

A DECLINING BUT PERSISTENT THREAT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND BEYOND

Southeast Asia's Threat Environment in 2024

Greg Barton

Decentralising and Coordinating P/CVE through the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub)

Cameron Sumpter

Situating Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya's Emergence in Bangladesh's Threat Landscape

Iftekharul Bashar



A Declining but Persistent Threat in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Terrorism in Southeast Asia has declined considerably as both Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS)-aligned jihadist groups are struggling under persistent counterterrorism pressure from regional states. In July, Jemaah Islamiyah, a Southeast Asian jihadist group linked to AQ, announced it would disband and move away from violence after twenty years. Enhanced regional cooperation among security institutions, improved intelligence sharing, and a balanced focus on kinetic and non-kinetic responses to violent extremism have suppressed the threat levels. External factors like the decline of IS in the Middle East and AQ's overall weakening have also played a role in the waning ideological appeal of regional threat groups in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, new and diverse forms of violent extremism have reared their ugly heads, like far-right extremism, lone-actor terrorism, as well as online self-radicalisation. The group-centric radicalisation of the past has been replaced by people radicalising within smaller networks or on their own, by consuming extremist content and absorbing ideological influences, while coping with identity crises pushing them to search for a sense of belonging and meaning in life. The declining number of terrorist plots in the region coupled with sporadic attacks underscore the weakened but persistent nature of the terrorist threat in the region.

Nonetheless, one game-changing event or situational stressor can reignite the old threat groups. Therefore, Southeast Asian governments need to be watchful and keep their guard high. Similarly in South Asia, the region's fragile stability faces added threats following the recent political turmoil in Bangladesh. The current issue features three articles looking at Southeast Asia's overall threat picture, deradicalisation efforts in Indonesia, and the emergence of a new militant group in Bangladesh, which, despite its dormancy, can bounce back by benefiting from Bangladesh's recent political turmoil and re-emergence of some extremist clerics.

The first article by **Greg Barton** surveys the threat environment across Southeast Asia in 2024, assessing that counterterrorism efforts in the region have shown encouraging results in managing and containing the dynamic and persistent threat of terrorism. In June, JI's core leadership announced that the group was disbanding as a militant network and shifting its focus towards non-violent religious education. Ongoing peace processes in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, meanwhile, have resulted in the decommissioning of many fighters in the former and a sharp decline in violent attacks in the latter. Looking ahead, the

author argues that the greatest danger in Southeast Asia comes from lone actors inspired and potentially assisted by a resilient IS, although the threat posed by AQ cannot be discounted either, especially in light of divisive sentiments surrounding the conflict in Gaza.

In the next article, **Cameron Sumpter** discusses the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub), an online platform by the country's National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), that plays a key role in preventing violent extremism under its National Action Plan (RAN PE). Initiated in 2020, I-KHub aims to coordinate and share data among provincial Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) stakeholders, fostering collaboration and local ownership. Regional PCVE action plans (RAD PE) have been developed in several provinces, though many often mirror the national plan rather than addressing specific local needs. Additionally, while the I-KHub platform also supports civil society organisations that are crucial in PCVE efforts, more needs to be done to sustain stakeholder collaboration and maintain momentum in Indonesia's long-term PCVE initiatives.

The third article by **Iftekhharul Bashar** examines the origins and evolution of an AQ-centric Bangladeshi militant group, Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAHS), and the country's response. The author notes that JAHS poses a significant asymmetric threat to Bangladesh due to its advanced training capabilities, strategic alliances, and ongoing radicalisation efforts. Despite the arrest of the group's key leaders and apparent weakening, the prevailing instability and collapse of the law enforcement apparatus in Bangladesh raises concerns about its potential resurgence.

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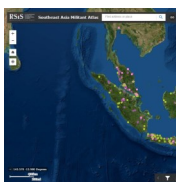
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SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



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>

Southeast Asia's Threat Environment in 2024

Greg Barton

In September 2024, the decades-long struggle to contain and manage the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia is showing encouraging results.¹ Southeast Asia counter terrorism police, government agencies, community groups and civil society actors have together achieved a remarkable level of effective containment of a resilient and dynamic threat.² Insurgent violence in Thailand's Deep South and in the southern Philippines is sharply down, and Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s major affiliate network in the region, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI),³ has just announced that it is renouncing terrorism and disbanding.⁴

The Context

In the 2000s, Southeast Asia bore the brunt of some of the most serious Al-Qaeda (AQ)-inspired terrorist operations worldwide. The enormity of the problem was brought home by the shocking bombings in Bali on October 12, 2002, which killed 202 people.⁵ But, in hindsight, this was only the most devastating in a series of enigmatic incidents that were not then understood to be connected terrorism attacks. In Indonesia and the Philippines, bombers linked to either Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or its Philippines ally, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), contributed to deadly attacks throughout the early 2000s.⁶

Careful post-blast forensics work after the 2002 bombings in Bali, jointly conducted by the Indonesian National Police (Polri) and the Australian Federal Police, led to the members of a JI bomb cell being arrested.⁷ This saw the launch of an intensive counter terrorism response⁸ that led to the formation of the Detachment 88 (Densus 88) counter terrorism unit within Polri.⁹ But, despite a sharply increased level of surveillance across Indonesia, JI-linked bombers were still able to conduct a series of attacks throughout the remainder of the decade.¹⁰

In August 2003, JI bombers detonated a powerful vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) in the forecourt of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, killing 12 and injuring 150 people. A follow-up VBIED bombing saw a box truck detonated outside the Australian Embassy in September 2004.¹¹ Fortunately, hardening of the embassy in the wake of the October 2002 Bali bombings, in which 88 Australians were killed, with blast walls and reinforced windows, kept the death toll to nine people.¹² In October 2005, JI-linked bombers also launched two pedestrian suicide bomb attacks and a VBIED attack in Bali.¹³ Four years later, in 2009, the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta was targeted by JI-linked suicide bombers a second time, together with the adjoining Ritz-Carlton Hotel, killing seven and injuring 15.¹⁴

In addition to these high-profile attacks, JI was also active between 1999 and 2002 in communal conflict violence in Ambon, Maluku; in Poso and Palu, Central Sulawesi; and in eastern Indonesia via the jihadist militia, Laskar Jundullah, led by JI fighters trained in AQ camps in Afghanistan.¹⁵

Finally, in February 2010, a terrorist training camp was uncovered in Aceh linked to key figures formerly associated with JI, in particular, JI co-founder Abu Bakar Ba'asyir¹⁶ and the ASG-linked Dulmatin, the bomb-maker behind many of the JI attacks since 2000. The camp was detected shortly after it was established in order to train a wide range of militants across the Indonesian extremist scene. And whilst this period marked the end of terror attacks associated with elements of the JI network, the social network remained extensive and resilient.¹⁷ Even after decades of arrests that saw 346 members arrested between 2019 and 2023,¹⁸ the JI network remained persistent, with around 6,000 members and thousands more associated with its community of

supporters, and over 16,000 students in the 42 *pesantren*, or residential *madrassas*, formally affiliated with JI.¹⁹

Consequently, the video announcement by 16 of JI's most senior leaders on June 30, 2024, that the group was disbanding as a militant network and pivoting to focus solely on non-violent religious education, represents a major breakthrough.²⁰ Whilst the terror attacks of the past decade in Indonesia have almost entirely been the work of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), the major Islamic State (IS) affiliate in Indonesia, rather than the AQ-aligned JI, the level of extremism inherent within JI's social activities, the fact that many of its members had travelled to Syria to train with and learn from jihadist militant groups in the struggle against the Bashar al-Assad regime,²¹ and its latent potential for returning to a campaign of terror, meant that JI absorbed a substantial commitment in resources from Detachment 88.

JI's 2024 Disbandment

The announcement by the core leadership of JI on June 30 that the organisation was turning its back on terrorism came as a shock to most. Even after it was followed by a succession of similar statements renouncing terrorism by other JI leaders and branches, many were left doubting the group's motives.²² It was hard to understand why a resilient network that had remained steadfastly committed to violent jihad, in principle if not in practice, for more than 30 years should suddenly renounce it.

The decision by the JI leadership to renounce violent terrorism did not come overnight.²³ It would appear that decades of police counter terrorism surveillance, arrests and prosecutions, together with a remarkable level of sustained dialogue with the police and community groups, had finally persuaded the JI leaders there was little to gain by continuing on a path in which they had everything to lose.²⁴

The constant pressure of surveillance and arrests meant that JI was in very real danger of losing control of its precious *pesantren*. Although its long-held principled commitment to militant jihad was dear, this was trumped by the core purpose of the schools, which was *dakwah*, or religious education. The *pesantren* were felt to be essential to the JI community being able to continue to maintain intergenerational fidelity to JI's conservative understanding of Islam. This remarkable dénouement to the terror network was only possible owing to years of dialogue with key counter terrorism police and other Islamic community leaders.

This does not preclude that in the future there will not be splinter elements and impatient young activists who will strike out on their own to return to violent jihad. That is indeed very much the history of JI over the past three decades. Virtually all of the terror attacks attributed to JI in the past were led by breakaway elements acting in small cells at arm's length from the JI leadership. A handful of brilliant and charismatic figures, mostly trained in Afghanistan,²⁵ were behind these attacks. They include Indonesians Hambali, Imam Samudra and Dulmatin,²⁶ and Malaysians Dr Azahari Husin²⁷ and his protégé Noordin Top.²⁸

Even if the disbanding of JI cannot fully guarantee that future terrorist acts will not be attempted by individuals who have come out of the network, its full cooperation with the Indonesian police does lay the foundation for limiting that possibility. It both allows the police to redirect precious limited resources to other threats, for the most part those associated with IS and networks like JAD, and at the same time sends a message to radical Islamists that their activism can find expression in a non-violent future.

The Philippines and Thailand's Peace Transitions

Just as this substantial development in Indonesia represents a product of a combination of effective hard measures of counter terrorism with soft measures of countering violent extremism, so too are the remarkable achievements in the southern Philippines through the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) peace process over the past five years. This follows the

establishment of the BARMM region in 2019.²⁹ By May 2023, some 26,132 fighters from the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) militia had been decommissioned.³⁰

At the same time, around 1,866 fighters from Dawlah Islamiyah Sulu, along with the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF)'s forces, have also surrendered to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Significantly, this comes on the back of more than 800 IS-aligned fighters being killed in the five-month-long siege of Marawi in 2017, a dramatic development that saw many IS militants and groups defect. In addition to the BIFF fighters of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), many members of the ASG, a key element in the constellation of violent extremist groups that in 2014 rallied under the banner of IS, have individually surrendered to local authorities in substantial numbers. Years of pressure from counter terrorism forces and disillusionment with the groups' leaders have seen hardened fighters turning away from a life of terrorism.

A similar process has been underway in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand, home to majority populations of ethnic Malay Muslims who identify as Patani Malays.³¹ There, the mechanism of a long-drawn peace process is more difficult to read.³² Significant elements have not been formalised through public agreements, involving erstwhile combatants who have organised themselves under flat structures of 'leadership resistance'. Nevertheless, the decline in violent attacks and deaths is dramatic, and aligns with anecdotal accounts of militants being persuaded to turn away from violence, both because of the pressure they face from counter terrorism forces and powerful arguments that the path of violence is counterproductive to advancing the interests of their community.

Effective Counter Terrorism

In the 2024 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), the Philippines is ranked 19th in the world in terms of nations impacted by terrorism. This represents a decline of just one ranking place over the previous 12 months. But, assessed over the previous five years, the situation in the Philippines has improved substantially, as the Philippines was for many years placed consistently in the top 15 of global countries impacted by terrorism. In the GTI 2024, Thailand also improved to a rank of 28, representing a movement of five places on the global ranking.³³ And Indonesia moved to a rank of 31, which represents a positive improvement by seven places. Meanwhile, Malaysia, where effective counter terrorism intelligence work had succeeded in detecting and disrupting virtually all terrorist plots, was ranked at 81 in the world, improving by five ranking places.

Similar improvements in these Southeast Asian nations can be seen in the sister report to the GTI, the Global Peace Index, where Indonesia is ranked in the same 'high' level of peace band as Australia (with Malaysia being 'very high'), and the Philippines and Thailand appearing in the middle band of 'medium' levels of peace.³⁴

This speaks to the bigger picture that the GTI regularly illustrates – that of an inverse correlation between levels of positive peace and good governance and the impact of terrorism. For the countries at the top of the GTI ranking (respectively, Burkina Faso, Israel, Mali, Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Myanmar, Niger and Iraq), terrorism represents an extreme threat, or even an existential one. By contrast, in Southeast Asia, terrorism has been successfully contained and managed. Nonetheless, it remains a resilient and demanding source of threat.

An Evolving Threat in the Philippines

Whilst these Southeast Asian nations have done well in countering the threat of terrorism, there are drivers of terrorism that operate at a global level beyond the immediate control of these nations. Before considering the reasons why countries in the region need to brace themselves for deteriorating global conditions, it is helpful to do a quick stock take of how their own capacity to manage the threat has developed.

In the Philippines, the BARMM peace process has yielded far-reaching dividends, with the vast majority of former armed combatants handing themselves over to the authorities and entering into

the formal decommissioning process. Whether the mistakes made in the five-month-long siege of Marawi in 2017 have been fully internalised in terms of the way that the AFP uses kinetic hard power to respond to threat of terrorism, is not clear.³⁵ But, fortunately, circumstances have changed, so this is not likely to be put to the test anytime soon.

Not only did the siege of Marawi, the largest Muslim city in the Philippines, continue for a disastrous five months, in which the vast majority of physical infrastructure was destroyed, eight years later few inhabitants have been able to return home. Notably, whilst government buildings have been replaced, residential neighbourhoods remain fields of rubble. It should be acknowledged, however, that relatively few non-combatants were killed even though the physical fabric of the city was destroyed, because the exodus of non-combatants to safe locations was relatively well managed.

The 2025 BARMM elections scheduled for next May are fast approaching, and levels of violence in places such as Cotabato, the BARMM administrative capital, have increased substantially. As ever in the southern Philippines, it is difficult to know how many of the deaths from ongoing drive-by shootings and other executions are due to inter-clan rivalry or criminal disputes, and how much relates to the political fortunes of BARMM leaders. What is clear, however, is that some people currently in power will lose political leverage as a result of the expected outcome of the MILF falling short of winning a majority of votes and having to form a government, should it be able to do so, through a coalition with other parties.³⁶ This suggests that the current high levels of violence will continue, if not increase, over the next year or so.

Some have argued that, for this reason, it would be best if the MILF was guaranteed control over the BARMM region for a further election cycle. Others, however, argue that this would do little to help the peace process and that the current turbulence need not derail the larger movement towards the negotiated ending of violence. The abundance of small arms, exacerbated by the slow decommissioning process and handing over of weapons, adds to the vulnerability to violence. In Southeast Asia, the BARMM region and surrounding districts of Mindanao remain at greatest risk from an escalation in terrorism off the current historically low base.

Adding to the woes facing communities in western Mindanao is the impact of climate change, resulting in severe drought, crop failure and periodic flooding. An environment of endemic poverty and historic clan rivalry expressed through clan violence, or *rido*,³⁷ in a region awash with small arms, means that in the Philippines there are rich opportunities, human resources, means, motivation and scope, for terrorist actors to engage with.³⁸

Indonesia's Conundrum

In Indonesia, notwithstanding the very significant achievements of taking the vast majority of the extensive JI network out of the immediate picture, the high numbers of detainees in Indonesian prisons, either on charges of terrorism or awaiting trial, and the relatively short sentences of those formally charged, mean that there is considerable churn in a system which has inadequate resources for parole and pre- and post-release management. More than 500 people are currently detained in Indonesian prisons on terrorism charges, spread across more than 100 locations,³⁹ with around 3,000 people arrested for terrorism-related offences since 2000.⁴⁰ And another 500 or so people are awaiting trial. There is little improvement in these numbers from year to year as hundreds are arrested and charged each year, replacing the hundreds who are released.

Fortunately, there have been good results in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, particularly those led by Detachment 88, and a substantial growth in capacity and involvement by civil society organisations.⁴¹

Both counter terrorism and countering violent extremism have never been as well executed as they are currently in Indonesia. The flip side of this, however, is that there are multiple ways in which the situation could deteriorate. The current immediate threat comes largely from IS actors, whether those formerly aligned with groups like JAD or those newly inspired to act in the name of IS. Over the past decade, the vast majority of JAD attacks have been focused on uniformed

personnel, in particular, the police and police stations. Should this focus shift for some reason, influenced by messaging from IS globally urging different modes of attack and different targets, then it is easy to conceive that even lone actors could implement attacks that could have much larger death tolls.⁴² This is especially if soft targets such as churches, shopping malls, and hospitality and tourism centres are targeted.

The ready availability of small arms,⁴³ particularly assault rifles, in the neighbouring region of the southern Philippines means that there exists considerable potential for high-death toll lone-actor attacks to occur if soft targets are chosen and the weapons can be procured without being detected.

Another development that may lead to unintended consequences is Indonesia's looming change in government. After two five-year terms in power, the former small businessman cum regional administrator cum developmentalist, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), is being replaced by Prabowo Subianto, a retired general, former head of the Indonesian special forces (Kopassus) and former son-in-law of the late President Suharto. Although elected in a landslide victory at the polls early this year, due in large part to an endorsement by the extraordinarily popular current president, it is possible that the transition to Prabowo will mark the biggest change in Indonesian politics since the Suharto era. The once-in-a-decade political transition comes after a period of rising oligarchic power,⁴⁴ at the cost of sustained democratic regression⁴⁵ and a weakening of accountability mechanisms, both in government institutions and across civil society.⁴⁶

The cosmopolitan, polyglot incoming president may yet confound his critics and shepherd in positive changes informed by his globalised experience and strong desire for success. But there also exists the risk that the former general and current minister of defence will push for a greater role for the military in counter terrorism, and inadvertently compromise the effectiveness of Detachment 88.

Thailand and Malaysia's Prospects

In Thailand, the only certainty in national politics over the past two decades has been turmoil and change.⁴⁷ Fortunately, a series of recent upheavals in Bangkok have not yet had a significant impact on local negotiations for peace in the Deep South. But that might change if national political contestation should somehow spill over into provincial affairs, as it has in the past.

In Malaysia, for all the political turmoil of the past decade,⁴⁸ the police-led counter terrorism programme and the work in rehabilitation and reintegration, has continued without interruption. This too could change, particularly if the current cohort of highly experienced police officers, who have led efforts in detection and disruption, are not replaced in sufficient numbers with equally competent counter terrorism practitioners.

Outlook

For Malaysia, as in Indonesia, the Philippines and also Singapore, the greatest danger comes from lone actors inspired,⁴⁹ and possibly assisted, by the global IS movement with its increased focus on external attacks. This is illustrated by the increased reach of the Afghanistan/Central Asia-based Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK),⁵⁰ but the threat goes well beyond a single branch of IS.⁵¹ This is notwithstanding the association of ISK⁵² with the successful Moscow attack in March 2024 and the IS threat projection across Europe.⁵³

As the recently thwarted terror plot targeting the Taylor Swift concerts in Vienna,⁵⁴ Austria, and the August 25 lone-actor attack by a 26-year-old Syrian extremist allegedly linked to IS in the German city of Solingen, which saw three people stabbed to death, remind us, IS is increasingly succeeding in mobilising teenagers and young men without a prior history of radicalism.

The threat of lone-actor attacks by young men radicalised online via virtual networks is a steadily growing global threat, and sophisticated, economically advanced nations such as Singapore or

Australia are not immune. In the post-pandemic age, the threat has morphed to increasingly include those drawn into malign virtual relationships after falling down rabbit holes of conspiratorial thinking. This is resulting in individuals mixing extremist religious ideas, including Christian fundamentalism, with a deep distrust of government.⁵⁵

Instances of such radicalisation have already begun to appear in Singapore, including the case of a 16 year old who was detected by the police, resulting in him being placed under a restriction order in November 2023, before the matter escalated. Although of Chinese ethnicity, the boy was drawn to white supremacist extremism, evidently falling into this form of far-right extremism via distorted ideas about Christianity.⁵⁶

In a somewhat similar earlier case, another 16-year-old Singaporean boy was arrested in December 2020 after the police became aware of his plans to attack two mosques near his home using a machete to fatally wound unsuspecting congregants. The youth, a Protestant Christian of Indian ethnicity, was inspired by the shocking attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, carried out by an Australian lone-actor terrorist on March 15, 2019, in which 49 worshippers were shot dead whilst at Friday prayers.⁵⁷

Separately, a 15-year-old youth became the youngest person ever detained under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) in December 2022, having been 'self-radicalised' by IS propaganda.⁵⁸ Radicalisation, however, is a social process and rarely, if ever, occurs as the result of a solely individual journey. Rather, it is the friendships formed in chat groups and forums that are far more instrumental than the propaganda that sparks the conversations. As it turned out, this 15 year old had formed a friendship with a zealous 18-year-old Singaporean, Muhammad Irfan,⁵⁹ after having been influenced by the Zimbabwean extremist preacher Ismail Menk. Irfan had also separately befriended another 16-year-old boy, who was also described as 'self-radicalised'.⁶⁰

At the time of Irfan's arrest, Singapore's Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam said that nine individuals under the age of 21 had been dealt with under the ISA since 2015. Fortunately, in all these cases, the police were able to detect and disrupt the process of radicalisation into violent extremism before any physical harm was done. By collaborating with community groups such as the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), most have since made good progress in their rehabilitation. Nevertheless, these cases serve as a reminder that the reach of malign social networks via social media, has the potential, at least on occasion, to exceed the capacity of police intelligence and government agencies to detect and disrupt.

Less evident at the moment, especially when it has just lost a substantial community of support in the form of JI, is the steady rebuilding of AQ. For observers on the continent of Africa, this rise of AQ, often in tandem with its rival IS, is well understood. But in Southeast Asia, it is easy to make the mistake of assuming that AQ is a spent force. The reality of developments in Afghanistan over the three years since the fall of Kabul should serve as a warning against complacency.⁶¹ Neither AQ in Afghanistan nor its deeply linked host and partner the Taliban,⁶² wish to draw attention to the longer-term external threat posed by developments in the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

There is growing evidence that both IS and AQ are seeking to exploit passions and anger about the tragic war in Gaza. This was one factor, together with the burgeoning of far-right extremism and conspiracy theory fixations, which led the Australian authorities to recently raise the nation's terrorism alert level from 'possible' to 'probable', returning it to the level set in September 2014 in the wake of the declaration of the IS caliphate.⁶³ The destruction of Gaza has served to galvanise international attention, and AQ, for whom the Palestinian struggle is a foundational narrative, is determined to exploit this. The safe haven AQ has found in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan looks set to enable it to do this on a larger scale than ever.

Virtually all of Southeast Asia's recent terrorist networks and actors can be linked to the flow of *mujahideen* via Pakistan to AQ's training camps in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Current developments in both Pakistan and Afghanistan suggest that conditions are ripe for the cycle to be repeated.

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Decentralising and Coordinating P/CVE through the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub)

Cameron Sumpter

A recently established online platform called the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub) has come to play an important role as the country sees out the first iteration of its national action plan to prevent violent extremism (known as RAN PE). Among several functions, the national counterterrorism agency (BNPT) platform serves as an instrument to collate and share data regarding P/CVE activities underway throughout Indonesia, thereby encouraging local initiatives and facilitating coordination. In collaboration with the EU Delegation to Indonesia, a series of provincial workshops was organised in mid-2023, which sought to increase platform uptake among regional stakeholders and learn more about local P/CVE policies and practices. While ongoing challenges include differing perceived priorities and hesitant buy-in from regional governments, platforms such as the BNPT I-KHub can be an effective tool for the implementation of the national action plan and management of its myriad activities.

Introduction

Bolstered by legislative updates in mid-2018, Indonesia's counterterrorism policing has been highly effective over the past six years. Over 1,600 suspects were arrested and charged with terrorism offences during this period, and the nation has recorded an almost total decrease in attacks, according to the 2023 I-KHub National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) Outlook. In 2022 alone, police thwarted ten violent extremist plots, surely saving several lives while preventing the malignant side effects of terrorism.

Yet recent data suggests a concerning level of sympathy among young people for extremist causes and discriminatory views of perceived out-groups. The polling firm, Lembaga Survei Indonesia, found in 2023 that 6% of Indonesians under 40 support the use of organised violence to defend their religion, while a considerable 36% expressed discontent towards other religious faiths.¹ Successful policing has clearly blunted threats in the near-term, but such findings confirm the ongoing importance of more patient prevention initiatives.

With this longer view in mind, the government issued a presidential regulation in 2021 to enact a National Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism (RAN PE), following advocacy and planning from the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) and partners.² Among a raft of processes and intentions, the plan sought to improve coordination among stakeholders and encourage regional ownership of prevention strategies. This article will assess broad progress toward these goals, and particularly the role played by an innovative new online platform called the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub).³ Despite persistent challenges, the Indonesian government is constructing highly promising P/CVE infrastructure that can produce long-term benefits, if enthusiasm and resources are mobilised and sustained over the coming years.

Local Ownership and Coordination

International consensus has now largely formed that P/CVE is most effective when programming and activities are decentralised, so efforts can focus on distinct contextual factors and seek local solutions.⁴ While drivers for violent extremism certainly operate at societal and global levels, more specific root causes are found in municipalities, communities, and the associated experiences of people attracted to extremist narratives. For P/CVE initiatives, this ideally requires locally relevant programme design and management, as well as buy-in from subnational authorities. But as

extremist threats are often ambiguous and/or obscure, prevention plans can struggle to find prominence on regional lists of priorities.

Another key feature of P/CVE strategy is the fundamentally multi-stakeholder composition of its activities.⁵ Security, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies are clearly required to thwart plots, dismantle networks, and ensure public safety, but upstream prevention efforts involve a diverse range of actors, including religious scholars, educators, community leaders, social service providers, mental health professionals, youth workers, and even the private sector, such as business associations.⁶ This is often called a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to P/CVE, which was a central recommendation from the United Nations in its mid-2010s global call for nations to develop national P/CVE action plans tailored to their particular needs and contexts.⁷ However, establishing effective coordination mechanisms among often-disparate actors is not easy, especially in large nations with immense institutions, ample space for local autonomy, and multiple levels of administration.

National Action Planning

Overcoming the challenge of coordination and ensuring programmatic relevance were among the central themes of Indonesia’s new P/CVE strategy, which was officially coined the National Action Plan to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism (RAN PE – *Rencana Aksi Nasional Pencegahan Dan Penanggulangan Ekstremisme Berbasis Kekerasan Yang Mengarah Pada Terorisme*).⁸ Instituted in 2021 but covering an initial four-year period of 2020-2024, RAN PE sought to target the drivers of violent extremism but also aimed to build community resilience and undermine the influence of violent extremist narratives more generally. The comprehensive plan involves three pillars:

- Pillar One: Prevention (preparedness, counter-radicalisation, and de-radicalisation).
- Pillar Two: Law enforcement, protection of witnesses and victims, and strengthening of the national legislative framework.
- Pillar Three: International partnerships and cooperation.

Each pillar includes several sub-focus points outlined with an acknowledged problem, response strategy, associated actions, intended output, and expected results, allowing for a structured monitoring and evaluation logframe system. Almost 50 government institutions were identified as requiring involvement in the plan, while ministries, agencies, and local government authorities are expected to work together to implement the RAN PE actions, with community participation as and when necessary. A RAN PE Secretariat was established to coordinate, monitor, and evaluate the implementation process, both at the national and local levels.⁹

As of July 2024, focus group discussions among key government stakeholders and civil society representatives were underway to seek refinements and continuity towards the next phase of RAN PE, which is expected to be detailed in a subsequent regulation in 2025, once the incoming presidential administration is in place. Among the likely updates appears to be further emphasis on provincial strategies and enhanced local ownership of context-relevant programming.¹⁰

Promoting Local Ownership

Regional P/CVE action plans (*Rencana Aksi Daerah*) or RAD PE have been developing throughout the national plan’s inception period but have not necessarily emerged naturally among the nation’s 38 provincial governments. In the late 1990s, Indonesia passed legislation that would devolve considerable administrative authority toward regional levels of government to promote democratic processes and prevent secessionism.¹¹ However, certain areas of governance remained under the purview of the central government, including security and defence.¹² P/CVE may be a multi-disciplinary endeavour involving both security and social programmes, but over the past 20 years addressing terrorism has largely been viewed by regional governments as the remit of key institutions in Jakarta, such as the National Police (Polri), National Intelligence (BIN), and the BNPT. That said, roles such as social conflict prevention, nation-building and resilience, and

fostering community harmony, which are closely related to P/CVE initiatives, have been outlined as responsibilities shared with local government since 2014.¹³

Under the guidance and encouragement of RAN PE, this dynamic has been evolving, and several of Indonesia's 38 provinces have now established their own RAD PE, including East Java, Central Java, West Java, Banten, Aceh, Lampung, South Kalimantan, and Central Sulawesi. Others, such as South Sulawesi, have regional action plans currently in development. While notably encouraging, the regional strategies generally remain works in progress. Some appear to be quite similar in design and focus to the national action plan, suggesting that suboptimal assessments were undertaken regarding specific threats, needs, and contextual relevance. In other cases, P/CVE-focused civil society organisations were the main driving force behind the respective strategy, which may adversely impact provincial government ownership and subsequent compliance for implementing the stated plan.¹⁴

Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub)

An innovative instrument that has built an increasingly important role in the implementation of RAN PE is an online platform called the Indonesia Knowledge Hub (I-KHub), which was officially launched in October 2020. Developed by the BNPT, the I-KHub was initially intended to coordinate provincial P/CVE stakeholders from across the archipelago and encourage information exchange among practitioners. Soon, the platform grew into the official reporting mechanism for RAN PE progress and now has three established areas of work:

1. Knowledge Management: Identifying, capturing, and disseminating data worthy for policy making process, valuable insight, best practices, and lessons learned from partnerships and collaborations.
2. Platform Management: Technical site operation, security, aggregation, and organisation of content and users.
3. Partnership Management: Coordinating stakeholder input, engagement, and promoting active participation.

From late 2022, the BNPT I-KHub has partnered with the European Union Delegation to Indonesia to promote registration and uptake of the platform in the regions, while at the same time mapping current threats, ongoing grassroots activity, and strengthening local approaches through coordination. The engagement has been an important aspect of the EU's Counterterrorism and P/CVE Activity Plan for Indonesia and the Region (2020-2024).¹⁵ Supported by the EU project, Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA), the I-KHub team held operational workshops in five provincial capitals in 2023, and have since followed up with five more in 2024.

The 2023 workshop series visited Surabaya (East Java), Semarang (Central Java), Bandung (West Java), Pekanbaru (Riau), and Ambon (Maluku) between June and December. Participants included representatives of the Directorate of National and Political Unity (known by its Bahasa Indonesia abbreviation Bakesbangpol), which is an entity of the Ministry of Home Affairs tasked with coordinating and implementing certain central government activities at the regional level, including security. The second group were local members of the Terrorism Prevention Coordination Forums (FKPT), which is a BNPT-initiated monitoring and engagement network with chapters present in most of the nation's 38 provinces. Finally, P/CVE stakeholders from local civil society organisations (CSOs) joined the activities and conversations.

Each workshop also involved a panel of practitioners and policy makers from the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain, who discussed municipal-level P/CVE programming in their nations, including systems of coordination among stakeholders – vertically between central government and local authorities, and horizontally among various working level programme staff and front-line actors. Despite the obvious differences in context, it was remarkable how similar the challenges were between the EU Member States and Indonesian provinces regarding the implementation of initiatives – particularly around the management of tasks and input, the sharing of information, and the often-differing perspectives of those involved.

Findings and Discussion

The principal challenges to implementing P/CVE programmes and policies in the five Indonesian provinces were found to be variations in the priorities of central and local government, coordination snags, and resource constraints. During one discussion, a vice-governor from Java remarked that P/CVE policy and programming was generally considered an important yet non-urgent task for local governments, who remain focused on what they see as more pressing public matters, such as ensuring health services, alleviating poverty, and coping with housing issues.¹⁶

This hierarchy of priorities impacts budgeting, human resources, and the consideration allocated for P/CVE efforts at the local level. For instance, Bakesbangpol currently has a single full-time officer working on P/CVE in one of the provinces this author and colleagues visited (with a population of a medium-sized country). This example also highlights the issue of geography and scope of the potential problems. Central Java alone has over 35 cities and regencies, yet a majority of programmes are centred in the city of Surakarta (Solo), with less attention paid to other vulnerable pockets of the province, as identified in I-KHub mapping studies. Elsewhere, certain remote communities may also prove physically difficult to reach, inhibiting the frequency of interactions and monitoring.¹⁷

While Bakesbangpol appeared to be rather stretched in some provinces with regard to P/CVE management and activities, the agency conducts some valuable training for security and engagement at the local level. Examples include annual coordination meetings on security updates with other local agencies and engagement with different government-established civil society-based forums such as Forum Kewaspadaan Dini Masyarakat (FKDM).¹⁸ In Java, workshop participants stressed the importance of promoting 'local wisdom' (*kearifan lokal*) in holistic prevention efforts, which embody fundamental cultural values such as respect for the elderly, cooperation, and mutual assistance activities (*gotong royong*).

Given the tentative buy-in among busy provincial authorities, the I-KHub team has noted the similarity between the current P/CVE ambitions and well-established mechanisms for mitigating social conflict in the regions. These include the Community Awareness Forum (*Forum Kewaspadaan Dini Masyarakat*, FKDM) mentioned above, but also the Religious Harmony Forum (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, FKUB), and National Intermingling Forum (*Forum Pembauran Kebangsaan*, FPK). P/CVE-relevant initiatives can and have been 'piggy backing' on the instilled nature of these social conflict-focused forums in several regions, which may also help to desensitise activities, as engagements branded with terms like 'extremism' can be divisive and stigma-inducing.¹⁹

This method emerged during the Maluku workshop in Ambon, as well as subsequent meetings in West Nusa Tenggara, Riau Islands, and DKI Jakarta.²⁰ Similar notes were again made during the RAN PE focus group discussions in mid-2024, as participants stressed the need to avoid stigmatisation and adhere to a rights-based human security approach for the second phase of RAN PE.²¹

Another notably positive aspect of regional P/CVE observed during the I-KHub workshops was the proactive efforts of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the experience and knowledge accrued by many of their practitioners. According to last year's K-Hub Community Outlook²², 81 CSOs have engaged with more than 255 PVE programmes across Indonesia, over the preceding two years alone. The myriad programmes cover both ends of the P/CVE spectrum, from upstream youth-focused prevention activities to reintegration interventions for former extremists. Examples include school co-curricular initiatives and peace empowerment in Central Java; teacher and scout-leader schemes in West Java; and disengagement-focused former-terrorist associations in East Java.

Recognising the key role non-state organisations now play, BNPT has established the National Partnership Forum (*Forum Kemitraan Nasional*) and Thematic Working Group (*Pokja Tematis*) with members representing CSOs, the private sector (which in the next phase will include philanthropy) and higher education institutions. Seeking additional and ongoing support for their efforts will be

crucial for the decentralised vision of the national PVE action plan. Another important set of entities is known as Integrated Teams (*Tim Terpadu*), which generally cover certain thematic areas. One CSO participant highlighted the value of a deradicalisation integrated team in Central Java, which comprises various stakeholders who coordinate to facilitate prisoner reintegration processes, for example.²³

A further promising finding was that the BNPT-established FKPT prevention forums are becoming an impactful link between stakeholders, while fulfilling other important functions. For example, FKPT conducts provincial annual threat assessments, contributing to BNPT's national radicalisation potential index, and directs multi-stakeholder practitioner meetings in some provinces. One activity during the workshop series saw FKPT, CSO, and local government participants collaboratively mapping threat assessments and ongoing P/CVE programmes across their provinces. The FKPT and CSO representatives displayed particularly broad knowledge of the regional risks and established initiatives while adding convincing assessments of the associated requirements and deficiencies.

Again, the primary challenges were reportedly coordination and resource constraints, which also impact each other in different ways. Funding shortfalls will often leave programming gaps but similar and/or overlapping initiatives can exacerbate the problem through resource inefficiency. One participant highlighted that former prisoners in their province have received support from different (but unconnected) P/CVE interventions, complicating programme evaluation and possibly even risking counterproductive outcomes.²⁴ Interventions from the national government are now underway to tackle the issue of resource constraints, which include several guidelines on P/CVE budgeting at local levels.²⁵

Public sector budgets have been adversely impacted in many areas following the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic woes felt around the world, but coordination challenges can be overcome or at least mitigated with more effective systems in place. Avenues such as the I-KHub platform can potentially fulfil this need by connecting P/CVE practitioners and cataloguing ongoing projects, which should facilitate information sharing and work towards avoiding programme overlap and repetition.

Ideally, these connections will also induce regular meetings among key stakeholders. Annual or bi-annual update discussions (online or in-person) between FKPT, local government agencies and relevant civil society organisations would improve P/CVE communication, provide risk-landscape updates, and potentially generate fresh ideas. Greater awareness of the complete P/CVE picture in Indonesia will benefit the diverse range of actors involved, from those directing overall strategy in Jakarta to the small organisations working on grass-root initiatives in communities across the country.

Outlook

Indonesia's National Police proved the value of patient P/CVE work in mid-2024 with the disbandment of the decades-old terrorist organisation, Jema'ah Islamiyah. The historic announcement in late June 2024 was the culmination of successful investigations and prosecutions over several years, as well as "intensive engagement" between the police counterterrorism unit's (Densus 88) interlocutors and the extremist group's leading intellectuals.²⁶ But while the JI declaration is certainly a P/CVE success story, experts are not ruling out the eventual emergence of splinter groups and/or new generations inspired by their militant forebears.²⁷

To be sure, prevention is necessarily a long-term endeavour and needs to be sustained during periods of lulled extremist activity. The I-KHub cannot guarantee maintained enthusiasm among all stakeholders with a role to play in Indonesia's P/CVE plans, but the platform appears well set to facilitate involvement, collaboration, and cohesion as the nation further develops its all-of-society approach to preventing violent extremism.

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Situating Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya's Emergence in Bangladesh's Threat Landscape

Iftexharul Bashar

The Al-Qaeda (AQ)-centric new Bangladeshi militant group, Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS),¹ poses a significant asymmetric threat to Bangladesh and the neighbouring region. Despite key leaders' arrests and the group's apparent weakening, the prevailing instability and collapse of policing in Bangladesh in the chaotic wake of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster and installation of an interim government under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, raise concerns about its potential resurgence. Against this backdrop, this article examines the origins and evolution of JAFHS and Bangladesh's response. Operating from remote training camps in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and collaborating with groups such as the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), a Christian insurgent group, JAFHS aims to establish a self-styled caliphate through insurgent violence. Although the group was banned in August 2023 and its leaders have been detained, its advanced training capabilities, strategic alliances and ongoing radicalisation efforts continue to represent a serious security threat. While Bangladesh reforms its police, the country needs to maintain its zero-tolerance policy and restore its counter terrorism capabilities to check the re-emergence of militancy.

Introduction

The activities of Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqia (JAFHS), an Al-Qaeda (AQ)-aligned Bangladeshi terrorist group, came to light in October 2022, when the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the Bangladesh police's elite counter terrorism unit, was investigating the disappearance of seven youths from south-eastern Comilla district. Later, RAB discovered a list of 55 JAFHS trainees, mostly youth from across the country.

Since then, the RAB and the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes Unit (CTTCU) have arrested most of the JAFHS leaders and trained members in joint operations in the hills in the south-eastern region and other parts of the country, including the capital Dhaka.² These arrests and subsequent investigations have revealed preliminary data covering various aspects, including the group's structure and operational strategies.

Formed in 2017 by extremist inmates of a high-security prison, JAFHS has been involved in fund-raising, weapons acquisition and propaganda. It has received training and support from the AQ-linked Ansar al Islam (AAI) and formed strategic alliances with non-Islamist groups like the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF).

JAFHS seeks to establish a self-styled caliphate in Bangladesh and potentially extend its activities to India, Pakistan and Myanmar through armed struggle and attacks on key targets.³ The group adheres to the eschatological narrative of "Ghazwatul Hind" (the Great Battle of India), aiming for the conquest of India's eastern region.⁴

Bangladeshi authorities consider JAFHS a significant threat due to its advanced asymmetric combat capabilities and sophisticated operational tactics. The group is well funded, with connections to local and foreign sources, and operates through various business ventures.⁵ Some JAFHS members have used legitimate jobs as a cover for their activities. The group's long-term aim includes emerging as a powerful militant organisation in the region.⁶

The formation of JAFHS is a survival tactic of the older AQ-centric terrorist groups in Bangladesh, and, unlike its parent organisations, JAFHS is more focused on carrying out violence to reach its political goal. Keeping this in view, this article explores JAFHS' political and strategic aims, its formation and activities, as well as Bangladesh's response and the group's future trajectories.

Formation and Leadership

Though Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)'s Muhammad Shamin Mahfuz officially founded JAFHS in 2019, the idea of its formation was conceived as early as 2015 when he was in jail. AAI's Mainul Islam (aka Hasan aka Roxy) and Harkatul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B)'s leader Maulana Abu Sayeed were also instrumental in JAFHS' formation. JAFHS emerged on Bangladesh's threat landscape when other jihadist groups were being suppressed by law enforcement agencies after the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, giving it prominence. To fill the emerging vacuum, JAFHS used its platform to unite the remnants of other Bangladeshi jihadist groups.⁷

Sayeed, who is currently on death row for his involvement in the August 21, 2004 Dhaka grenade attack, reportedly advised Mahfuz and Islam to operate under a new name in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region.⁸ Reportedly, Abdullah Maymun, who later served as the head of JAFHS' *dakwah* (missionary) unit, suggested the name JAFHS with the aim of "assisting the larger Muslim Ummah".⁹

Mahfuz recruited nearly 100 JAFHS members across Bangladesh, established training camps in CHT and forged alliances with the KNF before his arrest in June 2023.¹⁰ In April 2020, JAFHS and KNF negotiated a deal of mutual non-interference at Hotel Bay Wanders, Cox's Bazar. According to the police, JAFHS also agreed to cover KNF's expenses and pay KNF trainers for imparting training on raids, ambushes, the use of improvised explosive devices, submachine guns and AK-47 assault rifles.¹¹

Under Mahfuz's coordination, JAFHS planned several attacks in Bangladesh to be carried out in 2024. Though it is not clear why this period was chosen, the January 2024 elections might have been a factor as the jihadists viewed democracy as "un-Islamic". Despite his arrest and JAFHS' subsequent ban in August 2023, Mahfuz's network remains a serious security concern as the group is likely to reorganise amidst Bangladesh's ongoing political unrest.

Another key JAFHS leader is its *emir* (leader) and founding member, Md Anisur Rahman Mahmud. He was appointed by Mahfuz as *emir* in 2021 after the group's first *emir* Mainul Islam was arrested.¹² Mahmud's focus was on domestic attacks, including planning armed assaults on law enforcement institutions. He forged tactical links with other extremists to secure weapons and training resources. Arrested in July 2023, he was also involved in recruiting members, producing propaganda videos and raising funds.¹³

In early 2023, Bangladeshi police recovered propaganda videos from JAFHS showcasing their operational activities, including training camps in remote areas. The videos, confessional statements of arrested militants and documents seized from JAFHS hideouts, led police to assess the group as a significant security threat compared to other militant organisations. The videos revealed plots to attack Kashimpur Central Jail to free high-profile militants and potential attacks on government and law enforcement targets.¹⁴

Training and Recruitment Strategy

JAFHS focuses on offline operations and avoids ideological propagation, preferring to conduct armed training discreetly, like the AQ-linked AAI. In January 2023, the RAB discovered that JAFHS members were being radicalised in Bangladeshi jails and were actively recruiting other prisoners. A case in point is Masukur Rahman Masud, who was detained on robbery charges. During his incarceration, Masud connected with JMB militants and maintained these connections after his release.¹⁵ Later, he became JAFHS' *shura* (council) member and head of the military wing. In

January 2023, Masud and his associate Bashar were apprehended in a Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar following a gunfight.

In 2020, police launched a crackdown against JAFHS' hideouts in Cox's Bazar, forcing the group to move its training camps to the hills in Chaikhyang Para, Remakri Union, Thanchi and Bandarban districts. During the training, in addition to weapons handling, militants also learned survival strategies in hostile environments.¹⁶ According to the RAB, after basic training, the recruits were sent to the mountains for advanced armed training, such as bomb manufacturing and guerrilla tactics.¹⁷

Drivers of Recruitment

JAFHS members come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ranging from lower-middle class families to some very poor households.¹⁸ Some are blue-collar workers, while others are *madrassa* (religious schools) or regular schoolteachers. JAFHS often targets these individuals with promises of benefits and religious governance. Prospective recruits are often taken to various mosques, where they are given lectures and shown videos on provocative topics, such as the persecution of Muslims in neighbouring countries. Essentially, by speaking against the country's judicial system and law enforcement agencies, their latent anger can be incited.¹⁹

This has led to many youth leaving their homes to embark on *hijrah* (the Islamic concept of emigration for the sake of faith) and join the group in secret.²⁰

Primarily, JAFHS recruits from Bangladeshi prisons, where extremist detainees hold bi-weekly religious rituals and group discussions. These gatherings are used by extremists to indoctrinate other inmates.

The pathway towards JAFHS is also due to social networks. Some of the youth reported that they were inspired to join JAFHS by their friends, relatives or acquaintances. Later, JAFHS encouraged them to emigrate and tempted them with promises of jobs, eventually leading them to the hills.²¹

Women's Branch

Reportedly, JAFHS has a women's branch that is involved mostly in fund-raising, *dakwah* activities, recruiting female militants and supporting militant families, particularly those families where the male members have moved to training camps or performed so-called *hijrah*.²² The RAB has identified at least six female militants, though the exact number is still unclear.²³ Wives of some of the group's members are also part of the women's branch, which had gradually been expanding before the arrests took place during 2022-2023.²⁴ However, no women have been found participating in the military wing, and most have performed secondary and assisting roles.²⁵ Law enforcement agencies say that extremists have used women to encourage male family members to leave home and move to training camps.²⁶ There has been at least one case where a radicalised mother sent her 15-year-old son to a militant training camp in the hills.²⁷

Finances

JAFHS is a well-funded group as finances come from local and external sources, including legitimate businesses.²⁸ The JAFHS financial stream revolves around self-funding, charitable projects, diaspora donations and contributions from other organisations. JAFHS has received support from Bangladeshi expatriates in the United Kingdom (UK), Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Pakistan (via *zakat*, or almsgiving money), alongside monthly donations from its members and fund-raising activities under the guise of aiding Rohingyas.²⁹ According to the RAB's investigation, the detained head of the *dakwah* branch, Abdullah Maymun, initially raised Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 5 million (US\$42,000 approximately) through donations from individuals abroad, other groups and his own resources.³⁰ Other key contributors included *Emir* Mahmud, who donated BDT 1.8 million (US\$9,000 approximately) from selling his house, and JAFHS' *shura* member and

militant wing leader Masud, who contributed BDT 500,000 (US\$4,200 approximately) from his pension and the proceeds from selling his car.³¹

Founder and chief coordinator Mahfuz played a crucial role in funding the group's operations, including weapons training and bomb-making.³² The organisation under his leadership garnered financial support through ostensibly benign projects like mosque construction and Islamic outreach, while avoiding overt references to militant activities. Members often self-finance their involvement through personal accounts or support from acquaintances.³³ Furthermore, JAFHS has received millions of BDT from domestic and expatriate donors via mobile banking and suspected illegal channels like *hawala* and *hundi*.³⁴ The militant organisation purchased foreign firearms worth BDT 1.7 million (US\$14,500 approximately) and paid around BDT 300,000-400,000 (US\$2,500-3,500 approximately) every month for training to the KNF.³⁵

Some of the group's members have reportedly used legitimate businesses and professions as a cover for their militant activities. For instance, JAFHS' chief recruiter, Rana Sheikh, worked at an insurance company until his arrest in May 2024.³⁶

Plans to Establish a Naval Unit

JAFHS also harboured plans to establish a naval unit in south-central Bangladesh's Patuakhali district for its members who possessed military training. The naval unit was designed to serve as a refuge in times of heightened law enforcement operations.³⁷ The plan to create a naval unit in Patuakhali,³⁸ a riverine district in south-central Bangladesh adjacent to the Bay of Bengal, reveals the group's strategy to enhance operational security and prepare for law enforcement confrontations. By focusing on members with military training and utilising the district's location and topography, they aimed to ensure a secure refuge and leverage natural features for tactical advantage in times of heightened pressure. The responsibility for the unit was assigned to a Patuakhali resident, Kazi Saraz Uddin, who had joined JAFHS from the Bangladesh chapter of the Pakistan-based militant group Harkatul Jihad al Islami (HuJI).³⁹ The RAB disclosed that AAI was the financier behind JAFHS naval unit.

State Response

According to the RAB, from October 2022 until July 2023, as many as 82 individuals affiliated with JAFHS were arrested across Bangladesh, including CHT. The leader of the group Mahmud was arrested in Munshiganj along with two associates. The authorities also seized firearms, bomb-making materials, extremist literature and cash from his hideout. Earlier, the group's founder Mahfuz and his wife were arrested in Dhaka, where a pistol and explosives were recovered.⁴⁰ In these raids, the RAB also discovered weapons, explosives, communications devices and documents. Concurrently, around 17 KNF leaders have also been detained for allegedly assisting the JAFHS militants in training and other activities in the hills.

In August 2023, Bangladesh's Ministry of Home Affairs banned JAFHS, citing public safety concerns, and mandated financial institutions to sever ties with the group.⁴¹ Soon after the ban, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit issued a directive directing that all financial institutions and businesses, including banks, insurance companies, money changers and legal professionals, halt any financial dealings with JAFHS.⁴²

Future Trajectories

RAB officials have reported that 12 to 15 individuals associated with JAFHS are still at large, with about 10 missing after their training in CHT. Some of the uncaptured leaders are notorious for their bomb-making and explosive-handling expertise. At any rate, JAFHS faces difficulties in reactivation due to its relative newness, with many members seeking to rejoin previous organisations like JMB, HuJI or AAI.⁴³

Despite the significant setbacks faced by JAFHS, including the arrests of key leaders and the official ban on the group, it remains a serious security threat to Bangladesh and the broader region. Recent political upheaval in Bangladesh, marked by major jailbreaks and a weakening of the country's policing and counter terrorism capabilities, has created an environment that could be exploited by extremist groups.

In a concerning development, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), the respective official franchises of AQ and the Islamic State in South Asia, have recently issued detailed statements in Urdu aimed at capitalising on the political uncertainty in Bangladesh. For instance, AQIS chief Usama Mahmood praised the resistance against corruption and secularism in Bangladesh, while calling for the establishment of an Islamic system and unity against oppression.⁴⁴ Conversely, ISK's statement encouraged jihad and preparation for conflict with India, emphasising divine rewards for their efforts.⁴⁵ This strategic messaging could attract disaffected individuals, including JAFHS militants who are currently on the run. These militants might be lured by the promises and ideological appeal of AQIS and ISK.

These developments may provide JAFHS with opportunities to regroup and increase its influence. The group's capability to unite various militant factions and its established network of training camps and strategic alliances enhance its potential for resurgence.

Recommendations

While Bangladesh reforms its police under a new interim administration, the country needs to maintain its zero-tolerance policy and restore its counter terrorism capabilities to check any re-emergence of militancy. There have been worrying indications as some of the pro-AQ militants are operating openly and reaching out to the public. JAFHS is likely to reactivate its network in the short term, especially as some of its leaders are believed to have escaped during the recent jailbreaks in the country. Bangladeshi authorities therefore need to maintain rigorous monitoring and conduct thorough investigations on JAFHS. There must be a concerted effort to address the group's financial sources and implement a comprehensive preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programme. At the same time, a comprehensive and adaptive approach is also needed to combat the evolving threat of JAFHS, including strengthening counter terrorism operations, improving prison management and addressing radicalisation both within and outside of the correctional system.

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¹ This article uses the spelling used in Bangladeshi media. Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (abbreviated here as JAFHS) literally translates as "the Supporters' Group in Eastern India". The meaning of the term Ansar is "helpers" or "supporters", but it is often used by militant or extremist groups to signify their role as defenders or champions of their causes. These groups adopt the term to frame themselves as modern-day "helpers" supporting their version of ideological, political or religious goals.

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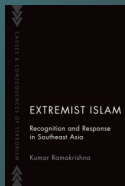
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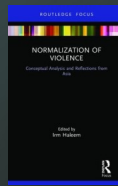


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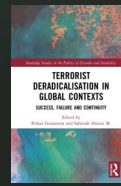
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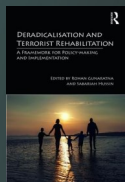
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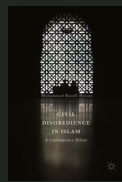
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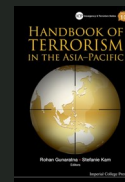
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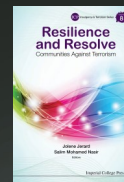
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