

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	293
Land:	Bangladesh
Kilde:	Jamestown Foundation
Titel:	DIVERGING TRAJECTORIES IN BANGLADESH - ISLAMIC STATE VS AL-QAEDA
Udgivet:	9. december 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. maj 2018

Jamestown Foundation

DIVERGING TRAJECTORIES IN BANGLADESH: ISLAMIC STATE VS AL-QAEDA; TERRORISM MONITOR VOLUME: 15 ISSUE: 23

BY: NATHANIEL BARR

December 9, 2017 03:51 PM Age: 1 week

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have adopted divergent strategies in their competition for dominance in Bangladesh. Al-Qaeda has sought to build popular support by exploiting the grievances of the country's political Islamists, and by employing targeted violence against secularists, atheists and those who are perceived to be advancing Western values, an approach that analysts have noted mirrors the Maoist insurgency model. [1] The group has also pursued a deliberate and cautious growth strategy, refraining from behavior that would expose its clandestine activities. IS, on the other hand, has adopted a more aggressive and confrontational approach, carrying out high-profile attacks against religious minorities, Westerners and security forces in an effort to sow sectarian tensions and destabilize the Bangladeshi state.

Though it once seemed likely that IS would eclipse al-Qaeda in Bangladesh, momentum within the Bangladeshi jihadist landscape has now shifted decisively in al-Qaeda's favor. Al-Qaeda's Bangladeshi wing has preserved much of its clandestine structure, garnered support from hardline Islamists and positioned itself to benefit from the Rohingya crisis in neighboring Myanmar. IS has had less success. Spectacular attacks perpetrated by the group attracted global attention and headlines, but also prompted Bangladeshi security forces to crack down on the group's network in the country. As a consequence, IS in Bangladesh has experienced significant attrition over the last 16 months.

Al-Qaeda and IS' diverging trajectories will have implications for Bangladesh's security and stability, but they also offer some insight into how the competition between the two jihadist groups will play out across the globe.

Al-Qaeda's Local Appeal

Al-Qaeda's population-centric strategy in Bangladesh aims to exploit the chasm between political Islamists and secularists, which has become one of the defining fault lines in Bangladeshi society.

An inflection point in the tenuous relationship between Islamists and secularists came in early 2013, when thousands of Bangladeshi citizens took to the streets to demand capital punishment for members of Bangladesh's largest Islamist political party, Jamaat-i-Islami, who had been convicted of war crimes for their involvement in the 1971 war that led to Bangladesh's independence. The protests were also a key moment in the development of al-Qaeda's strategy.

Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist movements, including the upstart Hefazat-e-Islam, saw the demonstrations, which came to be known as the Shahbag protests, as part of a broader, secularist-led push to marginalize the role of Islam within Bangladeshi society. In response, Islamist factions organized counter-protests. Hefazat-e-Islam issued a list of 13 demands that included a proposed ban on "anti-Islam activities," a call for a crackdown on bloggers promoting atheist ideals and the enactment of a blasphemy law that carried the death penalty for anyone who criticized Allah or the Prophet Muhammed ([The New Indian Express](#), July 30, 2013). Some Islamist actors also resorted to violence as a means of intimidating the Shahbag activists.

In January 2013, an atheist blogger was hospitalized after an attack in Dhaka. The next month, Ahmed Rajeeb Haider, a Shahbag activist, was killed near his home. [2] Another activist was wounded in an attack in Dhaka in March 2013. Rather than condemning the violence, some political Islamists celebrated it. Members of Islami Chhatra Shibir, the youth wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, praised the murder of Haider, whom they deemed to be an atheist ([Dhaka Tribune](#), June 16, 2016). Several months later, several hundred thousand Islamist protesters held a protest in Dhaka in which they called for the hanging of “atheist bloggers” ([al-Jazeera](#), April 6, 2013).

Political Islamists’ response to Haider’s assassination and to the broader Shahbag movement created an opening for al-Qaeda. By portraying itself as a bulwark against secular ideals and targeting secular activists, al-Qaeda could cement an alliance with hardline Islamists. This, in turn, would expand al-Qaeda’s recruitment pool and persuade some political Islamists to abandon politics entirely in favor of violent jihad, an objective that has long underpinned al-Qaeda’s interactions with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements.

Presented with a strategic opportunity, al-Qaeda’s network in Bangladesh launched an assassination campaign in 2015, killing a number of prominent secular activists, including the author Avijit Roy. Al-Qaeda, which operates in Bangladesh under the moniker Ansar al-Islam, amplified its targeted violence with propaganda statements in which it cast itself as a defender of Islamic values and urged political Islamists to take up arms against the Bangladeshi regime. An earlier propaganda video from January 2014 saw al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri call upon Bangladeshis to launch a popular uprising to “confront the crusader onslaught against Islam” ([Jihadology](#), January 14, 2014).

Al-Qaeda has paired these encouraging messages with more critical statements condemning Islamists’ continued involvement in politics. [3] Through this combination of incentives and criticism, al-Qaeda aims to coerce Bangladeshi Islamists into renouncing the democratic process.

But while violence is central to al-Qaeda’s strategy in Bangladesh, the group has been highly deliberate in its target selection. Al-Qaeda has avoided targeting Bangladeshi security forces or political figures, likely because it anticipates that doing so would trigger a crackdown. Instead, the group has, with one exception, exclusively targeted atheist activists and others associated with the secular movement in Bangladesh. The exception came in April 2016, when Ansar al-Islam killed two LGBT activists involved in the publication of Bangladesh’s only LGBT magazine. While the target was different, however, the justification for the assassinations was consistent with the rationale that the group had applied in its targeting of atheists — in a statement posted to Twitter, Ansar al-Islam claimed the two activists’ promotion of homosexuality was part of the “global military and ideological war on Islam.” [4]

Violence as a Means and an End

In stark contrast with al-Qaeda’s targeted and methodical approach, IS has favored spectacular violence. The group’s network in Bangladesh announced its presence in the country in September 2015 with the assassination of an Italian aid worker in Dhaka. In the following months, the group carried out several more assassinations and launched multiple attacks on religious minorities, including Ahmadis and Shia.

The strategy that IS implemented in Bangladesh closely mirrors the approach it has pursued in Iraq, Syria and other theaters. For instance, IS’ attacks on religious minorities were intended to fuel sectarian tensions in Bangladeshi society, a tactic that had proved to be highly effective in Iraq ([Dabiq](#), April 2016). Similarly, attacks on security forces and foreigners in Bangladesh resembled the group’s targeting preferences elsewhere. But IS’ approach, unlike al-Qaeda’s, was not tailored to the Bangladeshi political and social context, and the group’s violence often appeared indiscriminate and even careless. One incident that underscores IS’ overzealousness in Bangladesh came in October 2015, when members of the group killed Hoshi Kunio, a Japanese man accused of being an infidel. It was later revealed that Kunio had converted to Islam three months before his death and had been photographed wearing a skull cap in a mosque ([BD News 24](#), October 5, 2015). A similar incident occurred in April 2016, when IS operatives assassinated Rezaul Karim, a Bangladeshi professor who IS declared was an atheist, a claim his family publically rejected ([BBC](#), April 24, 2016).

Al-Qaeda’s Bangladeshi affiliate sought to distinguish itself from IS’ sloppiness. In a statement released in May 2016, Ansar al-Islam criticized IS for targeting “new reverts to Islam” and “individuals against whom there is no proof or evidence,” a likely reference to the assassinations of Kunio and Karim. [5] In the same statement, Ansar al-Islam reaffirmed its justification for targeting the LGBT activists, and even apologized for wounding a security guard in the course of the attack, explaining that he had been targeted in self-defense and that it would have attempted to compensate the guard for his injuries if security conditions had permitted.

The statement highlighted a key aspect of al-Qaeda's global approach to the IS challenge: rather than engaging in violent outbidding with its rival, al-Qaeda has portrayed itself to receptive audiences as a more palatable and restrained actor. In the Bangladeshi context, al-Qaeda has used IS' excessive violence as a foil in its efforts to appeal to political Islamists.

IS paid little attention to al-Qaeda's criticism, however, and instead escalated its violence. The apex of the group's activities in Bangladesh came in July 2016, when IS militants stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant in a Dhaka neighborhood popular with diplomats, expatriates and wealthy Bangladeshis, taking hostages and killing 20 civilians. IS leveraged its global propaganda machine to maximize the attention the attack received, posting pictures of, and claiming responsibility for, the massacre while its operatives were still in the bakery. It was the first time the group had claimed responsibility for an attack while it was ongoing. [6]

Differing Outlooks

While the assault on the bakery was a success from a tactical and propaganda perspective, it proved imprudent from a strategic point of view. The attack prompted the Bangladeshi government, which up to that point had been somewhat indecisive in its approach to jihadist groups, to mount a major counterterrorism campaign against both IS and al-Qaeda factions. [7]

Over the last 15 months, Bangladeshi security forces have significantly degraded IS' network, killing or capturing several prominent militants. Among those killed were Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, the alleged architect of the Holey Artisan attack, and Jahangir Alam, a former major in the Bangladeshi Army who provided training to the militants who stormed the bakery ([BD News 24](#), September 4, 2016). In March 2017, IS suffered another devastating loss, when Mainul Islam Musa, IS' top commander in Bangladesh, was killed in a counterterrorism raid ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 29).

The counterterrorism campaign has curtailed IS' capabilities and produced internal schisms within the group. Though it has carried out several operations since the Holey Artisan Bakery attack — including three attacks on security forces in March this year — the group's operational tempo has declined, and key components of its network, including military trainers, weapons traffickers and explosives experts, have been taken off the battlefield.

The decapitation of the IS leadership has fueled a succession crisis that has divided the organization. According to a Bengali-language news outlet, Hadisur Rahman (a.k.a. Saghor), a former deputy to Mainul Islam Musa, established his own group after another commander, Ayub Bacchu, was tapped to lead IS following Musa's death. [8] The same media outlet reported that members of IS have begun accusing one another of tipping off counterterrorism forces, with tensions resulting in bouts of violence between rival factions.

The counterterrorism campaign that IS provoked in Bangladesh derailed a key aspect of al-Qaeda's strategy. Prior to the Holey Artisan attack, al-Qaeda maintained a low profile in order to avoid a confrontation with the Bangladeshi state. [9] This approach exemplifies al-Qaeda's strategic patience. Though al-Qaeda considers the Bangladeshi government to be an apostate regime, and eventually hopes to spark a revolution that can topple it, the group has calculated that it does not have the internal capacity and manpower to take on the state. As such, in the years leading up to the bakery attack, al-Qaeda tried to expand its clandestine network and carry out targeted campaigns of violence without drawing the state's ire.

The counterterrorism crackdown thus attracted unwanted attention to al-Qaeda's expansion strategy, forcing the group to significantly curtail its military operations. [10] In a revealing statement posted on a pro-al-Qaeda website in September 2016, an unidentified author criticized IS for triggering the counterterrorism campaign in Bangladesh, and accused the group of misusing skilled militants, including Jahangir Alam, the former army officer killed by Bangladeshi security forces in September 2016. [11]

While al-Qaeda's network has experienced some losses in the last year — including the arrest of an IT specialist with Ansarullah Bangla Team, who was allegedly responsible for gathering information on atheist activists — the group has weathered the crackdown far better than Islamic State ([BD News](#), May 22). Many of al-Qaeda's senior officials remain at large, including Ziaul Haque, a former major in the Bangladeshi army who engineered a failed coup against the Bangladeshi government in 2012. Bangladeshi officials concede that they have struggled to make progress against the al-Qaeda network ([Daily Star](#), March 24). The group's resilience may be partly attributable to its clandestine, tiered cell structure. [12]

Al-Qaeda Resurgent

With its Bangladesh network still largely intact, al-Qaeda's outlook in the country is promising. Having witnessed the consequences of the Gulshan café attack, it is likely that al-Qaeda will revert to the cautious growth strategy it pursued prior to the security crackdown, allowing it to further expand its presence.

Al-Qaeda's network in Bangladesh also provides the group with a vehicle by which it can increase its influence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where a nascent Islamist insurgency has emerged. Numerous reports allege that al-Qaeda operatives in Bangladesh have recruited Rohingya Muslims, and have also directed funds to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, the Islamist militant group operating there ([Indian Express](#), January 6; [The Print](#), September 20).

Finally, al-Qaeda in Bangladesh may be able to capitalize upon IS' local and global struggles by recruiting disillusioned IS members. The confluence of these factors suggests that Bangladeshi security forces, which have focused their efforts in recent months on dismantling IS' network, should commit additional resources to disrupting al-Qaeda's deliberate and patient strategy.

Nathaniel Barr is an analyst at the US Department of Defense. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the US Department of Defense, or any other part of the US government.

NOTES:

[1] For a discussion of al-Qaeda's Maoist tendencies, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jason Fritz, Bridget Moreng and Nathaniel Barr, *Islamic State vs. Al-Qaeda: Strategic Dimensions of a Patricidal Conflict* (New America Foundation, 2015).

[2] It remains unclear whether al-Qaeda directed, or played a role in, Haider's assassination. In a statement posted in May 2015, AQIS retroactively claimed responsibility for Haider's assassination. However, the mastermind of the attack, Redwanul Azad Rana, fled to Malaysia in 2014 and later aligned himself with the Islamic State ([The Daily Star](#), February 21). Rana's ties with the Islamic State raise the possibility that Haider's assassination was perpetrated by an independent jihadist faction, and that al-Qaeda's subsequent claim of responsibility was opportunistic.

[3] For instance, an article in the second issue of al-Balagh, al-Qaeda's Bengali-language magazine, criticized Hefazat-e-Islam for issuing an appeal to the Bangladeshi Supreme Court to remove a statue of a Greek goddess from the court premises. The article asserted that the basis of Bangladeshi law was un-Islamic and contravened *sharia*, and called for Hefazat scholars to engage in jihad instead of continuing to work through democratic processes. See article written by Tamim al-Adnani, *al-Balagh*, second issue.

[4] Statement posted to Ansar al-Islam Twitter account (@AnsarAllIslam5), May 3, 2016.

[5] Statement posted to Ansar al-Islam's Twitter account (@AnsarAllIslam5), May 4, 2016.

[6] This observation was first made by Bridget Moreng on Twitter. See [@BridgetMoreng](#), July 1, 2016.

[7] It is worth noting that the Bangladeshi government has repeatedly claimed that neither al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State maintain a presence in the country. The government instead argues that Bangladeshi militant groups have no ties to foreign jihadist groups.

[8] SM Azad, "Police not Able To Arrest Gulshan Attacker Sagor despite Having Detailed Information: Sagor is Target of Four Consultant Board Member of Neo-JMB," *Kaler Kantho* [Bengali], July 31, 2017.

[9] This cautious approach resembles al-Qaeda's post-Arab Spring model in Tunisia, where Ansar al-Sharia, the group's affiliate, engaged in *hisba* violence, but sought to avoid a conflict with the Tunisian state while the group was building its clandestine network. As in Bangladesh, the group's strategy in Tunisia was derailed when a rogue faction within Ansar al-Sharia began targeting Tunisian politicians.

[10] Al-Qaeda has not claimed responsibility for an attack in Bangladesh since April 2016, a significant operational pause. It is likely that al-Qaeda's leadership, whether in Bangladesh or abroad, ordered this pause during the security crackdown to avoid exposing the group's network.

[11] Statement posted on *Dawahilallah*, [Bengali] September 7, 2016.

[12] A June 2016 article in a Bengali-language media outlet explained that al-Qaeda's Bangladeshi affiliate had adopted a four-tiered organizational structure, which included cells responsible for *dawah* (propagandizing and spreading al-Qaeda's ideology); *idad* (recruitment); *ribat* (training); and *qital* (guerilla warfare). See Syed Atiq, "Militant Activities are Underway at Four Tiers," *Jugantor* [Bengali], June 6, 2016.