

Radical thinking

Transnational jihadists eye Bangladesh

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri has urged Bangladeshis towards an uprising against the government and anti-Islamic forces. **Animesh Roul** examines the effect this rising interest in the country will have on the threat from local radical groups.

► KEY POINTS

- Bangladesh faces growing security threats from a range of radical Islamist interests, including entrenched Deobandi militants, newly emergent jihadist groups, and even transnational operations such as Al-Qaeda.
- A message from Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in January 2014, the first specifically directed at Bangladesh, will resonate with a number of radical groups aiming to spread jihad within the country.
- Despite not having established a cell within Bangladesh to date, Al-Qaeda's apparently rising interest in the country will galvanise local groups that pose a more immediate security threat.

Bangladesh, the fourth largest Muslim majority country in the world, has experienced resurgent religious confrontations since 2013, with moderate and radical Islamist forces taking to the streets for intermittently violent confrontations that have undermined the country's secular credentials. The trigger for what have been dubbed the 'Shahbag protests' (after the Shahbag area of Dhaka where they began in February 2013) was the ongoing trial for war crimes allegedly committed by Islamists during the 1971 Liberation War, as well as rising popular demands for punitive action against the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JeI

Bangladesh), the country's largest and most influential Islamist political party, because of the actions of some of their members during the war.

Within this troubled atmosphere, latent Islamist militancy also exists in the form of well-entrenched Deobandi militant groups such as Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B), both of which can trace their lineage to JeI and are now attempting to regain some of their past influence.

Other newly founded militant Islamist groups, such as the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), are also finding the resources and opportunities to mark their presence on the jihadist landscape of Bangladesh. Moreover, the country's political and social turbulence is also propelling global jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda to turn their attention to the country.

In mid-December 2013, the Bangladeshi police reported that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella grouping of Pakistani pro-Taliban groups, threatened to attack the Bangladeshi high commission in Pakistan following the execution of JeI leader and 1971 liberation war criminal Abdul Quader Molla in Bangladesh.

Then, in January 2014, three TTP operatives were arrested in the capital Dhaka with incriminating documents that included a bomb-making manual and information on military training. Around the same time, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri also urged Bangladeshis towards a popular uprising (intifada)

against the incumbent Awami League (AL) government and "anti-Islamic" forces.

Zawahiri's overtures in January 2014 and the deteriorating political and religious situation in Bangladesh offer fertile ground for the growth of transnational jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda, as well as favourable conditions for the consolidation of existing jihadist groups.

Call for intifada

The Al-Qaeda interest in Bangladesh is not new. The group has maintained a strong support base in Bangladesh since the late 1990s, when the leaders of the Jihad Movement of Bangladesh and HUJI-B endorsed Osama bin Laden's fatwa urging action against the United States. In September and October 2002, there were local and international media reports of Al-Qaeda militants landing as fugitives in Chittagong port – including Zawahiri – and hiding in safe havens, although the Bangladeshi government subsequently refuted these reports by November of the same year.

On 14 January 2014, the shadow of Al-Qaeda and Zawahiri returned to haunt the country when an audio recording featuring Zawahiri openly urged Bangladeshi Muslims to "confront the crusader onslaught against Islam". The message was released by the As-Sahab Foundation for Islamic Media Publication, the media arm of Al-Qaeda, and was titled *Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence*. The As-Sahab media release covered many issues, including the impact of the country's secularist movement, alleged

A police riot control vehicle passes cars set on fire by Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JeI) activists in the Shahbag area of Dhaka on 13 December 2013, following the execution of JeI leader Abdul Quader Mollah. PA: 1515557



atrocities committed by the security forces against pro-Islamist protesters, and a call for an Islamic state under sharia (Islamic law) to be established in Bangladesh.

The approximately 29 minute-long message depicted violence against Muslims, including footage of police action during the Islamisted 'Defend Islam' rallies of 5–6 May 2013 in Dhaka, and the subsequent crackdown by law enforcement. It was followed by a speech in Arabic by Zawahiri, and also featured messages from Pakistani militant cleric Maulana Abdul Rasheed Ghazi, US human rights activist El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (alias Malcolm X), and Palestinian Islamist ideologue Imam Abdullah Azam.

With carefully chosen footage showing police brutality and torture, the message made a direct reference to the Shahbag movement. Zawahiri said, "My dear Muslim brothers, thousands of people are being killed in the streets of Bangladesh without any guilt, except they have come out to protect against the collusion of the anti-Islam secular government with a bunch of transgressing secularists who are heaping insults and vulgar abuses on Islam and the prophet of Islam." He added, "Crimes are being committed in Bangladesh today against the core beliefs of Islam, the Prophet of Islam, and the Muslim Ummah."

While calling on supporters to have patience and to fight, Zawahiri urged Islamic scholars and clerics in Bangladesh to lead protesters from the front and asked them to teach defence of the religion and how to instil love

for martyrdom. He exhorted religious leaders to "teach your Ummah that the one who wants freedom must pay its price, and that the price of freedom is death".

In tandem with Zawahiri's general guidelines for jihad, which call on Muslims of the ummah to adhere to a two-pronged strategy of "jihad and dawa [proselytising]", he also sought to create awareness within the masses about the ongoing jihad and to exhort the population to mobilise in pursuit of two goals: to revolt against the rulers and to join the side of Islam. He told Bangladeshis, "I invite you to adhere to the laws of Islam, its ruling and ethics. Live up to the sharia, and bring up your sons and daughters on its firm adherence. I invite you to gather around the true scholars of Islam, support them and protect them. I invite you to back them and support them and guard them."

The latest message was the first ever direct communication from Al-Qaeda aimed at an audience in Bangladesh. It was in concordance with events in Bangladesh throughout 2013, such as mass protests and rallies across the country by radical Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI) in defence of the convicted war criminals of JeI.

Even though Zawahiri's message was aimed at Bangladesh, it also urged Muslims of the wider subcontinent to take up jihad against what he labelled "democratic" and "oppressive" governments, particularly in neighbouring India and Myanmar. The message not only aimed to provoke Bangladeshis into action,

but it also called on Muslims of the world to make efforts to bring an end to the alleged oppression of Muslims in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

Zawahiri also questioned the timing of massacres of Muslims in South and Southeast Asia. Zawahiri claimed that there was a conspiracy in which the forces opposing Islam in the West, Beijing, and Delhi were all collaborators, and that the events "taking place in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Somali, Mali, and Egypt" were also part of that conspiracy.

This message has come at a time when Bangladeshi radical clerics affiliated with HeI and JeI are spearheading an Islamist upsurge across the country, with radical clerics such as Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani and Maulana Habibur Rahman fuelling the extremist fervour. The timing of Al-Qaeda's message and the ongoing religious crisis in Bangladesh have only helped to reinvigorate the formerly suppressed Islamist militant groups.

Radicals' resurgence

Desperate to reassert themselves, the extremists and militant factions in Bangladesh pose an existential threat to the country's security. Groups such as JMB and ABT have a close affiliation with Al-Qaeda's ideology and a motivation for violent jihad in the country, and Zawahiri's message resonates in these groups' actions on the ground.

In Bangladesh, JeI has been at the forefront of political and religious movements' attempts



Participants in a march for peace carry white flags in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 15 December 2013. Violent confrontations known as the Shahbag protests began in February 2013.

PA: 1515568

to implement the Islamic code in all walks of life and to make the country into an overtly Islamic state. While being part of the constitutional process, the party on occasions resorts to violence to achieve its objectives, exemplified by incidents such as JeI activists torching offices of the ruling Awami League during the run-up to the January election.

The Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) into war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War, originally established in 2009, had by 2012 found evidence against members of the JeI to prove their complicity in crimes against humanity, genocide and war

crimes, and the violation of the humanitarian rules applicable in armed conflict. After the verdicts against many of its leaders, JeI and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) initiated countrywide protests and violence in a bid to save convicted JeI leaders. JeI vented its anger against secular forces, as well as the political and student affiliates of the AL government, during the Shahbag movement.

Meanwhile, on 1 August 2013, the Dhaka high court cancelled the registration of JeI and banned it from contesting future polls.

While JeI was on the back foot after the convictions of most of its senior leadership,

another conglomerate of Islamists in the form of HeI took over the reins of the 'Defend Islam' movement during the Shahbag protests in 2013. HeI has active political ties with both JeI and the ICS, and originally emerged onto the Bangladeshi religious scene in 2008 when it opposed the national women's development policy of the caretaker government at that time. As the umbrella group, HeI came out vehemently in defence of JeI leaders who had been found guilty of war crimes by the ICT. Along with JeI, it voiced concerns about supposedly anti-Islamic developments in the country. Its support base comes from its association with the country's private Qawmi madrassas that largely follow the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam.

Under the leadership of Mufti Shah Ahmed Shafi, who is the chairman of the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasah Education Board and current rector of the country's largest Deobandi madrasa, the Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari (Hathazari Madrasa) in Chittagong, HeI is prominent within the ongoing 'Defend Islam' movements in the country, and will continue to be so.

One of HeI's leaders, Maulana Habibur Rahman, is a proponent of Taliban-style rule and has previously admitted to visiting the HUJI offices in Karachi and Peshawar in 1998, and met HUJI's Pakistan chief Saifullah Akhtar in 1988 and the late Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1998.

Alongside these two relatively mainstream religious groups, the militant JMB continues to be the most lethal and resilient Islamist militant organisation in Bangladesh, despite supposedly being decimated by security forces' operations, according to the government. A well-orchestrated ambush on a prison van on 23 February 2014 at Trishal, Mymensingh district, suggested that this overtly terrorist-oriented group has future plans and motives for making a comeback to the jihadist landscape of Bangladesh.

The JMB is often considered the "Bangladeshi Taliban" because of its focus on madrasa students (taliba) as recruits. The prison van ambush and ensuing gunfight ended with the escape of three senior members – two of whom had been on death row – and the death of one police officer.

With a strong grassroots organisational structure, the resilient JMB has made several attempts to stage a comeback, morphing and camouflaging itself under different banners in the past, including Jadid-al Qaeda, Islam-o-Muslim (IoM), and BEM (the full name and

Bangladeshi nationals in international terrorism

Rajib Karim, a Bangladeshi national who lived in the United Kingdom and was employed by British Airways, was involved in raising money and making propaganda videos for JMB. Under the influence of AQAP's Awlaki, Karim was involved in a plot to smuggle an explosive device onboard a trans-Atlantic flight. He was arrested by the UK authorities, and received a 30-year prison sentence in February 2011 for terrorist activity.

In mid-2009, a US court found a Bangladeshi national identified as Ehsanul Islam Sadequee (alias Shifa) guilty of conspiring to support terrorists and sentenced him to 17 years in prison. Sadequee had videotaped landmarks such as the US Capitol building and the World Bank, and had sent the recordings to a terrorist facilitator

in London. Rezwana Ferdous, a naturalised US citizen of Bangladeshi descent, pleaded guilty in July 2012 to charges of attempting to damage and destroy a federal building with explosives, and attempting to provide material support and resources to Al-Qaeda. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison in November 2012.

Similarly, Quazi Mohammad Rezwana Ahsan Nafis, a Bangladeshi national who aspired to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank building in Lower Manhattan, New York, was sentenced in August 2013 to 30 years in prison after pleading guilty to terrorism charges. He had pleaded guilty in February 2013 to attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction and attempting to provide material support to Al-Qaeda.

meaning of which was never explained).

Even though it is a Bangladesh-centric militant group, the JMB has strong ideological links with the Ahl al-Hadith movement and possible, although unconfirmed, operational links with the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). During interrogation, former JMB chief Saidur Rahman admitted to having close ties with the Al-Qaeda leadership and that he obtained financial assistance from the group.

JMB has claimed responsibility for a countrywide synchronised series of bombings in mid-August 2005, and later the same year it targeted the country's judiciary – court buildings, judges, and government officials – with suicide attacks. Even though it has never claimed any significant militant strike in its own name since 2005, it has sporadically issued threats, such as in January 2011 when it threatened to assassinate then prime minister Sheikh Hasina and to blow up the central prison and court building in Chittagong.

Another new group that has recently emerged is the ABT, which made its presence felt in Bangladesh by killing anti-Islam blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider during the February 2013 Shahbag protests. Haider had played a key role in organising the Shahbag movement, demanding the execution of Islamists on trial for atrocities committed during the 1971 Liberation War. ABT cadres also attacked another blogger and activist, Asif Mohiuddin, during the days of protest. Zawahiri's January 2014 message cited Haider, along with writer Taslima Nasreen, as having "insulted Islam".

Even though the ABT is a relatively new entrant in Bangladesh's Islamist landscape, it has emerged as a group that aims to establish Islamic rule in the country through armed jihad. It exploits available modern technology to spread its agenda through social media and online blogs, and references to the ABT can be found in translated jihadist literature published online dating back to December 2010.

However, according to the confessions of Rahmani, ABT started its activities under the banner of the Research Centre for Unity and Development, a religious research organisation. ABT produces propaganda in three different languages – Arabic, Bengali, and Urdu – although Bangladeshi police became aware of the group's existence through the Ansar al-Mujahideen English-language forum, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated website that posted news about ABT student members of a Dhaka university under the heading "Five Lions of the Ummah".

Another website, bab-ul-islam.net, states

that the ABT was founded at North South University in Dhaka. ABT mostly targeted students from English-language colleges and universities for recruitment. There are also media reports about the group's possible operational links with ICS, which took inspiration from Yemen's late terrorist ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Following the arrest of Rahmani, the group is now reported by local media to be operating under the fugitive Major Syed Mohammad

that propaganda and jihadist rhetoric from Zawahiri or Rahmani will have more traction with Bangladeshi migrants or the diaspora who have greater access to online literature and sermons.

The essence of Zawahiri's message matches the claims made by radical followers of HeI or JeI Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda is trying to consolidate its position within the Muslim world, and at the same time it will seek to exploit what it sees as the necessary grounds for recruitment and funding in those countries of the

'The deteriorating political and religious situation in Bangladesh offers fertile ground for transnational jihadist groups'

Ziaul Huq, who masterminded a failed army coup plot in January 2012 but was never captured or charged. Rahmani is himself a follower of Awlaki, and is known for his radical sermons during his Friday gatherings in the Markajul Ulum Al-Islamia mosque in Dhaka.

Outlook

IHS Jane's monitoring of various internet jihadist forums confirms numerous instances of incendiary speeches by Bangladeshi militants such as Rahmani, Rahman, and Mufti Izharul Islam Chowdhury of HeI. Media clips include carefully chosen graphic details from worldwide jihadist battlefields, such as scenes of torture and bloodshed.

Such evocative jihadist discourse is targeted at potential younger activists, and is instrumental in raising the profile of groups like the ABT or providing a much-needed ideological boost for the JMB as it cements its resurgence. Bangladeshi militants' use of internet platforms to attract both publicity and followers appears set to rise as the groups aim to disseminate their messages more widely.

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda's latest call for popular uprising against the democratic government in Bangladesh and the resurgence of dormant militant groups raise the question of the extent to which Bangladeshi nationals have ever participated in international jihad, or will succumb to the call in the future.

Zawahiri's exhortations appear focused on garnering support from Bangladeshis, but not necessarily the domestic populace – it will also include the expatriate community, by highlighting the alleged sufferings of fellow Muslims at home. Indeed, it is most likely

subcontinent that have the largest Muslim populations.

However, despite Al-Qaeda's support for, and infiltration of, established local militant groups like JMB or ABT, it has so far been unsuccessful in establishing its own cells in Bangladesh. Zawahiri's call for Bangladeshis to become involved in transnational jihad will pose a direct challenge to the Bangladeshi security establishment, whose aim will be to assess whether the Islamist groups calling for a sharia-based caliphate in Bangladesh will be influenced by the Al-Qaeda leader's rhetoric. Consequently, even if the latest appeal from Al-Qaeda does not trigger militant attacks in Bangladesh, messages of this type will still help local militants to regroup for future action. ■

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