

## Post-Islamic State Scenario in the Middle East

Marcin Styszynski

## *Rumiyah* — Jihadist Propaganda & Information Warfare in Cyberspace

Remy Mahzam

## The Evolving Threat in Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar



## IS: Terrorist Attacks and Battlefield Losses

In the last several weeks, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group and its affiliates have demonstrated their continued ability to direct and conduct high-casualty and high-impact attacks in and outside their strongholds in Iraq and Syria. On 10 February, a car bomb struck Baghdad killing 10 people and wounding 33 others. Six days later, a suicide bombing at a Sufi shrine in Sindh (Pakistan) killed over 80 people and injured 250. The latest (8 March) is the attack on a military hospital in central Kabul which killed 49 people and injured over 60. The global terrorism situation remains grim as IS continues to plot more attacks and exploits social media to subvert the alienated and disgruntled to its jihadist cause.

On the battlefields in Iraq and Syria, however, IS is on the retreat, pounded by the US-led Coalition as well as Russian and Syrian forces. The Coalition forces are making significant progress in their offensive to retake western Mosul, capturing its airport, military base and main government complex. IS fighters are outnumbered and experts expect western Mosul to fall in coming months. On the Syrian front, IS has lost Palmyra again, after recapturing it in December last year, and is coming under attack in its de facto capital Raqqa. Some 400 US Marines have been sent to assist in the allied operation to retake Raqqa. It would not be long before more comprehensive, co-ordinated and forceful plans are implemented to defeat IS as well as other jihadist groups.

With the likely imminent defeat of IS on the battlefronts, it is timely to discuss the global threat landscape in a post-caliphate scenario. **Marcin Styszynski**, in his article, highlights four factors that will influence the threat trajectory: the strategic withdrawal of IS into smaller Sunni strongholds to carry out operations and attacks, the expansion of threat frontlines by IS' associated networks and returning fighters,

the rise of sectarian and religious tensions, as well as the competition between Al Qaeda and IS. The author concludes by emphasising the need to address the root causes of political conflict and instability if the significant successes of the Coalition forces in the last two years are not to be in vain.

This March issue also examines IS jihadist propaganda and information warfare in cyberspace. **Remy Mahzam** highlights the great emphasis IS places on online propaganda, and the significance of its propaganda magazine *Rumiyah* (Rome). He looks at IS calls for various forms of attacks to be executed, and attempts to influence specific groups of readers through exploitation of religious texts and powerful emotional and spiritual messaging. He concludes by spelling out what needs to be done to counter IS digital warfare.

**Iftekharul Bashar** looks at the threat in Bangladesh, six months after the Dhaka Café attack and argues that even though the security establishment has weakened IS through hard approaches, the group is far from eliminated. In his view, the current administration needs to adopt a long-term approach to tackle the broader issue of radicalisation and the diverse threat emanating from IS, Al Qaeda and other associated groups in the country.

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By Marcin Styszynski

## Introduction

The continuing military setbacks suffered by the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, the shrinking territory of the so-called caliphate, declining revenues, the decimation of top military commanders, fewer recruits as well as infighting and desertions, indicate that the group is on a systemic decline. However, despite experiencing losses on the main battlefields, IS global networks remain operationally active, both in the virtual and physical realm. A prognosis of the threat landscape post-IS must therefore take into account the following factors: the strategic withdrawal of IS from strongholds into less-populated areas to plan and carry out terrorist attacks; IS' expansion of terrorist frontlines and returning IS fighters; the rise in sectarian and religious conflicts; and Al Qaeda's re-emergence.

## Strategic Withdrawal of IS Insurgents

To date, IS has lost a significant percentage of its territories, including the Iraqi bases in Ramadi and Tikrit, as well as the Syrian branches in Kobane and Palmyra. One estimate put the territorial loss at over 60% in Iraq and 30% in Syria. Currently, IS is fighting a losing battle in western Mosul which is under heavy attack from US-led Coalition forces, and preparing for the impending all-out offensive against them in Raqqa, IS de facto capital.

As IS' focus shifts from being localised to becoming more globalised, IS is likely to shift to less populated areas with deserts or mountainous terrains to avoid direct confrontations with government forces and their Western allies. The group will also relocate to

smaller strongholds to conduct terrorist activities and to create political and social unrest in the Middle East. Already Syrian jihadist groups like *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* (previously al-Nusra) or *Harakat Ahrar Al-Sham* have taken the lead and begun moving from their bases in Idlib province to smaller strongholds in Al-Bab, Deir al-Zor or Wadi Barada near Damascus.

Such a strategic withdrawal is not new, as Iraqi jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Mujahideen Council or the Islamic State of Iraq had similarly relocated to smaller strongholds following the US intervention in 2003 and collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Initially, these jihadists started their terror campaign in Sunni strongholds in Falluja and Ramadi but resumed terrorist attacks on checkpoints, security forces and civilians in smaller districts and villages (Diyala, Baiji, Sinjar, Taji, Husseiniya, Haditha and Haswa) following the raids on their terrorist bases.

## Expanding Frontlines

In 2016 IS' spokesman, Mohammad al-Adnani (killed in August 2016) had encouraged IS supporters to establish local branches and to carry out attacks in other parts of the world. To complement the establishment of IS *wilayats* (provinces) globally, IS has also coordinated terrorist attacks and called on jihadist fighters to strengthen an asymmetric terror campaign and activate new frontlines in the Middle East, in a move that is touted to be a diversionary tactic aimed at refocusing the attention away from IS' losses in Iraq and Syria. This was evident during the attack on 20 December 2016 targeting the Karak Castle in Jordan, which killed 10 people.



IS claimed responsibility for the attack and referenced what it called the symbolic role of the Karak castle in the crusade wars against Islam. This was the second IS assault after a suicide attack at a military outpost at the border with Syria in June 2016. It demonstrates the intensifying jihadist offensive along new frontlines, especially in neighbouring countries bordering Iraq and Syria. In January 2017, an IS supporter rammed a truck into a group of Israeli soldiers killing four and injuring 17 in Jerusalem. In February 2017, IS also claimed responsibility for a rocket fire on Eilat, an Israeli resort.

Besides terrorist attacks on neighbouring countries, foreign fighters returning from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq will also pose a significant challenge to the security of the host countries as they embed themselves within the civilian population. This was evident in the Paris bombings of 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016, both of which were perpetrated by terrorists who were trained in IS' camps and who had fought in the Middle East.

#### **Increase in Sectarian and Religious Conflicts**

One possible implication of the post-IS threat landscape would be the rise in intra-religious and inter-religious conflict in countries already afflicted by Sunni-Shia conflict like Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and the targeting of religious communities. Following the collapse of the Sunni-dominated government under Saddam Hussein in 2003, jihadist groups took advantage of the resulting political changes that privileged the Shias and marginalised the Sunni clans. Clashes erupted between rebels from the Sunni districts in Baghdad, Baquba, Ramadi, Tikrit, Samarra and Falluja, and the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and the US forces in 2003 and 2004. In 2004, the anti-Shia campaign received more traction with the terrorist activities of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi whose group was responsible for conducting several attacks against Shia shrines in Karbala and Baghdad. For example, over 180 people were killed following the car bomb attacks in Karbala in December 2004. Sunni-Shia relations have worsened since then and remain vulnerable to exploitation by various political forces, especially religious extremists and jihadists.

IS is also likely to exploit neighbouring areas with Sunni-Shia tensions, particularly in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, IS and Al Qaeda jihadists are capitalizing on the fighting between the Shia Zaydi Houthis, a militant group said to

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be backed by Iran, and the largely-Saudi-backed government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, infiltrating cities and towns and creating enclaves.

In the eastern province of Saudi Arabia which has a significant Shia minority, anti-Shia terrorist incidents have increased. On 29 January 2016, a suicide bomber attacked Shia mosques in Al-Ahsa in the east of the country. At least four people were killed and 18 others wounded. Earlier in May 2016, a suicide bomber attacked the Shia Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib Mosque in Qatif, killing at least 21 people.

Another dimension of the conflict is the targeting of other religious communities, such as Christians. For instance, on 11 December 2016, IS claimed responsibility for the bombing attacks at St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Cairo, which killed 29 people and injured 47 others. (Eight days later, IS would again claim responsibility for the Christmas attack in Berlin that killed 12 and injured 56 others.)

IS can be expected to execute more outrageous terror attacks against Christians and Westerners in order to provoke strong anti-Muslim backlash and create social unrest and discord.

### **Al Qaeda's Resurgence**

Neutralisation of IS' bases and capabilities is likely to affect the competition between IS and Al Qaeda as jihadist fighters search for new avenues to advance the fight against the West. To further its cause, Al Qaeda relied in the past on Islamophobic narratives and capitalised on the perceived humiliation of Muslim communities during the Western military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.

Presently, Al Qaeda still maintains its own structures in Maghreb, Sahel, Yemen and Somalia. The collapse of IS' caliphate could possibly lead to a resurgent AQ, which will incentivise the group to redefine its strategy, increase recruitment, consolidate its enclaves, expand into new territories and intensify terrorist activities to recover its position as the pre-eminent global jihadist movement. In this regard, recently, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has condemned IS for its brutal tactics and encouraged all jihadists to unite and fight for establishing Sharia in the Arab-Muslim world.

A younger generation of jihadists are likely to grow more influential in the future as evidenced by the appearance of Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza bin Laden in AQ's public materials in 2016 Hamza was reported to have said in a speech that all jihadists are Osama – an obvious attempt to exploit Osama's brand name – and declares revenge for the death of his father and oppression of Muslims in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. In an audio message in May 2016, Hamza urged Muslims to join the intifada in Palestine to liberate Jerusalem by attacking Jews and their interests worldwide. It is also pertinent that many insurgents travelled with their children to Iraqi and Syrian territories controlled by IS and AQ. These children were forced to study in IS' schools and were indoctrinated from a tender age; they represent the jihadists of tomorrow and may grow to be a significant security threat.

### **Conclusion**

The final defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria as well as destruction of IS' branches in Sirte (Libya) have forced jihadists to rethink their strategies and future approaches in the Middle East. In fact, jihadists have sought to recapitulate past tactics

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that have succeeded in Iraq. In their search for new territories and enclaves, terrorist groups like IS and Al Qaeda will seek out appropriate social and political opportunities ripe for conducting terrorist activities, which will encumber efforts by authorities to prevent and disrupt the threat. Increased inter-agency collaboration will better enable governments to work together in eliminating such loopholes. The imminent threat of foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq also requires strengthening the mechanisms for protection of borders, verification of documents and surveillance of extremists and terrorists.

Also, the neutralisation of IS' bases will compel a resurgent Al Qaeda to gain more recruits by stirring up Islamophobic tendencies in the West and elsewhere and reinvigorate activities in old strongholds in Yemen, Maghreb or Somalia. Such virulent narratives must be countered by discourse of tolerance and inclusivity, with the objective of censuring intolerant and exclusive voices.

IS' children who grew up in the so-called caliphate will also need to be carefully assessed and rehabilitated so as to shatter the illusion of any hope of furthering the cause of the jihadi progenitors in the like of IS and Al Qaeda.

Addressing the root causes of political conflicts and instability will be critical if the significant successes of the Coalition forces in the last two years are not to be in vain. To prevent IS or Al Qaeda from exploiting the marginalisation of Sunnis in Iraq, socio-economic discontent, poor governance, corruption and unemployment, it is imperative that action be seen to be taken on these fronts, challenging though they are. The alternative is the revival of IS and the strengthening of Al Qaeda, dire outcomes for political stability and security in and outside the region.

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# Rumiyah – Jihadist Propaganda & Information Warfare in Cyberspace

by Remy Mahzam

## Introduction

Recognising that wars are no longer confined to the physical battlefields, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group has since 2014 embarked on an aggressive propaganda campaign in cyberspace through the release of various online publications like *Dabiq* (discontinued since August 2016), *Amaq News*, *Al-Naba* and *Rumiyah*. Since its debut in September 2016, *Rumiyah* ('Rome' in Arabic), which draws its title from a Prophetic tradition foretelling the fall of the West, is a strategic distraction from the realities on the ground characterised by the considerable loss of territory and revenue, heavy casualties and low morale among fighters. The launch of *Rumiyah* came precisely at a time when the rhetoric to justify the final battle in Syria seemed counter-intuitive and signalled a strategic shift in IS' *modus operandi*, with the battle against its enemies going not only beyond the Middle East but also into the realm of the digital.

## The New Face of Terrorism Propaganda

In terms of substance, *Rumiyah* is not dissimilar to its predecessor *Dabiq* or other jihadist publications such as Al-Qaeda's *Inspire* or Jabhat Al-Nusra's *Al-Risalah*. It is however likely to be more influential in the realm of jihadist propaganda given its wider reach. Translated into 10 languages (English, Bahasa, Bosnian, French, German, Kurdish, Pashto, Russian, Turkish and Uyghur), IS' narratives could easily be localised and tailored to fit the readership and dynamics of particular communities in the respective regions, from the Middle East to Xinjiang and Southeast Asia. Its availability in multi-lingual forms is designed to appeal to a

broad spectrum of adherents across the world compared to previous IS foreign language publications, like the Russian language *Исток* (Istok), Turkish language *Konstantiniyye*, French language *Dar Al Islam* and Bahasa language *Al-Fatihin* which only catered to a specific demographic or locality.

Each monthly issue of *Rumiyah* averages around 40 pages – an abridged and streamlined version of *Dabiq* (which was nearly twice in length). Each issue is sub-divided thematically, and includes a segment on latest news updates from the battlefields. *Rumiyah* complements two of IS' publications released in Arabic, *Al-Naba* (released weekly) and *Amaq News Agency* (released daily). The release of *Amaq News Agency*, *Al-Naba* and *Rumiyah* in conjunction with each other is a telling indication of IS' current media strategy: to dominate and thrive in cyberspace through frames of misinformation, and compete with mainstream news.

To avert attention on its military decline, IS uses *Rumiyah* to purvey carefully-crafted narratives to amplify its strengths and reframe its setbacks, while assuring its supporters of eventual victory. Undeterred by the recent death of the group's chief propagandist Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS' media apparatus continues to operate under the group's lesser known spokesman, Abul Hasan Al-Muhajir.

*Rumiyah* epitomises the next phase of IS' propaganda warfare. As IS progresses into a techno-savvy terrorist organisation, it has deployed hybrid warfare in the form of military operations and media engagement through networks in Europe, West Africa, Somalia, Sinai



(Egypt), Khorasan (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Qawqaz (Caucasus) and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia). The group continues the fight to maintain its self-proclaimed caliphate, making it an obligatory objective for all its supporters to struggle for.

### Justifying Terrorism

To intensify its campaign of terror, IS used *Rumiyah* to feature successful terrorist attacks and instigate its supporters to emulate these attacks and improvise where necessary, under what it calls ‘*Just Terror Tactics*’ as outlined in an article in Issue 2. It details explicit instructions on how to carry out self-directed attacks using knives, with the exhortation to take “simple and readily accessible materials” to conduct a campaign of “just terror operations”. The main targets are those in *Dar al-Kufr* – territories which are not governed by the laws of Islam.

*Rumiyah* Issue 3 released in November 2016 focuses on the use of vehicles to kill. This method of attack was adopted by Lahouaiej-Bouhlel who had deliberately driven a 19-tonne cargo truck into the crowd during Bastille Day celebrations in Nice, France in July 2016. Similarly in Berlin, a truck driven by Anis Amri also known as Abul-Bara at-Tunisi hit a crowd at a Christmas market beside Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Both assailants of the truck attacks in Nice and Berlin, were lauded in *Rumiyah* as “Soldiers of the Khilafah” and were described to have carried out their so called “just terror operations” in response to calls to target the citizens of states that are fighting against IS.

The Knife Attack strategy is revisited in *Rumiyah* Issue 4 (December 2016), with an info-graphic offering advice on the usage of knives and choosing targets. This issue was released about the same time as a video posted by Wilayat Raqqah media arm titled, “*You Must Fight Them, O Muwahhid*” featuring a French-speaking militant detailing instructions on how to engage in knife attacks and a tutorial on making improvised explosive devices (IED) using household items.

Issue 5 of *Rumiyah* (January 2017) shifts the focus to arson attacks using readily accessible flammables. It also singles out the First Baptist Dallas church in the US state of Texas which it refers to as “a popular Crusader gathering place waiting to be burned down.” The article provides steps on how to make Molotov cocktail and Napalm explosives using home-made items and

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went on further to explain how to claim responsibility after the attacks.

Throughout, readers are exposed to various terminologies which reinforce the narrative of a so-called war between Islam and the West and others, with references to the *Kuffār* (infidels), *Murtāddin* (apostates), *Tawāghīt* (tyrannical rulers), *Rafīda* (Shiites), *Sahwāt* (Syrians or Iraqis who have collaborated with the US-led coalition) and the ‘Crusaders’ (the West or Christians). These groups of people have been unconditionally identified by IS as enemies of God. As such, attacks on them have been described as “just terror” – acts that are portrayed as not only religiously acceptable, but obligatory and worthy.

Verses from the Qur’an and Hadith (Prophetic traditions) and words of famous scholars including theologian Abul-‘Abbas Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Jawzi, are excessively cited in *Rumiyah*’s articles. The publication exploits selected chapters of Islamic history, often taking out of context Prophetic episodes in the medieval era to justify the case for migration (*hijrah*), as evident in “Hijrah Does Not Cease as Long as the Kuffar Are Fought”. It also takes out of context the meaning of martyrdom (*istishhadi*) in

“Examples of Sahabah’s Eagerness to Attain Shahadah”, and condones the merciless killing of enemies in “The Kafir’s Blood is Halal For You, So Shed It”. *Rumiyah* is also replete with inspirational stories of ordinary militants shared in “Among the Believers are Men: Abu Mansur al-Muhajir” and “Paths to Victory by Abu Hamzah Al-Muhajir”.

### IS’ Calls for Attacks

With the addition of *Rumiyah* to the ever-growing IS-centric media apparatus, IS has repeated its calls for terrorist attacks to be executed outside the self-proclaimed caliphate. These attacks serve three purposes: First, to inflict substantial collateral damage on enemy infrastructure in various locations across the world. Second, to display IS’ enduring influence by boosting its branding through the acknowledgement of attacks. Third, to inspire a new generation of young, internet-savvy militants through the documentation of their terror experiences. Perpetrators inspired by IS are advised to leave “some kind of evidence or insignia identifying the motive and allegiance to the Khalifah” after performing an attack. The mode of IS-inspired attacks which occurred from June to December 2016 bear striking similarities to those advocated in *Rumiyah*’s foreword:

22-year-old Dahir Ahmed Adan had used steak knives during the mass stabbing attack at a shopping mall in the US state of Minnesota in September 2016 and was known to have had no previous connection to violence and extremism.

Two 16-year-old Australian teenagers were arrested in October 2016 on suspicion of planning a knife attack. They had in their possession bayonet-style knives and notes pledging allegiance to IS.

*Amaq News Agency* took credit for a murder in Hamburg, Germany in October 2016 in which a 16-year-old boy was stabbed in Kennedybrücke. The real motive of the attack is still not known but it is suspected to be in retaliation for Germany’s participation in anti-IS bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria.

In Tangerang, three Indonesian traffic police officers were stabbed by a 22-year-old IS supporter in October 2016. The attacker was armed with two unexploded improvised explosive device (IED) de-

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scribed as pipe bombs and an IS sticker.

In November 2016, a furniture factory which was set ablaze in Losino-Petrovsky, Moscow, has been cited in *Rumiyah issue 5* as an act of arson performed by a soldier of the *Khilafah*.

The assailant of the Ohio State University attack in November 2016, 18-year-old Abdul Razak Ali Artan, used both knife and vehicle methods as endorsed in *Rumiyah* when he rammed his car into a crowd on the Columbus campus before charging out with a knife.

Abu Suleman, leader of the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) linked-IS Bengal Caliphate operatives, gave a directive to use knives as a weapon for attacks. Investigations revealed that IS-JMB members were instructed to focus on carrying out knife attacks and not to source for guns or bombs so as to avoid detection from intelligence agencies.

### *Rumiyah*’s Targets

*Rumiyah*’s narratives (and for that matter *Dabiq*’s also, before its cessation) are targeted at three broad groups of readers – IS fighters, supporters and sympathisers, IS enemies (that includes the ‘Crusaders’ and Shiites), and potential recruits from the large middle ground of Muslims across the world, particularly Muslim minorities in the West and in conflict zones.

For its fighters and supporters in and outside Iraq and Syria, IS hopes to boost their morale, strengthen their resolve and empower them to mount terrorist acts by highlighting IS' operational strength and potency, the caliphate's viability, and successes in battlefronts and terrorist attacks. *Rumiyah* articles boast of inflicting considerable damage on its enemies. Info-graphics laden with battle statistics of fatalities, the number of tanks and military paraphernalia seized or destroyed and the number of *istishhadi* and *inghimasi* operations executed are included to counter mainstream media reporting. Military setbacks are portrayed as temporary or a test by God on their faith and religious commitment to struggle for the establishment of God's Word on earth. The bottom-line is that IS will eventually triumph because this has been prophesied. An article in *Rumiyah* issue 2, "Glad Tidings of Imminent Victory to the Patient", reminded readers that the conquest of Constantinople comes after "very many martyrs and wounds" and after "much blood and sweat" before the "triumphant survivors" advanced to siege the city. "Examples of the Sahabah's Eagerness to Attain Shahadah" in issue 6 recollects stories of the companions of the Prophet who attained martyrdom in momentous conflicts in Islamic history such as the Battle of Badr, Uhud and Mu'tah.

For its enemies, *Rumiyah* regularly employs literary leitmotifs, recurring themes and vivid imagery of blood, explosions, destruction, casualties and gruesome executions (by burning, shooting or beheading) of captured enemies, dissidents and offenders. The intent is not only to demonstrate IS power, supremacy and ruthlessness, but also to terrify and deter attacking forces as well as to intimidate the opposition and spies within its territories. The savagery and brutalities depicted are not random or arbitrary but the outcome of a cold and calculated decision with a strategic aim in mind – regime survival. A vivid illustration of this is demonstrated in an info-graphic, "Effects of Attacks by Mujahidin on the Economy of the Mushrikin" which details not only the direct losses suffered by IS enemies in the form of physical damages but also medium-term and long-term losses seen through the destabilisation of the economy, increasing security costs and unemployment rate, as well as weakening the tourism and insurance industry.

For potential recruits and perceived 'fence-sitters' within Muslim communities, IS attempts to

**“ *Rumiyah* articles boast of inflicting considerable damage on its enemies. Info-graphics laden with battle statistics of fatalities, the number of tanks and military paraphernalia seized or destroyed and the number of *istishhadi* and *inghimasi* operations executed are included to counter mainstream media reporting.”**

project how Islamic it is and how closely it adheres to injunctions in the Qur'an and Sunnah and how others like the Shiites, Sufis, hypocrites, waverers and others have deviated from the right path. In this connection, it appeals to them to migrate (*hijrah*) to the greater Levant to live and experience the Islamic way of life in the caliphate. Given its recent territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, IS has now urged its supporters to migrate to its various *wilayats* from Africa to Southeast Asia if they are unable to move to the greater Levant.

To counterblast mainstream media depiction of chaos, insecurity and deprivations in IS-controlled territories, *Rumiyah* projects an alternative reality, showing happy and well-groomed children playing or in school, shoppers in well-stocked retail outlets and markets, business



going on as usual in offices and factories, roads being repaired, telephone lines being installed, and *zakaat* (religious tithes) being collected and distributed to the poor.

The exploitation of media and the powerful emotional and spiritual messaging in *Rumiyah* (and its predecessor *Dabiq*) draws its lessons from Ayman Al-Zawahiri's comments on the importance of media to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (IS 'founder') in 2005. In a letter, Al-Zawahiri wrote that it is important that the *mujahiddin*'s operations have a media orientation towards issues of concern to the people as "more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."

### What Needs to be Done

The war IS is waging goes beyond ballistics and armed operations. It is very information-driven, strategically fought in both physical and cyber realms and is likely to persist until the so-called caliphate is routed and the Salafi-jihadist ideology exposed and overwhelmingly discredited. Unlike Al-Qaeda's *Inspire* or Jabhat Al-Nusra's *Al-Risalah*, *Rumiyah* (and its predecessor *Dabiq*) has demonstrated that the global jihadist struggle involves more than just military capacity but also a proficiency in crafting narratives through digital media. As quoted in Jabhat Al-Nusra's *Al-Risalah* magazine, "A gun can stop a heartbeat but a camera (media) can give life to a thousand hearts."

*Rumiyah*'s readership is not limited to just its supporters and sympathisers. It is gradually finding adherents among IS' enemies and converting fence-sitters among vulnerable segments of society. There are serious repercussions arising from this new wave of information warfare. Digital peripherals, videos and info-graphics have become *sine qua non* medium to influence or transform thinking and behaviour, in a manner that is unlike coercive warfare in the physical space.

Four essential steps need to be taken to counter IS digital warfare. First, neutralise the producers of *Rumiyah* and other IS and IS-affiliated online publications. The takeover of all of Mosul, Raqqa and other remaining towns in the greater Levant – expected in coming months – would be the first step. But more should be done to locate the propagandists operating underground in and outside Iraq and Syria. The painstaking and elaborate methodology employed to identify and

**“ To counterblast mainstream media depiction of chaos, insecurity and deprivations in IS-controlled territories, *Rumiyah* projects an alt-reality...”**

track down cyber-attackers of US defence and other sensitive institutions and assets should be replicated and deployed on the terrorist digital front.

Second, the so-called IS political structures have to be destroyed, starting with the so-called caliphate and followed up with the *wilayats*. This is because the effectiveness of IS propaganda relies on the concrete manifestation of IS perceived strength, capability and viability; the destruction of these tangible edifice would severely undercut its propaganda and undermine faith and confidence in IS. Third, no effort should be spared in preventing and disrupting the dissemination of IS online narratives which seek to sow discord between religious communities and rupture the existing social fabric and national cohesion. Since mid-2015, social media networks such as Twitter has suspended over 360,000 suspected terrorist accounts to disrupt the dissemination of propaganda aim at radicalising and recruiting supporters. But many thousands still operate unhindered because they are not as easily identified. International online news and social networking services as well as Internet national service providers and security agencies will do well to collaborate and intensify cyber police patrols, and continue the harassment of advocates of religious extremism and violence.

Lastly, it is imperative that effective religious and political counter-narratives be crafted by established clerics and propagated worldwide

through all channels, from mosques and *madrassas* to schools and both mainstream and online media. This requires close collaboration between governments and religious establishments and organisations. The objective must be to criminalise and marginalise the jihadists and their supporters who dream of building 'religious' and political institutions through terrorism, inter-religious conflict, public disorder and chaos.

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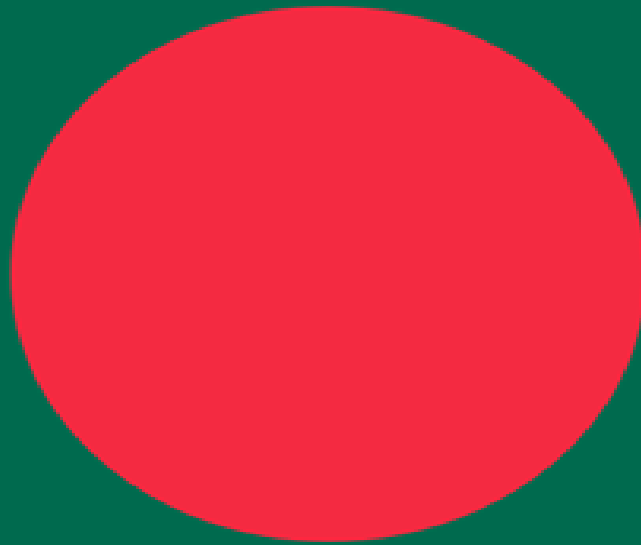
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# The Evolving Threat in Bangladesh



by Iftekharul Bashar

*Fresh recruitment in terrorist groups like IS and AQIS is becoming a challenge for counter-terrorism agencies in Bangladesh. As the global terrorist threat is becoming more complex and challenging, Bangladesh's over-reliance on reactive and operational response will not be effective in the long-term. The country at this juncture needs a more pro-active and strategic response to check religious intolerance and build better safeguards and firewalls.*

## Introduction

Six months after the deadly Dhaka Café attack in July 2016, the persistent threat of terrorism in Bangladesh has created concerns both in the country and abroad. Indeed, the authorities have been successful in operationally weakening the Islamic State (IS) terrorist cell led by Bangladesh-born Canadian Tamim Chowdhury. However, counter-terrorism efforts in Bangladesh remain reactive rather than proactive, hence creating opportunities for terrorists to strike. The authorities are struggling with preventing recruitment by IS, Al Qaeda and other lesser known local groups. Checking terrorist recruitment, including that of lone-actors, should be a priority to avoid future attacks. The present administration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has the political will to tackle radicalisation but lacks a well-articulated strategy and a dedicated body to coordinate inter-agency response to the problem of radicalisation towards violence.

While counter-terrorism operations have brought a temporary lull in violence in the country, there are concerns about IS' re-emergence in view of its continued online activities and recruitment of members. According to the country's law

enforcement agencies, two or three youth go missing almost every month in various parts of the country and some of these cases even go unreported. Local security officials consider this trend alarming because in the past such disappearances frequently occurred prior to an attack in the country by members of a terrorist cell. Such a trend might therefore signal that ongoing preparations by terrorist cells to carry out an attack are underway.

It is highly likely that some overseas Bangladeshi IS supporters, including Bangladeshi fighters in Syria, are actively recruiting Bangladeshi residents and the diaspora community. According to Bangladesh's counter-terrorism professionals, IS has changed its recruitment strategy and now runs a network of recruiters who act as intermediaries/liaisons to hire new recruits for IS local cells in Bangladesh. Presently, the Bangladeshi IS recruiters appear to be more sophisticated and better resourced as they have access to and are active on various social media platforms, including Facebook. Once recruited, the recruiters advise their new members to use more secure mobile applications, such as Threema and Telegram.

Several factors indicate that IS in Bangladesh still has access to finances and explosives. In this respect, the group's cross-border linkage in India remains of particular concern. According to the confession of a high-value IS detainee in Bangladesh, the group has sent at least two of its operatives to India for advanced training in manufacturing Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The Dhaka café attack revealed the group's heavy reliance on small arms and explosives made in India. IS in Bangladesh also

has highly-motivated and well-trained operatives across the country, but primarily in the northern region. IS/Neo-JMB remains a major threat group in Bangladesh in terms of military capability and manpower. Bangladeshi citizens are reportedly being recruited overseas too, particularly in Malaysia. For instance, in January 2017, Malaysian authorities arrested two Bangladeshis with links to an IS cell based in southern Philippines. This underlines the possibility of a linkage between IS in Bangladesh and IS in Southeast Asia.

### **Ansar al Islam/AQIS**

Beside IS, Ansar al Islam also poses a potent threat. In fact, Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies have said that Ansar al Islam has a deeper reach in the country than IS. Ansar al Islam is affiliated with the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and operates on behalf of the latter in Bangladesh. Members of Ansar al Islam were responsible for the killings of more than a dozen Bangladeshi bloggers and activists since 2013, and the authorities have not been able to make much progress in neutralising its threat. There are also indications that Ansar al Islam operatives may have a strong link to Malaysia and some of its members have become pro-IS.

The group's online presence and continued propaganda remains a major concern. There are clear indications that the group is trying to target the NGOs promoting tolerance in the country. For instance, on 24 February 2017 Ansar al Islam uploaded an audio message condemning an NGO for promoting moderation among the Qawmi madrassa students and alerted the students not to participate in the campaign. It is highly likely that the group has been able to recruit some madrassa-educated online activists and use them for conducting smear campaign against the NGOs. According to Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies, Ansar al Islam continues to hire new recruits and is possibly working closely with other terrorist groups in the country, in particular JMB (the old JMB). Additionally, the authorities have also expressed concern over Ansar al Islam's efforts to boost its IED capabilities and hence its capacity to conduct deadlier attacks.

Al Qaeda appears to be interested in maintaining and tightening its grip on Afghanistan, Kashmir and Arakan (Rakhine state, Myanmar). As Bangladesh shares a long and porous border

**“ Bangladesh’s law enforcement agencies have said that Ansar al Islam has a deeper reach in the country than IS. Ansar al Islam is affiliated with the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and operates on behalf of the latter in Bangladesh.”**

with Myanmar, it is not difficult for Ansar al Islam to recruit extremists and direct them to Myanmar to fight against “those who oppress Muslims.” As such, the Bangladesh-Myanmar border is highly vulnerable to exploitation by terrorists, especially AQIS. There is also half a million Rohingyas (refugees and illegal immigrants) in Bangladesh who view the fight against Myanmar military as an existential struggle. Travelling to Syria and Iraq is becoming increasingly difficult due to the anti-IS military offensives there. Therefore, these new fronts, particularly western Myanmar, are potential destinations for Bangladeshi jihadists. If mismanaged, the Rohingya militancy will escalate, as societal frustrations fuse with narratives fueled by religious fundamentalism. This will in turn, benefit both IS and AQIS as these militants align themselves with the global jihadi cause.

The otherwise dormant AQIS in recent months has shown signs of revival, particularly in the social media. It is possibly trying to exploit the space left by IS due its military setbacks in its heartland in Iraq and Syria. AQIS' revival, at least on social media, demonstrates that the group is attempting to keep its old network in South Asia intact. The group may be trying to attract a vulnerable segment of Bangladeshi diaspora overseas.

### Existing Gaps in Counter-terrorism

There are some gaps in Bangladesh's counter-terrorism policy that need to be addressed. Firstly, the CT agencies remain focused in the capital Dhaka. There is inadequate coverage of the more vulnerable northern and south-eastern regions of Bangladesh. These areas are at greater security risk due to a pronounced presence of extremist outreach efforts mainly through radical preachers or so-called social organisations. Secondly, there is a need for more coordination and information sharing among the various security agencies in the country. The coordination is limited despite the government's stress on better coordination and formation of several committees to this end. On the strategic front, Bangladesh's response remains weak. There are some initiatives to utilise media to create social awareness and resistance against extremism and terrorism. However, the progress is slow and the outcome remains to be seen. In recent months, there have been some concerns about the government's appeasement of an Islamist vigilante group known as Hefajat-e-Islam, which is a pressure group of madrasah (religious schools) teachers and students. The government has changed the content of some school textbooks by 'Islamising' them. Many observers in Bangladesh are worried that this move will be counterproductive, especially at a time when Bangladesh is attempting to eradicate extremism.

### Way Forward

A new threat landscape is emerging in Bangladesh, which will be more complex than ever before. It is marked by multiple groups, which are operating either on IS or AQIS platform. At times, these groups may also overlap and collaborate with each other. Smaller and lesser known groups might also make themselves relevant by forming strategic alliances with bigger groups. In this scenario, it will be crucial to monitor the trajectory and direction of both IS and AQIS. It is also crucial to stay alert of lone-actors who are inspired by terrorist propaganda without necessarily having a direct link to any outfit. It is highly likely that both IS and AQIS will try to recruit from the 70,000 Rohingyas who have recently crossed over to Bangladesh to escape persecution in Myanmar. A key challenge for Bangladesh will be to protect the Rohingya refugees from exploitation by terrorists in Bangladesh.

While the country's on-going counter-terrorism

**“ Al Qaeda appears to be interested in maintaining and tightening its grip on Afghanistan, Kashmir and Arakan (Rakhine state, Myanmar). As Bangladesh shares a long and porous border with Myanmar, it is not difficult for Ansar al Islam to recruit extremists and direct them to Myanmar... ”**

efforts have been somewhat effective in reducing the threat of formidable attacks, it remains to be seen how Bangladeshi authorities will act on the strategic front.

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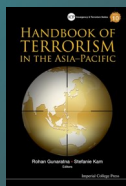
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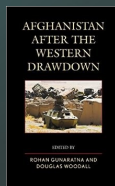


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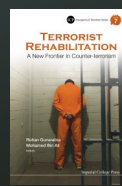
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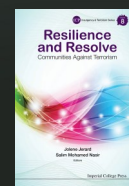
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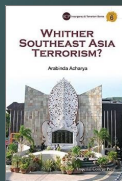
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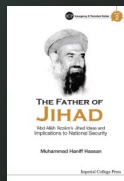
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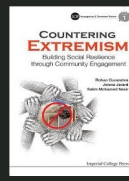
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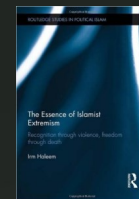
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