

## Annual Threat Assessment

### GLOBAL THREAT FORECAST

by Professor Rohan Gunaratna

### SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Singapore

### SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka

### CENTRAL AND EAST ASIA

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China

### MIDDLE EAST

Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Turkey

### AFRICA

Egypt, Libya, Nigeria and Somalia

### SOUTH AMERICA

Colombia



# Executive Summary

## Annual Threat Assessment 2016

**W**e are pleased to release Volume 7, Issue 11 (December 2015 / February 2016) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta) (ISSN 2382-6444) by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

A theme that runs common in this annual assessment is the growing clout of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). The year 2015 was marked by a number of high-profile terrorist attacks all over the world, including those in Paris, Maiduguri in Nigeria and others. Though the attacks were perpetrated by different groups and individuals, the significance of the spread of ISIS – both in terms of ideology and physical presence – was evident in most of the attacks.

Despite universal revulsion, ISIS continues to spread all over the world, mainly due to the lack of unanimity among the countries concerning the most effective strategy to fight, degrade and defeat the group. In fact, the threat of ISIS is at the heart of security concerns of all the countries analysed in this issue.

### Southeast Asia

In 2015, countries in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, faced palpable threats from violence carried out by traditional groups and human smuggling networks working to facilitate militants' travel across the borders. The rapid spread of ISIS in the region has further threatened the security of the countries in the region.

Even though Indonesian authorities thwarted a number of plots, the challenge from ISIS-linked entities is gaining increasing traction in the country as evidenced by the January 2016 attacks in Jakarta. Moreover, although Singapore remained unscathed from terrorist attacks, there were a handful of self-radicalised individuals attempting to join ISIS, which have become a matter of grave concern for the country. Despite peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and rapprochement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the government of the Philippines faces the threat of the spread of ISIS particularly in view of the fact that a number of groups in the country have converged to facilitate the establishment of an ISIS enclave in the region. At the same time, Thailand confronts newer challenges besides its age-old brush with insurgency in its southern provinces in particular, the threat from human smuggling networks and an overwhelming presence of Rohingya (from Myanmar) and Uighur (from China) refugees in the country.

**Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis** is a monthly journal of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. The CTTA has a circulation of more than 11,000 subscribers.

<b>Editor-in-Chief</b>	Arabinda Acharya, Ph.D
<b>Associate Editor</b>	Stefanie Kam
<b>Assistant Editor</b>	Shahzeb Ali Rathore
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# Executive Summary

## Annual Threat Assessment 2016

### South Asia

South Asia continued to be in limelight not only because it registered the highest number of terrorist attacks but also due to the prospect that instability in few of the key countries could render the conflicts in the region more intractable.

In Afghanistan, poor governance, lax security and fractionalisation of the Taliban after Mullah Omar's death has created unrest and instability which ISIS has capitalised to build its own infrastructure. As Pakistan reels under the threat of domestic militant groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and others, ISIS appears to be making a firm and steady foothold in the country. In Bangladesh, intolerance along religious lines is on the rise despite years of efforts by the government to degrade and destroy the traditional militant groups. The spread of ISIS in the country has also placed this region under sharper focus. Relatively immune from terrorist attacks in the past, the presence of Maldivian fighters in Syria and Iraq has exposed the country in terms of its vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment efforts by groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda. As Sri Lanka attempts to recover from the deadliest terrorist threat from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the remnants of the group and militant Islamist networks portend new challenges to the security of the country.

### Central and East Asia

The jihadists' narrative of armed struggle against Syria's "anti-Sunni Alawite" regime appears to be the main driver for the recruitment of Central Asia's Sunni Muslims, particularly for those who feel a sense of solidarity and duty to protect their co-religionists in the Middle East. Beijing continues to be concerned about the spill-over of violence in Xinjiang into other parts of China, as well as the presence of Uighur militants in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, China continues with its tough posture against separatism and terrorism, as evidenced by the passage of its first counter-terrorism law in December 2015.

### Middle East

In 2015, Middle East remained the epicentre of the global jihadist threat despite the intervention of global players like the U.S. and its allies, Russia and Iran. The Middle East, especially countries like Syria, Iraq and Libya are falling into the proverbial trap of "great games," a development which is evident in the rather individualist policies pursued by each of the countries involved instead of the most common and the pressing need to defeat ISIS.

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# Annual Threat Assessment 2016

### Africa

Countries in Africa continue to face terrorist threats in multiple dimensions and in diverse forms due to the porous borders, poor governance and undertrained and under-equipped armed forces. This is compounded by the involvement of criminal networks in illegal drug, arms trade and human trafficking.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is reverting to violence, while ISIS Sinai Province carried out attacks against Egyptian security forces and claimed responsibility for downing of the Russian airliner. In Somalia, despite counter-offensives by the government forces along with African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), Al Shabaab's capabilities seem intact. ISIS appears to be expanding its influence in the country. Libya has been in a state of perpetual conflict for the past several years since the fall of Gaddafi regime, mainly due to the failure on the part of the successor parties to reach an agreement on a unity government. ISIS has exploited the chaos to establish its stronghold in Libya in 2015. Nigeria continues to experience violence in the form of terrorist attacks carried out by Boko Haram even as the current government has introduced policies to empower marginalised northern communities and immunise them from the risk of radicalisation.

### South America

Attacks by Colombia's insurgent groups, including the ELN and criminal gangs, known as BACRIM continued throughout the year. Despite skepticism about the outcome, the Santos administration resumed peace negotiations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and managed to secure an agreement on transitional justice which will hopefully pave the way for the signing of a peace deal in 2016.

### Looking Ahead

Terrorism remains the top national security threat for most countries. ISIS and Al Qaeda continue to project their presence and relevance, carrying out attacks all over the world. However, the threat of terrorism, whether from ISIS or Al Qaeda, is not existential for the states concerned and should not be taken as such. The apparent success of groups like ISIS is largely due to the inaccurate understanding of the intention and capability of groups, together with an inaccurate assessment of opportunities for these groups to operate in respective countries. There is also a lack of unanimity among the countries about the strategy to fight the threat – which requires a combination of both kinetic means and strategic initiatives like countering the radical ideology, deradicalisation and community engagement, among others. This issue of CTTA makes a modest contribution to place the terrorist threat in its current perspective and help the international community in general and policy makers in particular to craft appropriate responses against the same.

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# Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis

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Each issue of the journal carries articles with in-depth analysis of topical issues on terrorism and counterterrorism, broadly structured around a common theme. CTTA brings perspectives from CT researchers and practitioners with a view to produce policy relevant analysis.

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# Global Threat Forecast

## The Rise of ISIS

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Rohan Gunaratna

With the emergence and the growing clout of Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the terrorist threat confronting the international community has undergone a profound and dangerous transformation. At the same time Al Qaeda is still in the game – a bit diminished but lethal. Unfortunately however, governments – individually and collectively - continue to be ambivalent about the threat leading to lacklustre responses highlighted by lack of understanding of the threat, political will and coordination of operations against these groups.

### Introduction

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and its claim of the establishment of the Islamic State have introduced a threat of unprecedented magnitude to the international community. Even as the Al Qaeda remains significant despite having diminished in size, strength and influence, the threat from the group and its affiliates and supporters has begun to eclipse due to ISIS. With territorial control, huge resources, savviness in exploiting modern communication technology, especially the social media and brutality and barbarism, ISIS has presented a new version of extremism and terrorism to the world. Despite counter-offensives like aerial bombings and ground combat on multiple fronts, ISIS continues to survive and has been able to demonstrate its robust and lethal capabilities with attacks in many countries and to spread its influence worldwide. In a recent development, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) mounted a terrorist attack in the Indonesian capital city of Jakarta on 14 January 2016. The terrorist attack in Jakarta was portrayed as a success by ISIS. The possibility of future similar attacks by ISIS remains,

unless their capabilities in Southeast Asia are dismantled.

### Background

ISIS (originally Islamic State of Iraq - ISI) evolved out of Abu Musab al Zarqawi-led Al Qaeda in Iraq. Though the initial objective of ISI was to create a Sunni enclave in Iraq to counter the growing dominance of the Shias and the Kurds, instability in the country together with disbanding of the Iraqi military and intelligence apparatus and dismantling of Ba'ath party and its affiliated governmental apparatus let the group to grow and expand. The post-Arab Spring chaos in many Middle Eastern countries specifically in Iraq's neighbourhood allowed the group to capture territory and establish its rule projecting it as the Islamic State – the Caliphate. As Al Qaeda's leadership of the jihadist movement began to wane especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden, many groups and individuals that Al Qaeda mentored with ideology, training and financing are now increasingly turning to ISIS and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi for strategic leadership and inspiration.

### ISIS' Strategy

Today, ISIS has become a transnational phenomenon with an estimated 80,000 fighters including 30,000 Iraqis and Syrians and 20,000 foreigners combating in Iraq and Syria and hundreds of thousands of supporters worldwide. According to Western security and intelligence estimates ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq grew from 30,000 in 2014 to 50,000 in 2015 and likely to increase further in coming months as the group grabs more territory.

ISIS strategy is to govern the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria and expand to other Muslim territories by accepting pledges of allegiance from local jihadist groups. At present, more than hundred groups have pledged allegiance to ISIS and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Specifically ISIS seeks to control territory and administer the caliphate; expand the caliphate into other permissive areas; and exploit and destabilise areas not under its control. By demonstrating the establishment of the Islamic State, propagating the idea of a global caliphate and at the same time undermining competing groups and co-opting likeminded groups, ISIS is garnering more support and resources including manpower thereby the potential for future expansion. ISIS has also inspired individuals to carry out attacks

**“ Despite counter-offensives like aerial bombings and ground combat on multiple fronts, ISIS continues to survive and has been able to demonstrate its robust and lethal capabilities with attacks in many countries, even as it continues spreading its influence worldwide. ”**

in their home countries as it become increasingly challenging for foreign recruits to travel to Syria and Iraq. This nevertheless benefits the group in its quest for global expansion.

### Dynamics of ISIS' Expansion

ISIS grew in territories where states failed to govern. This has been mostly the case in Iraq and Syria. As the rulers got entrapped in state-building initiatives (Iraq) or dealing with the chaos induced by Arab Spring (Syria), ISIS was able to grab territory, amass wealth and armaments from all vulnerable sources including oil and natural gas production and distribution systems, financial institutions like banks and even the disbanding Iraqi army. The group also aims to establish more satellites of the Caliphate known as wilayats (governorates or provinces) in other permissive areas across the world. For example, in Afghanistan, poor governance, lax security and fractionalisation of the Taliban after Mullah Omar's death allowed ISIS to grow, where it refers to itself as Wilayat Khorasan. Though Taliban is still the key player in most of Afghanistan, ISIS has occupied the eastern Nangarhar province, adjacent to the tribal areas of Pakistan operating from more than eight

districts in the province and expanding.

Wilayat Khorasan has conducted multiple attacks targeting Hazara Shi'ites and the security forces in Afghanistan and released an array of brutal beheading videos. This group comprises members largely of breakaway factions of the Pakistani Taliban who are based on Afghan soil. The group has expanded further into other parts of Nangarhar in the east, Farah in the north and Helmand in the south in Afghanistan. It also maintains influence in specific parts of Pakistan. ISIS has also been engaged in sporadic clashes with the Taliban, which refuses to acknowledge the former as a stakeholder in the Afghan state. With the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan ISIS is likely to emerge as a formidable force posing a challenge to the Taliban in the mid to long term.

ISIS has also expanded in to Libya. Numerous terrorist groups took roots in the country after Muammar Gaddafi was killed in 2011. Majlis Shura Shabab Al Islam (Islamic Youth Consultative Council) and a faction of Ansar Al Sharia in Libya pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi creating Wilayat Al Barqah, Wilayat Fizzan and Wilayat Al Tarabulus respectively. In addition to consolidating control in the declared provinces, ISIS is likely to expand further. Sirte, a backup capital for ISIS, has become a base for the group's operations, logistics and training.

Similarly, Boko Haram based mainly in northern Nigeria pledged allegiance to Al Baghdadi and subsequently renamed itself Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) also known as Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya. In Algeria, ISIS created Wilayat al-Jazair; in Yemen, Wilayat Sanaa; and in Saudi Arabia, Wilayat al-Haramayn. In addition to mounting attacks in Algeria, ISIS conducted and claimed attacks against the Houthis in the Yemeni provinces of Lahij, Aden, Abyan, Shabwah, Sa'ada, Sana'a, Ibb, Taiz, al-Jawf, al-Bayda, and Hadramawt. On 20 March 2015, ISIS targeted two Zaydi mosques in Sana'a and a government facility in Sa'ada killing 137 and injuring 345.

ISIS also seeks to attack Saudi Arabia to take control of Islam's two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina before attacking Israel to take control of Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem - the third holiest site in Islam. Calling for the overthrow of the House of Saud, ISIS has carried out attacks in Saudi Arabia's Najd and Hejaz provinces and likely to target the ruling family in

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Saudi Arabia.

In June 2015, ISIS proclaimed Wilayat Qawqas in northern Caucasus under the leadership of Abu Muhammad Al Qadari. The terrorist groups in the four out of six sub-divisions that come under Al Qaeda's Islamic Emirates of the Caucasus have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Moreover, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, an Egyptian militant group that pledged allegiance to Al Baghdadi in 2014, creating Islamic State of Iraq and Levant - Sinai Province or ISIL-SP (Wilayat Sayna), bombed the Russian airliner killing 224 on 31 October 2015. The attack was carried out in retaliation to the Russian support for the Assad regime and bombing of ISIS positions in Syria.



## Mapping the Threat in to the Future

A number of issues characterise the future trajectory of the threat. First, despite losing territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS will continue to attempt to expand into parts of Africa, Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus and Asia. ISIS is actively recruiting in western Balkans, including Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro. Similarly, ISIS is recruiting in Southeast Asia with the intention of declaring a Wilayat either in Eastern Indonesia or southern Philippines. In 2015, Bahrun Naim from ISIS external operations wing issued instructions to Southeast Asian groups to attack both domestic and coalition targets. With recruitment of Chinese Muslims, ISIS is likely to declare a Wilayat in Western China where a large number of Uighur recruits and their families from Xinjiang have joined ISIS though some have also joined its rival group - Jabhat al Nusra which is an Al Qaeda affiliate.

Second, using its newly constituted external operations wing staffed by foreign fighters, ISIS will attempt attacks including spectaculars like 9/11 in the countries which, either individually or jointly are in offensive against the group in Iraq and Syria. The November 2015 Paris attacks demonstrated ISIS' capability to collaborate with locals to strike overseas. The Paris-template, a copycat version of the attacks in Mumbai in India in November 2008, is likely to be repeated in a number of countries.

Third, online activity will continue to garner recruits for ISIS and help it radicalise more Muslims from vulnerable segments all over the world. ISIS ideology of hatred seeks to replace mainstream Islamic teaching among Muslim communities. However, even as about 80 to 90 percent of social media sites transmitting ISIS propaganda are hosted on U.S. and European servers, lack of political will and clear strategy have failed the governments and their agencies from counter-messaging, taking down ISIS platforms and degrading ISIS' strategic communication and information capabilities.

Fourth, without unanimity and unity among the countries, offensives against ISIS will continue to be ad-hoc and ineffective. Until now cooperation at the strategic level and coordination of operations beyond exchange of information and intelligence has eluded the countries fighting ISIS or being affected by its atrocities.

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Last but not the least, refugees and asylum seekers from conflict zones to the West are susceptible to ISIS' message. ISIS is likely to exploit them to target its enemies in the countries that the refugees are flocking to in large numbers. Unfortunately countries involved do not have effective policies and plans of action to mitigate the humanitarian crisis arising out of the outflow of refugees in such a large number.

## Responding to the Threats

Today, ISIS presents a four dimensional threat to most governments - ISIS Core in Syria and Iraq, ISIS Branches, ISIS Global and ISIS online. Countering these threats requires both conventional combat strategies including boots on the ground and creation of new capabilities especially those involving communication management to produce and disseminate counter narratives against radical messages. It also involves community engagement. More specifically, these capabilities include expanding elite counter terrorism tactical units; increasing the numerical strengths of national security services; developing a robust legal framework on preventive detention; raising dedicated units to police the cyber domain; and an integration of capabilities by shifting from counter- terrorism

cooperation to collaboration. Arguably, the key to dismantling the ISIS core in Iraq, Syria and Libya is increased intelligence-led military operations to kill or capture its leaders, dismantle its support and operational structures, training camps and financial infrastructures. Both special and general purpose forces on the ground, in addition to air campaign, is essential to degrade and destroy ISIS.

Governments must take steps to deny ISIS the opportunity to expand its territorial control. This involves identifying and securing vulnerable areas as a physical deterrent. Building trust among the inhabitants of these areas for their respective governments is equally important. Moreover, tempo of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria created the momentum for the spawning of associated groups outside the primary theatre. In order to break this momentum, it is paramount to focus on both the core area and the satellite provinces and break their nexus.

New executive and legislative tools are necessary to proscribe entities and personalities that advocate, support and participate in ISIS activities. They should be investigated, charged, and prosecuted.

Given ISIS's growing presence in the virtual domain, governments should step up their efforts to prevent extremist and terrorist exploitation of the internet through a robust legal and governance framework. This also requires partnerships with business firms, civil society and community groups. The key to building enduring and effective partnerships lies in complementing the whole-of-government approach with a whole-of-society approach. The strategy is to build and sustain a community of experts including religious scholars to develop and disseminate counter-narratives to the extremist propaganda through the internet, more specifically through the social media to prevent radicalisation. It also involves measures to implement de-radicalisation programmes to rehabilitate those that have already fallen victims to extremist propaganda.

Most importantly, governments, irrespective of whether they are directly affected by the threat and despite political and ideological differences, must put their acts together and present a common front to degrade and destroy ISIS, Al Qaeda and other similar groups. However as mentioned earlier the responses have so far been ad hoc, piecemeal and lacking in cooperation and coordination which have largely been ineffective and often counterproductive.

### **Conclusion**

Terrorism is not new to the world. Throughout the ages it has manifested in many forms most notably from ethno-political and left and right wing terrorism as the predominant source of political violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to its current politico-religious variety spearheaded by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. While the previous versions of political violence could be contained though not eliminated altogether, it is not easy to speculate how and when the current threat can at least be managed. This is due to the peculiar nature of the threat itself – a hybrid with potent mix of distorted religiosity with pseudo politics that moreover does not recognise any constraint in the use of violence.

The world, led by the U.S. fought Al Qaeda and significantly degraded its core capabilities including its core leadership. With ISIS, a newer version of the threat confronts the international community. But it will be naïve to believe that groups like ISIS can overthrow the existing world order. ISIS has sustained itself so far due mostly to inaction or ineffective response.

Notwithstanding the current capabilities of these groups there are key vulnerabilities like territorial control and increasing revulsion among the Muslims themselves due to extreme brutality and barbarism by these groups that the governments can exploit. On a positive note, a consensus of sorts is slowly emerging among the countries involved with regard to the strategy to deal with ISIS, especially with the Vienna plan and its aftermath though it is difficult to speculate on its implementation. But there is no substitute to a multi-pronged and multi-national response to the type of threat that groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS pose against humanity.

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# Indonesia

Muh Taufiqurrohman

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Throughout 2015, Indonesia continued to experience militancy and a steady growth of supporters for the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), particularly in the provinces of East Java, Lampung in Sumatra, South, West and Central Sulawesi. The Indonesian government, especially the police, as well as Shi'ite, Buddhist and Christian communities, remained the main targets of terrorist attacks. Detachment 88, Indonesia's counter-terrorism unit, made at least 57 arrests and killed some five members of the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) – an ISIS-linked terrorist group led by Santoso operating out of Poso.

## Major Players

On 14 January 2016, a team of four men armed with explosions and guns carried out a terrorist attack on an affluent shopping area on MH Thamrin Street in Central Jakarta. The attacks killed eight people, including the four attackers and four civilians, and injured at least 24 others. The attackers were all killed following a rapid counter attack conducted by Indonesian police. ISIS claimed responsibility for this attack, saying that it had sent its fighters to kill Indonesian police and foreigners whom ISIS viewed as being a part of the crusader coalition. This was the first major attack in the country targeting foreigners after the July 2009 hotel bombings in Jakarta. One of the attackers is believed to be Afif alias Sunakim, a student of Aman Abdurrahman, ISIS' spiritual leader who is based in Indonesia. The others include Muhamad Ali, Ahmad Muhazan bin Saroni and Dian Joni Kurniadi. Bahrun Naim, the mastermind of the attack, is believed to be in Syria.



In 2015, Indonesian authorities foiled a number of attacks, including a planned bombing on 17 August 2015 in Central Java. Unfortunately, Indonesian authorities failed to prevent the killings of three civilians in Central Sulawesi in September 2015. These attacks were encouraged by ISIS leaders or directed by Indonesians fighting for ISIS in Syria. Police believe that the foiled Central Java bombing in particular was funded and directed by Bahrun Naim of ISIS' external operations wing.

The attacks were targeted at the Pasar Kliwon police precinct, a church, and a Confucian temple in Solo. The assailants intended to bring chaos in the province during Indonesia's Independence Day festival. The motivations for the attacks and killings so far appear to be linked to a combination of factors, including the Indonesian police crackdown on suspected terrorists, and ISIS supporters' perceived oppression and persecution of Muslims.

Despite these attempts and attacks, the capability of ISIS supporters to launch large-scale attacks appears to be limited. As evidenced in the case of the foiled bomb attack in Central Java in August, the perpetrators had learned to make rudimentary bombs following instructions on a website. Nonetheless, this has not deterred ISIS supporters in Indonesia from preparing for attacks in the future.

In October 2015, ISIS supporters reportedly conducted military training sessions for some 71 men in the Bogor area, West Java. Given present trends, ISIS supporters will remain the likely perpetrators of terrorist attacks in Indonesia – although these attacks may be limited in terms of scale and scope. The Indonesian police, Christian, Shi'ite and Buddhist communities will continue to remain the primary targets of these attacks, together with the U.S. and other countries that are involved in airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Additionally, the Syrian conflict continues to inspire interest in militant jihad among Indonesian ISIS supporters. A handful of these, when arrested, told the police about their interest to link up with MIT militants based in Poso. The majority of these supporters prefer moving to Poso than to Syria due to the geographical proximity and costs of migrating to Poso as compared to Syria.

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Finally, ISIS supporters in East Java, West Nusa Tenggara and South Sulawesi have established a network of support among the locals in Poso with safe houses and other logistics. As such, this has enabled them to move into Poso to provide MIT with the manpower and financial support.

### **Tactics and Targets**

The grouping of its supporters into public and private fronts, the frequent changing of the group's name, the use of sophisticated communication platforms, and the recruitment of women for logistical support – constituted some of the key tactics employed by ISIS supporters in Indonesia in 2015. This reflects a shift from 2014, when ISIS supporters openly expressed their support for ISIS even on social media platforms.

Support for ISIS in Indonesia has manifested itself on two fronts, both publicly and privately. The public front, which gathers around an organisation called *Panitia Bersama Pembela dan Pendukung Khilafah* (the Joint Committee of Caliphate Defenders and Supporters), advertises itself as a moderate Islamic organisation. In contrast, the private front is centred on a group called *Junud Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara* (the Army of the State in the Archipelago).

*Junud Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara* conducts secret meetings, military trainings, and has been involved in planning attacks. Its members have also been drafting plans to migrate to Syria.

ISIS supporters in Indonesia have frequently united under different names to evade detection by authorities. In 2014, ISIS supporters mostly gathered under the banner of the *Forum Komunikasi Aktivis Syariat Islam* (the Forum of Activist for Islamic Sharia/FAKSI) and *Umat Islam Nusantara* (Islamic Community in the Archipelago). In 2015, when the Indonesian police began arresting prominent figures of these two groups, ISIS supporters changed the group's name to *Forum Komunikasi Dunia Islam* (the Communication Forum of Islamic World/FKDI).

The FKDI, led by Syamsudin Uba, a Bekasi-based ISIS preacher, changed its name to *Panitia Bersama Pembela dan Pendukung Khilafah* and came under the collective leadership of Syamsudin Uba, Fauzan Al Anshari, Nanang Ainur Rofiq, Abu Nusaybah, Abu Mush'ab, Abu Abdillah and Anwar. In addition to that, ISIS supporters also refer to themselves as *Anshor Khilafah* (Helpers of the Caliphate), *Anshor Daulah Indonesia* (Indonesian Helpers of the Islamic State) and *Anshor Daulah Nusantara* (Helpers of the Islamic State in the Archipelago).

There has also been a noticeable shift in ISIS supporters' preferred mode of communication. In 2014, ISIS supporters mostly used online forums, as well as social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In 2015, ISIS supporters have shifted to the use of mobile messaging application services ranging from Blackberry Messenger, WhatsApp to Telegram.

Harnessing encrypted platforms for communication has enabled ISIS supporters to evade detection by authorities – a lesson that they learnt from the mistakes of Indonesian jihadists who exposed themselves in the past to the police by communicating openly through Facebook. ISIS supporters share religious teaching, intelligence and military training materials via *Daulah Islamiyah Baqiyyah*, a WhatsApp chat group and *Wa Iddu*, a Telegram chat group.

In addition, compared to 2014 in which men were involved heavily in running ISIS networks in Indonesia, in 2015, women within the community

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of ISIS supporters in Indonesia played important managerial and logistical roles. The women are also responsible for providing logistics and for assisting ISIS supporters with organising gatherings and fundraising activities on the ground. In January 2015, police arrested the wife of a Poso-based ISIS supporter and member of the MIT who was reportedly assisting MIT's military training participants.

### Internal Conflicts

Despite a relatively strong facade, the community of ISIS supporters in Indonesia appear to be beset by internal divisions, mostly stemming from power struggles and security-related paranoia; sources of which may serve to drive the groups apart.

The divisions and dissensions have divided ISIS supporters into several factions. The various factions are unable to come to an agreement on attack strategy and thus are incapable of successfully executing any large scale attacks so far. The growth of mistrust and suspicion among the ISIS supporters may bring about further divisions among ISIS supporters.

### **Flow of Indonesians into Syria**

Despite the efforts of the Indonesian police and the Turkish government, ISIS supporters in Indonesia continue to go to Syria. According to an estimate by the Indonesian National Police, at least 384 Indonesians have joined ISIS so far, with 70 of them having returned to Indonesia. Some of these returnees, such as Afif Abdul Majid, have been arrested and sentenced to four years imprisonment. However, he was sentenced not for joining ISIS but for his involvement with other terrorism activities, including the 2010 Aceh military camp. Some others, like Syamsudin Uba, live freely and continue to recruit people for ISIS. This has been a major weakness in Indonesia's criminal justice system and a significant security concern from a counter-terrorism perspective. Moreover, ISIS supporters have managed to circumvent restrictions through discussions on group chats on mobile messaging applications to disseminate tips for evading the Indonesian police's monitoring and surveillance and the Turkish security apparatus' screening or ambush.

### **Looking Ahead**

The flow of Indonesians to Syria highlights the rise in ISIS supporters and the need for the Indonesian government to take further steps to deter and disrupt existing ISIS supporters and would-be ISIS supporters. The emergence of groups with new names reflect the need for the Indonesian government to shift away from targeting extremists in Indonesia using a group-based approach to targeting extremists at the individual level. The fact that women have increasingly become involved in terrorist activities in the country also reinforces the need for intervention; from both the Indonesian government and by the society at large.

The presence and activities of ISIS supporters indicate the need for close monitoring and surveillance brought about by the mobilisation of security resources and the transferability of such resources towards a national database. Ideally, this database should be shared among security agencies and immigration office so as to facilitate the enforcement of restrictions on persons linked to ISIS and to prevent those planning to plot terrorist attacks from entering.

More importantly, as violent radicalisation remains a key challenge for the country, the Indonesian government and parliament should start working together to pass legislations regulating the laws against speech and narratives that lead to exclusivist practices, including justifications for the killings of those with a different belief system.

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# Malaysia

Stefanie Kam and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin

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In 2015, Malaysian authorities foiled a handful of terrorist plots to the country and detained at least eight militants under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 on their return from the Middle East. Individuals with links to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), and those with groups linked to Al Qaeda, continue to present a grave security concern for Malaysia.

## **2015: Trends and Developments in Malaysia**

In 2015, the detention and arrests of suspects returning from the Syrian conflict were of particular importance for Malaysia. In December, Malaysian police detained a 19-year-old Malaysian student at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The suspect, who was studying at a university in Cairo, Egypt, had joined Jund al Aqsa, an Al Qaeda-linked group, in 2014, after contacting cell members through Facebook. He was believed to have travelled from Cairo to Turkey, then onwards to Syria where he was trained to use weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, anti-tank weapons. He was among one of eight militants to have been detained by the police on their return. The other seven suspects had been charged, and two were already serving sentences.

Malaysia also arrested five suspects, four of which were foreign nationals. These included a 44-year-old European who had links with Al Qaeda and allegedly participated in militant activities in Afghanistan and Bosnia. Three other suspects – a 31-year-old Indonesian, a Malaysian and a Bangladeshi were part of a cell linked to ISIS tasked with recruiting volunteers to take part in militant activities overseas.

In addition, Malaysian courts charged a 39-year-old Indonesian national, Hani Yahya Assagaf, for possessing items related to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). He is also a suspect in the plot to attack the U.S. embassy and the tourist hotspot Jalan Alor in Kuala Lumpur.

The penetration of militant jihad influences within the country's security apparatus has also become a matter of serious concern. Amid reports that a number of Malaysian Special Forces were found to be ISIS sympathisers, a number of civil servants were also detained by Malaysian authorities for links to Tandzim al Qaeda (a group inspired by Al Qaeda) and ISIS. The men, aged between 22 and 36, were nabbed in simultaneous operations in the states of Selangor, Johor and Perak.

In June 2015, there were reports suggesting that Malaysian extremists were working with foreign jihadists based in the Philippines' Mindanao region. One of the jihadists was reportedly from the Malaysian Special Forces, and working with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). The men were suspected to be linked to ISIS through one of the ASG's members. The presence of foreign terrorists, including Malaysians, in Sulu and Basilan, was confirmed by the Philippines' Armed Forces Public Affairs Office chief, Lt. Col. Harold Cabunoc. In August 2015, Malaysian police stated that they had arrested and were investigating 10 Malaysians – six of which were from Malaysian security services – for links to ISIS.

Evidence of human smuggling networks assisting ISIS in their radicalisation, recruitment and training efforts in the region, especially in Malaysia, have also surfaced in recent times. In September 2015, the head of Indonesia's national counter-terrorism agency warned that ISIS is working with people-smuggling networks to bring foreign fighters from Malaysia to Sumatra and then to Poso in Central Sulawesi.

Against this backdrop, a number of training camps being used by the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) are based in the Poso area. In addition, ISIS is also suspected to have used the area as a training ground for its militants. Malaysia also issued a number of arrest warrants for Malaysians who were alleged to have facilitated the movement of the suspects of the August 17 2015 Erawan Shrine attack in the Thai capital of Bangkok, which killed at least 22

**“ In all, these developments – sympathisers within the Malaysian security apparatus; evidence of links between ISIS-linked individuals in Malaysia with people smuggling networks; and the involvement of Malaysians in combat activity – suggests that the threat of terrorism to Malaysia remains dynamic and complex. ”**

people and left more than a hundred others injured. Furthermore, there has been increased evidence of Malaysians in ISIS-held areas in positions ranging from janitorial and guard posts to combat ranks – serving as snipers, bomb makers and suicide bombers.

In October 2015, Malaysia's counter-terrorism director Ayub Khan stated that ISIS was relying on Malaysians “to carry out strike missions against several key structures in Iraq... in a bid to reclaim territory in Iraq that government forces had taken over.” In the same month, there were reports that three Malaysians – Zid Saharani Mohamed Esa, Muhamad Syazani Mohd Salim and Fadzly Ariff Zainal Ariff – had been killed in Iraq while carrying out special operations for ISIS. To date, at least 14 Malaysians fighting alongside ISIS with various militant groups have been killed in both Syria and Iraq.

In all, these developments – sympathisers within the Malaysian security apparatus; evidence of links between ISIS-linked individuals in Malaysia with people smuggling networks; and the involvement of Malaysians in combat activity – suggests that the threat of terrorism to Malaysia remains dynamic and complex.

Furthermore, the continued appeal of ISIS' Malay Archipelago combat unit the Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyyah (The Malay Archipelago Unit of the Islamic State), established in 2014 and comprising mainly Indonesian and Malaysian nationals, has sparked concerns that alliances and friendships formed in Syria and Iraq could be exploited by the fighters to stage attacks in the Southeast Asian region.

### **Online Radicalisation, Recruitment and Fundraising**

The existence of extremist websites and social media platforms has also led to an increase in radicalisation, recruitment and funding of terrorist activity. Individuals in Malaysia have been arrested for their roles in promoting, recruiting and financing trips to Syria.

On 25 May 2015, Malaysia's Home Minister informed the Parliament that the Malaysian police was stepping up efforts to monitor social media sites for possible terrorist activities. The announcement came after it was revealed that seventy-five percent of Malaysian ISIS militants were recruited through social media. Since 2008, online extremist narratives in support of the use of violence have played an important role in the radicalisation and recruitment of Malaysians, and Southeast Asia has seen a rise in such content in the online domain.

In an ASPI-RSIS joint report released in 2008, it was stated that there were some 117 extremist websites, most of them in Bahasa Indonesia on the internet. Currently, there are at least 1,000 such sites in Bahasa Indonesia and Malay language ranging from pro-ISIS, non-ISIS and anti-ISIS leanings.

The Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) has detected between 70 and 90 websites and blogs and at least 500 social media accounts in Bahasa Indonesia. The Malaysian Police is reported to have identified 500 pro-ISIS Malaysian social media accounts.

## **“ Individuals in Malaysia have been arrested for their roles in promoting, recruiting and financing trips to Syria. ”**

Some notable examples of recruiters in Malaysia include the infamous Dr. Sham, also known as Green Bird of Jannah. Dr. Sham maintained an active online presence until mid-2015, when she ceased posting on her Tumblr and Twitter online pages. Another is the account of Malaysian fighter Akel Zainal who had reportedly recruited a Malaysian female named Syamimi Faiqah on Facebook. Syamimi Faiqah later travelled to Syria to marry Akel Zainal.

A prominent example of a Malaysian militant with a social media presence is Mohd Lotfi Ariffin, a former Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) leader and Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) member who subsequently travelled to Syria to join Afnad al Sham, a group which adheres to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. When Mohd Lotfi Ariffin first started out, he was able to garner around 27,000 followers on Facebook.

Authorities have also detected traces of fundraising elsewhere by extremist groups and individuals in promoting, recruiting and financing trips to Syria. When faced with challenges travelling to Syria, individuals have sought donations online. These pleas are commonly made through more private communication platforms such as telegram or via private messages on Facebook. In April 2015, some Malaysian militants were also observed to have solicited donations through social media.

### **Malaysian Response**

In September 2015, the Prevention of Terrorist Act (POTA) was put into effect to strengthen Malaysia's counter-terrorism legislative mechanisms. Since February 2013, Malaysian authorities have arrested 123 suspected militants, including 106 Malaysians, 12 Indonesians and two Iraqis.

The Malaysian government has been careful not to create unnecessary alarm with regards to the increasing signs of interest in ISIS across the country. For instance, in October 2015, ISIS flags were sighted in several states in Malaysia, including Perak, Terengganu, Kedah and Selangor. To avoid generating panic, Malaysia's Bukit Aman Special Branch Counter Terrorism Division head, Datuk Ayub Khan was quick to dispute concerns about these flags, adding that the Malaysian authorities have been closely monitoring the situation, especially regarding the recruitment of Malaysians by ISIS.

With Malaysian security forces stepping up efforts to disrupt terrorist attacks, so far, none of alleged plotters have been able to carry out terrorist attacks in the country. Nevertheless, the vigilance of the Malaysian security forces was put to the test several times this year. For instance, in March 2015, in a one-minute video posted on a YouTube Channel 'ISIS Malaysia 69', a group of four masked men threatened to set Malaysian courthouses on fire. In April 2015, 17 suspected militants were detained for allegedly plotting to carry out terrorist acts in the country's capital city, Kuala Lumpur. In September 2015, police in Kuala Lumpur arrested three men – a Syrian, a Malaysian and an Indonesian – for their alleged links to ISIS. According to official accounts, these plots have involved returnee fighters from Syria and Iraq, members of the security forces, and foreign nationals.

The ability of Malaysian authorities to successfully thwart the said attacks highlights the robustness of the security apparatus in the country. However, this has not stopped ISIS from maintaining an active online presence, with the aim of carrying out radicalisation, recruitment and fundraising activities in the country and the region.

### Looking Ahead

Based on recent assessments, Malaysia faces a moderate threat of terrorism in the coming years. However, it should continue to exercise caution and remain vigilant in mitigating threats to public safety.

Given evidence that Malaysian and Indonesian suspects have collaborated in attempts to recruit individuals for ISIS, Malaysian authorities should continue to remain cautious about signs of an evolving threat of terrorism in the country as well as in the region. Continued regional collaboration and cooperation and increased surveillance and intelligence-sharing, particularly among Malaysia's neighbours, will be needed to counter the threat from both the physical and online domains. In the long-term, there is a need for sustained efforts by the civil society to mount public education campaigns and outreach efforts both online and on the ground, so as to discredit extremist ideologies and to mitigate the threat from ISIS' virulent propaganda and its likes.

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# Myanmar

Iftekharul Bashar

For Myanmar, the year 2015 was significant especially with the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the representatives of eight Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) and the government. Nevertheless, Myanmar faces threats from other major EAGs, particularly in Kachin and Shan state that are not part of the NCA and continue the fight against the government. Besides the ethnic conflict, inter-religious tensions mar the country's social fabric besides rendering it a victim of extremism and radicalisation. There is evidence that terrorist groups like Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) are exploiting the religious tensions in Myanmar for their own gains. Resolving the ethnic conflicts in the country, and managing the threat associated with the issue of terrorism, extremism and rising inter-religious tensions will be the key challenge for Myanmar's new government under the National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

## **Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement**

On 15 October 2015, the Myanmar government and eight ethnic armed groups signed a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The NCA aims to end internal conflicts, some older than the modern state of Myanmar itself, and pave the way for political dialogue on long-standing ethnic issues. Myanmar has at least 18 EAGs in the country mostly in its periphery bordering China and Thailand.

EAGs differ greatly in size, capability and in their relation with the central government but all claim to champion the rights of their respective ethnic

minorities. These groups control territory and provide basic services to the respective populations and rely mostly on taxation, extortion, illicit trade and resource exploitation to generate revenue. Some groups in Kachin and Shan states derive revenue from illegal drug sales while others have investments in legitimate businesses. While claiming to fight for democratic ideals and minority rights, EAGs have been accused of forcible recruitment, oppressing other ethnic minorities, and various other illegal activities.

The groups that signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement comprise the following: All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF); Arakan Liberation Party (ALP); Chin National Front (CNF); Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA-5); Karen National Union (KNU), KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC); Pa-O National Liberation Organisation (PNLO) and Shan state Army – South/ Restoration Council of Shan State (SSA-S / RCSS). However, 10 other EAGs did not sign the NCA, though six of these have already signed separate ceasefire agreements with the government.

As of November 2015, five EAGs are fighting with the central government: Shan state Army – North (SSA-N/ SSPP); the Kachin Independence Army (KIA); the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA); the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Arakan Army (AA). Although the SSA-N/SSPP have a ceasefire agreement with the government, clashes have intensified since October 2015.

The United Wa State Army, believed to be the largest and best equipped of the country's armed ethnic groups, did not sign the NCA. The Kachin Independence Organisation, which controls vast areas of Kachin state in Myanmar's northeast, is also not part of the peace process. The group's armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army, has clashed regularly with the Myanmar military since 2011, after a 17-year ceasefire between the two collapsed.

### Challenges to NCA

One of the major issues for signing of the NCA by all EDAs has been the differences regarding the inclusiveness of the negotiating sides. The government has refused to recognise six EAGs as potential signatories to the NCA: the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA); the Arakan

**“ The United Wa State Army, believed to be the largest and best equipped of the country's armed ethnic groups, did not sign the NCA. ”**

Army (AA); the Arakan National Congress (ANC); the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA); the Wa National Organisation (WNO) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU). However, it has stated that the TNLA may be included in the NCA if it signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement first. This has hampered negotiations as the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) insists on a unified negotiating position. Complicating the matter further, the powerful UWSA, which is not a part of the NCCT, has demanded for the negotiations to be inclusive.

The other major challenge is to bring the Kachin Independence Army back on board. Both sides have met numerous times to discuss ceasefires, but these efforts have backfired due to recurrence of violence and counter measures. The Kachin conflict has raised doubts on the military's commitment to peaceful resolution of conflicts, and has made other EAGs, regardless of ceasefire status, less confident of the negotiations. The large humanitarian toll from the Kachin conflict – including high profile incidents such as the rape and murder to teachers, has made the Kachins less amenable to ceasefire offers.

In the past, ceasefires were often fragile and prone to being violated. Therefore, the current NCA process is not seen by many EAGs as definitive and may undermine the entire effort especially due to factionalism within the EAGs themselves. The Myanmar army, also known as Tatmadaw, has also been frequently seen as violating the terms of the ceasefire. In January 2013, the KIA alleged the Tatmadaw of ignoring President Thein Sein's calls for a ceasefire.

Moreover, while many EAGs have tried to stand behind a united banner, a many have experienced repeated divisions over matters such as personality clashes and interactions with the government. Based on past occurrences, disgruntled commanders or units can easily split away and raise their own outfit, to either negotiate for a ceasefire with the government or to renege on an existing deal. Nonetheless, the NCA is considered as a critical step in a long process of building durable peace in the country. Although criticised for its lack of inclusiveness, the current effort represents the closest Myanmar has ever been to ending the chronic and complex conflicts in the country.

### Conflict in Kokang

In February 2015, Myanmar Army launched an operation in Kokang in northern Shan state of Myanmar. From February to May 2015, clashes erupted between the Myanmar Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The MNDAA was created in 1989 after the disintegration of the Communist Party Burma (CPB) and was one of the first CPB breakaway groups to sign a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the then military regime. MNDAA's position changed in 2009 when it came under pressure by the Myanmar government to transform into paramilitary border guard forces under the command of Myanmar army. MNDAA reportedly uses child soldiers in the conflict.

On 13 March 2015, a bomb explosion at a sugar cane field in Lincang, China, killed four and wounded nine others. The Chinese government demanded a full investigation into the attack. Myanmar government issued a formal apology to China acknowledging the cross-border bombing. According to Myanmar's military intelligence, MNDAA forces are being supported by former Chinese soldiers recruited as mercenaries. China has denied the allegation. On 27 December 2015, three people were killed and another three injured after a mine blast explosion in Chin Swe Haw town, in northern Shan state's Laukkai district. According to some reports officials found another improvised explosive device (IED) near the scene of the first blast that however failed to detonate.

### General Elections 2015

On 8 November 2015, Myanmar held its first national election since a nominal civilian

**“ According to Myanmar’s military intelligence, MNDAA forces are being supported by former Chinese soldiers recruited as mercenaries. China has denied the allegation. ”**

government was introduced in 2011, ending nearly 50 years of military rule. Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory in the general elections. The election was generally seen as free and fair even though it could not held in some areas due to clashes between EAGs and the Myanmar army. An eight-member committee has been set up to facilitate the transfer of power from the current Myanmar government to the NLD. It is now generally held that a smooth transition of power in Nyi Pyi Taw is vital not only for Myanmar overall transition to democracy and economic growth but also for resolving the numerous conflicts within the country.

### Threat of Transnational Terrorism

Myanmar faces a growing threat from transnational terrorist groups. Anti-Muslim violence and hate speech in its western, central and regions are the key factors behind the radicalisation of a vulnerable section of the Muslim minority. Propaganda materials by Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) repeatedly feature the humiliation and plight of the Muslim minority.

Though these groups are primarily interested in the Rohingyas or Arakani Muslims, other Muslims living in central and north-eastern areas of Myanmar as well as Myanmar Muslim refugees and diaspora overseas are also likely targets for their radicalisation and recruitment efforts.



In September 2015, ISIS revealed its plan to expand in South Asia by establishing a base in Bangladesh. According to the twelfth issue of ISIS' magazine Dabiq, ISIS intends to establish a base in Bangladesh to use it as a springboard for its expansion in Myanmar.

### Looking Ahead

Myanmar has made steady progress in resolving its ethnic conflicts particularly with the signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. The success of the NCA will depend on its inclusiveness and implementation. Reconciling ethnic differences remains a key challenge for conflict resolution in Myanmar. Although the country has made significant strides in peace and reconciliation since 2011, much more remains to be done to solve the country's chronic problems involving ethnic and religious issues. The success of the peace process in Myanmar will depend on post-NCA initiatives, such as the rehabilitation and reintegration of the members of the ethnic armed groups, equitable economic development across the country, the peaceful negotiation of ethnic minorities' demand for greater political rights, and the creation of an inclusive national identity that will transcend entrenched ethno-religious differences.

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# Philippines

Rohan Gunaratna

From a terrorism perspective, the most significant development in the Philippines in 2015 was the expressions of support by a number of rebel groups for the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). Though political violence and terrorism is not new to the country, the support for ISIS from these groups could significantly alter the dynamics of the threat in the Philippines. At the same time, the peace process with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) is on track and attempts are on foot to restart the negotiations with the Communist Party of the Philippines/ New People's Army (CPP-NPA), while the capability of groups like Abu Sayyaf Group and others like the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and Rajah Suleiman Movement (RSM) has been significantly degraded.

## Overview of the Terrorist Threat in the Philippines

Unlike other countries in Southeast Asia, the Philippines faces a complex terrorist threat. For a long time, the Moro conflict has taken centre-stage, although the conflict remained largely contained due to a peace deal with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996 and an ongoing peace process with the MILF, which is likely to lead to a negotiated settlement scheduled in 2016. However, groups like ASG, RSM, and BIFF – a breakaway faction of MILF – and the CPP-NPA continues to pose threats to the security of the country albeit in differing magnitude and intensity.

ASG, which has degraded itself to a criminal enterprise despite its radical Islamist rhetoric and alliance with Al Qaeda, continues to carry out extortions and kidnap-for-ransom activities. In 2015, the group kidnapped Malaysians,

Taiwanese, Chinese, and Filipinos from Sabah in Malaysia; Dutch, Germans, Korean, and Filipinos from the Philippines mainland; and a Swiss national from Tawi Tawi in the Sulu Archipelago. While some hostages escaped, others were released after payment of the ransom and others were killed. In November 2015, the group beheaded Malaysian businessman and engineer Bernard Then Ted Fen even after half a million U.S. dollars of ransom was paid. Reports suggest that the hostage was executed by the Abu Sayyaf Group faction led by Idang Susukan in Indanan following a week long deadline given to meet the demand for higher ransom to secure his release. ASG also kidnapped a Canadian, Norwegian and a Filipino in Samal Island on 21 September 2015.

CPP/NPA continues to carry out attacks, particularly against the Philippines troops in the provinces of Sugirao, Compostela Valley and Bukidnon despite a 12-day holiday truce from 23 December 2015 to 3 January 2016.

### ISIS in the Philippines

Over the last two years, ISIS has been working with range of groups in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to build a satellite state in the region. In 2015, ISIS' Ahlus Shura (council) appointed Isnilon Tutoni Hapilon – a senior leader of the ASG – to lead ISIS in the Philippines. Referring to Isnilon Hapilon as "Sheikh Mujahid Abu Abdullah Al-Filipini," Al-Naba, an ISIS official newspaper, also announced the unification of four battalions in the Philippines and the allegiance of their leaders to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The four battalions are Ansar Al-Shariah Battalion with its leader Abu Anas Al-Muhajir; Ma'rakah Al-Ansar Battalion with its leader Abu Ammar; Ansarul Khilafah Battalion with its leader Abu Sharifah and Al Harakatul Islamiyyah, in Basilan.

Al-Naba described Hapilon as "one of the senior figures of the Mujahideen in the Philippines." It added that Hapilon's "jihad against the Crusaders began more than two decades ago when he was a leader" in the Abdurajak Abubakr Janjalani-led ASG. As the Emir (leader) of ASG in Basilan for five years and the deputy leader for six years, ISIS' choice of a highly experienced and a notorious leader to lead an ISIS province in the Philippines presents a long-term threat to the security of the country and the region.

**“ Over the last two years ISIS has been working with range of groups in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to build a satellite state in the region. ”**

At the oath taking event the battalions were represented by Ansar Al-Shariah Battalion leader Abu Anas Al-Muhajir alias Abraham, who is also known as Mohammad bin Najib bin Hussein. Mohammad bin Najib bin Hussein, an engineer and a sundry shop owner, is from Malaysia and his battalion is in charge of laws and matters pertaining to jurisprudence. The other Malaysians – Dr. Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah from the Universiti Malaya and former Selayang Municipal Council employee Muhammad Joraimee Awang Raimee – wanted by the Malaysian police for their involvement in recruitment of Malaysians for ISIS – are believed to be hiding in the southern Philippines. A total of 31 Filipinos and Malaysians and took the oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi during the event which Hapilon presided. Although the leader of the Ma'rakah Al-Ansar Battalion was unable to attend the event, Abu Ammar sent Abu Harith – a former ASG member based in Sulu as a representative. Abu Harith's appearance at the event with other ASG leaders like Talha Tanadjalin, an experienced combat tactician and the brother of Suhud Tanadjani, a sniper trainer for the group could mean a split within the ASG.

Following the pledge of allegiance by the Philippines groups, ISIS released a statement saying that, "The unification of the Mujahideen under one leadership and banner of the Caliphate is seen as a huge threat to the tyrants of the Philippines and is an important step in order to liberate areas in Southeast Asia in general." Emphasising the goal to establish an Islamic caliphate, it further stated, "It has a huge significance in the spreading of tawhid (monotheism) in the region, fighting the

Christians, Buddhists and other polytheists as well as establishing the religion of Allah in this part of the world.”

In October 2015, eight members of Ansarul Khilafah Philippines (AKP) were killed in an encounter with the Philippines national police Sultan Kudarat. AKP is one of the newer groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2014. Police recovered ISIS flags, high-powered firearms and materials for making improvised explosive devices, radio equipment and various documents of high intelligence value from the slain militants. Earlier in August 2014, AKP released statements threatening to deploy suicide bombers in the Philippines and to make the country a “graveyard” for U.S. soldiers. In 2015, an attempt by the group to transport weapons to Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) was disrupted by the Philippine National Police (PNP) working with their Indonesian counterparts. AKP also posted videos expressing their support for ISIS before the Asia Pacific Economic Conference Summit in Manila was held in November 2015, even threatening to disrupt the Summit with attacks.

### Significance of the Philippines for ISIS

For the last two decades, the Philippines has been an important arena for domestic, regional and global terrorist groups. Since 1994, when Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) established their first training camp, Hudaiybiah, the Philippines emerged as the training ground for Indonesians, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Thai Muslims and Arabs. Most of the instructors were non-Filipinos; they were either Indonesians or Arabs trained by Al Qaeda. In addition the Sulu archipelago transforming into a base for training and operations, the area is a strategic bridge linking the Philippines and Malaysia.

Unlike other Southeast Asian countries with a substantial Muslim population, ISIS was unsuccessful in recruiting a significant number of Muslims in the Philippines. The number of Filipino Muslims that travelled to Syria to fight is only a handful but ISIS’ influence grew rapidly among Muslim pockets in the Philippines. ISIS’ influence was harnessed by co-opting rebel groups in the south. However, ISIS’ influence has not been limited to the south; it is also spreading to the north as evidenced from the sale of ISIS-related propaganda materials at the Masjid al-Dahab (The Golden Mosque; Filipino name: Moskeng Ginto) in the predominantly

**“ Unlike other Southeast Asian countries with a substantial Muslim population, ISIS was unsuccessful in recruiting a significant number of Muslims in the Philippines. ”**

Muslim section of the Quiapo district in Metro Manila. ISIS has also been using prominent propagandists and proselytizers like Bilal Philips, to spread its ideology and influence in the Philippines and the region. It could be a matter of time before ISIS sends its explosives experts, tacticians and combat trainers to train the members of the groups and individuals supporting its cause.

### Peace Talks: Challenges Ahead

The Philippines government has been employing a mix of hard and soft power tactics to deal with threats from political violence and terrorism in the country especially involving groups like MNLF, MILF and CPP/NPA. In 1996, Manila signed a peace deal with the MNLF – the largest and most organised separatist group in the country at the time. However, its impact was rather limited not only due to factions within MNLF itself which led to the creation of MILF, but also due to government’s failure to implement the deal.

Now the government has engaged MILF in a structured peace process, which appears to be on a track that could potentially lead to a resolution of one of the longest separatist conflicts in the world. On 27 March 2014, the Government of the Philippines (GOP) and MILF signed the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) to pave the way for an autonomous Bangsamoro region in Mindanao, replacing the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindano (ARMM) established under the 1996 agreement.



Under the CAB, MILF also reconfirmed its commitment to “autonomy” instead of “independence” and agreed to hand over weapons to a jointly determined third party. MILF also agreed to decommission its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Force and integrate the qualified former militants into a police force that would be in charge of the security of the new autonomous region. There was also an agreement on Revenue Generation and Wealth Sharing, Power Sharing, and Normalisation and devolution of resources (taxes, natural resources) in favour of the proposed Bangsamoro Government.

Despite these very positive developments and as Manila works on the modalities to create legal provisions to put the agreements into force which requires amendments to the Philippines constitution, there are some challenges which can't be ignored. There are elements both within and outside of the MILF that are opposed to autonomy instead of separation. A breakaway group of the MILF led by Commander Umbra Kato has formed Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in open opposition to peace talks.

Similarly, the role of the MNLF faction led by Nur Misuari, the former governor of ARRM, has become rather problematic especially after his involvement in August 2013 declaration of independence of a 'Bangsamoro Republik' and in September 2013 the 'Zamboanga City Siege' which saw clashes and heavy casualties. In the meantime however, both MILF and MNLF have agreed to negotiations under 'MILF-MNLF Bangsamoro Coordination Forum' (BCF), brokered by the Organisation on Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The idea is to find a common ground between 1996 Final Peace Agreement with the MNLF and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the MILF and to coordinate the efforts of MILF and MNLF towards achieving a political solution to the Moro conflict.

The government has also initiated talks with the communist insurgents under the umbrella of the National Democratic Front (NDF). A number of issues however remain to be resolved including Joint Agreement on Safety and Immunity Guarantees (JASIG) and the release of detained NPA leaders and social and economic reforms under the Comprehensive Agreement of Social and Economic Reforms (CASER). The CPP/NPA accuses GOP of lacking in sincerity to engage in

**“ The Government of Philippines has made significant gains by engaging the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) through engagement in a peace process that appears to be progressing well. ”**

meaningful negotiations with the groups.

#### Looking Ahead

The Government of Philippines has made significant gains by engaging the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) through engagement in a peace process that appears to be progressing well. With a resumption of talks with the CPP/ NPA rebels, it may also be possible to neutralise the communist threat in the country.

However, Manila's efforts to deal with the ISIS threat appear to be ad-hoc and inadequate. Despite evidence to the contrary, the government continues to be in a denial mode about the spread of ISIS threat in the country. For example, when eight members of AKP were arrested by the Philippines police in October 2015 with ISIS flag and propaganda materials, the government insisted that there was no confirmed links of these elements to ISIS, that AKP is rather a bandit group “engaged in criminal activities” and that the government had found no credible threat in the country from ISIS.

However, by forging a merger among diverse militant factions in the Philippines, ISIS now presents a new challenge to Manila, which, if left ignored, could come at a huge cost to the security of the country. Arguably, the professionalism of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and other branches of the government, including its intelligence apparatus, has kept the country free from major terrorist attacks so far.

But it would be foolhardy for the government to be complacent and ignore the emerging threats from groups like Al Qaeda which had significant traction on the local groups and ISIS, which is gaining in its influence by displacing Al Qaeda very rapidly. Apart from a robust military response against militancy which Manila has already demonstrated against traditional groups in the country, it is necessary to invest in halting the spread of radical ideology propounded by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS.

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# Thailand

**Stefanie Kam and Vikram Rajakumar**

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In 2015, Thailand continued to be embattled by domestic political problems and the separatist insurgency in the southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, Songkhla and Pattani. On 17 August 2015, Bangkok experienced a devastating terrorist attack at the Erawan Shrine, with at least 22 deaths and injuries to 125. Attempts by the Thai government to revive peace talks have made little progress, due to ongoing violence in the south and internal differences among major insurgent groups.

## **Thailand's Southern Insurgency**

This year, southern Thailand experienced sporadic bomb and gun attacks targeting security forces, defence volunteers and civilians, including Buddhist monks and local village chiefs. In all, attacks this year were carried out with rudimentary weapons, using small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and hand grenades. These attacks appear to have been triggered by increased crackdowns and the Thai government's curtailing of freedoms in the south. The sporadic and uncoordinated attacks however, have reinforced the perception that the violence in the south has been the handiwork of an insurgent movement operating amorously, rather than by groups with a central command and control. While the insurgency in the south is rooted in the Malay nationalist resistance to Thai rule, the current wave of violence can be traced back to 2004, when militants killed four soldiers and stole more than 400 small arms in a raid on an army base in Narathiwat province, forcing the military to respond. The intractability of the current conflict is compounded by the inadequacy of the response by previous as well as successive Thai

Governments in addressing entrenched grievances as experienced by the Malay-Muslim community.

## Key Developments in 2015

### *ISIS Presence in Thailand*

While Thailand's southern insurgency is confined to the south, recent indications may potentially challenge this assertion, in light of evidence that jihadist elements have penetrated the country. For instance, in late November 2015, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) reportedly informed Thai police about the entry of 10 Syrians linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) into Thailand. According to the FSB, the Syrians entered the country in October 2015 potentially to target Russian interests and were planning attacks during the Christmas and New Year period. The presence of ISIS-linked militants was a first in the country which had remained relatively immune from ISIS activity up till now. It highlighted the relative ease by which militants from the Middle East, including those with ISIS, could trespass into Southeast Asia to mount attacks, or to radicalise, recruit and promote extremist and terrorist activity.

### *Human Trafficking Networks*

One of the major concerns for Thailand has been the flow of refugees, mostly Rohingyas, from Myanmar and Uighurs from China's Xinjiang province. Though most of these refugees are coming to Thailand mainly with the purpose of crossing over to Malaysia, Indonesia and even to some countries in the Middle East, their movement exposes the existence of organised human smuggling networks in Thailand and in the region. In August 2015, Narathiwat immigration officials detained a member of a human trafficking network and five Myanmar nationals who planned to sneak into Malaysia. In Thailand's battle against human smuggling, several high-profile government officials have also been implicated. For instance, in June this year, Thailand arrested Lt General Manas Kongpaen, a senior Army advisor for his role in the Rohingya trafficking network in southern Thailand.

### *Siam Paragon blasts and attack at Criminal Court*

On 1 February 2015, two bomb blasts took place outside the Siam Paragon Mall in Bangkok,

**“ One of the major concerns for Thailand has been the flow of refugees, mostly Rohingyas, from Myanmar and Uighurs from China's Xinjiang province... their movement exposes organised human smuggling networks in Thailand and in the region. ”**

resulting in one injury. Two low intensity steel pipe-bombs were hidden behind electric controls on the elevated walkway and were set on timers. The March 2015 attack at the Criminal Court was caused by a grenade explosion and attributed to radical 'Red Shirt' supporters of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, although no injuries were reported.

### *Erawan Shrine Bombing*

On 17 August 2015, a bomb explosion at the Hindu-Buddhist Erawan Shrine in the Thai capital of Bangkok killed 22 people, including Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean, Chinese, Thai, Taiwanese and Hong Kong nationals. Compared to bomb attacks carried out in the past in Bangkok, which have been mainly low intensity IEDs, investigations revealed that the device used for this attack comprised of three kilogrammes of TNT and ball bearings to ensure high casualties. There was a second explosion on 18 August 2015. Witnesses reported seeing an explosive device thrown from the Thaksin Bridge at the Sathorn Pier, a busy transport hub along the Chao Phraya River used by both locals and tourists alike. However, there were no casualties.

On 28 August 2015, Thai authorities detained and charged a 28-year-old Turkish man named Adem Karadag, also known as Bilal Mohammed, in connection with the first attack on 17 August 2015.

On 1 September 2015, a suspect named Yusuf Mieraili was arrested near the Thai-Cambodian border. The suspect was holding a Chinese passport, with his birthplace listed as Xinjiang. Mieraili admitted to charges of illegal possession of explosives in connection with the 17 August 2015 bombings. During the police re-enactment, Mieraili had handed the bag to a man wearing a yellow T-shirt. Surveillance images obtained from a closed-circuit television (CCTV) in the vicinity of the Erawan Shrine showed the man in yellow T-shirt placing the backpack at the shrine just minutes before the explosion. On 8 September 2015, Thai police issued another arrest warrant for 27-year-old Abudurehman Abudeusataer alias Ishan from the Xinjiang region. Ishan was believed to have been the mastermind of the attack. According to one report, after the attack he left for Abu Dhabi transiting through Dhaka (Bangladesh) and New Delhi (India).

The primary motivation for the attack was the Thai government's battle against human smuggling networks, although other reports had pointed to the Thai government's deportation of the 109 Uighur refugees back to China in July 2015. Thai police also issued a number of arrest warrants for suspects implicated in providing accommodation and other support to those involved in the bombing and those involved in smuggling the Uighurs into Southeast Asia to facilitate their travel to Turkey,

Nonetheless, these findings had reinforced the fact that the attacks were carried out by Uighurs with links to regional human smuggling networks. It remains unclear whether or not these suspects were eventually apprehended. In all, the attacks in the capital, and the penetration of Syrians linked to ISIS, raised questions about the security and stability in the country.

### Thailand's Response

In the past, Southern Thai Muslims have had bitter encounters with the army. The 2004 killings of Muslims at the Krue Se Mosque, followed by the Tak Bai incident months later, had brought about a serious trust deficit between the Muslims there towards the security establishment.

**“ ...with some elements in favour of a negotiated settlement and others continuing to advocate the use of violence... this lack of unity among the rebel groups is believed to be hindering the possibility of talks aimed at ending the insurgency. ”**

### Peace Talks

In August 2015, the Thai army held peace talks with representatives of Thailand's southern insurgent groups, the third since the coup in April and June of 2014, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. According to the chief Thai peace negotiator, General Aksara Kerdpol, the insurgents have renamed themselves Mara Patani to remove their old image of violence. The new umbrella organisation comprises six insurgent groups, including Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GMIP), Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani (BIPP), and 3 factions of Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO). In November 2015, a three-point proposal for peace was sent to the Malaysian facilitator to be conveyed to Mara Patani. Specifically, it sought to establish "a safety zone", "areas for urgent development" and "an alternative justice process".

Amid these developments, Wan Kadir Che Man, the former leader of the now-defunct Bersatu, an umbrella organisation that emerged in the 1980s to unite the longstanding Patani Malay separatist organisations, has voiced criticism about the ongoing peace initiative, stating that Mara Patani does not represent all the groups involved in the southern unrest, particularly those without any control over the combatants on the ground.



This lack of unity among the rebel groups is believed to be hindering the possibility of talks aimed at ending the insurgency. Besides these externally mediated peace talks, the central government appears to be trying its best to seek out ways to engage the Muslims in the south. On 25 January 2015, Thailand's Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC) and the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) Fourth Region Forward Command launched a project to promote harmony in society during the month of Ramadan. The project provided food and health supplies to families in the region. A total of 22,500 families benefited from the initiative.

On 30 September 2015, about 1,000 scholars, diplomats, social workers and students took part in an international conference in the south, which was aimed at fostering peace in the region. Participants from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines gathered together to discuss challenges and potential solutions pertaining to the southern insurgency.

### Looking Ahead

The protracted violence in the south and the attacks to the capital in 2015 has appeared to underscore the challenges facing Thailand's current military government. Thailand lays smack in the middle of international human and drug trafficking routes. Illegal flows of refugees, especially the Uighurs from China's Xinjiang province and Rohingyas from Myanmar are of concern, particularly with recent evidence of the involvement of some in illicit and militant activities in the country and the region.

Previous Thai governments have tried various means to stem the insurgency in the southern provinces, but have not achieved a sustained and appreciable decline in the overall threat in the south. The string of bomb attacks in the Thai capital, including the deadly bombing attack at the Erawan Shrine, might force the government to undertake harsher measures which could be however counterproductive, as in the past.

Together with appropriate security measures, the Thai government needs to address underlying concerns, including building trust and confidence in the south and working closely with its neighbours not only on counter-terrorism issues but also on dismantling the human trafficking network that significantly threatens the security and stability in the region.

**“ Illegal flows of refugees, especially the Uighurs from China's Xinjiang province and Rohingyas from Myanmar are of concern, particularly with recent evidence of the involvement of some in illicit and militant activities in the country and the region. ”**

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# Singapore

Stefanie Kam

Although Singapore continued to remain safe from terrorist attacks in 2015, the country has not been completely immune from extremist and terrorist ideology. Since the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), a handful of individuals from Singapore have travelled to Syria to participate in the conflict. In 2015, there were at least five cases of self-radicalised individuals who had plans to join ISIS, although authorities eventually disrupted their plans. Since 2014, there have been cases of Singaporeans travelling to participate in the conflict in the Middle East. Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, a naturalised Singaporean citizen of Indian descent, had brought his wife and three children to Syria, with the hopes of joining the conflict. A 47-year-old female Singaporean is also believed to have gone to Syria with her Malaysian husband and two teenage children. Several others, including Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, Zakaria Rosdan and Khairul Sofri Osman, had attempted to join the conflict in Syria but were stopped by authorities before they could leave.

In the first case of a foreign jihadist terror cell in Singapore, between 16 November 2015 and 1 December 2015, Singapore arrested 27 radicalised Bangladeshi construction workers for their support of the “armed jihad ideology” of ISIS and Al Qaeda. Although they were not planning a terrorist attack on Singaporean soil, 26 of them were members of a closed religious study group that subscribed to extremist beliefs and teachings of radical figures like Anwar al-Awlaki, an Al Qaeda-linked extremist preacher who was killed in a drone strike in Yemen in September 2011.

According to a report by Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the group “took measures to avoid detection by the authorities” and “shared jihadi-related material discreetly among themselves” during their weekly meetings, where they also discussed armed militancy and recruitment efforts. Among the 26 repatriated to Bangladesh, 14 of them were sentenced to jail under Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Act.

### Self-Radicalisation in Singapore

In October 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong issued a statement that nine people who were self-radicalised have been detained to date. Some of them had plans to go to Syria to join ISIS. In August 2015, two Singaporeans were detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for planning to join ISIS and take up arms. One of the men was a 29-year-old Muhammad Shamin Mohamed Sidek, who was previously convicted for inciting violence on social media. Shamin was a self-radicalised individual who was also influenced by ISIS' online propaganda. The other individual is an 18-year-old Muhammad Harith Jailani, who was radicalised by ISIS' online propaganda.

In May 2015, Shamin was convicted and sentenced to three months' jail for inciting religious violence through his pro-ISIS postings on social media. Throughout his three-month imprisonment, he had continued to display support for ISIS. Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) found that Shamin planned to travel to Syria to join ISIS once he had raised enough money to fund the trip and had also considered fighting alongside a militant group in the region aligned with ISIS in the event that he could not join ISIS itself. Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) added that Shamin was not deterred by his arrest, and aspired to pursue his plans to join ISIS after his release from detention. He had become radicalised by ISIS' ideological narrative, and even claimed that he was prepared to die in the course of defending the "caliphate" ISIS had declared.

Harith, on the other hand, was prepared to be trained by ISIS to fight and kill the group's enemies, and to die in the process so that he would receive divine rewards for being a martyr. Reportedly, as part of his preparations, Harith had collected information on how he could travel to Syria. He even attempted to convince those around him to support ISIS' cause in the hopes

**“ The persuasive appeal of ISIS' ideology continues to impress upon young minds, despite the group's resort to violence and mass executions. ”**

of recruiting them to join the terrorist group. The susceptibility of teenagers in the country to ISIS' radical ideology highlighted that the persuasive appeal of ISIS' ideology continues to impress upon young minds, despite the group's resort to violence and mass executions. In May, a 17-year-old Singaporean was arrested after investigations revealed that the youth had become radicalised through extremist and terrorist propaganda on social media platforms and websites. The youth had started making preparations to join ISIS to engage in armed jihad in the Middle East.

Another youth, a 19-year-old post-secondary student, named M Arifil Azim Putra Norja'l, was also detained by Singapore's authorities for harbouring the intention to carry out violent attacks in Singapore. Authorities had arrested a 51-year-old Singaporean named Mustafa bin Sultan Ali for making plans to join ISIS in Syria. He had left Singapore in late May 2015 and planned to fly into Turkey and cross into Syria from the Turkish border. However, he was detained by the local authorities in Turkey and deported to Singapore.

### Southeast Asian Links to ISIS: Implications for Singapore

The increase in support for ISIS in the country and the region reflects the need for society to be vigilant and resilient against potential threats. From a security perspective, it also highlights the need for strengthened measures, including enhanced monitoring and surveillance mechanisms to deal with the threat posed by individuals radicalised by the group.

In 2014, ISIS declared a new Malay-speaking combat unit named Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah (also known as the Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State). The unit is headquartered in Al Shadadi, the Syrian province of Hasaka. Katibah Nusantara assists families in Indonesia and Malaysia whose husbands or children are in Iraq and Syria. The possibility of Singaporeans joining Katibah Nusantara is also another concern. The close geographical proximity between Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia may encourage the movement of militants and terrorists across borders. This stresses the importance of border security and shared intelligence and monitoring efforts across the concerned security agencies.

### **Singapore’s Counter-terrorism Response: Preventive and Pre-emptive**

Singapore continues to view terrorism as a serious threat to its national security, and has taken measures to prevent the travel and support for terrorist activity. This is in line with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2178, which specifically states that Member States shall, consistent with international law, prevent the “recruiting, organising, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts.” Singapore has co-sponsored the UNSC resolution on foreign terrorist fighters that requires all nations to adopt laws that would make it a serious crime for their nationals to, among others, join extremist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliate Al Nusra Front.

Singapore’s Internal Security Act (ISA) remains the main judicial mechanism for detaining terrorist suspects. The ISA, first promulgated by Malaysia in 1960, has remained in force after Singapore’s independence in 1965. The law “empowers the government to address threats to national security not just through preventive detention, but also other measures like the imposition of curfews to deal with civil disorder.” The Singaporeans who were planning to join ISIS over the course of 2015 were detained under Singapore’s ISA.

Al Qaeda, through the Southeast Asian militant group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), had carried out numerous deadly attacks in the region, especially in Indonesia. There were also plans to

**“ Singapore continues to view terrorism as a serious threat to its national security, and has taken measures to prevent the travel and support for terrorist activity. This is in line with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2178... ”**

carry out a number of attacks in Singapore itself which were fortunately disrupted. In the words of Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, although there have been no serious threats or attacks in Singaporean soil in recent years, the country “remains a target for terrorism.” In the fight against terrorism, Singapore will need to rely on a whole-of-society approach, with efforts involving family members, friends, colleagues and members of the public. Thus far, Singapore has adopted a five-pronged approach to its defence, conceptualised in its Total Defence strategy encompassing military, civil, economic, social and psychological defence. In this, all Singaporeans have a role to play, individually and collectively, to build a strong, secure and cohesive nation prepared and able to deal with any crisis.

Religious and community leaders play an important role in countering radical ideologies by serving as peace advocates and by promoting messages of moderation and tolerance. In August 2015, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean lauded recent initiatives by Muslim community groups, including the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) and Inter-Agency Aftercare Group, for their pioneering works in countering radicalisation and extremism.



The organisations recently introduced ground initiatives, which included a helpline for callers to clarify religious concepts as well as community outreach efforts to alert youth to the dangers of radical influences. In April 2015, Singapore hosted the East Asia Summit Symposium on 'Rehabilitation and Reintegration.' It was attended by some 550 international delegates from fields of security, policy and government. The Symposium served as a platform for the exchange of views on best practices in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

On 19 January 2016, Singapore's Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam highlighted the growing tendency towards greater religious extremism and exclusivity in the region in recent years, as well as the rise in sectarian strife and terrorist attacks around the world. Mr. Shanmugam outlined four kinds of threats confronting the country, which include: direct terrorist attacks; the radicalisation of a part of the Muslim population; a section of Singapore Muslims growing somewhat distant from the rest of society, and growing Islamophobia – or distrust and intolerance towards Muslims among non-Muslim communities. He further warned against the threat from those who use religion as a "tool for terror," in contrast to its use "as a force for good," and stressed that this tendency is "not unique to any organised faith."

Moving ahead, Singapore must continue to safeguard itself against the threat of attacks by home grown terrorists seeking to sow chaos and discord within the country. Terrorist returnees to the region also pose a concern for Singapore. This would mean that solutions will need to be sought, including those which involve sustained efforts to strengthen its national resilience, in addition to national and regional cooperation on the counter-terrorism front.

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# Afghanistan

Abdul Basit

The situation in Afghanistan remained volatile in 2015. Apart from increasing levels of violence in the country and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan, the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death was followed by the subsequent collapse of the Taliban-Kabul peace talks and deteriorating relations with Pakistan. These developments brought about significant implications for Afghanistan's politics and security.

## Major Trends in 2015

### *Mullah Omar's death*

The disclosure of Taliban chief Mullah Omar's death in July 2015 came with opposing accounts concerning how, when and where he died. Afghan intelligence maintained that Omar died in April 2013 in a hospital in Karachi while the Afghan Taliban insisted that he passed away in Afghanistan. The news of his death came a few days before the representatives of the National Unity Government (NUG) and Afghan Taliban were to meet for the second round of Pakistan-brokered peace talks.

A significant outcome of the revelation of Mullah Omar's death was the outbreak of a struggle among different factions of the Afghan Taliban, especially involving the issue of peace talks with Afghan government. The pro-talk factions are represented by the current Taliban head Mullah Muhammad Akhtar Mansoor while the anti-talk (pro-fight) Taliban factions rally around the former Taliban military head, Mullah Qayum Zakir.

Due to news of Mullah Omar's death, the Afghan government raised concerns about the unity, composition and efficacy of the Afghan Taliban as a coherent group. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, which improved dramatically under Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, also nosedived after the disclosure of the news of Mullah Omar's death. Sceptical of Pakistan's intentions for keeping news of his death a secret, the Afghan government withdrew from peace talks with the Taliban.

### ***Taliban Resurgence and Spring Offensive 'Azm'***

The Taliban recovered quickly from the initial setbacks of disclosure of Mullah Omar's death by increasing their attacks in Kabul. The insurgent group also took over the Kunduz province in Northern Afghanistan even though it could not hold onto it for long. Although the Afghan forces retook control of Kunduz city from the Taliban, the brief capture of the city and other battlefield gains reunited most of the Taliban factions under Mansoor's leadership and gave him the opportunity to reassert his authority.

During the 2015 'spring' offensive, codenamed 'Azm', the Taliban displayed improved military capabilities, shifting from 'hit-and-run' guerrilla tactics to 'capture-and-hold' territories. Though the Taliban cannot take Kabul through force, their improved military skill has established their capacity to continue the fight for many years and has helped to strengthen their position as an important player in the Afghan conflict.

### ***Peace Process***

The stalled Qatar peace process which started in 2013 was re-launched in May 2015 with an informal meeting between the representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar. The meeting was sponsored by Pugwash, an international NGO and led to a series of non-binding confidence building measures between the two parties. In May 2015, NUG held a more formal meeting with the Taliban in Urumqi, China. This meeting then culminated into Pakistan-brokered first high level official interaction between a delegation of NUG and representatives of the Afghan Taliban in Murree, Pakistan. The Murree meeting was held in a cordial environment where both sides agreed to continue discussions in future.

**“ Due to news about Mullah Omar's death, the Afghan government raised concerns about the unity, composition and efficacy of the Afghanistan Taliban as a coherent group. ”**

However, the sudden disclosure of Mullah Omar's death a few days before the second meeting derailed the peace process. Doubting Pakistan's intentions and feeling betrayed by Pakistan for keeping Omar's death a secret, the Afghan government withdrew from the peace talks. The Afghan government also refused Pakistan's help in negotiating with the Taliban, demanding eviction of the latter from former's territory. The Afghan Taliban also suspended peace talks to deal with issues of succession and matters arising from the disclosure of Omar's death. Since then, the peace process has been in limbo, even as the Taliban intensifies its offensive against Kabul.

On 9 December 2015, a new diplomatic effort was launched to re-initiate the peace process after the conclusion of 5<sup>th</sup> Summit of Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process in Islamabad under a Quadrilateral Framework. The Quadrilateral Framework includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and U.S. whose first meeting was held in Islamabad on 11 January 2016 to work out future roadmap for peace talks. However, buoyed by their military gains, the Afghan Taliban toughened their stance on peace talks maintaining there could be no talks as long as foreign troops remained on Afghan soil.

### ***ISIS in Afghanistan***

In 2015, the threat posed by ISIS through its local franchise in Afghanistan, ISIS-Khurasan Province has steadily increased.

The group is now operational in different parts of the country, especially Nangarhar province. Since launch of ISIS-Khurasan in January 2015, the group has challenged Taliban. In October 2015, the Taliban created a special force called ‘Defence Units’ to combat ISIS-Khurasan’s growing influence in Afghanistan. This unit has been provided with more weapons as compared to other Taliban fighters.

According to a United Nations’ report released on 25 September 2015, ISIS has made its presence in nine Afghan provinces and made recruitments from 27 different areas. After establishing its presence in southern Afghanistan’s Helmand province and eastern Nangarhar province, the group is now trying to expand its influence in northern parts of Afghanistan. Much of ISIS’ presence in northern parts of Afghanistan is near the borders with Central Asian states with the possibility of its expansion into Central Asia.

### Challenges

The emergence of ISIS has turned militancy in Afghanistan into a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, with the pro-ISIS allegiances at the heart of this competition. Though the Taliban drives the fight against the Afghan government on the ground, more and more Taliban fighters, especially the younger, educated ones, are getting inspired by the ideology of ISIS. So far, *aqeedah* (doctrines of faith) and *bay’ah* (oath of fealty to the Afghan Taliban) had been the two major factors preventing the younger generation from joining ISIS. However, the death of Mullah Omar has freed them from this condition.

Moreover, unlike their predecessors, the younger generation do not carry the ideological baggage of fixed loyalties to one school of thought. They are inspired by symbols of the so-called caliphate propounded by ISIS. In the near future this would lead to more Afghan Taliban joining ISIS which will further complicate the already fragile security in Afghanistan. Due to ISIS’ penchant for killing Shi’ites, sectarian violence among the Sunni and the Shi’ite, which was largely absent in Afghanistan so far is likely to intensify in strength.

The inconsistent U.S. policy in Afghanistan is another challenge confronting Afghanistan’s government. In early 2015, under the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), the U.S. and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)

**“ In 2015, the threat posed by ISIS through its local franchise has steadily increased. The group is now operational in different parts of the country, especially Nangarhar province. ”**

pulled most of the 150,000 troops out of Afghanistan leaving behind 12,500 soldiers (9,800 from U.S. and 2,700 from NATO).

It was announced that the Afghan security forces were capable of defending Afghanistan against Taliban attacks with continued funding, training and technical assistance from the U.S. and its allies. The objectives of the new mission, Operation Resolute Support, changed from counter-insurgency operations to assistance, advisory and training roles. As planned, this mission started in January 2015 and had to run through the end of 2016. However, in October the U.S. decision to keep 5,500 troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016 indicates how quickly the situation has deteriorated in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s ambivalent approach to the Afghan conflict has been a source of destabilisation in Afghanistan as well. Despite Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s cooperation, Pakistan’s half-hearted approach to Afghan peace process has frustrated NUG. More importantly, Pakistan’s failure to convince or compel the Taliban to renounce violence in Afghanistan, despite its promises to Kabul, exposes the country’s perfunctory approach towards the peace process.

While a solution to the Afghan conflict would require Pakistan’s involvement it will not be possible if Pakistan continues to vacillate with its Afghan policy. Given the trust-deficit and mutually exclusive interests whenever the peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban recommence, the negotiations will be protracted



and long drawn-out. So, at the outset, a framework of non-interference in Afghanistan should also be worked out among the regional countries, so as to ensure an environment conducive for negotiations.

The dysfunctional nature of the NUG is another serious challenge. The government has yet to deliver on the key promises and policies it announced to bring stability and development in Afghanistan. Government's policy inertia, political squabbling, corruption and mismanagement of the economy have left Afghanistan in a virtual state of paralysis. Governance in the country has come to a standstill. As such, no amount of foreign aid, military assistance or regional backing will salvage Afghanistan from its current situation unless issues of governance are resolved.

The Afghan government also faces the daunting task of ensuring a strong Afghan security apparatus that can face an emboldened Taliban insurgency. In 2015, Afghan National Security Forces faced the Taliban in their first major battle without support from international troops. The fighting exposed the poor training of ill-equipped and cash-strapped Afghan Army and police. The fights in Afghanistan increasingly took a heavy toll on civilians. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimated that in the first six months of 2015, as many as 5,000 civilians lost their lives.

### Looking Ahead

Notwithstanding the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, there is still an opportunity to find a political solution. For that to happen, local, regional and international stakeholders of the Afghan conflict need to work together.

The U.S. decision to station troops in Afghanistan beyond 2016 will assist the Afghan government in averting a major security meltdown. However, a renewed focus is needed to look for a realistic political settlement. The continuing conflict in Afghanistan will only complicate matters for all the stakeholders.

Given the high stakes attached to the Afghan conflict, the incentive of working together outweighs the proclivity for a zero-sum game that will only strengthen the hands of militants. Afghanistan's slide into chaos will put regional peace and stability at peril. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan holds the key to regional peace.

**“ Given the high stakes attached to the Afghan conflict, the incentive of working together outweighs the proclivity for a zero-sum game that will only strengthen the hands of the militants. ”**

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# Bangladesh

Iftekharul Bashar

In 2015, Bangladesh witnessed a spate of attacks by Islamist militants, targeting, in particular, prominent bloggers known for their vehement criticisms of religious extremism. Though the government has largely been able to contain most of the traditional militant groups, new groups or a hybrid of old and the new, inspired by the ideology of Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) or Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), are gaining a slow but steady foothold in the country by manipulating the social media to radicalise and recruit followers, threaten enemies and rally individuals to violence in the name of jihad.

## **ISIS Challenge**

On 3 October, 2015, a Japanese businessman - Kunio Hoshi - was shot dead in northern Bangladesh about a week after three people killed an Italian aid worker - Cesare Tavella - while he was jogging in the diplomatic quarters in Gulshan. ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing, stating that a "security detachment [of ISIS]" was following the Italian citizen and later killed him, with the warning that "citizens of the crusader coalition" would not be safe in Muslim nations. However, the Bangladeshi government rejected these claims on grounds that ISIS lacks an organised presence in the country. In 2015, at least eight attacks took place in Bangladesh for which ISIS claimed responsibility. The motive of the attacks remains unclear. However, investigations indicate the involvement of militants linked to Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

This JMB faction is known to have the aspiration to become ISIS' local affiliate. The attacks in 2015 were most likely aimed at drawing ISIS' attention and recognition. Most of the members, supporters and sympathisers of this JMB faction are located in the north-western region of Bangladesh.

Though there is no exact data about the number of Bangladeshi fighters in Syria or Iraq. According to some estimates there are between 20 to 25 Bangladeshis in Syria, some of whom have already died. In Bangladesh, pro-ISIS materials are being circulated on social media platforms as well as through mobile phone applications. ISIS publications, particularly Dabiq's twelfth issue, reflect the group's interest in gaining a foothold in Bangladesh. In September 2015, ISIS expressed its intention to use Bangladesh as a base and to expand its influence in India and Myanmar. This is significant since militants in Bangladesh are known to have links with their counterparts in India and Myanmar.

In September 2015, ISIS' Furat Media published its first article on Bangladesh. The article urged Bangladeshis to pledge allegiance to the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and also called for the release of jihadists from the country's prisons; for waging an armed jihad in Myanmar from Bangladesh to restore what they consider the dignity of the Arakani/Rohingya Muslims; and the battle for Gazwatul Hind – the final battle of India – which will bring the Indian Subcontinent under Islamic rule.

### AQIS

Since the launch of the AQIS in September 2014 by Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al Zawahiri, at least three Islamist militant groups in Bangladesh have become active because of their ideological links with Al Qaeda. The launch of Al Qaeda's South Asia chapter inspired these loosely affiliated groups to be a part of the bigger organisation. These include the Ansarullah Bangla Team (also known as Ansar al Islam), a segment of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B). On its part, AQIS has also issued warnings to publishers in Bangladesh not to publish materials opposed to Sharia (Islamic Law). In March 2015, AQIS published a statement on Twitter declaring that the group will target those, particularly atheist bloggers, whom they consider to be involved in blasphemous writings.

**“ More than thirty militant groups of varying strength and capabilities have grouped themselves into at least three coalitions to emerge as a stronger collective force.”**

### New Jihadist Alliances

More than thirty militant groups of varying strength and capabilities have grouped themselves into at least three coalitions to emerge as stronger collective forces. These include the Bangladesh Jihadi Group (BJG), Jund al Tawheed wal Khilafah (JATWK), and Hilful Fuzul al Islam Bangladesh (HFIB) groups. These three alliances have established linkages with either ISIS or AQIS. The BJG has over 100 members today. The group has forged close associations with AQIS and is seeking to retain Al Qaeda's influence on local militant groups, particularly Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) currently the most dangerous groups in the country. Some members of Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) responsible for carrying out violent attacks on several bloggers in the country on accusations that they were involved in blasphemy are reportedly part of BJG.

The second known umbrella organisation is the Jund al Tawheed wal Khilafah (JATWK), comprising pro-ISIS militants in Bangladesh who consider fighting in the current Syrian conflict and serving ISIS a religious obligation. In October 2014, JATWK pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Factions from Hizb ut-Tahrir and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) comprise the JATWK. JATWK's mission is to recruit Bangladeshi fighters for the Syrian theatre and to create a force to establish an ISIS province in South Asia.

The third and most recent umbrella organisation is the Hilful Fuzul al Islami Bangladesh (HFIB). The platform has established partnerships with at least 28 violent extremist groups, both within and outside of Bangladesh. In a recent media report, the group is said to be making preparations to attack critical infrastructure, including the port, petrochemical plants as well as the naval bases in Chittagong in Bangladesh. Several Rohingya militant groups, including the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), are a part of this alliance. The HFIB has a strong financial support base with funds derived from both legal businesses as well as criminal activities, including human smuggling.

At a broader level, the aims of these three coalitions, which share similar interests and objectives to some extent, including the need to challenge the secular character of the Bangladeshi state, turning it into a theocracy based on their understanding of Islam. Although the aspiration for a theocratic state is not new in the country and militants have collaborated with each other at an individual level, the forging of formal alliances among the groups could be quite unsettling for Bangladesh from a security perspective. Moreover, in the context of growing traction of ISIS and AQIS, such alliances may portend to an overall escalation of the threat of terrorism in the country.

### **Attacks on Secular Bloggers**

The Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) has been implicated in the brutal attacks and murders of secularist bloggers from 2013 to 2015. On 26 February 2015, Avijit Roy, a U.S. citizen of Bangladeshi origin and a prominent blogger and author, was killed in Dhaka. On 30 March 2015, Washiqur Rahman Babu, blogger, was hacked to death by three men in Dhaka while Ananta Bijoy Das, blogger for Mukto-Mona website, was killed while on his way to work in the city of Sylhet on 12 May 2015. Niloy Chatterjee, blogger, and Faisal Arefin Dipon, the owner of a publication house, were hacked to death on 6 August and 25 October 2015 respectively. On the same day, Ahmed Rashid Tutul, the owner of another publication house and two other writers were hacked by a group of unidentified assailants at their office in Dhaka.

The bloggers were attacked due to their vocal criticisms of extremist and fundamentalist Islam and support of secularism.

## **“ The Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) has been implicated in the brutal attacks and murders of secularist bloggers from 2013 to 2015. ”**

In August 2015, authorities arrested 58-year-old Touhidur Rahman and two active members of ABT in Dhaka for masterminding the killings of Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy Das. Police also arrested two members of ABT for their involvement in the killing of blogger Niloy Chatterjee.

In the wake of the killings, demonstrations were held in different parts of the city, demanding speedy investigations and trials. In December 2015, two men, Faisal bin Nayem and Rezwanaul Azad Rana from the ABT were sentenced to death for their role in the February 2013 murder of Ahmed Rajib Hyder, a secular blogger from Bangladesh. A further five, including Mufti Jashimuddin Rahmani, a senior figure in the Ansarullah Bangla militant group, were given prison sentences.

Since then, a total six have been killed since Haider was hacked to death in the Mirpur section of the capital Dhaka, a trend which testifies to the absence of speedy investigation in dealing with the killings of the secular bloggers. On 25 May 2015, Bangladesh government banned Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).

### **War-crimes Tribunal**

In 2010, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opened an inquiry into war crimes involving atrocities committed during the 1971 Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) Liberation War. A tribunal, created to deal with this issue, has since convicted and executed several senior leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI - an influential Islamic political party founded in 1941) involved in these atrocities.



Jel of course denies any wrongdoing. In 2013, militants targeted several secular bloggers who led a movement demanding the death penalty for the perpetrators of the atrocities, including members of the Jel. One such incident involved blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, who was killed that year near his home in Dhaka. Militant groups have harnessed this tension to instigate violence and attack individuals who support the trial by the tribunal.

### **New Counter-Terrorism Unit**

In a bid to enhance its capabilities to fight militancy and terrorism in the country, Bangladesh has created a specialised counter-terrorism unit known as the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC). Comprising 600 members, CTTC is expected to work as a 'one-stop' centre empowered to investigate terrorism and transnational crime related cases. The CTTC unit conducts research after collecting terrorism-related information and also deals with terror financing, including mobile financial services, alongside transnational crimes, human trafficking, smuggling of drugs and illegal firearms and fake currency. The CTTC will have a division on cyber security and crime. The existing Special Weapons and Tactics and Bomb Disposal units of the Detective Branch will eventually merge with the new unit.

### **Looking Ahead**

The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken a zero tolerance approach to terrorism. Her administration set up the war-crimes tribunals for those responsible for the atrocities in 1971 which includes a number of members of Jel was set up. Though Jamaat-e-Islami is lying low at present, it remains a powerful force in Bangladeshi politics. Moreover, given the growing influence of transnational extremist ideologies in Bangladesh, it is highly likely that militant groups in Bangladesh will further consolidate and aim for larger scale attacks in the country.

This makes a strong case for Bangladesh to rethink its overall counter-terrorism strategy which has been quite effective in its kinetic aspects – degrading the terrorist and extremist groups with a kill and capture strategy, but not being as successful in stemming the spread of extremism and radicalisation in the country.

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# India

Vikram Rajakumar

In 2015, India's security forces thwarted terrorist attacks along the international borders and prevented attempts by terrorists from infiltrating into the country. Still, this year, 685 people were killed in terrorist incidents, compared to 976 in 2014. India also experienced a decrease in small-scale terrorist attacks in its seven states in its northeast and a decline in incursion attempts in Jammu and Kashmir. In 2015, there were only 3 major attacks, compared to 7 in 2014. As many as 62 were arrested for their involvement in plotting terrorist acts, subversion and for their involvement in activities linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS).

## Major attacks

### *Attack in Manipur*

On 4 June 2015, militants ambushed a military convoy in Manipur's Chandel district, which killed at least 20 army personnel and injured 11 others. Following the blast, the militants fired heavily at the convoy of four army vehicles with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and automatic weapons. The local media reported that the attack was well-planned and that the area was mapped with assistance from a local guide. The perpetrators were believed to be northeast India insurgents from Manipur rebel outfits, People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL).

The motive for the attack was attributed to discontent that the government was not doing enough in the region to tackle problems associated with corruption, narcotics trade and immoral activities.

#### *Siege in Gurdaspur, Punjab*

On 27 July, 3 terrorists in military uniforms opened fire at the Gurdaspur police station. 7 people were killed and 10 others were injured in the attack. Gunfire ensued, and eventually the attackers were killed by the Indian security forces. Police also recovered live bombs at the Pathankot-Dinanagar railway track. Police believe that the explosives might be linked to the 3 terrorists. No group has taken responsibility for the attack although it is speculated that perpetrators might be militants from the Jammu and Kashmir region due to similarities in the modus operandi like the attack on 21 March 2015 in Kathua district which killed 4 policemen.

#### *Indian Mujahideen (IM) and ISIS*

In March 2014, Tehseen Akhtar, alias Monu, was arrested from Naxalbari in Darjeeling District of West Bengal. Akhtar had replaced Yasin Bhatkal as the Indian Mujahideen's (IM) 'India operations chief', according to a report published by Jason Burke from The Guardian. He was also the mastermind of the Bodh Gaya and Patna attacks in 2013.

On 7 May 2015, intelligence agencies were able to dismantle an ISIS-linked five-man terror unit in Ratlam, Karnataka. Members of the unit were persuaded by ISIS recruiters to target leaders of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). A follow-up investigation revealed that the members of this module were also members of Indian Mujahideen (IM). Moreover, the arrest of these five individuals enabled the identification of several IM members who had travelled to Syria, such as Sultan Armar and Anwar Qureshi. Despite the arrests of key leaders and members, the Indian Mujahideen has managed to remain active through the various support bases it has established over the years.

#### *Hanging of Yakub Memon*

Yakub Memon was given the death sentence on 27 July 2007 under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) and was subsequently hanged on 30 July 2015, at the

**“ As many as 62 were arrested for plotting terrorist attacks, subversion and for their involvement in activities linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). ”**

Nagpur Central Jail in Maharashtra. He was convicted on 12 March 1993 for his involvement in perpetrating the Mumbai bomb blasts that killed 257 people. Yakub Memon is the brother of Ibrahim Mushtaq 'Tiger' Memon, who is one of the prime accused of the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts.

#### **The Maoist Insurgency**

The Maoist, also known as Naxalite insurgency is the single biggest domestic security threat faced by India in the recent years. The Maoists have launched attacks against security forces, public and private infrastructure, as well as civilians. Strategic targets such as the coal mines in Jharkhand and Orissa have been targeted in attacks by the Maoists, which have inflicted heavy losses to the Indian economy. Commonly used tactics include ambush, shootings, abductions of government officials and prominent members of the society, like political leaders, businessmen and social workers, vandalism of public property, and use of IEDs including land mines particularly against the security forces. Affected states also include Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

Despite the threat from the Maoist insurgency, India experienced an overall decrease in the total number of Maoists related incidents of violence within the “Red Corridor” from January to September 2015.

The Red Corridor commonly refers to a zone spanning from the northeast corner of the sub-continent all the way to the southwest of India that is affected by Maoist violence. However, the state of Chhattisgarh, one of most severely affected provinces in India witnessed a thirty-four percent increase in attacks in 2015 and higher casualties compared to the period in 2014.

### Insurgency in the Northeast

The insurgency in the seven states, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura that make up India's northeast has been on the rise, even as the support base of the insurgents has declined. Communities that traditionally supported the insurgency have withdrawn their support due to the rise of basic income and education. However, insurgents are increasing the frequency of their attacks to demonstrate that they are continuing in the struggle against the state. The region is still particularly vulnerable to attacks by the insurgents, due to weak governance, poor security apparatus, and the volatile geopolitical environment.

Insurgent attacks in the northeast of India has impacted other countries, including Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan. For example, after the attack on June 2015, insurgents Perpetrators fled on foot into Myanmar and were believed to have evaded detection. Consequently, on 10 June 2015, the Indian army, in cooperation with Myanmar, launched an operation deep into Myanmar's territory, attacking insurgent camps. It was the first cross border operation between India and Myanmar. India and Bangladesh have carried out a number of cross border operations in the past.

### Jammu and Kashmir

Although there has been a decline in the number of militant attacks in Jammu and Kashmir in 2015, there have been an increased number of attempts to breach the border at the Line of Control (LoC).

In 2015, there were at least 5 reported sightings of the ISIS flag, as compared to only 1 incident last year. India's northern Army Commanders, Lieutenant General DS Hooda and Lieutenant General Subtra Saha have expressed concerns regarding youth radicalisation, as seen in other parts of India like Hyderabad and Maharashtra,

**“ The insurgency in... India's northeast has been on the rise... insurgents are increasing the frequency of their attacks to demonstrate that they are continuing in the struggle against the state. ”**

where the youth were not only self-radicalised but were also radicalised collectively in small groups in support of ISIS and its ideology.

### Changing Nature of the Threat

ISIS has further added complexity to an already complicated web of security problems that India currently faces. Speeches by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi and videos by Al Isabah media, one of ISIS' media houses, have been translated to Urdu, Hindi and Tamil.

One video in particular calls on non-Muslims to convert to Islam, with specific instructions for them to travel to fight with ISIS in Syria. These videos and speeches target the Indian Muslim community within India. The community in Tamil Nadu remains highly vulnerable to ISIS propaganda, owing to the real or perceived marginalisation as experienced by the people there.

On 28 July 2015, an article published by the USA Today and reported by American Media Institute referred to a 32-page Urdu document obtained from a Pakistani citizen with connections to the Pakistani Taliban. According to the report, the document mentions “preparations” for an attack in India was underway. Furthermore, although the Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent (AQIS) remains inactive, its threat potential should not be underestimated.

## Looking Ahead

Even as the Indian security establishment thwarted several potential attacks in 2015, the infiltration by militants into India from Pakistan through the Line of Control (LoC) in northern Jammu and Kashmir; the rise in number of ISIS related incidents in the north and evidence of local militants travelling to Syria to fight alongside ISIS are matters of growing concern in the year ahead.

Current counter-terrorism efforts undertaken by New Delhi remain inadequate and piecemeal. Political discordance has prevented the establishment of the National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) – a nodal agency responsible for tackling all terrorism related cases in the country. This has been a major setback in India's fight against terrorism and insurgency.

Similarly, India's ambitious National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) project conceived to integrate data from diverse agencies to help, among others, security agencies in terrorism related investigations has yet to actualise into tangible outcomes. In August 2015 the government started the initiative to rope in National Informatics Centre (NIC) to create a "state-of-the-art" system data and behaviour patterns to generate actionable inputs for investigative agencies.

In addition, a lack of resources (financial, man-power, and technical) as well as the lack of research organisations on terrorism and insurgency further widens the gaps in India's security apparatus. In this context, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 5-day State visit to the United States (24 to 28 September 2015) was crucial from the perspective of strengthening national security through bilateral initiatives. Both countries have agreed to increase joint combat exercises, maritime security endeavours, and intelligence sharing and military exchanges. Although this move will not only increase India's defence and counter-terrorism capabilities, it is unlikely to have any impact on reducing the overall threat from extremism and militancy in the country.

Moving forward, New Delhi needs to develop socio-economic policies related to employment and education that lie at the root of the violence in India. In particular there is an urgent need to develop infrastructure in the Maoist affected areas, the Kashmir valley, as well as the northeast region which will improve communication, bring development and employment to the impoverished areas and raise the standard of living of the local populace, thereby substantially reducing the temptation to resort to violence.

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# Pakistan

Sara Mahmood

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In 2015, terrorist attacks in Pakistan declined significantly as compared to the previous year. In comparison, 2014 ended on a sombre note following the December 2014 attack at the Army Public School in Peshawar which killed 132 children. The overall reduction in terrorist attacks is largely attributed to two military operations, namely Zarb-e-Azb in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and the Karachi Operation, both of which have entered into their second phases. Under the newly implemented National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan's military courts handed out at least 300 death sentences to militants this year. At the same time, a large number of Baloch militants surrendered under a general amnesty scheme - 'Peaceful Balochistan.' However, sectarian violence and attacks on high profile targets continued, while the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) strengthened its presence in the country.

## **Decline in Terrorist Attacks**

In 2015, Pakistan witnessed significant dip in fatalities in terrorist violence compared to 2014. According to the Annual Report of the Centre of Research and Security Studies (CRSS), compared to 7,622 deaths in 2014, a total of 4,612 people died in 2015, which represents a decrease of forty percent. A CRSS report further added that this could have been due to a coordinated state response to criminal and terrorist activity following the implementation of the NAP though it is difficult to establish a "direct correlation between the NAP and decrease in violence-related fatalities."

The overall decrease in terrorism is also attributed to Pakistan stepping up its counter-terrorism operations in North Waziristan and Khyber Agencies, and Karachi as well.

### Sectarian Violence

Sectarian attacks against the Shi'ite community continued unabated throughout the year. Anti-Shi'ite militant groups, like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) carried out suicide bombings in the country, targeting imambargahs (Shi'ite mosques) and Shi'ite Ashura processions in Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

On 30 January 2015, a suicide bomber from Jundullah, a banned militant group, carried out a bomb attack at a Shi'ite mosque in the Shikarpur district of Sindh, killing 60 and injuring 60 others. Other incidents included multiple targeted assassinations of Hazara Shi'ites across Quetta and a bomb blast targeting a mosque of the Dawoodi Bohra (minority sect within the Shi'ite school of thought) community in Karachi.

### ISIS in Pakistan

In January 2015, ISIS' Wilayat Khorasan (Khurasan province based in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan) released a video featuring dozens of Pakistani Taliban members pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

This was followed by an attack in May 2015 on a bus carrying 60 Ismaili Shi'ites in the Safoora Goth area of Karachi. The attack was claimed by ISIS-inspired militants. More than 40 people, including women and children were killed during the attack, and 13 others injured. While the individuals conducting this attack were not directly linked to Wilayat Khorasan, the attack highlights the increased traction of ISIS in Pakistan. In September 2015, the group also set fire to a Pakistani check-post along the Durand Line, threatening similar attacks in the future.

This relates to the group's aims of uniting Muslims under ISIS' conception of the caliphate, while refusing to recognise the Durand Line that separates Pakistan from Afghanistan. Since its advent, the group has also released multiple beheading videos, imitating ISIS central through its violent and media savvy campaign. Its media campaign contrasts heavily with that of other extremist groups in Pakistan,

## “Sectarian attacks against the Shi'ite community continued unabated throughout the year.”

in terms of the resources and its displays of brutality particularly in the form of beheadings. Although Pakistan's security establishment denied the presence of ISIS affiliated groups in the past, in February 2015, the Foreign Office conceded that there is a 'serious threat' from ISIS, adding that pro-ISIS graffiti had surfaced in several parts of the country. In October 2015, the Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif, reiterated the Foreign Office's claim, but added that Pakistan would not tolerate the shadow of ISIS, labelling the group a greater threat than Al Qaeda.

Shortly after these claims, reports emerged of multiple ISIS-linked arrests in Pakistan alongside, incidences of women fleeing Pakistan with their children to join the group. The case of one woman in particular, named Bushra, who joined ISIS in September 2015, and was a principal at a Lahore-based Islamic centre is pertinent. Bushra has been convincing like-minded women to join the group, and intelligence estimates reveal that close to 20 men, women and children, connected to her network have travelled to Syria.

Following the recent string of arrests, intelligence reports revealed that those joining ISIS were previously members of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), renamed Jamaat-ud-Dawa. According to Russian intelligence estimates, Wilayat Khorasan has a small following, with close to 3,500 members from Pakistan and Afghanistan, operating in the latter.

It is possible that this number might increase if there are defections from existing militants joining ISIS, and also from men and women influenced by ISIS rhetoric and propaganda. For instance, it was also reported that Malik Ishaq, the leader of LeJ, planned to join ISIS before he was killed.

### Amnesty for Baloch militants

Following the initiation of the general amnesty scheme (also known as the ‘Peaceful Balochistan Package’) there were large-scale surrenders of more than 1,000 militants. These included leading commanders and members of the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), United Baloch Army (UBA), Baloch National Movement (BNM) and Lashkar-e-Balochistan (Army of Balochistan).

A noteworthy number of those who surrendered cited alienation from the leadership as a reason for denouncing anti-state violence. The government has allocated an initial amount of close to USD\$15,000 to those Baloch militants who have surrendered to the authorities. Similar amnesty programmes were introduced in the past, but they have not ensured long-term peace in the province.

To sustain the momentum, it is necessary for the governments both at the federal and the provincial level remain engaged in negotiations with the key stakeholders and those with influence over ideologically motivated militants and implement rehabilitation programmes to reduce recidivism of militants. Many of them were likely to have surrendered due to hefty monetary benefits at the moment.

The government is currently in the process of talking to the self-exiled leader of BRA, Brahumdagh Bugti, who is the grandson of Nawab Akbar Bugti, the veteran Baloch nationalist leader and former Chief Minister of Balochistan. The government’s engagement in talks with his grandson indicates willingness to bring the stakeholders to the table for possible concessions. The result of these talks will determine the trajectory of the insurgency which has plagued the province since 1948.

### Military operations

The military offensive, Zarb-e-Azb (Sword of the Prophet), in North Waziristan Agency entered its second year in June 2015. Since then, 2,763 militants have been killed in the area. In June 2015, the government claimed control over ninety-five percent of the territory after the conclusive phase of the Khyber Operation, which flushed out large numbers of terrorists. Two years into Karachi Operation, which began in September 2013, and which served to weaken

**“ Without a doubt, military operations have been beneficial towards reducing terrorism. However, they cannot account for a complete annihilation of the same since terrorist attacks have continued, hitting high profile targets...”**

the nexus between political parties, criminal gangs and terrorists, Pakistan witnessed a decreasing numbers of attacks in the city. The CRSS reported a forty-eight percent reduction in criminal, ethnic, sectarian and politically motivated targeted killings. Other violence-related incidents involving criminal activities and terrorism have also declined by thirty-eight percent.

The military has stated that the Zarb-e-Azb operation will continue on into 2016 until ‘terrorism is wiped out’ from the specific areas. Without a doubt, military operations have been beneficial towards reducing terrorism. However, they cannot account for a complete annihilation of the same since terrorist attacks have continued, hitting high profile targets which include the Badaber Army Base Camp in Peshawar, killing of Punjab Home Minister, Shuja Khanzada and the Parachinar blast in Kurram Agency targeting Shi’ites. Moreover, both Khyber Agency and North Waziristan are adjacent to the porous Durand Line - the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the past, militants in FATA have sought refuge in Afghanistan during operations by the Pakistan army. As such, there is a possibility that militants will move back into Pakistan’s tribal belt after the military operations. Therefore, border control is another aspect of ensuring long-term sustainability of military operations.

The current number of 182,000 Pakistan Army troops stationed along the 1,400 mile long Durand Line might not be sufficient.

### **Military Courts and Capital Punishment**

In 2015, following the December 2014 Army Public School attack in Peshawar, the moratorium on capital punishment was lifted through a constitutional amendment. With an amendment in the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997, military courts were created to adjudicate terrorism related cases, as the civilian courts had often been inefficient in prosecuting terrorists.

At the beginning of 2015, close to 8,000 prisoners were on death row, and as the year drew to an end, more than 300 of them had been executed. However, there are concerns about trials by military courts as these are generally perceived to be devoid of due-process. This has also eroded the authority of the civilian judiciary, and bestowed the military excessive power in a process which lies beyond the scope of the constitutional domains.

Moreover, the efficacy of the trial by military courts and capital punishment has been put to the test by retaliatory attacks by terrorist groups. For instance, in January 2015, LeJ's co-founder, Akram Lahori, was hanged based on a ruling by the military courts. Shortly after his hanging, the group conducted attacks on security and government targets, claiming them as revenge for the execution of leaders, including Akram Lahori and Malik Ishaq. One of these attacks was the targeted killing of Punjab Home Minister, Shuja Khanzada, in a bomb blast in August 2015.

In this scenario, the military courts simply represent an additional dimension to the kinetic approach of countering terrorism, akin to the military offensives. In addition, in order to uphold the rule of law, every individual, irrespective of his crime or the charges revelled against them, deserves a transparent trial. Military courts also raise issues about transparency, as details regarding the prosecution and defence of the suspects are kept secret.

### **Implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP)**

The twenty-point NAP was enacted in January 2015 in an effort to counter terrorism through predominantly non-militarised approaches,

**“... current initiatives are unlikely to be very effective as large segments of the Pakistani society remain heavily polarised along sectarian lines.”**

especially in the wake of the Army Public School attack in Peshawar. The NAP focuses, among other aspects, on tackling terrorism by dismantling terrorists' financial networks, banning extremist madrassas (religious seminaries), sectarian outfits and combating hate speech against religious and ethnic minorities.

In November 2015, the Pakistan Electronic Media and Regulation Authority (PEMRA) issued a notification calling for a ban on the coverage of 60 banned groups. Moreover, in September 2015, law enforcement agencies identified the geographical locations of more than 3,600 madrassas. The authorities also shut down 100 madrassas with extremist leanings. A number of students studying in these seminaries were known for maintaining active contact with terrorist groups. Around 200 of these madrassas were allegedly receiving funds from outside Pakistan. Consequently, widespread arrests of terrorist financiers and extremist clerics have also taken place. Such measures highlight the country's toughened stance against terrorist groups in general and sectarian outfits in particular. Previously, the government had received criticism for neglecting the plight of minority sects such as the Shi'ites.

However, current initiatives are unlikely to be very effective as large segments of the Pakistani society remain heavily polarised along sectarian lines. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center poll, only fifty percent of Pakistanis consider Shi'ites as Muslims. Conversely, the focus on promoting alternate ideologies of peace and coexistence to counter the message of the extremists' remains low on the priority list of the government.

## Looking Ahead

While the overall reduction in violence this year is commendable and testifies to the gains of the military operations, it does not denote long-term peace. Killing militants is simpler than targeting their ideology and support networks upon which they thrive. The ability of the militant groups to carry out attacks like the December 2014 Army School in Peshawar and to retaliate against arrests and conviction of their members, especially the leaders, are telling indicators of the inadequacy of the military offensives as the sole means to fight terrorism. Therefore, the successful military offensives should be complemented with a renewed determination to operationalise the non-kinetic approaches under the framework of the National Action Plan.

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# Maldives

Iromi Dharmawardhane

Despite its geographical remoteness and small population size, Maldives is a fertile ground for transnational jihadist recruitment, as seen in the disproportionate number of Maldivian fighters in Syria. The growth of jihadism in the Maldives is a serious security concern, particularly for India and other South Asian countries. Although a phenomenon of the past decade, organised jihadist networks of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups operate in Maldives. An increasing number of individuals in the country are showing signs of radicalisation. Terrorism has become a concern in recent times, especially in light of the 28 September 2015 attack targeting President Abdulla Yameen.

## **Maldivian Fighters in Syria and Iraq**

Some of the earliest cases of Maldivians – believed to be between 50 to 100 – attempting to travel to Iraq and Syria were reported in October 2013. According to some sources, at least twelve Maldivians have died in Syria and Iraq to date. Most Maldivian fighters who travelled to Syria joined the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (JN). There have been Maldivian fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), as well as other groups such as the Islamic Front (IF) and Free Syrian Army (FSA). Until recently, fighters have included students, those convicted or accused of terrorism-related or other crimes in the Maldives, as well as religious figures and former military personnel. In 2015, members of criminal gangs in Male such as Kuda Henveiru and mostly young ones, have been reported going to Syria.

Maldivians transit through Sri Lanka, India or Thailand, and travel from there to Pakistan for training or Turkey from where they cross over into Syria. Like many others migrating (hijra) to the Islamic State which ISIS has claimed to have established, Maldivian fighters have also gone to Syria with their wives and children, especially since 2014. In 2015, it was reported that about 20 individuals from the Maldivian community in the southern Indian state of Kerala have travelled to Syria to join ISIS.

### Rising Radicalisation

As a country with a majority Muslim population, Maldives has traditionally been relaxed in terms of religiosity. But of late, jihadist activity and radicalisation has been on the rise. Pamphlets disparaging Alawites and Shi'ite Muslims have been found in several mosques. The Taliban-style public flogging as a punishment for adultery has also become widespread. The appeal of Al Qaeda and now ISIS seems to be resonating with the Maldivians, especially the youth in recent times.

Radicalisation and recruitment of Maldivians to fight in Syria occur online, as well as in a number of mosques. This is accompanied by the collection of funds for the propagation of terrorist and extremist activities in the country. Forty-three percent of the Maldivian population have access to the internet and many Maldivians are well-versed in the English language. This makes local social media users very susceptible to online jihadist propaganda. In fact, several extremist Maldivian online groups have thousands of supporters on Facebook. Radical Maldivian preachers generally have a presence across the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and others.

Before social media became the main medium of radical propaganda, Maldivians were lured to extremism through teachings in Pakistani madrassas, like the Jamia Salafia Islamia seminary in Faisalabad, Pakistan which offered free education to these students. In February 2010, the Maldivian government estimated that there were some 200 to 300 unregistered Maldivian students in Pakistan. There are also many foreign-funded mosques across the Maldives which adhere to the Salafist-jihadist ideology.

**“ Maldivians travel through Sri Lanka, India, or Thailand, and then from there to Pakistan for training or to Turkey, crossing over into Syria. ”**

### ISIS-linked activity

On 31 August 2015, a YouTube video entitled 'A Message to the Maldives Government' featured three masked men with rifles threatening to kill the Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen and Vice President Mohamed Jameel Ahmed and carry out attacks in the Maldives. They also threatened to target the Maldivian economy by attacking tourist resorts, one of the major pillars of Maldives' economy, if their demands were not met within 30 days. The video carried the ISIS flag logo but it is uncertain whether the video was released or even sanctioned by ISIS. The men featured in the video seem to be connected to the Maldivian political opposition as two of three main demands were in their interest. Their demands included, the release of an Islamist political leader of Adhaalath ('Justice') Party (AP), Sheikh Imran Abdulla, who was arrested on 1 May 2015; for the government to cease its pursuit of an exiled anti-government political/human rights activist, Ibrahim 'Sandhaanu' Luthfee, currently residing in Switzerland; and for the government to repeal the new anti-terrorism bill which was introduced in May 2015.

One of the earliest incidents demonstrating organised support for ISIS in Maldives was a protest conducted by about 200 people on 5 September 2014. Some of the protesters were carrying ISIS flags, calling for the full implementation of the Sharia (Islamic Law) and to put an end to secular rule in the Maldives. *Haqqu*, the most active Maldivian online group supporting ISIS, had 1,056 (members) on Facebook as of 30 December 2015. ISIS is also believed to draw recruits and support from radicalised criminal gangs in Male.

The majority of them were convicted for crimes relating to drug-trafficking, assault and murder. Since 2012, radicalised gang members have been physically assaulting, abducting or murdering individuals whom they perceive as engaging in *laa dheenee* ('un-Islamic') activities. Their targets have included moderate clerics, political figures, journalists and bloggers.

### Al Qaeda in Maldives

The earliest detailed accounts of Maldivians fighting in Syria were of those fighting for the Jabhat al Nusra (JN), made known in August 2013 by the JN-affiliated Bilad al-Sham Media (BASM) online group, which claimed to be the media representative of Maldivian fighters in Syria. BASM, believed to be a group comprising of about 20 Maldivian jihadists, in Syria and in the Maldives posts the stories of Maldivian fighters that had died while carrying-out suicide attacks for JN. BASM's Facebook page was taken down but it was then re-launched on 30 December 2015.

BASM is anti-government, anti-democracy and has called the electoral win by President Abdulla Yameen as "a victory for *jahiliyya* [ignorance] over *jahiliyya*." BASM also said that members of the Maldives National Defence Force (MDNF) are "fighters in the devil's path." In line with Al Qaeda's ideology, BASM calls for a global 'Islamic caliphate' and urges Maldivians to join JN in the fight against the Syrian government. Particularly, BASM promotes 'martyrdom' operations in order to recruit suicide bombers for JN.

On 26 December 2014, BASM posted a video threatening Sean Paul, the famous Jamaican singer, scheduled to appear in a performance in the Maldives which was cancelled as a result. However, although the video carried the logo of the group, in a Twitter message, BASM denied their involvement in this post. On 8 June 2015, Malaysia shared the interrogation report of Sri Lankan Mohammed Hussain Mohammed Sulaiman pertaining to the plot by the LeT and Al Qaeda to attack the U.S. consulate in Chennai and Israeli consulate in Bengaluru in Southern India in April 2014 involving two Maldivian suicide bombers. Mohammed Sulaiman also stated that he was to ferry the two suicide bombers from the Maldives to a South Indian coast to carry out the terrorist attacks.

**“ ISIS is also believed to draw recruits and support from radicalised criminal gangs in Male. The majority of them were convicted for crimes relating to drug-trafficking, assault and murder.”**

Furthermore, of the five men that were to be sent to Chennai for the attack on the U.S. Consulate, three were Maldivians. The report supports the view that Maldivians continue to be recruited for attacks abroad and that jihadist networks span the region. It can be noted the 2007 Sultan Park bombing, which injured 12 foreign tourists, was a collaboration between jihadist networks in the Maldives, those in Pakistan and India (LeT), Saudi Arabia (Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadees) and the UK (Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen).

### Attempt on President Abdulla Yameen

On 28 September 2015, a blast occurred in the official speedboat of the Maldivian President, causing serious injury to the First Lady, Fathimath Ibrahim, while President Abdulla Yameen narrowly escaped. Several aides and a bodyguard were also injured. Investigations determined that an explosive device was placed under the seat the President usually occupy on the boat in an attempt to assassinate him. Although the blast occurred after the August 2015 video threatening the President, no specific group claimed responsibility for the incident. Vice President Ahmed Adheeb Abdul Ghafoor is suspected of masterminding the attack. He was accused of "high treason" and arrested on 24 October 2015 on evidence of his links to army soldiers accused of tampering with evidence shortly after the bomb blast.

Other associates, including the defence minister, were also implicated in the attack. Bomb-making materials were found in some of the houses searched by government officials during the raids. On 31 October 2015, guns and ammunition linked to an associate of the Vice President were found hidden at the bottom of the sea near Hibilhadhoo Island in Baa Atoll, north of Male. The weapons stash included several hand guns, T56 assault rifles, and a MP5 sub-machine gun, as well as a large amount of bomb-making material. On 2 November 2015, an improvised explosive device (IED) was found in a vehicle parked near the presidential residence in Male, and subsequently defused. On 5 November 2015, Vice President Ahmed Adheeb was unanimously impeached by the Maldives Parliament for his role in the assassination attempt on President Abdulla Yameen.

### State Response

Over the past few decades, successive Maldivian governments have failed to curb exposure of its citizens to extremist Islamist ideology. Similarly, the governments have failed to stem the flow of foreign funds or foreign radical preachers promoting jihadist ideology into the country.

In October 2015, Maldives passed a new anti-terrorism law defining acts of terrorism offenses and punishment for these offenses. The law gives authority to the government to declare any group a terrorist organisation, monitor conversation through telephone or over the internet, prosecute individuals for speech or statements encouraging terrorism and to prevent the travel of suspected ISIS sympathisers. However, there is widespread opposition to the legislation, especially from the political opposition.

One of the challenges for Maldives has been the support for the propagation of the Salafist ideology from the Adhaalath Party (AP), as well as from extremist NGOs, such as Jamiyyatul Salaf (JS), DhiSalafiyyah and Islamic Foundation of Maldives and individual radical preachers. Presently, as a strategic ally of AP and in its need to oppose the ruling government, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) led by Mohamed Nasheed is also believed to lend tacit support for the spread of radicalism in the country.

**“ Maldivian jihadist groups continue to disseminate Al Qaeda and ISIS’ ideology through their online outlets, leading to radicalisation and recruitment of Maldivians to fight and carry out suicide attacks for JN and ISIS in Syria.”**

To contain the growth of political treason and the spread of terrorist activity in the country, the Maldivian government has reshuffled its security and governance structure. It has also detained personnel guilty for their involvement in terrorist activity and terminated personnel who have failed to prevent terrorist activities.

### Looking Ahead

The growth of jihadism is a serious security concern for Maldives and others, especially India – the prime target of jihadists in the region. Maldivian jihadist groups continue to disseminate Al Qaeda and ISIS’ ideology through their online outlets, leading to radicalisation and recruitment of Maldivians to fight and carry-out suicide attacks for JN and ISIS in Syria. More comprehensive counter-terrorism measures specifically to protect the country’s vital tourism industry are essential for the country. The government needs to crack-down on criminal gangs, many of which are connected to transnational drug cartels and particularly predisposed to radicalisation. At the same time, community engagement programmes to counter the radical ideology and rehabilitation initiatives especially for returning fighters from Syria is key.

Other related challenges for the Maldives include reducing poverty and increasing employment opportunities, diversifying the economy beyond tourism and fishing, and combating drug trafficking and drug abuse, along with gang culture among the youth. With its limited resources, Maldives cannot achieve all this on its own. A regional effort is required to dismantle the jihadist and drug-trafficking networks which span the region. International aid and cooperation are required to counter extremism in the country and to tackle the challenges arising from socio-economic grievances that the country encounters.

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# Sri Lanka

Iromi Dharmawardhane

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Even though the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was defeated in 2009 in Sri Lanka, the threat posed by LTTE members and their supporters living abroad remain. In 2015, the arrests of LTTE operatives in Tamil Nadu in India who were planning to carry out attacks in Sri Lanka exposed an active international network which continues to operate. At the same time, Sri Lanka has begun to witness a penetration of Islamist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). These developments have introduced a new dimension of threat to the country.

## **Arrests of LTTE Operatives in Tamil Nadu**

Following three decades of relentless guerilla campaign against the Sri Lankan government, LTTE was defeated in May 2009, with almost all its top leaders, including Velupillai Prabhakaran either killed or captured in military action. Subsequent attempts by remnants of LTTE operatives to carry out attacks in Sri Lanka have been thwarted by authorities. However, LTTE continues to remain a threat to the country, albeit at a lower level.

On 20 July 2015, Indian authorities arrested three LTTE operatives in Uchipuli, in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, India planning to travel to northern Sri Lanka, which was under LTTE's control until its defeat. They were found to be in possession of large quantities of cyanide (75 cyanide capsules and 300g of cyanide powder) and communication equipment. In the past, LTTE members used to carry cyanide capsules strung around their necks to commit suicide, in the event that they were captured.

One of the individuals, identified as K. Krishnakumar, served as a secretary to LTTE's slain leader, Prabhakaran, and the other two were Prabhakaran's associates – R. Sasikumar and N. Rajendran – who were Indian nationals from Uchipuli. On 25 July 2015, Kumaraguru, who was an active LTTE operative and with links to Krishnakumar, was arrested at the Tiruchirapalli International Airport in Tamil Nadu while attempting to leave India on a forged passport.

On 14 August 2015, Kolkata's special task force in the Indian state of West Bengal arrested six Sri Lankan nationals. Among them, two were senior members of LTTE, identified as Gunasekharan and Balasingham. The six suspects travelled to Kolkata from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, where many LTTE supporters are based. The arrests of LTTE operatives in Tamil Nadu attest to the fact that some Tamil groups, including political parties in Tamil Nadu in India, continue to support LTTE and its agenda. On 26 November 2015, several Tamil groups and political parties such as the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi commemorated the birthday of the slain LTTE leader Prabhakaran.

### **LTTE's International Network**

On 19 June 2015, the U.S. Department of State revealed that "LTTE's financial network of support continued to operate throughout 2014." According to the U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Terrorism 2014, remittances to Sri Lanka from abroad especially from Middle East have increased sharply in recent years. Though the report did not make a direct reference to these funds being used for financing terrorism in Sri Lanka, it expressed concern about factors that make the "country vulnerable to money laundering and terrorist finance." It is to be noted that before its defeat, LTTE "used its international contacts and the large Tamil diaspora in North America, Europe and Asia to procure weapons, communications, funding and other needed supplies."

According to a report of the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), a new Tamil television channel named "Deepam", targeting Tamils living in Europe, Sri Lanka and southern India, was launched in Norway on 7 September 2015. The station is run by LTTE's leader Perimpanyagan

**“ The arrests of LTTE operatives in Tamil Nadu attest to the fact that some Tamil groups, including political parties in Tamil Nadu in India, continue to support LTTE and its agenda.”**

Sivaparam, a.k.a. Nediyan, who is based in Norway. In 2009, following the killing of Velupillai Prabhakaran and other senior leaders, Nediyan declared himself the new leader of LTTE. Nediyan continues to call for an armed fight to create a separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

On 14 August 2015, a senior LTTE member was deported from Malaysia to Sri Lanka. Investigations indicated his involvement with collecting funds from Sri Lankans in Malaysia with the objective of reviving LTTE and carrying out terrorist activities in Sri Lanka. He was also part of a credit card fraud syndicate in Malaysia. On 30 April 2015, five Dutch citizens of Sri Lankan Tamil origin were given jail sentences for raising funds for LTTE, relying on methods which included organising illegal lotteries. They were also charged for threatening those who refused to make donations.

### **ISIS in Sri Lanka**

The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS)'s influence in Sri Lanka came to notice when Sharfaz Shuraih Muhsin, also known as Abu Shureih Seylani was killed in an airstrike in Syria on 12 July 2015 while fighting for ISIS. Investigations revealed that Muhsin had close personal and family ties with individuals in Pakistan. Muhsin, who graduated in Sharia (Islamic Law) from the International Islamic University in Pakistan, travelled to Syria from Pakistan.

It is likely that he first became exposed to extremist ideologies during his time in the university. Many of his family members, including his wife and five kids, have been residing in Pakistan for several years.

At least one other Sri Lankan has travelled to Syria and is presently in Damascus, although some reports have stated that there are over a dozen Sri Lankan Muslim fighters in Syria. On 10 September 2015, a report by *IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, highlighted radicalisation and recruitment activities by ISIS as growing sources of concern for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has also arrested a number of Maldivian nationals attempting to transit through the country to Syria allegedly to join the fight in that country, though their affiliation with any specific group has not yet been established.

### **Sri Lanka Thawheed Jamaat (SLTJ)**

A group that is gaining increasing prominence is Sri Lanka Thawheed Jamaat (SLTJ). SLTJ was influenced by the Tamil Nadu Thawheed Jamaath (TNTJ) – an extremist organisation based in Tamil Nadu in India. Colombo is concerned that SLTJ, a Wahhabi movement that has been spreading from the east of Sri Lanka since 2009, could become the platform through which Sri Lankan Islamist extremists will join the rank of groups like ISIS to fight at home or abroad. However, a majority of Sri Lankan Muslims are against this movement. On 7 November 2015, many Muslims conducted demonstrations on the streets of Colombo to protest against the planned visit of the extremist Tamil Nadu Muslim leader Moulvi P. Jainul Abideen (also known as 'PJ') and the founder of TNTJ The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) – apex body of Islamic theologians of Sri Lanka – also issued a statement to the SLTJ to appeal against the visit of Moulvi P. Jainul Abideen to the country in the interest of preserving inter-communal harmony. However, the Sri Lankan government denied visa to the TNTJ's leader thereby preventing his entry into the country.

### **Looking Ahead**

Since 2009, the Sri Lankan government has succeeded in detecting and neutralising many LTTE related activities in the country. However, LTTE's international network continue to pose numerous challenges – plotting and funding operations in Sri Lanka, and mounting a

**“ Colombo is concerned that STJJ, a Wahhabi movement that has been spreading from the east of Sri Lanka since 2009, could become the platform through which Sri Lankan extremists will join the rank of groups like ISIS to fight at home or abroad. ”**

relentless misinformation campaign against the country.

The funding and influence of the LTTE-linked diaspora calling for a separate state is a palpable threat to the sovereignty and security of the country. To counter efforts by LTTE's network and to disrupt its funding and influence, Sri Lanka must adopt a strategic and long-term international communications strategy. To appease domestic populations, the Sri Lankan government must reach out more conscientiously to the conflict-affected Tamil community.

At the same time, the emergence of jihadist networks connected to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in Pakistan, Al Qaeda and ISIS in the country need to be countered to prevent radicalisation and recruitment of more local Muslims into the global jihadist movement that would significantly broaden the threat of terrorism in the country. This requires expanding Colombo's counter-terrorism operations – hitherto focused on the terrorist activities of LTTE members. The security platform must remain strong in Sri Lanka to counter both LTTE and newly emerging jihadist terrorist threats in the country.

Insurgency and terrorism in Sri Lanka, whether from Sinhala or Tamil nationalism, is inextricably linked to an overall lack of access to education and economic opportunity and poverty among particular segments of the population in the country. While Sri Lanka's economy has shown great resilience, it requires sound economic and development policies aimed at serving all segments of the population, which will alleviate the economic hardships endured by these segments. This requires continued investments in infrastructure and other developmental initiatives to create employment and administrative reforms to deliver good governance while ensuring affordable access to education for all. At the same time, the government needs to initiate measures to promote national reconciliation and cohesion to bring all communities together.

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# Central Asia

**Nodirbek Soliev**

Owing to the involvement of Central Asian militants in the Middle East conflict, the terrorist threat to Central Asia has become transnational and multi-faceted. At present, approximately 2,200 Central Asians – comprising 700 Tajik, 500 Kyrgyz, 400 Kazakh, 360 Turkmen and 200 Uzbek nationals – are believed to be fighting alongside jihadists in Syria and Iraq. In recent years, these militants have established and organised themselves into a number of independent combat units known as kateebat (battalion) or jamaat (group) on the basis of ethnicity, kinship or language. The militant unit comprising Kazakh fighters is known as ‘Kazakh Jamaat’, and it is fighting alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). The majority of Tajik jihadists have come together under ISIS as ‘Tajik Jamaat’. Ethnic Uzbeks on the other hand have established Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB)/‘Imam Al-Bukhari Battalion’ and Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ)/‘Battalion for Monotheism and Jihad’. KIB and KTJ operate alongside the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra (JN).

Central Asian governments are increasingly concerned about ISIS’ growing foothold in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and the resurgence of Taliban and other militant groups in northern Afghan provinces adjacent to Central Asia. In October 2015, Russian intelligence revealed that there were some 3,500 ISIS militants and supporters in Afghanistan. Militant offensive involving both pro-ISIS and pro-Taliban outfits in northern Afghanistan have been spread out on two fronts: in the provinces of Kunduz and Takhar, bordering Tajikistan and in the provinces of Badghis and Faryab, bordering Turkmenistan.

In August 2015, the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which completed its relocation from tribal areas of Pakistan to Afghanistan last spring, announced its incorporation into ISIS' local affiliate – Wilayat Khurasan (the Khurasan Province) – in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **Kazakhstan**

Although a relatively new phenomenon, the number of Kazakhs fighting in Syria and Iraq is growing. In November 2015, officials in Kazakhstan revealed that about 400 Kazakh nationals have travelled to the Middle East to join jihadists. Recruitment of Kazakh people mainly takes place in Atyrau, Aktobe, South Kazakhstan, and Jambyl provinces. A majority of Kazakh fighters united under a militant unit known as 'Kazakh Jamaat' have been fighting alongside ISIS. Official reports from Kazakhstan suggest that Kazakh nationals have also joined Abu Hanif's Jamaat, an independent combat unit within ISIS comprised predominantly of fighters from Russia's North Caucasian Federal District.

A few notable Kazakh individuals have joined ISIS. For instance, in April 2015, Aibek Gubaidullin, a former captain of a reputed football team, FC Akzhayik, had travelled to Syria to fight alongside ISIS. A video circulated by ISIS on the internet in January 2015 featured a young Kazakh boy shooting two alleged "Russian spies" with a pistol served to highlight the trend of children participating in 'jihad'. Some Kazakh nationals fighting in Syria and Iraq were reported to have returned to Kazakhstan and found to be engaged in terrorist activities in their home country.

On 20 February 2015, a court in Kazakhstan sentenced two men – Dmitry Nikolayev, a citizen of Kazakhstan, and Adilet Temirkanov, a Kyrgyz national – to long-term imprisonment on terrorism charges. The court reported that the two men, who returned home after fighting with Abu Hanif's Jamaat against the Syrian government, were plotting attacks on a military base and a police station in Temirtau city.

### *Government Response*

In 2015, Kazakhstan scaled up its response against terrorism and extremism. Dozens of terrorist and extremist personalities have been arrested and a number of terrorist plots disrupted.

**“ Central Asian governments are increasingly concerned about ISIS' growing foothold in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and the resurgence of other militant groups in northern Afghan provinces adjacent to Central Asia.”**

On 20 November 2015, Kazakh security authorities revealed that they thwarted a number of attacks by a "well-organised and well-equipped group" in the capital Astana. Kazakhstan's current strategy in combating terrorism focuses primarily on preventing radicalisation, with particular efforts to increase public awareness on the dangers of extremism.

The Kazakh media has broadcasted interviews with former militants who publicly acknowledged that they regret their deeds, while appealing to Muslims in Kazakhstan not to be induced by extremist propaganda. Islamic scholars have reached out to youth via websites such as 'E-Islam' to increase their understanding on Islam and to counter extremist narratives. The Prosecutor General's Office of Kazakhstan has also blocked 703 websites containing extremist and terrorist content.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

ISIS has sought to increase its recruitment, radicalisation and mobilisation efforts among Kyrgyz people through its robust propaganda on social media platforms. In July 2015, ISIS released its first Kyrgyz language propaganda video specifically addressing Kyrgyzstan's Muslims.

The video, entitled “Message to the People of Kyrgyzstan” featured a Kyrgyz fighter urging Muslims in Kyrgyzstan to migrate to ISIS-held territories in Syria and Iraq. Kyrgyz security authorities later identified him as Ulan Subankulov, a 29-year-old Kyrgyz national from the country’s southern province of Jalal-Abad. Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies identified at least 209 cases of Kyrgyz people who were recruited by jihadists in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. A large number of Kyrgyz women have also been involved in the war in Syria and Iraq. In November 2015, officials in Kyrgyzstan revealed that at least 122 of the 500 Kyrgyz nationals involved in the war in Syria and Iraq were women.

Investigations revealed that the majority of Kyrgyz women have travelled to the conflict zone with their husbands or other family members rather than on their own. It indicates that there have been well-organised cells that have actively recruited Kyrgyz families; funded and facilitated their safe mobilisation into Syria. It also suggests that Kyrgyz security services failed to timely detect activities of those networks and to prevent migration (hijrah) of entire Kyrgyz families in such large numbers to the conflict zones. Eighty percent of Kyrgyz nationals fighting in Syria and Iraq are reported to be from Kyrgyzstan’s southern provinces of Osh, Jalal-Abad and Batken, homes to mainly ethnic Uzbek minority and traditionally seen as more devout than the country’s north.

After bloody clashes between the ethnic Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, families affected by conflict have become increasingly vulnerable to the ideological influence of violent extremist groups. The conflict left about 470 people dead, mostly Uzbeks, and 400,000 others displaced. Apart from ISIS, a significant number of Kyrgyz nationals have also joined Kateebat at Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), pro-Al Qaeda Central Asian militant unit which is predominantly comprised of ethnic Uzbeks fighting in northern Syria.

Established and led by Abu Saloh (his given name is Mukhtarov Sirajidin), a notorious Uzbek fighter from Kyrgyzstan’s southern Osh province, KTJ has been operating under Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate Jabhat al Nusra (JN) since December 2014. In recent months, KTJ has actively participated in militant operations of “Jaish al Fatah” (‘Army of Conquest’), a jihadist alliance comprised of JN, KIB and Chechen-led Jaish al-

## “ In November 2015, officials in Kyrgyzstan revealed that at least 122 of 500 Kyrgyz nationals involved in the war in Syria and Iraq were women.”

Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). A few days after Russia’s announcement of carrying out airstrikes in Syria in September 2015, KTJ pledged allegiance to JN. KTJ has an Uzbek-language media wing named “Jannat Oshiqdari” (‘Lovers of Paradise’), and a website. Videos uploaded by the group indicate that KTJ currently has more than 100 fighters.

### *Government Response*

Kyrgyzstan has mobilised its resources on legislative and operational fronts to diminish threat of extremism and terrorism. Kyrgyz security services have arrested at least 239 individuals involved in extremism and terrorism-related activities, seizing significant amounts of extremist propaganda materials, small weapons and explosives.

On 16 March 2015, the Kyrgyz government designated ISIS as an extremist and terrorist organisation, and banned its activity in Kyrgyzstan’s territory. It is now considering amending existing terrorism legislation to incorporate more criminal punishments for its nationals who participate in conflicts abroad.

In 2015, Kyrgyz security services disrupted at least three major attacks by ISIS and its IMU affiliate in Afghanistan across the country. On 16 July 2015, Kyrgyzstan’s State Committee for National Security (SCNS) thwarted two separate attacks by local ISIS members during Eid prayers at the central square in the capital Bishkek and on the Russian Kant airbase in Chuy province. The SCNS killed at least six gunmen and arrested seven others, and seized large amounts of cash, several small weapons and 500 kilograms of ammonia nitrate in the house that the gunmen used as their stronghold.

## Tajikistan

Tajikistan's internal security remains highly volatile. In September 2015, violent clashes erupted between the Tajik government forces and armed insurgents supported by the former Tajik deputy defence minister Gen. Abulkhalim Nazarzoda in the capital Dushanbe, Vahdat and Romit Valley killing at least 40 people, including nine police officers. The violence was potentially linked to the government's crackdown of the country's largest opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) a few days before the bloody incident.

On 28 August 2015, the Tajik government issued an ultimatum that the IRPT had to cease all its activities during ten days. This decision appeared to undermine the peace accord between the secular-oriented government and the IRPT-led Islamist opposition force that ended Tajikistan's civil war in 1997. With approximately 50,000 members, the IRPT failed to win any seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

Though this was mostly a political issue, the crackdown of the IRPT could lead its supporters to join terrorist groups such as ISIS. Currently, at least 700 Tajiks are reported to be fighting alongside ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In Tajikistan, recruitment of Tajik people has mainly occurred in the capital Dushanbe, the northwestern Sughd and the southern Khatlon provinces.

Investigations conducted by the Tajik General-Prosecutors Office reveals that Tajiks fighting for ISIS are paid USD 100 per month. Recruitment efforts in Tajikistan are primarily undertaken by the IMU and its Tajik affiliate Jamaat Ansarullah (JA), both currently based in Afghanistan. On 21 March 2015, police in Tajikistan's Sughd province dismantled a recruitment cell comprising ten Tajik members of the IMU that have recruited local people to fight abroad.

A number of notable individuals fighting for ISIS are also of Tajik origin. In a video uploaded on the internet by ISIS on 28 May 2015, Col. Gulmurod Halimov, the former commander of the Tajik Interior Ministry's Special Purpose Mobile Unit (Otryad Mobilny Osobogo Naznacheniya: OMON), who vanished in late April 2015, claimed that he had joined ISIS. This highlighted the penetration of ISIS' ideological influences within the Tajik security apparatus.

**“ In Tajikistan, recruitment of Tajik people has mainly occurred in the capital Dushanbe, the northwestern Sughd and the southern Khatlon provinces... recruitment efforts in Tajikistan are primarily undertaken by IMU and its Tajik affiliate, Jamaat Ansarullah (JA).”**

The situation is further complicated by the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan's northern provinces of Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar, near the Tajik-Afghan border, where 1,500 Taliban militants and ISIS affiliated groups were said to be staged.

Russia has announced that it will deploy attack and military-transport helicopters to beef up its military presence in three different military facilities in Tajikistan, including the air base outside Dushanbe, and two others in southern Khatlon province – an area which shares a border with Afghanistan.

### *Government Response*

Tajikistan has criminalised unauthorised participation in armed conflicts abroad. It has also offered amnesty to those who voluntarily renounce violence and resume peaceful lives at home. One such example is Farruh Sharifov, a 25-year-old resident of the northern Tajik city of Khujand, who travelled to Syria to fight alongside ISIS was granted amnesty on 7 May 2015 after he voluntarily confessed of his crime to Tajik authorities.

Tajikistan's counter-terrorism strategy also focuses on combating online radicalisation. The Tajik government has identified and blocked more than 2,000 websites with extremist and terrorist content.

### **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan continues to face serious security issues along its 744-kilometre long and porous borders with Afghanistan due to an increase in militant activity by Taliban in northern Afghanistan in recent years. In 2015, Taliban took partial control over the Afghan provinces of Faryab and Jowzjan, bordering Turkmenistan. The situation in Faryab was made critical in July 2015 when the Taliban seized more than 100 villages.

Furthermore, in October 2015, about 80 Taliban militants, who fled from Afghan national army's offensive in Jowzjan, sheltered on an island in the Amu-Darya River which serves as a natural borderline between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Given the fact that at least six Turkmen border guards have been killed by Taliban since 2014, Taliban's growing presence in areas close to the Turkmen border has been a significant security concern for Turkmenistan government.

Attacks on the Turkmen border areas are believed to be attempts by Taliban to establish a passage to Central Asia. An alternate view holds that Taliban's target is not Turkmenistan or Central Asia. Rather, the attacks were likely aimed at heightening tensions in the north and west of Afghanistan which used to be relatively trouble-free so that Taliban will be able to further expand its area of influence across Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan is also one of the main transit routes for the transportation of Afghan drugs to Russia and Europe. Drugs through Turkmenistan also move across Iran and the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus, Turkey and the Balkans. About 80 tonnes of drugs are believed to pass through Turkmenistan annually.

### *Government Response*

Turkmenistan continued to enhance security along its border with Afghanistan, mainly to counter the Taliban offensive and narcotics trafficking. In recent months, Turkmenistan, which has neglected its military as an outcome of its declared political neutrality in 1995, began

**“ ...Taliban's growing presence in areas close to the Turkmen border has been a significant security concern for Turkmenistan government.”**

beefing up its military capabilities to strengthen security along its border with Afghanistan. Turkmenistan has deployed as much as seventy percent of its armed forces to its borders with Afghanistan. Heavy military vehicles have been deployed near the border and local military garrisons have conducted rapid-response drills in preparation for possible militant attacks.

In order to better manage possible attacks from Taliban, Turkmenistan needs to improve border management and control. Political neutrality has kept Turkmenistan outside of regional security institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). However, reinforcing and developing bilateral or multilateral military and technical cooperation with countries in the region could help Ashgabat to halt the threats militant groups like Taliban and its allies pose.

### **Uzbekistan**

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) remained the principal terrorist threat to Central Asia including Uzbekistan, although it has not carried out a successful attack in the region in several years. IMU lost its sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal areas following the Pakistani army's operation 'Zarb-e-Azb' campaign in June 2014 and relocated into Afghanistan.

Throughout 2015, IMU has been seeking to regain a foothold in Afghanistan's northern provinces, including in Jowzjan, Badghis, Takhar, Kunduz, Badakhshan and Faryab, adjacent to Central Asia. On 6 August 2015, IMU leader Usman Ghazi announced that IMU had been incorporated into ISIS' Wilayah Khurasan (Khurasan Province) in Afghanistan and Pakistan.



He claimed that his group was no longer a movement but part of what he called a 'state'.

The statement released through a video came on the heels of an open letter issued by IMU in which the group outlined its grievances with the Afghan Taliban, accusing Taliban's leadership of deceit and collusion. IMU's switching of allegiance from the Taliban to ISIS was a strategic move to rebrand itself in order to attract fresh recruits from Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to elicit external funding from its supporters and sympathisers.

The estranged relations between IMU and Taliban appeared to end up with a direct fighting with each other in Afghanistan's Zabul province in November 2015. According to unofficial reports, the fighting has resulted in the capture of Usman Ghazi and the near-elimination of IMU.

On 6 December 2015, Taliban supporters posted a couple of photos on Twitter and Facebook featuring a corpse of a man which was similar to Ghazi. They claimed that IMU leader was killed by Taliban after he cut his beard and hair to escape from the area where he was hiding. The silence on the part of IMU on this could indicate that these claims are true, though there is no official confirmation about the same.

According to Uzbekistan's religious authorities, about 200 Uzbek nationals are fighting alongside ISIS. In February 2015, Uzbek security authorities revealed that they disrupted a local cell of ISIS and IMU involved in plotting a number of attacks in Uzbekistan.

On 13 November 2015, the Supreme Court of Uzbekistan sentenced 23-year-old Uzbek national Mukhammad Abdullayev to 13 years in prison on charges of fighting with ISIS in Syria. On the same day, a court in Uzbekistan issued an international arrest warrant for a 35-year-old Uzbek citizen, Khurshid Mukhtarov, who has been fighting for ISIS in Syria since 2014. According to Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry, Mukhtarov has publicly called on his compatriots to topple the constitutional order in Uzbekistan through violence.

### *Government Response*

Uzbekistan has substantially scaled up its response to extremism and terrorism. Apart from the law enforcement response, governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in

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the country have been counselling the youth studying at schools and universities with a view to immunise them against radical ideologies. Religious scholars and clerics also have warned the public against supporting extremist and radical propaganda. In February 2015, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan published the anti-ISIS propaganda book titled 'The Incitement of ISIS' ("IShID fitnasi" in Uzbek). The book criticises crimes and brutalities committed by ISIS, challenging and delegitimising the group's deliberate attempts to distort the religion.

### **Looking Ahead**

The ongoing turmoil in Middle East and the drawdown of the U.S.-led Western forces in Afghanistan have profoundly transformed the security dynamics of Central Asia. In order to meet the evolving threats from transnational terrorism more effectively, countries in Central Asia need to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation and take preventive measures at both national and regional levels. There is a need for strengthening the management and control of the borders with Afghanistan in order to prevent the infiltration of militant elements into Central Asia. As long as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq persist, the number of Central Asians travelling to join the civil war in those countries is likely to continue.



Although factors motivating Central Asians to join the war in Syria and Iraq are multifarious, jihadists' narrative of armed struggle against Syria's "anti-Sunni Alawite" regime appears to be the main driver for the recruitment of Central Asia's Sunni Muslims, particularly for those who feel a sense of solidarity and duty to protect their co-religionists in the Middle East. In order to fight against extremism and terrorism more effectively, governments of Central Asian countries should focus primarily on the prevention of radicalisation, particularly on efforts to promote sound counter-narratives to challenge and delegitimise jihadist narratives.

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# China

## Stefanie Kam

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In 2015, China's Xinjiang region remained unstable, with sporadic, albeit deadly attacks targeted at civilians and state-backed imams. On 18 September 2015, a knife attack took place at the Sogan colliery, in Aksu, Xinjiang. The attack killed at least 50, according to a report by Radio Free Asia.

Violence in Xinjiang appears to stem from Uighur grievances towards the Hans and towards the Chinese government. The Uighurs believe that the state's preferential policies towards the Han Chinese in Xinjiang, both in terms of housing and employment, have economically and socially marginalised the Uighur community. They also accuse China of curtailing their religious freedom by restricting their practice of Islam, destroying their cultural heritage to completely erase Uighur identity. However, Beijing denies any religious or cultural discrimination, and maintains that its policies are aimed at encouraging assimilation of ethnic minorities into the Chinese state. In September 2015, the Chinese government released a White Paper, which outlined the importance of ethnic equality, unity and development in Xinjiang, but stopped short of a reference to root causes of instability there.

Xinjiang has witnessed a recurrence of violence in recent years. In the past, tensions between Hans and the Uighur have led to large-scale riots. In the 2009 Urumqi riots, about 197 persons lost their lives while more than thousands sustained injuries. There were also similar tensions between the two sides in the following years.

The 2013 Tiananmen Square attack in Beijing which killed five; including the two pedestrians, the three perpetrators, and injured more than 40 others was attributed to Uighur separatists connected to the Uighur diaspora in Europe and North America. Rights groups and exiles argue on the other hand that the violence stems more from widespread Uighur resentment at Chinese restrictions on their religion and culture, rather than that of a well-organised militant group.

### Uighur Militancy and ISIS

The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is the primary Uighur separatist group whose principal objective is to secede from China and to establish an Islamic state in the Xinjiang province. The TIP's militants operate mainly in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Afghanistan.

Of late, Xinjiang's Uighur have joined ISIS or Al Nusra Front, as well as groups like Ahrar al Sham and different Chechen-led militant units like Jaish al-Muhajireen wal Ansar (JMA) and Saifullah Al Shishani's Jamaat. On 24 May 2015, an individual with the username @ArjDnn tweeted that he had joined a Kurdish militant group known as People's Protection Units, otherwise known as YPG.

In November 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) announced that it had killed Fan Jinghui, a Chinese national who had been taken hostage by the group earlier. On 6 December 2015, a Chinese-language propaganda audio, issued by Al-Hayat media – ISIS' foreign language media propaganda outlet – surfaced online. The 4-minute audio, entitled "We are Mujahid", called on all Chinese Muslims (including Hui Muslims) to take up arms and join the battlefields, in an indirect reference to the conflict in Syria and Iraq. This was not the first of ISIS' attempts to recruit fighters from China. In August 2015, ISIS released a video (titled 'Message to the People of Turkistan [Xinjiang]') featuring Uighur fighters calling on Muslims in China to migrate to ISIS-held territories in Iraq and Syria.

### Uighur in Southeast Asia

In recent years, an increasing number of Uighurs have moved into Southeast Asia to seek refuge. While some Uighur refugees might genuinely be seeking refuge, other Uighur refugees have

**“ In December 2015, China passed its first anti-terrorism law, which, according to the government, will help it to deal with the terrorist threat ‘at home and boost international security.’ ”**

transited through Southeast Asia and travelled to Turkey on fake Turkish passports. The danger this poses is that some have crossed the Turkish border into Syria and Iraq to join ISIS. Recently, Thai authorities established that perpetrators of the Erawan Shrine bomb attack in central Bangkok on 17 August, which killed 22 and injured 125, were Uighurs facilitated by regional human smuggling networks.

The motive of the attack stemmed from a combination of factors, including revenge for Thailand's crackdown on human smuggling, which disrupted the route that Uighurs frequently used to travel to Thailand, and possibly for Thailand's earlier deportation of 109 Uighurs back to China. In July 2015, Indonesia sentenced three Uighurs to six years in prison after finding them guilty of conspiring in attacks with terrorists from Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT), a group based in Poso in Central Sulawesi. This has raised concern about Uighur presence in the respective countries and the region as a whole.

### Beijing's Response

Since 1997, China has adopted a unified and comprehensive Criminal Code. This means that all criminal provisions have to be included in the Criminal Code. This principle also applies to the fight against terrorism. In fact, China's Ninth Amendment to the Criminal Code, adopted on 29 August 2015, contains several provisions on terrorism.

Before 2005, China relied on its general domestic laws, various terrorism-related provisions in various terrorism-related provisions in these laws, and the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separation and Extremism in its battle against terrorism. Following several terrorist attacks, including the October 2013 Tiananmen Square attack in Beijing and the knife stabbings in March 2014 in Kunming, China's counter-terrorism posture seemed to have hardened further.

In December 2015, China passed its first anti-terrorism law, which according to the government, will help it to deal with the terrorist threat “at home and boost international security.” The law is based on the argument that terrorist attacks “have caused heavy losses of people's lives and properties, posing a serious threat” to China's “security, stability, economic development and ethnic unity.” Furthermore, the law mandates the state to set up a national intelligence centre dedicated to counter-terrorism and requires technology firms to “hand over technical information and help with decryption” if required, for investigation of terrorism related acts. Notably, the final legislation dropped the demand requiring these companies to hand over “encryption codes and other sensitive data for official vetting before they went into use”. The law also allows the military to venture overseas on counter-terror operations. In January 2016, Chinese state media reported that Xinjiang's legislature will draft “local implementation guidelines” for its first counter-terrorism law.

In addition to efforts to crackdown on terrorists, extremists and separatists, China has also focused on preventive measures, including development in the region, introducing jobs and better housing so as to improve the living standards of Uighur communities and stabilise the region. Uighurs perceive these initiatives, together with religious restrictions by the Chinese government, including the ban on fasting for civil servants during Ramadan, as attacks on their cultural and religious identity, especially as most of these policies benefit the Han Chinese. This may challenge China's attempts to narrow the ethnic divide between the Han Chinese and the Uighurs in the region. As restrictions on religious freedoms in the region appear to have aggravated existing discontent, there is a risk that some disenfranchised Uighurs may potentially turn to militancy as an outlet to give vent to their frustrations.

**“ Apart from the Uighur issue, China was also confronted with acts of violence perpetrated by others with different motivations and grievances.”**

Amid growing concerns about the rise of religious extremism and widespread international media reports of government policies that constrain religious and cultural practices, in January 2016, China announced the adoption of new rules in Xinjiang to boost “ethnic solidarity” and promote ethnic unity. China also began drafting regulations against religious extremism. The planned legislation coincides with the passage of the new anti-terrorism law in December 2015 and comes on the heels of China's announcement to extend the 'strike-hard' campaign in Xinjiang, which has since brought extra troops and police deployed to the region to quell the violence, from as early as 2014.

Owing to the threat along its peripheries, China remains concerned about the potential linkages between radicalised Uighurs and militant groups in its neighbouring countries, Central Asia and Afghanistan. China has vested geostrategic interests in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatres and the existing militant groups there threaten to undermine the stability of the region. There is also concern about an upsurge in insecurity and instability in that area, in light of the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. With the countries of Central Asia, China continues to rely on the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to strengthen cooperation in the ambit of counter-terrorism.

Apart from the Uighur issue, China was also confronted with acts of violence perpetrated by others with different motivations and grievances. On 30 September 2015, at least 18 bombs exploded in multiple locations across Liucheng county and Liuzhou city in China's Guangxi region, killing at least 11.

The perpetrator was a 33-year-old disgruntled employee named Wei Yinyong from Liucheng Daipu town. In December 2015, about 100 masked attackers destroyed a security checkpoint in China's northern region of Inner Mongolia, injuring 13 people and wrecking 11 vehicles. The report did not provide a motive for the attack on the security post in Ejin county. However, similar attacks which have occurred in the past appear to highlight a growing trend of violence carried out by individuals with context-specific grievances unrelated to the issues in Xinjiang.

### Looking Ahead

Rather than a well organised militancy movement, violence in Xinjiang appears to stem more from a direct struggle for recognition and the Uighur minority frustrations. This is in relation to a state response which is perceived by Uighurs to have been heavy handed and restrictive, in a region where they are considered a majority. Political and economic frustrations as experienced by the general Uighur minority population in their daily lives, along with the rising interest in militant jihad, have also contributed significantly to the radicalising process and the readiness to resort to violence.

In the larger context of China's battle against extremism and terrorism, China may wish to consider policies which address the root causes of radicalisation in the context of Xinjiang's socio-political and religious milieu. There is also a need for China's ethnic policies to respond to challenges faced by Muslim Uighur communities, particularly the youth. Inter-religious and inter-ethnic education to promote concepts like tolerance, inclusivity and multiculturalism, to safeguard the youth from becoming influenced by extremist narratives would be useful.

Lastly, along with the rising global jihadist threat, particularly from ISIS, increasing security cooperation between China and the international community is needed, particularly in the area of information sharing, cooperation in mutual legal assistance, and implementation of coordinated border controls, so as to prevent individuals from joining the conflict in the Middle East. This is however, better said than done, given pragmatic concerns, which include the lack of transparency in Beijing's policies due to restrictions on international media and evidenced by the controversy surrounding the passage of the country's first counter-terrorism law.

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# Syria

**Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff**

In 2015, the Syrian conflict entered into its fifth year with new and old challenges, ranging from the involvement of Russia in the conflict to the persistence of the threat from various militant groups in the country. Meanwhile, U.S.-led coalition airstrikes continued into 2015, as sectarian, jihadist, militant groups and proxies of regional powers with vested interests continued to operate. These developments came against the backdrop of a worsening humanitarian crisis – an outflow of refugees in large numbers adding another dimension to an already explosive situation in country and the world.

## **Syrian Crisis and External Intervention**

Since August 2014, U.S. led-coalition forces have been conducting airstrikes in an effort to degrade and defeat Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). This is however, limited to airstrikes on ISIS-held territories in Iraq and Syria, and oil refineries and transportation systems that the group controls. Washington is yet to commit ground forces on its own and has not been able to persuade any of its alliance partners to do so. So far, non-combatant troops are deployed for logistics support, training, and coordination of forces opposing President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

On 18 February 2015, the U.S. Department of Defense stated that they had identified 1,200 Syrian opposition fighters willing to participate in a U.S. military-led programme to fight ISIS, defend areas controlled by the “moderate” opposition, eventually leading to the removal of Assad.

Beginning March 2015, Washington has put in place a three-year programme for training and arming 5,000 fighters which is estimated to cost \$500 million annually.

On 26 July 2015, Bashar al-Assad made a public appearance – his first time during the year – in Damascus, Syria. In a speech, he alluded to the setbacks faced by the military, especially with regards to human resources, but reasserted his determination to win the civil war. He expressed his support for a political solution, but described the rebels, especially the political opposition, as terrorists. He was also at dismay with the international actors supporting the rebels. In the same speech, he commended Iran and Russia for providing economic, military, and political support to bolster the government’s commitment to winning the civil war.

On 30 September 2015, Russian air forces launched airstrikes primarily in the northwest region, targeting militant groups opposed to the Syrian government, especially Al Nusra Front, ISIS and Jaish al Fatah. In October, President Assad went to Moscow for a discussion on a joint military campaign against the rebel groups in Syria. His discussion with President Vladimir Putin also involved strategies for a long-term resolution of the civil war and plans to put an end to the problem of terrorism in Syria with the participation of all political, ethnic and religious groups.

Prior to the airstrikes, Russia had already expanded its military presence in Syria. It was reported that Russia conscripted 15,000 new troops into the Russian army as it prepared for a major offensive alongside with Iran and Islamist group Hezbollah. However, Moscow claimed that the move was not intended to further escalate the conflict in Syria.

Russia’s involvement in Syria is not limited to targeting ISIS but also extends to Assad’s oppositions. According to Russia, if Assad resigns abruptly, it will result in a vacuum which a myriad of militias and insurgents will exploit and create more chaos in the country. In an effort to weaken Assad’s opposition, Russia apparently aims at destroying their supply lines by hitting Aleppo, a province in the middle of supply routes used by the Assad’s opposition. Russia also deployed its army in Latakia, as it is the ancestral home of Assad’s family and the Alawite sect he belongs to. Latakia is also Assad’s political stronghold.

**“ ... support for the anti-Assad political opposition remains inadequate. Moreover, the composition of and schism among the groups opposing the Assad regime has also complicated efforts by the country to reach a viable solution. ”**

Assad had even previously created a militia called “Shield of the Coast” belonging to the National Defence Army to protect and counter any threats in the area. Following the 31 October 2015 downing of Russian airplane Metrojet Flight 9268 and 13 November 2015 Paris attacks claimed by ISIS, countries involved in the coalition forces increased their airstrikes. Russia, though not part of this coalition also increased its attacks against ISIS. The coalition forces targeted mainly ISIS-held territories.

Recently, the United Kingdom also joined the offensive against ISIS after its parliament authorised airstrikes in Syria on 2 December 2015. Until then, the U.K.’s military involvement was limited to airstrikes in Iraq alone. In all, the global actors are divided into two camps, namely, pro-Assad and anti-Assad. The anti-Assad camp further comprise of the ethno-nationalists, particularly the Kurdish fighters. These divisions however, are in favour of the current Syrian government under Assad, and see it as representative of a sovereign state. Russia and Iran have sent troops and military assets upon request by the Syrian government. However, support for the anti-Assad political opposition remains inadequate. Moreover, the composition of and schism among the groups opposing the Assad regime has also complicated efforts by the country to reach a viable solution.

## Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria

Capitalising on the instability and increasing-lawlessness in Syria and Iraq, ISIS declared an Islamic caliphate in June 2014 after instituting control over vast areas of territory in the two countries. The group's aim is to establish a state governed by strict Sharia. ISIS continues to control large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, despite efforts to degrade and defeat the group. In May 2015, the group took Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar province and the ruins of the historic city of Palmyra in Syria. According to SOHR estimates, ISIS now controls more than half of Syrian territory.

As ISIS expands in Iraq and Syria, it has also established several wilayah or provinces in other countries such as Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan-Pakistan, West Africa and Caucasus, by harnessing on its supporters who have pledged allegiance to the group. Juxtaposed against Al Qaeda's ideology which aimed to establish an Islamic state, ISIS claims to have been able to make it a reality. This has increased ISIS' legitimacy and appeal to recruit supporters and sympathisers around the world. In the Syrian context it means more foreign fighters and supporters flocking to "migrate to the Islamic State to support it or defend it against its enemies.

The group relies on a number of strategies for survival and growth. One of these is to take advantage of Assad's strategy of attacking weaker opponents rather than hitting ISIS. This way ISIS is able to ward off attacks by the incumbent regime in the country and expand its hold on territories that the Assad regime is unable to control. Territorial control has not only enabled ISIS to extract resources but also to attract foreign fighters. Ultimately, objectives are not always ideological, but stem from the existential quest for financial gains, resources, and power. The establishment of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria signals the beginning of the group's effort to achieve this objective which seems to be effective for the time being.

## Humanitarian Crisis

The number of people killed and displaced due to the Syrian conflict varies, according to different reports. According to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 320,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian conflict.

**“ Syria is in dire need of a cessation of all hostilities, especially because of the increasing humanitarian crisis. As the solution is political, the call for Assad to resign needs to go beyond mere rhetoric. ”**

According to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), at least 250,000 people have been killed and 12 million displaced. Moreover, more than four million people, mostly women and children, have fled Syria since the start of the conflict. This has precipitated a serious humanitarian crisis, the effects of which have spilled over to other countries, especially to Europe with a massive exodus of Syrian overwhelming the countries concerned. Though there has been a broad support to accept Syrian and other refugees, the November 2015 Paris attacks in which saw ISIS sympathisers masquerading as refugees has led to a widespread demand for a thorough review of the policy of taking in migrants specifically into European countries. The same is also the case in the U. S.

It is a widely accepted fact that terrorist attacks and collateral damage from airstrikes have caused widespread chaos and destruction in the country. Horrific human rights violations both from the forces loyal to Assad and those opposing it including the so-called Islamic State of the ISIS are widespread, while basic necessities like food and medical care are getting almost non-existent. Though it is not known if the Syrians are fleeing from the brutality of groups like ISIS or Assad's regime, they have been fleeing the country in epic proportions. This is a crisis, which the international community in general and the stakeholders in the Syrian crisis in particular, need to consider in a more holistic manner than its current perfunctory response.

## Looking Ahead

Syria is in dire need of a cessation of all hostilities, especially because of the increasing humanitarian crisis. As the solution is political, the call for Assad to resign needs to go beyond mere rhetoric. However the political opposition in Syria lacks the unity and cohesion to form a stable government in the event that Assad resigns or is deposed. Therefore, a proper framework needs to be developed in order to unite the political entities opposing Assad.

Political solutions aside, military efforts to eliminate ISIS have also not been entirely fruitful. The group's ideology and capability in spreading terror continue to remain a significant security concern for nations worldwide. Direct and indirect international interventions into the Syrian conflict should also be more congruent and harmonious rather than an obstacle in hindering steps towards a peaceful solution for Syria, an outcome of which, unfortunately, still eludes the international community.

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# Iraq

Aida Arosoaie

Even as the government scored a number of tactical victories in 2015 – retaking Ramadi, Tikrit and Sinjar from ISIS control – Iraq continues to reel under the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). There are also concerns about Iran-backed Shi'ite militias involved in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, Iraq is still grappling with the most important issue - building and sustaining an inclusive governing structure in the country.

## The ISIS Threat

### *The Fall of Ramadi and its Retake*

Ramadi fell to ISIS on 17 May 2015. Ramadi is the capital of the Anbar Province and a mostly an under-developed desert area bordering Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Though the fall of the city was downplayed by most, especially by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey stating that "The city itself is not symbolic in any way. It's not been declared part of the (Islamic State) caliphate or central to the future of Iraq." From ISIS' perspective, it was a strategic gain. ISIS considers Ramadi as part of the Caliphate as Anbar province has always been the target of the group since its formation in 2006 when it called itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). It is a Sunni dominated area and a "key communications centre along the Euphrates River corridor." From the perspective of the U.S. and its allies fighting to stabilise Iraq, the city was the home to the 'Awakening.' The latter is a movement led by local Sunni tribes which was mostly instrumental in defeating Al Qaeda-backed forces during the "surge" of U.S. forces from 2007 to 2008.



The fall of Ramadi is attributed to the neglect of the region by the Iraqi government, from both economic and security standpoints. ISIS capitalised the lack of governance and security in the uncontrolled belts in rural and suburban areas of Ramadi, seized territory and then expanded to the city itself. Most importantly, ISIS was able to harness the local frustrations and the anger against the Iraqi government in its favour. In a statement on 27 April 2015, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi called on the fighters in Syria to mobilise and join the battlefields of Salah ad-Din and Anbar which led to ISIS fighters pouring into the area to take control of the city.

Nevertheless, on 29 December 2015, the Iraqi forces retook most of Ramadi delivering a strategic blow to ISIS. As Daniel Byman puts it, retaking Ramadi is “not an isolated event or simply a symbolic victory. It shows the Islamic State is facing real reversals on the ground.” However, though the city is now under the control of the Iraqi state, a number of challenges remain, not the least of which include getting the remnants of ISIS forces out from locations where they are hiding and getting the area rid of improvised mines and explosives planted by ISIS. As it is, most of the city is in ruins. Therefore, the government needs to invest in reconstruction and overall development of the region. Furthermore, it needs to attempt to integrate a predominantly Sunni area with the Iraqi state. To do so, requires efforts to co-opt Sunni fighters into the force that Baghdad had formed - al-Hashd al-Shabi - to oppose ISIS. This move could, to a large extent, mitigate the sectarian tensions in the country in favour of Iraqi nationalism. Ultimately, this could be the ultimate antidote against groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda.

#### *Battles for Tikrit and Sinjar*

On 2 March 2015, around 4,000 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) troops, accompanied by almost 20,000 Shi'ite militias, launched an offensive in a third attempt to retake the city of Tikrit from ISIS. Initially, the combined forces were able to capture the outlying areas and encircle the city. However, the offensive was not successful as ISIS put up a stiff defence which led to a very high number of casualties. This compelled Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi to call Washington for help. Washington agreed to join the fight with the condition that the Iran-backed militias withdrew. At the end nevertheless, combination of the

**“ ISIS capitalised the lack of governance and security in the uncontrolled belts in rural and suburban areas of Ramadi, seized territory and then expanded to the city itself. ”**

ground combat of ISF and Shi'ite militias, and the aerial strikes by the U.S.-led coalition managed to drive out ISIS from Tikrit.

However, in the aftermath of the battle, both the U.S. and Iran-backed Shi'ite militias sought to claim the victory. U.S. officials deemed the militias as inconsequential, while militias' leaders asserted that its manpower on the ground was instrumental *sine qua non* for the victory. In retrospect, the battle for Tikrit highlighted two important aspects of the battle against ISIS. Firstly, tensions involving the U.S. and the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias need be addressed especially since deployment of ground forces is an absolute necessity to defeat ISIS.

Secondly, the battle exposed the weakness of the ISF. At this point, the bulk of the fight against ISIS in Iraq is carried out with foreign assistance and Shi'ite militias. This might severely challenge the legitimacy of the Iraqi political and military establishment because it portrays the Iraqi state as being dependent on Western and Iranian support, the support of which has been mutually exclusive.

On 13 November 2015, Kurdish Peshmerga, and Yazidi fighters supported by airstrikes by the U.S.-led coalition, recaptured the town of Sinjar. ISIS seized the town in August 2014 and subjected its population, primarily Yazidis to ethnic cleansing, though many of the Yazidis managed to flee. As a result of this, but also because of the airstrikes, most of the town has been destroyed. Various sources claimed that the damage instilled on the Yazidi community has led to growing intolerance and hatred

towards Sunni Muslim. This highlights a serious challenge to the Iraqi government to defuse the tensions threatening the Iraqi social fabric following the territorial defeat of ISIS.

### **Threat of Iran-backed Shi'ite Militias**

The Popular Mobilisation Force (PMU), comprising Shi'ite militias is specifically created to fight ISIS. This comprises "Shrine Militias" – perceived as the guardians of the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and considered safe by the U.S. and its allies due to their affiliation with the Iraqi Shi'ite clergy. There are also Iranian-backed militias which are scorned by the U.S. and its allies due to their association with Iran and the terrorist groups that Tehran supports.

Incidentally, the Shi'ite militias fighting for Tikrit belonged to the latter category. While groups such as Hezbollah al-Abrar, Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Badr Brigades and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq constitute a strong opposition against ISIS, they also carried out terrorist activities against the coalition forces from 2003 until 2011. In addition to Iranian support, these militias are also assisted by the Iraqi government, especially from funding through PMU.

The threat posed by these militias was first manifested in their attempt to establish zones of influence in parallel to the Iraqi State. For example, following the battle for Tikrit, Hezbollah al-Abrar raised its own flag over a defaced ISIS logo in a village right outside of Tikrit. Another was the battle for Baiji. Baiji is a city in northern Iraq, which is best known for its oil refinery. In May 2015, the battle for Baiji gained momentum with the ISF and the Shi'ite militias waging an offensive against ISIS. During these clashes, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq set its own flag in several locations in Baiji.

Shi'ite militias have also been seen to be dampening ISF's recruitment efforts. Their battlefield prowess, high salaries for its cadre and propaganda comprising pan-Shi'ite Islamist rhetoric, make them popular among the Iraqi Shi'ite youth. Moreover, in comparison with the Iraqi army they seem more professional and far less accountable for their battlefield behaviour. This has resulted in a large influx of Iraqi youth to the militias, which has undermined government's efforts to recruit and replenish its own armed forces.

**“ Shi'ite militias have also been seen to be dampening ISF's recruitment efforts. Their battlefield prowess, high salaries for its cadre and propaganda comprising pan-Shi'ite Islamist rhetoric, make them popular among the Iraqi Shi'ite youth. ”**

Thirdly, Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias like Hezbollah in Iraq are threatening the legitimacy of the Iraqi political establishment and the governing structure. In July 2015, Hezbollah in Iraq threatened to confront Qassim al-Fahdawi, the Minister of Electricity, for high levels of corruption in the ministry that the group ascribed to the crisis in electricity supply in the country. The sheer magnitude of governance related grievances in the country could be stoking the frustrations and anger of the common Iraqis which could prove to be destabilising for the state in the long run.

Fourthly, the unbridled expansion of the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias might exacerbate sectarianism within Iraq. ISIS would also benefit from the sectarian violence which plays along the group's sectarian rhetoric – Shi'ites have always sought to attack and humiliate Sunnis. Shi'ite militias carried out rampant sectarian violence in the aftermath of the battle for Tikrit. Hezbollah Battalions and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) members abducted over 200 Sunni residents, including children, most of whom remain unaccounted for till today.

## Looking Ahead

In July and August 2015, protests erupted in Baghdad, Erbil and Basra arising from dissatisfaction against Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's inability to provide basic goods and services and to keep corruption under control. In response, Abadi put forward a bold reform plan on 9 August 2015. The reforms include dismissing several corrupt officials, and ending the Sunni-alienating quota system in government positions. He also proposed to recruit 10,000 persons into the army and raising the accountability bar for those in the armed forces.

There is however scepticism about the proposed measures due to the concern that the anti-corruption programme might not be implemented in a fair way especially involving the members of the Dawa Party which Abadi belongs to. Moreover, the proposed reforms in the military establishment failed to inspire confidence as these are being seen in lacking strategic significance and structural coherence.

As the Iraqi government needs to put in place a more comprehensive and transparent and inclusive governance reforms including in the military, the U.S. and its allies must enhance their respective involvement in the country and the region. This involves, among others, deployment of ground troops and training and arming anti-ISIS elements to fight, degrade and defeat ISIS and prodding the Iraqi government to be more inclusive, transparent and be devoid of issues such as corruption and sectarian politics.

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# Yemen

**Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff**

In 2015, Yemen experienced threats ranging from the Houthis' seizure of territory, the involvement of the Saudi-led coalition in the conflict, and the continuing provocations by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

## **The Houthi Rebellion**

Since 2004, Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah ('Supporters of God') have been seeking greater autonomy in the northern province of Saada, the Houthi heartland where they had been enjoying political, social and economic rights for the past millennium. As early as 2014, they have carried out protests and waging an armed insurgency in rebel strongholds and in the capital from as early as 2014.

As loyalists to the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh – who served from 1990 and stepped down from power in favor of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi under a Gulf-sponsored initiative in 2012 – are not in favour of the new president, they forged an undeclared alliance late last year with the Houthis. Former President Saleh, despite his resignation, remains politically influential due to the support he had garnered support from the military and other security apparatus during his 33 years of ruling the country.

Meanwhile, Yemen's current president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi has yet to gain popular support on the ground. Military personnel who support him are mainly southern separatists opposed to the former President Saleh or those with vested interest in their own security, such as the tribesmen – all of whom

are against the Houthi movement.

### Key Developments in 2015

#### *Resignation of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi*

After Houthis took over Yemen’s capital, Sana’a in September 2014, there were growing protests over the removal of fuel subsidies and calls for the formation of a new government. In January 2015, President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and his government were forced to resign. In February 2015, in a decision that was seen as a coup by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the Houthis declared a new government by appointing a transitional five-member presidential council as a replacement to President Hadi. In addition, the Houthis placed President Hadi under house arrest, after which, he fled to Aden and subsequently to Saudi Arabia. Several other ministers and officials were also placed under house arrest, including Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, Foreign Minister Abdullah Al-Saidi, and Defence Minister General Mahmoud Al-Subaihi. They were released after two months.

#### *Houthis’ Seizure of Taiz*

In the absence of good governance, Houthis continued to expand by seizing more territory. In March 2015, Houthis seized areas in Taiz. Taiz, which is Yemen’s third largest city, is strategically located between Sana’a and Aden, provides the Houthis rebels with an opportunity to ease their way to the south to overtake Aden.

The Houthis’ advance into the city had also put them more firmly on a path toward military confrontation with opposing troops loyal to President Hadi, based in Aden, some 120 miles southeast of Taiz. Houthis’ success in advancing and controlling many territories in the north can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the fact that the Houthis were part of Yemen Arab Republic or North Yemen before its unification in 1990 with South Yemen, previously also known as the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. In addition, the Houthis also controlled the northern part of the country for almost 1,000 years until 1962 when they lost power and the Imamate system was overthrown. The North Yemen civil war ensued in the wake of the overthrow, lasting from 1962 to 1970, and led to the birth of two states – North and South Yemen.

**“On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia, together with at least 10 other countries including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), excluding Oman, conducted Operation ‘Decisive Storm.’”**

Houthis comprise one-third of the population in the country. Their strength in numbers may have been a crucial factor in helping them to gain the influence of Zaydi Shi’ites by tapping into their grievances to achieve control of northern territories. Finally, the Houthis also reportedly receive support from Iran in the form of weapons, money and training, and are seen as sharing in the same Shi’ite ideology.

#### **Saudi-led Coalition for Intervention: Operation ‘Decisive Storm’**

On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia, together with at least 10 other countries including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), excluding Oman, conducted Operation ‘Decisive Storm.’ The operation aimed to repel Shi’ite Houthis rebels in Yemen and to protect the legitimacy of President Hadi. The coalition ended Operation ‘Decisive Storm’ on 21 April 2015. Declaring the operation to remove the threats from Saudi Arabia and its neighbouring countries a success, the operation destroyed all heavy weapons and ballistic missiles belonging to the Houthis and also control over Yemeni airspace. Saudi Arabia also initiated another operation called “Renewal of Hope” with the objective “to protect civilians and combat terrorism.”

#### *Implications*

The Saudi-led coalition’s involvement in the country has worsened the conflict that is increasingly also becoming more sectarian. The two regional rival powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia,



are jostling power and influence in the Middle East. The rivalry between these two states is also based on their opposing identities: the perception of Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world and Iran's identity as the face for the Shi'ite Muslim world. Saudi Arabia's ability to control Yemen will also give the country an advantage in terms of granting access to the Arabian Sea as well as freedom to use the strait of Bab Al-Mandab. The latter connects the Arabian Sea with the Red Sea, shortening critical trading routes from the Arabian Peninsula to Europe.

### Threat of ISIS and AQAP

#### *ISIS' Expansion in Yemen*

The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) declared it had expanded into Yemen in October 2014. On 20 March 2015, the group carried out its first attack in the country with two suicide bombing attacks to Badr and Al-Hashoosh mosques in Sanaa. The attack killed 137 people and injured 345 others. Since then, ISIS has conducted many attacks, majority of which the Houthis were the main targets.

To justify its actions, ISIS has capitalised on the anti-Shi'ite narrative in many of its campaigns. This anti-Shi'ite narrative claims Sunnis are oppressed and marginalised by oppressive governments including President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, who are both Shi'ite. In relation to ISIS' branch in Yemen, the group has targeted the Houthis due to their identification with the Shi'ite sect. Like AQAP, ISIS has demonstrated that it is keen to exploit ungoverned territories to stake its claims.

#### *Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)*

AQAP has capitalised on the ongoing unrest and instability in Yemen. On 2 April 2015, in a bid to create chaos and instability in the country, members of AQAP stormed a prison in Mukalla, the capital city of Yemen's Hadhramaut coastal region, freeing more than 300 prisoners. Among them was Khalid Batarfi, a senior leader of AQAP who was involved in the battle with the Yemeni army from 2011 to 2012. On 30 June 2015, another prison break took place and more than 1,200 dangerous prisoners were freed, most of whom were Al Qaeda suspects. The incident took place in Taiz, in central Yemen.

**“ The Saudi-led coalition's involvement in the country has worsened the conflict that is increasingly also becoming more sectarian. The two regional rival powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are jostling power and influence in the Middle East. ”**

U.S.-led drone strikes have killed a number of senior AQAP leaders. These include religious officials, ideologues or spokesmen like Harith al-Nadhari and Ibrahim al-Rubaish, as well as religious and military officials like Nasser al-Ansi. Drone strikes are believed to be a temporary measure in reducing the AQAP threat, as it is reportedly cost-effective and eliminates targets with precision. Western allies, particularly the U.S., are AQAP's main enemies. This contempt for western targets and call to armed jihad is evidenced in the September 2015 issue of Al Qaeda's English online publication, *Inspire*. The group admonishes 'noble mujahedeen' to carry out 'Lone Jihad attacks...' '...the same way it was done in the battles of New York, Pentagon and Boston.'

### Looking Ahead

There is an urgent need for political settlement. Sectarianism has intensified with Saudi Arabia's involvement. Violence in the country has been driven by the underlying problems of economic and political marginalisation. It will be vital to include these main issues on the agenda of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). To end the conflict, regional powers, be it Saudi Arabia or Iran, should not seek to arm the Houthis, southern separatists, or insurgent groups like AQAP or ISIS.

Doing so would be a grave mistake and will see no end to the problem of insurgency in the country. Persistence of the Houthi rebellion may also instigate the southern secessionists to call for separation. The southern secessionists have been marginalised politically and economically during former President Saleh's tenure, and have been protesting since 2007. Policies addressing the conflict should focus on comprehensive long-term solutions, including social cohesion among all parties involved and providing equal access to economic opportunities for all segments of the Yemeni population.

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# Turkey

Aida Arosoaie

Since the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), Turkey has been in the limelight not only due to the use of its territory for the entry of foreign militants into Syria and Iraq but also for the escalation of terrorist attacks on its own soil. On 20 July 2015, a suspected member of the ISIS carried out a bomb attack in Suruc, a city with predominantly Kurdish population. The bomb attack was aimed at the Kurds – an ethnic minority in Turkey, whose kin in Syria and Iraq comprise the strongest military resistance against ISIS. Two days later, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), an outlawed Kurdish militant organisation in Turkey, claimed responsibility for assassinating two Turkish policemen in Sanliurfa. On 24 July 2015, the Turkish government announced it would join the U.S.-led coalition in Syria against ISIS.

## **Breakdown of Ceasefire between Erdogan and the PKK**

PKK's insurgency against the government, which began in 1984, has led to the killings of over 40,000 people to date. In 2013, after two years of secret negotiations, a ceasefire was reached between current president of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Ocalan of PKK who is serving a life imprisonment. The Kurdish insurgency plays an important role in the political dynamics of the Middle East, as it affects countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria and others. However, the ceasefire between PKK and the Turkish government broke down shortly after the assassination of two policemen in Sanliurfa on 22 July 2015 by PKK members. PKK justified the killings as an act of revenge against what they claimed as the cooperation between Turkish authorities and ISIS.

There was also discontent about the passivity of the Turkish government in respect of the fight for the northern Syrian city of Kobani. The fight over the city of Kobani lasted from September 2014 until March 2015. The city is currently controlled by the People's Protection Unit (YPG), a PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish group fighting against ISIS. As the YPG was the main combatant against ISIS, the fight saw Turkish Kurds travel to Syria in order to help their kin. However, Erdogan initially refused to provide assistance to the YPG. He also resisted multiple international calls to join the U.S.-led alliance against ISIS. As a result, most of the Turkish Kurds withdrew their support for Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), accusing him of cooperating with ISIS.

### Turkey's Participation in the Coalition against ISIS

On 23 July 2015, Turkey formally joined the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. Additionally, Turkey permitted the U.S. and its allies to use its Incirlik and Diyarbakir airbases against ISIS. Ankara and Washington also discussed the establishment of a *safe zone* in the northern part of Syria administered by 'moderate rebels' backed by the U.S. and its allies for Syrian refugees.

Critics have denounced Erdogan's entry into the war as a means to suppress the Kurdish insurgency at home and to regain the electoral support it had lost to the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in the parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015 for the first time since 2002.

Since it joined the alliance, Turkey is primarily targeting PKK and YPG. Moreover, the *safe zone* stretching from Jarablus to Azaz in Aleppo province is being seen as an attempt by Ankara to undermine the autonomous Syrian Rojava enclave controlled by the YPG after it seized the area from ISIS. From a political perspective, this is perceived to be an attempt by Erdogan to hinder the enclave from becoming an independent Kurdish state.

The Kurds' standing in the region has been visibly strengthened as they turned out to be the most significant fighters against ISIS. However, Ankara perceives these to be threatening especially because of the territorial expansion of the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria and since the Syrian Kurds are in a non-aggression agreement with Bashar al Assad's regime.

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### ISIS in Turkey

The attacks in Suruc on 20 July 2015 and in Ankara on 10 October 2015 were all suspected to have been carried out by ISIS. Although the group itself did not claim responsibility for these attacks, experts believe that the nature of the attacks and the targets bear ISIS' signature. It is being generally held that ISIS presence in Turkey is primarily to attack and terrorise the Kurds in the country and to polarise Turkey's social fabric so that Erdogan's Party, the AKP, could attack PKK and further stigmatise the Kurds. Nonetheless, this strategy could backfire with a rise in Salafi-jihadi radicalisation in Turkey.

On 1 June 2015, ISIS released its first official publication in Turkish entitled *Konstantiniyye* – a term which refers to the Ottoman denomination of today's Istanbul. The theme was the “Conquest of Constantinople” and included quotes from the Hadith to elicit support from the conservative Muslims of Turkey in conquering Istanbul “with the call of takbir (Tekbir or Takbeer, is the term for the Arabic phrase Allāhu Akbar usually translated as “God is [the] greatest,” or “God is great”) and without weapons or blood.”

The magazine was published on the occasion of the national parliamentary elections in Turkey and the annual celebration of the conquest of Constantinople. The latter, commonly referred to as “Fetih Günü”, commemorates the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453.

### Looking Ahead

This would mean that Ankara needs to be more circumspect about its rather ambivalent understanding of ISIS and its intentions. Moreover, it is necessary that Ankara reevaluates its policy against the Kurds in the country especially as the latter are becoming increasingly urbane, better educated and politically sensitised. This makes it all the more difficult for the government to suppress the Kurds in the name of terrorism, especially after the formation of PKK’s Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movements (YDG-H), an organisation which was formed in 2012, comprising members aged between 15 and 25 who grew up during the state-led oppression against the Kurds in the country. Youth movements of rival political parties are equally threatening for the current state of affairs in Turkey as well. Examples include “Idealist Hearths” – a youth organisation affiliated with the Nationalist Movement Party – and youth movements affiliated with radical elements of the AKP. These movements and militias are likely to be media-savvy, and predisposed to radicalisation due especially to their encounters with the Turkish military.

Another source of destabilisation in the country could be the revival of defunct organisations and their nefarious activities during the Dirty War – which refers to Turkish regime’s crackdown on the Kurdish insurgency in the 1990s. This was marked by torture and forced disappearance of civilians. Two such organisations widely known for brutal crackdown of the Kurdish insurgency were the Huda-Par – a Kurdish Islamist Party suspected of being an offshoot of the Turkish Hezbollah – and Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele, also known as Gendarmerie Intelligence Organisation (JITEM) – an intelligence unit comprising of the Turkish gendarmerie (a branch of the Turkish Armed Forces). They operated above the law and were perceived by the Kurds as being aligned with the Turkish government.

**“ Ankara needs to be more circumspect about its rather ambivalent understanding of ISIS and its intentions. Moreover, it is necessary that Ankara reevaluates its policy against the Kurds in the country especially as the latter are becoming increasingly urbane, better educated and politically sensitised. ”**

Moreover, the release of *Konstantiniyye* at the time of the national parliamentary elections indicates a potential change in the relationship between ISIS and the Turkish government. The two were previously believed to be in a tacit understanding with each other, especially due to their similar views in respect of the Kurds and Bashar al-Assad. By urging conservatives Muslims in Turkey to reclaim Istanbul, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi is clearly projecting a more provocative stance which Ankara could find hard to deal with.

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# Egypt

Rohan Gunaratna

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Egypt, the most populous Arab state, faces a range of threats from extremist and terrorist groups, not the least of which includes the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) Sinai Province. These groups, located in both the Sinai Peninsula and mainland Egypt, present a significant threat to the neighbouring countries as well, especially Israel. The political and social turmoil brought about by Arab Spring, created fertile conditions for these organisations to rise to prominence leading to dramatic transformations in the security environment of the country and the region now.

The Arab Spring uprisings, which unseated President Hosni Mubarak, brought Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's first and oldest Islamist organisation to power. Muslim Brotherhood's rule under Mohammad Morsi was marked by a marginalisation of democratic forces, including women, seculars, liberals and Coptic Christians. Moreover, Morsi ignored the rising discontent, even to the extent of passing legislations without judicial oversight. This resulted in mass protests against the Muslim Brotherhood's rule. Eventually, Morsi and his party were removed from power in 2013 in a coup d'état by the then army chief, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who became President on 8 June 2014.

On 9 August 2014, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), was also dissolved. This came after the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist group by Sisi's government on 25 December 2013 and upheld by the judiciary. Morsi was imprisoned and sentenced to death on 16 May 2015. This was followed by a series of attacks by some members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

On 23 June 2015, the Egyptian government also banned Muslim Brotherhood literature, in a move that was seen to put greater pressure on activities of the group. As a consequence, some members of Muslim Brotherhood once again turned violent, taking up arms against the state.

Egypt also faces a severe threat from Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (renamed ISIS Sinai Province after it declared allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi), which is responsible for carrying out most of the attacks in the Sinai region. President Sisi has vowed to counter these threats and restore stability to the country. However, due to on-going instability in the region, managing the security remains a challenge for the Egyptian military, law enforcement and national security agencies.

### **Extremist and Terrorist Groups in Egypt**

Several armed extremist and terrorist groups emerged in Egypt as a consequence of the instability caused by the Arab Spring. One of these is Ansar Bait al-Maqdis which, in 2012, set up training camps in the Sinai region. Ansar Bait al-Maqdis was responsible for targeting Jewish settlements near the border of Gaza, including an attack on a tourist bus in Eilat in September 2012 that killed eight Israelis. To avoid conflict with Israel, Egypt cleared a one kilometre stretch of land from the Gaza border.

According to Human Rights Watch, as of September 2015, Egypt has demolished more than 3,255 homes and other buildings in the Sinai Peninsula bordering Gaza which were believed to have been linked to Ansar Bait al-Maqdis.

Initially, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis had complex affiliations, building ties with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Libya's Ansar al Shariah, the Islamic State of Iraq (predecessor of ISIS) and al Nusra in Syria. On 30 June 2014, some members of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in the Sinai province pledged allegiance to ISIS; this was followed by the pledge of allegiance by Jund al-Khilafah in Egypt on 23 September 2014. The latter is a splinter group from Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) that primarily operated in Algeria but has also expanded its operations in Egypt.

The group has threatened to strike American interests and kill Christians in Egypt. In October 2014, two envoys of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis met ISIS leaders in Syria and received training, weapons and funds.

**“ Several armed extremist and terrorist groups emerged in Egypt as a consequence of the instability caused by the Arab Spring. One of these is Ansar Bait al-Maqdis which, in 2012 set up training camps in the Sinai region. ”**

As many Sinai-based members of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis have pledged allegiance to Baghdadi, the group has been split into two factions. The Sinai faction joined ISIS, rebranding itself as ISIS Sinai Province, whereas the Nile Valley faction continued to work with Al Qaeda.

Members of ISIS Sinai Province are actively engaged in attacking Western and Egyptian military targets. For instance, in June 2015, the group launched coordinated attacks on Egyptian military bases in Sinai Peninsula, which left 17 soldiers and more than a hundred militants dead. The attack also involved terrorists planting bombs along a road between Sheikh Zuweid and al-Zuhour army camp and seizing two armoured vehicles, weapons and ammunition.

The Arab Spring also created an opportunity for Al Qaeda, led by an Egyptian Dr Ayman al Zawahiri, to reinvest in Egypt. Mohammed Jamal, an Egyptian Al Qaeda operative, had attempted to form his own branch of Al Qaeda in Egypt and Libya before he was arrested in 2012. However, Egyptians continued to feature in Al Qaeda's branch in Africa - Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

### **ISIS in Egypt**

On 16 February 2015, ISIS released a video featuring the mass beheadings of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya. In response Egyptian government launched airstrikes against ISIS

bases in Libya while U.S. condemned the attacks and religious figures, community leaders and politicians expressed their condolences. Nevertheless, ISIS attacks on Christians have had deleterious effects on relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt.

On 3 July 2015, ISIS Sinai fired rockets into Gaza, promising to uproot Israel and secular Palestinian movement Fatah, headed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Egypt and Israel cooperated to break up the movement of supplies to Gaza from Egypt. Although ISIS' operational strength is in Sinai, ISIS seeks to target the mainland too operating on both sides of the Nile. In addition ISIS Sinai Province has links with several ISIS affiliates in the cyber domain.

Several skilled military and law enforcement personnel, including Egyptian Special Forces Colonel Hisham al Eshmawi and Egyptian military officer, Walid Badr, have defected to ISIS in Sinai. The defection of military and law enforcement personnel has provided the terrorist organisation with the capability to attack the military, police and other hardened targets. In addition, the tourism industry has not been spared. On 10 June 2015, ISIS Sinai Province attempted a suicide attack on the Karnak Temple in Luxor but this was thwarted by the police. The attack was planned by Colonel Hisham al-Eshmawi's deputy, Ashraf Ali Hassanein al-Gharabli, who was killed on 9 November 2015 in a gunfight with the Egyptian police.

On 29 June 2015, Hisham Barakat, Egypt's chief prosecutor was killed by a car bomb attack in Cairo, along with three civilians. Mr Barakat had sent thousands of Islamists, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood for trial, since the overthrow of Morsi in 2013. Hundreds of them were sentenced to death or to life imprisonment.

Owing to his efforts to fight militants, he received several death threats. No one took responsibility for the attack, which is why it is unlikely that ISIS Sinai – which has in the past always claimed responsibility for attacks carried out by their members – was behind it. It is possible that the attack was carried out by any of the Islamist group whose members Mr Barakat prosecuted. Demonstrating its reach, ISIS Sinai bombed the Italian Consulate in Cairo on 11 July 2015, which killed one person and wounded at least 10. The group has also emulated ISIS' signature beheading of its captives.

**“ Of all attacks carried out by ISIS Sinai Province this year, the bombing of the Russian airline Metrojet Flight 9268 was the most prominent. The attack was in response to Russia's campaign against ISIS in Syria. ”**

On 22 July 2015, ISIS' Sinai Province kidnapped a Croatian expatriate - Tomislav Salopek - working for a French company in Egypt, and beheaded him. Before carrying out the execution, the terrorist group demanded the release of female Muslim prisoners from Egyptian prisons. On 16 July 2015, ISIS Sinai Province also attacked an Egyptian coastguard vessel two miles off the coast of northern Sinai, an area bordering Israel and the Gaza Strip. The vessel burst into flames, injuring the crew.

Of all the attacks carried out by ISIS Sinai Province this year, the bombing of the Russian airline Metrojet Flight 9268 was the most prominent. The attack was in response to Russia's campaign against ISIS in Syria. The 214 Russian and three Ukrainian passengers and seven crew members on board the flight were killed in the mid-air explosion. Both ISIS and ISIS Sinai claimed responsibility for the attack.

ISIS Sinai Province ended the year 2015 on a high note by claiming responsibility for the bombing of an Egyptian police checkpoint in Giza, one day after killing an Egyptian army officer and his driver in Cairo. In a communiqué distributed on Twitter and Telegram on 31 December 2015, the group reported that a security detachment detonated a large Improvised Explosive Device (IED) at the police checkpoint, killing and wounding all who were inside.

While Egyptian media reported that security forces discovered and detonated the IED outside the checkpoint, ISIS claimed that the security forces concealed the invasion due to the extent of their losses.

ISIS Sinai Province is seen to be establishing itself as a potent threat not only to Egypt but also to the region. On 7 January 2016, the group claimed responsibility for an attack on a gas pipeline carrying gas to Jordan. ISIS Tweet and Telegram monitored by SITE Intelligence Group reported that ISIS Sinai Province took responsibility for the attack and claimed that not one drop of gas will reach Jordan unless it is permitted by the emir (leader) of the believers. The emir the group referred to is Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Numerous attacks were also conducted by a group called Afnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt). The group is situated in the Sinai region but also carries out operations in mainland Egypt. In April 2015, the leader of this group, Hammam Attiyah, was killed in a gunfight in Cairo with the police. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) both published eulogies commemorating him.

### Looking Ahead

With the instability at home and the greater Middle East, terrorist threat to both mainland and peninsular Egypt is likely to grow. With its attacks on Coptic Christians, ISIS has threatened the traditionally harmonious relations between the Christians and Muslims of Egypt. The group's vicious campaign of terror has also extended to tourism and investment infrastructure, which has severely impacted the country's economy. ISIS Sinai Province has also penetrated the rank-and-file of the military collecting information that has enabled them to attack both military officers and their reinforcements.

ISIS Sinai Province is replicating the Al Qaeda franchise's tactic of expansion by harnessing the extant Islamist infrastructure in Egypt. ISIS' headquarters in Syria is working closely with ISIS Sinai Province to project its reach into Africa more specifically using it to facilitate travel of jihadists to and from Libya.

So far, the Egyptian agencies have pre-empted ISIS Sinai Province's plans to create a safe zone in northern Sinai, giving them little opportunity to hold ground and fight.

**“ With its attacks on Coptic Christians, ISIS has threatened the traditionally harmonious relations between the Christians and Muslims of Egypt. The group's vicious campaign of terror has also extended to tourism and investment infrastructure...”**

But the overall counter measures need to be calibrated so as not to overreact which could alienate the public, even as the government conducts a campaign delegitimising ISIS and its ideology.

Egypt has been a victim of a number of atrocities from domestic and foreign terrorist groups in the last four decades but the threat was kept under a tight rein until Egypt's long-ruling leader Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down as a result of 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The terrorist threat took a turn for the worse after the ousting of Morsi in 2013. At this point, ISIS Sinai Province leads has become the source of most threats in the country and the region though the potential of mischief by groups like Afnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Revolutionary Punishment, and Al Murabitoon cannot be underestimated.

The Muslim Brotherhood also poses a serious threat to Egypt. In 2013, after Morsi was forced out of power and given the death penalty, the Egyptian government declared the group a terrorist organisation. Since then, hundreds of its members either face life imprisonment or the death penalty. The Muslim Brotherhood has always harboured extremist ideas; this was apparent even when it was in power.

In response to the crackdown by Sisi's government, some of its members are reverting to violence. Some of the key leaders and the group's operatives have relocated overseas, from where they are providing support and urging the youth to commit violence against the state. It is therefore crucial that the international community backs the Egyptian government in its fight against extremism and terrorism from groups like Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS Sinai Province and others.

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# Libya

**Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff**

In 2015, four years after the fall of leader Muammar Gaddafi, Libya is torn by a conflict between two fronts – the internationally recognised government and its elected parliament, and an unofficial government controlling Tripoli, each backed by competing armed factions. The discontent and division arise from disputes concerning the legitimacy of Libya’s transitional governing authorities primarily on religious grounds. Many former rebels – including Islamists – perceive the post-Gaddafi government as broadly acceptable, and wanted to influence it from the inside. However, extreme hard-line factions condemned it for being based on democratic elections, relying on former members of Gaddafi’s regime, and failing to apply Sharia (Islamic Law).

The warring sides have yet to reach any agreement on a unity government even after a U.N.-brokered year-long dialogue. The process has been complicated by armed hostilities, shifting alliances on both sides, and divergent interests of neighbouring countries and regional powers. The political impasse however has made it possible for the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) to establish a foothold in Libya. Other factors complicating the process include local conflicts and the grievances of those in Libya’s vast southern region and ethnic minorities such as the Tuareg, Tebu, Arab and Amazigh tribes. Fighting involving tribal and ethnic groupings emerged after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Their grievances stem from the perception that they are being side-lined in negotiations and initiatives involving Libya’s future. Libya has also been plagued by a growing presence of militant and extremist groups.

## A Divided Government

In 2015, divisions within the Libyan government have further eroded the prospects for stability and peace in the country after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. In 2011, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was set up as a transitional arrangement. The subsequent failure of the NTC in laying down clear rules for disarming the revolutionary armed groups (forces fighting for or against Gaddafi) or effectively integrating them into the state security forces has given rise to various hybrid elements to support the police. These hybrid forces, which included the Supreme Security Committee, and the army, including the Libya Shield Forces, were created to establish a degree of control over and to organise the country's numerous revolutionary armed groups.

Divisions emerged after the 2014 election failed to achieve any outcome on a political unity in Libya. Fajr Libya, or “Libya Dawn” – a diverse coalition of armed groups comprising both former rebels from the city of Misrata and Islamist-leaning brigades – rejected the election's outcome and seized control of Tripoli. After the Islamists lost many of its seats in the parliament and accused the new parliament of being dominated by supporters of Gaddafi, they set up a rival government, known as the new General National Congress (GNC), in Tripoli, the capital, seeking to restore the old national congress. The internationally recognised government emerged victorious in the elections and relocated to Tobruk, a city in eastern Libya, located along the Mediterranean coast near the Egyptian border.

As forces aligned with the Tobruk government had fought against Fajr Libya, the conflict has become divided along international lines. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have launched air strikes targeting Libya Dawn, while Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan are believed to have provided the Islamist-dominated coalition with varying degrees of support. For a year, Tripoli has been held by Fajr Libya. The east of Libya is governed by an internationally-recognised government and elected parliament, backed by a loose network of armed factions, including a divisive former Gaddafi ally, General Khalifa Haftar.

Currently, the state has two rival governments, with two parliaments and two state-owned oil companies, each backed by loose coalitions of

**“ The subsequent failure of the NTC in laying down clear rules for disarming the revolutionary armed groups (forces fighting for or against Gaddafi) or effectively integrating them into the state security forces has given rise to various hybrid elements to support the police.”**

armed forces predominantly inspired by local or tribal loyalties, rather than by a concept of statehood. The existing conditions have complicated the process for a dialogue for a unity government. Moreover, a United Nations brokered year-long dialogue for a unity government has yet to be established. This has allowed militants to take advantage of the chaos and gain greater ground.

## ISIS in Libya

Taking advantage of the power struggle in the country, ISIS set up its branch in the country early this year and gained some momentum. The group took control of Sirte city and has attracted foreign fighters to its ranks.

Nonetheless, the group is trying very hard to hold its presence in the country. Majlis Shura Shabab Al-Islam (MSSI), an Islamist group in Libya, associated with Ansar Al-Sharia, has gained control over the Libyan coastal city of Derna. In June 2014, MSSI pledged allegiance to ISIS' leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, and was later accepted to be part of ISIS. In June 2015, however, they were pushed out from their stronghold by Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, an Al Qaeda affiliate and a powerful local militia.

Holding Sirte has not been without challenges for ISIS. In August 2015, clashes erupted in Sirte between ISIS and Islamist residents, most of whom were from the Ferjan tribe, in what would appear to be a response against ISIS' hardline ways. ISIS responded with a brutal crackdown, resulting in the killings of 57 people. The group also conducted public beheadings of twelve members of the tribe near a school to strike fear in the hearts of the people.

The control of Sirte by ISIS was accomplished within six months of the group's seizure of a radio station, the Wataniya television studio, the immigration centre, Ibn Sina Hospital, the University of Sirte, local government buildings and the city's power plant. The group also took several towns near Sirte, giving them complete control over Sirte.

ISIS' success in holding Sirte was largely a result of divisions among existing Islamist groups. The Islamists have devoted their efforts and resources in fighting General Haftar as he was the main adversary. ISIS was able to draw strength from their unresolved struggles.

Securing Sirte is of strategic importance as the area serves as a gateway to both Europe and Africa, which will ensure a steady supply of foreign recruits for ISIS. ISIS' desire to control Libya's vast and oil and gas wealth would also deprive Europe, especially Italy, of important natural resources. Major oil facilities are located in Sirte, potentially providing ISIS with a new source of funding through oil trading.

### Looking Ahead

Despite the divisions in the country, on 11 July 2015, 18 out of the 22 participants of the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue signed a preliminary framework agreement in Skhirat, Morocco, tabling a way out of a conflict that has left Libya torn between two rival sets of governments with separate legislative bodies and military coalitions since July 2014.

The primary objective of the agreement is to reach broader consensus on differences and to forge a common platform that will form the basis for a peaceful resolution of the political and military impasse in Libya. After which, talks can proceed to the next milestone on the political roadmap, namely, the establishment of a national unity government.

**“ Notwithstanding the process of the political dialogue, there is more that needs to be done. Ceasefires are crucial, as well as cooperation from both sides.”**

The Political Dialogue includes four representatives from each parliament – the internationally recognised House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk and its predecessor, the GNC in Tripoli, as well as the boycotting members from both sides and a number of independents, mainly former bureaucrats. The GNC delegation stayed away from the final talks in Skhirat and refused to sign the agreement due to the ambiguity concerning the power of a separate body, the State Council, and its role in the new setup. The State Council has been set up to absorb GNC members into the government.

Notwithstanding the process of the political dialogue, there is more that needs to be done. Ceasefires are crucial, as well as cooperation between military elements from both sides. This would help in eroding the potential space for growth of ISIS elements.

In addition, the country will also need to find avenues to resolve the issue of illegal migrant smugglers who capitalise on the chaos to send their cargos across the Mediterranean from Libya's coast. Refugees flocking out of the country to Europe and other countries could pose serious security issues to the respective countries. The stabilisation of Libya therefore is critical not only for the country itself, but also for the international community.

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# Nigeria

Atta Barkindo

In 2015, Boko Haram, Nigeria's militant Islamist group, carried out a number of terrorist attacks in the country. Between May and August 2015, the group carried out more than 200 attacks, killing over 5000 people in the Lake Chad border region. Over seventy percent of these attacks occurred in Nigeria, while other attacks occurred in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. As of 2015, the group is suspected to have killed over 17,000 Nigerians, in addition to displacing about 3.3 million others from their homes.

On 3 October 2015, bombs were detonated in Kuje, a satellite city in Abuja, killing over 15. Later that day, another bomb was detonated in Nyanya area of Abuja, killing more than 18 people. According to reliable sources, these bombs were detonated by Boko Haram's suicide bombers, one of which is a woman. Boko Haram later claimed responsibility for the bombings. In March 2015, the group pledged allegiance to ISIS, in a bid to reorganise its leadership. Abubakar Shekau recognises Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the Emir and considers Abu Muhammed al Adnani, ISIS' spokesman, as ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's second-in-command.

In a video posted in July 2015, Shekau refuted a claim by Idris Deby, the President of Chad, which stated that he had been replaced by a new leader called Abu Daoud, referring to himself as the Wali (provincial leader) of the Islamic State West Africa Province, the new name of Boko Haram. Boko Haram has confined itself to Sambisa forest and the Mandara Mountains and also facilitates the recruitment of fighters for ISIS. Current estimates indicate Boko Haram has recruited about 150 fighters on behalf of ISIS.



Boko Haram has relied on guerrilla warfare, mounting attacks to villages at night and escaping by morning. They also use human shields, hiding in densely populated areas to carry out bombings for maximum damage, a method which the group used for the October 2015 bombings in Abuja.

Boko Haram has also used cluster bombs in territories re-taken from the group and in areas it cannot reach easily. These bombs were recovered in contested areas of the northeast that are still under the control of Boko Haram, yet on the verge of being retaken by the Nigerian military of the northeast, particularly the state of Adamawa. Based on media reports, Boko Haram has also targeted market places, religious places of worship as well as military camps and security patrols.

### **Nigeria's Counter-Terrorism Approach**

President Buhari's strategy is holistic, combining the use of military approach as well as negotiation. In principle, the rhetoric is tilted towards economic empowerment of marginalised northern communities at the risk of radicalisation.

A regional summit of the Lake Chad border countries (Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin) was held on 11 June 2015. The countries agreed to strengthen the Regional Intelligence Fusion Unit (RIFU) for greater intelligence sharing. President Buhari also secured from the summit the transfer of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) headquarters from Nigeria to Chad, with an approved USD\$30 million for the building and equipping of the MNJTF Headquarters.

The MNJTF was set up in 1998 by the governments of Chad, Niger and Nigeria as a direct response to the cross-border crimes and to mitigate the flow of arms orchestrated by illegal aliens. These problems were often exacerbated due to the porous borders between the countries. In 2012, the three countries extended the mandate of the MNJTF to cover counter-terrorism operations, and specifically target Boko Haram.

At the national level, President Buhari announced the relocation of the military command from Abuja to Maiduguri in May 2015. This was done in order to improve coordination and intelligence among security agencies deployed against Boko Haram.

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Tactically, Buhari has ceased the initiative to isolate Boko Haram members in the Sambisa forest, and with the help of neighbouring countries such as Chad, Niger and Cameroon, the military has blocked escape routes and safe havens and ultimately retaken most of the territories controlled by the group. He also endorsed the Countering Violent Extremism Programme inaugurated by the office of the National Security Adviser in January 2015 which receives funding from the European Union Technical Assistance to Nigeria's Evolving Security Challenges (EUTANS).

Part of this programme aims to counter radicalisation on fringe communities in northern parts of the country, particularly in Damaturu (Yobe state), Mubi (Adamawa state) and Gworza (Borno state) that feel marginalised and excluded from the mainstream. These communities were considered because they have been hit hard by the Boko Haram conflict, and as a result of poverty, unemployment and low level of education, the inhabitants are at risk of being radicalised. They also continue to be targeted in Boko Haram attacks.

President Buhari also put in place plans to implement pro-poor development initiatives in the north. These initiatives include the rebuilding of roads, hospitals and places of worship that have been destroyed. In addition, President Buhari has plans to diversify the Nigerian economy, so as to eliminate the country's reliance on the oil industry and put a new focus on agriculture, with a view to creating employment in the country.

On 15 September 2015, while on a visit to France, President Buhari disclosed that the government was in negotiations with Boko Haram. Prior to this, on 6 July 2015, about 182 suspected Boko Haram members were set free from custody in Maiduguri as part of Nigeria's National Army Day celebrations. President Buhari also ordered the withdrawal of all military checkpoints across the country except in the north eastern states of Adamawa, Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe, in a move that is likely linked to the need to deploy more forces against Boko Haram.

### **Trajectory of Threats by Boko Haram**

The withdrawal of military and security checkpoints across the country, with the exception of the Northeastern regions, is likely to empower Boko Haram and cause members of the group to infiltrate other areas and carry out major attacks. The recent attacks in the satellite towns of Kuje and Nyanya in Abuja, attests to this fact. Of particular concern is the attack in Kuje which was carried out close to the prison facility where high-profile Boko Haram members are kept.

Similarly, the sudden release of 182 members of Boko Haram from prison without due assessment and rehabilitation leaves such members vulnerable to being re-absorbed by Boko Haram. More than retaking territories from Boko Haram, the Nigerian military has demonstrated a lack of commitment in sustaining security in these retaken areas. Boko Haram is likely to take advantage of the lack of security in these areas and attempt to make a comeback aided by its familiarity with the rugged terrain of the Mandara Mountains and local language.

Before President Buhari came to power, collaboration between the Lake Chad border countries, Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, on security and immigration issues was minimal. The inability to assert regional dominance in terms of military and security cooperation at

## **“ Attacks by Boko Haram have become more vicious, particularly in light of its recent alliance with ISIS.”**

these open border areas may continue to provide Boko Haram with the space and the agility to carry out attacks. Thus, without security at these border areas, Boko Haram can freely recruit or conscript from villages and towns, and also kidnap more women and children as strategic tools for negotiations.

Finally, the growing alliance between Boko Haram and ISIS is likely to increase the number of attacks in the coming months. The videos shown in 2015 reflect the deepening level of collaboration between the two groups. ISIS released the English edition of its al-Bayan news bulletin on 9 July 2015, which included reports of the twin suicide operations carried out by Boko Haram in Chad in June 2015. On 23 June 2015, ISIS distributed a 4 minute 46 second video on Twitter featuring a Boko Haram massacre. In a message on Twitter in Arabic and signed by the Islamic State West Africa Province, Boko Haram also claimed responsibility for the most recent suicide bomb blasts in Abuja.

### **Looking Ahead**

Following the election of President Buhari in May 2015, there has been renewed hope that his integrity and military experience may put an end to the conflict. Attacks by Boko Haram have become more vicious, particularly in light of its recent alliance with ISIS. President Buhari's strategy against Boko Haram has seen an increase in regional collaboration in military operations and intelligence sharing. At the national level, President Buhari has moved the military command to Maiduguri, the hotbed of Boko Haram activities, taken care of security forces' welfare, reabsorbed the sacked soldiers, tightened the rope around the Sambisa forest and endorsed the countering violent extremist programme funded by the European Union (EU).

There is however, a need for the government to set up a team of religious scholars and researchers to undertake a comprehensive study of the ideology which forms the basis of the Boko Haram conflict so as to provide an effective counter narrative for deradicalisation programme. Islamic and Christian scholars across the country, particularly in northern Nigeria, should cooperate with communities in stemming the tide of radicalisation in mosques, churches and community gatherings, and to make it difficult for Boko Haram to poach and recruit especially the youth. Security forces should endeavour to work with local communities, particularly the vigilante groups, so as to build a sustained defense against Boko Haram's activities in the retaken areas.

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# Somalia

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**Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff and Nur Aziemah Azman**

In 2015, Somalia continued its fight against terrorism while seeking to expand its authority and attempting to stabilise those areas reclaimed from the Al Qaeda-linked militant group, Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen, also known as Al Shabaab. This year, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), a peacekeeping mission sanctioned by the United Nations, carried out operations against Al Shabaab, and dislodged the militant group from at least two of its major strongholds. Nevertheless, Somalia and AMISOM continue to face challenges which include, liberating other areas from Al Shabaab's control, and stabilising those areas with development projects and humanitarian support. Concurrently, the country needs to remain extremely vigilant against the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), as it vigorously seeks to gain a stronger foothold in Somalia.

## **Al Shabaab**

Al Shabaab has been losing territories over the last four years to the military forces, but its capabilities seem unaffected. Notwithstanding threats to the surrounding countries, including Kenya and Ethiopia, the militant group remains the main threat for Somalia. After losing its leader in 2014 and being stripped of its many territories, in 2015, Al Shabaab changed its strategy. Many of the major attacks were conducted locally in the country with the security apparatus and lawmakers being the main targets. Due to Somalia's offensive against the group that resulted in the loss of many of its strongholds, Al Shabaab carried out two major attacks to AMISOM this year.



On 26 June 2015, Al Shabaab attacked an AMISOM base in the small town of Leego, northwest of Mogadishu. Intense fighting ensued between the AMISOM forces and Al Shabaab, resulting in the death of at least 50 soldiers. It was reported that Al Shabaab took control of the base, raised their flag and looted weapons. On 1 September 2015, another base belonging to AMISOM in Janale, southeast of Mogadishu, was attacked. A large number of Al Shabaab fighters, reported to be at least 200, stormed the base. Al Shabaab claimed at least 70 soldiers were killed in the attack.

Also in 2015, Al Shabaab attacked several hotels in Mogadishu which were frequented by lawmakers and government officials. On 20 February 2015, the group attacked Central Hotel which resulted in the death of at least 25 people. On 1 November 2015, the group attacked the Sahafi hotel resulting in the deaths of at least 13 people. Lawmakers were among the casualties in both attacks.

### **Response against Al Shabaab**

AMISOM has been conducting special offensive operations against Al Shabaab, together with the Somali forces. In July 2015, AMISOM and Somali forces jointly initiated an operation, codenamed “Operation Jubba Corridor” together with Ethiopian and Kenyan troops. The operation targeted the Bay, Bakool, and Gedo regions that share borders with Ethiopia and Kenya. Within a few weeks, the operation succeeded in pushing Al Shabaab out of its strongholds.

Two of Al Shabaab’s strongholds were in Bardere town in Gedo, and Dinsoor town in Bay. Bardere is a strategic crossing point for Al Shabaab fighters and is used as a launching pad to attack the port city of Kismayo, Baidoa city, the port town of Barawe, as well as in the Kenyan border towns of Elwak and Mandera, where two major attacks by Al Shabaab in November and December 2014 killed 28 and 36 respectively. Meanwhile, Dinsoor, which is used as a launching pad to attack other parts of the country, has also been used as a sanctuary for Al Shabaab’s top leadership cadre since the fall of Barawe in October 2014.

### **ISIS’ Influence in Somalia**

In early October 2015, ISIS media released several videos featuring ISIS fighters from Somalia.

**“ Due to Somalia’s offensive against the group that resulted in the loss of many of its strongholds, Al Shabaab carried out two major attacks to AMISOM this year. ”**

The ISIS Somali fighters in the videos urged other fighters in Somalia to join the ranks of ISIS, stressing the importance of unity and the peril of division. They emphasised the obligation to pledge allegiance to ISIS’ leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The fighters also encouraged fighters in Somalia to defect and leave their group, should the leader of their group refuse to give their pledge to al Baghdadi. They reiterated that the objectives of fighting alongside ISIS is in accordance to the way of God and aimed at achieving a state or “caliphate” ruled by Sharia (Islamic Law).

Following the release of the videos enticing Somali fighters to join ISIS, on 23 October 2015, Shaykh Abdiqadir Mumin, a senior Al Shabaab commander based in the Puntland region of Somalia, pledged allegiance to Baghdadi. 20 other Al Shabaab fighters also joined him in the pledge. Subsequently, an ISIS video released on 8 November 2015 featured Somali fighters pledging allegiance to al Baghdadi. However it is not clear whether the fighters were members of Al Shabaab.

Al Shabaab's leaders have given due warnings to defected fighters. Al Shabaab is known for their harsh treatment of those who break away or are suspected to have switched allegiances. One such case is the killing of Al Shabaab’s American fighter, Omar Hammami. Tensions between Hammami and Al Shabaab’s leadership over certain religious principles, coupled with Hammami being seen as an outsider disrupting the local social identity had led to his killing by Al Shabaab’s Amniyyat, the unit responsible for intelligence gathering, counter-intelligence and carrying out clandestine and special operations.



The Amniyat is also responsible for protecting Al Shabaab's emir, and ensuring that he remains in power against both internal rivals and external enemies.

### Significance of Somalia to ISIS

ISIS' stated objective is "Baqiya wa tamaddad", which means to "remain and expand". According to a report released by the Institute for the Study of War, the 'ISIS Global Intelligence Summary', ISIS is said to be executing a complex global strategy across three geographic rings: the "Interior Ring", which is the centre of the fighting and includes Al-Sham, i.e., the Levantine states of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel and Palestine; The "Near Abroad Ring", includes the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, extending east to Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the "Far Abroad Ring" includes the rest of the world, specifically Europe, the U.S. and Asia.

The strategy of ISIS' pursuit of expansion into Somalia, which falls under its Near Abroad Ring, is to find organised local groups and seed them with resource and training to increase their combat effectiveness. With this strategy, ISIS has succeeded in expanding into Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Nigeria. Al Shabaab is an organised group with trained fighters. If the group joins hands with ISIS, it will help ISIS prepare the ground for its future expansion into the rest of the Horn and East Africa.

After challenging Al Qaeda's presence in Yemen by creating a wilayat (province) towards the end of 2014, ISIS seeks to undermine Al Qaeda even further by calling Al Shabaab fighters, to join its ranks. With the failure of governance and lawlessness across the country, ISIS could use Somalia as a safe haven for its fighters. As Somalia is situated close to Yemen, a war-torn country, ISIS' establishment of its branches in both countries may provide safe haven and safe passage for its fighters travelling to and from Africa.

In addition, Somalia's location in the Horn of Africa has considerable importance for trade routes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Piracy is one of the issues faced by vessels travelling through those routes. If ISIS were to secure the Horn of Africa and exploit piracy, it may benefit the group economically as well as strategically.

**“ ISIS’ stated objective is... to remain and expand. With this strategy, ISIS has succeeded in expanding into Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Nigeria. Al Shabaab is an organised group with trained fighters. If the group joins hands with ISIS, it will help ISIS prepare the ground for its future expansion into the rest of the Horn and East Africa.”**

### Looking Ahead

The international community needs to do its best to assist Somalia to recover from all round state failure and free the country from the scourge of terrorism. On 5 May 2015, the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, made an unannounced visit to the country, which highlighted the commitment of the U.S. in its engagement with Somalia. During the visit, Mr. Kerry also addressed the issue of terrorism concerning Al Shabaab with the goal of putting an end to it.

With the extension of the deployment of AMISOM until 30 May 2016 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it is vital that Somalia strengthen its security apparatus, improve coordination among different agencies and improve the presence of its national army throughout the country.

The increased involvement of AMISOM has helped in decreasing the terrorist threat in the country. But there is still a need to continue to work on degrading and finally eliminating the threat posed by Al Shabaab, both in Somalia and in the East African region.

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# Colombia

Franck Emmanuel Marre

In the first six months of 2015, Colombia experienced an increase in attacks from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Illicit criminal activities, including drug cultivation and trafficking, especially of cocaine, remained a persistent problem. In September 2015, both the Colombian government and the FARC made major headway with a justice deal in relation to conflict-related crimes including kidnapping, murder, forced displacement, disappearance and torture.

## Mapping the Conflict: Key Players and Attacks

### *FARC*

In the months after FARC's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire on 17 December 2014, clashes resumed. 11 army soldiers were killed and 18 were injured in an ambush attack by the FARC rebels on 15 April 2015. Subsequently, 26 FARC guerrillas were killed on 22 May 2015 in Cauca during bombing raids carried out by the Colombian army on rebel positions. FARC rebels suspended their unilateral ceasefire and in June and July, began carrying out violent attacks in FARC's strongholds and strategic areas (which include Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Antioquia and Norte de Santander). FARC carried out attacks to the army and destroyed key infrastructure, including electric power lines and main roads. Rebels blew up the Transandino oil pipeline in Nariño on 25 June 2015, cutting off the water supplies in the town of Tumaco.

In July 2015, FARC called for a unilateral one-month ceasefire in an attempt to defuse tensions. On 26 July, President Santos responded by ordering the army to suspend air strikes against FARC rebels. This was followed by FARC's announcement that it would extend their ceasefire for an indefinite period, beginning in August. These positive moves were instrumental in deescalating the tensions. On 23 September, a decisive step forward was reached as FARC and the government secured an agreement on the issue of transitional justice.

Although FARC's military capacities remain intact, it is unlikely that the rebels would jeopardise the justice deal by launching major attacks against the army and civilians, unless internal divisions develop within FARC's chain of command. It is estimated that FARC currently has 8,000 rebels under their command.

#### *ELN*

ELN is a Guevarist guerrilla movement formed in 1964 and the second left-wing rebel group after the FARC. The ELN is listed as a Terrorist Organisation by the U.S. and the European Union. The ELN reached the height of its power in 1999 with more than 4,000 insurgents and 50 fronts when they carried out hundreds of kidnappings and hit infrastructure such as oil pipelines and high-voltage power lines. ELN involved in drug cultivation and production since 2,000, often forming alliances with criminal gangs.

There has been an increase in violent attacks carried out by the ELN to security forces and attacks on electric power lines, oil pipelines and villages from December 2014 in an attempt to cause a deeper impact on the public. In April 2015, the army and counter-narcotics police launched a three month military offensive against ELN's main strongholds.

Following an incident on 7 May 2015, when ELN rebels displayed in a school of Norte de Santander a mutilated leg of an army soldier who sustained injuries while removing landmines, President Santos ordered security forces to step up their offensive against rebels. In July 2015, ELN carried out two terrorist attacks in Bogotá, injuring eight. The motive for the attack was likely to challenge the armed forces demonstrating that the military offensives did not weaken ELN's determination to continue with the violence.

**“ Although FARC’s military capacities remain intact, it is unlikely that the rebels would jeopardise the justice deal by launching major attacks against the army and civilians, unless internal divisions develop within FARC’s chain of command. ”**

However, there is a hope that despite the failure of the exploratory talks in December 2014, government could potentially draw ELN to the negotiating table in the near future in the same manner as the justice deal with FARC.

The threat posed by ELN is moderately high. The army should not underestimate their military capacity as they still have the means to cause extensive damage, especially in Antioquia, Norte de Santander and Arauca, which are ELN's strongholds. ELN currently has seven fronts and an estimated 3,000 rebels under their command.

#### *BACRIM (Criminal gangs)*

As a result of the unsuccessful demobilisation process in 2006, many paramilitary groups were able to continue with their hugely profitable criminal activities (mainly drug business and extortions), leading to the rise of Colombia's *Bandas Criminales Emergentes* (BACRIM). These criminal gangs carried out massacres, assassinated left-wing activists and were involved in drug trafficking and extortion.

BACRIM subsequently grew to a point where they became one of Colombia's largest drug trafficking organisations. Most criminal gangs had been eradicated as a result of military offensives carried out by former and the current governments.

The remaining groups that are in operation include *Oficina de Envigado*, *los Urabeños*, *los Rastrojos* and *ERPAC's* (Ejercito Revolucionario Popular Antiterrorista Colombiano or the Popular Revolutionary Anti-Terrorist Army of Colombia) splinter groups. On 23 April 2015, security forces launched a major offensive in an effort to dismantle them in Antioquia, Chocó, Norte de Santander and the Eastern Plains region. As a result, their criminal activities dropped by fifty percent in 2015, as compared to 2014. On 27 September, one of BACRIM's most important leaders and drug traffickers was killed by Colombia's special police unit.

BACRIMs have been significantly weakened although they are still in existence in the country. In January 2015, *los Rastrojos* and *los Urabeños* discussed the possibility of surrender, in exchange for judicial benefits. Authorities are currently working on a legislative proposal aimed at facilitating a massive surrender.

### Challenges to Peace Talks with FARC

Since the early 1980s, the common denominator of all the armed groups involved in the Colombian conflict has been drug production and trafficking. The drug trade is a highly profitable business and has undoubtedly been the key driver of the conflict.

The pervasiveness of the drug business has fuelled corruption in the country. In addition, there is a high level of violence and lawlessness in Colombia as the various armed groups regularly clash with one another to get a larger share in this lucrative business. There is very little that the Colombian security forces and government can effectively do to disrupt the drug issue with solely police and military means.

Although military force is necessary to blunt all the armed groups on the ground, Colombia's counter-insurgency Special Forces and airborne anti-guerrilla operations alone cannot root out the evil entirely. The need for a comprehensive approach must be a *sine qua non* condition for a peaceful and effective resolution of the Colombian conflict.

**“ As long as the grievances involving social and economic inequality remain unresolved, Colombia's armed groups will continue to turn to violence and criminality. ”**

As long as the grievances involving social and economic inequity remain unresolved, Colombia's armed groups will continue to turn to violence and criminality. Peace talks were first initiated by President Santos in 2012 with the FARC in an attempt to put an end to five decades of conflict.

FARC has killed more than 30,000 Colombians over the past twenty years, and more than 200,000 civilians have been killed since the start of the conflict in 1964. In May 2014, the Colombian government and FARC reached an agreement on three among five points on the agenda – land reform, political participation for the rebels in Colombian politics and drug trafficking. Transitional justice and justice for the victims were the remaining two issues that were yet to be negotiated.

A major point of contention between the FARC and the Colombian government arose in 2015, when the issue of transitional justice was taken up for negotiation. The FARC leaders, along with the FARC's chief negotiator Ivan Marquez, had demanded amnesty, refusing to take responsibility for war crimes committed under their command and be condemned to jail, much to the dismay of victims and the general public. In an attempt to defuse tensions, FARC declared a unilateral ceasefire in July 2015. This prompted the government's declaration that it was prepared to restart the talks. This then led to a bilateral ceasefire.



Santos had previously refused to engage in a ceasefire with FARC, as the rebels had re-grouped and re-armed during previous ceasefires in 1982, 1990 and in 1999.

On 23 September, both parties secured an agreement on transitional justice. An amnesty will cover rebels, unless they committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Special courts will be set up to provide accountability for these crimes and to judge both FARC rebels and members of the security forces.

While President Santos' supporters championed the justice deal, the general public and opposition leaders, led by former president Alvaro Uribe, expressed scepticism about ongoing negotiations and were pessimistic about a successful peace agreement.

### Looking Ahead

#### *Peace at the End of the Road?*

The breakthrough related to the justice compromise suggests that peace negotiations with the FARC will likely proceed without major interferences in 2016. On 23 September, FARC and President Santos promised that a peace deal will be signed within six months from the agreement date. There is a general sentiment that the FARC insurgency might soon come to an end.

Nonetheless, the battle for peace is far from over; conditions for the demobilisation of guerrillas have yet to be set, as well as the terms of the bilateral peace agreement. Some challenges include the likelihood that some FARC fronts involved in illicit cultivation and production will refuse to disengage from the lucrative drug business and disarm due to the perceived losses from demobilisation. In addition, the probability of splinter groups with a predisposition to violence could emerge within the FARC, and could seriously jeopardise peace efforts.

2016 will undoubtedly be a tough year as the government, the opposition and the FARC grapple with several contentious issues. Although a successful peace deal could be signed with the FARC, the peace challenge will not be easy as Colombia's criminal and terrorist landscape remains complex, violent and tightly intertwined with drug production and trafficking.

**“ Although a successful peace deal could be signed with the FARC, the peace challenge will not be easy as Colombia's criminal and terrorist landscape remains complex, violent, and tightly intertwined with drug production and trafficking. ”**

That said, a historical opportunity for peace should not be missed. 2016 could potentially be a year full of dangers for President Santos.

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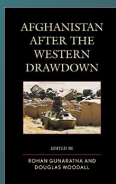
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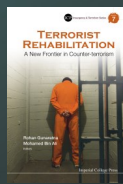


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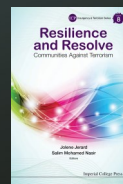
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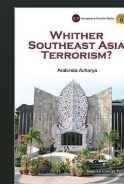
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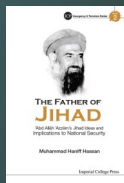
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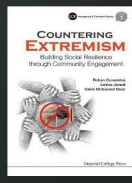
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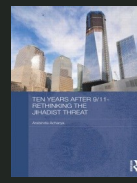
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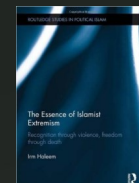
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