
SADF COMMENT

27 June 2019

Issue n° 145

ISSN 2406-5617

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Programme); he was educated at the Institute of Political Science (IPW) and South Asia Institute (SAI), both Heidelberg University. Additionally he is member (affiliated researcher) of the SAI as well as a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).

From Mumbai to Marawi:

The evolving interlinkages of Jihadism in South and South East Asia and the need for a regional response

Siegfried O. Wolf

This article is written in memory of the victims of the Holey Artisan Bakery Cafe terror attacks on 1st and 2nd July 2016 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The 1st and 2nd July 2019 mark the third anniversary of the largest and one of the most horrific terror attacks in Bangladesh since independence. Three years ago, five militants armed with rifles and machetes stormed into the Holey Artisan Bakery Cafe (HABC). They took 22 hostages, mostly foreigners, and murdered them after 12 hours (Hammadi, Scammell, & Yuhas, 2016, July 3). At the time it seemed to many observers that the HABC attack should be seen in the context of a series of Islamist attacks in the country perpetrated against foreigners, religious minorities, and secular intellectuals¹ critical of religious fundamentalism. Said series of events peaked between 2013 and 2016 (Wolf, 2015, March). Despite the fact that the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack - and that several international experts stressed both the IS's linkage with the HABC incident and a possible role by Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) in the events (PTI, 2016, July 3) - Bangladesh's authorities denied (at least publicly) any foreign involvement in this Jihadist assault (Washington Post, 2016, July 3). Instead, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) blamed local terrorist groups alone - namely

**South
Asia
Democratic
Forum**



Avenue des Arts 19

1210 Brussels

info@sadf.eu

www.sadf.eu

¹ Especially academics, journalists, and blogger were targeted by Islamist radicals.

the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB; Payton, 2016, July 3). This move by the GoB stirred up a heated debate both within the country and abroad. But instead of undertaking the much needed, fundamental, wide public discussion on how to address the growing menace of Jihadism and religious radicalisation, the highly politically aware but polarised Bangladeshi society became deeply engaged in a disruptive contention over the extraordinarily rigorous anti-terror campaigns led by the country's law enforcing agencies during recent years (Wolf, 2016, June 24). That some international observers contributed to such de-constructive path instead of supporting a non-biased exchange of views further complicated the quest for a national consensus on how to counter Jihadist terror (Wolf, 2015, November 11). This is unfortunate, for the HABC attack undeniably opened a new chapter in the country's history of terrorism.

For the HABC attack was not an isolated, fragmented, purely domestic incident conducted by 'home-grown terrorists' but a constituent part of wider international phenomena. The (officially) promulgated notion that this was a crime conducted by Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and as such a Bangladeshi issue alone is far from congruent with reality. The argument's rationale is clear - the country's authorities want to avoid any 'reputational damage', or being branded as a 'hub' for global terrorism. Tarnishing the country's image and creating maximum fear are obviously major goals among terrorists (Rabbi & Tipu, 2019, January 20).

But this official interpretation of the HABC attack leads to misunderstandings regarding the whole complexity of the unfolding Jihadist landscape in Bangladesh. This regards not so much the organisational structure involved -these groups indeed mainly consist of local bodies. However, branding the HABC terrorist attack as 'specific and localized' blinds the public to the rapidly growing, foremost online-based, 'people-to-people connectivity' among domestic and international terrorist networks. We witness an extremely relevant, enhanced synchronisation among global and local Jihadist ideologies and their articulated efforts to push anti-secular and anti-democratic sentiments within Bangladesh's society. This is one among several areas of collaboration which will be explained below.

It must be understood that the HABC attack is in line with other major Jihadist activities witnessed in numerous countries, especially in South and South-East Asia. Of course, the HABC attack itself was indeed carried out by the local JMB - and the whole incident is deeply linked with the specific Bangladeshi context. In other words, there are indeed a lot of

similarities between the HABC attack and earlier militant incidents in Bangladesh which at first glance have nothing to do with international terrorist groups or 'global jihad'. But on a comparative perspective, dynamics in the extended region reveal the HABC attack as part of a larger international puzzle.

Further south, the horrific Easter bombing in Sri Lanka earlier this year constitutes a critical juncture for terrorism in South Asia (Ethirajan, 2019, May 11).

The attack reveals the increasing influence of the IS in South Asia, especially in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Military defeat in Syria and Iraq is leading to an increased interest by the IS in South Asia as a new area of operation. As such, one must expect the IS to step up its engagement in building-up its own physical-organisational structures in South Asia in the middle- to long-term perspective. Here, it seems that South Asia's 'domestic terrorists' are increasingly receptive not only towards IS ideology but also for intensified organisational and personal interweavements.

Another indicator for the changing nature of terrorist attacks in South Asia is that they are starting to follow the patterns of global jihad, not only regarding the brutality and high complexity of coordination but especially in the way local and international terrorist groups interact with each other. The fact that the main perpetrators of the Sri Lankan bombings were able to turn their whole families into suicide bombers in order to attack the investigation teams of security forces constitutes a new level of terror in the Island state (Ethirajan, 2019, May 11). A phenomenon which is not unknown in Bangladesh, where terrorists are able to turn their spouses into combatants willing to conduct directly militant activities - another new feature in South Asian terrorism (Roul, 2018, November 17). One can state that both newly emerged terrorist organisations and existing groups underwent similar transformational processes leading to common features regarding their leadership structure, ideology, recruitment patterns and activities.

In this context, it is interesting to broaden the comparative perspective and have a closer look at South East Asian countries, particularly the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. These countries have to deal not only with (religiously inspired) insurgency movements but also with growing Islamist terrorism. There is an emerging common link among the rising number of South Asian and South East Asian cases of terrorism. First, the common existence of local militant groups with local grievances. Second, allegiances and alliances are developing between these groups and international terrorist groups – for example

through the creation of the Islamic State Lanao (ISL)/Islamic State Philippines (ISP) which was set up by the local Maute Group (Gunaratna, 2017, July). Thirdly, these ties are usually interpreted by both sides (local and international terrorists) as mutually beneficial. Often, local terrorist groups receive training, funding, and equipment as well as a link to the ‘attention-grabbing brand’ of the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda (Slater & Constable, 2019, May 3). In the meantime, international Jihadist groups are able to hijack local conflicts for their own agenda and propaganda, thus enjoying new opportunities to broaden their support and recruiting base (Slater & Constable, 2019, May 3). The fact that in 2017 local IS affiliates in the Philippines were able to take over, at least temporarily, a whole city (Marawi²) stresses the potential threat caused by the cooperation between international terrorists and local militants (Gunaratna, 2017, July).

Final thoughts

Considering the growing domestic-international linkages among Jihadist attacks, it becomes obvious that isolated national approaches will likely be insufficient. There is a need for a regional-level counter-terrorism strategy based on close collaboration both among governments and among governmental agencies. The decrease in the number of terrorist attacks during the last years in Bangladesh due to the massive crackdown on terrorist suspects provides only an elusive semblance of calm. In fact downplaying the international dimension of terrorist threats while deeply politicising counter-terrorism approaches can turn out to be extremely harmful (Wolf, 2016, January 26). To sum up, it appears that three years after the traumatic HABC attack the country’s leadership and opposition are not willing or able to understand that the costs of ignoring the full dimension of the ‘Global Jihad’ are much higher than narrow political gains. This could lead to further entrenchment of a fundamentalist ethos in Bangladesh.

² Marawi is the capital city of the Lanao del Sur province in the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The southern island of Mindanao, the second largest in the country, hosts a large Muslim community (24 per cent of 24,1 million citizens are Muslims) and faces severe insurgency movements. It is interesting to note that Marawi was the first city outside the Middle East and Africa to be temporarily taken over by the IS in conjunction with local allies.

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