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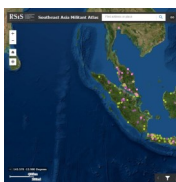
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## SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



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

# Global Threat Assessment 2023

Kumar Ramakrishna

## Overview

Without doubt the year 2023 was eventful as the latest pieces in this current volume will show. This overview will cover the following three broad themes: significant global developments and trends; notable operational trends and developments; and, finally, the enduring salience of a holistic, integrated approach in dealing with violent extremism.

## Significant Global Developments and Trends

### *The Israel-Hamas War and Its Wider Repercussions*

2023 will certainly be remembered for “ Hamas’s unexpectedly large assault from the air, sea and land on southern Israel on October 7”.<sup>1</sup> Hamas militants “killed some 1,200 Israelis, injured many more, and kidnapped about 240 Israeli civilian and military personnel, including several children and foreign nationals”.<sup>2</sup>

The attacks appeared to have “caught Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s most right-wing government in Israel’s history and its array of intelligence and security forces... off guard”, while at the same time also surprising the United States (US), Israel’s chief backer.<sup>3</sup> Israel responded with a massive assault on the Gaza Strip, aiming to utterly destroy Hamas. During the first four weeks of the war alone, Israel dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza and killed over 10,000 civilians, including some 4,000 children.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, almost one million of Gaza’s 2.3 million population were dislocated, generating a huge humanitarian crisis. Following heavy pressure from the international community, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) agreed to a humanitarian pause to allow aid and relief to thousands of traumatised Gazans. At the same time, some hostages taken by Hamas on October 7 were released in exchange for Palestinians held in Israeli detention centres.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, the Hamas-Israel war brought an abrupt end to a period of gradual improvement in Middle Eastern security, involving Israel and some Arab states, marked especially by a China-brokered normalisation of ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March.<sup>6</sup> It was noted that the Hamas attack was likely an attempt to thwart Saudi Arabia from normalising ties with Israel.<sup>7</sup>

The Hamas attacks on October 7 energised transnational Islamist threat networks. Al-Qaeda (AQ) and its affiliates, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Shabaab, celebrated the attacks, calling for the “complete liberation of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem”, while AQ urged Muslims everywhere to “take part in the fighting in Gaza, whether physically as fighters, financially or through moral support”.<sup>8</sup> AQ also called for “attacks on Israelis in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain”, and on “American military bases, airports and embassies in Muslim countries”.<sup>9</sup>

In Southeast Asia, pro-AQ social media activists, primarily from Indonesia, intensified their activities, echoing AQ’s call for Muslims to actively participate in the Israel-Hamas conflict.<sup>10</sup> Such activists justified participation as “a *fardhu ain*, or religious obligation”.<sup>11</sup> Such online calls are significant. In October 2022, the Singaporean authorities arrested a local teacher who had planned to travel to and engage in armed jihad in Palestine. Radicalised by foreign extremist preachers and online material, he intended to join Hamas and participate in armed combat against the IDF.<sup>12</sup> There were also concerns that “regional terrorists” would seek to “emulate Hamas’ surprise terror attack, which demonstrated terrorists’ evolving ability to effectively combine high- and low-tech forms of warfare to devastating effect”.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Continuing Challenge of Afghanistan Under the Taliban and Its Regional and Global Implications*

The re-emergence of a Taliban-run Afghanistan since August 2021 continued to worry observers. Despite the Taliban regime's denial of links with AQ and its claims of dominance over its ideological rival, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), both AQ and ISK "remain[ed] active in Afghanistan".<sup>14</sup> AQ was "clearly "protected by and working with the Taliban".<sup>15</sup> From Afghanistan, AQ reportedly launched terrorist attacks in neighbouring Pakistan with the assistance of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).<sup>16</sup> Additionally, in Afghanistan, AQ "boosted its propaganda once again with Al-Qaeda in the Indian-Subcontinent (AQIS) being the most active" in this effort.<sup>17</sup> Notably, the "senior AQ leadership in Afghanistan" reportedly continued to plan "attacks in other regions of the world", calling into question the "professed commitment" of the Taliban regime "to a free and secure Afghanistan", and suggesting that this stance may well be "a facade concealing the actual global threat" from that country once again.<sup>18</sup>

This view of Afghanistan once again being a springboard for global jihadism was further strengthened by the ISK factor. In 2023, ISK continued to attract the "international community's attention as a transnational jihadist entity in competition with the Taliban", and its appeal remained potent.<sup>19</sup> In Afghanistan, ISK remained resilient, undergoing "several transformations" in "its tactics while keeping intact its broad strategy in the region".<sup>20</sup> Despite territorial and operational setbacks at the hands of the Taliban, ISK doggedly persisted, although not controlling any territory – unlike Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP); Islamic State in Sahel Province; or Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP). ISK remained "the only province in IS' ecosystem which [was] projecting itself as the launching pad for regional and international operations aimed at targeting Afghanistan's neighbours as well as the West".<sup>21</sup> ISK seemed intent on imitating "AQ, the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which have successfully carried out overseas attacks".<sup>22</sup>

The concern that AQ or ISK could seek to conduct or influence external operations from Afghanistan is not unwarranted. In Bangladesh, the "primary security concern centre[d] around Ansar al Islam (AAI), also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which now operates under the name Al-Qaeda Bangladesh (aqb)".<sup>23</sup> AQB joined forces with the former Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkatul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B), "amplifying the security risks".<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the IS threat in Bangladesh largely emanated from "homegrown militants belonging to the Neo-JMB network" who have been influenced by IS ideology. While Neo-JMB's network had somewhat fragmented following IS' military setbacks in the Middle East, it was notable that "some remaining members ha[d] attempted to establish contact" with ISK in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

In Southeast Asia, while the operational capacities of Indonesian pro-IS groups appeared to generally decline, they still "exhibited a strong enthusiasm to connect with international organisations and stay informed of dynamics abroad", with pro-IS online networks actively interacting with Indonesians in Syrian IS camps, and translating "Abu Huzaifah's audio communications when he became IS' new emir" in August 2023.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, there was "little evidence" of "Malaysian militants having an interest in IS' African affiliates and wanting to travel there".<sup>27</sup> Likewise, there was "little indication" of Malaysian nationals seeking to "travel to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to join either AQ or IS and their affiliates there".<sup>28</sup> That said, in Singapore, a 15-year-old self-radicalised boy who planned to attack non-Muslims had been influenced, apart from other online material, by IS propaganda.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Growing Transnational Threat Involving Central Asian Jihadists*

A third notable trend that emerged in the year, though not an entirely new issue, was a discernible uptick in the number of Central Asian jihadists involved in plots worldwide. For instance, "Tajik nationals" appeared in "substantial terrorist plots in a growing number of places", with many cases linked to ISK.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the number of Uyghurs fighting under the "Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)'s banner in Syria and Afghanistan" remained "substantial".<sup>31</sup> TIP reportedly plotted alongside

the TTP, Jamaat Ansarullah and ISK in Afghanistan to plan attacks against Chinese targets in Kabul.<sup>32</sup> A June United Nations (UN) report also noted that TIP had sent militants to “establish bases in Africa and South Asia” so as to “expand its operations” and target “Chinese nationals and agencies”.<sup>33</sup> From a “global terrorism threat perspective”, Central Asia remained a potential “source of concern”, because networks associated with the region and embedded with ISK or the AQ-linked Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) or other threat groups continued to “emerge around the world, with a geographical reach”.<sup>34</sup> While Central Asian militants were implicated in plots in Europe in particular, their signature was also detected in the US and even Southeast Asia. In March 2023, Indonesian authorities detained four Uzbek citizens associated with KTJ. The Uzbeks had “met with an Indonesian ISIS sympathiser” who suggested they become religious teachers to encourage individuals to travel abroad to support IS.<sup>35</sup> While this was likely an outlier event, the Central Asian nexus is worth monitoring.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Persistence of the Extreme Right Threat*

The extreme right can be understood as a movement that espouses “at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy”, while the far right can be regarded as referring to the “political manifestation of the extreme right”.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, the relatively close nexus between extreme right social movements and far right political entities continued to be discerned in 2023.

Over the course of the year, the far right made “further strides in becoming politically more mainstream in Western Europe”, with multiple observers noting “the rise of the far right in national politics of various Western European countries”.<sup>38</sup> Analysts warned that far right ideological tropes were increasingly “reflected in the agendas of elected governments in these countries”, and the shift in the public political mood “in turn could stoke violence”.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, 2023 evinced the “globalised nature of some aspects of the extreme right-wing and white supremacist movements in particular”.<sup>40</sup> In January, a British teenage extremist was jailed for producing videos which had directly inspired at least “two far right attacks in the US”.<sup>41</sup> The following month, the founder of the US-based Atomwaffen Division was charged with planning to attack infrastructure targets in the US, and had apparently been “passing similar planning material along to Australian extremists”.<sup>42</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, several youth were arrested in August after attacking “Asians” and employing “fascist imagery”.<sup>43</sup> Kyrgyz authorities were concerned that this case might have been influenced by “the war in Ukraine, where Russia continues to advance a narrative of fighting a fascist government in Kyiv”.<sup>44</sup> Observers have suggested that Moscow has been “behind a range of far and extreme right political activity in Europe in particular”.<sup>45</sup> Closer to home, while “Islamist terrorism” remained the key threat, “extreme right-wing ideology or strands of it” – such as “Islamophobia” and “anti-Semitism”, for instance – also “resonated among a few self-radicalised individuals in Singapore in recent years”.<sup>46</sup>

Hindu extreme right activity continued unabated in 2023, encouraged by the “aggressive majoritarian” politics of the ruling far right-oriented, “Hindu nationalist” Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).<sup>47</sup> In India, hate speech, which “often referred to anti-Muslim conspiracy theories like ‘love jihad’ and ‘land jihad’, were used to justify violence against them”.<sup>48</sup> Like the Western extreme right, the “Hindutva movement” includes a “powerful global component, enjoying the support of a strong network of organisations in the Hindu diaspora and benefiting from their funding of its activities in India”.<sup>49</sup> Worryingly, it seemed in 2023 that “Hindutva violence [went] global, too”, with “Hindutva supporters” issuing “threats and attacking Sikhs and Muslims”.<sup>50</sup> In 2023, clashes occurred between Hindutva groups and Khalistan activists amongst the Sikh diaspora in Western countries, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.<sup>51</sup>

### *The Continuing Salience of Social Media as a Force Multiplier for Violent Extremism*

It has long been known that IS “has not backed down from its 2014 vision of cyber jihad”,<sup>52</sup> and its online activists have readily embraced the increasingly “decentralised nature” of “pro-IS online propaganda and community activities emerging within the expanding digital landscape”.<sup>53</sup>

Certainly, in 2023, social media firms attempted to eliminate violent extremist content from their platforms. However, while the volume of such jihadist content on, for instance, Telegram has declined, much of the material remains online through the “creation of new private channels backed up by bot automation”.<sup>54</sup> Jihadist communities thus maintained a “vibrant online ecosystem” spread across a range of “small, less regulated platforms”, “all of which possess minimal content moderation”.<sup>55</sup> Mainstream social media platforms also remained “susceptible to infiltration” by jihadist influencers, despite their efforts to purge such extremist material.<sup>56</sup> The implications remain significant. For instance, the “role of the internet has always played a crucial role in the radicalisation process of Malaysians”, as more than “75 percent of Malaysians who had been involved with IS cited the internet as a primary source of radicalisation”.<sup>57</sup>

Social media was similarly exploited by the extreme right in 2023. The Western extreme right “online landscape saw the continued traction of militant accelerationist proponents” like Terrorgram, a “loose network of white supremacist Telegram channels and accounts”.<sup>58</sup> Terrorgram disseminated ideological material promoting “white supremacist and accelerationist ideologies, offering detailed instructions on how to carry out attacks”.<sup>59</sup> Online extreme right “communities’ propagation of conspiratorial and disinformation narratives” – containing elements of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim racism, misogyny and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments – were also increasingly “more prominent on mainstream social media platforms, occasionally leading to violence”, as “far right actors” became “increasingly adept at evading platform regulations and moderation”.<sup>60</sup> In the Hindutva case, there were “indicators that such online narratives” had fuelled “actual acts of violence on the ground”, as was evidenced in the “bouts of civil unrest” in the Indian State of Haryana in June and July, as well as “violence between diaspora Sikh and Indian communities in Melbourne in January”.<sup>61</sup>

#### *The Grey Zone: Non-Violent Islamist Extremism*

In 2023, there was subtle evidence of a blurring of lines between putatively constitutional, non-violent Islamist political parties/civil society groups and violent Islamist actors. For instance, the Barelvi “radical group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is entrenched in Pakistan’s Barelvi community, which is 60 percent of the population”.<sup>62</sup> On paper, the TLP “operates in the country’s mainstream politics, participates in elections” and formally “eschews violence”.<sup>63</sup> However, the TLP’s mainstream political participation gives it “a semblance of legitimacy to its incendiary ideological rhetoric” – which has “undermined efforts to foster moderation, tolerance and respect for religious diversity and harmony in Pakistan”.<sup>64</sup> This has prompted some observers to argue that over the long run, the putatively non-violent TLP is arguably “more dangerous” than violent threat groups like the TTP and ISK.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, a similar ideological and institutional porosity between certain Islamist parties and more extremist groups was noted. In 2023, a “new extremist group”, with connections to the Islamist threat groups “HuJI-B, JMB, and AAI” emerged, called Jamaatul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS). Notably, JAFHS was founded by a former student wing member of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI), the largest Islamist political party in the country. Bangladesh has officially banned JAFHS, “citing the organisation as a significant threat to public safety”.<sup>66</sup> This worrying potential blurring of lines between violent groups and non-violent Islamist ones, was further evidenced by a HuJI-B section which tried to “infiltrate politics by merging with Hefazat-e-Islam, an unregistered but influential Islamist group among Muslim students and teachers in local madrassas”.<sup>67</sup>

Yet another example of ostensibly non-violent “Islamist extremism in Bangladesh” was provided by Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). While HT supposedly “promotes non-violent means to achieve its goals”, it has been criticised for its “conservative interpretation of Islamic law, rejection of democracy, opposition to nationalism and vision of a unified Islamic state, which many argue misrepresents Islam and challenges modern democratic principles and human rights”.<sup>68</sup> While HT Bangladesh was banned in 2009, the authorities believe that “even after more than a decade of proscription, HT remains a major security threat”, especially since it has expanded its reach from the urban areas to “suburbs and even the rural areas”.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, Hizb ut-Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) remains

active in the country, disseminating its ideology amongst university students, lecturers and businessmen.<sup>70</sup> While HTM has not engaged in any violence thus far, it has certainly stirred communal passions. In January 2023, HTM organised a public demonstration in front of the Swedish and Dutch embassies in Kuala Lumpur to protest the “Quran burning and desecration incidents in Sweden and the Netherlands, respectively”.<sup>71</sup>

### **Notable Operational Trends/Developments**

In terms of more narrowly focused operational trends and developments, three key themes appeared to stand out in the 2023 survey.

#### *Attack Modalities and Targets*

As in previous years, threat groups employed a wide variety of attack modalities against a range of diverse targets. In Afghanistan, a change in ISK tactics was detected from 2022 onwards. ISK began to focus on mass-casualty attacks employing mostly suicide bombers. Hence, several suicide operations and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks were carried out in Kabul and other cities, targeting high-ranking Taliban officials.<sup>72</sup> From its Afghan base, ISK also seemed intent on targeting Pakistan’s upcoming election in February 2024 under its so-called “battle against democracy”.<sup>73</sup> ISK additionally targeted religious gatherings, political rallies and politicians in different parts of Pakistan. Meanwhile, the aforementioned TJP, a front group of the TTP, also carried out suicide bombings. In seeming contrast to ISK, the TTP and TJP appeared to target the security forces rather than soft targets. For its part, the aforementioned “non-violent” but arguably extremist TLP, viewing the Ahmadiyya and Christian minority communities as “an imminent risk to the Barelvi way of life and values”, weaponised “incendiary narratives” to “dehumanise Ahmadis and Christians” and “normalise violence against them”.<sup>74</sup> In Bangladesh, observers noted that pro-IS threat groups engaged in targeted killings and employed IED and suicide attacks against “the police, other law enforcement agencies, non-Muslims and foreigners”.<sup>75</sup>

In Southeast Asia, “almost all terrorist attacks and plots in Indonesia” involved a “combination of three types of weaponry: IEDs, firearms and sharp weapons”.<sup>76</sup> However, “firearms and sharp weapons” were “the most commonly used”.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Indonesian police officers and headquarters “continued to be the primary target of terrorist attack plots in 2023”.<sup>78</sup> That said, online postings by the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) network indicated an intent to attack polling stations. This is especially noteworthy as pro-IS groups have “signalled their intent to attack not only during polling day”, but also in the lead-up to the country’s 2024 presidential elections.<sup>79</sup>

In southern Thailand, vehicle bombings targeting the police and mounted by the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) Islamist separatist group were observed.<sup>80</sup> A study found that between January to August 2023, unarmed civilians suffered higher casualty rates in attacks compared to the security forces. Infrastructure also seemed to be targeted: in May 2023, 23 locations in Thailand’s Deep South provinces were hit by arson attacks, targeting mobile phone antenna towers and electricity poles.<sup>81</sup>

In Myanmar, where the civil war between the military junta and an array of armed opposition and ethnic groups continued to rage, it was observed that “resistance fighters” were “more frequently relying on commercial drones to conduct bombings and surveillance of military forces”. Technological advances and cost efficiencies “enabled drones to carry greater loads, fly at higher altitudes and circumvent the junta’s anti-drone jammers”.<sup>82</sup>

#### *Youth, Women and Family Networks*

A second key operational trend that stood out in 2023 was the continuing salience of youth, women and family networks in terrorist plots. In Pakistan, Islamist extremist propaganda aimed to harness the potential of women “as propagandists, recruiters, informers, matchmakers, nurturers of future generations of militants, icons and mentors for would-be female radicals and, in extreme cases, as suicide bombers”.<sup>83</sup> In Bangladesh, the AQ-oriented AAI “established a new women’s division

comprising wives and female relatives of militants”. Similarly, the IS-leaning Neo-JMB formed a female unit, “predominantly used for communication and logistics support”.<sup>84</sup>

Neo-JMB also sought to recruit predominantly “younger males aged 18-22 years old” for lone-actor operations. Additionally, Bangladeshi authorities discovered “a new terrorist group”, Imam Mahmuder Kafela (IMK), which targeted “youth for eschatological ‘armed jihad’ described as Ghazwatul Hind”.<sup>85</sup> IMK’s broader recruitment efforts encompassed “youth, women and families”.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria reportedly “trained some 500 ‘minors’ of whom at least 200” had fought on the frontlines.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, since 2015, “11 self-radicalised Singaporean youths aged 20 or below have been detained under the Internal Security Act”, while “three of the four cases dealt with since the previous report in 2022 involved youths”.<sup>88</sup> It was also reported that “traditional social media channels” aside, terror groups had also “started to exploit online gaming and music streaming sites” to attract youth.<sup>89</sup> In Malaysia, officials in November expressed concern that “80 per cent of arrests by police in the latest available data involved those under 40”.<sup>90</sup>

### *The Lone Actor Threat*

A third key operational trend that persisted in 2023 was the continuing persistence of lone-actor incidents. In India in April, a “25-year-old youth”, radicalised apparently by “online jihadist propaganda”, engaged in a “lone-wolf attack” against fellow passengers on an express train in Kerala, dousing them with petrol and setting them ablaze.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Bangladeshi police noted that the IS-leaning Neo-JMB was keen to recruit youth “particularly for lone-actor operations”.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, in Malaysia, the “biggest threat c[a]me from lone-actor terrorism”, with the “most plausible scenario of an attack” being a “lone actor or a decentralised cell” with or without “direct links to a terrorist group”, and “inspired” to attack “as opposed to centrally directed”.<sup>93</sup> In Singapore, it was observed that “lone-actor attacks” in public places “using low-tech weapons such as knives remain[ed] a possibility due to the relative ease of procuring such weapons” from e-commerce platforms and convenience stores.<sup>94</sup>

Lone actors figured prominently in the case of the Western extreme right as well. During an October 2023 hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, US officials “spoke of how lone actors were the most likely threat vector that the country faced”, while in Europe, Europol assessed that while there were fewer “right-wing” incidents in 2023 compared to 2022, the “attacks that took place were all lone-actor incidents”.<sup>95</sup>

### **The Enduring Need for a Holistic, Integrated Approach in Dealing with Violent Extremism**

Finally, the year’s developments showed again that a judicious mix of hard and soft approaches involving serious effort in addressing underlying structural grievances, remained important to effectively mitigate terrorist and extremist threats.

#### *The “Hard” Approach: Strengths and Limitations*

Strong legislation remained a key measure to deal with the evolving terrorism/extremism threat. In the case of the Thai Deep South, martial law and an emergency Thai government decree had long permitted “security forces to operate with few judicial checks and balances”.<sup>96</sup> In this respect, the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, which came into effect in February 2023, was “expected to enhance the prevention of human rights violations and torture under state custody”.<sup>97</sup> This is because the law, inter alia, required security officials to “keep voice and video recordings of the arrest and release of a suspect”, and ensured “the right of relatives and lawyers to access information about the detained suspect”.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, the Internal Security Act in Singapore continued to retain its importance in empowering the authorities to act swiftly and pre-emptively to prevent self-radicalised individuals from executing their violent plans.<sup>99</sup>



At the same time, the 2023 survey made it plain that hard approaches alone were insufficient. Hence, while the Indian government’s “arrests and crackdowns may have helped dismantle networks and prevent jihadist and militant attacks in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country”, the threat persisted. This is because the authorities were “not addressing the underlying grievances” that were “keeping alienation among different affected communities alive”.<sup>100</sup> In particular, the Indian government’s “reluctance to act robustly against Hindutva violence and the ecosystem that sustains it” empowered “anti-India propaganda by militant and secessionist groups”.<sup>101</sup>

Similarly, in Myanmar, the military junta “deployed airstrikes with greater frequency in 2023, in tandem with ground infantry and artillery operations”, which reports indicated had resulted in “several hundred civilian casualties and left communities in some areas living in perpetual fear of being bombed”, which only increased mass alienation against the authorities.<sup>102</sup> By the same token, many argue that the IDF’s disproportionate use of force in Gaza at the time of writing has been highly counterproductive,<sup>103</sup> generating vast Muslim and global resentment, which Islamist extremists have already exploited.<sup>104</sup>

### *“Softer” Approaches Needed As Well*

Finally, the 2023 survey reinforced once again the consistent theme that addressing underlying political and socioeconomic grievances must be part of the overall mix in dealing with the terrorism/extremism challenge. For instance, most of the Middle Eastern governments remained authoritarian in nature, ignoring “societal forces that demanded political pluralism, individual rights and freedoms, and popularly mandated governments”, as well as an “end to state repression, human rights violations, and social and economic inequity and injustices”.<sup>105</sup> In Pakistan, in the case of the “ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan”, the continuing “absence of a political process” contributed to “its lethality and longevity”.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the Pakistani “state’s indifference to the Baloch community’s political and socioeconomic grievances and continued harassment”, has “pushed the educated Baloch youth towards separatism”.<sup>107</sup>

Within Southeast Asia, Rohingya refugees in southern Bangladesh faced “increasingly dire prospects of returning home to Rakhine State”, while “living conditions in the camps, which house over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims, worsen”, with dwindling supplies of food rations, movement restrictions and criminality rife within the camps.<sup>108</sup>

Observers caution that such unsavoury conditions could “push some disillusioned Rohingya refugees, particularly men and boys, towards militancy or enlistment in armed groups and gangs”.<sup>109</sup> That said, it was heartening to observe in the case of Mindanao that in spite of “the prevailing poor socioeconomic environment, residents from Marawi and Sulu” appeared “resilient against terrorist narratives and recruitment”.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, given the continuing “harsh living conditions”, anti-government, even “separatist”, sentiments could well fester, with worrying consequences downstream.<sup>111</sup>

In sum, the geopolitical and transnational terrorism/extremism environment remained challenging in 2023. In particular, the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in October, with its worldwide energising impact on threat groups, whilst potentially undermining the domestic security and cohesion of multicultural societies in Southeast Asia and beyond, bears watching into the new year.<sup>112</sup>

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- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
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# SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore

## INDONESIA

Alif Satria

*This article discusses developments in Indonesia's terrorism landscape and counter terrorism efforts in 2023. In line with the trends of the past five years, the threat posed by terrorist organisations in the country declined last year. While the number of terrorist plots increased, no attacks were successfully conducted in 2023. While major terrorist organisations in Indonesia do harbour intentions to exploit the sociopolitical dynamics in the upcoming 2024 national elections, it is unlikely that they will possess the necessary operational capacities to successfully execute them – if counter terrorism efforts are sustained.*

### Introduction

The overall threat posed by Indonesia's terrorist organisations continued to decline in 2023. While the number of recorded terrorist plots increased from five plots in 2022 to seven plots in 2023, the number of successful attacks decreased, from one attack in 2022 to none in 2023.<sup>1</sup> While this is a welcome trend, caution is still warranted as Indonesia's major terrorist organisations – namely, the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the main pro-Islamic State (IS) group; the Jamaah Islamiyah (JI), Indonesia's largest pro-Al-Qaeda (AQ) group; and the Darul Islam (DI), the country's oldest terrorist organisation – are known to be resilient and seeking to exploit the sociopolitical dynamics of the upcoming 2024 national elections.

### Organisational Dynamics

#### *Jamaah Islamiyah*

Ever since senior members of JI became the main target of Indonesia's counter terrorism operations in 2020,<sup>2</sup> the group's operational capacity has significantly weakened.<sup>3</sup> Court documents involving JI members disclosed in 2023 noted that apart from successfully disrupting JI's outward-facing initiatives, such as its attempts to fund-raise via charity foundations and conduct *dakwah* via mass organisations,<sup>4</sup> widespread arrests of JI members between 2018-2022 have also compelled the organisation to dissolve its more inward-facing units. These include its Education and Cadet Academy (ADIRA), which JI shut down in June 2020; its Coordination and Synchronisation Unit (KOSIN), which stopped operating in early August 2019; and its Intelligence Division (ALWI), which was dissolved in June 2019.<sup>5</sup>

The weakening of JI's operational capabilities continued in 2023 with the arrest of 38 members. Among these, the arrests of two clusters were particularly detrimental to JI. The first involved the six-member Lampung cell, who retaliated and opened fire during their arrest.<sup>6</sup> Further investigations found that the group possessed various weapons<sup>7</sup> and had made plans to conduct attacks targeting local police officers.<sup>8</sup> These arrests were particularly damaging to JI not only in terms of disrupting the planned attacks, but also because the Lampung cell had played a pivotal role in assisting fugitive senior group members. With the arrest of these members, JI is now more limited in its ability to safely relocate senior leaders.<sup>9</sup>

The second arrest cluster which was detrimental to JI involved five members in Palu, Central Sulawesi. During the arrest, investigations found that the group possessed over a dozen weapons,<sup>10</sup> along with links to two local charity foundations in Donggala and Sigi.<sup>11</sup> This Central

Sulawesi cell had, over the past decade, helped JI to restore and test various programmes in the area, such as domestic military training programmes in Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, firearms procurement efforts and recruitment initiatives.<sup>12</sup> With these individuals arrested, JI will now have a harder time exploiting the local population's historical grievances and rebuilding its presence in a strategically vital region.<sup>13</sup>

Despite its ongoing operational decline, however, JI remains a key security concern. Notably, the organisation has demonstrated a clear intent to capitalise on the 2024 national elections, in line with its evolving "bullet to ballot" strategy.<sup>14</sup> This shift in approach has been evident in recent years, with JI members' participation in the 2016 212 Defend Islam Rally, efforts to establish and infiltrate new political parties,<sup>15</sup> and attempts to influence communities through participation in other mass organisations like the National Anti-Syiah Alliance (ANNAS).<sup>16</sup> While the senior members who were key in spearheading this new strategy have been arrested, there are still over 40 Syrian-trained JI members who are at large and could be specifically groomed to replace them.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah and Other Pro-Islamic State Groups*

Indonesia's largest pro-IS organisation, JAD, has yet to recover since senior members from its central command structure were arrested in mid-2018.<sup>18</sup> Till today, JAD's remaining members have yet to formulate a viable, unified strategy, and individual cells have rarely been able to collectively mobilise resources and collaborate for a coordinated operation.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, whereas JAD operations in 2016 often mobilised members and cells from multiple regions, JAD operations today are commonly planned and executed by a single cell.<sup>20</sup> When cells do cooperate with one another, they are often made possible not by the formal coordination efforts of cell leaders, but by the informal social ties between cell members.<sup>21</sup>

Despite its current state of disarray, however, JAD cells continue to remain active in planning attacks. The arrest of five JAD members in Central Java in August 2023, for example, led to the discovery that another Solo cell had in their possession an improvised explosive device (IED) that they were planning to use in an attack targeting the police headquarters of Solo Raya, Central Java.<sup>22</sup> Further investigation also found that the head of JAD Solo Raya was in fact responsible for creating the IED used in the 2022 Astana Anyar Bombing in Bandung, West Java.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, no details exist as to whether this cooperation was an isolated incident or if it indicates a systemic development within JAD's overall operational capabilities to structurally foster inter-regional cooperation. Additionally, the arrest of two JAD suspects in West Java in late November 2023 revealed the existence of a JAD faction led by Abu Oemar, whose members have devised several plans to disrupt the 2024 elections.<sup>24</sup>

Indonesia's other pro-IS terrorist organisation, the Mujahidin of East Indonesia (MIT), remained inactive in 2023 following the killing of its last known member in late 2022.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, while MIT had experienced a surge in potential recruits in early 2022,<sup>26</sup> there was no discernible increase observed in 2023. That said, MIT still warrants concern. Not only has the organisation successfully rebuilt its ranks before,<sup>27</sup> there still exists several potential sources of MIT recruitment across its areas of operation in Poso. These include sympathisers in neighbouring districts like Parigi Muotong and Tojo Una-Una; former MIT detainees who are set for release in late 2023, including a potential successor to major MIT figure Ustadz Yasin;<sup>28</sup> and individuals associated with MIT-affiliated Islamic schools like Pesantren Darul Anshor Putri in Kayamanya.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, despite the continued decline of their domestic operational capacities in 2023, Indonesian pro-IS groups still exhibit a strong enthusiasm to connect with international organisations and stay informed of dynamics abroad. Pro-IS networks online, for instance, still actively interact with Indonesians in Syrian IS camps, and some were quick to translate Abu Huzaifah's audio communications when he became IS' new emir in August 2023.<sup>30</sup> This enthusiasm has also manifested offline. In March 2023, for example, Indonesian authorities in Jakarta detained four Uzbek citizens who were associated with the AQ-affiliated Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ).<sup>31</sup> Subsequent investigations found that the group had "met with an Indonesian ISIS sympathiser" who suggested the Uzbeks become *ustazs* (religious teachers) to advocate for people to travel

abroad and support IS.<sup>32</sup> While this was notably an outlier event, it points to the underlying threat of international events and actors aggravating domestic groups' fervour to conduct jihad.

### *Darul Islam (DI)*

Indonesia's oldest terrorist organisation, DI, did not make significant headway in achieving a mass revival in 2023. Whereas some DI cells in 2022 were discovered to have formulated attack plots, like DI's West Sumatra cell which had intended to carry out low-level attacks using machetes in March 2022,<sup>33</sup> there was no indication of any DI cells expressing an intent to conduct attacks in 2023. Additionally, whereas over 24 DI members were arrested in 2022, throughout 2023, Indonesian authorities arrested only one individual affiliated with DI – a man in North Jakarta who was detained in late January.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, no weaponry or documents containing details of attack plots were found in the investigations following his arrest.

That said, DI should remain on the security radar. Not only do DI members often break away to become recruits of more violent terrorist organisations,<sup>35</sup> its largest faction, the Tahmid Faction, has issued clear instructions for its members to prepare for an armed jihad in 2024.<sup>36</sup> This armed jihad, however, is not particularly motivated by the 2024 Indonesian elections, but by their belief in a *hadith* (prophetic saying) predicting “the end of time”. Specifically, this refers to a *hadith* which stated that a *mujahideen* (fighter) will lead Muslims to victory every 100 years. Senior DI *ulama* (religious scholars) then calculated the timeline as beginning with the fall of the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 – indicating that a Muslim victory would come in 2024.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, since 2020, DI's Tahmid Faction has carried out various preparations. The faction has set up home-based factories to produce sharp weapons like machetes and arrowheads, conducted military training exercises in West Sumatra and South Tangerang, and accelerated its recruitment process.<sup>38</sup> A 2023 report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) noted that DI uses what they have termed the “One Man One Object (OMOO)” strategy for its recruitment efforts, where each member is required to recruit “at least one other person”. Additionally, each subdistrict-level unit is given a quota to recruit at least “seven new members per month” and up to 30, if possible.<sup>39</sup>

However, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that DI's attempt to stage an armed jihad in 2024 will manifest. This is chiefly because a large number of DI members have revoked their membership. Up to September 2023, for example, over 1,079 DI members had retracted their *bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance) to the organisation and instead pledged loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>40</sup> While some may have retracted their *bai'ah* to avoid arrest, many have done so because they are merely new recruits with no strong personal or official ties to the organisation.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, in late June 2023, DI-affiliated Al Zaytun Madrassa in Indramayu, West Java, became mired in a national controversy when its leader, Panji Gumilang, was reported to the police for blasphemy.<sup>42</sup> While the government decided not to close Al Zaytun,<sup>43</sup> the recent spotlight will make it more difficult for DI to use it as a recruitment source.

## **Trends in Plot Tactics and Targets**

### *Tactics of Attacks*

Almost all terrorist attacks and plots in Indonesia involve a combination of three types of weaponry: IEDs, firearms and sharp weapons – which encompass melee weapons such as machetes and long-range weapons such as bows. However, among these three weapon types, firearms and sharp weapons are the most commonly used. Data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) indicates that between 2017-2021, over 73.9 percent of all terrorist attacks and plots in Indonesia featured some form of firearm or sharp weapon, while only 26.1 percent involved explosives.<sup>44</sup> This pattern persisted in 2022, where firearms and bladed weapons featured in over 66.7 percent of all terrorist plots and attacks, and explosives accounted for only 33.3 percent of such incidents.<sup>45</sup>

In 2023, however, there was a slight increase in percentage terms of terrorist plots that intended to use explosives. Among the five discovered attack plots whose details were publicised by the Indonesian authorities, 60 percent featured IEDs.<sup>46</sup> These include the plot of a pro-IS individual who was apprehended in Sleman, Yogyakarta, in January 2023,<sup>47</sup> the aforementioned plot of the JAD cell in Central Java to target the police headquarters of Solo Raya,<sup>48</sup> and the plot to disrupt the 2024 planned by Abu Oemar's JAD faction.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite this slight increase in percentage, the absolute number of IEDs employed in 2023 remained relatively low compared to years like 2018, when over five IEDs were used in terrorist plots and attacks.

The two remaining terrorist plots uncovered in 2023 intended to use firearms as their primary means of violence. The first of these was the plot by the JI Lampung cell, who wanted to attack local police officers. In preparation, the group had amassed various firearms including air rifles and factory-made weapons, including an M-16 which experts believe to have come from the southern Philippines.<sup>50</sup> The second plot was planned by a pro-IS individual who worked in the state-owned railway company PT KAI and was arrested in August 2023.<sup>51</sup> Investigations found that this individual had prepared over 18 firearms, including factory-made rifles and modified airsoft guns, to attack the Police's Mobile Brigade Corps' headquarters in Kelapa Dua, Banten.<sup>52</sup>

### *Targets of Attacks*

Like in 2022,<sup>53</sup> Indonesian police officers and headquarters continued to be the primary target of terrorist attack plots in 2023. Notably, out of the seven attack plots uncovered, four planned to attack police-affiliated entities, namely, local police officers in Lampung and Riau, the police headquarters of Solo Raya and the Police's Mobile Brigade Corps' headquarters in Kelapa Dua. However, apart from targeting the police, online posts by JAD members also indicate that the group intends to attack polling stations that are "within reach".<sup>54</sup> Additionally, some experts have noted that pro-IS groups have signalled their intent to attack not only during polling day, but also during the campaigning period leading up to the 2024 elections.<sup>55</sup>

## **Counter Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism**

### *Counter Terrorism Developments*

Indonesia's counter terrorism (CT) capabilities have increased significantly compared to the early 2000s.<sup>56</sup> These capabilities were further bolstered when Indonesia enacted the 2018 Anti-Terrorism Law, which expanded the pre-emptive detention powers of the country's CT unit, the Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88).<sup>57</sup> Hence, since 2018, the number of terrorist arrests in Indonesia has increased greatly. Before 2018, CT operations annually saw an average of 170 suspects apprehended. Afterwards, this number surged to around 300 terrorist suspects annually. Importantly, this increased capacity has also enabled the arrest of key senior members of various terrorist organisations, such as members of JAD's central command and JI's Shura Council.<sup>58</sup> In total, over 1,565 terrorist suspects were arrested between 2018-2022.

Despite this consistent increase in operational capacity, the number of suspected terrorists arrested in Indonesia, however, decreased in 2023. Whereas more than 248 terrorist suspects were apprehended in 2022, up until November 2023, only 108 terrorist suspects were arrested – marking a 56.4 percent decline. These arrests have largely targeted members of pro-IS groups, constituting for 51.8 percent of all arrests, and JI, accounting for 36.1 percent.<sup>59</sup>

### *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Developments*

Indonesia's CVE infrastructures have also developed significantly compared to the 2000s, when such programmes were largely ad hoc and off budget.<sup>60</sup> Not only are CVE responsibilities now institutionalised in the programmes of the National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and Densus 88's Directorate of Identification and Socialisation,<sup>61</sup> Indonesia has also developed the 2021 National Action Plan Against Extremism (RAN PE). This involves a blueprint with 130 CVE reform



plans ranging from strengthening CVE data governance to standardising CVE assessment metrics.<sup>62</sup> These government-led efforts have also been complemented by a significant number of CVE programmes by civil society organisations (CSOs). Recent research by PeaceGen found that over the past couple of years, CSOs have conducted over 448 CVE programmes across 11 provinces.<sup>63</sup>

Despite these advancements, Indonesia's CVE initiatives face persistent challenges such as a lack of robust evaluation methods and standardised risk assessment tools.<sup>64</sup> While the RAN PE has prioritised addressing these issues, implementation of Indonesia's CVE reforms has stalled due to budget constraints, coordination problems and a lack of prioritisation among relevant ministries and local governments.<sup>65</sup> For instance, only six provinces and two cities have enacted the necessary regional regulations to implement RAN PE programmes.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, CSO-led CVE programmes currently face ongoing challenges ranging from insufficient incentives to poor coordination and a lack of programme sustainability. Consequently, there is often an overlap in the various CSO initiatives. PeaceGen's study, for example, found that 84.6 percent of CSO-led CVE initiatives focus solely on preventive measures.<sup>67</sup>

## Outlook

The operational capabilities of terrorist organisations in Indonesia have been on the decline in the past five years, a trend which continued in 2023. Indonesia's main pro-AQ group, JI, has not managed to rebuild its ranks to the level prior to the arrest of its leader Para Wijayanto in 2019, and its options on where and how to do so are dwindling. Additionally, JAD is still in a state of disarray as collective strategising and resource mobilisation, except in some instances, remain rare amongst their cells. Moreover, DI is increasingly unlikely to successfully orchestrate a 2024 armed jihad, with many of its members having renounced their membership.

That said, Indonesian terrorist organisations are highly resilient and have all expressed varying levels of interest in exploiting upcoming events in 2024. As mentioned above, JI has planned to influence upcoming political dynamics through either infiltrating political parties or bandwagoning on the activities of other mass organisations; JAD has expressed its intention to attack polling stations on voting day and other targets throughout the campaign period; and DI has carried out preparations to launch an armed jihad in the belief that 2024 will be the year of victory for Muslims. Furthermore, the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict has resulted in heightened animosity and large demonstrations that terrorist organisations could exploit to recruit, fund-raise or send members to Palestine.<sup>68</sup> If CT operations are sustained, however, it is highly unlikely that these groups will have the operational capacities needed to successfully realise their intentions.

The larger concern is whether stakeholders can effectively implement the CVE reform measures that were listed in the 2021 RAN PE. As of now, these efforts are mired in challenges and thus have not made a meaningful, positive impact on how CVE programmes are run in the country. Even today, former terrorist prisoners in Poso are still distrustful of BNPT's programmes as they believe that the institution's CVE initiatives, such as its economic empowerment programmes, are "just promises".<sup>69</sup> Without these reforms, it is unlikely that Indonesia will be able to reduce its recidivism rate of 11.4 percent.<sup>70</sup> While this percentage is not necessarily high, it is still a major concern given that the number of arrested suspects CVE programmes need to monitor and rehabilitate has exponentially increased in the past five years. A complacent CVE environment, in which radicals are released without having been weaned off their violent jihadist inclinations, will only provide opportunities to terrorist groups to rebuild and re-orchestrate their radical communities.

## About the Author

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## PHILIPPINES

**Kenneth Yeo**

*The general terrorism threat landscape in the Philippines has improved significantly. Through military and non-military interventions, terrorist elements across the country have retreated and surrendered. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has maintained its leadership decapitation strategy, killing significant leaders like Abu Zacariah and Pasil Bayali in 2023. The surrender of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)'s leader, Abu Turaife, also marked a significant development. Nonetheless, the threat still persists, as illustrated by the December 2023 deadly bomb attack at a gymnasium in Marawi City, and amid the persistence of factors such as the entrenched rido (clan wars) culture, the impending Bangsamoro elections and the persistence of poor conditions of vulnerable communities in conflict-afflicted Mindanao.*

### Introduction

The terrorist threat landscape in the Philippines significantly improved in 2023. The year saw a significant decrease in terrorist attacks, an increased number of combatant surrenders, the retaking of terrorist-held territories and the removal of key terrorist leaders from the southern conflict theatre. Overall, while the terrorist threat has reduced significantly, militant groups like the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) continue to survive and pose a security concern in Mindanao, southern Philippines.

### Decline of the ASG Threat

Aggressive military operations involving the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)'s 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (11ID) have forced the ASG, a key threat actor, out of its longtime stronghold in Sulu province. This marks the culmination of efforts since 2018, when the AFP first established a permanent military presence in Sulu to address the persistent ASG threat. The military, local government units and civil society organisations (CSOs) have also worked alongside the authorities in a coordinated and multipronged effort that eventually allowed Governor Abdulsankar Tan to declare Sulu an "Abu Sayyaf-free" area on September 6, 2023.<sup>71</sup>

The AFP 11ID has adopted a holistic approach to reduce the ASG's presence in Sulu, increasingly emphasising peace-building and livelihood improvement over just military confrontation. Critical to their success has been the improved civil-military relations, which embed military operations into the "Balik Barangay" programme.<sup>72</sup> This programme aims to bring internally displaced persons (IDPs) affected by the conflict between the AFP and ASG back to their original villages. Through a coordinated approach by the AFP, local government units (LGUs) and CSOs, they have been able to: 1) protect civilians from the ASG's atrocities; 2) limit the space ASG members can operate in; and 3) demoralise ASG members.<sup>73</sup>

Following the death of former leader Hajan Sawadjaan in July 2020, the rank-and-file members of the pro-Islamic State (IS) ASG faction in Sulu began to surrender to the AFP at a significant rate. These included members who had originally surrendered to the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the late 2000s.<sup>74</sup> Surrendered combatants in Sulu are held in the AFP's facilities and are closely monitored. They also receive religious rehabilitation through the Al Wasatiyyah Islam programme on religious moderation jointly organised by the Kapatut Bangsasut, a civil society group, and the Sulu Ulama Council for Development (SUCD).<sup>75</sup>

Hajan Sawadjaan's nephew, Mundi Sawadjaan, was purported as the next leader of the pro-IS ASG faction in Sulu. While sources claimed that Mundi was not viewed as leadership material, he continued to be a threat due to his bomb assembling skills and role as a bomb-maker in the Jolo Cathedral suicide bombing in January 2019.

According to assessments by police sources, Mundi declined to take on the leadership role and subsequently fled Sulu to Sumisip, south of Basilan Island. It was believed he had been holed up there since 2020. He later attempted to link up with and join the pro-IS BIFF faction's leader, Abu Turaife, but to no avail.<sup>76</sup> Based on intelligence sources, the authorities had been attempting to convince Mundi to surrender.<sup>77</sup> He was later killed while trying to evade military operations in Basilan on December 2, 2023.<sup>78</sup>

While the government's claim that Sulu is "Abu Sayyaf-free" is largely accurate, it must not be interpreted as representing a complete eradication of ASG elements from the wider territory. Today, ASG continues to operate in the neighbouring island of Basilan. While areas in northern Basilan, like Isabella City and Lamitan City, are generally safe from the ASG's influence, ASG elements maintain a presence in southern Basilan, particularly in the Sumisip area. Pasil Bayali, who was reportedly killed on October 6, 2023, had apparently been the main ASG leader in the area.<sup>79</sup>

In southern Basilan, much effort has been made to reintegrate ASG members into society. Jul Adnan Hataman, the mayor of Sumisip, introduced the Program Against Violent Extremism (PAVE) model to provide a whole-of-society approach to reintegrating former combatants into the community.<sup>80</sup> However, while the AFP acknowledges the surrender of ASG members in Sumisip, their efforts have not been recognised by the Philippines National Police (PNP) as there are outstanding criminal charges against some surrendered ASG members in Basilan.<sup>81</sup> Such differences between the PNP and AFP are still being worked out.<sup>82</sup>

### **Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group: Weakened but Persistent**

In Lanao del Sur, there were significant developments involving the IS-linked DIMG network, particularly involving the death of its prominent leader, Abu Zacariah.<sup>83</sup> On May 26, 2023, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) captured four youth members from DIMG.<sup>84</sup> One of them was DIMG's designated spokesperson, Muhammad Nasif alias Abu Rasas.

This operation resulted in retaliation from DIMG as they threatened to "carry out bombings and sow violence" throughout Marogong village if the four youth members were handed over to the AFP. In response, the AFP, PNP and MILF jointly conducted an evacuation operation in Marogong village within the space of three hours.<sup>85</sup> By then, the hunt for Abu Zacariah, the then declared emir of IS in Southeast Asia, had also intensified.

Abu Zacariah visited Marawi City on June 14, 2023. He and his lieutenant, Abu Morsid, rented an apartment in Marawi City. However, due to the unpopularity of DIMG in Marawi City, citizens tipped off the authorities almost immediately after they sighted Abu Zacariah.<sup>86</sup> This resulted in a joint operation between the AFP and PNP to arrest Abu Zacariah. However, because Abu Zacariah resisted arrest, he was eventually killed along with his lieutenant on the same day of his arrival in Marawi City.<sup>87</sup>

The death of Abu Zacariah resulted in an uproar amongst the rank-and-file members of DIMG. They called for revenge and threat escalation, promising retribution on the citizens of Marawi City. Through text messages circulated in IDP camps, DIMG promised that because a "fellow Maranao"<sup>88</sup> had betrayed them, they would outdo the 2017 Marawi Siege.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, they claimed that DIMG had thoroughly infiltrated Marawi City and actively participated in public gatherings and political activities.<sup>90</sup> They also called for the killing of political figures in Southeast Asia, such as Ibrahim Murad (leader of the MILF), Ferdinand Marcos Jr (President of the Philippines), Joko Widodo (President of Indonesia) and Halimah Yacob (then President of Singapore).<sup>91</sup> However, there was little evidence to suggest that these threats were credible.

However, an attack took place at the Mindanao State University (MSU)'s gymnasium on December 3, 2023.<sup>92</sup> The gymnasium was being used by a Catholic congregation in Marawi for their Sunday mass service. According to local sources, the IS-linked attack, which killed four mass attendees and injured 50 others,<sup>93</sup> was masterminded by Arsani Membisa and Wahab A Macabayao (alias Wabie/Mortaba Marangit), who planted an improvised explosive device (a 60mm mortar).<sup>94</sup> Wabie had allegedly surrendered in the first quarter of 2018 but returned to DIMG afterwards.<sup>95</sup>

Similar to Sulu and Basilan, much has been done to reintegrate former combatants from DIMG into society. The main organisation overseeing the reintegration efforts of former DIMG members is Project Sindao.<sup>96</sup> However, unlike reintegration initiatives in Sulu and Basilan, which involve participants of a wider age range, Project Sindao primarily focuses on rehabilitating and reintegrating youths from DIMG due to the younger demographic of DIMG members.<sup>97</sup> The critical thrust of Project Sindao is to provide youths with education on religious moderation and a sense of belonging and empowerment to combat the urge to join local terrorist groups.<sup>98</sup>

### **The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters**

Today, the BIFF continues to be the largest terrorist group in Mindanao. There are three BIFF factions, but only one has pledged allegiance to IS.<sup>99</sup> In the middle of 2023, a culmination of events led to the false declaration of Abu Turaife, the pro-IS BIFF leader, as the emir of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines.<sup>100</sup> However, Abu Turaife was reported to have surrendered to the AFP in Maguindanao.<sup>101</sup>

The surrender of Abu Turaife was unexpected. On the one hand, Abu Turaife had indicated interest in becoming the "leader of jihad" in Southeast Asia during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, after the killing of Abu Zacariah in Marawi City, the Turaife-led BIFF faction launched a retaliatory attack on the evening of his death against the PNP.<sup>103</sup> Hence, there seemed to be clear intent on Turaife's part to become the emir of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines.

At the same time, however, Abu Turaife had also expressed clear hesitation in taking on the role of the leader of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines. After the death of Hajan Sawadjaan in 2020, Abu Turaife's deputy, Salahuddin Hassan, was nominated as the leader of Dawlah Islamiyah Philippines despite the former's seniority. Moreover, Abu Turaife had been actively campaigning for a certain "Abu Erhabee" to take on the role of emir, based on discussions in the East Asia Knights messaging channel.<sup>104</sup>

The surrender of Abu Turaife was intended to be kept a secret by both the AFP and PNP.<sup>105</sup> The authorities had initially feared that the public announcement of Abu Turaife's surrender would lead to an outcry from Dawlah Islamiyah members across Mindanao, resulting in an increase in retaliatory attacks against civilian populations.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, they had intended to leverage Abu Turaife's cooperation to completely demobilise the BIFF before announcing his surrender.<sup>107</sup> At present, it remains unclear how the revelation of Abu Turaife's surrender would affect the rank-and-file members of Dawlah Islamiyah.

### **Continued Threat**

Despite the optimistic outlook for the terrorist threat landscape in the Philippines, there are persistent challenges. The attack at MSU's gymnasium highlights the ongoing threat of terrorism in Mindanao. The Philippines must continue to address these challenges to keep the threat at a reduced level.

First, the *rido* culture of the Mindanao region tends to protract violence between families and kinship networks of ethnic Muslim groups in the region.<sup>108</sup> Many of these inter- and intra-ethnic clan feuds continue to persist within Mindanao, and largely go unreported.<sup>109</sup> Such a persistent culture of violence creates an industry for small arms and weaponry, which can negatively impact the threat landscape in Mindanao if left unchecked. While efforts have been made to educate the

population and dissuade them from continuing to uphold *rido*, the authorities also recognise the difficulty of changing this long-entrenched culture.

Second, electoral violence is a staple in Mindanao. With the barangay elections happening in 2023-2024 and the upcoming Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) elections slated for 2025, some level of violence can be expected in the region.<sup>110</sup> It is, however, unclear if electoral violence will be motivated by terrorist intent.<sup>111</sup>

The third challenge concerns the delivery of public goods. IDPs from Sulu and Marawi continue to suffer from a lack of basic public goods, including access to clean drinking water, electricity, stable internet access and jobs.<sup>112</sup> The authorities conduct frequent visits to affected areas to deliver water rations to the community, but more can be done.<sup>113</sup> Beyond the provision of basic public goods, IDPs need psychological and mental support that is often not rendered immediately.<sup>114</sup>

Despite the prevailing poor socioeconomic environment, residents from Marawi and Sulu are resilient against terrorist narratives and recruitment.<sup>115</sup> But while it is unlikely for Islamist terrorist groups like the ASG and DIMG to recruit individuals suffering from harsh living conditions, separatist sentiments against the government may appeal to the affected residents.

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## MALAYSIA

**Rueben Dass**

*The terrorist threat landscape in Malaysia remains muted. In 2023, there were no reported terrorism-related arrests. Nevertheless, the Malaysian Special Branch (MSB) remains vigilant against a range of threats to the country. The continued threat of online radicalisation, the use of the country as a safe haven and transit point for terrorist elements, and the proliferation of hate speech remain trends to look out for.*

### Domestic Threat Landscape

#### *Continued Lull in Terrorist Activity*

There were no reported terrorism-related arrests in 2023 in Malaysia. This points towards a decreasing trend of terrorist activity in the country. There are several possible reasons for this. First is the relative weakening of groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) in conflict hot zones such as Iraq and Syria compared to the 2013-2019 period.<sup>116</sup> External developments, particularly within the Muslim world such as in the Middle East, have always had a strong influence on the Malaysian threat environment. The Arab Spring in 2011, the subsequent Syrian Civil War and the rise of IS shortly after were key pull factors that attracted Malaysians to join IS in the Middle East in the 2013-2019 period.<sup>117</sup> The fall of the IS caliphate in 2019 and its subsequent weakening in Syria has reduced its appeal among Malaysians.<sup>118</sup>

While IS remains active in Africa, there is currently little evidence that points towards Malaysian militants having an interest in IS' African affiliates and wanting to travel there. This may be due to the unfamiliarity of the land and language, unlike the Middle East, which is a popular destination for travel and study among Malaysians. Likewise, there also seems to be little indication at present

of Malaysian nationals wanting to travel to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to join either AQ or IS and their affiliates there.

The second factor for the drop in terrorist activity is the lack of terrorist leaders. The terrorism threat landscape in Malaysia has been primarily driven by key charismatic personalities who are able to recruit, galvanise and mobilise support among local militants.<sup>119</sup> In the early 2000s, during the peak of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s activity in the region, there were several key Malaysians involved with the group. These included Dr Azahari Husin, Noordin Mat Top and Wan Min Wan Mat.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, with the rise of IS, significant Malaysian personalities who were members of the group included Muhammad Wannady Mohd Jedi, Akel Zainal, Fudhail Omar, Fadhlan Shahidi and Zainuri Kamaruddin. With the elimination of these influential terrorist leaders, the terrorist landscape in Malaysia has become leaderless and diffuse. The absence of a key leader who is able to recruit and mobilise has contributed to the reduced terrorist threat in the country.

The decline in terrorist activity in the country can also be partly attributed to the effects of the pandemic. The economic hardship wrought by COVID-19 resulted in a substantial segment of the population losing their jobs and suffering other adverse economic consequences.<sup>121</sup> This caused them to shift their attention to bread-and-butter issues to ensure their survival and reduced their proclivity to engage in radicalism. However, with the effects of the pandemic subsiding, there may well be a reversal to this.

### *IS Returnees*

There are currently 54 Malaysians previously linked to IS who are believed to be in Syria.<sup>122</sup> Out of these, 19 are male and 11 are female. A further 22 are below the age of 12 and two are between 13-21 years old.<sup>123</sup> The Malaysian government maintains an open-door policy towards returnees and continues to engage in repatriation efforts of its citizens from conflict zones. As of 2022, 17 Malaysians have been repatriated from the Syria-Iraq theatre.<sup>124</sup>

However, the government faces several challenges associated with repatriation. First is the unwillingness of some individuals to be repatriated. While several Malaysians in the displacement camps in Syria have willingly engaged the Malaysian authorities, some have avoided repatriation for fear of arrest and prosecution back home. The Malaysian government also faces diplomatic hurdles given they do not recognise the authorities in charge of the displacement camps in Syria. This adds an extra layer of complexity to the repatriation process. Finally, the exact number and identity of Malaysians in Iraq and Syria are unknown. There may be individuals who are there but remain under the radar. Unless they bring themselves forward, identifying and repatriating them will remain a problem.

The repatriation process is a multi-agency effort that involves the MSB, Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and several others. It is divided into five phases: investigation, assessment, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>125</sup> Male returnees are prosecuted under terrorism laws in Malaysia before being put in rehabilitation programmes, while females and children undergo rehabilitation and assessments that may take anywhere between one and four months before they are reintegrated into society.

### *Maritime Security – Sabah*

The level of activity of terrorist groups in Sabah, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and other pro-IS affiliates, has declined. The weakening of pro-IS groups in the southern Philippines has contributed to the reduction of terrorist activity in Sabah. However, illegal immigration, particularly through the porous maritime borders in the region, remains a concern.<sup>126</sup> Radicalisation and recruitment among disenfranchised migrant communities also remain security risks.

Apart from the Islamist milieu, Sabah faces a significant threat from separatist groups such as the Royal Sulu Force (RSF). The RSF is linked to the heirs of the Sulu Sultanate, who claim that parts of Sabah belong to them; it is the group that carried out the invasion of Lahad Datu in 2013.<sup>127</sup> The

RSF is believed to have a significant amount of support from the Sulu diaspora in Sabah. Another group of concern is the Sultan Sulu Darul Islam (SSDI).<sup>128</sup> Although the leadership structure of this group is unclear, it is believed they too have support among the Sulu diaspora in Sabah. In the past, the SSDI issued its own identification cards in an attempt to assert influence and proclaim sovereignty.<sup>129</sup> Although the Malaysian government won the legal dispute with the Sulu Sultanate over the latter's claim of land in Sabah,<sup>130</sup> the possibility of a second Lahad Datu-style invasion by the RSF or any of its affiliated factions cannot be ruled out.

Sabah remains a hotspot for illegal smuggling activities.<sup>131</sup> Examples of smuggled goods include oil, petrol, diesel, contraband, drugs and firearms. The hotspots for smuggling activities are Sandakan and Semporna in the eastern coastal region. Smuggling networks are usually linked to militant networks and the profits gained from smuggling activities are believed to be used to fund militant groups in the region.<sup>132</sup> Kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) activity by ASG factions has largely ceased owing to the weakening of the group in the southern Philippines. However, the emergence of smaller criminal networks in the region that might carry out KFR must be watched closely.<sup>133</sup>

### *Non-Violent Extremism*

Within the non-violent extremist milieu, Hizb ut-Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) remains active in the country. HTM is one of approximately 40 Hizb ut-Tahrir affiliates active worldwide. HTM rejects secular democracy, the West and any un-Islamic influences. It advocates for the institution of an Islamic state with *shariah* (Islamic law) in the country. The group's goal is the formation of a transnational *khilafah* (Islamic caliphate) through a political struggle as opposed to militant means. HTM remains steadfast in achieving its goal without the use of violence.

In the past, HTM recruited its members from among university students, lecturers and businessmen.<sup>134</sup> The official number of group members remains unknown. HTM is active in carrying out recruitment drives, *ceramah* (public speaking) sessions and demonstrations. In January 2023, HTM carried out a public demonstration in front of the Swedish and Dutch embassies in Kuala Lumpur in response to the Quran burning and desecration incidents in Sweden and the Netherlands, respectively.<sup>135</sup> The group has not engaged in any form of violence thus far.

Malaysia has also seen a rise in the use of hate speech and divisive racial and religious rhetoric by certain political parties for political leverage and to galvanise support among segments of the population.<sup>136</sup> Much of such speech and rhetoric has been strongly exclusivist in nature. During the 15<sup>th</sup> General Election (GE15) in November 2022, and amid a surge in political chatter online, the Malaysian Islamist Party (PAS) was seen as the biggest amplifier of race-based narratives.<sup>137</sup> Social media platforms, particularly Tik Tok, were found to have the most inflammatory content.<sup>138</sup> The recent state elections in August 2023 also saw a rise in political content on social media platforms such as Tik Tok.<sup>139</sup>

### **Responses**

Although the terrorist threat appears to be low for the moment, the Malaysian security apparatus continues to remain vigilant. Since the fall of the so-called IS caliphate in Syria in 2019, the MSB has shifted its counter terrorism focus from operational activities to preventive measures.<sup>140</sup> These include early intervention measures, rehabilitation and reintegration, and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) initiatives. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to counter terrorism, this modified approach seems to be the most optimal in dealing with the threat given the current threat landscape.

The MSB continues to carry out monitoring of violent extremist and terrorist content online. Most of the online investigations in 2023 were linked to IS- or pro-IS-related accounts.<sup>141</sup> Other investigations were linked to groups such as AQ and the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO).<sup>142</sup>

On the east coast, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) has remained vigilant and engaged in several measures to deal with the threat in Sabah.<sup>143</sup> ESSCOM continues to carry out land and sea patrols in the waters surrounding the state to mitigate the threat from groups attempting to carry out KFR, smuggling and illegal migration into Sabah.<sup>144</sup> In July 2023, ESSCOM carried out operations under a campaign titled “Ops Gasak Laut”, targeting the illegal pump boats that are often used in KFR, robbery and smuggling activities.<sup>145</sup> In the same month, ESSCOM announced the setting up of a drone unit within its air wing.<sup>146</sup> The use of drones in the region is aimed at strengthening ESSCOM’s response to intrusion and other criminal activities in the waters.<sup>147</sup> In August 2023, another operation aimed at curbing illegal immigration in Lahad Datu, called “Ops Bersepadu”, was carried out.<sup>148</sup>

## Outlook

The MSB continues to classify the current terrorism threat in Malaysia as “possible”.<sup>149</sup> This implies that while a terrorist attack is possible in the country, credible intelligence indicates that there is limited intention or capability by terrorist groups to conduct attacks in the country. The terrorist threat landscape in Malaysia remains leaderless and diffuse. Until and unless a charismatic leader who is able to mobilise support emerges, the threat will likely remain neutered.

The biggest threat comes from lone-actor terrorism. The most plausible scenario of an attack would be from a lone actor or a decentralised cell who may or may not have direct links to a terrorist group, and who is inspired as opposed to centrally directed. In this regard, online radicalisation plays an important role and is a point of concern. The role of the internet has always played a crucial role in the radicalisation process of Malaysians. Upwards of 75 percent of Malaysians who had been involved with IS cited the internet as a primary source of radicalisation.<sup>150</sup> The Malaysian authorities continue to monitor the online space closely in this regard.

Malaysia also continues to be a favoured transit point and safe haven for persons of interests linked to terrorist groups, including AQ affiliates. Among other activities, some individuals have used Malaysia as a location to organise member gatherings and plan strategies, and as a temporary residence headquarters. One of the reasons for this could be Malaysia’s visa-free policy, which encompasses a wide range of countries particularly in the Middle East. In March 2023, four Uzbek nationals linked to the Central Asian militant group Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) travelled from Turkey and transited in Malaysia before proceeding on to Indonesia.<sup>151</sup> Apart from peninsular Malaysia, Sabah is also a popular transit point and safe haven owing to its strategic location and geographical proximity to the southern Philippines and Indonesia.

Jl in Indonesia remains a key driving force in the violent extremist milieu in Southeast Asia. However, the group seems to have pivoted away from violence and moved towards political infiltration.<sup>152</sup> Most of the Malaysians who had been involved with Jl in the early 2000s were either arrested or killed. Those who have been released remain under supervision by the MSB. The current status of Jl activity in the country remains unclear, but has to be continuously monitored owing to the historical links the group has with the country.

Apart from the terrorist threat, non-violent extremist groups and the proliferation of divisive narratives by political parties remain key concerns. The increase in hate speech and political rhetoric along racial and religious lines has the potential to exacerbate racial polarisation and sow the seeds of radicalism and extremism. While there has been no evidence of this escalating into violence thus far, it certainly has the potential to lead to detrimental consequences if left unaddressed.

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## MYANMAR

**Iftekharul Bashar**

*In 2023, Myanmar faced a deepening crisis as the anti-junta resistance, alongside ethnic armed groups, made territorial gains, leading to intense clashes with the military. Civilian deaths exceeded 4,000, revealing the impact of the Tatmadaw's operations on non-combatants. These casualties highlighted the indiscriminate nature of some of the military's actions. Ethnic armed groups played pivotal roles in anti-junta operations, and launched an unprecedented offensive from late October that led to the seizure of several towns and strategic junta bases in the northern region. Cases of military surrenders and defections coupled with the complex Rakhine State crisis added to the turmoil. The outlook remains bleak, underscoring the urgent need for international assistance to address the growing humanitarian crisis and seek a path to stability and reconciliation.*

### Trends

In 2023, the Myanmar resistance movement, comprising anti-junta democratic forces and ethnic armed groups, made territorial advancements in some border regions and ethnic states. Fierce clashes between these forces and the Tatmadaw (the military) were observed for control of vital transportation routes such as roads, rivers and railways. The junta regime managed to maintain a degree of control over supply lines, enabling them to sustain ground and air offensives. The ability to maintain airstrikes relatively unimpaired has given the junta an asymmetrical advantage.<sup>153</sup>

The armed resistance has become better organised, trained and equipped, and has posed a significant challenge to the junta and the police.<sup>154</sup> Over the past year, resistance forces have increasingly relied on weaponised drones laden with drop explosives to attack military targets. They have also become more effective in orchestrating hit-and-run attacks on military convoys, targeting junta officials and using social media to convince soldiers to defect.<sup>155</sup> The military lost control of some rural areas in Sagaing, Chin and Kayah, which have emerged as major resistance strongholds.

With the country embroiled in a full-fledged civil war, the junta and its proxies have resorted to airstrikes, heavy weapons and scorched earth tactics, including in civilian areas, to quell the resistance offensives. The clashes have exacted a significant human toll. In the past two years, the civilian death toll has exceeded 4,000 (as of August 2023), with an estimated 1,080 civilians killed in the first eight months of 2023 alone.<sup>156</sup> According to United Nations (UN) data, approximately two million individuals have also been displaced within Myanmar. Furthermore, over 63,000 people remain displaced in neighbouring countries following the military takeover in 2021.<sup>157</sup> With the ongoing state of emergency extended until January 31, 2024,<sup>158</sup> the cycle of violence and upheaval will likely persist into the foreseeable future.

### Resistance Movement's Intensified Operations

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the 2021 military coup, with the state of armed conflict, insurgency and chaos only deteriorating over time.<sup>159</sup> In many regions over the past year, the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow civilian government made up of activists and opposition politicians, and its armed wing, the People's Defence Force (PDF), have collaborated operationally with some major ethnic armed groups in the border regions, to simultaneously "increase pressure on the military on all fronts".<sup>160</sup>

According to the NUG, clashes have taken place across most of Myanmar's 14 states and regions, except in Yangon and Ayeyarwady Region, both key regime strongholds, where resistance fighters have orchestrated targeted bombings. These include a recent bomb attack on a junta airbase near

the capital, Naypyidaw.<sup>161</sup> Regime sources indicate that skirmishes have been mainly confined to Sagaing, Magway and Bago Regions, as well as Kayin, Kayah, Chin and Mon States.<sup>162</sup> More recently, the Tanintharyi Region in the south has seen clashes. PDFs have also acquired more advanced weaponry with support from both domestic and international sources.<sup>163</sup>

Analysts and some ethnic revolutionary leaders suggest that the junta is transitioning from offensive to defensive military tactics in response to the growing resistance, citing, among other claims, that the junta has lost 30,000 troops, or nearly half its combat forces.<sup>164</sup> Additionally, the NUG reported the capture of 28 junta bases in the first year and 107 in the second year of the resistance.<sup>165</sup> These claims have been dismissed by the junta. Figures cited are often challenging to verify and are frequently inflated, especially by media outlets aligned with the NUG.<sup>166</sup>

Despite sustaining operational losses, the Tatmadaw has maintained the capacity to carry out sustained operations on multiple fronts.<sup>167</sup> In particular, its use of artillery strikes and airpower makes it hard for resistance forces to hold on to territory gained for long.<sup>168</sup> Resistance forces are also fractured and hindered by a lack of access to sophisticated weapons. They also lack the backing of more powerful ethnic armed groups.<sup>169</sup> In addition, reports of criminal activities, including homicides, sexual assaults and other misconduct, have exposed internal fissures. These issues have been attributed to a perceived lack of a unified chain of command within the resistance movement and a clear code of conduct.<sup>170</sup>

### **Ethnic Armed Organisations' Growing Footprint**

Ethnic armed groups, which have for decades waged armed battle with the military for greater autonomy in some regions in ethnically diverse Myanmar, now boast significant manpower and access to advanced weaponry. As such, some have become significant actors in the post-coup landscape. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), for one, in 2023 engaged in battles to counter junta advances in northern Myanmar's Kachin State.<sup>171</sup> They also collaborated with the NUG and supported PDF troops. Similarly, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) has achieved some territorial gains in south-eastern Myanmar by capturing military camps. The junta's response has mainly involved airstrikes and artillery attacks, including on local communities, which has resulted in a notable increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kayin State.

Apart from the KIA and KNLA, groups such as the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) in Kayah State and the Chin National Army (CNA) in Chin State have also emerged as significant players in the resistance movement.<sup>172</sup> Additionally, the Brotherhood Alliance, composed of the Arakan Army (AA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), have collaborated with the NUG, with each group pursuing its own distinct goals in Rakhine State, northern Shan State and the Kokang Region, respectively.

On October 27, a coalition of ethnic armed groups<sup>173</sup> launched a series of coordinated offensives against junta forces in northern Shan State. Over the subsequent weeks, ethnic fighters, many aligned with the broader resistance movement, captured over 200 military outposts and bases, as well as a number of towns and key trade routes near the border with China, in one of the most expansive resistance offensives in years. Each ethnic group in the alliance appears to have had varying agendas, from seizing lands to expanding influence along trade routes.<sup>174</sup>

### **Funding the Resistance**

Amid widespread clampdowns imposed by the ruling junta on financial flows, Myanmar's anti-coup resistance movement has largely raised funds through various diaspora networks overseas. The NUG, for example, recently reported providing US\$15.7 million in funding, mainly from overseas networks, to PDFs since September 2021.<sup>175</sup> More recently, however, they have sought to adopt other innovative and high-tech methods, including via digital currency, real estate auctions, mining leases and bond sales.<sup>176</sup> The NUG also launched a digital currency in 2023, called the Digital Myanmar Kyat (DMMK), to move money within the country.

In a possible bid to circumvent ongoing banking restrictions, the NUG in July 2023 announced ambitious plans to open an online bank run on blockchain technology. There were also efforts to raise funds through mobile games. For example, an IT professional in Myanmar created a mobile game called "The PDF Game", where players take on the role of PDF soldiers, to raise funds and awareness for the anti-regime forces. Funded by in-game ads, the game raised over US\$508,000 between early 2022 and August 2023.<sup>177</sup> Collectively, these creative financing methods have provided both operational and humanitarian support for the opposition.<sup>178</sup>

However, observers say these fund-raising approaches have not yielded significant results across all areas in which the resistance forces maintain a presence.<sup>179</sup> In some regions, PDFs are increasingly levying tolls and resorting to coercive measures on roads they oversee – for example, by establishing frequent checkpoints. Sources say residents in some areas willingly participate in these payments, while others, particularly in the northwest, express a contrasting sentiment.<sup>180</sup>

## **Evolving Battlefield Tactics**

### *Increasing Use of Drones*

Resistance fighters in Myanmar are more frequently relying on commercial drones to conduct bombings and surveillance of military forces. According to NUG sources, technological advances and cost efficiencies have enabled drones to carry greater loads, fly at higher altitudes and circumvent the junta's anti-drone jammers.<sup>181</sup> The NUG's Defence Ministry has also distributed more drones to its armed wing, enabling a greater number of aerial attacks across the country.<sup>182</sup>

In 2022, there were around 642 drone attacks.<sup>183</sup> Rebel forces claim the use of drones increased in 2023, but did not provide details, citing security concerns. While they may not match the junta's conventional aircraft, the increased adoption of modern war technology by resistance fighters has to some extent shifted the balance on the battlefield, observers say.<sup>184</sup> But drone attacks have also resulted in civilian casualties.<sup>185</sup>

### *Maintaining Air Attacks*

The junta deployed airstrikes with greater frequency in 2023, in tandem with ground infantry and artillery operations. A UN report published in September 2023 stated that many of the Tatmadaw's operations had targeted civilians, adding that 988 such strikes were conducted from February 2021 to July 2023, with a further 687 recorded between April 2022 and July 2023.<sup>186</sup> The strikes have resulted in several hundred civilian casualties and left communities in some areas living in perpetual fear of being bombed, the report added. A separate non-profit report also highlighted a shift in target areas for the military's operations, with central regions now bearing the brunt of the bombings.<sup>187</sup>

A notable incident was the April 11, 2023 airstrike on the village of Pazi Gyi in Kantbalu Township, Sagaing Region, which resulted in the loss of more than 170 lives, including 42 children. This attack marked the deadliest event since the military seized power in 2021. A Myanmar military spokesperson acknowledged responsibility for the airstrike, justifying it by claiming it had targeted the opening ceremony of a public administration office held by the "civilian anti-regime" NUG and its armed wing, the PDF, which the regime has proscribed as a terrorist organisation.<sup>188</sup> However, local villagers denied the junta's accusations, asserting that there were no PDF groups present in their village. They claimed their village only had members of the village defence force tasked with protecting residents' properties and safeguarding the community.<sup>189</sup>

### *Escalating Conflict Along Strategic Transport Routes*

Fighting continues to rage along key transport routes in Myanmar as the junta's opponents contest strategically located roads, rivers and railways. They target regime convoys, flotillas and infrastructure, while the regime maintains control over supply lines. In the Dry Zone, Bago East

and Kayah, clashes intensified in 2023. In early September, resistance groups launched an attack on a convoy of junta vessels on the Chindwin River in Salingyi Township, Sagaing Region.

The resistance fighters, including members of the Myanmar Royal Dragon Army (MRDA) and Monywa District Battalion 11, targeted a military flotilla transporting supplies like rations, weapons, ammunition and fuel from Pakokku Township to Sagaing Region. The clash lasted for about an hour, leading to the destruction of one vessel. The military subsequently retaliated using heavy weapon fire on nearby villages. These attacks on junta supply routes via rivers represent a continuing challenge for the military, as they rely on these routes due to land-based ambushes by PDFs.<sup>190</sup>

### **Military Defections and Surrenders**

Myanmar's military has faced defections over the past two years, as the resistance movement gains momentum. Defections have been prominent in regions like Chin, Kayah and Kayin States.<sup>191</sup> In 2023, the NUG claimed that around 15,000 soldiers and police officers had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) since February 2021.<sup>192</sup> According to reports, these defections can be attributed to growing disquiet in the Tatmadaw's rank and file over the military's intensified operations in civilian areas, human rights violations and inability to quell the uprising.<sup>193</sup> It is also noteworthy that the NUG has set up cash rewards for defectors and publicised these events via huge photo opportunities.<sup>194</sup> Since late 2023, there have also been an increasing number of surrenders, an unprecedented development since the 2021 military takeover. In one instance, an infantry battalion of 127 soldiers and 134 family members surrendered.<sup>195</sup>

It is often difficult to confirm defection figures as both the junta and the NUG make claims that are highly questionable.<sup>196</sup> For its part, the military has lowered the eligibility criteria for officer recruitment and extended the defence services academy's application deadlines. The military has also organised beach holidays for wounded soldiers, town hall meals and other activities to retain soldiers and boost morale.<sup>197</sup>

### **Ongoing Crisis in Western Myanmar's Rakhine State**

The enduring crisis in Western Myanmar's Rakhine State was largely overshadowed in 2023 by post-coup developments elsewhere. Despite a temporary ceasefire between the junta and AA, the situation in Rakhine State has become more complex, with the AA controlling much of the countryside in central and northern Rakhine, including along the Bangladesh border, and setting up its own administration and judiciary. Tensions with the regime persisted throughout 2023 and eventually spilled over in mid-November, when fresh clashes broke out between the AA and junta forces in Rakhine State, causing tens of thousands to flee the four major townships. The skirmishes broke a ceasefire that had been in place since November 2022,<sup>198</sup> with the latest developments potentially having far-reaching regional and transborder implications.

Rohingya refugees in southern Bangladesh face increasingly dire prospects of returning home to Rakhine State, even as living conditions in the camps, which house over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims, worsen. In addition to dwindling supplies of food rations, the imposition of arbitrary movement restrictions has also made it harder to move around within the camps.<sup>199</sup> Meanwhile, violence in these Rohingya refugee camps has steadily increased, as armed groups and criminal networks engage in turf wars as they seek to entrench themselves among the refugee population.<sup>200</sup>

Against this backdrop, the prospect for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees has grown increasingly bleak, with international support for a brokered settlement fast dwindling. This is despite another Beijing-backed effort in 2023 by Bangladesh and Myanmar's military regime to restart a repatriation process following two previous failed attempts in 2018 and 2019, amid mounting international pressure.<sup>201</sup> The protracted malaise could push some disillusioned Rohingya refugees, particularly men and boys, towards militancy or enlistment in armed groups and gangs.

Meanwhile, the militant Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which has been accused by state forces in the past of carrying out attacks on police outposts, increased its activities in Rakhine State in 2023. This came amid a government crackdown on its activities in neighbouring Bangladesh after the killings of Rohingya community leaders in the refugee camps. In Maungdaw Township, for example, ARSA, grappling with food shortages among its fighters, is alleged to have kidnapped fellow Muslims and sought extortion money.<sup>202</sup>

Frequent clashes also erupted between ARSA and AA, and there were troubling allegations suggesting possible complicity between Myanmar's military and ARSA. According to analysts, a resurgent and increasingly bold ARSA could be receiving covert support from the junta via the supplying of weapons and granting of ease of movement around the region, as part of a strategy to weaken the AA.<sup>203</sup> Some reports also indicate that ARSA supporters have possibly split into four factions and that a relatively new Rohingya armed group named the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) has emerged. The ARA, led by an alleged drug dealer, Abdullah Kane, has also been accused by local sources of being sheltered by the Myanmar Border Guard Police, with whom it is allegedly cooperating in drug-trafficking activities.<sup>204</sup>

Lastly, ARSA has established connections with Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist organisations, including Ansar al Islam/Al-Qaeda Bangladesh, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkatul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B), along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. ARSA has also maintained strong ties to HuJI-Arakan in Rakhine State, whose leader is based in Pakistan. According to Bangladeshi security sources, ARSA is actively working to expand and acquire weapons, such as AK-47s, relying on funding from overseas sources and the profitable trade of methamphetamine drugs. These sources added that ARSA's long-term plan is to capture territory that includes parts of Chattogram Division in Bangladesh and northern Rakhine State.

Taken together, these activities have the potential to exacerbate the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State and the Myanmar-Bangladesh border region. However, local sources in Myanmar have cautioned that ARSA remains relatively under the radar in Rakhine State and is still viewed by most non-Rohingya communities in the area as a weaker threat actor compared with other armed groups such as the AA.

## Outlook

The security outlook for Myanmar remains bleak, with the military government so far failing to restore peace and stability in the country amid a growing pro-democracy resistance movement.<sup>205</sup> Both the Tatmadaw and the resistance forces are determined to secure a decisive victory, and there are no discernible indications that conducive conditions are in place for a politically negotiated settlement to emerge in the near future. Consequently, Myanmar's already dire socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis is likely set to intensify.

The complex and volatile situation requires a peaceful resolution, increased humanitarian aid and a comprehensive, multilateral approach. In this respect, the independent verification of events and claims by the key conflict actors is important to effectively address the crisis and its implications.<sup>206</sup> The outlook for 2024 will be significantly shaped by a myriad of factors, including political developments, the evolving security landscape and the involvement of international actors, with the regime deepening its economic and defence dependence on Russia and China.

## About the Author

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## THAILAND

### Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat

*The level of violence in Thailand's Deep South has been on a downward trend since the 2013 launch of a peace dialogue, although attacks against non-combatants remain a concern. In February 2023, a general framework known as the "Joint Comprehensive Plan towards Peace" was agreed upon between the Thai government and the separatist group Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front, or BRN), laying out a roadmap for the conduct of a ceasefire and public consultation expected to lead to political solutions. While the newly elected Thai government has pledged to resume the peace talks with Malay-Muslim insurgents fighting for independence, its commitment and vision remain unclear. Given that the military has dominated Thai politics for nearly a decade, regaining civilian control over government operations in the Deep South could significantly change the dynamics of the conflict. However, it is doubtful if the government will be bold enough to challenge the military and other conservative forces that have long dominated conflict management in the restive region.*

#### State of the Conflict in Thailand's Deep South

2023 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> year since the resurgence of the violent insurgency in Thailand's southernmost region.<sup>207</sup> According to the Deep South Watch (DSW), there have been more than 22,100 violent incidents since 2004, with some 7,520 people killed and 13,900 others injured (as of August 2023).<sup>208</sup>

Since the launch of a formal peace dialogue in 2013, the number of violent incidents and casualties has significantly declined. Over the past few years, the level of violence has largely held steady. From January to August 2023, there were 351 violent incidents in the Deep South, killing 89 people and wounding 157 others. The monthly average of violence and casualties was largely on par with 2022, during which 488 violent incidents took place, leaving 117 dead and 227 injured. Comparisons of victims classified as hard targets (armed combatants) and soft targets (unarmed civilians) from January to August 2023 showed that casualty figures were higher in the latter category, with 62 killed and 78 wounded. Twenty-seven hard targets were killed and 79 injured.<sup>209</sup>

There are three main observations of the insurgents' ongoing military operations in the Deep South. First, while the BRN's military operations have focused more on combatants, indiscriminate attacks affecting civilians have also occurred. There were 69 bombings (as of August 2023) compared with 129 explosions in 2022.<sup>210</sup> In one of the most catastrophic incidents in recent years, a vehicle-borne bomb exploded at a police flat compound in Narathiwat's Muang district on November 22, 2022, killing a police officer and injuring 31 others – including 13 police staff and 18 civilians, of whom three were children.<sup>211</sup> The BRN has said that such bombings are used as "political communications" of its struggle for the "independence and self-governance of Patani".<sup>212</sup>

Second, cross-province coordinated attacks have persisted, which serve as a testament to the BRN's military capability. These operations are intended as a display of military force rather than an attempt to maximise casualty numbers. For example, some 20 insurgents attacked a security outpost in Yala's Muang district with pipe bombs, grenades and automatic rifles on April 9, 2023. There were no casualties among the security forces.<sup>213</sup> On May 11, 2023, 23 locations across the three southernmost provinces were hit by arson attacks, targeting mobile phone antenna towers and electricity poles.<sup>214</sup> Coordinated attacks have often been used to boost the morale of fighters and to demonstrate the presence of BRN fighters on the ground.

The conflict-ridden Deep South remains under a state of exception (characterised by the suspension of the normal regime of law), which, coupled with the enforcement of special laws (martial law and an emergency decree declared by the Thai government), allows security forces to operate with few judicial checks and balances. Since the 2006 coup, martial law has

continuously been enforced in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, allowing the military to arrest suspects without a court warrant and detain them for up to seven days.

In September 2023, the Srettha Thavisin government extended the imposition of the state of emergency in 22 out of 33 districts in the three southernmost provinces for one month instead of the usual three-month extension.<sup>215</sup> The emergency decree enables security forces to detain suspects without charge for up to 30 days.<sup>216</sup> Security forces have often taken advantage of the two special laws and increased the period of detention for up to 37 days.<sup>217</sup> A month later, the cabinet revoked the emergency decree in three districts (Krongpinang in Yala, Thungyangdaeng in Pattani and Yingo in Narathiwat), but reimposed the special law in the remote district of Srisakhon, Narathiwat.<sup>218</sup>

While the government claimed that the extension of the state of emergency was based on feedback from various stakeholders, the survey conducted by the interior ministry required respondents to identify themselves, raising concerns over whether these were genuine opinions.<sup>219</sup>

The Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, which came into effect on February 22, 2023, is expected to enhance the prevention of human rights violations and torture under state custody. The law obliges law enforcement officials to keep voice and video recordings of the arrest and release of a suspect (Section 22), and guarantees the right of relatives and lawyers to access information about the detained suspect (Section 24), among other things.<sup>220</sup> This Act may be a good countermeasure, even as the military still defends the need for special laws in the Deep South.

An opinion survey on holding an independence referendum also sparked a strong reaction from the conservative forces and security agencies in Thailand. On June 7, 2023, Pelaja Bangsa, an umbrella organisation of student activists, conducted a survey during a seminar at the Prince of Songkla University in Pattani on “the right to self-determination”, asking dozens of participants whether the “Patani people should be entitled to have a lawful referendum on independence”. This campaign was perceived as a violation of the 2017 Constitution’s Section 1, which states that Thailand is an indivisible kingdom. The military-led Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) subsequently filed a lawsuit against three activists and one activist-turned-politician involved in the survey, charging them with treason and sedition.<sup>221</sup> This controversy suggests that, in the view of Bangkok, independence will remain off limits when it comes to political solutions to the conflict.

### **Srettha Thavisin’s Government and the Peace Dialogue**

Under the government of newly elected premier Srettha Thavisin, the peace dialogue has resumed; however, to what extent it can make substantial progress remains to be seen. Srettha, a real estate tycoon-turned-politician, became the 30<sup>th</sup> prime minister of Thailand after the Pheu Thai Party managed to form an 11-party coalition, which includes two pro-military parties affiliated with the 2014 coup leaders. In discussions with his Malaysian counterpart Anwar Ibrahim on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, Srettha pledged to continue the peace process in southern Thailand and welcomed the role of Malaysia as facilitator.<sup>222</sup>

The peace process was initiated by the civilian Pheu Thai-led government in 2013, but it has largely been undertaken by the military-dominated governments which ruled Thailand until 2023. The launch of the peace dialogue was an important milestone in the conflict. Notably, since its inception, the level of violence has sharply declined, while the BRN, a clandestine separatist organisation, began to publicly communicate with its constituencies and the public on various media channels, including YouTube. Following the 2014 coup, however, the BRN refused to take part in the peace talks led by the post-coup government, during which MARA Patani<sup>223</sup> – an umbrella organisation of separatists mainly based in Malaysia – took its place as the dialogue partner. After the 2019 general election that saw General Prayut Chan-ocha retaining power, the BRN decided to return to the dialogue table.

The decade-long peace dialogue has been a bumpy and slow journey. The biggest hurdle remains the fear of an internationalisation of the conflict and the involvement of international actors. The Thai peace dialogue panel has refused to ink any agreements with MARA Patani and the BRN, creating mistrust and doubt over the Thai government's seriousness in finding a solution to the conflict. Bangkok fears that the BRN could use such signed agreements to wage international campaigns for secession.<sup>224</sup>

When the Thai peace dialogue panel reached an agreement with the BRN on the General Principles of the Peace Dialogue Process in March 2022, international observers were requested to sign the agreement instead.<sup>225</sup> The General Principles, drawing upon the "Berlin Initiative" (backchannel talks facilitated by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in 2018-19), represents a significant breakthrough as it lays out a framework for the peace process, comprising three substantive matters: 1) reduction of violence/cessation of hostilities; 2) public consultation; and 3) political solutions.<sup>226</sup> Previously, the peace talks had only focused on procedural matters and confidence-building measures.

When Anwar Ibrahim assumed the premiership in Malaysia in late 2022, General Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, a former military chief, was appointed as the new facilitator for the peace process in southern Thailand. During the first meeting facilitated by Zulkifli in late February 2023, the Thai peace dialogue panel and the BRN agreed on the two-year-long "Joint Comprehensive Plan towards Peace" (JCPP). Drawing upon the General Principles, the JCPP contains two components: violence reduction and public consultation that would lead to political solutions.

The public consultation is set to cover at least five key areas: 1) form of governance; 2) recognition of the Patani community, identity and culture; 3) human rights, justice and legal matters; 4) economic development; and 5) education.<sup>227</sup> While the JCPP appeared to be a positive step forward, the BRN decided not to turn up for the following meeting of the technical team in March 2023, claiming it desired to wait for the new Thai government to be in office before returning to negotiations. It also turned a cold shoulder to the offer of General Wanlop Rugsanaoh, the then head of the Thai peace dialogue panel, to sign the JCPP agreement, if completed.<sup>228</sup>

In the May 2023 general election, the Pheu Thai Party garnered 141 seats, the second highest after the Move Forward Party (MFP). Pheu Thai then struck a deal with the two pro-military parties to form a coalition, along with nine other parties.<sup>229</sup> Srettha, who had joined politics only a few months before the elections, won sufficient votes from senators during the nomination process to elect the prime minister, most of whom were associated with former prime minister Prayut.<sup>230</sup> But doubts have been raised if the governing coalition, which has few shared agendas, would be able to push through important policies. The new government has not shown strong leadership when it comes to conflict resolution in the Deep South. To the surprise of many, including some in the coalition parties, there was no direct mention of how the government would address the violent conflict in its policy statement – a common practice by its predecessors, including the Prayut and Yingluck Shinawatra governments.<sup>231</sup> No deputy prime minister has been assigned to take charge of security affairs either, raising further questions about the uniformity of policies.<sup>232</sup> Srettha, also the finance minister, is supposed to take responsibility for the peace dialogue, but it is doubtful if he would have the time to pay attention to this task.<sup>233</sup>

It is also unclear to what extent the government would take the lead in steering the direction of the peace process and challenging the military's influence regarding the Deep South insurgency. Justice Minister Thawee Sodsong, who is the leader of the Prachachat Party, would be one of the most suitable persons to oversee the peace talks. He was a key person behind the launch of the peace dialogue in 2013 while serving as the chief of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre (SBPAC). The military was initially not supportive of the peace talks. The tension between Thawee, who was then close to the Pheu Thai Party, and the military was so high that he was removed immediately after the 2014 coup.

Popular among Malay Muslims in the Deep South, Thawee, together with other veteran Malay-Muslim politicians, later formed the Prachachat Party, which is arguably the current strongest



regional party that represents the interests of Malay Muslims at the national level. In the May 2023 general election, it won seven out of 13 constituencies and gained victory in the party-list vote in the three southernmost provinces. However, while the Prachachat Party is part of the coalition government, it remains to be seen to what extent the party with nine MPs can play a leading role in resolving the southern conflict.

Nonetheless, given his previous role and the fact that the Deep South is the main constituency of the Prachachat Party, Thawee should be capable of directing the government's policies on the southern conflict. Yet, there is no indication (at the time of this update) that Thawee would be tasked to lead these efforts.

On the contrary, Srettha softened his stance towards the coup leaders and the military soon after assuming the premiership; for instance, he has said that rather than "military reform", he would prefer to "jointly develop" the army.<sup>234</sup> The prime minister's gesture suggests he might seek to avoid any move that could offend the military and the conservative forces entrenched in Bangkok. Devolution of power and autonomy would be among the most contested issues.

For its part, the BRN has clearly shown its willingness to pursue peace talks with the new government.<sup>235</sup> There is a possibility that the BRN might change the head of its peace dialogue panel to improve its advocacy and diplomatic works. Dr Nikmatullah, a current member of the dialogue team who has been working on the diplomatic front, is among the top candidates for the position.<sup>236</sup> The BRN still insists on three key demands: 1) parliamentary endorsement of the peace process; 2) signing of documents agreed upon at the dialogue table; and 3) immunity for the BRN's overseas-based representatives to enter Thailand for public consultation. There remains some tension between the BRN's military and political wings, with the former holding a more hardline position. The military wing has raised doubts about holding talks "within the framework of the Thai constitution", which de facto rules out the BRN's ultimate goal of independence.<sup>237</sup> In contrast, moderate BRN elements have argued for the strategy of incremental victory by making use of the dialogue process to advance its political agenda.

## Outlook

The commitment and vision of the Srettha government regarding conflict resolution in the South as well as the trajectory of the peace process remain unclear. Given that the military has dominated Thai politics for nearly a decade, the re-establishment of a civilian-led government could have significant bearings on the southern conflict. It should be noted that Suthin Klangsang, an MP from Pheu Thai, is the first civilian to become defence minister without concurrently holding the premiership. However, doubts have been raised over the extent to which he can hold sway over the military. Given that the old hands involved in the peace process in its initial stage are still associated with the Srettha government in some capacity or another, the talks could potentially make considerable progress – provided there is political will.

There are at least three key challenges to address if the government seeks to push the peace process forward. The first and perhaps most significant would be to debunk the fear long held by government agencies over the internationalisation of the southern conflict and the engagement of international actors. If separatist conflicts elsewhere are any indication, the engagement of third parties, both nationally and internationally, could enhance the success of the peace process. International support has thus far been limited due to the Thai authorities' misgivings over the engagement of foreign organisations.

Looking ahead, an independent mechanism for ceasefire monitoring would be necessary. Since the Thai government and the BRN are parties to the conflict, it would not be legitimate for them to carry out this task. Local third-party organisations, particularly civil society organisations, could fulfil this role, but they would require capacity building. Expertise from international organisations could empower them to work in a more professional, effective and transparent manner. Besides, when an important deal is reached at the dialogue table, signing the agreement would help to enhance confidence in the peace process. Concerns among relevant government agencies over

inking agreements with the BRN has somewhat eased, as evidenced by the fact that Gen Wanlop was previously willing to sign the JCPP document. This positive gesture needs to be carried forward.

The second challenge centres on the need to ensure inclusivity in the peace process. The BRN representatives who take part in public consultation should be granted immunity to return to Thailand. The peace process should also not only be a matter between the state and armed groups. A proper process and mechanisms need to be put in place to articulate the voices of people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. These include Thai Buddhist, Chinese and other minorities in the conflict area. International support would also be immensely helpful for the conduct of an inclusive public consultation process.

The final challenge is the need for a permanent agency with the necessary resources and manpower to work exclusively on the peace process – if this is to truly become a national agenda as the authorities have claimed. When the Philippine government was engaged in the peace process with Muslim rebels fighting for independence in the southern part of the country, its president issued an executive order to set up an Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process to drive the peace process forward.<sup>238</sup> The establishment of a similar permanent unit could serve to crystallise the Thai government's commitment to peaceful conflict resolution in the southernmost region.

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## SINGAPORE

### Kalicharan Veera Singam and Abigail Leong

*In its threat assessment report, Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) stated that the threat of terrorism to Singapore "remains high".<sup>239</sup> Although there are no suggestions of an impending attack, Singapore continues to be viewed by extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) as a prized target for attacks. There also remains a persistent stream of self-radicalised cases. In 2023, youth radicalisation, lone-actor plots and "radicalisation and recruitment through social media and gaming platforms" were among the threat concerns identified.<sup>240</sup>*

### Threat From Islamist Extremism

Islamist extremism continues to pose the biggest ideological and internal security threat to Singapore. Terror groups such as the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) continue to spread extremist propaganda, raise funds and plot attacks, including online, which has radicalised some fringe and vulnerable groups.<sup>241</sup> For example, while IS has been defeated on the physical battlefield, its messaging of defending oppressed Muslims continues to retain traction online. In June 2023, regional IS supporters called for retaliatory attacks to avenge the death of then IS East Asia Province leader Abu Zacariah. Posters were also circulated identifying regional government leaders, including former Singapore president Halimah Yacob, as targets.<sup>242</sup>

Highlighting the global nature of the terrorist threat, in October 2022, the authorities arrested a Ministry of Education (MOE) teacher who had planned to travel to and engage in armed jihad in Palestine.<sup>243</sup> Mohamed Khairul Riduan Mohamed Sarip, 38, was the first public servant to be arrested for a terrorism-related offence. He had been radicalised by teachings of foreign preachers

and extremist videos online. Khairul intended to join Hamas and participate in armed combat against the Israel Defence Forces, having been motivated by a misguided sense of religious obligation.<sup>244</sup>

### *Youth Radicalisation*

Terror groups have also been increasingly targeting youth, who are more vulnerable and impressionable and thus more easily influenced. In 2023, three youths who self-radicalised primarily online were detained by the ISD. Among them was also the youngest detainee to date, a 15-year-old self-radicalised boy who harboured intentions to carry out attacks in Singapore targeted at non-Muslims. He was influenced by the online sermons of a foreign “segregationist” preacher, Ismail Menk, and IS propaganda online.<sup>245</sup>

Besides traditional social media channels, terror groups have started to exploit online gaming and music streaming sites popular among youth. A second youth detained in 2023 was a 16-year-old student who had earlier been drawn to far right extremist content, such as anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism, and subsequently became an IS supporter. The youth was also found to have been engaged in online gaming platforms such as Roblox, which likely further contributed to his radicalisation. The boy joined several IS-themed games on Roblox which simulated role-playing as an IS fighter.<sup>246</sup> He also created videos by superimposing images of IS flags on and adding other symbols such as *nasheeds* (Islamic vocal music) and IS factions to the Roblox game footage.<sup>247</sup> The youth also promoted IS propaganda on social media.<sup>248</sup>

A third youth, 18-year-old Muhammad Irfan Danyal bin Mohamad Nor, who was detained in December 2022, was known to the two earlier mentioned youths. Although all three radicalised separately, they shared their extremist beliefs and ways to conceal their activities in online conversations. These cases of teen extremism, particularly the very young age of some affected, have resulted in renewed focus from relevant local stakeholders on understanding and addressing youth radicalisation in Singapore.<sup>249</sup>

### **Potential Non-Islamist Extremism Concerns Facing Singapore**

While Islamist terrorism remains the most potent threat for now, other security developments, particularly extreme right-wing ideology or strands of it, also pose some potential security concerns to Singapore. Singapore is among the most diverse societies in the world in terms of religious, ethnic and national affiliations; in addition, it is highly globalised and digitally connected. In an era where ideas and images can go viral in seconds, there remains the possibility of such extreme ideologies, or associated strands, which have grown in influence in other parts of the world, becoming more prominent and appealing to fringe groups and individuals in Singapore. Islamophobia<sup>250</sup> and anti-Semitism,<sup>251</sup> for instance, are ideas that resonated with a few self-radicalised individuals in Singapore in recent years.

In addition, conflicts in Southeast Asia such as in Myanmar, the Russia-Ukraine war and the Middle East tensions have also spotlighted concerns that state-linked or other proxies may choose to engage in terrorism against their adversaries.<sup>252</sup> This raises the spectre that third-party countries like Singapore could be mired in the crossfire, or that such conflicts or extremist rhetoric from those conflicts could spill over into Singapore’s society. While at present the nature of such threats and how they would land in Singapore remain unclear, they warrant continued monitoring.

### **Responses**

Singapore has developed and implemented a range of policies and programmes, to mitigate security threats posed by extremist actors and enhance community resilience to prevent radical ideas from taking root in society.

Maintaining the stance of “not if, but when” regarding terrorist attacks, the different arms of Singapore’s security apparatus regularly run joint attack simulation exercises to test emergency

response mobilisation and evaluate inter-agency coordination as part of ongoing crisis preparedness efforts.<sup>253</sup> Such response plans were tested when a few bomb threats were reported in 2023. In August 2023, bomb threats were made at 18 locations around the island, including government buildings, foreign embassies and other places of interest.<sup>254</sup> There were also two other unrelated incidents involving false bomb threats – one on a Scoot flight on transit to Australia and another on a cruise ship berthed at Marina Bay Cruise Centre.<sup>255</sup> Although they all turned out to be hoaxes, the incidents highlighted the importance of continued vigilance and affirmed the responsiveness of the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and other agencies in critical situations.

Singapore also updated its legal framework to better address a range of terror threats. In September 2023, the parliament passed a series of amendments to the Immigration Act to strengthen border controls and give the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) enhanced legal powers to effectively manage evolving security threats.<sup>256</sup> The provisions will allow the ICA to collect advance passenger and crew information across all modes of entry for screening and assessment purposes, issue no-boarding directives (NBDs) to transport operators to deny the embarkation of undesirable individuals, and detain persons or vehicles involved in non-immigration offences.<sup>257</sup>

The Developers (Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing) Act passed in parliament in 2018 also came into operation in June 2023. Targeted at strengthening regulatory levers in the real estate sector, the Act lays out several key requirements that all housing developers in Singapore are mandated to observe concerning property sales and purchases to deny terrorist financiers and money launderers the space to operate in the country.<sup>258</sup>

The slew of recent cases involving self-radicalised youths has also highlighted the important role played by relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, schools and families, in understanding the needs and concerns of the younger generation, as well as engaging with and guiding them so that they do not fall prey to misguided and radical teachings.<sup>259</sup> To that end, the Ministry of Education announced in September 2023 the introduction of counter-radicalisation workshops, facilitated by the ISD, for student ambassadors in all junior colleges. The objectives are to raise awareness of the terrorism threat and to teach students and educators how to identify and respond to signs of radicalisation in an individual.<sup>260</sup> Similar workshops for younger students at the upper secondary level are also in the pipeline.

The government has also actively engaged the wider community through outreach, education and partnerships, with the aim of not only mobilising society in the fight against terrorism but also building community resilience and fostering social cohesion as a bulwark against divisive and extremist ideologies. One such key initiative is SGSecure, a national movement launched in 2016 to equip the community with the necessary tools to prevent and deal with a terrorist attack.

A survey in late 2022 revealed that only half of Singaporeans believed the country to be a terrorist target,<sup>261</sup> while only about a third would contact the authorities if someone they knew was exhibiting signs of radicalisation.<sup>262</sup> In light of this, in July 2023, the next phase of SGSecure was introduced to raise greater awareness of the gravity of the terrorism threat and to encourage community members to play a more active role, individually and collectively, in countering extremism and terrorism.<sup>263</sup> Carrying the tagline of “What’s Your Role?”, the new campaign outlines six primary roles that an individual can play.<sup>264</sup> Aside from an online quiz to help individuals find their appropriate role, the campaign incorporates interactive roadshows, grassroots projects and community roundtables.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) has also persevered in its efforts to counsel and deradicalise persons detained under the ISA, and cultivate religious moderation and tolerance in society. Celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2023, the RRG marked the occasion by opening the new Majulah Gallery at the Khadijah Mosque, featuring exhibits and videos highlighting the organisation’s continuing work in rehabilitation and community outreach.<sup>265</sup> Cognisant of the increasing spread of radical ideologies on social media, the RRG also launched a TikTok account in 2023 to reach a younger audience in order to correct misinterpretations and promote a proper

understanding of religious texts and concepts. Videos posted by the group on TikTok have covered topics such as jihad and *hijrah*.<sup>266</sup>

## Outlook

Self-radicalisation through online means remains the primary driver of the terrorist threat in Singapore.<sup>267</sup> Extremist actors across the ideological spectrum have proven adept at manipulating social media to propagate radical ideologies, reach out to potential recruits and plot attacks. Loopholes in big tech's content moderation processes, the availability of encrypted and alternative social media platforms, and the high level of internet penetration in a developed country like Singapore only exacerbate the issue.

Youth radicalisation can be expected to persist in the foreseeable future, owing to a multiplicity of factors as highlighted above. Self-radicalised youth should not be underestimated simply because of their age. Lone-actor attacks using low-tech weapons such as knives remain a possibility due to the relative ease of procuring such weapons and carrying out stabbing attacks in public places.<sup>268</sup> Several youths detained under the ISA in recent years had planned to conduct knife attacks in tourist areas and places of worship, using weapons available on e-commerce platforms and in convenience stores.<sup>269</sup> Developing age-appropriate interventions and engaging with families and community partners to address the younger generation's needs, concerns and vulnerabilities is necessary to prevent them from turning to extremism for answers.

Issues around race and religion also remain potential fault lines that radical elements of all ideological stripes could exploit to erode social cohesion and sow intercommunal discord, opening up space for extremist influence to germinate and grow. It is thus important to cultivate tolerance and harmony among the various races, religions and groups to deny extremist actors any opportunity to foment and exploit division.

The worsening conflict between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas from October 2023 onwards, which has significantly impacted communities worldwide<sup>270</sup> including in Singapore, has reinforced the importance of buttressing the country's racial and religious harmony against external events. While Singapore supports a two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict, it unequivocally maintains that terrorist violence for any cause, however rationalised, should not be tolerated.<sup>271</sup> Authorities may also need to guard against regional terrorists seeking to emulate Hamas' surprise terror attack, which demonstrated terrorists' evolving ability to effectively combine high- and low-tech forms of warfare to devastating effect.<sup>272</sup>

Overall, the threat picture in Singapore can be described as diverse and evolving. Islamist extremism has traditionally been of greatest concern and will likely continue to demand concerted counter-terrorism efforts. However, other types of extremism – religiously or politically motivated, ideologically defined or unstable, or otherwise – should also be monitored and guarded against.

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- <sup>84</sup> Merlyn Manos, "Hundreds Evacuate in Lanao del Sur Over Dawlah Islamiyah Threat," *Rappler*, 28 May 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/hundreds-evacuate-lanao-del-sur-over-dawlah-islamiyah-threat/>; Froilan Gallardo, "2,000 Residents Flee Lanao del Sur's Marogong Town," *MindaNews*, May 28, 2023, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2023/05/2000-residents-flee-lanao-del-surs-marogong-town/>; Edwin O. Fernandez and Richel V. Umel, "Lanao del Sur Families Flee As Armed Group Warns of Attack," *INQUIRER.net*, May 29, 2023, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1776002/lanao-sur-folk-flee-as-armed-group-warns-of-attack>.
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- <sup>86</sup> ICPVTR field notes.
- <sup>87</sup> Bianca Dava, "ISIS-Southeast Asia Leader Killed in Marawi Encounter, Says Military," *ABS-CBN*, June 14, 2023, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/14/23/isis-southeast-asia-leader-killed-in-marawi-military>.
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- <sup>89</sup> ICPVTR online monitoring.
- <sup>90</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Joel Guinto and Virma Simonette, "Mindanao: Four Killed in Explosion at Catholic Mass in Philippines," *BBC News*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67604592>.
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- <sup>94</sup> ICPVTR local sources.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Project Sindao is a combination of two Maranao words: *sindaw* (light) and *nda* (teaching). The project's founder, Jalliah Hadji Sapiin, explained that she created this project because she believes there is a brighter future in teaching former combatants the ways of religious moderation.
- <sup>97</sup> This may be due to the demographic of combatants who join DIMG. Based on ICPVTR online monitoring, members of DIMG tend to be adolescents.
- <sup>98</sup> Based on local research conducted by Project Sindao, they found that Maranao youth join terrorist groups because of a sense of belonging and empowerment. During the leadership of Abu Dar (2018-2019), youth were given the responsibility to lead religious prayers and take key appointments in the organisation.
- <sup>99</sup> Note that some may consider the "Hassan Faction" as a separate faction. However, Salahuddin Hassan only led the faction for approximately a year. He is also known to be the lieutenant of Abu Turaife, and most of the attacks conducted by the "Hassan Faction" are linked to the Turaife Faction.
- <sup>100</sup> Zam Yusa, "Who is Abu Turaife, Filipino Terrorist Touted As New Emir of IS Southeast Asia?" *SEA Militancy*, July 14, 2023, <https://seamilitancy.substack.com/p/who-is-abu-turaife-the-touted-filipino>.
- <sup>101</sup> Rommel Banlaoi, "Terrorist Threats in the Philippines 22 Years After 9/11: Declining But Not Disappearing – Analysis," *The Eurasia Review*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11092023-terrorist-threats-in-the-philippines-22-years-after-9-11-declining-but-not-disappearing-analysis/>.
- <sup>102</sup> "BIFF Commander Claims Leadership of Jihad in Mindanao, Calls for Recruits," *SITE Intelligence Group*, August 19, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-Threat-Southeast-Asia/biff-commander-claims-leadership-of-jihad-in-mindanao-calls-for-recruits.html>.
- <sup>103</sup> Rommel Rebolledo and Ferdinandh Cabrera, "2 Cops Killed, 4 Wounded in Maguindanao Del Sur Ambush," *Rappler*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/cops-killed-ambush-maguindanao-del-sur-june-14-2023/>.
- <sup>104</sup> Kenneth Yeo, "Rebranding the East Asian Knights: A Reflection of Dawlah Islamiyah's Effort to Learn," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNet)*, March 1, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/01/rebranding-the-east-asia-knights-a-reflection-of-dawlah-islamiyahs-effort-to-learn/>.
- <sup>105</sup> ICPVTR field notes.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>108</sup> The *rido* culture advocates for revenge against acts which dishonour the family. For example, if a family member is dishonoured, it is a cultural obligation for the family of the dishonoured party to kill the entire family of the perpetrator. There are slight differences between how each ethnolinguistic tribe executes *rido*. For example, the Tausug excludes violence against female members of the perpetrator's family, while the Maranao does not. See Maria Bernadette L. Abrera, "Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao," ed. Wilfredo Magno Torres III, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (2016), pp. 329-332.
- <sup>109</sup> Richard Falcatan, "Man Killed As Basilan Rido Violence Spills Over Into Zamboanga," *Rappler*, July 26, 2023, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mindanao/death-basilan-rido-violence-spills-over-zamboanga-july-25-2023/>.

<sup>110</sup> Cheng Xu and Jacques Bertrand, "Barangay Elections in the Bangsamoro: A Crucial Test for the Future of the BARMM," *The Diplomat*, June 23, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/barangay-elections-in-the-bangsamoro-a-crucial-test-for-the-future-of-the-barmm/>.

<sup>111</sup> ICPVTR field notes. Residents reflected on the dilemma of an MILF administration with little experience in governance and the potential for an MILF wipe out. They fear that if the MILF no longer holds power within the BARMM, it may resort to violence to take over the BARMM. Yet, locals also support the MILF despite their lack of administrative competence because they are perceived to be the representatives of the indigenous Maranao and Maguindanao people.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. In the context of Marawi, IDPs expressed the need for a "livelihood". As the Maranao people are merchants, equipping them with vocational skills may not be relevant to their culture. Instead, they desire access to markets to trade products. Ultimately, infrastructure investments in Marawi should fit the needs of the local culture.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. The authorities deliver water to the IDP camps twice every week. However, due to the erratic weather conditions of Marawi, floods and landslides may affect service delivery within the city.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. Individuals affected by the 2019 Jolo Cathedral attack only received mental health support three years after the incident. Access to mental health support may be due to the improved security situation in Sulu.

<sup>115</sup> In the context of Sulu, 2023 is the first time many civilians have experienced peace. They no longer need to live in fear of the ASG and have begun to blame it for the imposition of Sulu curfews in the past. In the context of Marawi, IDPs blame DIMG for destroying their homes and looting generations of wealth from their homes.

<sup>116</sup> Pierre Bousel, "ISIS Keeps Dwindling in Syria," *GIS Reports*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/syria-isis-terrorism/>; Daniel Byman, "Whatever Happened to Al Qaeda?" *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/31/al-qaeda-zawahiri-death-strength-decline-terrorism/>.

<sup>117</sup> Rueben Dass and Jasminder Singh, "Pathways to the Caliphate: Mapping Malaysian Foreign Fighter Networks in Iraq and Syria from 2012-2019," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 35, No. 7 (2022), pp. 1-34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2022.2059352>.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with a subject matter expert, July 2023.

<sup>119</sup> Dass and Singh, "Pathways to the Caliphate."

<sup>120</sup> The trio were among the key Malaysian members of JI during the height of the group's activity and prominence in the early 2000s.

<sup>121</sup> Stewart Nixon, "Commentary: Resurgent Pandemic Sparks Unemployment Crisis Among Malaysia's Most Vulnerable Workers," *Channel News Asia*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-covid-19-economy-mco-johor-worker-graduate-jobs-skills-1843201>.

<sup>122</sup> *Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Malaysia: Handbook for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)* (Putrajaya: United Nations Development Programme, 2022), p. 8, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/%5BFA%5D%20UNDP%20PVE%20Publications\\_Handbook%20for%20CSOs\\_High%20Res\\_210323\\_0.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/%5BFA%5D%20UNDP%20PVE%20Publications_Handbook%20for%20CSOs_High%20Res_210323_0.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> Ahmad El-Muhamaddy, *Managing the Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families: Malaysian Experience* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2023), pp. 7-11.

<sup>126</sup> "Sabah Immigration Department Has Deported 10,000 Illegal Immigrants since 2021," *New Straits Times*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/03/894091/sabah-immigration-department-has-deported-10000-illegal-immigrants-2021>; Juwan Riduan, "APMM Thwarts Attempt by Nine Undocumented Filipino Immigrants Crossing Sabah Waters," *New Straits Times*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2023/08/938322/apmm-thwarts-attempt-nine-undocumented-filipino-immigrants-crossing>.

<sup>127</sup> "Malaysia Classifies Fuad A Kiram as a Terrorist," *New Straits Times*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/04/898644/malaysia-classifies-fuad-kiram-terrorist>. In February 2013, more than 200 militants linked to the Sulu Sultanate and its affiliate groups invaded Kampung Tanduo in Lahad Datu to assert territorial claims over parts of the state. The invasion escalated into a military conflict that lasted for more than a month. The incident was a precursor for the formation of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM).

<sup>128</sup> Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad et al., "Tackling Sabah's Sulu Threat," *New Straits Times*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2022/09/832735/tackling-sabahs-sulu-threat>.

<sup>129</sup> Ahmad Fadhullah Adnan, "MHO Dakwa Waris Sulu Sedang Aktif Rekrut Rakyat Sabah," *Utusan Malaysia*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.utusan.com.my/nasional/2022/07/mho-dakwa-waris-sulu-sedang-aktif-rekrut-rakyat-sabah/>.

<sup>130</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "Malaysia Wins Court Battle Over \$15 Billion Sulu Heirs Award," *The Diplomat*, June 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/malaysia-wins-court-battle-over-15-billion-sulu-heirs-award/>.

<sup>131</sup> Durie Rainer Fong, "GOF Intercepts over RM600K of Smuggled Goods at Sabah Checkpoint," *The Star*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/06/30/gof-intercepts-over-rm600k-of-smuggled-goods-at-sabah-checkpoint>.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>161</sup> “2 Years On, Myanmar’s Resistance Is Formidable Foe of Junta: Head of Shadow Govt,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 7, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/resistance-09072023161600.html>.

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<sup>163</sup> Resistance forces usually use homemade mortars and grenade launchers. They have also produced devices akin to claymores/front-facing mines as well as chain IEDs – usually a string of IEDs along the road to target junta truck columns. For details on PDF’s weapons, see Anthony Davis, “Myanmar PDFs Getting the Guns to Turn the War,” *Asia Times*, May 19, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/05/myanmar-pdfs-getting-the-guns-to-turn-the-war/>.

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<sup>168</sup> Andrew Nachevson, “Myanmar Anti-Coup Forces Retain Optimism in Face of Air Attacks,” *Al Jazeera*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/1/myanmar-anti-coup-forces-retain-optimism-in-face-of-air-attacks>.

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<sup>170</sup> “Rooting Out the Resistance Criminals That Threaten Myanmar’s Revolution,” *The Irrawaddy*, August 28, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rooting-out-the-resistance-criminals-that-threaten-myanmars-revolution.html>.

<sup>171</sup> Hein Htoo Zan, “KIA: Myanmar Junta Under Attack in Kachin State,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/kia-myanmar-junta-under-attack-in-kachin-state.html>.

<sup>172</sup> The KNDF, despite Kayah State’s modest size, has engaged in multiple clashes with regime troops and has emphasised cooperation with other anti-regime groups. The CNA, situated in Chin State, has intensified attacks on military convoys. The situation in these regions remains unpredictable.

<sup>173</sup> The Brotherhood Alliance comprises AA, MNDAA and TNLA. It is noteworthy that AA had a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar military, but the group ended it in November 2023. AA has reportedly clashed with the Myanmar military in the western state of Rakhine.

<sup>174</sup> Underscoring Beijing’s ability to significantly influence Myanmar’s security environment, some analysts say China, which has significant influence in parts of neighbouring northern Shan State, was likely aware of developments prior to the ethnic offensives. Its ensuing inaction has been linked in part to frustrations with the Myanmar junta over a failure to shut down scam operations targeting Chinese citizens in the area. See Leong Wai Kit, “CNA Explains: Myanmar’s Rebels Are Gaining Ground With Their Latest Attacks. Could They Overthrow the Junta?” *Channel News Asia*, November 20, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/myanmar-junta-ethnic-resistance-operation-1027-brotherhood-alliance-3933466>.

<sup>175</sup> Ministry of Defence – National Unity Government of Myanmar, “Press Release – 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023,” *Facebook*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/modNUG/>.

<sup>176</sup> Zsombor Peter, “Raffles, Bonds and Crypto Are Funding Myanmar’s Armed Resistance,” *VoA*, July 8, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/raffles-bonds-and-crypto-are-funding-myanmar-s-armed-resistance-/7172762.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Despite regulatory challenges from Google Play and Apple’s App Store, the online game continues to support the PDFs and humanitarian efforts. Ko Toot aims to raise US\$1 million per month to help the people of Myanmar in their struggle against the military. See Oliver Slow, “The Mobile Game Funding a Revolution in Myanmar,” *BBC News*, August 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65906961>.

<sup>178</sup> Peter, “Raffles, Bonds and Crypto.”

<sup>179</sup> Their bonds are scheduled to mature by November 2023, and it is likely that most, if not all, of the bondholders will choose to either donate their proceeds or agree to the NUG’s proposals when the bonds mature. However, local observers on the ground believe that this situation does not bode well for the NUG’s long-term fund-raising efforts.

<sup>180</sup> “Death Highways: Driving in Myanmar’s Conflict Zones,” *Frontier Myanmar*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/death-highways-driving-in-myanmars-conflict-zones/>.

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- <sup>182</sup> “As Resistance Drone Attacks Rise, Myanmar Junta Seeks Regional Help,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/as-resistance-drone-attacks-rise-myanmar-junta-seeks-regional-help.html>.
- <sup>183</sup> *Radio Free Asia*, “Myanmar’s Resistance Says It Has Cracked Junta’s Anti-Drone Jammers.”
- <sup>184</sup> Kyi Sin, “Resistance Forces in Myanmar: Changing the State of Play with Weaponised Drones,” *Fulcrum*, February 10, 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/resistance-forces-in-myanmar-changing-the-state-of-play-with-weaponised-drones/>.
- <sup>185</sup> One incident in April 2023 saw a drone strike hit a school in northern Sagaing’s Kywei Pon village, resulting in eight casualties, including five children who were celebrating a water festival. Some local media quoted pro-resistance sources who claimed the victims were affiliated with the Pyu Saw Hti militia. Myanmar’s Deputy Home Affairs Minister called for improved border controls to prevent such groups from acquiring drones. See *The Irrawaddy*, “As Resistance Drone Attacks Rise.”
- <sup>186</sup> Hein Htoo Zan, “Central Myanmar Sees 324 Percent Increase in Air Strikes: UN,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/central-myanmar-sees-324-percent-increase-in-air-strikes-un.html>.
- <sup>187</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>188</sup> Yuzana, “Horror of Myanmar Junta’s Aerial Massacre in Pazi Gyi,” *The Irrawaddy*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/horror-of-myanmar-juntas-aerial-massacre-in-pazi-gyi.html>.
- <sup>189</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>190</sup> “Resistance Groups Kill 10 Myanmar Junta Troops in Attack on Military Flotilla,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/resistance-groups-kill-10-myanmar-junta-troops-in-attack-on-military-flotilla.html?fbclid=IwAR29DkFg1WOHS5ZJ3LI0r9TRvrDhfK3z5UIJjvnXZYueglSisJawbiSyT4>.
- <sup>191</sup> “Myanmar Military Suffers Spike in Defections as Resistance Gains Ground,” *The Irrawaddy*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-suffers-spike-in-defections-as-resistance-gains-ground.html>.
- <sup>192</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>193</sup> Ibid. See also Ko Ko Aung et al., “Myanmar Coup: The Soldiers Refusing to Fight,” *BBC News*, May 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65743887>.
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- <sup>195</sup> Grant Peck, “An Ethnic Resistance Group in Northern Myanmar Says an Entire Army Battalion has Surrendered to It,” *The Associated Press*, November 16, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-ethnic-group-army-battalion-surrenders-a4832dd5b74ba44b58b1868e1f28d0b1>.
- <sup>196</sup> The military has also offered cash rewards for PDFs to defect and similarly made huge photo ops for supposed PDF defectors. For details, see “Myanmar Junta Offers Cash Rewards to Resistance Defectors,” *The Irrawaddy*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-offers-cash-rewards-to-resistance-defectors.html>. According to sources on the ground in Myanmar, there have definitely been some PDF defections, albeit at a much smaller scale than the military/police ones, but it is something the military is trying to expand.
- <sup>197</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, “Myanmar Military Suffers Spike in Defections.”
- <sup>198</sup> Approximately 500,000 people have been displaced nationwide since October 2023, prompting the UNOCHA to urge urgent funding to address the growing humanitarian crisis. “Tens of Thousands Flee Intensifying Clashes in Myanmar’s Rakhine State,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/clashes-12012023151051.html>.
- <sup>199</sup> Tan Hui Yee, “Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh Say Living Conditions Worse Than in Myanmar: Report,” *The Straits Times*, September 23, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh-say-conditions-there-worse-than-in-myanmar-report>.
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- <sup>201</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>202</sup> “ARSA Blamed for Killing Muslim Villager in Rakhine,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arsa-blamed-for-killing-muslim-villager-in-rakhine.html>.
- <sup>203</sup> “The Arakan Army Alleges the Junta’s Covert Support for ARSA,” *BNI Online*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/arakan-army-alleges-juntas-covert-support-arsa>.
- <sup>204</sup> Naing Lin, “A New Dimension to Armed Conflicts in Arakan?” *Transnational Institute (TNI)*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/a-new-dimension-to-armed-conflicts-in-arakan>.
- <sup>205</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>206</sup> “ARSA Spreading Through Western Myanmar,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 4, 2023, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arsa-spreading-through-western-myanmar.html>.
- <sup>207</sup> This paper employs qualitative research that relies on in-depth interviews and document analysis, including primary source materials, newsletters, and mainstream and social media reports.
- <sup>208</sup> Data obtained from Deep South Watch, October 4, 2023.

<sup>209</sup> While attacks against soft targets have significantly reduced compared with the pre-peace talk period, violence against vulnerable groups remains a concern. Two children aged below 18 were killed and 16 were injured, while five women were killed and 14 wounded.

<sup>210</sup> Data obtained from Deep South Watch, October 4, 2023.

<sup>211</sup> Waedao Harai et al., “Police Flats Car-Bombed, One Killed, 31 Injured,” *Bangkok Post*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2443712/police-flats-car-bombed-one-killed-31-injured>.

<sup>212</sup> “Peta Rundingin Damai Patani dan Pilihan Raya Thailand 2023 Menyahut Cabaran Atau Memberikan Harapan Palsu [Plan on the Patani Peace Dialogue and Thailand’s 2023 Election: Responding to Challenges or Creating False Hope],” *Surat* No. 98 (May 2023), p. 7. *Surat* is an internal newsletter produced by the BRN’s *Jabatan Penerangan dan Media* (Department of Information and Media).

<sup>213</sup> “Insurgents Attack a Government Outpost in Yala Province,” *Thai PBS World*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/insurgents-attack-a-government-outpost-in-yala-province>.

<sup>214</sup> Abdullah Benjakat and Wassana Nanuam, “Arson Attacks Strike 23 Locations in Far South,” *Bangkok Post*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2569012>.

<sup>215</sup> “Emergency Decree in Restive South Extended for One Month,” *Thai PBS World*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/emergency-decree-in-restive-south-extended-for-one-month>.

<sup>216</sup> Apart from the three districts mentioned above, the districts where the state of emergency was revoked are Sungai Kolok, Waeng and Sukhirin in Narathiwat; Yaring, Mayo, Mai Kaen, Kapho and Maelan in Pattani; and Betong and Kabang in Yala. See “Emergency Decree in Restive South Extended for One Month,” *Thai PBS World*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.thaipbsworld.com/emergency-decree-in-restive-south-extended-for-one-month/>.

<sup>217</sup> The third special law is the Internal Security Act (ISA), which has been enforced in 11 districts in the three southernmost provinces as well as four districts in Songkhla (Thepa, Chana, Na Thawi and Sabayoi) following the revocation of the emergency decree. The ISA enables the court to drop cases against security-related offenders.

<sup>218</sup> “Khoromo To-Ayu Phoroko Chukchoen Chaidae Tai Ik 3 Duan Ruam 20 Amphoe [Cabinet Extended Emergency Decree in 20 Districts for 3 Months],” *Thansettakij*, October 16, 2023. The state of emergency is currently imposed in 20 out of 33 districts in the three southernmost provinces.

<sup>219</sup> It would be more credible for such a survey to be conducted by a third party and the identities of respondents anonymised. Otherwise, the government agencies involved could mobilise, if not fabricate, public opinion to justify the prolongation of the emergency decree, which has been enforced in the Deep South since 2005. Romdon Panjor, a Move Forward Party MP, made this observation in a Facebook post on October 17, 2023.

<sup>220</sup> The Prayut Chan-ocha government issued an executive decree to postpone the enforcement of Sections 22-25 of the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act from February 22 to October 1, 2023, following a request from the police calling for a preparation period before the enforcement of this new law. The Constitutional Court, however, ruled in May 2023 that the order was unconstitutional, making the Act fully effective. “Delay Torture Law No More,” *Bangkok Post*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2573742/delay-torture-law-no-more>.

<sup>221</sup> “Poet Chue 5 Khon Raek don Ko-O-Ro-Mo-No Chaeng Damnoenkhadi Prachamati Ekkarat [Five Sued By ISOC for Independence referendum],” *Isra News Agency*, June 24, 2023.

<sup>222</sup> “Thailand, Malaysia Agree to Deepen Ties in Trade, investment, and Tourism,” *Malay Mail*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2023/09/22/thailand-malaysia-agree-to-deepen-ties-in-trade-investment-and-tourism/92328>.

<sup>223</sup> MARA Patani (Majlis Syura Patani, or Patani Consultative Council) comprises four separatist movements – Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (Patani Islamic Liberation Front, or BIPP), Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (Patani Islamic Mujahideen Movement, or GMIP) and individual members of the BRN. The latter’s engagement in MARA Patani has not been endorsed by the BRN’s leadership.

<sup>224</sup> Bangkok has tried to keep the southern conflict an internal affair. Since 2020, the Thai peace dialogue panel led by General Wanlop Rugsanaoh has allowed international observers to witness the peace talks, but only “in their personal capacity”.

<sup>225</sup> Interview with a senior member of the Thai peace dialogue panel, September 4, 2023.

<sup>226</sup> Statement of the Thai peace dialogue panel, April 2, 2022.

<sup>227</sup> Statement of the Thai peace dialogue panel, February 22, 2023.

<sup>228</sup> “Pernyataan Khusus Jabatan Penerangan BRN Terkait Proses Perundingan Damai BRN-RTG [Special Statement of the BRN Information Department Related to the BRN-RTG Peace Negotiation Process],” *Jabatan Penerangan BRN*, YouTube video, May 4, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JvIw9hrf0M>; interview with a senior member of the Thai peace dialogue panel, September 4, 2023.

<sup>229</sup> Although the Move Forward Party (MFP) gained electoral victory by winning 152 out of 500 seats, it was unable to form a coalition government as it failed to secure the more than 375 votes needed from a joint sitting of the House of Representatives and the military-appointed Senate. The conservative forces strongly opposed the formation of an MFP-led government due to the party’s perceived radical policies on the reform of the *lèse-majesté* law, the military and monopoly capitalism.

<sup>230</sup> The 2017 Constitution, drafted by a military-appointed committee, allows senators to vote alongside the 500 members of the House of Representatives to appoint a prime minister within the first five years of the formation of the first parliament. Prime ministerial candidates need to gain the backing of more than half of the 700-member parliament to get parliamentary endorsement.

- <sup>231</sup> Police Colonel Thawee Sodsong, Justice Minister and leader of the Prachachat Party, also raised to the cabinet the question of why there was no mention of the conflict or peace-building in the Deep South in the policy statement. "Thawi Lan Nayobai Rattaban Fuenfu Lak Nititham Chonotho Tong Mai Pai Yuen Fang Khon Tham Phit [Thawee Proposes Policy to Restore the Rule of Law, Officials Must Not Side With Wrongdoers]," *Thai Rath*, September 12, 2023.
- <sup>232</sup> Deputy Prime Minister Somsak Thepsuthin of the Pheu Thai Party oversees the SBPAC, the civilian agency in charge of development works in the Deep South, and chairs the Emergency Situation Administration Committee in charge of examining the enforcement of the Emergency Decree, which is due for renewal every three months. Under the Prayut government, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, another coup-maker, oversaw security affairs.
- <sup>233</sup> Interview with a National Security Council officer involved in the peace dialogue, October 2, 2023.
- <sup>234</sup> "Kao Iai Chuak Nayobai Kanmueang – Kongthap Khoromo Settha Pen Suan to Khayai Rabop Prayut [MFP Criticises Srettha Govt's Political Policies, Army, Charging It is an Extension of Prayut regime]," *BBC News Thailand*, September 13, 2023.
- <sup>235</sup> Jabatan Penerangan BRN, "Pernyataan Khusus Jabatan Penerangan BRN."
- <sup>236</sup> Interview with a senior BRN member, September 28, 2023.
- <sup>237</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>238</sup> For more information on the OPAPP, which later changed its name to the "Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace, Reconciliation and Unity", see <https://peace.gov.ph>.
- <sup>239</sup> Internal Security Department (ISD), *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2023*, (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023), <https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/singapore-terrorism-threat-assessment-report-2023.pdf>, p. 2.
- <sup>240</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>241</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>242</sup> Hariz Baharudin, "Terror Threats in Region Continue, With Singapore Seen As Prized Target: ISD," *The Straits Times*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/terror-threats-in-region-continue-with-singapore-seen-as-prized-target-isd>.
- <sup>243</sup> Goh Yan Han, "Teacher Arrested Under ISA; First Public Servant Detained for Terror-Related Offences in Singapore," *The Straits Times*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/teacher-arrested-under-isa-first-public-servant-detained-for-terror-related-offences-in-singapore>.
- <sup>244</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>245</sup> ISD, *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2023*.
- <sup>246</sup> "Two Self-Radicalised Singaporean Boys Given ISA Orders; 15-Year-Old Youngest to Be Detained," *Channel News Asia*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/internal-security-act-isa-self-radicalised-singaporeans-students-detained-islamic-state-al-qaeda-roblox-3292691>.
- <sup>247</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>248</sup> Jean Iau, "2 Teens Dealt With Under ISA; 15-Year-Old Student Is Youngest-Ever Detainee," *The Straits Times*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/two-teenagers-dealt-with-under-isa-including-15-year-old-who-is-youngest-ever-detainee>.
- <sup>249</sup> Kalicharan Veera Singam and Ahmad Helmi Hasbi, "Commentary: How Singapore Can Tackle the Growing Spectre of Teen Terrorism," *TODAY*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/commentary-how-singapore-can-tackle-growing-spectre-teen-terrorism-2119616>.
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- <sup>251</sup> Hariz Baharudin, "Singaporean Youth Detained Under ISA for Planning Knife Attack on Jews Leaving Synagogue," *The Straits Times*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-youth-detained-under-isa-for-planning-knife-attack-on-jews-leaving-synagogue>.
- <sup>252</sup> Baharudin, "Terror Threats in Region Continue."
- <sup>253</sup> Nadine Chua, "Anti-Terror Exercises Must Be Taken Seriously As 'One Day, We May Not Be Lucky': PM Lee," *The Straits Times*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/anti-terror-exercises-must-be-taken-seriously-as-one-day-we-may-not-be-lucky-says-pm-lee>.
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- <sup>255</sup> Singapore Police Force, "Two Men to Be Charged for Two Separate Incidents of Making a False Bomb Threat and Communicating False Information of Harmful Thing," press release, October 14, 2023, [https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20231014\\_two\\_men\\_to\\_be\\_charged\\_for\\_communicating\\_false\\_information\\_of\\_harmful\\_thing](https://www.police.gov.sg/media-room/news/20231014_two_men_to_be_charged_for_communicating_false_information_of_harmful_thing).
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- <sup>258</sup> *Developers (Anti-Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing) Act 2018*, No. 54 of 2018, Republic of Singapore Government Gazette, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/54-2018>.

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# SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan

## AFGHANISTAN

Iftikhar Firdous

*Since August 2021, following the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan has entered a turbulent period of transition, particularly in terms of shifts in governance, security and geopolitics. Seeking to foster diplomatic ties with all neighbouring countries, the Taliban regime has been facing serious internal security threats that have the potential to influence its international commitments and engagements. Militant groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the National Resistance Front (NRF), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and Jamaat Ansaar Ullah (Tehreek-e-Taliban Tajikistan), have been presenting internal security challenges to Afghanistan. These groups may not only pose direct threats through attacks and destruction, but also have the potential to negatively impact Afghanistan's relationships with other nations.*

### Trends

#### *Taliban's Governance and Internal Divisions*

The Taliban's claim of having control over the country's governance has faced persistent challenges, even from various local leaders within Taliban power factions.<sup>1</sup> As a result, frequent political tensions have arisen between Kabul (the political power centre) and Kandahar (the spiritual power centre).<sup>2</sup> The international community lacks a structural understanding of the Taliban's governance structures and decision-making hierarchy. Hence, it is unable to exert the kind of diplomatic influence required to mould decisions palatable to the world. On top of that, the Taliban's vague counter terrorism commitments, a ruthless crackdown against the ISK notwithstanding, and the ban on girls' and women's rights to education and work, have made matters worse. The West terms the Taliban's policies towards women as gender apartheid, while the Taliban view it as the continuation of the former's cultural war against Afghanistan.

The Taliban leadership is divided mainly into two categories: the spiritual order and the political order. The former, based in Kandahar, makes decisions based on their interpretation of Islamic *shariah*, no matter how politically unpopular its implementation might be for the political order on the ground. On the other hand, the political order resides in Kabul and dispenses day-to-day governance and engages with the international community and other stakeholders.<sup>3</sup>

The internal differences among the Taliban leadership are tribal in nature rather than ideational.<sup>4</sup> With much affiliation to the likes of Pashtun tribal culture, climbing the hierarchical ladders over others, whether they are friends or foes, is an established trend with centuries of documented history. Therefore, the reported differences between the major factions of the Taliban – the Haqqani Network and the Kandaharis – are mostly over tribal dominance, rather than an ideological divide.<sup>5</sup> Kandaharis have traditionally dominated the Afghan leadership, whether during the Taliban or non-Taliban periods, while the greater Paktika region (Khost, Paktika and Paktiya provinces), which currently represents the Haqqani Network, remains a major support base for Kandaharis to take control of either Kabul or Kandahar. The Haqqanis and Kandaharis bicker over the distribution of cabinet positions,

government jobs and credit claims for the August 2021 victory.<sup>6</sup> The Haqqanis maintain that the war was won through a military campaign which they spearheaded. On the contrary, the Kandaharis believe that negotiations in Doha led by current Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar resulted in an agreement in 2020 which paved the way for the United States (US)'s exit from Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

The Taliban's primary and firm strength lies in their ideological framework, which works as a gel holding the movement's coherence together and undoing even the strongest tendencies of tribal rivalries. Though at the surface there are differences and disagreements, they have never been so intense as to cause major discord. The Taliban have always settled their rivalries in the wake of an external threat.

In the future, the leader of the Haqqani Network and current Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, with all his contributions in the military, political and financial spheres, will make him a strong candidate to succeed the current Spiritual Leader, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada. Furthermore, to maintain a balance between Afghanistan's southern and eastern parts, the Taliban's leadership council may prefer him over other leaders from the Kandahar region, such as Defence Minister Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob, who is the son of the Taliban's founder Mullah Omar. However, Sirajuddin's ostensibly liberal stance on certain domestic issues, such as girls' right to education, and his openness to work with the West, make him a less favourable candidate. The Taliban, for internal cohesion, require a radical ideologue.

Differences will likely persist, mainly on political matters, but there is nothing to suggest that these political differences will lead to infighting. All key Taliban leaders realise that escalation beyond a certain point will result in a civil war that will not benefit any of the factions and, more importantly, their ideology – something they will never compromise.

#### *Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)*

Since its inception in 2015, ISK has been one of the most brutal enemies of the Afghan Taliban and its affiliates, including religious scholars and local political leaders.<sup>8</sup> ISK has challenged the Taliban's claim of restoring peace in Afghanistan by targeting religious minorities and the Taliban's leader as well as assaulting their ideological base through relentless social media propaganda, portraying the Taliban as power hungry and opportunistic. ISK's propaganda arm, Al-Azaim Foundation, has labelled the Taliban as apostates for being soft on Shias and diplomatically engaging with Iran.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2022, ISK killed Sheikh Rahim Ullah Haqqani, one of the top pro-Taliban religious scholars and a vocal critic of the former.<sup>10</sup> Following the incident, the militant outfit carried out a series of attacks against the Taliban as well as on minorities in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

In January 2023, ISK carried out two devastating attacks in Kabul, targeting the Kabul International Airport on January 1<sup>12</sup> and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 11<sup>13</sup> with suicide bombers. These attacks signalled a change in ISK tactics, which had been evolving since late 2022. ISK began to carry out attacks less frequently but with a focus on mass casualties, mostly deploying suicide bombers. Hence, several suicide operations and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks were carried out in urban centres such as Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Faizabad, targeting high-ranking Taliban officials, including northern Balkh province's governor Mohammad Daud Muzammil,<sup>14</sup> Badakhshan's governor Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi,<sup>15</sup> the police chief of Baghlan Safiullah Samin, and the police chief of Badakhshan Mawlawi Abdul Haq Omar. Other attacks, though less impactful, took place in the form of ambushes and targeted killings, mostly in Kunar province and Herat city.

At any rate, ISK continues to attract the international community's attention as a transnational jihadist entity in competition with the Taliban, and its appeal remains strong.<sup>16</sup> The group has successfully

recruited individuals from outside Afghanistan, particularly Uzbek and Tajik nationals, who have been travelling to Afghanistan to join ISK and participate as suicide bombers in the group's major operations. As a result, ISK's threats are firmly anchored in the transregional and transnational appeal that the group wields, thereby sustaining the organisation and enabling it to carry out major attacks across Afghanistan's urban landscape. The terrorist group has tried to fracture the relationship of the Taliban with its neighbours, while simultaneously backing its dense propaganda and ability to successfully execute its threats against a plethora of local and regional adversaries. It has targeted Russian, Chinese and Pakistani diplomats in Kabul, along with conducting fire raids on the Uzbek and Tajik borders.

With its so-called caliphate decimated in Iraq and Syria, ISK has confirmed itself as the most dynamic Islamic State province in terms of adaptation to a new security environment, rivals and propaganda narratives. Since its official inception in January 2015, ISK has undergone several transformations in its tactics while keeping intact its broad strategy in the region.<sup>17</sup> The group's trajectory manifests its resilience to political and security changes in the region, overcoming territorial and operational setbacks over the years. Furthermore, contrary to more militarily successful provinces – such as Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP), Islamic State in Sahel Province and Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP) – ISK does not control any territorial stronghold. However, ISK is the only province in IS' ecosystem which has been projecting itself as the launching pad for regional and international operations aimed at targeting Afghanistan's neighbours as well as the West.

#### *The National Resistance Front (NRF)*

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, experts worldwide raised concerns regarding security issues posed by militant organisations.<sup>18</sup> However, not enough attention was paid to the National Resistance Front (NRF)'s uprising in the northern and north-eastern provinces of the country, led by Ahmad Massoud, son of the Afghan resistance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

According to Amnesty International's 2022 report, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented a minimum of 160 extrajudicial executions by Taliban fighters between the group's assumption of control on August 15, 2021 and June 15, 2022.<sup>19</sup> The UN reported in December 2022 that there were at least 69 additional extrajudicial killings, with 48 of them involving NRF members, occurring between September 12 and 14 in Panjshir province.

With time, the NRF has acquired a strong ground presence despite being attacked by the Taliban. According to the latest on-ground reports, the NRF has claimed to have killed at least eight members of the Taliban.<sup>20</sup> However, the Taliban have consistently denied a strong presence of the NRF in the North. Nevertheless, due to the proliferation of anti-Taliban sentiments in the region, over 20 smaller militant groups have emerged. The key challenge they face is a lack of unity, which hinders their ability to operate as a cohesive force against the Taliban. In a future scenario, if the Central Asian republics see the Taliban as a growing threat or witness ethnic cleansing of communities linked to these countries, the NRF could be empowered by the Central Asian republics.

#### *Al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda (AQ) faced a major setback after the killing of its topmost leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Kabul in August 2022.<sup>21</sup> Since then, the group has not yet chosen a new leader, notwithstanding that Saif al-Adel, who resides in Iran, is touted as the group's de facto leader. Zawahiri's killing in Kabul once again brought into sharp focus the close ties between AQ and the Taliban.

Under the Doha Agreement 2020, the Taliban are obligated to ensure that Afghanistan's soil will not be used for terrorist activities against any other country.<sup>22</sup> While the Taliban claim to maintain a

watchful eye on AQ, it is important to recognise that AQ's ideology is global and its goal is to serve as a vanguard for jihad worldwide.

In 2023, AQ boosted its propaganda once again with Al-Qaeda in the Indian-Subcontinent (AQIS) being the most active. AQIS is AQ's official South Asian franchise, whose current leader is Ustaz Osama Mahmood. Reports suggest that senior AQ leadership in Afghanistan continues to oversee plans for attacks in other regions of the world. Reportedly, AQIS is operating from Afghanistan. The propaganda of AQ also suggests that it is helping groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Evidence has also emerged of AQ's involvement in terrorist attacks in Pakistan with the TTP's help and under cover names of newly emerging jihadist entities like the Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP)<sup>23</sup> – a shadow group that has conducted large-scale attacks on military installations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces (a more detailed discussion in the Pakistan threat assessment in this issue). All these pose a potential threat to the Taliban's international engagement, and their professed commitment to a free and secure Afghanistan may serve as a facade concealing the actual global threat.

#### *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)*

Although the TTP does not pose a direct threat to the internal security of Afghanistan, it is damaging the country's relations with Pakistan. While hosting the top commanders of the TTP and their families in Khost and Kunar provinces, the Taliban have asked Pakistan to resolve disputes and ongoing issues with the TTP through negotiations (a more detailed discussion in the Pakistan threat assessment in this issue). The Pakistan-TTP talks spanning over a year with the mediation of Sirajuddin Haqqani in 2022<sup>24</sup> remained unsuccessful. Keeping in view recent bilateral tensions, the TTP is the most critical element affecting Pakistan and Afghanistan relations.

A recent large-scale attack along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan in the Badakhshan-Chitral region saw more than 400 TTP fighters attacking Pakistani check posts, the first large-scale attempt by the group to enter and control territory in Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> After a terse military and diplomatic response from Pakistan, TTP fighters pulled back. But the incident further strained the already abysmal ties, resulting in direct policy changes from Islamabad, affecting the fate of around 1.6 million Afghan immigrants inside the country.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Response**

Considering the presence of ISK and the NRF, the two biggest competitors to the Afghan government, the Taliban have deployed most of their resources to counter the agendas of the two groups. In the face of ISK's escalating attacks, the Taliban's campaign against the group has been ruthlessly effective. It has forced ISK to change its tactics, adopting a lower profile while preparing for other significant attacks, as well as relocating some of its fighters to Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

Reportedly, in 2023, the Taliban killed 14 top ISK leaders together with more than 50 low-ranking members, leading to the dismantling of several networks, such as the one in Badakhshan which orchestrated several attacks in the province.

Likewise, to counter narratives that undermine their credibility, the Taliban have established a propaganda organisation, Al-Mirsaad (a vantage point to observe and attack). The primary mission of Al-Mirsaad is to provide detailed responses to all ideological arguments put forth by ISK to discredit the Taliban, thereby addressing the core of ISK's ideology.<sup>28</sup> Though Al-Mirsaad has consistently emphasised its complete independence from the Taliban government, the fact that it is headquartered in Kabul suggests a close collaboration with the Taliban authorities. Officially launched in February 2022, Al-Mirsaad has been publishing and featuring content which directly attacks the Islamic State

as a whole and ISK in particular. Now, Al-Mirsaad acts as a counter to ISK's regional mouthpiece, Al-Azaim Foundation, publishing in different languages including Pashto, Dari, Urdu, Uzbek and English.

In order to restore diplomatic relations with Pakistan and clean up the image of the Taliban government, a series of background meetings has resulted in the Taliban making public statements that condemn acts of terrorism inside Pakistan. For instance, the Afghan Consul General Hafiz Mohibullah Shakir was asked to make a public statement, "Jihad in Pakistan is not Jihad".<sup>29</sup> This was an extension of a legal decree by Taliban Supreme Leader Haibatullah, who, after taking charge of his office, said that no actions outside Afghanistan's border would be taken without his consent.

## Outlook

In 2023, the US lauded Afghanistan for apparently gaining control over ISK and its activities within the country. However, it cannot be ignored that, apart from the NRF and ISK, there is a multitude of small militant groups, such as the Afghanistan Freedom Front, Afghanistan Islamic National & Liberation Movement, Watan Dost Patriotic Front and Ghazdomak Unit (Death Squad), in the central and eastern regions of Afghanistan which continue to stoke militant sentiments and entice individuals to join various extremist organisations.

Internal militant threats in Afghanistan are aggravated by the precarious economic and political instability that the country has been facing since August 2021, in addition to the social grievances the Afghan Taliban rule is fuelling. While the Taliban security apparatus has been effectively countering direct, physical threats to the country, other non-kinetic and fluid threats persist, which can lure individuals and militant factions into challenging the Taliban authorities – such as the ideology of jihadist groups; economic opportunities from war; shifting alliances; or revenge for imposed grievances. Should the Taliban security apparatus be overstretched and weakened, such militant groups may take advantage and reopen warfronts in other areas of Afghanistan where militancy has been dormant recently.

While there is a continued need for international engagement with the Taliban, the war in Ukraine and the crisis in the Middle East between Israel and Hamas have overshadowed the developments in Afghanistan. Even though the Taliban have announced a general amnesty for everyone,<sup>30</sup> evidence suggests that ordinary Afghans with affiliations to the previous Ashraf Ghani government have been targeted.<sup>31</sup> The situation with respect to girls' education and the overall humanitarian outlook paint a grim picture in Afghanistan, which is expected to further deteriorate with the influx of newer repatriations from Pakistan and Iran. This has the potential to further boost the ranks of groups like the NRF and ISK.

While the Taliban have a no-tolerance policy towards ISK, the group has a more indulgent policy towards the TTP. The TTP has a past with ISK, as the latter was formed out of a broken faction of the former and the Taliban. The TTP is currently inclusive of 41 militant groups, small and large. The relationship with one of the larger groups, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), has been a bumpy ride for the TTP after the leader of JuA, Omar Khalid Khorasani, was killed in a mine explosion during the peace talks with the Pakistani state, which JuA had shown its reservations against. JuA, when it broke off from the TTP, had formed an informal alliance with ISK from 2014 to 2017, resulting in some of the most brutal attacks along sectarian lines. With the Taliban restraining the TTP, which was evident from the trajectory of attacks in the last quarter of 2023, JuA has acted independently, carrying out some high-profile attacks against non-combatants, such as the devastating suicide bombing in a mosque in Peshawar in late January. The attack left more than 100 people dead. At the same time, some large-scale attacks in Pakistan have been unclaimed, which is a deliberate tactic to not attract the wrath of the Taliban. These initial differences are suggestive that if the Taliban tighten the noose against the TTP, the group may split into factions, with ISK being one of the potential recruiters.

## About the author

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## BANGLADESH

### Iftekharul Bashar

*In 2023, Bangladesh faced a complex security situation marked by the resurgence of Al-Qaeda-centric threats, as the influence of Islamic State-affiliated groups seemingly declined. The breakaway factions from established militant groups actively recruited and trained members for surprise attacks, with a specific focus on key installations like prisons. At the same time, extremist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir were also active in major cities. At any rate, Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies undermined militant groups' ability to coordinate attacks through arrests and timely identification of emerging threats. As a result, Bangladesh's ranking in the 2023 Global Terrorism Index improved. Though Bangladesh has made progress in addressing security threats, sustained vigilance and counter terrorism efforts remain essential.*

### Trends

#### *Ansar al Islam (AAI) / Al-Qaeda Bangladesh*

The primary security concern in Bangladesh centres around Ansar al Islam (AAI), also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), which now operates under the name Al-Qaeda Bangladesh (AQB).<sup>32</sup> AAI has forged a joint front with the former Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkatul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B), amplifying the security risks.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, AAI has established a new women's division comprising wives and female relatives of militants, providing the group with additional manpower and capability. For example, investigations showed that a member of AAI's women's wing played an active role in planning the abduction of two militants from the court premises in Old Dhaka on November 21, 2022.<sup>34</sup> The group is reportedly trying to bring in fighters from overseas to carry out attacks.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Harkatul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B)*

Despite numerous setbacks, HuJI-B poses a persistent threat in Bangladesh. Though the group was more active in *dawah* (missionary work) and recruitment activities, one of its factions has been plotting attacks in Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>36</sup> HuJI-B has tried to recruit from Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar and is active in the Arakan (Rakhine State) region. The group is now divided into several sections, with each section performing a specific task. For instance, one HuJI-B section is trying to infiltrate politics by merging with Hefazat-e-Islam, an unregistered but influential Islamist group among Muslim students and teachers in local madrassas.

Likewise, one other section is reorganising itself, including from within prisons, for militant activities under its own banner, while another has forged an alliance with AAI. Many of the HuJI-B members have been convicted in various cases, but they have escaped after securing bail. At the same time,

some imprisoned HuJI-B leaders are continuing their activities from within the jails.<sup>37</sup> Some members, after serving their prison sentences, have also rejoined HuJI-B.<sup>38</sup>

According to Bangladeshi law enforcement, HuJI-B is active in the Greater Sylhet region (northeast Bangladesh). Alarming, international terrorist entities such as those within the Al-Qaeda (AQ) network continue to maintain contact with HuJI-B, heightening concerns about its enduring presence and influence.<sup>39</sup>

In February 2023, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit arrested a key HuJI-B leader, Fakhru Islam, who had received training in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> After returning to Bangladesh, he became associated with HuJI-B, primarily focusing on fund-raising and social media activities. He also visited Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, aiming to bolster the group's membership and plot attacks in Bangladesh.<sup>41</sup> HuJI-B's resilience and ability to adapt to changing circumstances underscore the ongoing security challenges it presents in Bangladesh.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Jamaatul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS)*

Jamaatul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS) is a new extremist group, with connections to HuJI-B, JMB and AAI. JAFHS' activities have raised concerns, particularly in the remote hilly regions of Bandarban and Rangamati, where it has links with separatist outfits as well. The group had plans to create a naval unit for its members with military training to take refuge if law enforcement became vigilant against their existence. They secured financing from AAI and intended to use large rivers and river islands for shelter. Currently, they are scattered across the plains, and efforts are ongoing to apprehend them. Numerous individuals connected to the group have been arrested, but some key figures are still at large.<sup>43</sup>

JAFHS had been under scrutiny for its alleged connections with a fugitive militant, Ziaul Haque, who had been sentenced to death for his involvement in the murders of secular writers and bloggers. Authorities had previously arrested the group's alleged leader, Md Anisur Rahman, along with two others.<sup>44</sup>

JAFHS was founded by Shamin Mahfuz, an ex-member of the Islami Chatra Shibir, the student wing of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI), the largest Islamist political party in the country. Shamin Mahfuz, who was associated with AAI, had been arrested in 2011 and 2014. While in prison, he first planned to form JAFHS and developed close links with the imprisoned top leaders of JMB and HUJI-B.<sup>45</sup> Arrested once more in June 2023, Shamin Mahfuz was found with a huge cache of explosives in his possession.<sup>46</sup>

Bangladesh has officially proscribed JAFHS, citing the organisation as a significant threat to public safety and law and order. JAFHS' ban brings the total number of proscribed militant organisations in Bangladesh to nine.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Tawhidul Uluhiyah al Jihadi (TUJ)*

In September 2023, Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) uncovered a newly formed jihadist group, Tawhidul Uluhiyah al Jihadi (TUJ), led by Jewel Molla.<sup>48</sup> The group was planning a major attack in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, including at a high security prison to release an AAI ideologue, Jasimuddin Rahmani. Molla's journey from a bakery worker to a jihadist leader is emblematic of the digital age's impact on radicalisation. He initially joined AAI, having been inspired by online lectures, and quickly rose through its ranks. Molla was eventually arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2019 during a covert meeting with other JMB members in Rajshahi district (northern Bangladesh), but he continued radicalising fellow inmates during his nine-month prison term. Upon his release in

2023, he founded TUJ, drawing recruits from various Bangladeshi jihadist groups. TUJ, with an estimated 80-90 members, gained attention for disseminating jihadist propaganda and advocating the establishment of a caliphate by overthrowing Bangladesh's democratic system. Molla's livestreamed messages led to increased surveillance by the ATU and, in September, he and other TUJ leaders were arrested.<sup>49</sup> However, many TUJ members remain at large.

#### *Imam Mahmuder Kafela*

Bangladeshi authorities have unearthed a new terrorist group, Imam Mahmuder Kafela (IMK), named after its leader. Mahmud is also known as Jewel Ali, Jewel Mahmud and Habibullah Mahmud. IMK remained unknown until August 2023, when authorities arrested Mahmud, a physically challenged member and the regional commander of JMB, along with at least 40 other members. Under Mahmud's leadership, IMK had established a training camp in a remote hilly area of north-eastern Bangladesh for preparing youth for eschatological "armed jihad" described as Ghazwatul Hind.<sup>50</sup> Subsequent investigations brought to light their recruitment efforts, which encompassed a broad spectrum of individuals, including youth, women and families. Jewel had been arrested at least two times for terrorist activities in 2019 and 2020.<sup>51</sup>

### **Islamic State-Centric Threats**

Since the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016 carried out by pro-Islamic State (IS) JMB elements, the Neo-JMB organisational network has largely disintegrated and its activities have been effectively curtailed. IS' diminished global influence after its military defeat in the Middle East has dented the terror group's appeal in Bangladesh as well. The Neo-JMB's network has since fragmented, although some remaining members have attempted to establish contact with the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> However, the persistence of IS radical narratives, coupled with the emergence of lone-actor terrorism, the use of cryptocurrencies for financing and the rapid dissemination of IS propaganda in Bengali, indicate the persistent terrorist threat of IS ideology in Bangladesh.

The growing presence of ISK's supporters in Bangladesh is a serious concern for law enforcement agencies. Local-language websites and social media accounts actively spread ISK content, fostering indoctrination and depicting the terror group as a role model. In Afghanistan, ISK has transitioned from seeking territorial control to urban warfare, posing a security threat to the Afghan government and aiming to disrupt the Taliban's governance. Saiful Islam Khaled, a Neo-JMB leader in Bangladesh who is currently facing a death sentence, reportedly used Telegram from prison to communicate with ISK militants in Afghanistan to seek financial assistance.<sup>53</sup> Notably, a Bangladeshi ISK member Mohammad Tanvir, who was arrested in Afghanistan in 2020,<sup>54</sup> escaped during a jailbreak, and is believed to still be in Afghanistan. Several other Bangladeshi ISK members are also thought to be in the Af-Pak region.

#### *Leadership of the Islamic State (IS) in Bangladesh*

In Bangladesh, the IS threat primarily comes from homegrown militants belonging to the Neo-JMB network (a splinter of JMB) who have been influenced by the former's ideology. Neo-JMB's leader Mahadi Hasan Jon was arrested in Turkey, and Bangladeshi authorities were trying to bring him back with the help of Interpol.<sup>55</sup> While counter terrorism operations have weakened the capabilities of Neo-JMB, the emergence of virtual cells and the use of secure apps for communication among IS followers pose new security challenges. According to Bangladeshi police, recruitment by Neo-JMB, particularly for lone-actor operations, primarily occurs online and predominantly among younger males aged 18-22 years old. It is also worth mentioning the existence of a female unit within Neo-JMB, predominantly used for communication and logistics support.

#### *Organisational Strategy and Tactics*



So far, IS followers in Bangladesh have been adapting their organisational tactics. They now form small cells comprising six to seven members, employing a “cut out” method to conceal their identities and addresses.<sup>56</sup> However, a more recent trend indicates a preference for lone attackers. According to Bangladeshi investigators, these individuals are trained for various types of operations, including target killings, the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and even suicide attacks. The group's primary targets are the police, other law enforcement agencies, non-Muslims and foreigners.

### **Hizb ut-Tahrir**

In the lead-up to Bangladesh's general elections in 2024, the banned extremist outfit Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) has striven to regain prominence in the country. HT has been banned in some countries, including Bangladesh, for its political activities and perceived threat to government stability. While HT promotes non-violent means to achieve its goals, it has faced criticism for its conservative interpretation of Islamic law, rejection of democracy, opposition to nationalism and vision of a unified Islamic state, which many argue misrepresents Islam and challenges modern democratic principles and human rights.

HT initiated its organisational activities in Bangladesh in 2001, holding public gatherings and marches during the BNP-Jamaat coalition government's tenure. In 2009, the Awami League government banned HT in Bangladesh. However, the security agencies believe that even after more than a decade of proscription, HT remains a major security threat.<sup>57</sup> Though HT in Bangladesh initially had an urban footprint, it has since expanded its reach to suburbs and even the rural areas.

Despite increased vigilance against its activities currently, HT has distributed inflammatory leaflets and displayed posters in Dhaka and other major cities.<sup>58</sup> Some of the posters and leaflets carrying anti-state slogans called for the overthrow of the government. HT activists have openly encouraged public participation in their online conferences and placed their posters in areas without CCTV coverage to evade surveillance and arrests. HT has actively recruited students from educational institutions, explaining their presence in these areas.<sup>59</sup> In May, HT also reportedly sent invitations to journalists and police officers in the southern port city of Chattogram to participate in their online conference.<sup>60</sup> Law enforcement agencies claimed to have arrested several HT members on charges of anti-state activities.

According to law enforcement officials, HT may have a plan to sabotage the upcoming parliamentary elections. HT had called an online conference in March 2022 mainly to publicly articulate its position on various political issues in Bangladesh. Due to frequent changes in live broadcast platforms and URLs, law enforcement agencies were unable to detect their online activities.<sup>61</sup> According to media reports, more than a hundred HT members on bail have left Bangladesh and are financing the group from overseas, including from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Hong Kong and Pakistan.<sup>62</sup>

### **Rohingya Armed Groups**

In 2023, Bangladesh faced significant threat from Rohingya armed groups. For instance, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a Rohingya insurgent group active in Cox's Bazar, committed crimes such as murders, kidnappings, extortion and smuggling of narcotics. Although various criminal groups operate in the Rohingya camps, ARSA is reportedly the most organised. ARSA is also reportedly working closely with AQ-centric groups such as AAI and HuJI-B. However, there is conflicting information about the presence of criminal elements in Rohingya camps. For instance, security agencies suggest that around 450 ARSA members are involved in crimes; however, local Rohingyas claim thousands of Rohingyas are engaged in crimes. Typically, violence and insecurity stem from turf wars, drug trade and extortion, with most incidents involving ARSA. Besides, reduced

food allocations within the Rohingya refugee camps have created financial difficulties, pushing some to engage in criminal activities.<sup>63</sup>

In August, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested ARSA's finance secretary Mohammad Yunus in Cox's Bazar. His arrest brought into sharp focus ARSA's financial network and arms procurement methods. During the investigation, Yunus revealed that ARSA collects funds from Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, the US, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Thailand as well as donations from Rohingya villages in Myanmar. These sources provide the group with an estimated monthly income of BDT 1,000,000–1,500,000 (US\$10,000–15,000).<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, ARSA is heavily armed, with an arsenal including looted AK-47 assault rifles. ARSA operates in a well-structured manner, making it challenging for law enforcement agencies to uproot it entirely, as members receive training in remote hills in Myanmar.

In January, an unverified Bangladeshi media report claimed that Rohingya militant groups have set up base camps in the zero line near the Tumbru between the Bangladesh-Myanmar border as well as in the Tota Dia island. The report also indicated the presence of Rohingya fighters trained by Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Pakistani Taliban. The report also indicated that these fighters are paid by ARSA and the Nobi Hossain Group, with both fighting for dominance in Rohingya camps as well as in the burgeoning drug trade.<sup>65</sup>

## **Response and Challenges**

In a continuation of their strategy of recent years, in 2023, the Bangladeshi security authorities carried out operations against planned terror plots and arrested extremists and terrorists belonging to different jihadist organisations. Aside from Jewel Molla and Jewel Mahmud mentioned in preceding paragraphs, another key arrest was that of senior AQIS leader Ikramul Haque in May 2023. Ikramul Haque, a member of AAI who had joined in 2017 and risen to a leadership position in AQIS, was arrested in Dhaka. Haque, also known as Abu Talha, had studied in a prominent Indian madrasa (Darul Ulum Deoband) and was a top wanted terrorist. This arrest aligns with India's Anti-Terrorism Squad's efforts to detain Bangladeshi individuals with connections to extremist groups like AAI. In a related incident, four Bangladeshi youths were arrested in Gujarat in May, citing influence from Ikramul Haque. Three Bangladeshi nationals were also arrested in Bhopal in October 2022, leading to the subsequent detention of eight more individuals in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. These actions highlight concerns about the expansion of AQ-centric networks from Bangladesh into India.<sup>66</sup> A source within the Bangladesh police also informed the author that there are reportedly 30 to 40 AAI operatives inside Myanmar, and that the group is increasingly becoming Myanmar focused.

However, despite the low incidence of terrorism in Bangladesh currently, the country continues to face challenges on the legal and digital fronts.

On the legal front, the foremost challenge has been the provision of bail to terrorist suspects who later re-engage in terrorist activities, with some even escaping overseas. Once they are released on bail, it is challenging for the authorities to monitor them. For instance, a Bangladeshi court granted bail to the chief of Neo-JMB's female unit, Humayara Zakir Nabila, in 2022. After securing bail, she tried to travel overseas. Though Bangladeshi authorities have blocked her passport, she continues to make efforts to travel.<sup>67</sup> While the law enforcement agencies are trying their best to address such legal challenges, there remain weaknesses in the Bangladeshi judicial system.<sup>68</sup>

Additionally, the accelerated dissemination of extremist propaganda materials by new dedicated websites, including those accessible via the dark web, have added to the operational challenges. The faster dispersal of IS materials in Bengali means a rapid flow of ideas, directives and inspirations to the Bengali-speaking audience in Bangladesh and beyond.

## Outlook

2023 has revealed a concerning evolution in Bangladesh's terrorist threat landscape. This threat is now more diverse, widespread and complex, with AQ-centric groups playing pivotal roles. Looking ahead to 2024, it is crucial for the incoming administration to promptly address these challenges, as Bangladesh currently lacks a comprehensive countering extremism strategy. The weaknesses in the nation's counter terrorism mechanism, compounded by political divisions and the use of religion in politics, underscore the need for a concerted effort to safeguard the country's security. The forthcoming administration must exhibit both political will and capacity to prevent the resurgence of militant groups and lone-actor terrorists. The terrorist groups are likely to exploit remote terrains and may even target critical facilities, including prisons. The unresolved Rohingya crisis adds another layer of complexity, creating a security challenge that extremist organisations like AAI and HuJI-B actively exploit. The plight of Rohingya refugees provides fertile ground for recruitment and radicalisation, making it crucial to address their grievances and vulnerability within refugee camps.

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## INDIA

### Dr Sudha Ramachandran

*In 2023, India witnessed multiple incidents of mass violence despite the weakening of several militant and separatist movements. Hindutva organisations weaponised Hindu religious festivals and processions to unleash mob and vigilante violence against Muslims. Meanwhile, Manipur, where ethnic tensions and insurgencies had declined in recent years, saw an eruption of violent clashes, potentially providing a fertile ground for the revival of militancy in the border state. Militant attacks declined in Jammu and Kashmir, and militants shifted operational focus to the thickly forested Pir Panjal region. Though the global jihadist groups failed to carry out any attacks in India in 2023, the country remained in the crosshairs of their social media propaganda. Likewise, while the support for Sikh separatism in India was weak, the movement found traction among pockets of the Sikh diaspora community in Canada, where the rhetoric for an independent Khalistan was articulated strongly. As for the Maoist insurgency, it continued to decline in terms of attacks and areas of influence. While a variety of reasons underlie India's multiple militant protests and movements, Hindutva violence appears to be playing an important role in fueling many of them.*

## Trends

### *Hindutva Violence*

Attacks by Hindutva activists and organisations on Muslims continued in 2023. Hate speeches, which often referred to anti-Muslim conspiracy theories like 'love jihad' and 'land jihad', were used to justify violence against them.<sup>69</sup>

According to the independent United States (US)-based research project, Hindutva Watch, there were 255 cases of hate speech at public gatherings in the first half of 2023 in India. Direct calls to violence,

including ethnic cleansing and genocide of Muslims as well as the destruction of their places of worship, were made in 33 percent of these events. In 12 percent, the call to arms included Hindutva leaders inciting Hindus to keep weapons. Events for the distribution of *trishuls* (tridents) were also organised. Hate speech events surged in March; 18 hate speech events took place that month across India, suggesting that there was a coordinated campaign to incite violence that month.<sup>70</sup>

Hindutva groups repeatedly weaponised Hindu festivals and processions to unleash violence against Muslims. The surge in hate speeches in March was likely aimed at using processions on Ramanavami and Hanuman Jayanti,<sup>71</sup> which fell on March 30 and April 5 (and coincided with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan) to incite violence against Muslims. Processions on Ramanavami, for instance, entered Muslim neighbourhoods, and violent clashes ensued for several days across India.<sup>72</sup>

Hindutva groups' exploitation of religious processions to incite violence against Muslims was on full display in Haryana's Nuh district, which has witnessed several incidents of cow vigilantism since 2016, the most recent being in February. Communal tensions were therefore already running high when Hindutva organisations like Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal called for a *Brijmandal Jalabhishek Yatra* (religious procession) on July 31. The run-up to the event saw a high-decibel campaign of provocation and incitement on social media. On the day of the procession, sword and trident-brandishing activists entered a Muslim neighbourhood shouting anti-Muslim slogans. Stone pelting followed, which quickly escalated into violent clashes that culminated in the loss of lives, damage to homes and shops, and large-scale displacement of Muslims. The communal violence in Nuh was not a spontaneous, sudden eruption of festering anger which manifested in violence. It was thus not a riot. Instead, it was, as is the case with many incidents of Hindutva violence, a pre-planned violent attack on minorities.<sup>73</sup>

While Hindutva organisations have used festivals and processions to incite violence in previous decades too, their frequency, scale and intensity have grown in recent years. Hindutva activists mobilise mass support, under cover of a so-called tradition, and gain religious legitimacy for their violent attacks.<sup>74</sup>

The Hindutva movement has always had a powerful global component, enjoying the support of a strong network of organisations in the Hindu diaspora and benefiting from their funding of its activities in India.<sup>75</sup> Recent developments indicate that Hindutva violence has gone global, too. As in India, Hindutva supporters abroad are issuing threats and attacking Sikhs and Muslims. Violent clashes have broken out between Hindutva groups and Khalistan activists among the Sikh diaspora in several Western countries, especially Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.<sup>76</sup>

### *Jihadist Threats*

Global jihadist groups did not carry out any attacks in India in 2023 although they were active in their anti-India propaganda.

As in previous years, in 2023, global jihadist organisations drew on anti-Muslim violence in India in their propaganda aimed at Indian Muslims. Groups like Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State al-Hind (ISH) tailored their propaganda to focus on local grievances in their publications. For instance, AQIS threatened to avenge the "Muslims killed on live television in UP [Uttar Pradesh]", a reference to the extrajudicial killing of gangster-turned-politician Atiq Ahmed and his brother Ashraf, who were shot dead at point-blank range in the full glare of television cameras.<sup>77</sup>

Jihadists used vitriolic and incendiary rhetoric to incite violence against non-Muslims in India. For instance, an article in the *Voice of Khorasan* (VOK), while goading Muslims to kill Hindus in India, noted, "Leave *dar al-kufr* (country ruled by non-Muslims) and perform Hijrah (religious migration). For those who cannot make *hijrah*, make *dar al-kufr* your battleground. Put your trust in Allah, take a knife,

and slice the Kafir's throat, poison his food, burn their houses and greenery, turn their joy to sorrow and strike terror in their hearts with Allah's help".<sup>78</sup>

Separately, an important target of ISH's propaganda was Indian Muslim preachers and scholars. Issues of *Seerat-ul-Haq*, ISH's English-language magazine, carried articles deriding Muslim scholars for participating in an inter-religious meeting with leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological fount of Hindutva organisations, in January 2023. In this meeting, Muslim scholars from leading Islamic organisations like Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind and the Darul Uloom Deoband engaged RSS leaders in discussions on hate speech, mob lynching and disputed religious sites. Likewise, an article in VOK's 24th issue criticised Muslim scholars for giving up claims on Babri Masjid and discussing RSS demands for "surrendering the mosques in Varanasi and Mathura, jointly declaring cows as a national animal, and imposing a ban on cow slaughter".<sup>79</sup>

ISH's propaganda efforts are focused on South India by reviving radical content in Malayalam, which is spoken in Kerala. The messages in ISH's publications are addressed "especially to mujahedin in south India" along with attack threats.<sup>80</sup>

Alarmingly, ISH propaganda appears to be gaining traction on the ground. On April 2, a 25-year-old youth doused his fellow passengers travelling on the Alappuzha-Kannur express train in Kerala with petrol and set them ablaze. Although initial reports hinted at IS links, investigations revealed that this was a lone-wolf attack. However, he had drawn inspiration from online jihadist propaganda.<sup>81</sup>

In 2023, ISH suffered a setback when its chief of India operations Ejaz Ahangar was killed in Afghanistan in January.<sup>82</sup> Ahangar had been declared a terrorist in India just weeks earlier and his elimination is likely to have hit the ISH hard as he was a key recruiter and propagandist for the outfit in India. Following his death, ISH went on a propaganda overdrive, which analysts interpreted as aimed at signalling that its capacity was intact. It also, rather belatedly, claimed responsibility for blasts in southern India in October-November 2022.<sup>83</sup> Amid the fall in morale among Indian jihadists following Ahangar's death, ISH was perhaps keen to show through its claim for the attacks, which were in fact a failure, that it remains operationally active and engaged in India.

### *Militancy in Jammu and Kashmir*

Militancy declined in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 2023. There were 42 terrorism-related incidents in the first nine months of 2023, the lowest since the start of the militancy in 1990. The previous low of 113 was registered in 2013.<sup>84</sup> The decline in militancy in recent years has been attributed to the "muscular approach" of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government since the revocation of J&K's autonomy on August 5, 2019.<sup>85</sup>

Under pressure in Kashmir, militants have been shifting base to the Jammu region of the union territory. In 2023, the Pir Panjal region of Jammu, which spans the Poonch and Rajouri districts, witnessed a resurgence in militancy. There were several major attacks in the two districts which border the Line of Control with Pakistan administered Kashmir.<sup>86</sup> In addition to some of the best infiltration routes into India lying in these two districts, the hilly and thickly forested terrain provides an ideal environment for militants to operate.<sup>87</sup>

Between June and October, there were several ambushes and gunfights between security forces and militants in Kulgam and Anantnag districts in the Kashmir Valley, which are contiguous to the Pir Panjal range. In September, security forces were locked in a week-long encounter – the longest in many years – to flush out militants holed up in a Gadool hill cave in Anantnag district. If in previous years, militants operated in built-up urban areas in Kashmir, the Gadool encounter indicated that they now operate in hilly and forested areas in Kashmir, similar to Jammu earlier in 2023. Importantly, while militants in Kashmir flaunted their faces and identities in public and in photographs and videos posted

on social media in recent years – this helped security forces to locate and eliminate them – they now prefer to maintain a low profile, hiding in caves and forests.<sup>88</sup>

The number of local youths, i.e., those from J&K, joining militancy is said to be falling. Compared to 143 local youths who picked up arms in 2019 and 100 in 2022, the number who joined militancy up to September 2023 was below 30.<sup>89</sup> Importantly, the foreign component of the militancy appears to have risen. Of the roughly 100-plus militants said to be active in J&K, as many as 71 are foreign militants, i.e., from Pakistan or Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and around 38 are said to be locals.<sup>90</sup>

While the fall in local recruitment to militancy could be interpreted as declining local alienation, the rising foreign component is a matter of concern for India's counterinsurgency operations in J&K. Foreign militants are usually more battle-hardened and better trained than their local counterparts, and are thus harder to eliminate.

### *Ethnic Violence in Manipur*

The security situation in the north-eastern state of Manipur, which had “been showing sustained improvement over the last several years, with occasional intervening spikes”, deteriorated significantly in May 2023, when violent clashes broke out between the majority Meitei and minority Kuki-Zo communities. Mob violence, which has included killings and rapes as well as looting and arson of properties, continues to date. Importantly, the unrest has been accompanied by a reactivation of militancy. That the ethnic clashes were a trigger to the return of militancy in Manipur is evident from the fact that Manipur recorded four insurgency-linked fatalities between January 1 and May 2, compared to 120 fatalities between May 3 and September 22.<sup>91</sup>

Meitei and Kuki militants have participated in mob violence, ostensibly in defence of their communities, and carried out sniper attacks and ambushes against the Indian security forces.<sup>92</sup> Several insurgent groups that were dormant till recently, as they had signed a Suspension of Operations agreement with the Indian and Manipuri governments in 2008, are active again. These include some 25 Kuki militant groups linked to the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), United People's Front (UPF), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF), Zeliangrong United Front (ZUF) and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA), among others.<sup>93</sup>

The resurgence of militancy in Manipur can be attributed to several factors. First are the ethnic clashes since May, which served to reignite long-running ethnic tensions and hostilities. Then, amid the breakdown of law and order in the early months of the crisis, rampaging mobs looted the armouries of police stations and took away large quantities of weapons and large quantities of ammunition, boosting the firepower of the militant groups.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, Manipur shares a 400-kilometre-long unfenced border with Myanmar, which is in the grip of a civil war. Manipuri militants, who were reportedly fighting in Myanmar, are said to have returned. Instability in Myanmar will facilitate their operations in India. Additionally, a thriving narcotics-guns network in the region fuels militancy and instability in Manipur.<sup>95</sup>

While the conflict in Manipur has been largely along ethnic lines, the communal dimension cannot be ignored. The Meitei are largely Hindu, while the Kukis are Christian. Political power resides in the hands of the Meitei. Moreover, the Hindu nationalist BJP, which has been in power in Manipur since 2017, has pursued an “aggressive majoritarian” agenda. Hindutva networks have expanded in the state. It culminated in the burning down of scores of Kuki churches, especially in the early stages of the clashes in 2023.<sup>96</sup>

### *Sikh Separatism*

The Indian media was rife with reports of a possible revival of Sikh separatism in the Indian state of Punjab in the early months of 2023. This perception was prompted by sporadic incidents of violence

in Punjab accompanied by occasional calls for Khalistan in recent years. Additionally, in late 2022, Amritpal Singh, a self-styled radical Sikh “preacher”, who made fiery pro-Khalistan speeches and advocated violence, began drawing crowds in rural Punjab. This and the storming of Ajnala police station by Singh’s sword-wielding supporters on February 3, which culminated in the Punjab police giving in to their demands to free a jailed associate, and the failure of the police to nab Singh swiftly, fuelled reports of the revival of Sikh militancy in Punjab.<sup>97</sup> However, separatist activism died down quickly.

Currently, support for Sikh separatism and the Khalistan narrative is weak on the ground in Punjab; what exists in Punjab today is a shadow of the insurgency that raged in the 1980s and 1990s. The current spate of Sikh separatism “is diaspora-led, fed by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and implicitly supported” by several Western countries, especially Canada “for geo-strategic political reasons and domestic political imperatives”.<sup>98</sup>

India has alleged that Canada is sheltering Khalistan extremists and turning a blind eye to their anti-India propaganda, fund-raising and financing of violence in India.<sup>99</sup> According to the Punjab police, 56 pro-Khalistan outfits are operating in Western countries, and some of them were responsible for 15 targeted killings in Punjab over the past six years.<sup>100</sup> Khalistani elements have issued threats from abroad. For instance, the US-based Gurpatwant Singh Pannun of the banned Sikhs for Justice, has repeatedly issued threats, including one in October, when he warned India of a “ Hamas-like attack” and incited Palestinians to attack the Indian consulate in Ramallah.<sup>101</sup>

Lacking support among the Sikh people in Punjab, Sikh separatism appears to be propped up from abroad, with the idea of an independent Khalistan being kept alive by sections of the Sikh diaspora. Also, whether in India or abroad, Sikh militancy is being fuelled by Hindutva violence. Hindutva and Khalistani groups have repeatedly clashed abroad.

### *Left-Wing Extremism*

Data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal reveals that on all parameters of violence, be it the number of terrorism-related incidents, major incidents and fatalities, or the number of districts varyingly affected by Maoist activities, the declining trend in left-wing extremism continued in 2023.<sup>102</sup> There was a 52 percent decline in left-wing extremism and a 69 percent drop in fatalities during the 2014-2023 period compared to the preceding decade. Home Minister Amit Shah said in October that the number of “vacuum areas”, i.e., “core” Maoist strongholds where the state’s administrative or security machinery could not function, are shrinking.<sup>103</sup>

Yet, the Maoists continue to display the capacity to inflict severe damage on the security forces. On April 28, they set off an improvised explosive device packed with 50 kilogrammes of explosives that targeted a van in south Chhattisgarh, killing 10 soldiers and a civilian. This was the deadliest Maoist attack in two years,<sup>104</sup> indicating that the Maoists’ intelligence-gathering capacity continues to exist.

### **State Response**

The Indian government’s approach to militancy and separatism in 2023 remained kinetic, relying on terrorism legislation and arrests. Security forces carried out raids against proscribed groups like the Popular Front of India and global jihadist groups, and the government has been successful in dismantling their networks.<sup>105</sup> Several militant groups active in J&K, including The Resistance Force, the People’s Anti-Fascist-Front and the Jammu and Kashmir Ghaznavi Force, were declared terrorist groups and banned.<sup>106</sup> The Indian government was also accused of eliminating Sikh separatists abroad. For instance, the Canadian government alleged in October that there were “credible allegations potentially linking” India to the killing of Canadian Sikh Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who was declared a terrorist in India in 2016, in Canada. India rejected the allegations.<sup>107</sup>

With militancy abating in Kashmir, the government is reportedly considering withdrawing the army from the region in a phased manner and replacing it with the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force.<sup>108</sup> In Jammu, it revived a plan to arm civilians to defend their villages against terrorists.<sup>109</sup> Political processes in the union territory remained in abeyance. Neither dialogue nor elections were announced in 2023.

The Indian state's approach to extremism and communal violence has been selective thus far, underscored by its reluctance to act against Hindu extremism especially. No Hindutva group or activist was included in the terrorist list. Those arrested in communal clashes were overwhelmingly Muslim, and collective punishment meted out after communal clashes was reserved for Muslims only.<sup>110</sup>

## Outlook

The government's arrests and crackdowns may have helped dismantle networks and prevent jihadist and militant attacks in J&K and other parts of the country. However, it is not addressing the underlying grievances and is thus keeping alienation among different affected communities alive. Indeed, the government's reluctance to act robustly against Hindutva violence and the ecosystem that sustains it is providing fuel for anti-India propaganda by militant and secessionist groups. The possibility of the government changing its approach on the matter is low as it is the polarisation of society along communal lines that keeps the BJP in power.

## About the Author

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## PAKISTAN

**Abdul Basit**

*Pakistan's diverse security landscape became more volatile in the absence of a coherent counter terrorism response in 2023. The interlocking political and economic crises and the Taliban's reluctance to dismantle Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)'s sanctuaries in Afghanistan further worsened the security situation. Pakistan has entered a new phase of extremist violence where old trends persist even as new ones are emerging. Presently, the country is confronted with a three-front situation from a resurgent TTP, a persistent ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan, and a resilient Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK). In Punjab's heartland, the Barelvi radical group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) continues to shape extremist trends through blasphemy activism. Ahead of the general election in February 2024, TLP's participation in electoral politics, ISK's so-called "battle against democracy" to target the polling process, and TTP's ideological narrative against the parliamentary system and in favour of the self-styled Islamic Emirate combined would undermine Pakistan's democracy. The Pakistani state's failure to anticipate the real consequences of supporting the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has given the militant networks an edge over it.*

## Trends

Since the Taliban's takeover, violence has surged in Pakistan by 73 percent.<sup>111</sup> According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2023, as the seventh most-impacted country by terrorism, Pakistan has two



active conflict fault lines with TTP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the ethno-separatists in the south-western Balochistan provinces, respectively.<sup>112</sup> For the third consecutive year, the year-on-year attacks and casualties continued to increase in Pakistan. The security forces bore the brunt of these attacks, losing 345 security personnel from the military and police, the highest terrorism-related casualties in eight years.<sup>113</sup> As the asymmetric conflicts escalated in Pakistan, disturbing new security trends emerged while old ones persisted.

## Enduring Old Trends

### *Resurgent TTP*

In September, TTP launched a massive incursion into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Chitral district after amassing hundreds of its fighters in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar and Nuristan provinces.<sup>114</sup> Since its resurgence, this was TTP's first serious attempt to take territory in Pakistan.<sup>115</sup> The attack was repulsed after intense fighting spanning four to five days.<sup>116</sup> Currently, TTP lacks territorial control and some form of support in the population to transform into an insurgency.<sup>117</sup> In its bid to win local public support, TTP has tried to embrace Pashtun nationalism, which traditionally has been a secular movement, and even reached out to the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement's leader, Manzur Pashteen<sup>118</sup> for a dialogue.<sup>119</sup>

Despite lacking territory and public support, TTP is following a discriminatory targeting strategy, that is, attacking the security forces and avoiding soft targets. In other words, TTP is behaving like an insurgent group without controlling territory or enjoying public support. Beliakova, Berger and Moghadam (2014) classify such groups as "proto-insurgents" or "hybrid terrorist groups".<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, TTP has rhetorically distanced itself from Al-Qaeda (AQ) to a point where it disowns the latter's role in creating, financing and ideologically guiding the former in the past.<sup>121</sup> TTP has repeatedly reiterated its Pakistan-centric focus and even signalled to the international community that it is fighting the Pakistani state for the creation of a Taliban-like *shariah* state.<sup>122</sup>

TTP has been able to articulate these narratives through its resuscitated propaganda arm, Al-Umar Media, indicating the group's savviness with information warfare.<sup>123</sup> Al-Umar Media has an elaborate presence across digital and social media platforms. The linguistic and editorial quality of TTP's propaganda has substantially improved since Qari Munib Jutt, the chief propagandist of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), joined the group. Now, TTP regularly publishes three monthly magazines (including one for women discussed in the emerging new trends section), infographics and statements, and runs bi-weekly podcasts as well as different video series.<sup>124</sup>

Moreover, TTP has remodelled its organisational structure from an umbrella movement to a more centralised framework along the Taliban's insurgency model, dividing its militant campaign in Pakistan into two zones: the north and the south.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, it has announced seven shadow ministries;<sup>126</sup> intelligence, suicide and training units; a three-layer court system; an Islamic jurisprudence institute; and 12 *wilayat* (provinces).<sup>127</sup>

TTP is using its cross-border sanctuaries in Afghanistan and presence in the ex-FATA region as a force multiplier to expand its existence in mainland Pakistan. It bears mention that TTP has successfully expanded its footprint into Balochistan's Pashtun-majority areas and carried out several high-profile attacks in 2023.<sup>128</sup> TTP's expansion efforts come on the heels of more than 40 militant factions that have pledged their oaths of allegiance to the group, boosting its operational and organisational strength.<sup>129</sup>

Taking advantage of several factors,<sup>130</sup> TTP is showcasing a Taliban-like *shariah* system as an alternative to the failing democratic governance in the country. Critically, the second and third generations of TTP militants are being educated in the Taliban-run madrassas of Afghanistan,<sup>131</sup> unlike

TTP's first generation, which studied in Pakistan's Deobandi madrassas.<sup>132</sup> Consequently, the new generation of TTP militants will be more radical, closely aligned with the Taliban's ideology and with a weak association with Pakistan.<sup>133</sup>

### *Resilient ISK*

Facing a hostile crackdown from the Taliban in Afghanistan, ISK has relocated some of its fighters to Pakistan, where it is fighting a battle of survival and relevance. As ISK's visibility and attacks have shrunk in Afghanistan, they have correspondingly increased in Pakistan, more particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bajaur and Balochistan's Mastung districts. Despite ISK's declining attacks in Afghanistan, the Taliban's claims of decimating the group's network seem premature. Since its creation as an IS franchise in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in 2015, ISK has gone through two contraction-expansion periods. For instance, between August 2018-2019, the group carried out 400 attacks, which steeply declined to 157 between August 2019-2020. However, ISK bounced back between August 2020-2021 and August 2021-2022 with 275 and 314 attacks, respectively. ISK is now going through another contraction period as the attacks have declined to 69 during the August 2022-2023 period.<sup>134</sup>

During the contraction periods, ISK has managed to adapt to hostile environments<sup>135</sup> and has also adjusted its strategic goals, ideological ambitions, operational strategies and propaganda messaging.<sup>136</sup> The group exploits pre-existing sectarian, political and socioeconomic fault lines, which are numerous in Pakistan,<sup>137</sup> to advance its interests.<sup>138</sup>

To navigate the ongoing contraction period, ISK has fixed its eyes on Pakistan's election in February 2024 under its so-called "battle against democracy".<sup>139</sup> The upcoming elections in Pakistan will offer numerous opportunities for the group to hit soft targets and dispel the impression of its decline. Already, the group has targeted religious<sup>140</sup> and political rallies and politicians in different parts of the country. For instance, ISK attacked Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUIF) leader Hafiz Hamdullah in Mastung district in September, which he narrowly escaped, and the party's worker convention in Bajaur in July, leaving 44 people dead and over 100 injured.<sup>141</sup> The Bajaur suicide attack was preceded by 23 targeted assassinations of JUIF workers and local leaders by ISK. The ISK-JUIF tussle is grounded in their sectarian rivalry straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in Bajaur district.<sup>142</sup>

ISK's emerging footprint is concerning for Pakistan for the following three reasons:

First, ISK's aspiration for external operations, particularly in the West, is a worrying development. The terror group is trying to imitate AQ, the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which have successfully carried out overseas attacks. So far, around 15 terrorist plots, nine in very advanced stages, to target Western embassies, consulates and worship places have been traced to ISK in Afghanistan.<sup>143</sup> The United States (US) Annual Threat Assessment 2023 noted that "ISK almost certainly retains the intent to conduct operations in the West and will continue efforts to attack outside Afghanistan".<sup>144</sup> Unlike ISK, AQ, IS and AQAP possessed safe havens to plot and train for attacks. Yet, despite lacking stable sanctuaries in Afghanistan, ISK's external arms capability has grown due to its local-foreign structural duality. ISK's inner layers comprise around 80 foreigners who plot overseas attacks, and it remains obscure and mobile.<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, the outer layer is composed of local militants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian states, and the Taliban's crackdown has damaged that outer layer.<sup>146</sup> If ISK moves some components of its inner layer to Pakistan, it could bring the country into the crosshairs of global counter terrorism discussions once more as a country of concern.

Second, ISK's inroads into vulnerable segments of Pakistan's educated middle- and upper-middle-class youth are even more alarming. Due to political instability, the economic meltdown and a growing state-society gap, the unemployed educated youth feel dispossessed by a broken system which only

caters to an exploitative elite. Amid an identity crisis, the youths' search for a sense of belonging and meaning in life leaves them vulnerable to ISK's ideological propaganda, easily accessible through social media.<sup>147</sup>

Lastly, ISK's indiscriminate attacks against religious minorities and its ideological rivalries with the Deobandi and Bareilvi communities could push the more extreme TTP elements to cross over to the former. Consequently, any ISK or TTP efforts to carry out large-scale attacks to outdo each other, would further undermine an already fragile security situation in Pakistan.

#### *Majoritarian Bareilvi TLP*

The Bareilvi radical group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is entrenched in Pakistan's Bareilvi community, which is 60 percent of the population.<sup>148</sup> Hence, TLP's radicalism takes a majoritarian shape in Pakistan. Since TLP operates in the country's mainstream politics, participates in elections and eschews violence, it is more dangerous than TTP and ISK. Traditionally, the anti-Shia Deobandi militant group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and its political front, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, had dominated Punjab's militant landscape until recently. Now, TLP has taken over by exploiting the Bareilvi community's victimhood narrative centred around blasphemy politics.

Drawing its legitimacy from Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws, TLP acts as the self-appointed guardian of Prophet Muhammad's honour and finality.<sup>149</sup> In doing so, TLP has not only positioned itself as the anti-minority and anti-secular group in Pakistan, but its blasphemy politics has also sharpened the intra-Sunni rivalry between the Bareilvi and Deobandi subsets of the Hanafi school of thought.<sup>150</sup>

TLP views that blasphemers should be given the death penalty and that those trying to amend the blasphemy laws are also blasphemers.<sup>151</sup> TLP considers Pakistan's mainstream political parties as well as fellow Bareilvi political organisations advocating for reforms in anti-blasphemy laws as agents of Western liberal lobbies.<sup>152</sup> In TLP's view, reformation of blasphemy laws would pave the way for Pakistan's secularisation and mainstreaming of the Ahmadiyya community.<sup>153</sup>

TLP's blasphemy activism, apart from posing a clear danger to minorities, is concerning for two reasons. First, TLP operates in mainstream politics and, hence, notwithstanding its poor electoral performance, has a greater societal outreach.<sup>154</sup> Also, participation in politics gives a semblance of legitimacy to its incendiary ideological rhetoric.<sup>155</sup> Second, TLP's majoritarian discourse has shrunk the space for critical discourse on the role of religion in Pakistan's politics and contested national character (the Islamic versus a moderate Muslim state debate).<sup>156</sup> At the same time, it has also undermined efforts to foster moderation, tolerance and respect for religious diversity and harmony in Pakistan.<sup>157</sup>

TLP views the Bareilvi community as a suppressed group which has been ruled by a corrupt, indifferent and extractive elite against its will.<sup>158</sup> TLP maintains that these corrupt elites have been imposed on the masses against their will to serve the geopolitical interests of their foreign paymasters, including mainstreaming of the Ahmadiyya community and reformation of the anti-blasphemy laws.<sup>159</sup> The group also holds corrupt elites responsible for empowering Deobandi groups in politics to the detriment of the Bareilvi community.

TLP sees the minority Ahmadiyya and Christian communities as an imminent risk to the Bareilvi way of life and values. As such, TLP weaponises incendiary narratives to ostracise and dehumanise Ahmadis and Christians, and normalise violence against them.<sup>160</sup>

In 2023, around 34 attacks on Ahmadis' worship places and graves were reported in Pakistan involving workers and supporters of the TLP.<sup>161</sup> Likewise, an angry mob burned Christian churches and properties in August in Faisalabad district's Jaranwala area, following fake blasphemy charges. TLP's

workers and supporters joined the foray as soon as the disinformation spread on social media and engaged in ransacking and vandalism. TLP also used mosque loudspeakers to incite violence.<sup>162</sup>

### *Persistent Ethno-Separatism*

In 2023, the ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan showed no sign of abating amid worsening living conditions. While the insurgency remains stalemated on the battlefield, the absence of a political process is contributing to its lethality and longevity.<sup>163</sup> The state has shown no political will to reach out to insurgents to start a negotiation process.<sup>164</sup> At the same time, the Baloch insurgents are equally disinterested in reconciliation and a political compromise. The result is greater militarisation from both sides, leaving the Baloch masses in the crosshairs of a never-ending cycle of insurgent-counterinsurgent violence.<sup>165</sup>

The current (fifth) wave of insurgency in Balochistan is the largest and most lethal as compared to the previous four waves: 1948, 1958-59, 1962-93 and 1973-77.<sup>166</sup> The Baloch insurgents' alliances and mergers have enabled them to achieve lethality and resilience.<sup>167</sup> The state's indifference to the Baloch community's political and socioeconomic grievances and continued harassment, such as the arrests of Baloch students from different universities in Punjab, have pushed the educated Baloch youth towards separatism.<sup>168</sup> The suicide bombing by Sumaiya Qalandarani Baloch, the second by a female suicide bomber in as many years, brought into sharp focus a disturbing reality that the recruitment has now expanded from Baloch men to women as well (further discussion in the emerging new trends section).<sup>169</sup>

Alarmingly, the conflict has shifted from one generation to another who has grown up in an atmosphere of intimidation, ethnic discrimination and social injustices.<sup>170</sup> The new generation of Baloch insurgents spearheading the movement are from an educated middle-class rather than tribal background.<sup>171</sup> The new insurgent generation is more radical, has no tribal baggage and embraces more extreme tactics like suicide terrorism.

### **Emerging New Trends**

New trends are by-products of the evolution of pre-existing trends, and highlight the worrying expansion and intensification of asymmetric militant threats in Pakistan.

#### *New Group – Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan*

A little-known militant group, Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), has emerged on Pakistan's militant landscape, pointing to potential expansion of conflict actors. The group carried out high-profile suicide attacks against the security forces in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>172</sup> TJP's spokesperson Mullah Qasim announced its formation on X, formerly Twitter, and claimed that it had fought in Afghanistan; after the US exit in 2020, it has now shifted its focus to Pakistan for the creation of a *shariah* state.<sup>173</sup>

Based on available open-source information and circumstantial evidence, TJP seems to be a front group of TTP, carrying out suicide bombings on its behalf. TTP and TJP's targets seem to be similar: security forces. Likewise, TJP has not attacked soft targets, which is also consistent with TTP's selective targeting strategy. TJP's emergence in Balochistan also coincides with TTP's ingress in the province. In July, TTP was compelled to reveal that TJP is a brother jihadi organisation, following a war of words with its dissident commander, Asad Afridi, after he claimed an attack for which TJP also accepted responsibility.<sup>174</sup>

Furthermore, TJP belongs to the Deobandi school of thought, as it claims in its social media postings. Given the sophistication and geographical spread of its suicide attacks between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

and Balochistan, it consists of experienced militants with considerable combat exposure.<sup>175</sup> Interestingly, TJP claimed some attacks in Balochistan for which the Islamic State of Pakistan (ISP) also accepted responsibility. Ostensibly, TJP seems to be undermining ISP's footprint in Balochistan.<sup>176</sup>

TJP also has some members of the Taliban and AQ in its ranks who were keen to continue militancy in Pakistan for the creation of a *shariah* state following the US exit from Afghanistan. Hence, TJP was created as TTP's front group to conceal the organisational identities of these militants.<sup>177</sup> It bears mention that the Taliban regime has instructed its fighters not to fight outside of Afghanistan without Supreme Leader Haibatullah Akhundzada's permission. Likewise, under the Doha Agreement 2020, the Taliban are under obligation to ensure that Afghanistan's soil will not be used by AQ, among other groups, for terrorism against other countries.

#### *Female Suicide Bombers and Women-Focused Radical Propaganda*

A miniscule but concerning trend of women's participation in terrorist attacks, coupled with concerted efforts by TTP and Baloch separatist groups to produce women-focused propaganda, was also prominent in 2023. On July 25, Sumaiya Qalandrani Baloch, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA)'s second female suicide bomber, targeted a security convoy in Turbat, Balochistan.<sup>178</sup> Subsequently, BLA's propaganda arm, Hakkal, published several articles and reports eulogising the two female suicide bombers to boost women recruitment.<sup>179</sup> BLA's suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade, claims that following the female suicide bombings, several Baloch women have enlisted for self-sacrificing missions.

Separately, TTP has increased its focus on producing women-focused propaganda material through Al-Umar media. For instance, in July 2023, the group started publishing a monthly Urdu-language magazine for women, *Banat-e-Khadijat-ul-Kubra* (Daughters of Khadija, Prophet Muhammad's first wife).<sup>180</sup> So far, the group has published two issues of this magazine. This is TTP's second attempt to publish women-focused propaganda material. The first attempt was in 2017-2018 when it brought out two issues of the English-language magazine *Sunnat-e-Khauula* (The Way of Khauula, a historical female fighter known for her bravery).<sup>181</sup> In sum, TTP has reinforced its ideological worldview in these periodicals centred around patriarchal social values, urging women to be the nurturers of future generations of jihadists and heavily attacking liberal feminist lobbies in Pakistan.<sup>182</sup>

In September, five female militants belonging to ISK were arrested in Punjab's Lahore and Sheikhpura cities. These arrests, seen together with the discovery of a 17-member pro-ISK cell, of which 12 were girls, in Islamabad, underscore ISK's focus on recruiting women through social media platforms from Pakistan's urban centres. In the past, women belonging to ISK were also arrested in Karachi and Lahore, among others.

Despite women's limited participation in terrorism in Pakistan, the groups' increasing focus through propaganda material points to their renewed interests in harnessing females' potential for different roles in their organisational structures, such as propagandists, recruiters, informers, matchmakers, nurturers of future generations of militants, icons and mentors for would-be female radicals and, in extreme cases, as suicide bombers.<sup>183</sup>

#### *Unclaimed and Contested Terrorist Attacks*

In Pakistan's fiercely competitive threat landscape, it is rare for militant groups not to claim terrorist attacks. However, no group claimed responsibility for some high-profile attacks in Pakistan, including suicide bombings, in 2023. Likewise, there were a few attacks which were simultaneously claimed<sup>184</sup> by different militant groups.<sup>185</sup>

At the same time, there were conflicting responsibility claims where more than one group took credit for the same attack. The majority of these attacks involved TJP, as discussed above, which claimed responsibility for attacks owned by ISP to undermine its footprint in Balochistan. For instance, TJP claimed responsibility for the March 6 suicide bombing targeting a vehicle of the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Balochistan's Bolan district, which ISP also owned.<sup>186</sup> Similarly, the July 12 raid on a garrison post in Balochistan's Zhob district was simultaneously claimed by TJP and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a dissident faction of TTP.<sup>187</sup>

The contested and unclaimed attacks reveal the evolving rivalries and relationships between different militant groups in a fluid threat environment. Though TTP has centralised its structure, it remains a conglomerate of more than 40 factions of varying sizes. Terrorist groups shy away from claiming attacks if they do not serve their strategic goals.<sup>188</sup> Likewise, sometimes groups do not take credit for attacks due to unintended consequences, such as mass casualties or fear of a stronger counter terrorism backlash.<sup>189</sup> For instance, TTP distanced itself from the Peshawar suicide bombing in February, which killed over 100 people, on the grounds that it was a violation of its code of conduct. JuA perpetrated the attack and claimed it independently as revenge for the killing of its leader Omar Khalid Khorasani, which brings to the fore the agent-principal problem, that is, the central group does not own an attack officially if it is conducted without prior permission.<sup>190</sup>

### **State Responses and Challenges**

To mitigate the rapidly evolving terrorist threats, Pakistan took a number of key decisions in 2023. After two failed ceasefire agreements with TTP in November 2021 and June-September 2022,<sup>191</sup> the government shelved the option of negotiations. However, the two botched ceasefires allowed TTP to regain space and resurrect its network in Pakistan.<sup>192</sup> At any rate, the Pakistani security institutions, keeping in view the financial and political limitations, tried to contain the threat through intelligence-based operations in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>193</sup>

Following a 72 percent rise in terrorism in the past two years, the government revitalised the Apex Committees in February at the federal and provincial levels for better coordination across different security and government institutions. Since Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is facing the brunt of TTP's attacks, the Apex Committee decided in February to create a headquarters for the Counter Terrorism Department in the province.<sup>194</sup> Likewise, the National Action Plan and the National Counter Terrorism Authority were also revived. At the same time, the government is also taking steps to empower the police to effectively perform counter terrorism tasks.<sup>195</sup>

Pakistan has also engaged the Taliban regime with a two-fold demand without much avail: 1) disarm and neutralise TTP; or 2) expel the group to Pakistan.<sup>196</sup> As TTP's attacks from its havens in Afghanistan continued unabated, Pakistan decided in October to expel about 1.6 million illegal Afghan refugees with a one-month deadline. In a press conference, Pakistan's caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti maintained that 14 of the 24 suicide bombings in Pakistan in 2023 were carried out by Afghan nationals.<sup>197</sup>

Three visible asymmetric challenges confront the Pakistani state with long-term security implications.

First, the new generation of insurgents and militants who are more radical and violent in their tactics. As discussed, the second and third generations of TTP jihadists are being educated and mentored in the Taliban-run madrassas in Afghanistan.<sup>198</sup> With weaker association with Pakistan, in the next eight to 10 years, the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban's younger fighters will become almost distinguishable. Similarly, the Baloch separatists' new generation has grown up in an atmosphere of hostility and mistrust, leading them to categorically espouse separatism and embrace suicide terrorism, without carrying the tribal baggage of their predecessors.<sup>199</sup> Likewise, ISK, despite recent setbacks, continues

to make inroads through social media platforms into the educated middle-class youth of Pakistan's urban centres.<sup>200</sup>

Second, the state lacks the capacity and sophistication to fight TTP on the discursive and operational fronts. Since the TTP's propaganda has moved to cyberspace and networks have shifted to Afghanistan, the state's ability to effectively manage the threat has shrunk.

Finally, the intersectionality of TLP's violence and the hybrid nature of its organisational structure as a party-movement that keeps it in the political mainstream pose a twin challenge to the state.<sup>201</sup> If the state lowers its threshold of violent extremism to ban radical groups like TLP, it runs the risk of unintentionally pushing its members towards violence. On the contrary, if the state does not revisit the violent extremism threshold, radical groups like TLP will continue to stay in the political mainstream.

## Outlook

Due to TTP's cross-border sanctuaries in Afghanistan, coupled with political and financial constraints hindering a large-scale counter terrorism offensive, various asymmetrical conflicts in Pakistan are likely to persist and violence will increase further. Within the existing political and financial bounds, the state can aim to contain the threat until such a time that it has the bandwidth for an offensive counter terrorism posture. Pakistan's future counter terrorism challenges are now intricately linked to its evolving relationship with the Taliban regime, and, without finding a viable working formula to address the TTP challenge in Afghanistan, its current counter terrorism policy will only deliver a temporary respite. Pakistan's myopic policy of supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan has backfired and the country has become a victim of its own contradictory policy of the "good" versus the "bad" Taliban.

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<sup>114</sup> Chitral is strategically located closer to Gilgit-Baltistan, the starting point of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, shares a border with Tajikistan via the Wakhan Corridor, and is located closer to Afghanistan's Badakhshan province, which abuts China's Xinjiang province.

<sup>115</sup> Abubakar Siddique and Majeed Babar, "Pakistani Taliban Attempts Land Grab To Boost Insurgency Against Islamabad," *Radio Free Europe*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistani-taliban-land-grab-insurgency-islamabad/32595679.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Iftikhar Shirazi, "7 Terrorists Killed, 6 Critically Injured by Security Forces in Chitral: ISPR," *Dawn*, September 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1775116>.

<sup>117</sup> Public opinion in the ex-FATA and Malakand regions, where TTP wreaked havoc during its first peak between 2008 and 2014, is very hostile. In 2021, when a few hundred TTP militants were repatriated to their native areas under a secret peace deal with the military (on the condition of disarmament and a peaceful conduct), people in different parts of the ex-FATA and Malakand regions organised massive anti-TTP rallies (or peace marches) to oppose the group's return.

<sup>118</sup> Mufti Abu Hasham Tariq, "Concerning Rallies Against Terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," *Mujallah Tehreek-e-Taliban*, January 2023, pp. 7-8.

<sup>119</sup> The Pashtun nationalists in Afghanistan and Pakistan do not accept the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as an internationally recognised frontier. They call it a British colonial imposition which has divided the Pashtun families living across the border. Furthermore, they believe Pakistan's Pashtun-dominated areas up to Attack district belong to Afghanistan.

<sup>120</sup> Assaf Moghadam et al., "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labelling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 8, No. 5 (2014), pp. 2-17.

<sup>121</sup> Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/21/evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-pub-86051>.

<sup>122</sup> Though the international community consistently raises its concerns about TTP's rising attacks from Afghanistan against Pakistan, it has not pressed the Taliban to dismantle TTP's network in Afghanistan.

<sup>123</sup> Abdul Sayed, "Resurgence of Umar Media Boosts Pakistani Taliban," *BBC Monitoring*, January 13, 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2040oi5>.

<sup>124</sup> Abdul Basit, "Afghanistan-Pakistan's Radical Social Media Ecosystem: Actors, Propaganda Comparison and Implications," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2023), pp. 9-16, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CTTA-September-2023.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> A military commission comprises six or seven TTP militants, including a director and his deputy, and oversees the *wilayat*.

<sup>126</sup> Tasked with specific responsibilities, the seven ministries include: information and broadcasting; welfare; political affairs; defence; accountability; education; and finance.

<sup>127</sup> Of the 12 *wilayat* across Pakistan, seven are in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two each in Punjab and Balochistan, and one in Gilgit-Baltistan. See Abdul Sayed and Tore Hamming, "The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan After the Taliban's Afghanistan Takeover," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2023), pp.1-12, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052023.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> Muhammad Akba Notezai, "Why TTP Is Opening Another Front in Balochistan," *Dawn*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1764840>.

<sup>129</sup> TTP has benefited from the Taliban's prison breaks at the time of the takeover, freeing thousands of its members as well as the mergers adding hundreds of militants to its ranks.

<sup>130</sup> These are: 1) Pakistan's failure to fulfil the promises it made to the people of ex-FATA at the time of the region's merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; 2) the Taliban's return and provision of sanctuaries to the group in Afghanistan; and 3) the ongoing political and socioeconomic instability in the country.

<sup>131</sup> "War On Education: Taliban Converting Secular Schools Into Religious Seminaries," *Radio Free Europe*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-secular-schools-converted-madrasahs-education/31914672.html>; "The Taliban Rule and the Radicalisation of Education in Afghanistan," *Global Campus on Human Rights*, November 24, 2022, <https://gchumanrights.org/preparedness-children/article-detail/the-taliban-rule-and-the-radicalisation-of-education-in-afghanistan-4945.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Zia ur-Rehman, "Where Afghanistan's New Taliban Leaders Went to School," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/25/world/asia/pakistan-taliban-afghanistan-madrasa.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Saqalain Eqbal "Taliban Calls Suicide Bomber Brigade Pride of Group," *Khama Press*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.khama.com/taliban-calls-suicide-bomber-brigade-pride-of-group-364752/>;

Lily Hamourtziadou, "Afghanistan: Taliban plans for Suicide Brigade Reveal Changing Nature of Warfare in 21st Century," *The Conversation*, January 31, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/afghanistan-taliban-plans-for-suicide-brigade-reveal-changing-nature-of-warfare-in-21st-century-174829>.

<sup>134</sup> Aaron Y Zelin, "ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>.

- <sup>135</sup> Amira Jadoon et al., “The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan’s Survival under Afghanistan’s New Rulers,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 8 (2023), pp. 8-15, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082023.pdf>.
- <sup>136</sup> Zelin, “ISKP Goes Global.”
- <sup>137</sup> For instance, when the group lost its territorial holdings in the eastern Nangarhar province in 2019, it devolved from a centralised to a decentralised structure comprising numerous cells, and instead of (re)capturing territory, it shifted its focus to high-profile urban attacks. Similarly, when the Taliban intensified their attacks on Salafi madrassas and mosques across Afghanistan to undermine ISK’s influence, the group shifted its recruitment to the country’s universities.
- <sup>138</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, “An Unfamiliar Challenge: How the Taliban Are Meeting the Islamic State Threat on Afghanistan’s University Campuses,” *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, May 2023, pp. 8-10, <https://static.rusi.org/rusi-emerging-insights-how-taliban-meeting-is-threat-on-afghan-university-campuses.pdf>.
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- <sup>140</sup> Zia ur-Rehman and Christina Goldbaum, “Blast Kills at Least 52 at a Religious Gathering in Pakistan,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/asia/pakistan-bombing.html>.
- <sup>141</sup> Syed Ali Shah, “JUI-F’s Hafiz Hamdullah Survives Bomb Attack,” *The Express Tribune*, September 14, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2435806/jui-fs-hafiz-hamdullah-survives-bomb-attack>; Javid Hussain and Umar Bacha, “At Least 44 killed, over 100 Injured in Suicide Blast at JUI-F Convention in KP’s Bajaur,” *Dawn*, July 30, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1767493>.
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- <sup>143</sup> Dan Lamothe and Joby Warrick, “Afghanistan has Become a Terrorism Staging Ground Again, Leak Reveals,” *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/22/afghanistan-terrorism-leaked-documents/>.
- <sup>144</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: ODNI, 2023), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.
- <sup>145</sup> Atal Ahmadzai, “IS-Khorasan: Organizational Structure, Ideological Convergence with the Taliban, and Future Prospects,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (2022), pp. 2-19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27168613>.
- <sup>146</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>147</sup> Huma Yusuf, “University Radicalization: Pakistan’s Next Counterterrorism Challenge,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2016), pp. 4-8, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss29.pdf>.
- <sup>148</sup> This is not to suggest that Pakistan’s entire Barelvi community subscribes to TLP’s incendiary rhetoric. Indeed, the Barelvi community in Pakistan is quite vast and diverse with multiple political and ideological shades. However, TLP’s entrenchment in the majority faith community proportionally increases the risk accordingly. See Jawad Syed, “Barelvi Militancy in Pakistan and Salman Taseer’s Murder,” in *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, eds. Jawad Syed et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 231-272.
- <sup>149</sup> Roohan Ahmed, “Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: An Emerging Right-Wing Threat to Pakistan’s Democracy,” *Atlantic Council*, January 15, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/tehrrek-e-labbaik-pakistan-an-emerging-right-wing-threat/>.
- <sup>150</sup> The Hanafi school of thought has two sub-denominations, Deobandis and Barelvis. Deobandis follow a more literal and puritanical interpretation of Islam. Barelvis follow a more inclusive, benevolent and plural interpretation of Islam. TLP blames Deobandis for the Barelvi community’s political marginalisation and attacks against major Sufi shrines across Pakistan. For details, see Zulqarnain Sewag, “The Intra-Sunni Conflicts in Pakistan,” in *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, eds. Jawad Syed et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 313–344; Syed, “Barelvi Militancy in Pakistan and Salman Taseer’s Murder.”
- <sup>151</sup> Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, “How Islamist Fundamentalists Get Away With Murder in Pakistan,” *Foreign Policy*, December 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/08/pakistan-blasphemy-killing-priyantha-kumara-islam/>.
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- <sup>157</sup> Ecaterina Matoi, "Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan: A Rising Extremist Force, or Just the Tip of Larger Radicalised Iceberg in the AfPak Region," *Scientific Research and Education in the Air Force*, 2021, pp. 203-222, <https://www.afahc.ro/ro/afases/2021/26-EcaterinaMATOI.pdf>; Imran Ahmed and Hatizah Rashid, "Church Attacks in Jaranwala and the Issue of Religious Intolerance in Pakistan," *Institute of South Asian Studies*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/church-attacks-in-jaranwala-and-the-issue-of-religious-intolerance-in-pakistan/>.
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TLP uses street pressure through social movement structure to compensate for its weak political clout and to pressurise the state to accept its political demands.



# Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

**Raffaello Pantucci**

*Central Asian militants continue to pose more terrorist threats abroad than at home. Though no large-scale terrorist attacks were witnessed in 2023 within the five countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), armed clashes and a steady patten of detentions at home and abroad stood out as two major trends. Neighbouring Xinjiang also remained quiet, with no reported attacks or major plots disrupted. Regional concerns continue to focus on Afghanistan, though so far, the problems Afghanistan has exported have for the most part gone south to Pakistan (or east to Iran) rather than north into Central Asia. However, the repeated appearance of Tajik nationals in terrorist attacks and plots around the world is concerning. In Afghanistan and Syria, Central Asian (including Uyghur) militants continue to play a prominent role, though whether this poses more than just a local threat remains to be seen.*

## Trends

### *Rise of the Tajiks*

Whilst not an entirely new phenomenon, this past year saw a spike in Tajik nationals appearing in substantial terrorist plots in a growing number of places. Many of these were linked to the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), though in some cases the nature of the link and direction was not clear.

The first such instance claimed in 2023 actually took place in December 2022, when a pair of Tajik ISK members launched an attack from within a Chinese-run hotel in downtown Kabul.<sup>1</sup> One of the two survived, and, according to ISK, went on to carry out a suicide bombing against Kabul's military airport on January 1, 2023.<sup>2</sup> In March, an explosion killed the Taliban's governor for Balkh province, Mohammad Daud Muzammil, who had played a crucial role in dismantling ISK's network in Nangarhar and had been a close associate of Taliban leader Haibatullah.<sup>3</sup> Reportedly, the assassin was a Tajik militant who hid explosives in his prosthetic leg.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2023, there was an attack at the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz, Iran, which led to two deaths and numerous injuries.<sup>5</sup> A Tajik was arrested and others detained in the subsequent investigation.<sup>6</sup> This was the second attack by a Tajik linked to ISK on this particular target in just under a year. While there is no doubt there is a tense rivalry between ISK and Iran, in part due to the ideological weight that ISK narratives put on Shia apostasy, there is also likely an opportunistic element to ISK's efforts against Iran. With a long and porous border with Afghanistan, alongside a large resident Afghan diaspora, Iran is likely a relatively easy target for ISK to strike. Given the narrative importance of the target, it is therefore likely a priority for the group in order to demonstrate its ability to project violence against its enemies successfully. It is certainly a considerable failure and demonstration of weakness by Iranian security forces that the same target could be hit twice in under a year.

Numerous Tajiks were also detained for their involvement in terrorist plots further afield. On New Year's Eve 2022, authorities in Istanbul detained a Tajik-Uzbek pair who were reportedly planning an attack under instruction and training by ISK.<sup>7</sup> In mid-January 2023, Turkish authorities detained a 15-member cell in Istanbul allegedly inspired by ISK for a series of plots targeting the Swedish and Dutch consulates, as well as churches and synagogues in the city.<sup>8</sup> The leader of the cell was a Tajik who had been dispatched personally by ISK's leadership in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> Soon after this news was made public, authorities in Turkey detained another Tajik national, a senior figure in ISK, and his wife.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, in late June, German authorities detained seven men and Dutch authorities detained a couple, allegedly for an undefined IS-linked terrorist plot.<sup>11</sup> Five of those detained in Germany and one in Holland were Tajikistanis. Finally, in October, Russian authorities presented a case against a group of five Tajiks and one Dagestani whom they accused of being behind a terrorist plot to attack the Lubyanka, the headquarters of Russia's domestic intelligence service, the Federal Security Service (FSB).<sup>12</sup>

Full details and information on all these plots and cases are unclear (nor is this list exhaustive – numerous other arrests of Tajikistanis have also been seen in other Central Asian countries and beyond), but they paint a worrying picture of Tajikistanis repeatedly appearing, either responsible for or accused of terrorist activity linked to ISK outside their borders. Whilst Tajiks were noted for their prominent role within IS in Syria as the group's most willing would-be suicide bombers,<sup>13</sup> and they have already been appearing as attackers around the world in growing numbers for some years,<sup>14</sup> the pace of their appearances has increased. The Taliban have also noted this and one of their supporting news organisations, Al-Mirsaad, released a video highlighting the connection and claiming that almost all of the attacks in Afghanistan over the previous 10 months had been undertaken by Tajiks, drawing on "information" they had received and confessions from various Tajiks in Taliban custody.<sup>15</sup>

A plausible explanation of the surge in Tajiks' involvement in terrorist attacks in 2023 is difficult due to the scarcity of reliable data. Nonetheless, the martyrdom statements or confessions released by either ISK or the Taliban point to individual anger that in part stems from the oppressive and anti-Islamic nature of the Tajik government. However, a curious fact is that there have been no major attacks in Tajikistan itself.<sup>16</sup> It is certainly notable that many of those who have been radicalised appear to do so while living in Russia. Again, it is difficult to decipher whether this is because radical networks target the Tajiks there specifically; the experience of being migrant labourers in Russia contributes to radicalisation vulnerability; some other factors; or a combination of all of the above. It is also notable that in sheer volume terms, there are far more Uzbeks in Russia than Tajiks. Yet, it is the Tajiks who are radicalising to violence in proportionally larger numbers. It is possible that the newly created recruitment networks are simply able to recruit and activate people with ease – flowing from supportive to active roles. For example, the suicide bomber responsible for the June 2022 ISK attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul was a Tajik who had previously served as the chief of Tajik language media for the group.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad Internationalises?*

In March 2022, the US government announced the addition of Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) to its roster of proscribed terrorist organisations.<sup>18</sup> Mostly active in Syria, KTJ has nonetheless shown that its tentacles reach beyond Syria and Central Asia. Between December 2022 and January 2023, South Korean authorities deported 10 individuals of Central Asian origin whom they accused of sending money in support of KTJ.<sup>19</sup> Those arrested in January were accused of using cryptocurrencies,<sup>20</sup> part of a much wider deployment of such funding methodologies by Central Asians.<sup>21</sup>

In April, Indonesian authorities were shocked when an attempted deportation of Uzbek nationals turned into a violent confrontation in which at least one security officer was killed.<sup>22</sup> The Uzbeks were reported to be linked to KTJ and had entered the country earlier in the year for unspecified reasons. Some were reported to be linked to local militant groups, though the exact nature of their intended radical activity was not clear. There was a suggestion that they might have been involved in the production of extremist materials.

In August, authorities in Philadelphia, US, arrested a 17 year old linked to KTJ through social media who had seemingly procured bomb-making materials.<sup>23</sup> The exact nature of his link to KTJ was unclear aside from the public statements by local authorities.

Whilst this roster of radical activity paints a picture of a group increasingly going global, when looking in detail at the cases, the links between the group and this activity seem distant. In each

case, KTJ's involvement appears passive, something reflective of the fact that the group itself appears for the most part focused on the battlefield in Syria where it fights alongside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).<sup>24</sup> According to the United Nations (UN) Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team's February 2023 report, in the wake of KTJ's proscription by the US government, HTS commanded the group's name be changed to "Liwa Abu Ubayda".<sup>25</sup> At the time, its strength was placed at around 800 fighters, a cohort described as "the most capable Central Asian terrorist group acting under the HTS umbrella".<sup>26</sup> In May 2023, the US Treasury Department added a Turkey-based key fund-raiser, Kubilay Sari, to its list of sanctioned individuals, accusing him of fund-raising globally and sending battlefield equipment to the group's fighters in Syria.<sup>27</sup>

### *Foreign Battlefields*

As illustrated above, Afghanistan and Syria continue to be the priority foreign battlefields for Central Asians, with residual cases associated with IS in Syria and Iraq still posing security challenges for authorities. While the Central Asian governments have been far more forward-leaning in repatriating their nationals from the Levant, a number still remain there. In 2023, a number of videos emerged from Iraq of Kazakh<sup>28</sup> and Uzbek<sup>29</sup> women, incarcerated on charges of being linked to IS, pleading with their governments to bring them home. In May, some 104 women, children and adolescents were brought back by the Tajik government from Syria, alongside five Kazakhs at Astana's request.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Kyrgyz authorities were reported talking to the Iraqi government in April about bringing back 41 of their nationals.<sup>31</sup> Separately, two Kyrgyz groups of 59 (in February) and 95 (in August) were repatriated from camps in Syria during the reporting year.<sup>32</sup> There is little clarity as to how many Central Asian nationals are still in custody (or fighting) in Syria and Iraq.

A new concern has arisen, however, over the past year of Central Asian nationals participating in the Russia-Ukraine war. Legislation has been passed in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan making it illegal to go and fight, while the Tajik authorities have told people not to go or face potential conviction. It is not clear whether Turkmenistan has done anything about this specific issue. Nevertheless, stories continue to emerge of Central Asians going to join in the war. In October, a court in Uzbekistan sentenced a man to five years in prison for fighting alongside Russian-backed forces in Donetsk.<sup>33</sup> In June, authorities in northern Kazakhstan (a region with a large ethnic Russian population) reported identifying efforts to recruit people to go and fight in Ukraine, with reports that Kazakhs had been found fighting on both sides.<sup>34</sup> Stories also continue to emerge of Central Asian labourers in Russia being coerced or tricked into joining the fighting.<sup>35</sup>

Authorities in Central Asia have also expressed some concern about ideologies linked to the battlefield spreading among their populations. For instance, a group of Kyrgyz youth was arrested in August after attacking "Asians" and using fascist imagery in Bishkek and Chuy regions.<sup>36</sup> The young men were potentially in part inspired by nationalist messaging they had heard from Russia. Similarly, authorities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan moved in March to disrupt an online community called PMC Redan, which draws inspiration from Japanese anime to incite youth to large brawls. An online community which is present in Belarus and Russia as well, some Uzbek commentators have linked the group to Moscow, suggesting it is being stirred up by Russian nationalists. Others, it should be noted, have blamed the US.<sup>37</sup> This story brings into sharp focus how the region is constantly seeking to identify and is highly concerned about any possible overspill of the conflict in Ukraine – either through people or ideas.

### **Central Asia: A Quiet Front**

The growing presence of Central Asian jihadists around the world belies a curious paradox at home, where no major terrorist attacks were reported this past year. Whilst all five countries display concern about potential threats, participate in both global and regional sessions focused on terrorist and extremist threats, and seem preoccupied about events in Afghanistan, there have been very few instances of violence or publicly revealed plots indicating high levels of planning and sophistication.

### *Kazakhstan*

For example, in Kazakhstan, while authorities throughout the year continued to detain individuals on charges of propagating extremism, there were no open trials involving major terrorist plots. This does not mean they did not disrupt any, however. In April, the authorities reported detaining an anonymous foreigner for planning a terrorist attack in the south of the country.<sup>38</sup> In August, security chief Yermek Sagimbayev expanded on this threat picture when he said that earlier in the year his forces had disrupted and neutralised a radical group “[p]lanning terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan”.<sup>39</sup> In June, they reported detaining some 31 individuals in the year to date.<sup>40</sup> Highlighting the level of concern they see, the Deputy Chief of the National Security Council flagged that there are around 80,000 Kazakhs consuming extremist materials online.<sup>41</sup>

### *Kyrgyzstan*

The situation in Kyrgyzstan was no different, though authorities did get involved in a shoot-out with an individual identified as an extremist in May in Chuy region. Two officers were injured while the man was shot.<sup>42</sup> In other cases, authorities arrested individuals they variously linked to Hizb ut-Tahrir, Afghanistan, KTJ and other anonymous groups. Kyrgyzstan also appears to have become something of a source of passports for extremists trying to mask their countries of origin. In March<sup>43</sup> and June,<sup>44</sup> cases were revealed of individuals manufacturing or doctoring Kyrgyz passports to facilitate extremists’ travel. In many ways, however, the bigger security threat Kyrgyzstan faces is its border dispute with Tajikistan, which, while quieter this past year, has led to a substantial military build-up between the two countries (more in the next section).

### *Tajikistan*

As already highlighted, the biggest feature of Tajik extremism during the reporting period was its growing appearance around the world. At home, however, authorities found themselves fighting conflicts on two borders, while also reporting a year-on-year growth of 18 percent between 2021 and 2022 of terrorism-related crimes.<sup>45</sup> In April 2023, a senior figure in the local security forces was killed in a shootout with unidentified assailants from across the border in Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> A similar incident played out in September, leading to no more security forces deaths but ending three cross-border terrorists.<sup>47</sup> There are other, less verifiable stories of such border clashes, with authorities often blaming a group called Jamaat Ansarullah, which has been fighting the Tajik state for some time to little effect. Reportedly, the group numbers a couple hundred and retains limited capability.

Tajik security forces, for the most part, seem more focused on their border with Kyrgyzstan. In the wake of clashes in 2022 (a continuation of clashes that date back to the foundation of the two countries), dozens were killed and tensions have continued to grow on the border. Currently, both sides are increasing their military and security spending on their border, including purchasing unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology from Iran and Turkey, something that is likely to remove capability from confronting security threats that may come across the border from Afghanistan.<sup>48</sup>

### *Turkmenistan*

There was no reporting of instances of violence or extremism within Turkmenistan during the past year. Surprisingly, amongst the Central Asians arrested in Germany in July, there was a Turkmen national identified – something of a rarity in jihadist reporting.<sup>49</sup> Other than this, experts in Ashgabat reported a threat picture which is limited to occasional cross-border incidents with Afghan forces largely blamed on criminal networks.

### *Uzbekistan*

Similar to the other nations, Uzbekistan did not face any attacks within its borders in 2023. However, the country saw a regular rate of arrests of locals on terrorism-related offences, including a relatively high number accused of planning to go and join groups in Syria. In October alone, two separate clusters of a total of 13 individuals were arrested on accusations of planning to go to Syria

to fight alongside KTJ.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the year, other arrests and detentions were made, for the most part involving the propagation of extremist materials. In September, authorities announced that Ulugbek Bobomurodov, the leader of Syria-based Katibat al-Imam al-Bukhari, was killed fighting in Syria.<sup>51</sup> His death was not widely reported, but highlighted how the groups in Syria continue to have a sway on and link to Central Asia in particular.

### *Xinjiang*

The security situation in Xinjiang also remained peaceful as there were no arrests or attacks reported.<sup>52</sup> The UN Monitoring Team's analysis based on member state reporting suggests that the contingent of Uyghurs fighting under the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)'s banner in Syria and Afghanistan remains substantial. According to UN reporting in February, the group was fighting alongside HTS in Afrin, including in the joint deployment of UAV platforms. The group had reportedly trained some 500 "minors" of whom at least 200 fought on frontlines.<sup>53</sup> The group also reportedly plotted alongside the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jamaat Ansarullah and ISK in Afghanistan – including planning attacks against the Chinese presence in Kabul.<sup>54</sup>

In May, the group was reported to have between 300-1,200 fighters in Afghanistan running multiple bases, with many fighters now possessing Afghan passports and identity documents.<sup>55</sup> According to the UN Monitoring Team's June report, the group reportedly dispatched individuals to establish bases in Africa and South Asia in an attempt to expand its operations and target "Chinese nationals and agencies".<sup>56</sup> However, reading the group's propaganda materials, it is difficult to draw similar conclusions about their actions and intent, with the group seemingly still largely focused on fighting on the ground in Syria, with occasional videos showing its presence in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> There have also been no publicly reported attacks by the group on Chinese targets. Beijing in the meantime continues to prioritise its concerns around Uyghur militants associated with ETIM/TIP in its interactions with Taliban authorities, as well as making regular mention of them during discussions with Central Asian interlocutors.

### **Conclusion**

From a global terrorism threat perspective, Central Asia remains a source of concern. Networks associated with the region – be they ISK, KTJ or others – continue to emerge around the world, with a geographical reach that appears unparalleled. The history and depth of this link were illustrated in 2023 with the revelation in UN reporting that an Uzbek-Finn, who had been involved in the radicalisation of a Moroccan asylum seeker who launched an IS-inspired attack in Finland in 2017,<sup>58</sup> has now emerged in Afghanistan alongside ISK, where he is a key figure in the production of extremist materials.<sup>59</sup> This case highlights the European-Central Asian connection which appears to be part of the particular threat ISK poses to Europe, while also illustrating the reach of the group's extremist narratives amongst the growing and diffuse Central Asian diaspora.

The particular rise of Tajiks in the frontline of attacks highlights a risk to the country, which appears to have one of the weakest security apparatuses in the region, yet at the same time the reality is that no attacks have taken place on Tajik soil in the past year. This is only one of the many paradoxes that appears to exist in Central Asian extremism, which as a region appears to increasingly have one of the most substantial, widespread and threatening networks of violent jihadists around the world, yet who at the same time seem disinterested in launching attacks at home where presumably their biggest target of rage would be. What is clear, however, is that the threat persists and is going to continue to be a priority for international security actors. For Europe in particular, the menace appears strong, and, as was seen in incidents in the past few years in the US as well as in links across Southeast Asia, the network's reach is far. Central Asian extremism will continue to be something for security officials around the world to pay attention to over the coming years.

### **About the Author**

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# The Middle East

Amin Saikal

*Following the recent Israel-Palestine tensions in October 2023, the Middle East is once again on a potentially combustive path that the region has not witnessed since the 1973 Arab-Israel War. As Israel is intent on eliminating Hamas despite mounting civilian casualties in Gaza, the persistence of the conflict potentially runs the twin risks of ballooning into a wider regional conflagration, with Iranian proxies or the so-called Axis of Resistance waiting in the shadows, and providing opportunities to the Middle Eastern jihadist groups to exploit the conflict for recruitment and narrative wars. Ostensibly, the Israel-Palestine tensions have paused the Arab-Israel normalisation initiated under the Abraham Accords, and overshadowed the enduring trends of violent extremism, state-society tensions and major power interventionism in the Middle East as well as the Saudi-Iran détente midwifed by China.*

## Trends

As a significant strategic and hydrocarbon-rich region, the Middle East changed dramatically with an unprecedented war between the Palestinian Islamist resistance movement Hamas and Israel. Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel from Gaza and Israel's massive response to eliminate the group deeply shook the region. The event constituted a critical threat to what was already a fragile and insecure region. It came against the backdrop of not only some positive steps taken by the main regional players towards improved relations, but also several other sources of threat to the region. These sources range from violent extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ), the Islamic State (IS) and their affiliates as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan; inter-state tensions; national upheavals; and major power interventionism.

The Middle East witnessed some favourable signs of improved regional relations in 2023, such as the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two regional rivals reached a China-brokered deal through lengthy backchannel negotiations and announced full resumption of diplomatic relations on March 10, 2023, after a seven-year split.<sup>1</sup> As the most influential actors in the Gulf who play a critical role in the wider Middle East, Tehran and Riyadh had been at loggerheads in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen by backing opposing sides, in one form or another. For confidence-building, they still have a long way to go; however, their initial steps to dial down ideological and geo-sectarian differences augur well for possible wider regional cooperation and conflict resolution as well as containment of violent extremism in the region.

The Arab League's re-admission of Syria to its membership was another important trend. In a turnaround, the League welcomed President Bashar al-Assad to its Riyadh meeting in May. The League concluded that despite the continuation of the Syrian conflict and Assad's brutal repression of the opposition, with the active backing of Iran, Russia and the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad regime had survived, and it was better to have it inside the tent rather than outside. However, this did not amount to full normalisation of Syria's relations with all the League members, which have their individual criteria and conditions. It nonetheless marked the end of a variable that had added to the historical divisions within the League and served as an impediment to at least a semblance of unity among the Arab countries. Whatever the future, the event pleased the Assad leadership and its outside supporters. This, in combination with the Saudi-Iran détente, was generally viewed as a stabilising development in the region, although to the chagrin of Israel and the United States (US) and its allies.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Türkiye's frosty relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)<sup>3</sup> and Israel experienced an improving trajectory. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was re-elected in May, decided that he needed more investment from and trade with the Middle Eastern oil-rich states to help Türkiye's economic and financial woes. His diplomatic charm offensives improved relations with those states. In the context of Türkiye being a member of the North Atlantic

Treaty Organisation (NATO) and pursuing balanced relations with major powers, he deemed it desirable to upgrade relations with Israel as America's important strategic partner in the region, while maintaining strong support for the Palestinian cause.<sup>4</sup> As part of this balancing act, Türkiye-Iran ties also saw an upward trend, despite the two parties' opposing sides in the Syrian conflict.

### *Regional Tensions and Conflicts*

Despite Iran-Saudi rapprochement and improvement in Türkiye's relations with key regional players, the Middle East remained prone to instability from the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as those in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and Libya. The danger of another flare-up on the Israeli-Palestinian front was never too far away during the year. The biggest eruption in 2023 came between Hamas and Israel. It was sparked by Hamas' unexpectedly large assault from the air, sea and land on southern Israel on October 7. Hamas fighters killed some 1,200 Israelis, injured many more, and kidnapped about 240 Israeli civilian and military personnel, including several children and foreign nationals.<sup>5</sup> The attacks seemingly caught Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's most right-wing government in Israel's history and its array of intelligence and security forces, which were supposed to be the best in the region, off guard. It also surprised the US as the main supporter of the Jewish state.

Yet, as the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres stated, the Hamas offensives "did not happen in a vacuum".<sup>6</sup> It came against the backdrop of Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. Indeed, Israel relinquished its control of the tiny and extremely densely populated Gaza as costly, ungovernable and squalid in 2005. But it nonetheless imposed a comprehensive blockade of it, turning the Strip into what former British prime minister David Cameron once called the largest "open air prison camp".<sup>7</sup> When Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, Israel rejected the outcome, declaring the group a "terrorist organisation", with the US and some of its Western allies following suit. Hamas' takeover of the Strip in 2007 caused a split with the Palestinian Authority (PA) as Israel's partner in peace, but largely in nominal control of the occupied West Bank.

In contrast to the PA, Hamas conditioned its recognition of the state of Israel on the creation of an independent Palestinian state first. With Israel further tightening Gaza's blockade, Israel-Hamas hostility deepened. It resulted in several confrontations over the years. This was despite Israel having initially backed Hamas when the movement was founded in 1987 as a counter to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). The latter subsequently formed the core of the PA, which was set up as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people under the September 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, signed by Israel and the PLO. The Accords provisioned the creation of an independent Palestinian state within five years, but Israel's intransigence in this respect was the main reason for the burgeoning of Hamas with active resistance to occupation, involving violent action that Israel called terrorism.

The October 7 Hamas offensives, planned and executed elaborately away from Israel's eyes, were certainly appalling and indefensible under international humanitarian law. But they essentially stemmed from a situation of no war, no peace. Former US president Barack Obama's push for a political settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict irrevocably ended in 2014, with Netanyahu declaring in March 2015 that there would not be a Palestinian state on his watch.<sup>8</sup> They also arose amid escalating Israeli-Palestinian tensions and clashes in the West Bank, Israel's two massive raids into Jenin refugee camp,<sup>9</sup> violation of the sanctity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, expansion of settlements and Jewish settlers' revengeful attacks on the Palestinians. By August, more than 200 Palestinians, along with some 30 Israelis, had been killed in intermittent violent incidents.<sup>10</sup>

The Hamas attacks challenged the status quo and Israel's position as the most powerful state in the Middle East and Netanyahu's personal reputation as Israel's security provider. They also played into the hands of the legally besieged Netanyahu, who faces charges of fraud, and fanatic members of his cabinet, to boost their anti-Palestinian credentials. The finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, even denied the very existence of a Palestinian people.<sup>11</sup>

Israel responded with a declaration of war on Hamas and an overwhelming application of brute force to eradicate the group at all costs. Backed by the US and its Western allies, Netanyahu and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) found it opportune to act with total impunity. During the first four weeks of the war alone, Israel dropped more than 6,000 bombs on Gaza, killed over 10,000 civilians, including some 4,000 children, turning the Strip, in the words of Guterres, into a “graveyard for children”,<sup>12</sup> dislocated one million of Gaza’s 2.3 million population and destroyed more than one-third of the Strip. This was in addition to depriving the Gazans of the basic means of survival – food, water, electricity, fuel and medicine – creating the biggest humanitarian crisis of the century.

While the UN Security Council was paralysed, Guterres called for a humanitarian ceasefire, only to be rejected by the Netanyahu and Joe Biden administrations, arguing that it would amount to surrendering to Hamas. The US moved forces to the east of the Mediterranean to warn the powerful arch-enemies of Israel and the US – the Lebanese Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, the latter of which has nurtured close links to two of America’s major adversaries, Russia and China – against entering the war in support of Hamas. However, as the crisis intensified, the US and other international supporters of Israel found it imperative to parallel their initial unqualified support of Israel with an effort to ease the suffering of the people of Gaza under what the UN called Israel’s “collective punishment”, and minimise the damage to the US and allied global reputation as complicit in Israel’s devastation of Gaza.

The US backed a Qatari mediation, with Egypt’s assistance, to pressure Israel to agree to a “pause” in the fighting to secure the release of Israeli hostages in return for the freedom of some Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails. The two warring parties commenced, on November 24, a four-day pause, which was renewed twice for another three days. This resulted in the freedom of some 70 women and children hostages in return for the release of 240 Palestinians – most of them minors – from Israeli prisons, and the transfer of more humanitarian aid to the destitute people of Gaza. Yet, Netanyahu vowed all along to resume fighting to achieve Israel’s goal of eliminating Hamas. At the end of the seven-day pause, the two sides accused each other of violating the terms of their agreement and fighting resumed, with Israel extending its massive military operations on the ground and from the air and sea across Gaza at the cost of more Palestinian lives and devastation. The situation remains highly polarising and potentially explosive at regional and international levels.

These developments have eclipsed some of the other sources of threat, which have continued to haunt the region as in the past. The most important ones are the following three.

### *Violent Extremism*

Attacks by violent extremist groups generally subsided during the year in the region under the weight of counter terrorism pressure from states and major powers, although mostly from the US. However, IS and AQ, along with their branches, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, as well as the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan, remained active mostly in the region’s conflict-ridden zones. IS was availed the necessary opportunity “to rebuild its rank and file”<sup>13</sup> in fragile Syria and Iraq. IS operations kept the US-led Combined Special Operations Joint Task Force-Levant and regional partners very busy in targeting IS- and AQ-linked bases and sites wherever necessary and in strengthening regional capability against the groups.<sup>14</sup>

The triumphant return to power of the erstwhile terrorist Taliban in Afghanistan, in the wake of the US and allied defeat in mid-August 2021, boosted the group’s long-standing ally, AQ. Contrary to the Taliban’s denial of links with AQ and claim of success against the rival ISK, both entities remain active in Afghanistan. AQ has never been stronger in the country since 9/11, protected by and working with the Taliban. According to former CIA targeting officer and current global threat advisor Sarah Adams, “there are still 15 high-profile terrorists, including individuals from Al-Qaeda and other well-known terrorist groups in Afghanistan”.<sup>15</sup> ISK continued its periodic attacks across the

land, with its latest operation causing a bus explosion in Kabul on November 7, killing seven and injuring 20 people.<sup>16</sup> These developments, which could only encourage other like-minded groups to aim for victory, prompted a UN warning in June about the danger of terrorism from Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the Iran-backed Hezbollah, which is designated as a terrorist organisation by Israel and the US and some of its allies, remained a very strong political and paramilitary force in Lebanon. The group, representing the Shia segment of Lebanon's divided population along confessional lines, enjoyed a virtually veto power within Lebanon's power structure and continued to be widely viewed as Iran's heavily armed regional proxy against Israel and the US. It possesses a highly disciplined and battle-hardened fighting force, equipped with more than 100,000 Iran-made rockets, including precision and anti-ship missiles, and drones in its inventory.<sup>18</sup>

In the war with Hamas, Israel and the US strongly feared the possibility of Hezbollah joining the Palestinian group in a full-blown war. However, while Hezbollah engaged in some cross-border operations and Israel targeted several of its bases in southern Lebanon, it appeared that neither Hezbollah nor its Iranian patron were finding it opportune to enter a major confrontation. In a defining speech on November 3, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, praised Hamas' action as heroic, but at the same time disassociated his organisation from it by saying that it "was 100 percent Palestinian"<sup>19</sup> in terms of both decision and execution. Even so, he reserved the option of joining the fight should the circumstances demand it. Whatever the future, Hezbollah is destined to remain a critical player in both the Lebanese and regional landscapes.

### *National Upheavals*

Most of the Middle Eastern states continued to live under authoritarian rulers, who focused primarily on such developmental and security changes that could serve the continuation of their reign and preservation of the status quo. This persisted in the face of the societal forces that demanded political pluralism, individual rights and freedoms, and popularly mandated governments, as well as an end to state repression, human rights violations, and social and economic inequity and injustices. A state-society dichotomy persisted in all states, although in varying degrees, and many of the region's countries experienced major civil unrest and state suppression.

For example, Iran saw a major upheaval, led by the "Women, Life and Freedom" movement. Although it had started as a protest over wearing the hijab, it also embodied wider public disenchantment with the country's Islamic regime over theocratic impositions and restrictions and declining socioeconomic conditions, partly due to international sanctions but largely because of mismanagement. Though the regime contained the protests through repressive measures, the underlying causes and societal grievances remain unaddressed as a source of threat to national stability.<sup>20</sup>

In some other cases, the gulf between state and society grew beyond social unrest. This was more prominently evident in Sudan. The struggle between the public's demand for democratic change and the military's determination to retain power since the demise of the country's long-standing dictator, Omar al-Bashir, in April 2019, led to a devastating conflict between the security forces. The fight for power between the leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces and a paramilitary group, called the Rapid Support Forces, plunged Sudan into a calamitous political, economic and humanitarian crisis. It threatened not only the destruction of the very fabric of Sudanese society, but also regional stability.<sup>21</sup>

The rest of the Middle Eastern states also suffered from political and social protests and forceful state crackdowns. For instance, Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt figured prominently among them. Israel was not spared either. Netanyahu's government saw massive public protests over its decision to reduce the power of the judiciary in favour of the executive within the Israeli governmental system. As for the other ongoing conflict-ridden spots, more specifically Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, they stood in a class of their own as sources of national and regional instability.

### *Major Power Interventionism (In a Polarised World)*

The Middle East, and more specifically its Gulf subset, endured growing major power involvement in a highly divided world. The US, which had traditionally been the main player in the region, had to contend with China and Russia's growing influence in the region. The heightening Sino-Iranian and Russo-Iranian multi-level economic and strategic cooperation, as well as the two powers' expansion of ties with other receptive states in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, marked an important development. The de facto but wealthy and ambitious Saudi leader, Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS), sought to diversify his kingdom's foreign relations – not to debase his country's traditional bonds with the US as its main security provider, but to be in a position to deflect Washington's pressure when required. He was seriously taken aback by US President Biden's earlier criticism of him for human rights violations, especially in relation to the gruesome killing of the Saudi dissident, Jamal Khashoggi, in Istanbul in 2018.<sup>22</sup> The president's release of US intelligence alleging the prince's involvement in that killing has had a residual effect on MBS, prompting him to strengthen relations with China and Russia.<sup>23</sup> Also, the US defeat in Afghanistan led him, along with some of his Arab counterparts in the Gulf Cooperation Council, to become doubtful of the US as a reliable ally.<sup>24</sup>

The UAE also sought to energise ties with America's adversarial powers. Its president Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in June for strengthening of ties. While MBZ desired closer relations, the Russian leader praised such a development.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi enhanced Cairo's relations with Moscow for both economic and strategic reasons. He wanted to meet his country's need for Russian food grain as well as to balance relations with Washington,<sup>26</sup> despite the latter's close to US\$2 billion annual aid that props up the Egyptian military as the backbone of al-Sisi's rule. The US' full-throated support of Israel against Hamas also signalled that America is still a powerful player in the region, although an entailing Arab/Muslim backlash cannot be underestimated. As such, the Middle East endures as an arena of intense major power rivalries.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Middle East indeed experienced some earlier hopeful signs of improved relations among some of its main players, the Israel-Hamas war has caused a serious blow to these nascent developments. With Iran and its regional allies backing Hamas, although not to such an extent as aiding it by opening a northern front from Lebanon and Syria against Israel, the Arab countries have reeled from Israel's devastating response to Hamas' attacks on Israel. Those Arab countries that had normalised relations with Israel, such as Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, with Saudi Arabia on the verge of doing so, could no longer find it expedient to be favourably disposed towards the Jewish state. Nor could they ignore public outrage over their failure to prompt Israel, through the US, to enforce an immediate ceasefire to minimise the suffering of the Gazan people and to prevent Israel from flattening the Strip. The Middle East has once again been placed on a potentially combustible path that the region has not seen since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

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# Digital Shadows: Key Trends in Online Extremist Narratives and Activities in 2023

Benjamin Mok and Saddiq Basha

*In 2023, online extremism persisted with extremist Islamist and far right extremist (FRE) actors adapting and refining their digital strategies, amidst relaxed moderation across online spaces and mainstream social media platforms. Jihadist groups, particularly the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliates, are leveraging a sophisticated and decentralised approach in propagating extremist narratives, combining official and unofficial sources to bypass moderation efforts. Ostensibly, this shift towards interactive and borderline content obscures the line between serious extremist narratives and innocuous postings. Meanwhile, the rise in FRE narratives globally underscores diversification of ideological divides, with an emphasis on reinforcing existing biases and advocating for violence, indicative of a potential escalation in real-world conflicts and ideological confrontations. These narratives, fuelled by political turmoil and societal discord, portray a trend of intensified and diversified extremist ideologies, reflecting a broad spectrum of threats.*

## Developments Within the Extremist Online Sphere

As digital evolution continues to shape narratives and communities worldwide, online activities by terrorist and extremist actors remain a key threat in counter terrorism assessments. The inception and circulation of extremist narratives, coupled with community activities such as discussions between like-minded parties, burgeoned within platforms ranging from mainstream social media to obscure, underground forums.

In 2023, the digital landscape was impacted by an industry-wide re-evaluation and diminution in moderation resources within the technology sector.<sup>1</sup> The ramifications of this are pivotal, heralding medium- to long-term consequences as extremist factions evolve, capitalising on the dilution of moderation measures, particularly within mainstream social media platforms.<sup>2</sup>

## The Survival of Islamist Extremism Online Amidst Ongoing Platform Moderation

In November 2019, a Europol-led purge of jihadist activity on the encrypted messaging platform Telegram marked the beginning of a new push for moderation efforts targeting Islamist extremist content, accounts and groups (CAGs).<sup>3</sup> This push has largely been successful over the past three years,<sup>4</sup> curtailing the online activities and propaganda of jihadists to this day, particularly when compared to the impunity with which they operated prior to moderation efforts before 2019.<sup>5</sup> Most notably, the loss of easy access to Telegram – the core platform favoured by the CAGs following purges on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram – has since resulted in significant disruption to their propaganda distribution and the building of online communities.<sup>6</sup> This focus on moderating Telegram continues to this day, with the reported removal of 15,021,951 instances of extremist content and the shutdown of 6,824 channels in 2022.<sup>7</sup> Attempts by jihadist CAGs to recover from these takedowns have shown mixed results, particularly in regions that enjoy less support from established jihadist groups and communities, and that possess higher moderation capabilities, such as South Asia.<sup>8</sup>

However, reports indicate that while the volume of such jihadist CAGs on Telegram has declined, they nonetheless continue to persist through the creation of new private channels backed up by bot automation.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that despite the significant volume of removal reported in 2022, many new extremist channels were subsequently created, replacing those that were taken down.<sup>10</sup>

Looking beyond Telegram, jihadist communities have a vibrant online ecosystem which is spread across a variety of small, less regulated platforms.<sup>11</sup> Popular encrypted messaging platforms



hosting jihadist CAGs include Hoop Messenger, TamTam, Rocket Chat and Element, all of which possess minimal content moderation.<sup>12</sup> Password-protected forums, the platform of choice for jihadist activity prior to the proliferation of mainstream social media and messaging platforms,<sup>13</sup> remain active.<sup>14</sup> Other forums traditionally used by far right extremists have also been co-opted by some users to host jihadist content, as seen in the regular posting of *nasheed* (Islamic vocal music) threads on 4Chan.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, while the dark web has been eschewed as a core platform for outreach and propaganda by online jihadists due to its inaccessibility, it is nevertheless used as a repository for past propaganda materials.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps most concerning amongst these general trends is the realisation that the mainstream social media platforms operated by major tech companies, particularly Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok,<sup>17</sup> have once again become susceptible to infiltration by jihadist CAGs, despite prior efforts to purge their respective platforms of such content.<sup>18</sup> The factors allowing for such re-entry into these mainstream platforms are manifold, but can largely be divided into two categories: 1) technical expertise allowing for the evasion of automated moderation used by these platforms;<sup>19</sup> and 2) the adoption of borderline content,<sup>20</sup> i.e., radical materials tied to jihadist CAGs that do not violate platform policies and could potentially radicalise consumers.

The above trends point to an ongoing “learning competition” between online platforms seeking to eliminate jihadist CAGs, and the jihadists seeking to bypass such moderation efforts.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, many of these actors do not belong to any particular group, operating as online communities isolated from established organisations. As noted in the following sections, this learning competition involves sophisticated attempts by jihadist CAGs to adapt to the changing online landscape, while at the same time spreading jihadist propaganda and building communities.

## Islamic State (IS)

### *Remaining vs Expanding: An Examination of al-Naba*

Official IS online propaganda continues to demonstrate the organisation’s focus on both *baqiyah* (remaining) and *tatamadad* (expanding), with a shift towards a balance of both, as opposed to favouring the former over the latter as it did in 2021.<sup>22</sup> This shift is apparent through an analysis of a regular infographic featured in IS’ official weekly newsletter, *al-Naba*, which highlights attacks conducted in various IS “provinces”. A numerical breakdown of these self-reported attacks according to province is provided in the chart below (Figure 1).

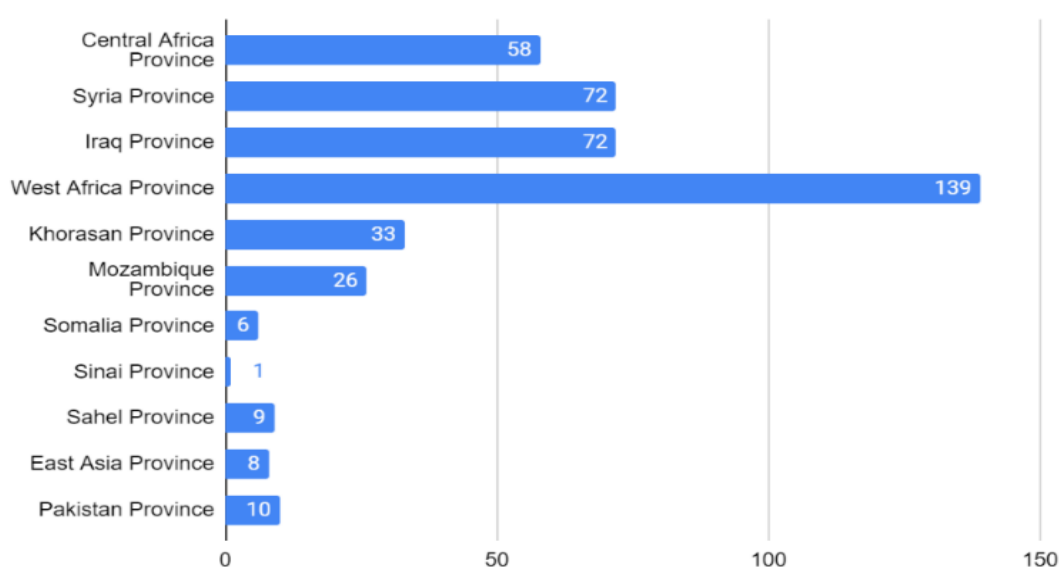


Figure 1: Numerical Breakdown of Attacks by Province Reported in *al-Naba*<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted that these numbers do not necessarily reflect the full scale of IS attacks conducted across its so-called provinces, as the authors of *al-Naba* have indicated that the information provided in the newsletter is partial.<sup>24</sup> Rather, this acts as an indicator of where *al-Naba*'s editorial attention is focused. Viewed through this lens, it is instead apparent that the newsletter's focus is equally split between attacks within the self-proclaimed Syria-Iraq provinces – indicating the focus on *baqiyah* – and attacks within the self-declared African provinces – indicating its shifted focus onto *tatamadad*. This shift was reflected in the editorials provided in the newsletter in 2023, with multiple editorials focused purely on Africa.<sup>25</sup> IS video production has exhibited a similar split in focus: for example, the videos produced by Al-Makatib al-'Ilaamiah<sup>26</sup> in January included one footage detailing attacks carried out against Iraqi security forces,<sup>27</sup> and another highlighting the organisation's campaign in Somalia.<sup>28</sup>

The ideological nuance of this shift towards *tatamadad* in Africa was reflected in the narratives produced in *al-Naba*. The editorial of Issue 388 emphasised that Muslims in Africa are continuing the path set by IS in Iraq and Syria, and that IS' expansion in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo is a “divine reward” for the faith shown by the organisation's fighters in Syria.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, the editorial tied together the notions of both *baqiyah* and *tatamadad*, placing them as mutually reinforcing concepts.

### *Decentralising Online Propaganda and Reconciling It With the Caliphal Institution*

While IS official media has demonstrated a slight shift in focus towards *tatamadad*, the breakdown of reported attacks and contents of *al-Naba* indicates that this shift is primarily targeted towards IS activities in Africa. Meanwhile, regions in which IS operations have been suppressed continue to see reduced attention from online IS propaganda, particularly Southeast Asia following the failed 2017 Marawi Siege.<sup>30</sup> However, this has not resulted in a significant reduction in online production and dissemination of IS propaganda related to other provinces, as unofficial regional and local actors have stepped in to fill the gap.<sup>31</sup>

The trend of decentralisation within IS' online propaganda machine encompasses multiple factors. First, official IS propaganda remains a central pillar of much jihadist CAGs throughout the online sphere; many of the unofficial outlets operate as translators of such material. A key development in this space has been the coalescence in March of numerous such translation entities under a single umbrella coalition named the Fursan al-Tarjuma (Knights of Translation).<sup>32</sup> The group is active across encrypted messaging platforms, particularly Telegram, Rocket Chat and Element.<sup>33</sup> The reach of the group is particularly strong on Rocket Chat, which can be attributed to the established nature of its constituent members, such as the French translation outfit Infos An-Nur (IAN) and the Spanish translation outfit Voice of Al-Andalus (VOA).<sup>34</sup>

Second, unofficial media outfits (Al-Munasirun)<sup>35</sup> have produced their own propaganda content related to a wide range of issues.<sup>36</sup> Many of these pertain to local sociopolitical issues – for example, the Philippines-based Al-Faris Media group (previously known as the East Asia Knights), has produced substantial propaganda focused on the Southeast Asian region, including calls for violence against prominent Southeast Asian political leaders.<sup>37</sup> Some unofficial IS propaganda content has also been produced anonymously, such as the 60-minute documentary titled *The End and the Beginning II: The War Hasn't Started Yet* anonymously circulated on Rocket Chat and Telegram.<sup>38</sup> Other unofficial outlets have also experimented with the production of training materials – for example, in May, a channel named “#The\_Kitchen” was formed on Rocket Chat to provide guidance on creating homemade explosives, in English and Arabic.<sup>39</sup>

Third, much of the decentralised propaganda machine revolves around online community interactions, rather than traditional production of media. The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR)'s research of a major pro-IS Rocket Chat server has shown that users on the server not only actively persuade others to undertake *hijrah* to IS-controlled “provinces”, but also advise on travelling incognito and evading surveillance measures

and border controls.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, many users encourage one another to carry out attacks in their respective areas, sharing training materials on producing homemade weapons and explosives.<sup>41</sup>

Fourth, the decentralisation of IS propaganda has also resulted in increasing sophistication of technical expertise as well as in the masking of proscribed content. The issue of artificial intelligence (AI) automation and chatbots has become a key factor in the learning competition between automated platform moderation and the continued activity of pro-IS CAGs.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the decentralised propaganda machine's reliance on online communities populated by younger generations of pro-IS supporters has resulted in memes and "terrorposting" making up a significant portion of the propaganda content being circulated today.<sup>43</sup> Much of this content can be considered "borderline" content, making it difficult to distinguish between what is posted ironically and what is posted seriously as part of IS' cyber jihad.

The above factors point to the complex dynamic between the centrality of the IS caliphal institution and the decentralised propaganda machine. The issue of unsanctioned online communities coming into friction with centralised portions of IS is not new; the notion of "jihadi fanboys" was coined as early as 2015. It denotes how established members of the IS ecosystem use it as a derogative term for these unsanctioned online content producers.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the March 2022 scandal revealing Afaq, a major unofficial pro-IS online foundation, as a fraudulent group, has brought to the forefront issues of potential trust-related scandals.<sup>45</sup> The outgrowth of IS' decentralised propaganda arms thus conversely runs the risk of highlighting how the once-central IS media production/dissemination hierarchy is diminishing from its prior role as a symbol of the caliphal institution, into the role played by a "paper state".<sup>46</sup> Yet, at the same time, these unofficial IS media outlets and communities remain reliant on IS Central's narratives. Furthermore, it seems that IS Central's strategy has not backed down from its 2014 vision of cyber jihad,<sup>47</sup> and may even come to embrace more of the decentralised nature of the pro-IS online propaganda and community activities emerging within the expanding digital landscape.

#### *Continuation of Trends Surrounding Governance and Identifying Disbelievers*

IS propaganda narratives generated by both centralised and decentralised arms of its propaganda machine have continued to push two key trends: 1) establishing the legitimacy of IS governance (*tamkin*) via "soft" propaganda; and 2) identifying disbelievers (*kuffar*) via theological and socio-political justifications.

With regard to the former, the soft propaganda continues to take the form of announcements and infographics covering issues unrelated to militancy and extremism. For instance, after the Turkey-Syria earthquake in February 2023, *al-Naba* included infographics teaching readers disaster response procedures.<sup>48</sup> Such a trend is also reflected in decentralised propaganda production by unofficial outlets. The Al-Saafat channel, which emerged on Telegram and Instagram in February, produces propaganda specifically focused on the wellness and needs of IS-affiliated women detained in refugee/detainee camps. Apart from the usual theological exhortations and sharing of IS media, the channel's content also includes practical information such as guides on fire safety, cooking and sewing.<sup>49</sup>

With regard to the latter, IS Central has increased its focus on identifying Al-Qaeda (AQ) and its affiliates as *kuffars* in various issues of *al-Naba* and the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)'s flagship English-language propaganda magazine, the *Voice of Khorasan*.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, IS Central's response to its fourth caliph Abu Al-Husayn's alleged killing by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is instructive. In *al-Naba*'s 405<sup>th</sup> issue, IS characterised HTS as a collaborator with Turkish intelligence and apostates of Islam, and promised vengeance against the group.<sup>51</sup> There has also been a steady focus on anti-Israel propaganda in *al-Naba* as well,<sup>52</sup> with the 377<sup>th</sup> issue wholly dedicated to a call for violence against Jews worldwide. It dovetails with another key IS narrative concerning the identification and condemnation of *taghut* (imperialist – implying that the government is a puppet of Western imperialism) governments, particularly the Taliban government in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup>

## Al-Qaeda (AQ)

Following the successful United States (US) drone strike that killed former AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July 2022, the volume of social media propaganda emanating from Afghanistan has decreased noticeably.<sup>54</sup> This shift in online activity came after an initial surge following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, which saw an increased frequency of Zawahiri's India-focused videos and propaganda.<sup>55</sup> AQ's reduced propaganda in Afghanistan could be attributed to the Taliban's desire to keep a low profile. Specifically, this comes as the Taliban, particularly the Haqqani network, seek to establish international legitimacy amid accusations of harbouring Zawahiri and efforts to conceal evidence of the strike.<sup>56</sup>

However, in the latter half of 2023, the online activities of AQ and its affiliates increased as they capitalised on two contentious and emotionally-charged events to mobilise sympathisers: 1) disrespect for Prophet Muhammad and the Quran following the Quran-burning protests in Denmark and Sweden; and 2) the Israel-Palestine conflict.

First, on August 13, 2023, AQ's official propaganda arm, Al-Sahab Media, issued calls for revenge against those committing acts of aggression towards the Quran and the Islamic faith.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, they leveraged the historical touchpoint of 9/11 to release a new edition of the magazine, *Umma Wahida*, dedicated to the 9/11 attacks. This publication described the "next Islamic strike" as not only more sophisticated and impactful but also unpredictable in terms of location, as it may not necessarily target the US.<sup>58</sup>

Second, following Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, AQ's General Command and affiliated groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Shabaab expressed their support and called for the complete liberation of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup> The statement issued by AQ's General Command, in particular, urged all Muslims to take part in the fighting in Gaza, whether physically as fighters, financially or through moral support.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, it called for attacks on Israelis in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and urged for attacks on American military bases, airports and embassies in Muslim countries.<sup>61</sup>

Responding to AQ's calls to support the Palestinian cause, a pro-AQ media outlet, Jaysh Al-Malahem Al-Electroni (Electronic Army of Epic Battles), claimed that it had successfully conducted "cyber warfare" against Jewish and European targets.<sup>62</sup> The attack, which they characterised as "a first of its kind", entailed the dissemination of disinformation through fabricated bomb threat reports at multiple European airports, tourist sites and educational institutions.<sup>63</sup> While not definitively linked, news reports indicate that there have been at least 70 bomb hoaxes at French airports since October 19, 2023.<sup>64</sup> Given the success of this operation in causing widespread disruption, there is a credible possibility that AQ and its affiliates will conduct further disinformation campaigns.

There was no significant Southeast Asian-specific activity on Geo News, the password-protected platform known as AQ's "propaganda diffusion backbone".<sup>65</sup> However, ICPVTR has identified pro-AQ users, primarily from Indonesia, disseminating official statements, attack updates and videos from AQ and its affiliated groups predominantly on Facebook. With the recent escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, these pro-AQ users have stepped up their activities, echoing AQ's call for Muslims to actively participate in the conflict.<sup>66</sup> They justify this as a *farḍu ain*, or religious obligation, emphasising that all Muslims must defend themselves against aggressors.<sup>67</sup>

## Pro-IS Social Media Content on the Upcoming Indonesian Elections

As the February 2024 general election in Indonesia draws near, the pro-IS community on mainstream social media platforms, notably Facebook, has been actively participating in online discussions against the elections and democracy. Central to this discourse is the concept of *tawhid hakimiyah* (Unity of Law), which asserts that only Allah has the authority to establish laws, in stark

contrast to laws created by humans.<sup>68</sup> They draw parallels between voting and *shirk*, which refers to idolatry or polytheism, implying that it is contrary to Allah's will.<sup>69</sup>

It is also worth noting that some of these pro-IS users have resorted to spreading misinformation to support their positions. For instance, following the nomination of Ganjar Pranowo as the Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P)'s candidate for the upcoming election, some pro-IS users began allegations against Pranowo, such as his so-called connections with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and suggested that he might become subservient to the People's Republic of China, thereby bolstering their point that he is a *taghut*, or, in this context, the puppet of imperialists.<sup>70</sup> On occasion, such discussions and debates have inflamed the feelings of pro-IS sympathisers to the point where they have expressed a willingness to resort to violence.<sup>71</sup>

## Global Far Right Extremism

In 2022, far right extremism (FRE)-related attacks declined in the West compared to 2017.<sup>72</sup> However, given the primarily online nature of the FRE movement,<sup>73</sup> it is critical not to underestimate the persistent threat it poses. Specifically, far right groups and adherents have been known to use the digital sphere (e.g., social media platforms, online forums and messaging apps) to not only disseminate and normalise their violent ideologies, but also radicalise and recruit vulnerable populations. Furthermore, it should be noted that the mainstreaming of violent FRE extends beyond its frequently highlighted Western variant (e.g., neo-Nazis and white supremacists) and includes other forms of ethnonationalist extremism, such as the Hindutva movement in India.<sup>74</sup>

### *Continued Dissemination of Ideological Propaganda*

In 2023, FRE groups and affiliates continued to rehash previous ideological propaganda through encrypted online platforms. In 2022, the FRE online landscape saw the continued traction of militant accelerationist<sup>75</sup> proponents such as Terrorgram, a loose network of white supremacist Telegram channels and accounts associated with the Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and The Base. Specifically, Terrorgram has been responsible for spreading new ideological publications, such as *Hard Reset*, a manifesto that promotes white supremacist and accelerationist ideologies, offering detailed instructions on how to carry out attacks.<sup>76</sup>

However, in 2023, there was a noticeable absence of similar ideological propaganda releases, possibly indicating an attempt to maintain a low profile considering the series of arrests of individuals directly linked to the Terrorgram network, such as Luke Kenna, Michael Brown Jr, Brian Tierney and AWD's founder Brandon Russell.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, various white supremacist and accelerationist Telegram groups continue to disseminate Terrorgram's ideological propaganda, manifestos of far right "saints" like Slovakian shooter Juraj Krajcik and Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant, and operational manuals detailing ways to sabotage cellular and electrical towers.<sup>78</sup>

Besides encrypted platforms, white supremacists and militant accelerationists persist in evading moderation on popular social media platforms like TikTok. For example, neo-Nazis have used seemingly innocuous memes like "gnome hunting" as anti-Semitic dog whistles to the act of murdering Jews. Similarly, eco-accelerationists have been identified creating videos that feature Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, often indirectly advocating for the use of violence in the name of environmental preservation. While these tactics involve coded language understood primarily by those deeply entrenched in niche subcultures, the presence of Discord and Telegram links on such accounts poses a risk of leading sympathisers to radicalisation.

### *Far Right Conspiratorial Narratives and Disinformation*

Online FRE communities' propagation of conspiratorial and disinformation narratives are becoming more prominent on mainstream social media platforms, occasionally leading to violence as well.<sup>79</sup> These narratives often contain elements of racism (particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim racism), misogyny and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. They are not, however, only found on alt-

tech platforms like 4Chan, Bitchute and Odysee, but also persist in dissemination on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and X, as far right actors become increasingly adept at evading platform regulations and moderation.<sup>80</sup> Of note, X has witnessed the resurgence of far right accounts, as Elon Musk continues to tacitly support them through his engagement with accounts known for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>81</sup> There were notable instances in 2023 where such beliefs translated into violent action. For instance, following the Brazilian presidential election in early January, a slew of conspiracy theories claiming electoral fraud incited supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro to storm various government buildings, similar to the events at the US Capitol riots in 2021.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, as the Israel-Palestine tensions unfold, there seems to be a surge in conspiracy theories in far right online communities that suggest Jewish involvement in the October 7 attacks, with the alleged intention of triggering World War III or bolstering their influence, regionally and globally.<sup>83</sup> This, combined with online incitements urging attacks on local Jewish individuals and institutions,<sup>84</sup> raises the concern of potential real-world incidents, such as the recent firebomb attack on a synagogue in Berlin.<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, often accompanying these conspiratorial narratives is the deliberate and expanding use of disinformation, designed to further incite reactionary far right sentiments. This was evident in the aftermath of the Nashville school shooting in late March, when an anonymous right-wing “sock puppet” account masquerading as a transgender individual shared old photos of Alana McLaughlin posing with a firearm as well as threatening tweets directed at Christians, in the hopes of stoking anti-trans sentiments.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, a fake manifesto claiming that the shooter did it in support of trans rights was also discovered on 4Chan. According to an intelligence analyst, the supposed manifesto was most likely created using image-editing software that mimics handwriting.<sup>87</sup> This not only underscores the ongoing inclination of the far right to employ disinformation strategies in their propaganda efforts, but also highlights their growing reliance on sophisticated software and AI tools.

#### *Doxing as an Offensive Strategy*

Another concerning trend within the Western FRE online milieu is the continued use of doxing<sup>88</sup> as part of an offensive strategy, carried out to intimidate and incite harm against specific individuals perceived as enemies. In the context of the US, the intensified use of doxing was initially observed as part of a strategic shift within the broader online far right landscape following the events of the US Capitol riots in 2021, as far right actors began to enhance their own security out of fear of being tracked down or banned from various social media platforms.<sup>89</sup> Specifically, the far right online community actively engaged in both individual and coordinated efforts on Telegram and even dark web forums to identify and release personally identifiable information of supposed investigators and, in some cases, their families.<sup>90</sup>

In 2023, pro-Donald Trump supporters were observed employing online doxing on multiple occasions. For instance, following the indictment of former US president Trump and 18 of his associates by the state grand jury in Georgia, there were attempts on 4Chan to dox members of the Georgia jury.<sup>91</sup> This trend, however, is not merely limited to the US but has also been observed in Europe. In France, where far right groups have grown in prominence and organisation, far right Telegram groups have been reported to have sent death threats and doxed members of the migrant rights non-governmental organisation Utopia 56.<sup>92</sup>

#### *Deepening Radicalisation Within the Pro-Hindutva Online Ecosystem*

Narratives and rhetoric circulated online point to an increasing rift between the fringe pro-Hindutva extremists and the mainstream pro-government elements of the Hindutva movement, particularly with regard to contentious issues related to the Indian Muslim community. For example, the Indian Supreme Court’s decision on January 5, 2023, to stay a prior order by the Uttarakhand High Court to evict approximately 50,000 individuals<sup>93</sup> from residences encroaching on public railway land, resulted in a significant increase in anti-government narratives being circulated on fringe pro-Hindutva online Telegram channels. Many of these narratives condemned the Supreme Court’s decision as evidence of the Indian government’s policy of appeasement towards Indian Muslims, at the expense of Indian Hindus, with some even labelling Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a

coward.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, following the expulsion of prominent opposition politician Rahul Gandhi from the Indian Parliament, fringe pro-Hindutva extremists on Facebook mocked the ruling party and criticised its alleged oppression of the opposition.<sup>95</sup>

The choice of such individuals to critique the establishment, even if they are acting against a figure to whom these individuals are ideologically opposed, indicates a possible deepening of the divide between fringe and establishment members of the Hindu nationalist movement. Whether such a deepening divide may lead to the radicalisation of individuals who are both firmly anti-government and believe in extremist ideals, bears further observation.

At the same time, the established trend of pro-Hindutva far right extremism online to push for violence against Indian Muslims intensified throughout 2023. Notable narratives included the reinforcing of the “Love Jihad” narrative<sup>96</sup> following the release of the film *The Kerala Story*, as well as the idolisation of a mass shooter who opened fire on and killed multiple Muslim individuals aboard a train carriage in Maharashtra.<sup>97</sup> Much of the anti-Muslim rhetoric employed in these narratives remains highly violent, often resorting to calls for genocide against the Indian Muslim population. There have been indicators that such online narratives have in turn translated into actual acts of violence on the ground, as seen in the bouts of civil unrest in Haryana in June and July,<sup>98</sup> as well as violence between diaspora Sikh and Indian communities in Melbourne in January.<sup>99</sup>

## Outlook

The digital domain remains a contested space between extremist entities and counter terrorism efforts. Jihadist and far right actors exhibit adaptability and resilience, indicating an evolving threat landscape. The diversification of online propaganda showcases a nuanced approach to disseminating extremist narratives, involving sophisticated evasion of moderation. Younger participants in extremist online spaces are gravitating towards interactive, “borderline” content, blurring distinctions between genuine propaganda and seemingly harmless posts. Such divisions can escalate radicalisation and real-world violence, necessitating vigilant monitoring and analyses. Enhanced moderation and strategic community engagement are pivotal to counteract the evolution and spread of extremist ideologies online.

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# Extreme Right-Wing in the West

Raffaello Pantucci and Kalicharan Veera Singam

*The extreme right-wing terror threat persisted in 2023, though it continued to plateau as in recent years. The volume and scale of attacks declined, though there was a persistent problem of hate crime and right-wing violence which often escalated in response to events. The ideological motivations behind most extreme right-wing attacks were similar to the past years – white supremacist, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Semitic tropes dominated, with recent events in Israel and Gaza creating a context in which these ideologies were able to flourish further. The immigrant crisis in Europe and the United States (US) continued to provide fuel for mainstream far right leaders to try to gain power, though it was notable how some far right European parties found themselves ousted from office. The looming 2024 US election and the possible return of Donald Trump to the White House remains the highest impact event that might awaken the threat once again. The current turmoil in the Middle East and Ukraine also has the potential to create a surge in extreme right-wing activity and violence.*

## The Threat in Numbers

The Asia-Pacific country most affected by extreme right-wing violence in recent years, Australia, did not see a surge in related violence in 2023. In February 2023, the chief of Australia's national security agency, Mike Burgess, provided his annual threat assessment for the country. In it, he outlined a persistent threat picture across the board. Notably, he highlighted how, notwithstanding an attack involving a Christian fundamentalist in the wake of the government's decision to lower the country's threat level in November 2022, there was no reason to raise the threat level again.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Burgess pointed out that since the end of pandemic restrictions, the proportion of far right-linked cases shrank back to 30 percent of the agency's caseload, rather than the earlier 50 percent.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to crack down on far right groups, Australia in June announced a nation-wide clampdown on Nazi symbols, including banning the trade and public display of flags, T-shirts and insignia.<sup>3</sup> The ban was already in place in many states, and the year was dotted with cases as authorities sought to impose the ban in the states of Queensland<sup>4</sup> and Victoria.<sup>5</sup> In Victoria, the case was linked to a neo-Nazi leader who was on trial for assault and whose group of around 30 followers clashed with police outside court.<sup>6</sup> While Australia did not see any attacks in 2023, security chief Burgess declared that neo-Nazis have emerged "as one of the most challenging national security threats over the past year". He also issued a warning about growing recruitment efforts by groups, amid a broader resurgence in far right activity.<sup>7</sup>

In Europe, the annual threat assessment provided by Europol provided a similar picture. The right-wing threat was reduced year-on-year (4 incidents and 45 arrests in 2023, compared to 6 incidents and 64 arrests in 2022).<sup>8</sup> The attacks that took place were all lone-actor incidents. In May, Dutch authorities released their annual assessment, stating while there were "likely a few hundred" extremists in Holland, "this number [did] not seem to have increased this past year".<sup>9</sup> In Denmark, authorities said that their extreme right-wing threat remained "general", similar to their European partners.<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom (UK), in November 2022, MI5 chief Ken McCallum provided his annual threat assessment shortly before a Parliamentary Committee published a report on the extreme right-wing threat faced by the country. McCallum's view highlighted that the "landscape has continued to evolve away from structured, real-world groups such as National Action to a diffuse online threat".<sup>11</sup> The "problem feels like it will endure",<sup>12</sup> he stated, echoing Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee which went further by stating that the threat was "steadily increasing".<sup>13</sup> Surveying the rest of the year, while the UK saw a steady drumbeat of arrests of varying levels of concern, attacks or a spike in arrests were not seen.

Within Europe, the most menacing picture was visible in Germany. Authorities there continued to arrest groups of individuals linked to the right-leaning Reichsbürger, a major anti-institutional movement.<sup>14</sup> According to German authorities, there are some 23,000 followers in Germany, of whom around 1,250 are classified as “right-wing extremists”.<sup>15</sup> Highlighting how this threat has blended into the mainstream, a report published by the Frederick Ebert Foundation reported that perspectives on the far right in Germany have become more popular over the past year.<sup>16</sup> Authorities in Germany also added another group, the Hammerskins, to their list of proscribed organisations.<sup>17</sup>

Looking to attack planning, far right plotters in Finland were caught trying to build weapons using 3D printers, part of a trend that has been observable amongst the following around the world.<sup>18</sup> In the UK, two separate cases which appeared to indicate active attack planning were presented in court, one concerning a man who was caught making viable explosives at home,<sup>19</sup> and the other a man who was jailed for scouting a police station he had intended to target with an attack.<sup>20</sup> Other cases were identified across Europe to varying degrees of seriousness.

The final hub of extreme right-wing violence was the United States (US) and Canada. At an October 31, 2023 hearing of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, the heads of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC) spoke of how lone actors were the most likely threat vector that the country faced. They collectively also highlighted various extreme right-wing ideologies as possible sources of this threat. In his testimony, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated, “the top domestic terrorism threat we face continues to be from domestic violent extremists (DVEs) we categorise as Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVEs) and Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists (AGAAVEs)”.<sup>21</sup>

Wray added that the number of FBI domestic terrorism investigations had more than doubled since the spring of 2020. As of September 2023, the FBI was “conducting approximately 2,700 investigations within the domestic terrorism program”.<sup>22</sup> According to Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of DHS, in 2022, 30 percent of “Historically Black Colleges and Universities” in the US had received bomb threats, representing a dramatic spike.<sup>23</sup> Across the border in Canada, in its April 2023 report on the country’s threat landscape, the Canadian Secret Intelligence Service (CSIS) reported that it had dedicated some 50 percent of its counter terrorism capability to dealing with “Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE)”.<sup>24</sup>

As of October 2023, the US was on course to see some 700 mass shootings.<sup>25</sup> Whilst ideological motivation was not clear in all of these, in some a clear white supremacist ideology was on display. Most graphically, in May 2023, a man murdered eight and injured half a dozen more in a mass shooting at a mall in Dallas.<sup>26</sup> At least eight violent incidents were linked to the extreme right in the US in the past year, according to data by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL),<sup>27</sup> and the issue continued to be the top priority for American law enforcement officials.<sup>28</sup>

The overall picture is of a threat that is constant, but that seems to have reached a metric plateau. No large-scale incidents like the 2019 massacre in New Zealand or 2011’s mass shooting in Oslo, Norway were reported, though a number of smaller, lone actor-style attacks were observed. None, however, appeared to have had the same global influential effect as the two earlier attacks.

### **Far Right More Mainstream, But With Caveats**

The far right has made further strides in becoming politically more mainstream in Western Europe. This trend was picked up by multiple major publications in 2023, which noted the rise of the far right in national politics of various Western European countries.<sup>29</sup> In Italy, Sweden and Finland, far right political parties have become part of the ruling coalitions and governments.<sup>30</sup> The line between the far right and the political mainstream has blurred in Austria, France, Germany, Sweden and Spain.<sup>31</sup> In Germany, there are concerns that extreme right-wing views are becoming more widespread in society.<sup>32</sup>

These trends arguably point to the steady normalisation and acceptance of far right views and political ideas into the political mainstream, which could have implications for these governments' relationship with extreme right-wing groups and civil society at large. There are also concerns that with the far right being more firmly part of ruling governments across Western Europe, the politics of these countries, and by extension the region, could alter significantly. Greater opposition to immigration, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments and other conservative views championed by these parties could get reflected in the agendas of elected governments in these countries. This in turn could stoke violence.

In the US, the far right has had a close but complicated relationship with the Republican Party in recent years. But with former president Trump's mounting legal woes and the Republican Party apparently not having a clear-cut candidate for the 2024 US Presidential Election, it is hard to tell what kind of a political impact there will be vis-à-vis the far right. While former president Trump continues to poll ahead of all his contenders on the Republican ticket,<sup>33</sup> it is still unclear if he has a clear path to the White House. The impact of the extreme right also varies from state to state, with developments in some states giving rise to concerns of a rapidly growing extreme right threat. In the swing state of Michigan, for instance, there has reportedly been a rise in the extreme right-wing at the "grassroots" level since early 2022.<sup>34</sup> The US also saw the most anti-Semitic incidents in 2022 since the Anti-Defamation League started tracking such data in 1979.<sup>35</sup> This will likely be exacerbated by recent events in Israel.

At the same time, the legal troubles former president Trump faces reflect a pushback to this mainstreaming. And similar rejection has been visible elsewhere, for example in Poland, where the ruling far right Law and Justice Party suffered an electoral loss in October as Poles unified around an opposition that sought to reject the hardline conservative party that had ruled the country since 2015.<sup>36</sup> The impact on the extreme end of the political spectrum is difficult to predict. It was clear under Trump's past administration, when many on the extreme edge in the US saw an opportunity to expand their influence and bolster their ideas – something that was also seen in Poland, where persecution of immigrant or LGBTQ+ minorities had become commonplace and even legalised. Whether the loss of these leaders and parties means people will now move back to the mainstream having watched the political rejection of their leaders, or feel themselves more marginalised and therefore needing to resort to violence, remains to be seen.

### **Transnational Links**

Most worrying in some ways, however, has been the growing emergence of far right extremist ideas elsewhere. For example, neo-Nazism has been reported to be spreading in historically German areas of Brazil with greater adoption of Nazi symbolisms such as the Nazi salute.<sup>37</sup> In April, a court in Brazil issued a banning order for Telegram after the app failed to supply information about neo-Nazi groups operating on its platform which had been linked to a pair of school shootings in the country.<sup>38</sup> The ban was lifted soon afterwards, but the case highlighted the growth of anti-Semitic and extreme right-wing ideas in the country. The year in Brazil started with a storming of national buildings in the capital Brasilia as supporters of right-leaning politician Jair Bolsonaro sought to contest the election victory of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.<sup>39</sup> Bolsonaro himself appeared to have stepped aside from the protests, though the clash highlighted the tense nature of Brazil's political spectrum.

At the other end of the scale, in Kyrgyzstan, a group of local youths shouting racial epithets and in possession of fascist imagery, attacked "Asian" looking Kyrgyz in Bishkek and Chuy.<sup>40</sup> Possibly inspired by Russian nationalists, the young men were detained, accused of seeking to foment racial, ethnic, religious and regional hatred.

The initial fear in Kyrgyzstan around this case was that it might be an offshoot of the war in Ukraine, where Russia continues to advance a narrative of fighting a fascist government in Kyiv. In fact, Moscow appears to be behind a range of far and extreme right political activity in Europe in particular.<sup>41</sup> Yet the Kyrgyz case seems isolated. In contrast, the ongoing war in Ukraine continues to be a rallying call for the extreme right-wing elsewhere, although the motivations and allegiances

of the individuals and groups drawn to the conflict are complex. Some of those fighting for the Ukrainian side, such as football hooligan Denis Nikitin, belong to the Russian far right.<sup>42</sup> It was reported that 120 “ultra-right” individuals are among the “more than 320” French citizens and residents believed to have gone to fight the war in Ukraine, although their political allegiances and which side they support in the conflict are not apparent.<sup>43</sup> Extreme right individuals from Australia have also been identified as having joined the fighting.<sup>44</sup> There remains a persistent fear in Europe that eventually some of these individuals will return home and participate in terrorist activity, though so far no direct cases have been observed.

## Outlook

What has become increasingly clear is the globalised nature of some aspects of the extreme right-wing and white supremacist movements in particular. In February 2023, the prominent founder of the American group Atomwaffen Division was charged with further offences in planning to attack infrastructure targets in the US. Information released alongside the case seemed to suggest he had been passing similar planning material along to Australian extremists.<sup>45</sup> In January, a British teenage extremist was jailed for publishing videos which had provided direct inspiration to at least two far right attacks in the US.<sup>46</sup> In June, a Scottish extremist linked to both the proscribed British group National Action as well as parallel extremist organisation Patriotic Alternative, was jailed, having been arrested in Spain from where he was running extremist networks.<sup>47</sup> In July, it was revealed that a school for children in the UK where conspiracy theories, anti-state ideas and weapons training were on the curriculum was being run by a pair who were linked to the British National Party (BNP) and had previously been involved in an Australian extreme right-wing organisation.<sup>48</sup>

These various international strands highlight how increasingly globalised the extreme right-wing has become. And while the year was not marked with as dramatic attacks as had been seen in the past, extreme right-wing ideas have continued to prosper and thrive. The international connectivity the networks supporting these ideas demonstrate provides an additional angle to the problem that has the potential to mature into a more substantial transnational threat. However, it is notable that the extreme right has not managed to deliver any major threats or attacks for some time. Still, the pull of mainstream far right ideas continues to be a problem, and is likely to become more complicated going forward, although how this may manifest into a terrorist threat is not always clear.

In fact, a more likely issue for the extreme right terrorist threat is its continued blending into a hybrid ideology, which security forces are increasingly talking about. The lines between ideologies have become increasingly confused, and, given most extreme right-wing adherents operate heavily in online communities, it is not always clear which ideology is most prominent in their thinking. This definitional issue is not a new one, but highlights another aspect of the complexity of trying to manage the current extreme right-wing globally. On the mainstream end of the spectrum, there is the danger of blending into mainstream thinking, while on the extreme end of the scale, it simply agglomerates into a mess of varying extremes online. This may seem like an esoteric concern, but it raises numerous questions at the political, judicial and response ends of the scale. Whilst clear-cut neo-Nazi adherents may be easy to respond to, this more confused picture is one that is harder to build a programme to counter.

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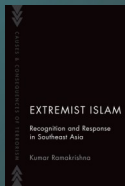
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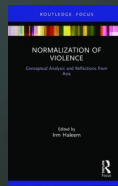


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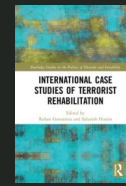
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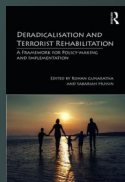
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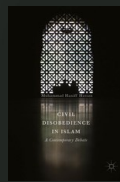
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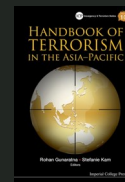
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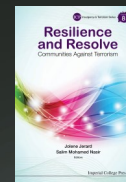
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