain-italy-france-uk-covid-19-pandemic-latest-a9403421.html.

Global Outlook

The worldwide lockdowns caused by the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020 initially disrupted the physical operations of VE movements, while momentarily diverting attention away from their cause. IS even fell in line with imposed movement restrictions as it called on followers to avoid travelling to COVID-19 "hotspots" and backed public health guidelines.[8] However, the respite proved temporary as the group quickly regrouped and re-strategised.

The rise of conspiracy theories and sustained disinformation campaigns about the virus helped fuel the agenda of violent extremists. Many Islamist and far-right groups infused these narratives into their own to create online "echo chambers" aimed at further polarising society and sparking distrust against the state. Existing research shows that conspiracy theories act as radicalisation multipliers as they reinforce groupthink, vilification of "the other", and eventually justify a resort to violence.[9] Extremist groups have infiltrated the growing presence of these like-minded communities on online discussion boards, gaming platforms, and messaging apps.

Another major concern is that movement restrictions have essentially created a captive virtual audience[10] for VE groups. Many Internet users turned to social media to stay connected with their peers, thereby putting themselves at greater risk of exposure to VE ideology.[11] Similarly, the pandemic provided an avenue for terrorist actors to leverage the

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[9] Terje Emberland, "Why conspiracy theories can act as radicalization multipliers of far-right ideals," *Centre for Research on Extremism (University Of Oslo)*, Feb 24, 2020, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/conspiracy-theories-radicalization-multipliers.html.
[10] "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism," *Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)*, June, 2020, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/news/impact-covid-19-pandemic-terrorism-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism-update.
[11] A report by Save the Children states that the world is facing a "lost generation of learners" as the pandemic has exacerbated interrelated crises that include extreme poverty, intercommunal violence, and climate change. Such conditions can in turn produce a disillusioned generation that is easily swayed by the false assurances of VE groups. See

role of alternative service provider and liberator, as they fill the void caused by weak state responses to the crisis.[12] The consequences of state failure in this case are two-fold: first, it embellishes the legitimacy of extremist groups, thereby increasing their support base; and second, it decreases trust in the state apparatus and strengthens the anti-state narratives peddled by VE groups.[13]

Pandemic VE Trends in Malaysia

In general, physical terrorist activity throughout Malaysia declined significantly in the two years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) made only seven terror-related arrests in 2020, compared to 72 in 2019.[14] Meanwhile, about 15 terror-related arrests were made in Sabah between May and September 2021.[15] The drop in arrests was attributed largely to movement restrictions and border closures, which limited the operations of terrorist networks. However, this does not imply an overall decline in the VE threat. Analysts say that online radicalisation activities continued during the lockdown, and had even increased as IS supporters exploited virtual platforms and new technologies like cryptocurrencies and the dark web to further their cause.[16]

Local events and controversies during this period also exacerbated the drivers of violent radicalisation and amplified extremist narratives online.

An initial trigger was the upsurge in hate speech and xenophobic sentiments on social media that were targeted particularly at minority communities deemed to be at fault for spreading the virus. Two particular groups that bore the brunt of online vitriol were undocumented migrants and refugees,[17] primarily from the Rohingya diaspora. These hateful sentiments flared up after Malaysia turned away boats carrying hundreds of Rohingya refugees[18] and detained several hundred other undocumented migrants in COVID-19 "red zones" across Kuala Lumpur[19] in an attempt to quell the virus' spread.

According to reports, postings on private groups within Facebook also appeared to incite or encourage physical violence against these communities.[20] Such sentiments could be exploited by VE actors, who seek to infiltrate these online spaces and spur further violent acts. Similarly, the sustained persecution of refugees like the Rohingyas leave them equally vulnerable to radicalisation.[21] The negative sentiments

"Protect a Generation: The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives," *Save the Children International*, 2020, https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/protect-generation-impact-covid-19-childrens-lives/.

[12] Update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism," *Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)*, June, 2021, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/update-impact-covid-19-pandemic-terrorism-counterterrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism.

[13] Harriet Allan, Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Jesperson, Sneha Reddy-Tumu, and Emily Winterbotham, "Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, October 16, 2015, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf.

[14] "Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Malaysia," *US Department of State*, December 16, 2021, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/malaysia/.

[15] Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass and Jasminder Singh, "Global Threat Assessment 2021: Malaysia," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 14,1, January 2022, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CTTA-January-2022.pdf.

[16] Muzliza Mustafa and Noah Lee, "Terror Arrests Drop in Malaysia Due to Pandemic, New Policing

Approach," *BenarNews*, January 15, 2021, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/my-counter-terror-01152021181945.html.

[17] Emily Ding, "Malaysia's Coronavirus Scapegoats," *Foreign Policy*, June 19, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/malaysias-coronavirus-scapegoats/.

[18] Tashny Sukumaran, "As Malaysia battles the coronavirus, its Rohingya refugees face a torrent of hate," *South China Morning Post*, April 28, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3081958/malaysia-battles-coronavirus-its-rohingya-refugees-face-torrent?module=perpetual_scroll_0&pgtype=article&campaign=3081958.

[19] Tashny Sukumaran and Bhavan Jaipragas, "Coronavirus: hundreds arrested as Malaysia cracks down on migrants in Covid-19 red zones," *South China Morning Post*, May 1, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3082529/coronavirus-hundreds-arrested-malaysia-cracks-down-migrants.

[20] Reuters, "Anti-migrant sentiment persists on Facebook in midst of spike in Covid-19 cases," *Free Malaysia Today*, October 14, 2020, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/10/14/anti-migrant-sentiment-persists-on-facebook-in-midst-of-spike-in-covid-19-cases/.

[21] "Over the Edge: Countering Violent Extremism Among Vulnerable Refugee Communities in Malaysia," *IMAN Research*, June 2020,

toward the Rohingya diaspora mark a stark departure for Malaysia, which had been largely empathetic to their plight in the past.[22] However, it corresponds to the prevalence of anti-immigrant rhetoric globally during the pandemic, which led to violence in some countries.

Another flashpoint for online radicalisation stems from the racial and religious rhetoric that has arguably worsened since the onset of the pandemic. In 2021, counter-terrorism officials identified racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism (REMVE) as the "most significant terrorism-related danger" for Malaysia, noting that the propagation of ethno-nationalistic and supremacist narratives by some quarters could beget violence and threaten the country's nation building efforts.[23] Counter-terrorism expert Dr. Ahmad El-Muhammady previously warned that groups like IS have learnt to exploit ethno-religious tensions to advance their ideology.[24] Malaysia also faces an increasingly volatile political landscape, having had three different governments since the general election in 2018. Coupled with growing dissatisfaction among large segments of the population, especially the younger generation's struggle with issues like income inequality and unemployment, these conditions are ripe for exploitation by extremist actors.

Multi-Stakeholder Approaches in P/CVE

In aiming to develop long-term resilience against the threat of terrorism and VE, especially in cyberspace, Malaysia has recognised that law enforcement efforts or conventional "hard" approaches alone are insufficient. Instead, these need to be combined with "soft" measures that focus on lasting prevention, and which tackle the root causes of violent radicalisation. This requires the buy-in of various actors, including state-based entities, civil society and youths, as well as the media. Although the P/CVE agenda as a whole is still relatively new to Malaysia, there are promising indications of multi-stakeholder involvement in this field.

Government

The pandemic inevitably shifted priorities at the national level in favour of immediate measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. However, government agencies continued to pursue strategies that either directly or indirectly addressed the threat of online extremism. Apart from existing law enforcement measures, legislations like the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 seek to prevent offensive or false material from circulating online,[25] including extremist content. From a religious standpoint, Malaysia has sought to promote a more moderate and inclusive version of Islam through the concept of *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* (Mercy to all Creations). One of its intentions was to counteract the exclusivist narratives of IS, which claim that countries such as Malaysia were not Islamic enough as it "practised secularism and capitalism".[26]

Meanwhile, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT) is a designated agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has developed strategic communications initiatives to dispel online VE narratives, as well as promote public awareness among youths.[27] During the pandemic, the agency shifted its outreach

https://imanresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Press-Statement.pdf.
[22]A. Ariffin, "Malaysia: Najib Leads Rally Against Rohingya Violence in Myanmar," *BenarNews*, December 4, 2016, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/najib-rohingya-12042016104140.html.
[23] Amy Chew, "From Malaysia to the Philippines, what are the most serious terror threats in Southeast Asia 20 years after 9/11?," *South China Morning Post*, September 23, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3149728/malaysia-philippines-what-are-most-serious-terror-threats.
[24] Terence Tang, "Islamic State could exploit local issues to advance ideology in Malaysia, says analyst," *Malay Mail*, May 14, 2019, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/05/

14/islamic-state-could-exploit-local-issues-to-advance-ideology-in-malaysia-an/1752631.
[25] Ammar Mohammed and Nazli Ismail Awang, "Offensive Content on The Internet: The Malaysian Legal Approach," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 5,2, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335227743_Offensive_Content_on_The_Internet_The_Malaysian_Legal_Approach.
[26] Mohd Mizan Aslam, "Applying Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin in Combatting Terrorism," *SEARCCT's Selection of Articles*, January, 2020, https://www.searcct.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/SEARCCT-Selection-Of-Articles-2020.pdf.
[27] "SEARCCT went virtual with BESTNYER program," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT)*, April 9, 2021,

programmes online by organising a series of webinars and virtual workshops that explored current trends and challenges in P/CVE, including topics like terrorists' use of the Internet.[28] A major challenge in tackling online radicalisation is that it can fester undetected due to the sheer volume of content on cyberspace, with youths and teenagers particularly vulnerable. Therefore, SEARCCT is working with several partners to establish an early warning mechanism against radicalisation on social media.[29]

On a broader scale, the government has embarked on a range of campaigns and initiatives to foster national integration and increase cybersecurity awareness, to mitigate the drivers of online radicalisation. At the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2021, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob mooted "peaceful co-existence" as an overarching concept to uphold unity and equality among Malaysians, and to characterise the country's foreign policy priorities.[30] Prior to that, Malaysia also joined the Christchurch Call to Action in eliminating terrorist and violent extremist content online.[31]

Civil Society and Youth

For years, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Malaysia had been far removed from a securitised field like counter-terrorism. However, this changed with the rise of IS and a recalibration towards preventive ("soft") approaches in dealing with the "push" and "pull" factors of VE. An increase of funding

opportunities for P/CVE programming also provided an avenue for community-based actors to complement state efforts. Local CSOs have fared particularly strongly in terms of education, dialogue and awareness raising initiatives to counter extremism,[32] as well as championing issues like governance, development and human rights, which altogether help mitigate the structural drivers or grievances leading to VE.

Similarly, CSOs are more adept in conducting targeted outreach or intervention programmes for vulnerable populations, by virtue of having a strong grassroots presence as well as being credible and trusted voices within these communities. The Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) has enjoyed success on this front, leveraging its vast network of followers nationwide to detect and prevent radicalisation online and offline, mainly by reinforcing moderate Islamic ideals.[33] In 2021, ABIM collaborated with the Ministry of Youth and Sports to develop a guidebook and webinar series on preventing extremism among youths.[34] IKRAM is another popular Muslim NGO that promotes healthy religious discourse and seeks to correct the distorted perceptions of *jihad* in IS' online messaging.

Amidst the pandemic, community actors played another crucial role as fact-checkers against virus disinformation and ensuring information accessibility among vulnerable populations like migrants and refugees.[35] The *#KitaJagaKita* (We Protect Each Other) and *#BenderaPutih* (White Flag) online grassroots

https://www.searcct.gov.my/en_gb/searcct-went-virtual-with-bestnyer-program/.

[28] "Webinar 2020," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT)*, February 27, 2021, https://www.searcct.gov.my/en_gb/webinar-2020/.

[29] This involves developing a context-specific guide on the common (and less common) indicators of pre-radicalisation and radicalisation leading to support for VE groups. Meanwhile, an intervention panel comprising qualified experts is also being studied to carry out rehabilitative procedures before there is a need for law enforcement to get involved.

[30] Adib Povera, "At UNGA, Malaysia calls for peaceful co-existence, global ceasefire," *New Straits Times*, September 25, 2021, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/09/730754/unga-malaysia-calls-peaceful-co-existence-global-ceasefire.

[31] Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, "Agenda Item 114: Measures To Eliminate International Terrorism," *Sixth Committee Of The 75th Session Of The*

General Assembly, October 7, 2020, https://www.kln.gov.my/web/usa_un-new-york/news-from-mission/-/blogs/statement-6c-agenda-item-114-measures-to-eliminate-international-terrorism.

[32] "Prevention from Below: Civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia," *The Asia Foundation*, October, 2020, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Prevention-from-Below-Civil-Society-Efforts-to-Prevent-Violent-Extremism-in-Southeast-Asia_full-report.pdf.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Buku Kecil: Belia Mencegah Ekstremisme," *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM)*, https://anyflip.com/obtem/edon/basic.

[35] Clarissa Ai Ling Lee, "Malaysia's #Kitajagakita invigorates political activism and tackles apathy," *AsiaLink University of Melbourne*, September 14, 2021, https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/malaysias-kitajagakita-invigorates-political-activism-and-tackles-apathy.

movements aided in channelling timely assistance to communities in need during the lockdown.[36] While its implications for preventing VE may not seem immediately apparent, the rise of citizen activism in the face of a crisis filled a major void that could otherwise have been exploited by malicious actors.

Media

The media in Malaysia remains a largely untapped yet important tool in combating VE ideology due to its reach and ability to shape public opinion. News reports and broadcasts about terrorism-related issues often serve to discredit the message of the terrorist and instead emphasise values like empathy, resilience and unity. However, at times, the framing of news can also stoke further discord and, in the worst case, incite hate and violence.[37] These sentiments flared up predominantly on social media, which has become the primary source for news and information today. Hence, the role of the media comes under greater scrutiny as half-truths, biases, and sensationalistic coverage usually end up being infused with and amplifying VE narratives.[38]

To that end, there is a pressing need to engage the media in P/CVE, and for industry-led efforts in establishing a set of reporting guidelines that not only dispels hateful extremism, but actively nurtures resilience and social cohesion. As a starting point, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC-IIUM) together with the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) and SEARCCT have launched *MyCVEGuide,* an online repository of P/CVE resources for journalists and researchers.[39] Concurrently, UNDP Malaysia and SEARCCT are producing a handbook for media practitioners to guide

reporting on preventing VE through the promotion of social cohesion. These initiatives can build the capacity of local journalists to be credible messengers in combating VE propaganda online, by way of advocating alternative narratives that foster inclusion and respect within virtual communities.

Towards Digitally Resilient Communities

As far as "soft" approaches go, counter narratives and counter-messaging programmes have long been advocated in response to the threat of online radicalisation. The premise put forward by proponents is that defeating the ideologies that drive individuals towards VE will reduce the number of followers and, thereby, diminish the threat. In reality, however, there is no certainty that counter-narratives actually reach their intended audience and, even when they do, practitioners lack the tools to measure whether these correspond directly to a drop in VE activity online.[40] Experts have also noted that counter narratives are often counter-productive, and can accelerate radicalisation.[41]

Similarly, counter-messaging strategies that have shown some efficacy only provide short-term gains. VE groups are constantly refining their narratives to stay one step ahead of the authorities. Therefore, any response to this appears reactionary and is akin to applying a 'band-aid' to the wider problem of online radicalisation. As such, stakeholders are looking into a more long-term and sustainable solution, which is to empower communities to be digitally resilient.

Digital resilience can be defined as the individual's ability to recognise online risks - "knowing what to do if something goes wrong, learning from your experiences of being

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[36] Ibid.

[37] For instance, a number of mainstream news outlets opted to platform individuals who were spewing xenophobic remarks about refugees and migrants during the pandemic, which arguably fuelled online hatred against these communities. In one incident, a Rohingya refugee was even verbally harassed on the streets by locals. See "Rohingya refugee in Malaysia harassed by local," *Free Malaysia Today*, April 28, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDWK46kpfL4.

[38] "Daesh Recruitment: How the Group Attracts Supporters," *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, November, 2016,

https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/daesh-recruitment-how-the-group-attracts-supporters/184

[39] "About Us," *The Portal of CVE in Malaysia*, 2021, https://mycveguide.com/about-us/.

[40] Eric Rosand and Emily Winterbotham, "Do counter-narratives actually reduce violent extremism?," *The Brookings Institution*, March 20, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/20/do-counter-narratives-actually-reduce-violent-extremism/.

[41] Jocelyn Belanger et al, "Do Counter-Narratives Reduce Support for ISIS? Yes, but Not for Their Target Audience," *Front. Psychol.* June 11, 2020, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01059.

online, and being able to recover from any difficulties or upsets."[42] In the P/CVE context, digital resilience enables Internet users to identify violent extremist messaging and be self-aware of efforts to radicalise and recruit them, altogether spurring them to reject such overtures. Digital resilience is certainly not an unfamiliar concept - it builds upon the traditional notion of resilience and combines it with wider efforts to enhance cybersecurity, specifically the creation of "safe spaces" online. It also reinforces the importance of basic digital literacy skills such as critical thinking and mutual respect in online interactions.

The potential implication of a digitally resilient society in combating VE is that more extremist content gets flagged and reported by netizen "watchdogs". People are also less likely to get trapped within online "echo chambers", and are better able to differentiate facts from unsubstantiated claims or conspiracy theories. By understanding the 'red flags' associated with online radicalisation and recruitment attempts, virtual communities can also effectively disrupt terrorist funding streams and possible cyber attacks by terror networks.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the world's dependence on technology for work, leisure, and staying connected. As this "new normal" is expected to endure into the future, policy decisions must include education and training initiatives on digital resilience that are particularly targeted at teenagers and young adults. Admittedly, digital resilience cannot be nurtured overnight, nor can it be fully taught. Resilience itself is a process that develops

over time and is the result of lived experiences, both positive and negative. As such, the active monitoring and regulation of online platforms must continue in tandem with efforts by tech companies like Google and Facebook to vigilantly remove or redirect extremist content on their sites.[43] In 2021, Facebook also ran a pilot test to notify and warn users who might have been exposed to "extremist content" on the site, and provided links for them to "get support".[44]

In terms of policy considerations for Malaysia, nationwide efforts to promote digital literacy and resilience are ongoing,[45] and should be intensified. The concept is also embedded as an aspiration under Strategies 26 to 28 of the recent National Security Policy,[46] as well as the impending NAP on P/CVE. Together, these commitments suggest that Malaysia is making significant inroads into tackling the threat of VE online. However, the success of its overall P/CVE strategy, especially in achieving long-term outcomes like social cohesion and resilience, hinges largely on effective multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration.

About the author

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[42] "What is Digital Resilience?," *EduCare*, February 7, 2020, https://www.educare.co.uk/news/what-is-digital-resilience.
[43] John Shinal, "Facebook, Google tell Congress they're fighting extremist content with counterpropaganda," *CNBC*, January 17, 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/17/facebook-google-tell-congress-how-theyre-fighting-extremist-content.html.
[44] Elizabeth Culliford, "Facebook asks: Are your friends becoming extremists?," *Reuters*, July 2,

2021, https://www.reuters.com/technology/facebook-asks-are-your-friends-becoming-extremists-2021-07-01/.
[45] "Training youths in creating a positive and safe culture online," *The Star*, October 25, 2020, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2020/10/25/training-youths-in-creating-a-positive-and-safe-culture-online.
[46] National Security Policy, *NSC*, 79-81.

China and the Evolving Militant Threat in Post-war Afghanistan

Stefanie Kam

Synopsis

After the US withdrawal, Beijing's principal security interest in Afghanistan is preventing the destabilisation of Xinjiang province arising from the potential cross-border infiltration of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP). The Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda terrorist groups, which have also targeted China in their propaganda in the past, also factor into Chinese security concerns. In view of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)'s more assertive messaging targeting Beijing in the October 2021 Kunduz attack, the intensity of terrorist threat to Chinese interests would be shaped by the dynamics between the militant groups and Beijing. This article examines Beijing's security concerns in post-war Afghanistan with respect to the TIP, ISKP, Pakistani militant groups, and the Taliban. The subsequent sections will outline China's external and internal counterterrorism approach in Afghanistan and Xinjiang respectively, and the likely future trajectory of the terrorism challenge for Beijing.

Background

China had reported no incidents of violence in the region since February 2017, when a knife attack in Pishan county by three attackers killed eight people.[1] In the last few years, the threat of militancy has mostly evolved outside China rather than within the country. Notably, terrorism features high on the list of risks in Chinese analysts' assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One study notes that among the countries along the BRI, 40 are considered peaceful, 15 are considered risky, 11 are experiencing unrest, and five countries (Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria) are considered high-risk regions.[2]

At any rate, with the US exit from Afghanistan, Beijing's immediate security interest in Afghanistan lies in preventing the destabilisation of its Xinjiang province from threats like the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the potential cross-border infiltration of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP).[3] Chinese foreign fighters, mostly Uyghurs of Turkic descent, have travelled to Syria and Afghanistan and used Turkey and Southeast Asia to transit into Syria. The August 2015 bombing attack on the Erawan shrine in Bangkok exposed the existence of a trafficking network facilitating the movement of Uyghurs into Southeast Asia and later Syria.[4] The suspects had arrived in Thailand from Turkey in possession of fake Turkish passports. Between 2014 and 2016, Southeast Asian authorities also disrupted links and uncovered a terrorist plot between some Uyghur jihadists and pro-IS and IS-linked terrorist cells (the Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT) and Katibah GR) in Indonesia.[5]

[1] Teddy Ng, "Eight Killed in Xinjiang Knife Attack: Police Shoot Three Attackers," *South China Morning Post,* February 15, 2017, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2070868/eight-killed-xinjiang-knife-attack.

[2] Zhao Minyan et al., "Yidai yilu yanxian guojia anquan xingshi pinggu ji duice" (Security assessment in BRI countries and policy responses), *Journal of China Academy of Sciences*, 31, 6, 2016, pp. 689–96.

[3] China refers to the group as the ETIM and has asserted that the group has, since the 1990s, been responsible for a series of violent attacks in Xinjiang. The militant group refers to itself as the TIP. Countries like the UK use ETIM and TIP both in their proscription, while the UN refers to the group as ETIM. This article will use TIP as the preferred nomenclature throughout.

[4] Stefanie Kam, "Thailand's Uighur Refugees: Security Implications for Southeast Asia," *RSIS Commentary,* July 29, 2015, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/icpvtr/co15160-thailands-uighur-refugees-security-implications-for-southeast-asia/#.YMR7ze8zbFQ; Charlie Campbell, "Bangkok Bombers Planned More Attacks, Thai Authorities Say," *TIME,* August 21, 2015, https://time.com/4016705/thailand-bangkok-bombing-erawan-shrine-china-uigur-turkey-explosives/.

[5] Nodirbek Soliev, "Uyghur Militancy in and Beyond Southeast Asia: An Assessment," *Counter Terrorist*

The ISKP's messaging on last October's Kunduz attack in Afghanistan, which the group claimed was targeted at China (along with the Taliban and Shiites), reinforced an increasingly precarious future trajectory of terrorism which would be dependent on a number of internal and external factors, including China's approach to Afghanistan.

Beijing's Security Concerns in Afghanistan

China's concerns about terrorism in Afghanistan come from TIP's connections with the Taliban and AQ.[6] China has referred to these links as a "direct threat" to its "national security and territorial integrity."[7] Beijing's assertion of TIP's connection to attacks in China intensified around 2012, as a result of a number of high-profile incidents in the country, including the 28 October 2013 SUV attack in Tiananmen Square, the 1 March 2014 Kunming railway attack, and the 30 April 2014 suicide bombing attack at the Urumqi central railway station. At a 28 July, 2021 meeting with a visiting nine-member delegation led by the Taliban's chief negotiator and co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi urged the Taliban to make a clean break with the TIP.[8]

While the Taliban's interest may not lie in directly facilitating chaos in the country now that

they control it, Beijing is concerned about escalating militant activities following the Taliban's takeover. Tribal politics and feuds within the Taliban could be destabilising for Afghanistan.[9] A fragmented Taliban would mean a further weakening of the Taliban's ability to govern the country and detract the group's focus from constraining the militant threat, particularly from the TIP. Moreover, the ISKP and Pakistani jihadist and insurgent groups also factor into Chinese concerns about terrorism in Afghanistan.

TIP in Afghanistan and Syria and Central Asian Jihadist Militancy

According to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)'s July 2020 report, at least 500 fighters under the TIP's Afghan branch were active in Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar provinces.[10] Following October 2021 reports alleging the relocation of Uyghur militants by the Taliban from Badakhshan to Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province, the continuing threat of Uyghur militancy in Afghanistan remains a concern for Beijing. The UNSC's February 2022 report estimated that the TIP now comprises between 200 and 700 fighters and "remains active in military training and in planning terrorist attacks against Chinese interests."[11] It stated that TIP members have been encouraged to

Trends and Analyses, February 2017, 9, 2, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CTTA-February-2017.pdf.
[6] The TIP is believed to be the same group formerly known as the ETIM, founded by Uyghur militants and led by Hasan Mahsum in Afghanistan in 1997. It seeks to establish an independent Islamic state, which it refers to as "East Turkestan" in Xinjiang and beyond. Under the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan served as a base for Uyghur militants, supplying them with weapons and sheltering those who fled from China. The ETIM is said to have rebranded itself as Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in the mid-2000s, serving as a propaganda wing for anti-Chinese Uyghurs who fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Since then, the TIP's role has evolved and expanded significantly from its primary base in Afghanistan and Pakistan as it emerged to become one of many key players among the militant groups in the Syrian civil war. However, others have questioned the lack of evidence that ETIM and TIP are related, which suggests organisational fragmentation, rather than alignment, between both groups. See Jacob Zenn, "Turkistan Islamic Party Increases Its Media Profile", *CACI Analyst,* February 5, 2014,

https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12909-turkistan-islamic-party-increases-its-media-profile.html.
[7] "Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar," *China MOFA,* July 28, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cesg/eng/jrzg/t1895950.htm.
[8] Ibid.
[9] "In Power, the Taliban's Divisions Are Coming to the Fore," The Economist, October 2, 2021, https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/10/02/in-power-the-talibans-divisions-are-coming-to-the-fore.
[10] "Twelfth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2557 (2020) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace stability and security of Afghanistan," *United Nations Security Council*, June 1, 2021, https://www.undocs.org/S/2021/486.
[11] "Twenty-ninth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," *United Nations Security Council*, Feb 3, 2022, https://documents-dds-

"strengthen their ties to Afghanistan by becoming refugees or Afghan citizens" to gain a foothold in the country and that, Central Asian and TIP fighters in Afghanistan also hope that, as the de facto administration in Afghanistan, the Taliban will provide them with refugee status and passports to facilitate travel internationally.[12] Under the Taliban's umbrella, the TIP is reported to have commanded an Uyghur contingent of around 1,000 fighters, including those in Afghanistan. Its deputy commander Hajji Furqan, or Qari Furqan, reportedly also served as a deputy commander in AQ.[13]

Most of the Syria-based Uyghur jihadist militants are fighting under the TIP's branch in Latakia and Idlib provinces. There are an estimated 1,000 to 5,000 TIP fighters in Syria fighting alongside the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Al-Nusra Front.[14] An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 Uyghur fighters and families were reported to be living in Syria and Iraq in 2017-2018.

The number of Uyghurs aligned with IS in Syria is estimated to be much smaller. In 2013-2014, reports indicated that some 400 Uyghur families, including 1,200 fighters, were stationed at IS camps in Raqqah.[15] However, this IS-Uyghur link appeared to have weakened around 2017, in parallel with territorial and military setbacks faced by IS. The relative absence of Uyghurs in IS messaging during this period appeared to support this trend.[16] The purported link between IS and an individual named "Muhammad al-Uyghuri" (a choice of kunya suggesting a possible Uyghur connection) in the Kunduz attack on 8 October 2021, therefore, highlighted the active threat of IS in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and its interest in co-opting the Uyghur contingent.

A security concern for authorities in China's neighbouring Central Asian region has been the trend of attacks by either 1) self-radicalised individuals of Central Asian ethnicity or nationality inspired by IS, or those 2) directly, or indirectly, linked to developments in Syria and Iraq (either IS or AQ).[17] Such a development could potentially impact the security and stability in Central Asia and consequently increase the regional security threat for China. The absence of a mass exodus of foreign terrorist fighters of Uyghur or Central Asian origin from Syria to Afghanistan can be attributed to a variety of mobilisation factors, including operational and logistical difficulties. Compared to Afghanistan, new zones of jihadist conflicts, such as West Africa and the Sahel, have presented themselves as more attractive destinations for foreign terrorist fighters. As Beijing increases its global presence, the transnationalisation of militant networks beyond Syria and Iraq would increase Beijing's security challenge from terrorism. Theoretically, the TIP could play a role in the global movement of Uyghur and Central Asian jihadists, as it has facilitated the flow of fighters from Syria, along various routes, including through Vietnam and Pakistan, into Afghanistan.[18]

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ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/pdf/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Chinese Uighur Militants Operating Under Taliban Umbrella in Badakhshan," *Kabul Now,* March 1, 2021, https://kabulnow.com/2021/03/chinese-uighur-militants-operating-under-taliban-umbrella-in-badakhshan/, cited in Raffaello Pantucci and Nodirbek Soliev, "China," in the January 2022 volume.

[14] TIP fighters in Syria are strengthened through their strategic and tactical alignment with two other militant networks in Syria. These include the al-Qaeda offshoot, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and Katibat al Ghuraba al Turkistan (KGT). The HTS emerged around January 2017 from a merger of Jabhat al-Nusra (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), Ansar al-Din Front, Jaysh al-Sunna, Liwa al-Haqq and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement, while KGT was formed in July 2017 in northern Syria. The KGT, made up of Syrians and fighters of Arab descent and Uyghurs of Central Asian origin, has produced media

in the Uyghur language and messaging targeting China and Xinjiang.

[15] United Nations Security Council, Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (July 21, 2021), 11, https://undocs.org/S/2021/655.

[16] Elliot Stewart, "The Islamic State Stopped Talking About China," *War on the Rocks,* January 19, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the- islamic-state-stopped-talking-about-uighurs/.

[17] Such attacks have occurred in Sweden, US, Turkey, Russia, Germany between 2016-2020. See Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel* 14, 1, Jan 2021, https://ctc.usma.edu/the-april-2020-islamic-state-terror-plot-against-u-s-and-nato-military-bases-in-germany-the-tajik-connection/.

[18] "From Myth to Reality: A Look at the Flow of Fighters from Idlib To Afghanistan," *Independent Turkce*, October 9, 2021, https://www.indyturk.com/node/421701/türkiyeden-sesler/efsaneden-gerçekliğe-idlibten-afganistana-

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ISKP's involvement in the Kunduz Attack

ISKP claimed responsibility for the suicide attack on a mosque belonging to the Shi'a Hazara community in Kunduz on 8 October 2021.[19] ISKP stated that the attack was committed by a certain "Muhammad al-Uyghuri" against Shiites and the acting Taliban regime for its deportations of Uyghurs from Afghanistan at Beijing's request.[20] There were three layers of ISKP's messaging, each directed at a specific audience.[21]

First, the attack demonstrated ISKP's sympathy towards Uyghurs' resentment with the Taliban regime and the former's relevance to the latter's contingent in Afghanistan. Given that the TIP has denounced IS' caliphate as "illegitimate" in the past, the messaging appeared to be an attempt by ISKP to court the Uyghur contingent in Afghanistan.

Second, coming on the heels of the Kabul airport bombing attack (a hard target) which killed 180 and injured hundred, the Kunduz attack on a Shia mosque (a soft target) indicated the ISKP's continuing threat in Afghanistan, the Taliban's inability to protect the community, and ISKP's intent to project itself as the primary opposition movement against the Taliban.[22] It bears mention that a week after the Kunduz attack, ISKP claimed an attack on a second Shia mosque in Kandahar which claimed over 65 lives.[23] As Afghanistan-based Baloch militants targeting Pakistan have been under pressure from the Taliban around this time, it is salient that ISKP made a point to mention that the attack was

conducted by two Afghan nationals – "Anas al Khurasani" and "Abu Ali al Baluchi".[24]

Third and finally, the messaging also signalled a shift in the ISKP's stance towards China, from relative silence in the recent past to more assertively targeting China in its messaging.[25] Contingent on the bigger picture, by attacking a target government in its messaging strategy at a time when China is facing international pressure and criticisms by the US and its allies for its human rights record and treatment of Uyghurs, the attacks are more likely to garner publicity.[26] Compared to the past, when IS did not directly draw an explicit reference to the Uyghurs or Xinjiang following an attack on Chinese nationals or interests, ISKP's messaging following the Kunduz attack reflects its intent to exploit wider geopolitical developments involving China to further its agenda.

Afghanistan-based Pakistan Militant Networks

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatists have also targeted Chinese interests and personnel in attacks in Pakistan. Although the TTP operates mainly in Pakistan, the group is also active in Afghanistan, where it has benefited from sanctuaries under the Afghan Taliban's umbrella. The TTP has targeted Chinese interests and is believed to have carried out the July 2021 suicide bombing attack in Pakistan which killed 13 people, including nine Chinese workers.[27] According to Abdul Basit, the TTP "has progressively shifted its discursive focus from the AQ-aligned global

savaşçi-akişi-iddialarina; see Raffaello Pantucci and Nodirbek Soliev, "China," in the January 2022 volume.
[19] Twitter post by Shadi Alkasim (@Shadi_Alkasim), *Twitter*, October 8, 2021, https://twitter.com/Shadi_Alkasim/status/144650542 8955934721?s=20
[20] Nodirbek Soliev, "Why Is the Islamic State in Afghanistan's Propaganda Targeting China?" *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/is-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan-targeting-china/.
[21] I thank my ICPVTR colleagues Raffaello Pantucci and Nodirbek Soliev for making this point (13 January 2022).
[22] Al-Qaeda has been able to draw from and coordinate with allied local groups embedded in multiple networks on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border and foster close linkages with the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and other militant groups.
[23] "Islamic State: Islamic State Claims Mosque Bombing in South Afghanistan," *The Economic*

Times, October 16, 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/islamic-state-claims-mosque-bombing-in-south-afghanistan/articleshow/87057676.cms.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Elliot Stewart, "The Islamic State Stopped Talking About China," *War on the Rocks*, January 19, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-islamic-state-stopped-talking-about-uighurs/.
[26] In November 2020, the US delisted the ETIM from its list of terrorist groups, delegitimising Beijing's claims that it faced a threat from the group. A US state department spokesperson stated that "for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist."
[27] Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan Says Attack That Killed Chinese Was a Suicide Bombing," *Reuters*, August 13, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/.

jihadist rhetoric to a Pakistan-focused and Pashtun-centric narrative."[28] In this vein, the recent localisation of the TTP's agenda indicates a recalibration of the TTP's strategy, which could impact overall stability in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In addition, Baloch groups have used Afghanistan as a base to target Chinese interests and personnel in Pakistan, and Pakistan more generally. This was evident in the suicide bombing attack by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) on 20 August 2021, which killed a Chinese engineer working at the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Gwadar.[29] It is unclear to what extent the Taliban's efforts to expel Baloch insurgents from Kandahar and other areas in southern Afghanistan may be effective in reducing the threat of Pakistan militant networks in Afghanistan to Chinese interests.[30]

Beijing's Security Approach in Afghanistan

The tacit support Beijing has extended to the Taliban regime can be viewed as a politically expedient move aimed at securing the Taliban's agreement to staunch the threat of Uyghur militants (as well as other anti-China Pakistan militant networks) in the country. It is also to prove the superiority of its political system and governance model as Beijing seeks to use economic means to build peace in the region. As economic statecraft is viewed as a particularly useful means for generating greater political influence, China's approach to engaging with the Taliban in Afghanistan can be viewed from this angle.[31]

China has relied on both economic assistance and diplomatic overtures in its engagement with the Taliban to address the instability in Afghanistan. Its approach encompasses providing humanitarian aid and donation of the COVID-19 vaccines, establishing direct communication channels, rallying international support and aid for rebuilding Afghanistan through calling the international community to lift sanctions and unfreeze Afghan foreign assets and coming together with other regional states to urge the Western powers to engage the Taliban and to provide assistance to the country.[32] At a 10 March 2020 UNSC meeting, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, urged all parties to "act in solidarity to counter terrorism through comprehensive measures, rather than relying solely on military means."[33] Beijing's emphasis on avoiding military solutions, in combination with economic and diplomatic means in Afghanistan, is seen as instrumental for enhancing its soft power, enabling the regime to gain the trust of the Taliban, to widen its international support base among states and militant groups, and to ameliorate wider concerns about its policy in Afghanistan.

Terrorism in Xinjiang and China's Response

According to the Chinese government's data, from 1990-2016, ethnic separatists, religious extremists and terrorists have planned and carried out thousands of attacks including bombings, assassinations, poisoning, arson, assaults, and riots in Xinjiang, resulting in the deaths of hundreds and enormous property losses.[34] In a March 2019 white paper on

[28] Abdul Basit, "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Discursive Shift From Global Jihadist Rhetoric to Pashtun-Centric Narratives," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 19, no. 18, September 24, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/tehreek-e-taliban-pakistans-discursive-shift-from-global-jihadist-rhetoric-to-pashtun-centric-narratives/.
[29] Gul Yousafzai, "Two Killed in Suicide Bombing Targeting Chinese Nationals in Pakistan," *Reuters,* August 21, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/.
[30] Abdul Basit, "A Taliban Takeover Will Strengthen Pakistan's Jihadis," *Foreign Policy*, August 18, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/taliban-afghanistan-pakistan-jihadis-al-qaeda-terrorism-extremism/; Abdul Basit and Raffaello Pantucci, "Why Terrorists Will Target China in Pakistan",

Foreign Policy , August 21, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/why-terrorists-will-target-china-in-pakistan/.
[31] David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.110.
[32] Mercy Kuo, "China in Afghanistan: How Beijing Engages the Taliban," *The Diplomat,* December 25, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/china-in-afghanistan-how-beijing-engages-the-taliban/.
[33] "China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Calls for Comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Instead of Relying on Military Force," *Huanqiu*, February 10, 2022,https://world.huanqiu.com/article/46ks9IIPA6M.
[34] "Full text: The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang," *The State Council of the PRC,* March 18, 2019,

Xinjiang, the Chinese government stated that "since 2014, Xinjiang has destroyed 1,588 violent and terrorist gangs, arrested 12,995 terrorists, seized 2,052 explosive devices, punished 30,645 people for 4,858 illegal religious activities, and confiscated 345,229 copies of illegal religious materials."[35] According to a data chart of the number of terrorist incidents each year from 1990 to 2016 released by the Chinese government on 13 December 2021, terrorist incidents registered a nearly tenfold increase between 2008 (111 incidents) and 2015 (1100 incidents).[36]

Over the past decade, Xinjiang has witnessed the rise of the "security state" in the form of intensified securitisation, surveillance and introduction of 're-education' centres.[37] This development can be attributed, in large part, to the increasing evidence of transnational linkages between Uyghurs and jihadi militants in Syria in close parallel with a number of high-profile attacks in Xinjiang and other parts of China between 2012 and 2014, and a decisive shift under the Xi Jinping administration from achieving economic growth through 'leapfrog development' to 'ensuring enduring stability' as Xinjiang's key policy agenda.[38]

While the PLA (People's Liberation Army) is equipped to deal with internal contingencies, including ethnic unrest and terrorism, it is the PAP (People's Armed Police), police, militia, public security personnel, and the XPCC (Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps) that are tasked with the everyday governance of Xinjiang. China's 2019 National Defense White Paper states that the PAP has assisted the government of Xinjiang in taking out 1,588 violent terrorist gangs and capturing 12,995

terrorists.[39] China has also legalised and institutionalised religious de-radicalisation in the form of 'vocational and educational training centres', shifting from the reliance on reactive approaches to more preventive and pre-emptive measures of control. Beijing has increased its ability to manage and control the population through the grid-management system of 'convenience police stations.' The integrated joint operations platform, an intelligence-led policing and surveillance platform, is also said to provide authorities with enhanced abilities to pre-empt signs of 'extremist, separatist or terrorist' behaviour among the targeted population. By recruiting ethnic minorities as security personnel in Xinjiang, Beijing has also co-opted Uyghur ethnic minorities into the state apparatus, increased social mobility opportunities and strengthened its security footprint in the region. As a means of community engagement, China's counterterrorism campaign in Xinjiang also includes establishing "partnerships of stability" at the grassroots.[40]

In October 2021, China announced new additions to the CCP's Xinjiang leadership – including a Han cadre and two Uyghur cadres with "significant security and development experience."[41] These recent developments signal that Beijing's stability-first approach is likely to continue in Xinjiang despite increasing international pressure and sanctions, particularly by the US and its western allies over its policies (in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong). After the Taliban takeover, the concern that Afghanistan could be used as a base to launch attacks elsewhere could also place authorities in Xinjiang on heightened alert. The logic underpinning this approach is found in Xi's

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http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2019/03/18/content_281476567813306.htm.
[35] Ibid.
[36] "Multiple scenes of Xinjiang violence and terror cases revealed for the first time! The thugs even slashed and killed their wounded accomplices," *Guancha.net,* December 14, 2021, https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2021_12_14_618407_3.shtml.
[37] Stefanie Kam and Michael Clarke, "Securitization, surveillance and de-extremization in Xinjiang," *International Affairs,* 97, 3, 2021, pp. 625 – 642.
[38] At the second Xinjiang Central Work Forum held in 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping emphasised that 'safeguarding social stability and achieving an enduring peace' is the general goal of Xinjiang work. See "Expand the scale of Xinjiang ethnic minorities

to live in the mainland," *Xinhua,* May 29, 2014, http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2014-05/29/c_1110926294.htm.
[39] "Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era," *State Council of the PRC,* July 24, 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html
[40] Tom Cliff, "The Partnership of Stability in Xinjiang: State–Society Interactions Following the July 2009 Unrest," *The China Journal,* No. 68 (July 2012), pp. 79-105.
[41] Linda Lew, "Communist Party's Picks to Join Xinjiang Leadership Point to Focus on Security," *South China Morning Post,* October 18, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3152790/communist-partys-picks-join-xinjiang-leadership-point-focus.

speech emphasising the interrelated nature of internal and external security challenges under "new circumstances" where threats have become "interlocked and can be mutually activated".[42]

Conclusion

To manage future security risks in Afghanistan, China could take on a more proactive role in supporting Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction. Beijing could also adjust its counterterrorism policies to achieve multiple strategic objectives: protecting overseas Chinese interests and personnel through increasing defence spending and deploying private security contractors (PSC), particularly in areas with BRI investment projects; decreasing the Taliban's international isolation through economic assistance and diplomatic overtures; strengthening security along the Xinjiang border with Afghanistan and assisting Afghanistan with counterterrorism.

Counterterrorism efforts by Pakistan and China to constrain Uyghur and Pakistan militant networks in Afghanistan have limited the TIP's operational capabilities. Given China's robust internal and external counterterrorism operations, the likelihood of TIP striking Chinese territory presently remains low. However, with ongoing developments in Afghanistan, which include the regrouping and realignment of militant groups on the ground, this situation may evolve. ISKP's recent appeal to the Uyghur plight and its targeting of China in its messaging following the Kunduz attack suggest that Uyghurs may be aggrieved by recent actions by the Taliban in response to requests from Pakistan and China to curtail their presence in the country. A rising China will likely continue to confront threats by militant groups in Afghanistan who are keen to exploit existing tensions to strengthen their base by appealing to a wider segment of the community. This may see more militant groups threatening attacks against Beijing.

About the author

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[42] Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China.* Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press, 2014, p. 223.

Taliban 2.0 and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan: Security Implications for Malaysia

Mohd Mizan Aslam

Synopsis

The Taliban 2.0's seizing of power in Afghanistan in September 2021 will have far-reaching implications for Malaysia and the regional threat environment. Malaysia faces threats not only from the Taliban and its affiliated groups but also their rival Islamic State (IS) factions. Following the formation of the IS' Afghan branch, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in 2015, foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), including Malaysian operatives aligned with the group, have partaken in a series of assaults against people and property in the Afghan theatre. Factors such as the declaration of open support for the Taliban by local mainstream political parties in Malaysia, the growing operational stature of the ISKP and the prospect of the latter utilising Afghanistan as a base for its violent extremist operations globally, could impact Malaysia's security significantly and are the focus of this paper.

Taliban's Return to Power

The Taliban's sudden return to power in late 2021 marked the latest chapter in the tumultuous history of Afghanistan, a strategically located country in the heart of Asia.[1] Following the takeover of Kabul, the so-called Taliban 2.0 administration declared the end of war for the country. It has also sought to present a moderate face to the world, including by promising to abide by international political norms and other issues that arose from concerns over the Taliban's ultra-conservative stance, such as on women's rights. In reality, however, the regime's claims that it has become more moderate is already on shaky ground, as it continues to demonstrate a disregard for basic human rights while maintaining its autocratic grip on power.[2]

The Taliban's shift from an insurgency to a governing entity has also unleashed new and complex security challenges for Afghanistan, the region and beyond. The Taliban's most formidable rival within Afghanistan is the Islamic State (IS)'s regional chapter, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). In the current phase of aggression against the Taliban, the ISKP has initiated regular attacks against the former and the country's Shia minority, and capitalised on mounting public unrest, particularly in eastern and northern Afghanistan.[3]

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[1] Ron Synovitz, "Regional Powers Seek to Fill Vacuum Left by West's Retreat from Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,* December 25, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-power-vacuum-russia-iran-china-pakistan/31624955.html.

[2] Atal Ahmadzai and Faten Ghosn, "Taliban 2.0 Aren't So Different from the First Regime, After All," *The Conversation*, January 18, 2022, https://theconversation.com/taliban-2-0-arent-so-different-from-the-first-regime-after-all-173394.

[3] While both are Sunni Islamist extremists, the two organisations have very distinct roots and have clashed due to ideological differences over religious interpretations. IS considers the Taliban "apostates" for negotiating with the US and for their lack of commitment to the "true sharia". Through its activities, ISKP seeks to cause turmoil in Afghanistan in order to disgrace the Taliban and weaken their credibility. See Oved Lobel, "The Taliban are Losing the Fight Against Islamic State," *The Strategist,* December 6, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-taliban-are-losing-the-fight-against-islamic-state/.

A recent UN report highlighting the tenuous relationship between the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-aligned Taliban and ISKP also indicated between 8,000 to 10,000 foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) are present in the country, most of whom originate from Central and Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, Pakistan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. Given that the two groups have been at odds since ISKP's founding in Afghanistan in 2015, when IS sought to expand its territorial reach beyond Iraq and Syria, FTFs, including Malaysians, have been recruited by ISKP to partake in attacks targeting Afghan civilians and property.

Following the Taliban's takeover, thousands of ISKP detainees, including Malaysian FTFs, were released from detention in Afghanistan, a development that was preceded by the Taliban regime's execution of former ISKP commander Abu Omar Khorasani in August 2021. Coupled with the chaotic US departure from Afghanistan a month later, and the lack of coherence in Washington's counter-terrorism strategy post-departure, this has meant the Taliban has been left to grapple with the country's domestic security issues. In turn, this has provided space for ISKP to enhance its operations and reach.[4]

Implications for Malaysia's Security Landscape

According to intelligence sources, several Malaysians have served as ISKP commanders and combatants; they were part of the coterie of FTFs tracked from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan, having travelled through Iran to join ISKP following IS' demise in Syria in 2019. Having made the challenging road journey to Kabul and Herat, most of these FTFs regrouped in Nangarhar, a stronghold of AQ under former leader Osama bin Laden,

and made preparations to launch attacks.[5] In late 2021, the Taliban announced it had detained two Malaysians and another four unidentified ISKP fighters following a fierce gun battle in western Kabul.[6]

Within jihadi circles, grievances towards the Taliban are growing due to the perceived "liberal" approach adopted by the present Baradar government. ISKP also continues to propagate the concept of Khorasan to recruit Malaysian nationals and other FTFs to the Afghan theatre. According to ISKP's discourse, an army of Islamic warriors will rise from the Land of Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan) towards the end of times, which they believe will revive Islam's lost glory.[7] This recruitment strategy, coupled with growing concerns that the group seeks to entrench itself further in Afghanistan and use the country as a base to conduct violent extremist operations globally, could significantly impact Malaysia's security environment for several reasons.

First, despite the Taliban's pledge to create an open and inclusive government after taking control of Kabul, signs point to the return of repressive theocratic rule. The Taliban has also been clear on its objective of re-establishing the "Islamic Emirate" of Afghanistan, with a strict version of *sharia* law, which some experts believe may lay the foundations for a universal caliphate that "is a haven for transnational extremists and violent Islamists around the world seeking training to carry out attacks back home".[8] The Taliban's return has also boosted militant morale in Southeast Asia, including among Malaysian jihadists, prompting security agencies to warn that it could increase terrorism-related recruitment and attack planning around the region.

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[4] Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson and Grace Hwang, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 8, 2021, https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp.

[5] Mohd Mizan Aslam, "Decoding the Global Security Threat of COVID-19," in *COVID-19 Pandemic: The Threat and Response,* ed. by Rohan Kumar Gunaratna and Mohd Mizan Aslam, (Routledge, 2022), 14.

[6] "Taleban Claims to Have Caught Two Malaysians Fighting for ISIS-linked Militants in Kabul," *The*

Straits Times, September 3, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/taleban-claims-to-have-caught-two-malaysians-fighting-for-is-k-in-kabul.

[7] Shamil Shams, "Khorasan – Examining a Jihadist Myth," *Deutsche Welle*, July 25, 2016, https://www.dw.com/en/khorasan-examining-a-jihadist-myth/a-19426159.

[8] Brahma Chellaney, "Forgetting the Lessons of 9/11 Led to US Defeat in Afghanistan," *The Strategist*, September 13, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/forgetting-the-lessons-of-9-11-led-to-us-defeat-in-afghanistan/.

In this regard, some individuals in Malaysia could be emboldened to travel to the Afghan theatre despite the challenges posed by COVID-19-related travel restrictions. There is precedence for such concerns. In the decades prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, AQ militant camps (Maktab al-Khidamat) there became the ideological and training centre for Southeast Asian terror outfits Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM).[9] This time around, there are concerns that AQ might again benefit from its Taliban ties, and Afghanistan could once more become a haven for militant training and attack planning. Around Southeast Asia, there is also potential for a rekindling of AQ's presence. Previously, the AQ-aligned Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), JI and KMM had strategic hubs in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

There are already indications that elements within JI could be open to rekindling their association, albeit indirectly, with AQ in the virtual space. Abdul Rochim Bashir, whose father Abu Bakar Bashir masterminded the 2002 Bali bombings, said JI was rejoicing "for the victory of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan fighters after more than 20 years of struggling to release Afghanistan soil from the occupation of [the] American aggressor and its puppet government".[10] Younger cadres could also be drawn by a technologically savvier Taliban 2.0, which is projecting a more sophisticated image, "right down to its fighters wearing trendy sneakers and designer sunglasses".[11] According to Indonesian terrorism expert Dr Noor Huda

Ismail, such posturing has been received positively in some circles, as evidenced by the Facebook postings and WhatsApp messages of supporters of pro-AQ groups like JI, with one user proclaiming "it's great, this is an inspiration for us".[12]

Second, Southeast Asian authorities had to primarily contend with the threat posed by JI's regional network. With IS' emergence in the mid-2010s, the current threat environment has evolved, with the realignment towards IS factions within ASG in the Philippines and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) in Indonesia. This is despite non-IS-aligned ASG factions and JI gaining significant ideological and political support at IS' expense more recently.[13] Having consolidated its position in Afghanistan, ISKP could seek to establish a foothold in Southeast Asia with the support of local terrorist groups, with such concerns reinforced by the previous success of AQ and the region's ongoing vulnerability to cross-border terrorism and financing activities.

Taken together, the potential re-emergence of AQ[14] and the growing stature of ISKP in Afghanistan, coupled with the latter's transnational ambitions, could potentially create a domino effect around the region. For example, given the prospect of various ASG factions professing allegiance to either AQ or ISKP (as an extension of their existing *bai'at* to IS Central),[15] segments of the indigenous Muslim population in parts of Malaysia, including Sabah, who trace their origins to the

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[9] Mohd Mizan Aslam, "A Critical Study of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, Its Wider Connections in the Region and the Implications of Radical Islam for the Stability of Southeast Asia," (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2009), 102.

[10] Chris Barrett and Karuni Rompies, "Selfies, Sunglasses and AK-47s: Taliban's Slick Victory Inspires Extremists in South-East Asia," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 22, 2021, https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/the-taliban-s-triumph-is-inspiration-for-extremists-in-south-east-asia-20210820-p58kfe.html.

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid.

[13] With AQ benefitting from its affiliations with the Taliban, Afghanistan could once again serve as AQ's safe haven for its militant training and planning for attacks. To reignite its Southeast Asian reach, AQ could seek to reconnect with Jemaah Islamiyah, which, between 1998 and 2009, carried out at least 30 terror attacks in the region. JI in Indonesia has

been damaged by arrests and ageing links with AQ, although counter-terrorism agencies have warned that events in Afghanistan were being met with euphoria by Islamist militant organisations in Indonesia.

[14] For the past 7 years or so, pro-IS groups have been the most proactive terrorist organisations in the region and the key target of counter-terrorism operations. Pro-IS groups, especially in Indonesia, have been significantly weakened in recent years. This could provide space for JI, with its ample financial resources, to re-emerge more strongly than in previous years. This is especially pertinent as the space for JI to regroup and run their madrassas, mosques, businesses and charities in Indonesia has grown in recent years.

[15] ASG has pledged allegiance to IS (equivalent to *bai'at* to ISKP that has served as the IS central that operated in Iraq and Syria) 3 times in 2014, 2017 and 2019.

former Sulu Sultanate, could require closer security monitoring given the presence of potential local ASG sympathisers.[16] Terrorist recidivism involving combat-trained ex-offenders from Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia who could plot guerrilla-style attacks also cannot be discounted.

Third, while cautious, Malaysia's foreign policy towards Afghanistan and the new Taliban administration is mainly favourable. The Malaysian High Commission in New Delhi, India, maintains diplomatic ties with the Taliban-led administration. Malaysia is also in talks with the Afghan government to assist in rebuilding efforts around the country while adhering to democratic norms and women's rights, which is broadly in line with the current US foreign policy position on Afghanistan. Malaysia's Deputy Foreign Minister Kamarudin Jaffar struck a cautious tone in Parliament on November 22, 2021, relaying that the government had called for the Taliban to address international concerns around democracy and human rights, while also emphasising Kuala Lumpur's ongoing support for Afghanistan.

The Islamist party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) was also one of the first local mainstream political organisations in Malaysia to publicly express support following the Taliban's takeover, citing its belief that the latter is now a different entity from the regime which ruled Afghanistan prior to 2001.[17] PAS believes that room should be given to the Taliban in order to keep their promise of restoring women's and people's rights. On August 25, 2021, PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang expressed his satisfaction with the Taliban's achievements and asked the entire

world to embrace them because they have changed.

But given that AQ and ISKP continue to be at odds, PAS' public backing of the Taliban could draw undesired attention from ISKP towards Malaysia.[18] In contrast to Indonesia and other nations in the region, where groups linked to AQ and IS pose the gravest threat, Malaysia's counter-terrorism position is that the main terror threat to the country comes from within, in particular from the stoking of racial and religious sensitivities by some local political actors. According to some security analysts, PAS' "open support" for the Taliban might unnecessarily drag Malaysia into a conflict between the latter and ISKP, raising the spectre of the country becoming a target for IS attacks.[19]

Fourth, there is the possibility of Malaysia emerging as a centre for financial terrorism accruing from the potential flow of donations and other illicit activities involving ISKP followers and sympathisers. Funds collected and circulated from Malaysia were previously used to fund the Bali and Jolo bombings in 2001-2002. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden's intricate network also included Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Hambali, both prominent global jihadists who had travelled extensively on reconnaissance and operational planning missions around the region. Later, direct transfers, *hawala* remittances and humanitarian initiatives were used to fund Malaysians fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria.[20]

If appropriate measures are not taken to address Malaysia's cross-border crime and terrorism financing activities, a repeat scenario cannot be discounted. The Afghan

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[16] While ASG's stronghold is in the Sulu archipelago in the Southern Philippines, due to porous borders in the tri-border area, it has been able to establish a small presence in Sabah, Western Malaysia. See "5 IS-linked Filipino Militants Killed in Sabah Shootout, Malaysian Police Say," *BenarNews*, February 18, 2022, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/my-ph-abusayyaf-05182021133228.html.
[17] "PAS Defends Taliban, Saying It Has Changed," *The Star,* August 25, 2021, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/25/pas-defends-taliban-saying-it-has-changed.
[18] PAS declared open support for the Taliban and urged Malaysia to develop diplomatic ties with the Taliban government as mentioned by PAS leader, Hadi Awang. See "PAS Defends Taliban, Saying It

Has Changed*," The Star*, August 25, 2021, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/08/25/pas-defends-taliban-saying-it-has-changed.
[19] "Malaysia's Terror Threat is From Within, PAS Praise for Taliban a Mistake, Says Report," *Free Malaysia Today*, September 23, 2021, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/09/23/malaysias-terror-threat-is-within-pas-praise-for-taliban-a-mistake-says-report. ISKP has the capacity to attack Malaysia's interests in Afghanistan in relation to humanitarian missions, economic activities and post-US development activities.
[20] As reported by the CIA in interrogation notes, shown to the author by the Royal Malaysia Police in 2010 at the Bukit Aman Police Headquarters, Kuala Lumpur.

diaspora in Malaysia, which official estimates put at up to 5,000 individuals,[21] should also be closely monitored to guard against individuals involved in financing militant activities and disseminating extremist ideologies. This especially applies to Afghan refugees who may be inclined to support ISKP due to previous unpleasant experiences with the Taliban.[22]

Future Trajectory

To date, Malaysia has been spared from direct or large-scale terrorist attacks in comparison to Indonesia and the Philippines, in part owing to the country's extensive experience dealing with the scourge of terrorism since the post-Second World War communist insurgency. However, Malaysian jihadists have surfaced prominently in the post-9/11 threat landscape in the region. Among them are Dr Mahmud Ahmad, Dr Azahari Husin, Nasir Abas and Noordin Mat Top, all of whom were involved in JI's regional network. Despite close monitoring from the Special Branch E8 Counter Terrorism Unit, the pull among some Malaysians towards jihadi activity cannot be discounted in the current threat climate.[23]

IS will continue to exploit social media to recruit new members (as opposed to the traditional *usrah*[24] method used by AQ which could still be effective). A protracted period of lockdowns and movement restrictions imposed in Malaysia and Southeast Asia as a result of COVID-19 has led to more people spending time in front of their computers and other electronic devices. This has enhanced the prospect of online indoctrination and recruitment by terrorist networks. The persistent threat from lone-wolf terrorism also continues to bedevil many countries, including Malaysia. In addition, the exploitation of racial

and religious issues by militant groups, from AQ-linked JI to IS affiliates in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Southern Philippines to radicalise and recruit disaffected individuals will likely continue.

Around the region, recidivism also remains an ongoing challenge, with the proliferation of social media providing a platform for hardline individuals to potentially regroup and conduct an attack inspired by the successes of the Taliban and ISKP in Afghanistan.[25] According to sources, at least 5 percent of radical individuals who have participated in Malaysia's rehabilitation programme may continue to hold on to their violent worldviews.[26] Many battle-hardened jihadists, such as Yazid Sufaat, Zainuri Kamaruddin, Lotfi Ariffin and Mohd Rafi Udin, could not be held indefinitely under Malaysian law and were eventually released. Some could return to the terrorist cause and influence a bigger audience if left unchecked.

To fulfil their objectives, JI and ASG, the respective AQ and IS proxies in this region, strategically locate their Southeast Asian bases in politically unstable areas with poor law enforcement and vast populations. Tawau and Semporna off the coast of Sabah, for example, have been used as transit points by foreign terrorists moving between Indonesia's Kalimantan and Sulawesi islands and the Philippines' ZamBaSulTa region, while Sabah's eastern coast is also strategically located for terrorist groups smuggling weapons and explosives due to open seas and porous borders.[27] There could be an uptick in kidnapping for ransom (KFR) activities in the near term, which serve as a major source of income for terrorist groups and are complicated to address.[28]

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[21] As revealed to the author by sources in the RMP.
[22] As recounted in a telephone interview in September 2020 with Nasir Abas, a former senior member of JI, who has resided in Indonesia since 2001.
[23] RMP officials confirmed to the author that, of the 103 Malaysian nationals known to have joined IS as FTFs, 48 have been killed, 53 remain in the Middle East theatre and 2 are reportedly missing (possibly having assimilated into the local community via marriage). Additionally, of the 16 individuals who applied to be repatriated, only 8 have returned to date.
[24] *Usrah* refers to a meeting involving Islamic religious activities, such as discussions of a religious topic. The word derives from the Arabic for "family".

[25] Ibid.
[26] Based on the author's experience dealing with Yazid Sufaat and other inmates in Tapah, Kajang and Simpang Renggam correction centres as part of the Malaysian National Rehabilitation Panel since 2017.
[27] As recounted in an interview with former Perlis Chief of Police, Datuk Shafie Ismail, in Ops Pasir in Tawau in 2016.
[28] KFR activities in the islands of Zamboanga, Basilan, Tawi-tawi, Sulu, Sabah and Sebatik involve cross-border crime. The Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) believe Filipinos and Sabahans of Sulu descent play a major role in KFR-related activities in this area.

Further, dual identities and close family bonds between terrorists and locals make the triangle connection between Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia vulnerable to terrorism-related operations. Taken together, Malaysia must continue to collaborate with its regional partners to mitigate the threats envisaged in light of recent developments in Afghanistan and the competing threats from local terrorist groups affiliated with AQ and ISKP. Working with the Taliban government might also be required to curb Malaysian jihadists from joining ISKP in Afghanistan, as well as to identify and monitor returnees with radical mindsets.

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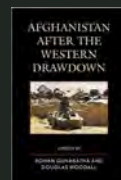
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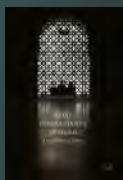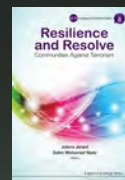
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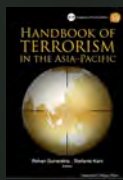
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