

The Blind Spot of Counter-Terrorism: Bangladesh

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When discussing the current and future trends in Islamic terrorism and counter-terrorism responses, nations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and a range of Middle Eastern states tend to receive the majority of attention. This is not surprising given Al-Qaeda Central's presence in Pakistan and its impact on the insurgency on both sides of the Durand Line as well as its continued efforts to create franchises worldwide and to establish cells in the West. What little attention is left often goes to India, the world's most terrorism-afflicted nation, although India is now set to figure in more prominently given recent developments. This lack of interest on behalf of the international community has given Bangladesh-based Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakat- ul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B) much-needed breathing space to consolidate their positions, recruit, train, procure weapons and explosives, and to chart their future strategic directions. Many in Bangladesh also greatly underestimated the strength of these groups and felt that the arrest and/or execution of several leaders would deal them a fatal blow. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has learned the hard way that these groups are not necessarily top-down outfits but rather decentralized and informal organizations that function under a cell structure that emphasizes autonomy while still taking major directives from the top. As such, it can reasonably be argued that Bangladesh's "militant cycle" is about 5 years behind Pakistan and Dhaka is not prepared to meet the challenge.

While distinct organizations, both JMB and HUJI-B share some striking similarities. In Pakistan, even groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and others who are actively engaged in hostilities with Pakistan's security forces still espouse nationalist rhetoric and offered to stand and fight with the Pakistan Army in the event of an Indian attack following the carnage in Mumbai in November 2008. They are also in lockstep with the position of many Pakistanis regarding the Kashmir dispute. However, HUJI-B and JMB are fundamentally against all tenets of the Bangladeshi state and society and seek to overthrow the secular government, replace the Western-style court system, and establish a Taliban-style state in Bangladesh. It should be noted that several of HUJI-B's most senior leaders are veterans of the Afghan conflict against the Soviet Union and that Osama bin Laden provided critical financial backing during the group's infant stages. Despite being a much younger outfit that is believed to have been formed around 1998, JMB's ideology and vision

for Bangladesh's future does not differ dramatically from HUJI-B's. JMB is an extremely formidable outfit as was demonstrated by its ability to carry out over 400 coordinated bomb blasts within one hour in all but one district in Bangladesh. Further, the threat posed by JMB as well as HUJI-B recently forced Sheikh Hasina to curtail her travel plans following her recent election.

Traditionally, HUJI-B has taken much of its training and arms supply from Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-Administered Kashmir (PAK) as part of its partnership with Harakat- ul-Jihad-i-Islami Pakistan (HUJI-P), a Kashmir-centred group that until recently was the stronger half. This has now changed and it has become the role of HUJI-B to maintain relevance by continuing to carry out attacks in Bangladesh while pairing with like-minded groups not only in Bangladesh, but also in India. Many analysts as well as Indian security officials believe HUJI-B actively works with the banned Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), is a component of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) as part of its design to expand its support base and to destabilize India, and was possibly involved in the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. HUJI-B still maintains some of its most critical Pakistani links and interrogations of captured militants have revealed that the group has recently enjoyed trainers from Pakistan-based Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). However, as the international spotlight shines brightly on Pakistan, HUJI-B has shifted many of its training and logistical operations into Bangladesh itself. The Chittagong Hill Tracts are the most obvious location given their tribal nature and rugged, mountainous terrain that is largely forested thus providing ideal cover. Many of the separatist groups in India's Northeast have and still likely do train there and this area was also the scene of fighting between Dhaka and left-wing extremist groups. However, as part of a hedging strategy, HUJI-B and JMB both have spread their training infrastructure throughout Bangladesh in order to lessen their vulnerability to a decapitating strike. Part of this strategy has included mobile training camps, something that has proved to be somewhat of a double-edged sword in that although they have made detection more difficult, it has also reduced the quality of training.

Not unlike many other subversive outfits in South Asia, HUJI-B and JMB seek to employ their own ink blot strategy by building their support base and cadre strength district by district and have begun to make inroads into the capital with the seizure of around 300 kilograms of explosives in a JMB house in central Dhaka being the most recent example. Further, these groups seek active participation in the legitimate political process and HUJI-B attempted to run in the elections in late 2008 under the Islamic Democratic Party but was

denied permission by the Election Commission. Also, JMB has now split and established a “mainstream” ideological wing that claims to operate separately from the militant outfit and has also reconstituted its Shura. All of these developments point to long-term strategic thinking and the intent to intensify their campaigns in the country. Not only will this have substantial implications for Bangladesh’s own security, but for India’s as well.

It is believed that much of the funding that allow these groups to operate comes from the Middle East with organizations such as the now-officially defunct Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation being singled out. However, financial contributions also come from individuals (Arabs, expatriate Bangladeshis, and others) and the Islamic Bank of Bangladesh has been accused of handling these transactions. Nonetheless, many of these groups’ operations are decidedly low-tech and do not require large sums of money, something that is also true of some groups in Pakistan. By maintaining low operating costs with a distinct focus on “bang for the buck”, these groups greatly enhance their survivability.

Unlike Dhaka, and many governments for that matter, JMB’s information operations (IO) are very effective and place great emphasis on leaflets and on immediately explaining the rationale for their actions in a clear and concise manner. For example, JMB explained the lack of massive casualties during their coordinated bomb blasts in 2005 as being the result of an intentional decision to not cause harm to innocents. Instead, they claimed that the bombs were designed to serve as a demonstration of power and a warning to Dhaka. In addition, the influence of the pan-Islamic Hizbut Tahrir has mushroomed in Bangladesh while the country still faces a critical shortage of iconic moderate Muslim clerics to counter this development and the increased propagation of radical Islamic ideology. Without an effective counterweight, breaking the recruitment cycle of groups such as HUJI-B and JMB will prove most difficult, if not impossible.

At the top echelons of these groups, education levels are usually high. However this is not the case amongst the lower rungs of the organization and many are unemployed individuals who lack the means of legitimate upward socioeconomic mobility. Predictably, many have been promoting an increased focus on development and literacy programmes with the belief that this will put an irreparable dent in the recruitment efforts of HUJI-B and JMB. Although these suggestions are not without merit, the road to development is a long one that is full of starts and stops while literacy programmes are also multi-year efforts. This will not provide the near-term results that are necessary to effectively combat these dangerous developments in Bangladesh. So what should be done?

What is sorely lacking in Bangladesh's counter-terrorism strategy is a solid IO campaign. In the case of Bangladesh, IO must utilize multiple sources because the medium of communication for Bangladeshis varies greatly. In Dhaka and other urban areas, it is advisable to focus on the internet as part of the IO effort, especially when attempting to reach the target audience of 18 to 25 year-old males, the group most susceptible to the messages espoused by terrorist groups. However, in the countryside a shift to radio and word-of-mouth is likely necessary as internet connectivity and literacy levels are lower. In regards to the word-of-mouth approach, the local leaders tasked with delivering the message must be carefully analyzed in order to avoid exacerbating the issue. Dhaka must also strive to be as invisible as possible in these efforts in order to maintain the credibility of local leaders that is largely hinged on the perception of independence. Nonetheless, this is not to say that discreet financial and logistical support for facilities such as radio stations is not in order.

Although secondary messages will have to be tailored according to the specific target audience, the primary message must remain consistent and appeal to Bangladeshi nationalism. It would be advisable to simply describe HUJI-B and JMB accurately – groups that advocate an entirely foreign form of extremist Islam that is regressive and offers no future. As part of this campaign, the immense economic hardship that occurs under Taliban-style rule (remember HUJI-B's Afghan roots) should be consistently highlighted. Further, a lack of an effective plan for governance or development by these groups needs to be emphasized in order to clearly communicate that economic conditions, though not ideal at present, would become much worse under a government headed by Islamic extremists. It is much easier to be a rebel movement but, as the Maoists in Nepal are learning, everything changes once in power. In rebellions, mistakes are often forgiven if it is believed that the end goal is still attainable. However, this is not the case in government. The future competition between Dhaka and terrorist outfits will not only involve appeals to individual understandings of Islam, but also to their day-to-day concerns. Even in a Muslim-majority country like Bangladesh, the latter is likely to figure in more prominently.

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