

## Terrorism in Bangladesh: Understanding a Complex Phenomenon

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## Terrorism in Bangladesh

### *Understanding a Complex Phenomenon*

#### ABSTRACT

Bangladesh continues to face a threat from Islamic terrorism. However, the drivers of this phenomenon remain under-studied. Research has traced terrorism in Bangladesh to wider processes of Islamization; a political context marked by conflict between the country's two main political parties and by authoritarian governance; the institutional weakness of the Bangladeshi security and justice system; and international factors, such as the Afghanistan War, influences from the Gulf, and more recently the Rohingya refugee crisis, as well as the increased interest of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in South Asia. Based on an analysis of the literature and interviews, I argue that while the growth of terrorism in Bangladesh has been a complex process in which all of these factors have interacted, different constellations of them have been decisive at different historical stages.

**KEYWORDS:** Bangladesh, terrorism, Islamism, Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami

THE DECEMBER 2018 ELECTIONS in Bangladesh, which were marred by serious irregularities, confirmed in power the Awami League (AL) government, which has continuously portrayed itself as a bulwark against Islamic terrorism. However, the worst terrorist attacks in the country's history occurred during the AL's last tenure (from 2014 to 2018), including the 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, which was claimed by the Islamic State (IS). While a harsh security crackdown has prevented open

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terrorist attacks since mid-2017, domestic and international experts concur that the risk of terrorism persists for various reasons, including problems of malgovernance and the increased interest that both al-Qaeda and IS have begun to show in the country (International Crisis Group 2018; Khan 2018, 191–92; Riaz and Parvez 2018, 944–45). Nevertheless, Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh continues to be under-researched. Thus, many of Bangladesh's international partners consider their own understanding of the topic insufficient for designing effective counter-terrorism support measures.<sup>1</sup>

Research has traced terrorism in Bangladesh to various factors, including a wider trend of social and political Islamization (Griffiths and Hasan 2015, esp. 238; Pattanik 2009) and the rise of Islamic orthodoxy (Kugelman and Ahmad 2017); a political context marked by fierce conflict between the AL and its main political rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and by authoritarian governance (International Crisis Group 2006, 2016; Islam 2016, 25–29; Munir 2015); the institutional weakness of Bangladesh's security and justice system (Ganguly and Riaz 2016; International Crisis Group 2016); and international factors, such as the Afghanistan War, influences from the Gulf, and more recently the increased influence of al-Qaeda and IS, and the Rohingya refugee crisis (Griffiths and Hasan 2015; Hasan 2012; International Crisis Group 2018, 13–14; Joehnk 2017; Roul 2014). While research before 2016 often focused on mapping the profiles of Bangladeshi terrorist organizations (International Crisis Group 2006; South Asia Terrorism Portal 2020), important new research has investigated the factors driving individual radicalization processes (Fair, Hamza, and Heller 2017; Riaz 2016; Riaz and Parvez 2018).

Although this research has furnished important insights, it leaves several questions unanswered. Works that trace the growth of Bangladeshi terrorism to wider Islamization processes often fail to provide detailed evidence that (or how) a greater presence of Islamic rules in society and politics<sup>2</sup> promotes terrorist activities. Similarly, they often fail to acknowledge the finding of radicalization research that even an increase in Islamic orthodoxy does not necessarily translate into terrorism (Harrigan 2013, 62). Furthermore, they rarely account for the significant ideological differences among the various

1. Interview, UN representative, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.

2. Definition of Islamization adapted from Ismail (2006, 1–4, 22–26).

Islamic and Islamist groups in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship focusing on the domestic and international contexts has often questioned the assumption of a link between religiosity and terrorism, pointing to the political conditions—such as the conflict between the AL and the BNP (Munir 2015), authoritarian legacies (Milam 2007), or the promotion of local terrorists by international actors (Roul 2014)—that enable Bangladeshi terrorism. However, this scholarship has often fallen short of providing a systematic overview of the specific causal dynamics that could explain how exactly this party conflict, authoritarian governance, and international factors spur terrorist activities. Moreover, much research has insufficiently distinguished between factors that directly promote terrorism and factors that hinder effective counter-terrorism measures, enabling terrorism indirectly. Furthermore, it has mostly stopped short of identifying which of the above-mentioned factors—Islamization, the party conflict, authoritarian governance, institutional weakness, and various international dynamics—have been the most important and how they have interacted in promoting terrorism at different historical stages.

Against this backdrop, in this article I try, first, to provide a more systematic overview of the possible causal dynamics explaining how exactly these factors may promote terrorism; second, to identify the relative importance of these factors at different points in time; and third, to establish tentative links between them. I synthesize the existing literature and complement it with interviews conducted between January 2017 and June 2020. I argue that while the growth of Bangladeshi terrorism has been a complex process in which these factors identified by the literature have interacted, different constellations of them have been decisive at different historical stages.

### THE PRECURSORS OF TERRORISM DURING MILITARY RULE

In 1971, the Bangladeshi liberation movement, led by the AL, fought a fierce independence struggle against Pakistan. The Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Society, JI) stayed loyal to Pakistan, and militias with JI members

3. Islamic groups are understood as social groups adhering to Islam, while Islamist groups are understood as *political* actors that locate their demands within an Islamic framework of reference (Asseburg 2007, 9–11). Islamic terrorism is understood as deadly violence targeting civilians to reach Islamist goals; definition adapted from Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (n.d., 5).

massacred Bangladeshi civilians. The independent People's Republic of Bangladesh was founded as a secular state, with its 1972 constitution enshrining secularism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. The AL government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1971–1975) invoked Bengali nationalism, which considers Bangladesh's ethno-linguistic characteristics the basis of national identity.

### **State-Led Islamization: The Role of Authoritarian Rule and Influences from the Gulf**

The military governments of General Ziaur Rahman (Zia, 1975–1981) and General Muhammad Ershad (1981–1990) promoted Islam, to gain extra-electoral legitimacy. Zia replaced the constitutional principles of secularism and socialism with the invocation of Allah; his removal of the constitutional ban on religion-based politics allowed the JI to re-enter the political process. Zia's BNP promulgated Bangladeshi nationalism that stressed the Muslim characteristics of the nation. The Ershad regime made Islam the state religion. Both military regimes built and renovated mosques and *madrassahs* (Islamic education institutions). Socioeconomic decline forced Zia to reorient Bangladesh's foreign policy toward the oil-rich Gulf states in exchange for aid, a trend that continued under Ershad (Hasan 2012, 67–68). Consequently, local mosques and *madrassahs* increasingly came under the influence of orthodox interpretations of Islam from the Gulf, such as Wahhabism.

The state-led promotion of Islam empowered Islamic movements that subsequently made autonomous contributions to Islamic revivalism (Islam and Islam 2018, 340). For instance, the Tablighi Jamaat (Society for Spreading Faith, TJ), a Deobandi movement, increased its *da'wa* (missionary) activities (Sikand 2001). The Deobandi ideology is a highly orthodox, scholastic doctrine within Sunni Islam that rejects South Asia's syncretistic Muslim traditions, including the moderate Sufi doctrine. While some Deobandi groups, such as the Taliban, use violence, others are strictly nonviolent (Hashmi 2016, 142). The TJ is both nonviolent and apolitical (Sikand 2001). While promoting a textual Islam, it focuses on self-purification, encouraging Muslims to follow *sharia* (Islamic law) in their daily lives, and rejects violent jihad (Huq 2009, 171–72; Islam and Islam 2018, 345–47). However, it has weakened tolerant, syncretistic Islamic practices (Sikand 2001), such as Sufi Islam.

Another orthodox religious current that grew from the military period on is the Ahle Hadith (Followers of Hadith) school, which emphasizes the strict application of the Koran, *sunnah*, and *hadith*,<sup>4</sup> rejects the established *madh-habs* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence), and strives to cleanse Islam of *bid'a* (innovation). It considers democracy and secularism expressions of *kufir*: unbelief (Islam and Islam 2018, 328, 344–45). Thus, Ahle Hadith thought is the ideological equivalent of Middle Eastern Salafism, which is shared by al-Qaeda and IS. However, just like the Salafist movement (Wiktorowicz 2006), Bangladesh's Ahle Hadith community is divided with regard to strategy: there are apolitical quietist, nonviolent political, and jihadist strands (Ahmad 2006).

There is no clear evidence that the emergence of Islamic orthodoxy during military rule directly supported the growth of terrorism later on, and in principle, orthodox groups that provide theological framings for nonviolent behavior can also contribute to countering terrorism (Lynch 2010). However, the spread of orthodoxy in Bangladesh seems to have undermined social tolerance of atheist and other “un-Islamic” beliefs, creating a climate of impunity for Islamist violence. A local terrorism expert recalled that in 1972 he had stated in a public seminar that “God is disturbing” and that the idea of God was “bothering” him. While the statement had been hotly debated, he said, he had been able to make it. During military rule, however, the dominant discourse had changed in a way that had made it impossible to criticize the Islamic faith.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Maidul Islam (2016, 27) argues that Bangladeshi proponents of an orthodox, “scriptural-dogmatic” version of Islam reject individual liberty in matters of faith and may thus consider acts of “blasphemy” attacks on Islam that warrant punishment.

### Islamic Terrorism: The Role of the Afghanistan War

What contributed more directly to the emergence of terrorism was the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US support for the Afghan resistance during the Cold War. According to Ali Riaz (2007, 82), around 3,000 Bangladeshis joined a “volunteer corps” to fight alongside the Afghan

4. *Sunnah* refers to practices, habits, decisions and words of the Prophet Mohammed, while *hadith* denotes written records of *sunnah* (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs 2020).

5. Interview, terrorism expert, Dhaka, March 4, 2017.

*mujahideen*. The Ershad regime, which depended on US aid, tolerated the public recruitment of Bangladeshi fighters (Hasan 2012, 69). According to a local expert, ordinary citizens often perceived these fighters broadly as “people going somewhere to fight for Islam and for the cause of Muslims.” Thus, on their return, they “were [often] regarded as heroes.”<sup>6</sup> However, they “brought back the ideology of jihad,” along with the confidence of having defeated the Soviet Union, one of the world’s strongest military forces.<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan veterans became the leaders of Bangladesh’s major terrorist groups from the 1990s on (Riaz 2007, 52, 58, 82). In 1992, the Bangladeshi branch of the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (Islamic Jihad Movement), a transnational terrorist organization that follows the Deobandi faith, announced its establishment in a press conference and staged an open procession in Dhaka. Generally, citizens remained passive, and there were no counter-protests, not least because the organization was founded by Afghanistan veterans who were admired by some people.<sup>8</sup>

## TERRORISM DURING THE PARLIAMENTARY PERIOD, 1991 TO 2008

Between 1991 and 2006, the AL and the BNP alternated in power. The fierce conflict between the parties periodically manifested itself in violent street battles, while the party in power regularly harassed the opposition, often through brutal attacks.

### State-Led Islamization: The Role of the Party Conflict

Owing to the party conflict, state-led Islamization continued in the parliamentary period. That is, both the AL and the BNP forged coalitions with the JI and other Islamist parties to form the government. Consequently, the influence of the JI in particular grew tremendously.

A lay movement with highly efficient and hierarchical cadre structures (Mannan 2015, 252), the JI is similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East (Kabir 2015, 51). Its ideology is based almost exclusively on that of Abul A’la Maududi, who emphasized political work to gain control over

6. Interview, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, Berlin, November 6, 2018.

7. *Ibid.*, and interviews with AL think tank representatives, Dhaka, March 8, 2017.

8. Interview, terrorism expert, Dhaka, March 4, 2017.

the state as a crucial means for changing society. Thus, the JI officially rejects violence.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is orthodox in that it opposes Bangladesh's syncretistic Sufi traditions (Kabir 2015, 52), and its political agenda is undemocratic in that the JI advocates the strict application of *sharia*, including corporal punishment for *houdoud* crimes (violations of Islamic law seen as crimes against God).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the JI stresses the need to suppress individual liberty to establish divine sovereignty, potentially promoting religious intolerance (Islam 2016, 27).

The BNP's tenure from 1991 to 1996 saw violent attacks on NGOs, including the burning of schools run by a development NGO, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Mannan 2015, 245–77), and a bomb attack on the home of human rights activist Sultana Kamal (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2003). In 1994, the so-called Sahaba Soldiers called for the execution of the feminist author Taslima Nasreen, placing a bounty on her head. Islamist demonstrations against Nasreen in Dhaka demanded the punishment, and at times the execution, of the writer, along with other *murtaddin*, or apostates (Rashiduzzaman 1994, 983). While secular intellectuals and NGOs have often ascribed these attacks on secular actors to the JI, an investigation by Manzurul Mannan (2015, 277) finds that they were mostly orchestrated by Deobandi mullahs and madrassahs, with the JI remaining passive.

From 2001 to 2006, the BNP headed a coalition government that included the JI and the Islami Oikya Jote (Islamic Unity Front), the main political alliance of the Deobandis. The BNP-led government encouraged the growth of mosques and madrassahs, and religious practices, such as mosque attendance and veiling, increased (Harrigan 2013, 62).

### **Islamic Terrorism: The Role of Growing Islamization and Orthodox Islamic Groups**

The tenure of the BNP-led coalition government saw the first major terrorist attacks, including a grenade attack on an AL rally in 2004, ascribed to the Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh, and over 400 simultaneous bombings in 2005, claimed by the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (Assembly of

9. Interview, senior JI adviser, Dhaka, March 4, 2017; telephone interview, leading JI member, February 15, 2017.

10. Interviews, senior JI adviser, Dhaka, March 4, 2017; JI leader, Dhaka, March 6, 2017.



Mujahideen Bangladesh, JMB). Given that they coincided with the increased visibility of Islamic practices in the public sphere (Harrigan 2013), many reports have attributed these attacks to the growing Islamization of society.

More specifically, several works have alleged that the JI sponsored terrorism (Ahsan and Banavar 2011, 46–70; Fair, Hamza, and Heller 2017, 4; Kumar 2009, 545–46). Given that several leading JMB representatives were former cadres of the JI or its student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) (International Crisis Group 2006, 18–19), such allegations have some “descriptive truth.”<sup>11</sup> However, the JMB’s main leaders, including its *amir* (religious commander) Abdur Rahman and its operational commander Siddique ul-Islam (alias Bangla Bai), adhered to the Ahle Hadith doctrine (Ahmad 2006), which differs significantly from the JI’s Maududi ideology. A JI representative maintained that the possible presence of former JI members in terrorist groups only showed that “JI is too soft for them . . . too moderate for them. That’s why they left Jamaat.”<sup>12</sup> Several experts likewise said that terrorist violence contradicts the JI’s ideological and strategic approach and that cadres advocating such violence are either expelled or leave the party voluntarily.<sup>13</sup> In interviews with a Bangladeshi scholar, JI leaders at the local level explained that cadres who had left the JI and formed terrorist groups often “accuse[d] JI of being reformist” and “co-opted” into the corrupt political system. Conversely, the local JI leaders sometimes viewed the terrorists as “brave” but “foolhardy,” considering their violent strategy counterproductive and unlikely to draw popular support.<sup>14</sup>

The controversy over the JI’s relation to terrorism mirrors the debate, prominent in Middle East studies, on whether orthodox but nonviolent mainstream Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood constitute a “firewall” against terrorism or rather, create a social and ideological environment in which terrorism can thrive, thereby acting as a “conveyor belt” (Lynch 2010). Drawing on Lynch (2016), nonviolent Islamist groups can act as a “firewall” when the political context allows them to, first, present themselves as a viable strategic alternative to terrorist groups, and second, establish effective organization structures enabling them to rein in militant believers who might otherwise turn to violence. This excludes neither “crossovers”

11. Interview, scholar, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.

12. Telephone interview, leading JI member, February 27, 2017.

13. Interview, university scholar, Dhaka, March 5, 2017; other interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

14. Interview, scholar, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.

(Lynch 2010, 470) from such nonviolent Islamist to terrorist groups, nor individual members of such nonviolent Islamist groups holding ambivalent views of ideological concepts used by jihadists, such as *takfir*, declaring fellow Muslims apostates (474).

Following the 2004–2005 terrorist attacks, another truism was that terrorists usually hailed from Qawmi madrassahs, which are often attended by poor children. However, in Bangladesh, Qawmi has two overlapping but not identical meanings. The first denotes the country's numerous privately funded madrassahs, which exclusively impart orthodox religious teachings and are not controlled by the state. (This is in contrast to Alia madrassahs, which are supervised and funded by the state and teach the government curriculum.) In its second meaning, Qawmi is a synonym for the orthodox Deobandi faith.<sup>15</sup> As of 2007, academic research pointed to a nexus between terrorism and Ahle Hadith madrassahs (Riaz 2007, 40), from which many JMB leaders hailed. However, most Ahle Hadith madrassahs are Qawmi madrassahs in the first but not the second sense; that is, they are unregistered madrassahs outside state control but do not follow the Deobandi faith.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, some Ahle Hadith madrassahs are technically Alia madrassahs registered with the state (Ahmad 2006). As mentioned, the Ahle Hadith and the Deobandi ideology have both jihadist and nonviolent strands, pointing to the need to further investigate the relationship between terrorism and what is broadly described as Qawmi madrassahs.

The work of Samia Huq (2011a, 2011b) points to the complex effects that some orthodox groups, such as study circles, may have on their members and the wider society. While such groups promote textual forms of Islam, they are very distinct from violent extremist organizations (Huq 2011a, 273, 2011b, 229) and at times reconceptualize jihad as an inner struggle for individual piety (Huq 2011b, 234, 236–37). Moreover, by consciously maintaining a distance from Islamist groups like the JI, such groups may sometimes enable rather than prevent pluralist, secular spaces (Huq 2011a, esp. 269, 282). Concurrently, however, they may strictly oppose acts of “devian[ce]” from their own orthodox ideals (Huq and Rashid 2008, 21–22) or induce their members to maintain a distance from non-Muslims (18), potentially hampering mutual understanding and thus contributing to intolerance.

15. Interview, embassy expert, Dhaka, March 8, 2017.

16. Interview, NGO expert, Dhaka, March 11, 2017.

### **Islamic Terrorism: Secular Problems of a Weak and Corrupt Security Apparatus**

Undoubtedly, however, the 2004–2005 surge in terrorism was enabled by the weakness and corruption of the security apparatus. The JMB emerged as a vigilante group in northern Bangladesh, where it was used by local security officials to fight left-wing insurgents (International Crisis Group 2018, 2–3, 18–19). According to a local expert who accompanied Bangla Bai for one day, the latter openly exercised *de facto* control in some areas, giving orders and commanding JMB forces in the presence of an inactive administration and police.<sup>17</sup> The BNP-led coalition government (2001–2006) initially denied the JMB's existence, suggesting that the group enjoyed high-level political protection (International Crisis Group 2006, 10–11, 18–19). A 2006 counter-terrorism crackdown conducted mainly by the paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the subsequent counter-terrorism measures of both the military-backed Caretaker Government (2007–2008) and the incumbent AL government halted open terrorist attacks until 2013.

### **TERRORISM UNDER THE AL GOVERNMENT FROM 2009 TO THE PRESENT**

Since its election in 2009, the AL has fiercely repressed the opposition. The BNP boycotted the 2014 elections, while a 2013 High Court verdict barred the JI from running on the grounds that its charter contradicted Bangladesh's secular constitution. The 2018 elections were unfree and unfair, with 288 of the 300 elected parliamentary seats going to the AL-led alliance.

### **Islamic Terrorism: Secular–Islamist Contestation, al-Qaeda, IS, and the Rohingya Conflict**

In 2010, the AL government established the International Crimes Tribunal to bring the war criminals of 1971 to book. Starting in 2013, it sentenced high-ranking JI leaders to death. But on February 5, 2013, JI leader Quader Mollah was sentenced to life in prison rather than death, sparking the Shahbag movement (named after Shahbag Square in Dhaka, where it began), which was initiated by secular bloggers and demanded death for Mollah, along with

17. Interview, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, Berlin, November 6, 2018.

a return to entirely secular politics. Hefazat-e-Islam (Protection of Islam), an orthodox Deobandi network rooted in Qawmi madrassahs, staged large-scale counter-demonstrations, demanding the punishment of the “anti-Islamic” and “atheist” Shahbag activists and, at times, the killing of secular bloggers.<sup>18</sup> Tracing the origins of Hefazat to the resistance of Deobandi mullahs to secular NGOs in the 1990s, Manzurul Mannan argued that “these religious leaders [are] looking for those type of [secular-Islamist] conflicts for two reasons: conflict helps them popularize their ideology, and through conflict they’re able to reorganize their organization[s].”<sup>19</sup>

Tying into Hefazat’s discourse, which approximated the jihadist practice of *takfir*, radical local preachers such as Mufti Jasim Uddin Rahmani, a known sympathizer of al-Qaeda, called for jihadist action. On February 13, 2013, the secular blogger Rajib Haider was hacked to death by militants of the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a local terrorist outfit in which Rahmani played a leading role (Roul 2014, 5) and which styled itself the Bangladeshi Unit of al-Qaeda on the Indian Subcontinent (Riaz 2016, 2). On May 5, 2013, the AL government dispersed Hefazat’s protests by force. Between 2013 and 2016, many secular and atheist bloggers, writers and intellectuals were hacked to death by violent extremists affiliated with the ABT who claimed allegiance to either al-Qaeda or IS. Al-Qaeda actively exploited the confrontations between secularists and Islamists. In January 2014, its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called for an intifada and for jihad against the secular AL government and other “anti-Islamic forces” (Roul 2014, 5), a move that corresponds with al-Qaeda’s new global approach of blending into local conflict situations.

While the AL ultimately cracked down on Hefazat, it was afraid of being seen as anti-Islamic if it antagonized orthodox groups too much. It was slow to prosecute the killings of the bloggers, instead reminding secular activists not to malign the Prophet (Lorch 2019, 269–270, 274). Similarly, the AL government has been hesitant to protect secular defenders of human rights, including a very prominent one, whom Hefazat leaders have threatened, saying, “If you come on the street we’re going to take your flesh and bones apart.”<sup>20</sup> This tendency of the AL government to allow some impunity for

18. Expert, telephone conversation, December 2019.

19. Interview, Manzurul Mannan, Dhaka, March 5, 2017.

20. Interview, prominent human rights defender, Berlin, October 20, 2019.

Islamist violence appears to be embedded in a wider social reluctance, shared by growing parts of the population, to be associated with “un-Islamic” or “anti-Islamic” expressions, a shift encouraged by the growing influence of orthodox groups. The abovementioned human rights defender told me,

The people . . . they’re religion-fearing, they’re not fundamentalists. But then if you say something in the name of religion they . . . shrink. You cannot go against religion. . . . In our culture there is . . . allegiance to religion. But then it has never been communal . . . , not separating, not dividing . . . [contrary to today]. . . . People [used to] believe that you *should* . . . not insult the Prophet [or say anything against religion]. . . . Now it has become you *cannot*.<sup>21</sup>

Analyzing writings by the Islamic Foundation, a semi-autonomous body under the Ministry of Religious Affairs that conducts research on Islam but also declaredly promotes the Islamic faith, Samia Huq (2013) finds that over time the state’s regulation of religion in the name of secularism (13) has resulted in the state-led promotion of an increasingly textual, rather than historically contextualized, understanding of Islam that has widened the “gap between Muslims and the non-Muslim others” (51). While this interpretation of Islam still demands tolerance of disbelievers, it also invokes notions of the latter’s culpability (59), potentially promoting intolerance.

In autumn 2015, an Italian missionary and a Japanese aid worker were shot dead, with IS claiming responsibility. In July 2016, six terrorists besieged the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, killing 18 foreigners and four Bangladeshis. Again, IS claimed responsibility. In March 2017, five suicide bombings occurred, including an unsuccessful attack on the RAB in Dhaka and a suicide blast in Sylhet that killed six people, with both al-Qaeda and IS claiming the attacks (Kugelman and Ahmad 2017). In addition, over two dozen minor terrorist attempts were committed between 2015 and 2016, but they failed to draw international attention because they were unsuccessful or not claimed by a transnational terrorist outfit.<sup>22</sup>

Some experts suspect that as IS loses its strongholds in Syria and Iraq it may increasingly turn toward Muslim-majority countries in Asia. Seven months before the Holey Artisan Bakery attacks, IS launched a Bangla-language version of its site for the recruitment of followers (Bhattacharya

21. Ibid.

22. Interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

2016). In its mouthpiece *Dabiq* (named after the town of Dabiq in Syria), it has called the AL government *murtaddin* and accused Bangladeshi citizens of both *bid'a* and *shirk*, or polytheism (Gurski 2017, 85), painting Bangladesh as a legitimate target for attacks. In April 2016, Shaykh Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, the reputed head of IS operations in Bangladesh, designated the country as a strategic target owing to its geographical position, which could make it a springboard for IS to expand into India and Myanmar. A similar strategic vision had been expressed by al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri in 2014, leading to fears that the two terrorist outfits might compete for supremacy in Bangladesh (*Stratfor Worldview* 2016). While there are few indications of direct operational connections between Bangladeshi terrorist groups and IS, some Bangladeshi extremists have apparently become attracted to IS's Salafist ideology. This aligns with IS's franchise model of allowing organizationally independent terrorist groups worldwide to claim its mantle.<sup>23</sup>

Since October 2016, atrocities by the Myanmar military have pushed over 800,000 members of the Rohingya, an ethno-linguistic minority that practices Islam, from Myanmar into Bangladesh. Both al-Qaeda and IS have exploited the Rohingyas' misery for propaganda purposes, calling on Muslims in Bangladesh and elsewhere to wage jihad against Myanmar (*Site Intelligence* 2017a). In 2017, the pro-IS Wafa Media Foundation called for using the porous Bangladesh–Myanmar border, which has long constituted a hot-spot for illegal arms and drugs trading, to smuggle arms and fighters into Myanmar (*Site Intelligence* 2017b).

### Islamic Terrorism: The Role of the Party Conflict and the New Drivers of Radicalization

The AL considers the JI the main sponsor of terrorism and has fiercely prosecuted the Islamist party. A representative of an AL think tank, which provides input into the government's Countering Violent Extremism policy, claimed that most of the members of *all* Bangladeshi terrorist groups, including the JMB and the ABT, came from the JI. Describing the party's ideology as "purely Wahhabi," he alleged that it had used its membership in the BNP-led coalition government to "indoctrinat[e] youth for jihad."<sup>24</sup>

23. Confidential expert conversation, May 2019.

24. Interview, AL think tank representative, Dhaka, March 8, 2017.

Both AL sympathizers and leftist secularists tend to view the JI's support for terrorism as demonstrated by the 1971 massacres, portraying present-day terrorism as part of a historical "continuum" ranging from the war of independence to the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attacks.<sup>25</sup> For the AL, this interpretation aligns with a larger propagandistic initiative aimed at "reinventing tradition [and] finding a smooth and continuous trajectory" that started with the Bengali resistance movement and "reached its peak in the current [AL] government,"<sup>26</sup> which the party uses to legitimize its increasingly authoritarian rule. However, it is important to distinguish between the JI's historical role and current terrorist activities.

As in the mid-2000s, former JI cadres might be found in present-day terrorist groups. After the 2006 crackdown, some remaining factions of the JMB, which included former JI and ICS members, merged into the ABT (later renamed Ansar al-Islam, Helpers of Islam). Moreover, some cadres of the old JMB make up one faction of the "neo-JMB," a term coined by the AL government, which holds the group responsible for the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attacks.<sup>27</sup> In 2017, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU) of the Bangladesh police claimed that former ICS cadres were leading the neo-JMB (*Daily Star* 2017). However, there are clear ideological differences between the JI's rather pragmatic Maududi ideology and the revolutionary brand of Ahle Hadith / Salafist thought that terrorist groups such as the JMB, IS, and al-Qaeda subscribe to. In its online propaganda, IS has identified the JI as a main target in Bangladesh, alongside the AL and the BNP,<sup>28</sup> a pattern that mirrors the condemnation by both IS and al-Qaeda of the Society of the Muslim Brothers in the Middle East as traitors who have forged alliances with apostate, secular regimes (Lynch 2010, 471).

The Holey Artisan Bakery incident further complicated diagnoses regarding the profiles of Bangladeshi terrorists, as the six attackers were mostly from upper-middle-class families and had educational backgrounds in Westernized, English-language private schools and universities (*Daily Star* 2016), rather than Qawmi madrassahs. Ali Riaz and Saimum Parvez (2018) find that many Bangladeshi terrorists are educated young males from well-to-do families who are radicalized through social relationships, personal crises, external

25. Interview, leftist Bangladeshi activist, Berlin, February 2, 2017.

26. Interview, scholar, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.

27. Interview, terrorism expert, Dhaka, March 4, 2017; other interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

28. Interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

relations, and the Internet. A local expert emphasized that present-day terrorists are often self-radicalized and first engage with radical content through the Internet.<sup>29</sup> While the trends of self-radicalization and sudden religiosity suggest that many new terrorists might be less ideologically versed than earlier ones, the role of personal crisis indicates that “Islamist” radicalization may sometimes have strong secular components. Concurrently, the attention of many international terrorism and aid experts has shifted to English-medium and private education institutions.<sup>30</sup> This new focus, however, neglects the ongoing radicalizing potential of some madrassahs. For instance, the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers were “mixed,”<sup>31</sup> with at least one being a madrassah student (*Daily Star* 2016).

Moreover, individual terrorists may sometimes use nonviolent Islamic networks, such as the TJ or Sufi networks, to hide or recruit followers. A member of a Sufi order explained,

[Let’s imagine] I’m a terrorist. . . . Tablighi [Jamaat] . . . they have a huge network. So after blowing [up] a bomb . . . , I immediately go into Tablighi for my shelter. . . . [Take] the Kakrail mosque . . . in Dhaka. Every single day 3,000 people enter . . . and just in a few days, they go out [again]. . . . Once you have killed someone and enter into the Tablighi movement, there is no way anyone [can] be able to trace you. . . . If you go to our annual [Sufi] festival . . . you will be shocked how many people go there. . . . Especially the . . . Sufi networks. . . . Once they [the terrorists] enter into this network, it is next to impossible to identify them. But then they are using this network to organize.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, the AL’s targeting of the JI is due to the party conflict as much as it is to the JI’s problematic legacy, with the AL repressing the JI to weaken the BNP’s electoral coalition. Drawing on Lynch (2010, 2016), persecution of the JI may spur terrorism, first because the resulting political vacuum may increase the “market-share” (Lynch 2010, 482) of jihadist competitors such as al-Qaeda and IS. Second, the fact that the AL has answered the JI’s nonviolent political engagement with repression may discredit the JI’s nonviolent approach in the eyes of Islamist activists. Third, the destruction of the JI’s formerly highly efficient cadre structures may weaken the party’s

29. Interview, terrorism expert, Dhaka, March 12, 2017.

30. Interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

31. Interview, UN expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017.

32. Interview, Sufi order member, Dhaka, March 5, 2017.



organizational control over more militant members, who might subsequently join terrorist groups.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, to counterbalance the JI's influence, the AL government has made significant concessions to the orthodox Hefazat movement.<sup>34</sup> For instance, it has granted official recognition to the *dawrah-e-hadith* certificates (from a six-year Islamic studies program focused on Islamic jurisprudence based on the Koran and the *hadith*—Miaze 2017) issued by the Deobandi madrassahs that form the backbone of Hefazat. Officially, Hefazat leaders have denied any affiliation with terrorism, calling Islam the religion of peace.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a Hefazat *maulana* (master, honorary title for a religious savant) stated that the Ahle Hadith madrassahs (where many JMB leaders were educated) were misleading people and strongly denied any similarity between Deobandi and Ahle Hadith madrassahs.<sup>36</sup> While there are both violent and nonviolent Deobandi groups in Bangladesh, from an organizational point of view, Hefazat has significantly less potential to act as a “firewall” against terrorism than the JI, because it is a loose network<sup>37</sup> that cannot enforce discipline over its members.

An NGO expert working with the Deobandi madrassahs called them a major source of hate speech.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Rohingya crisis may further the radicalization of Hefazat, which has staged large-scale protests where it echoed the rhetoric of IS and al-Qaeda, threatening Myanmar with jihad (Joehnk 2017). The AL government's co-optation of Hefazat could make the movement's jihadist rhetoric and threats against alleged apostates more socially acceptable, enhancing impunity for terrorist violence. However, just as in the case of the JI, such co-optation may also make Hefazat the target of terrorist groups such as IS.

### **Obstacles to Counter-Terrorism: The Role of the Party Conflict and a Weak Security Apparatus**

Both the AL and the BNP have accused each other of terrorism, preventing the development of an effective counter-terrorism strategy. In summer 2016,

33. Interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

34. Interviews, Dhaka: AL lawmaker, March 7, 2017; embassy experts, March 8, 2017; other interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

35. Interview, prominent human rights defender, October 20, 2019; expert, telephone conversation, December 2019.

36. Interview, Hefazat leader, Dhaka, March 11, 2017.

37. Ibid.

38. Interview, NGO expert, Dhaka, March 11, 2017.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina implicated the BNP in the Holey Artisan Bakery attacks (Fazli 2016). Moreover, many AL leaders accuse the BNP of having enabled the very emergence of terrorism, both directly during its tenure from 2001 to 2006 and indirectly through its emphasis of the Islamic characteristics of the state (International Crisis Group 2018, 18).<sup>39</sup>

Although some AL representatives appear to be privately convinced of a growing IS influence in Bangladesh, the AL government has consistently denied the terrorist outfit's presence in the country, referring to all terrorists sympathizing with IS as neo-JMB. A local expert recalled that when he asked a minister about the government's reasons for calling the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers neo-JMB, the minister answered that otherwise they would have to call them IS.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, some BNP leaders accuse the AL of instrumentalizing, or even inciting, terrorist attacks to get international security assistance and/or blame these attacks on the BNP. A high-ranking BNP leader depicted the post-2013 terrorist attacks as acts of desperate resistance to the AL's growing authoritarianism, calling the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers a loose conglomerate of common people who had been united by government repression and maintaining that IS did not exist in Bangladesh.<sup>41</sup> In accusing each other of terrorism, the AL and the BNP thus concur in denying the possibility of growing IS influence.

Moreover, the term "terrorism" is used broadly in Bangladesh to describe various kinds of political violence, including state repression and street violence. Thus, since the 1990s, both parties have continuously designated violent attacks by their respective rivals as terrorism.<sup>42</sup> As a foreign diplomat summarized, for both parties, the major national threat is not Islamic terrorism but the other party.<sup>43</sup> A local scholar said that to tackle terrorism "you have to create a culture of tolerance," an endeavor in which the political opposition would also have to participate. "You have to have a general consensus. . . . If you are accusing each other of terrorism, how can you fight it?"<sup>44</sup> However, due to the AL's portrayal of the JI as an extremist group, there is no

39. Interviews, Dhaka: AL functionary at Dhaka University (DU), March 7, 2017; AL lawmaker, March 7, 2017.

40. Interview, terrorism expert, Dhaka, March 4, 2017.

41. Interview, BNP leader, Dhaka, March 11, 2017.

42. Interviews, embassy experts, Dhaka, March 8, 2017.

43. Telephone interview, European diplomat, February 14, 2017.

44. Interview, DU expert, Dhaka, March 5, 2017.

interparty dialogue on terrorism. An AL functionary told me that his party would never dialogue with the BNP as long as it was aligned with the “radical JI,”<sup>45</sup> while an AL lawmaker claimed that the AL government had repeatedly “invite[d]” the BNP to cut its ties with the JI and then have a dialogue on terrorism, “but they [the BNP] did not respond.”<sup>46</sup>

The weakness of the criminal justice system, which is linked to the party conflict, further diminishes the government’s ability to combat terrorism. The AL’s instrumentalization of the security apparatus for the repression of political opponents diverts limited resources from counter-terrorism (International Crisis Group 2018, 20–21). Moreover, owing to the AL’s desire to gain public credit by portraying itself as the main bulwark against terrorism, state security agencies focus on making and publicizing arrests, rather than on collecting sufficient evidence for strong judicial cases against terrorism suspects.<sup>47</sup>

These problems coincide with an ongoing restructuring of the security sector. Specifically, the AL government has shifted some responsibility for counter-terrorism away from the RAB to the CTTCU (International Crisis Group 2018, 15). And though the government plans to establish local CTTCU chapters in all districts, so far only the central unit in Dhaka is operational, and even it is still small and lacks personnel.<sup>48</sup> While several CTTCU officers were drawn from the Detective Branch of the police and thus had some prior competence in counter-terrorism, many were appointed due to their political loyalty to the AL rather than their expertise. The chief of the CTTCU is an AL sympathizer close to Sheikh Hasina,<sup>49</sup> heightening the risk of the unit being instrumentalized for political purposes. The Anti-Terrorism Unit of the police became fully operational in 2019, but the division of competencies between this new unit and the CTTU remains largely unclear.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, the three main agencies in charge of counter-terrorism, the CTTCU, the RAB and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence

45. Interview, AL functionary at DU, Dhaka, March 7, 2017.

46. Interview, AL lawmaker, Dhaka, March 7, 2017.

47. Interview, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, Berlin, November 6, 2018.

48. Telephone conversation, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, June 7, 2020.

49. Interview and telephone conversations, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, Berlin, November 6, 2018, telephone January 31 and June 7, 2020.

50. Telephone conversations, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, January 31 and June 7, 2020.

(DGFI), the main military intelligence agency, are often competing rather than cooperating or sharing information. The rivalry appears to be especially strong between the police-based CTTCU on the one hand and the DGFI and the paramilitary RAB (both led by military officers) on the other.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, under the ever-more-authoritarian AL government the DGFI has become increasingly involved in politics, including the repression of political opponents.<sup>52</sup>

The BNP's 2014 election boycott left the AL with no proper popular mandate, a situation that has frightened many party leaders. Moreover, Western governments have criticized the 2014 and 2018 elections as lacking credibility. Some experts argue that the main reason the AL government defines present-day terrorism as purely homegrown is that AL leaders around Sheikh Hasina have become paranoid that an IS footprint in Bangladesh might give the West a pretext for forced regime change.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Since the mid-1970s, a number of factors have interacted to enable the rise of terrorism in Bangladesh: the conflict between the AL and the BNP, authoritarian governance, certain aspects of the increasing influence of Islamic orthodoxy, the weakness of the state security apparatus, and various international factors—in particular, the Afghanistan War, the transnational influence of al-Qaeda and IS, and the Rohingya crisis. However, the impact that different constellations of these factors have had on terrorism has varied greatly at different historical stages. Moreover, while some factors have directly promoted terrorist activities, others have hindered the realization of effective counter-terrorism measures, enabling terrorism indirectly.

During both military rule and the parliamentary period of 1991 to 2006, the party conflict and authoritarian governance promoted the increasing Islamization of society and politics, a process that was accompanied by the growth of orthodox groups. Contrary to what much of the literature implies, however, there is no clear evidence that Islamization in general or orthodox Islamic organizations in particular (such as the JI or Qawmi madrassahs) have

51. Interview, Bangladeshi terrorism expert, November 6, 2018.

52. Interviews, Dhaka: Supreme Court lawyer, March 9, 2017; BNP leader, March 11, 2017; other interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

53. Interview: UN expert, Dhaka, March 9, 2017; other interviews, Dhaka, March 2017.

*directly* promoted terrorism. The *indirect* impacts of orthodox groups on terrorism have been mixed and highly dependent on their specific tactics and organizational structures as well as on the specific political circumstances with which they have interacted at different points in time. Some orthodox groups, such as the TJ, emphasize individual piety and apolitical engagement to such an extent that they might in fact provide religious justification for the separation of politics from religion that liberal secularists also endorse (for a similar argument see Huq 2009, 176). Conversely, the 2013 agitations of Hefazat suggest that primarily nonviolent orthodox groups can sometimes enable terrorism by popularizing *takfir* narratives that jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda and IS, can tie into. Moreover, the reluctance of consecutive governments to punish attacks on secular activists whom orthodox organizations have branded as apostates indicates that the growing influence of Islamic orthodoxy has contributed to a climate of impunity for Islamist violence.

The secular international power politics of the Cold War contributed directly to the growth of terrorism. Specifically, the Afghanistan War enabled the emergence of jihadist leaders who subsequently established terrorist groups in Bangladesh (Riaz 2007, 52, 58, 82). It also created a certain popular appeal for the use of violence to defend Islam, even though this appeal was clearly different from support for terrorism.

Under both the BNP-led four-party government (2001–2006) and the current AL government (2009–present), the growth of terrorism has been *indirectly* enabled by secular problems of a weak and corrupt security apparatus and confrontational party politics. The conflict between the AL and the BNP has prevented both parties from undertaking an objective analysis of the causes of terrorism, hindering effective counter-terrorism measures. Under the present AL government, the ongoing restructuring of the weak security sector has coincided with the latter's instrumentalization for the repression of political opponents. Concurrently, the AL's repression of the JI as the BNP's main coalition partner might promote terrorism, as the weakening of the JI's organization structures may diminish the party's control over more militant cadres. Moreover, the political vacuum left by the JI might be filled by more-jihadist competitors.

The AL's politicized handling of the International Crimes Tribunal has triggered virulent secular–Islamist contestation, creating discursive and organizational opportunities for terrorist groups. However, defining the post-2013 growth of Islamist violence as a simple reaction to the AL's secularization

policies (Islam and Islam 2018, 352) underestimates the complexity at work. The post-2013 spike in terrorism appears to have been fostered by a combination of factors, including an increasing popular reluctance to condemn Islamist violence against “un-Islamic” individuals, al-Qaeda’s propagandistic exploitation of the 2013 confrontations, and the radical rhetoric of Hefazat. New international drivers of terrorism have thus begun to increasingly interact with domestic political dynamics.

Academic and policy research must further investigate the drivers of Bangladeshi terrorism. Thereby, future research should also engage with the finding of studies on the Middle East that effective organizational structures may increase the capacity of nonviolent Islamist groups to act as firewalls against terrorism (Lynch 2010, 2016), while loosely organized Islamist groups—or Islamist groups whose organizational structures are weakened by state repression—often lack such ability. Moreover, future inquiry should further explore the political and organizational circumstances under which different orthodox Islamic ideologies promote or hinder terrorism. For instance, the present study suggests that the Ahle Hadith and Deobandi ideologies may both have complex, and sometimes contradictory, impacts on terrorism, as they have manifested themselves in both nonviolent (quietist) and jihadist strands. I see no indications that liberal, syncretistic Muslim traditions encourage terrorism. Nonviolent orthodox Islamic organizations may sometimes act as “firewalls” against terrorism, but they can also have a detrimental impact on democracy (see also Lynch 2010). Thus, all international efforts to engage with orthodox groups, such as Qawmi madrassahs, should be carefully calibrated so as to not undermine Bangladesh’s secular traditions.

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