



Jihadi Terrorism in South and Southeast Asia

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European Eye on Radicalization



Introduction

The collapse of the Islamic State (IS) caliphate at the end of 2017 and the recent killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-declared caliph or leader of IS at the hands of the American special forces may convey the impression that the war against jihadi terrorism is almost over. This view may be further reinforced by the fact that the other major Islamist terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, has been on the run since the American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 and the subsequent killing of its charismatic leader, Osama bin Laden, by US special forces in Pakistan in 2011. The reality cannot be any further from this *false* impression, particularly as far as South and Southeast Asia are concerned.

South Asia

Jihadi terrorism is the most lethal threat faced by states and peoples in South Asia today. Most experts on Afghanistan agree that the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist group aligned to Al-Qaeda that wants to reimpose a harsh Islamic rule in the country, has effectively defeated the US-led NATO and Afghan government forces by capturing almost 70% of the state's territory and running a parallel government in the areas under its control. The Taliban forces seem resilient, capable, and determined, and can strike at will even in the highly fortified areas of the national capital, Kabul. It has managed to wear down the foreign occupying forces in over eighteen years of ceaseless fighting, and the U.S. government seems to be acknowledging this fact by desperately looking for a way out of Afghanistan.[1] Complicating matters in Afghanistan further has been the steady growth of IS. The expansion of the Afghan division of IS, the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK), has been the result of two main developments: the defection of extreme hard-line factions from the Taliban to ISK, and the steady return of jihadists from Syria as IS caliphate crumbled. This has further muddied the political landscape and security situation in Afghanistan. In recent times, ISK have carried out terror attacks against the civilian population, government officials, NATO/Afghan forces, and even against the Taliban.[2]

Jihadi terrorism in Afghanistan originates, in its essentials, in Pakistan. Over the past five decades, Pakistan's powerful military establishment and intelligence apparatus, specifically the notorious Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), have created, nurtured and consolidated a jihadi terror factory within the country.[3] The growth of Islamist forces in Pakistan serves two main purposes for the Pakistani military and ISI. One, they act as a counterweight to the mainstream political parties and serve as a loyal support base for the military when it frequently seizes overt control of the state. And, two, non-state jihadi forces can be used as an "unofficial arm" of the military to deniably pursue its strategic objectives in neighbouring states, notably Afghanistan and India.[4] In spite of massive international pressure, therefore, the Pakistani military has not seriously cracked down on jihadi groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), the Haqqani Network (HN), and a plethora of similar groups, and the fertile ground created by the military and ISI mean that when some of these groups—notably Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—turned on their patrons, there was no *ability* to crack down on them.

India has faced relentless jihadi attacks from groups based in Pakistan, especially since the outbreak of an armed insurgency in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In J&K, mainly in the Kashmir Valley, political protests and student demonstrations in the late 1980s were soon transformed into a full-blown armed insurgency in favour of independence led by the nationalistic Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). By the early 1990s, however, jihadi groups based in Pakistan had hijacked the movement. These groups, most notably the Hizb ul-Mujahideen (HuM), unleashed a campaign of terror in the Valley aimed at ethnically cleansing the area of non-Muslims. For example, Hindu Pandit families were massacred and forced to leave the Valley. And moderate Muslims were intimidated into accepting the jihadis' agenda.[5]

Other jihadi groups such as the JeM and LeT also carried out terror attacks in Kashmir and other areas of India, notably the attempt to blow up the Indian parliament (the Lok Sabha) in New Delhi in 2002 and the Mumbai terror siege in 2008. In recent times, JeM has carried out major terrorist attacks against Indian security forces, at Uri and Pulwama, which led to Indian reprisals against terrorist camps inside Pakistan, the February 2019 Balakot airstrikes being the primary recent case-in-point. The Indians have also looked to dismantle the terrorist launch pads across the line-of-control in J&K with various tactics, such as the commando raids in the aftermath of the Uri attacks in 2016.

A recent development in J&K that is deeply worrying is the growing popularity of IS and its ideology of the caliphate particularly amongst the Kashmiri Muslim youth based in the Valley.[6] These youngsters, many of them well educated, seem to have become disillusioned with the Pakistan-based jihadi groups, which mainly pushed Pakistan's strategic agenda. Instead they seem to find more resonance with the globalist jihadi ideology of IS, particularly its desire to create an Islamic caliphate stretching from Africa all the way to Southeast Asia. As part of that agenda, Kashmiri jihadis affiliated to IS talk about "*Ghazwa-e-Hind*—the strategic goal to take political control of the Indian Subcontinent through a holy war and convert it into an outpost or province of the caliphate.[7]

South Asia's smaller states with either a Muslim majority (such as Bangladesh and the Maldives) or a Muslim minority (such as Sri Lanka) have also witnessed a disturbing expansion in the popularity of jihadi ideology, especially among disaffected youth, many of whom are now openly identifying with IS and Al-Qaeda. In Bangladesh, a country of around 168 million people of which almost 90% are Sunni Muslim, the oldest jihadi group in operation is the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JeIB). JeIB and its student wing, the Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS), mainly draw their members from Deobandi seminaries that have mushroomed across the country. Modelling themselves along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, JeIB and ICS are tight-knit groups looking to convert Bangladesh into an Islamic emirate akin to the Taliban regime (1996-2001). These groups are joined by other Islamist forces, the most prominent of which are the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), spreading an ideology of hate that has led to numerous terrorist attacks, using mainly bombs and knives. In recent years, these groups have carried out attacks against secular bloggers, journalists, minorities, politicians, security personnel and prominent social and political activists. Several members of JeIB have been given death sentences by the Bangladesh courts for war crimes committed during the war of independence in 1971.

The two island nations of Maldives and Sri Lanka have also not been devoid of jihadi violence in recent times. Maldives has witnessed a growing radicalization of Muslim youths, encouraged to a large extent by former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and hard-line Islamic preachers patronized by the Gayoom regime. A large contingent relative to population size of radicalized fighters (around 200) went to Syria to join IS and help sustain the caliphate.[8] The radicalization of Sri Lanka's small Muslim or Moor minority, located mainly in the Eastern Province, has also been taking place over a number of years. At the height of the Tamil-Sinhalese civil war, clashes between the Tamil Tigers and Muslims used to be a regular occurrence. To protect their community from Tiger violence, Muslim youths had sought guidance

and support from jihadi groups like Al-Qaeda and had even organized themselves into Osama Hit Squads.[9] Once the civil war ended with the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, things calmed down for a while.

The rise of IS and the creation of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq energized another cycle of radicalization, especially among members of small obscure groups. On April 21, 2019, one such group, the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), carried out eight suicide bomb blasts that killed more than 200 people at several targets including two luxury hotels and three churches holding Easter services.[10] The main suspect, Zaharan Hashim, was a local Muslim preacher at his hometown Kattankudy in eastern Sri Lanka who was known for his radical views, calls for jihad and support for IS and the caliphate.[11] One of his associates, Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed, was reportedly radicalized in Australia where he lived from 2009-2013 and completed a postgraduate degree.[12] The suicide attacks, falsely believed initially to have been carried out to avenge the Christchurch mosque attack in New Zealand by a white supremacist, created inter-communal tensions between Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Southeast Asia

The picture is not much different if one looks at Southeast Asia. In Burma, national integration has been a key challenge, especially from non-Burman ethnic groups such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Arakan and the Rohingya. Over the years, the Burmese army has fought pitched battles with rebel forces belonging to various ethnic groups and the state has used serious forms of control and repression to manage inter-ethnic tensions. The most recent clashes flared in the Rakhine province in 2017 after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked a police station on 25 August killing 12 police personnel. The state accused the ARSA of being a terrorist organization and its leaders for fomenting jihad. According to the International Crisis Group, ARSA's founding leader, Ata Ullah, was born in Pakistan and raised in Saudi Arabia where he was exposed to Wahhabi-Salafi ideology and many of the group's leaders have trained abroad particularly in Saudi Arabia.[13] The ARSA rejected the terrorist tag and stated its aims are to "defend, salvage and protect" the Rohingya against state repression. The Burmese military, however, adopted a scorched earth policy, thereby creating a major humanitarian crisis. Due to the brutal crackdown by the Burmese military, over one million Rohingya refugees moved into neighboring Bangladesh.

Burma's southern neighbour, Thailand, has had to deal with a decades long ethno-religious insurgency in the four southern provinces inhabited by Muslim Malays: Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat (which originally constituted the Sultanate of Pattani). The Malay nationalists' main complaint was their forcible incorporation into Thailand by the British colonial rulers, and later repression and neglect by the Thai state. The Malay nationalists therefore demanded autonomy and self-rule. When this was not granted, a Malay insurgency sprang up demanding secession and independence of the four southern provinces. On 4 January 2004, a group of more than fifty insurgents stormed an army depot in Narathiwat province. They killed four soldiers, took more than 300 weapons and burned 20 schools. The incident marked a dramatic escalation and the Thai military responded with a severe crackdown.[14] Amnesty International believes that over the next decade and a half, the Thai military ran at least 21 unofficial detention centers in the south where detainees were tortured, in addition to the two official prisons for insurgent suspects.[15]

Due to the severe crackdown by the Thai forces, the insurgency in Pattani went underground. Over the years, a generational change took place among the insurgents, and the influence of IS and the Taliban/Al-Qaeda on a new generation of insurgents became severe. Today, very few in Pattani talk about Malay nationalism; most of the talk is of jihad and the caliphate.[16] The uneasy and misleading calm in Pattani was broken on 5 November 2019 when insurgents attacked a police checkpoint in the Yala province killing fifteen people including police officers.[17] Although no one can be yet sure as to which group carried out the attack, government sources have pointed the finger at the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), one of the three main insurgent groups in operation.

A major jihadi terrorism threat in the Philippines happens to be in the southern province of Mindanao, where a decades long ethno-religious insurgency has ebbed and flowed. The inhabitants of Mindanao are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and they have long resented the domination of the Christian north. The main nationalist organization in Mindanao that advocated for autonomy and self-rule was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Over the years, the MNLF has held several rounds of peace talks with various regimes in power in the Philippines. But sadly, none of the peace agreements were properly implemented. By early-2000s, the Moro nationalist insurgency transformed into an Islamic jihad under the tutelage of the Abu Sayyaf group.

Abu Sayyaf disagreed with the MNLF's policy of pursuing autonomy and wanted to establish an independent Islamic state. Its founder, Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, was an Islamic preacher who fought in the Soviet-Afghan war, where he was said to have met Osama bin Laden and been inspired by him. Al-Qaeda provided the group with funding and training when it was initially set up. In 2014, Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon swore allegiance to IS and declared himself the "Amir" of a South East Asian caliphate. Hapilon brought the Abu Sayyaf together with three other small, hardline insurgent groups owing allegiance to IS, who rejected peace talks with the government and advocated the creation of a caliphate based on a Salafi form of Islamic rule.

The Maute group was one of the most potent of these hard-line breakaway factions. It was founded about five years ago by Omar and Abdullah Maute, natives of Lanao del Sur and members of the Maranao clan. They both studied in the Middle East (Omar at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and Abdullah in Jordan), speak Arabic and are well-versed in Salafi and jihadist ideology. In 2017, the Maute and the Abu Sayyaf tried to take over the town on Marawi in Mindanao, leading to a fierce war with Philippine military backed by US special forces.[18] The war killed over a thousand and displaced hundreds of thousands. It was alleged that many foreign fighters from Malaysia, Indonesia, Chechnya and Yemen fought alongside the Maute/Abu Sayyaf forces. On October 16, 2017, the Philippines soldiers finally managed to track down and kill Hapilon and Maute. But several hundred militants have escaped and are believed to be hiding in some of the more remote islands in the Mindanao region. The jihadi campaign in Mindanao is therefore far from being over.

Indonesia and Malaysia are two of the Muslim majority states in Southeast Asia, along with countries like the Sultanate of Brunei. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, but it has faced serious ethnic tensions in zones like Aceh and West Papua. In recent years, the state has also had to deal with a serious challenge from radical Islamists for imposition of sharia rule. The state has tried to deal with the Islamists through policies of both co-optation (carrot) and repression (stick). Malaysia too has witnessed serious ethnic tensions between majority Malays and the Indians/Chinese minorities in the past. The state has tried to keep the "sons of the soil" Malays happy by giving them preferential treatment (affirmative action policies) in government employment, education, social benefits, and so on. But overt signs of Islamisation are steadily growing. Singapore broke away from Malaysia in the mid-1960s. It became one of the fastest growing and competitive economies in the world and a major hub of international shipping and trade. But, more ominously, compared to its small

population, Singapore had a significant contribution to IS war in Syria. Security agencies in Singapore are therefore extremely worried about the threat of terrorism that could be posed by returning jihadis.[19]

Conclusion

If we compare cases across South and Southeast Asia, several things stand out.

First, states in South and Southeast Asia have responded to jihadi terrorism mainly through force and repression. In Afghanistan, NATO special forces and air raids have played a key role in trying to reduce the capability of the Taliban to operate, which had enabled the US-created Afghan state to survive this long but with serious costs, human and political, that are likely to prove unsustainable once the U.S. withdraws. In India, the security forces have been given a free hand in J&K (under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act) which has led to the neutralization of many hardcore jihadi terrorists. As for Bangladesh, the state has responded to jihadi terrorism through force and several prominent Islamists have been killed or hanged in recent times. The Sri Lankan government also cracked down heavily on Islamists and jihadis in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter bombings. Whatever the shortcomings of these policies, they were at least in some measure law-bound, which cannot be said of what happened in Burma, Thailand, and Philippines, where the states responded to the jihadi terrorism threat with massive force and repression. In all three cases, there was widespread torture of suspects, extra-judicial and custodial killings. The Burmese military practiced a “scorched earth” policy in the Rakhine state against the Rohingya Muslims that amounted to crimes against humanity. The Thai military became infamous for widespread violation of human rights in southern Thailand. And President Duterte of the Philippines authorized his forces to raze Marawi to the ground. The mass-repression has undoubtedly dented and restricted the operations of jihadi terrorists, but the underlying dynamics remain in place and will flare back up in time.

Secondly, in their fight against jihadi terrorism, states in South and Southeast Asia have received substantial military, intelligence, and political support from Western states. In Afghanistan, the main fighting against the Taliban and IS insurgents has been done by US and NATO soldiers and special forces. In fighting Pakistan-sponsored jihadis in J&K, India has received intelligence and political support from the United States and other Western states; it has also received assistance from Israel. India also shares intelligence with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives regarding the operations of jihadis and terrorists. In fact, it has come to light that India had shared intelligence with Sri Lanka regarding the possibility of the 2019 Easter attacks, but unfortunately the Sri Lankan authorities could not act on it on time. In Southeast Asia, American and Australian special forces have been heavily involved in training the Philippines military in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency warfare. American special forces have been known to participate in military operations with the Philippines forces against IS-loyal Abu Sayyaf insurgents in Mindanao. China has provided anti-insurgency warfare training to the Burma and Thai military forces.

Finally, it is fairly well known that jihadis in South and Southeast Asia have established a network of collaboration not only among themselves but also with Salafi groups operating out of the Middle East. Most of the jihadi groups operating in South and Southeast Asia established strong links with Al-Qaeda in the 1990s, and some of their cadres had experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s, fighting alongside the Afghan Mujahideen as they tried—eventually successfully, with Western help—to rid their country of the occupying Soviet forces. After the Afghan war ended in 1989, some of these South and Southeast Asian fighters returned home and founded jihadi networks that received funding, support, and advice from Al-Qaeda. Other veterans of the Afghan jihad even travelled to places like the J&K, southern Thailand and Mindanao to help in local jihadi theatres there. After Bin Laden was killed and IS created its caliphate, many Al-Qaeda affiliates held their ground but in South and Southeast Asia there were significant defections to IS. Many Islamic militants from South and Southeast Asia flocked to Syria to help prop up the caliphate. The knowledge and experience that they gained there, especially in the use of explosives, have proven invaluable to local jihadi groups upon their return. It is believed that vast amounts of money have also poured into the hands of a plethora of jihadi groups in South and Southeast Asia from IS and AQ networks in the Middle East. The strength of jihadi terrorists in South and Southeast Asia has therefore grown phenomenally over the past two decades.

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