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PAKISTAN: GOVERNMENT LOSING OUT TO THE ISLAMISTS

Alexander Sehmer

Pakistan freed Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) chief Hafiz Saeed from house arrest on November 24, one of a number of recent incidents that have shown the government's increasing weakness when it comes to tackling the country's Islamists.

Saeed, the alleged mastermind behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks, had been under house arrest since January 31, with his detention periodically extended by application to the courts. Last month, the Lahore High Court rejected the government's application for a further extension and ordered the JuD leader's release ([Pakistan Today](#), November 24; [Dawn](#), November 24).

This could prove to be a boost to the JuD leader's political ambitions. Following his release, Saeed announced that his group's affiliated political party, the Milli Muslim League, plans to run in next year's general election, although the party is yet to be recognized by Pakistan's electoral commission ([Zee News](#), December 2).

Pakistan's government faced further embarrassment on November 26, when Justice Minister Zahid Hamid stepped down under pressure from Islamist protesters who had blocked roads and staged weeks of demonstrations across the country ([The News](#), November 26; [Geo News](#), November 28). The protesters — many of them supporters of the Islamist Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah political party — were angered by a change to the wording of the oath of office that they claimed to be blasphemous.

An attempt by police units to disperse protesters in Islamabad resulted in at least six deaths and saw about 200 people injured ([Aaj News](#), November 25; [Times of India](#), November 25). Islamists claimed that "dozens" of protesters had been killed, though that claim has not been confirmed in media reports.

Hamid eventually fell on his sword over the abandoned amendment, which the government insisted was a clerical error, but not before protesters attacked his home in Sialkot ([Dawn](#), November 25).

Significantly, it was the military that brought an end to the situation, brokering an agreement that saw Hamid step down and detained Tehreek-i-Labaik supporters

released. The military is the clear winner here, gaining kudos for ending protests that paralyzed large parts of the country and demonstrating a disconcertingly cozy relationship with the Islamists. The government, meanwhile, has seen its authority undermined.

Taken together, events over the last few months have highlighted the difficulties Pakistan's administration faces when it comes to containing the country's Islamist reactionaries, while setting the stage for potential disruption in the build up to next year's elections.

MALAYSIA AND THE PHILIPPINES: SOME SUCCESS AGAINST TERRORIST GROUPS

Alexander Sehmer

Security forces in Southeast Asia have seen a number of recent successes against Islamist militants, killing several key jihadist leaders and dealing a blow to Abu Sayyaf's criminal gangs.

Most recently, Malaysia's Eastern Sabah Security Command (Esscom) announced it had shot and killed a key Abu Sayyaf fighter in a gun battle off the coast of Sabah on December 4. An official said that police opened fire on a small boat in waters off Pulau Kantong Kalungan in response to shots fired by the craft's sole occupant, and caught up with it to find the man, a Filipino, had been killed ([The Star](#) [Malaysia], December 4). Officials later identified the man as Abu Paliyak, apparently determining his identity from the scars of multiple previous gunshot wounds and old injuries from an explosion ([The Star](#) [Malaysia], December 5).

Paliyak was a member of the so-called Remy Group, or "Kumpulan Remy," a small band of Abu Sayyaf fighters responsible for a series of kidnappings in the southern Philippines and off the east coast of Sabah since 2014. At the time of his interception by the security forces, Paliyak was supposedly scouting for further opportunities ([Malaysian Insight](#), December 4). Even before Paliyak's death, however, the group — thought to have comprised only 11 people — had already been largely decimated by the Philippine military ([Bernama](#), December 5).

Indeed, the southern Philippines has been the site of a number of recent victories against regional jihadists since the Philippine military announced in October that it had killed Isnlon Hapilon, the Abu Sayyaf commander who had become Islamic State's (IS) so-called emir in Southeast Asia. Also killed was Omar Maute, the last of the Maute brothers who were behind the takeover of the southern city of Marawi ([SunStar](#), October 16; [al-Jazeera](#), October 16). With their deaths, the Philippine military declared it had finally re-taken the city following months of fighting. A few days later, it announced that Mahmud Ahmad, a Malaysian militant and Islamic law professor thought to have taken over as IS regional chief following Hapilon's death, had also been killed ([Inquirer](#), October 19).

These deaths — more than that of Paliak, who was small fry by comparison — are a blow to jihadist enterprises in the region. Nevertheless, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, all of which are in the jihadists' crosshairs, cannot afford to be complacent. Esscom commanders have warned that, despite bringing an end to the Remy Group, at least four new kidnap and ransom groups are operating out of the southern Philippines ([New Straits Times](#), December 5).

The security forces patrolling the waters around Sabah must remain vigilant, but the real work needs to happen in the Philippines, where it will be necessary to embark on the rebuilding of Marawi and to engage non-IS militant groups if the jihadists are to be denied the opportunity to regroup.

The IS Economy: Will Losing Territory Cripple Islamic State?

Ludovico Carlino

Two recent offensives against Islamic State (IS) in Syria have forced the group further south, squeezing its so-called caliphate into a small pocket of territory between the Syrian and the Iraqi border. More crucially, these two successful operations — one undertaken by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the other by the Syrian army — have almost put an end to the group's ability to generate the revenue necessary to sustain its operations.

On November 12, 2017, the SDF, a U.S.-backed coalition of Sunni/Kurdish fighters spearheading the offensive against IS in eastern Syria, seized the al-Tanak oilfield in Deir al-Zour province from the group ([Hawarnews](#), November 12). Just a few weeks earlier, on October 21, the Syrian army wrested control of the al-Omar oilfield, also in Deir al-Zour province, from IS ([SmartNewsAgency](#), October 21). The ground operation, supported by air power, ultimately deprived the terrorist group of the most important energy asset under its control since 2014 ([Madardaily](#), September 12, 2015).

Establishing and Exploiting a Proto-State

Since the establishment of its self-proclaimed caliphate in 2014, IS effectively reached economic self-sufficiency through the illegal exploitation of energy, business, agricultural and commercial assets in territory under its control in Syria and Iraq ([al-Sumaria](#), January 13, 2016; [al-Modon](#), January 17, 2016). As a consequence, it was frequently described as the richest terrorist organization in history. Without that constant flow of cash replenishing its coffers and underpinning the attempts at governance and the highly bureaucratic structure it set up, its caliphate (used in this article to refer to the administrative body of the IS proto-state) would probably never have reached the resemblance of a functioning entity.

According to IHS Markit Conflict Monitor, which has been tracking the group's finances since the early stages of the caliphate, the IS "business model" rested on four main pillars, established well before the June 2014

proclamation, but developed and pervasively bureaucratized after that. Those pillars were: the production and smuggling of energy-related products, such as oil, natural gas and gasoline; a pervasive system of taxation on the population and on the profits of all commercial activities held in areas under its control as well as the confiscation of commercial assets and properties; a wide range of other illegal activities, including bank robberies, the smuggling of drugs and antiquities, kidnappings for ransom and the exploitation of other local resources such as agriculture; and the management of state-run businesses, including small enterprises such as transport companies or real estate agencies ([BusinessWire](#), December 7, 2015).

At the peak of IS territorial strength in Syria and Iraq, around late 2014, the group was exploiting more than 360 oil and gas fields in the two countries, including those in the oil-rich Deir al-Zour province, home to two-thirds of Syria's energy assets. Meanwhile, about nine million people were living in the caliphate and were compelled to pay taxes and fines to the group or face brutal punishments. Major population centers — this includes Mosul, Ramadi and Tal Afar in Iraq, and Raqqa, Deir al-Zour and Mayadin in Syria — provided the group with crowded markets from which a share of the profits ended up in its own treasury ([Deirezzor24](#), August 5, 2015; [SkyNewsArabia](#), February 20, 2016). This strict control over populace and territory, coupled with the lawlessness in Syria and western Iraq, ultimately enabled IS to create a parallel economy to sustain its territorial gains and fund its war machine.

The group gradually absorbed criminal and illegal smuggling networks that were already operating in Syria and Iraq, especially along the porous border between the two countries, bureaucratizing the whole system to serve its own purposes ([Addiyar](#), March 6, 2016). Hence the caliphate included several *diwan* (departments/ministries) tasked with overseeing economic activities, such as the *Diwan al-Rikaz* (department of “precious resources”) a Treasury (the so-called Bayt al-Mal, or “house of wealth”) and a pool of bureaucrats tasked with implementing their guidelines. [1]

Constant Decline of Territory and Money

All terrorist groups, as with any criminal organization, have historically used illegal means to obtain the funds necessary for their operations and criminal enterprises.

IS was no exception, with the key distinction being that the group needed a constant stream of revenue to run its proto-state. This is not to say that IS has been using generated revenues to improve the economy of the areas under its control. Recent studies have shown the group channeled only a limited portion of its income into local economies, which barely keeps them afloat. [2] Moreover, a portion of the revenues raised was most likely kept back for future operations or used to support IS affiliates elsewhere, as in the case of the Philippines ([Philippine Star](#), October 24).

However, providing basic services to the local population, running militant training camps and supporting thousands of fighters and their families who had migrated from different parts for the world to pursue their dream of living in a state “truly governed by Islamic law” all required regular funds. As this system was largely dependent on the exploitation of territory, IS' ability to generate money has always been strictly correlated to its level of territorial control.

By about mid-2015, for instance, when its caliphate was still encompassing large swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq, IS' overall monthly revenue was estimated at around \$80 million. The majority of this, around 50 percent, came from taxation and confiscation, while around 43 percent came from oil revenues ([Rudaw](#), December 12, 2015). In early 2016, as its territorial control started to decline at a higher pace, the first consistent drop was recorded in the group's monthly revenues — a drop by about 30 percent— as the population living within the caliphate declined to around six million people, leaving IS with fewer people and businesses to tax and less property and land to confiscate.

At the same time, oil production also went down to 21,000 barrels per day from the 33,000 first reported ([al-Hurra](#), February 17, 2016; [Middleeasteye](#) April 18, 2016). This was the result of energy assets being retaken from IS' control, especially in Iraq, and the intensification of the U.S.-led coalition's military efforts to degrade IS' capability to produce energy-related products. Almost all of the main oilfields operated by the group were in fact targeted by airstrikes, resulting in reports of extensive structural damage and the slowing of oil production ([MicroSyria](#), February 15, 2016).

In June 2017, three years after IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the caliphate, the group had lost

more than 60 percent of its territory and 80 percent of its revenues. There was a steady decline in the group's financial streams: oil production and smuggling, taxation, confiscation and other illicit activities. Average monthly oil revenue went down by 88 percent, and income from taxation and confiscation has fallen by 79 percent ([al-Monitor](#), June 29, 2017; [Kurdistan24](#), June 30, 2017). Territorial losses have played a key role in contributing to this loss of revenue. In particular, the group has been hurt by the recapturing of heavily populated Iraqi cities, such as Mosul, and oil-rich areas in the Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Homs.

A Continued Threat

In the past, IS used to increase the fiscal burden on the local population to compensate for declining revenues ([Azzaman](#), January 13, 2016). As the group no longer controls major urban centers, its capability to do so has been degraded. However, at the same time, without a proto-state to run, IS requires less cash.

As the group's strategic priority will now be waging a guerrilla style insurgency in both Syria and Iraq, the group will likely channel the money it has stockpiled over the years to fund its future campaigns. This is a considerable amount, and will be sufficient for IS to remain relevant in the years to come, even without territory under its control to exploit.

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NOTES

[1] For more information on the structure of the IS proto-state: Robinson, Eric. *When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017 (or online [here](#))

[2] Ibid.

Electronic Jihad in Nigeria: How Boko Haram Is Using Social Media

Jacob Zenn

While many jihadist groups have shown themselves adept at using social media to further their propaganda efforts, Boko Haram arrived late to the game. In 2010, the year then Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau declared jihad, one Boko Haram member even posted on the Ansar al-Mujahideen jihadist web forum that "we lack vibrant media experts in video production ... we are seriously lacking expertise, which is presently harming our efficiency" ([Ansar al-Mujahideen](#), November 4, 2010).

Seven years on, however, Boko Haram is on par with most other jihadist groups in exploiting online media, using it to promote its attacks and sharia punishments, and to engage in debates with rival factions. Alongside growing sophistication online, Boko Haram is also controlling territory more stably than at any time in its history, a fact that often goes unreported amid government claims of counter-insurgency success.

What may appear to be quietude from Boko Haram, with its relative lack of dramatic attacks or kidnappings compared to previous years, may actually be obscuring the reality that the group has achieved one of its long-time goals: de-facto governance. Nonetheless, those territories are difficult to access. Therefore, the group's transparency on social media provides one of the best avenues to understand Boko Haram's current ideological and operational development.

The Battle on the Ground

Despite an ongoing military offensive against Boko Haram that began in early 2015, the main factions in the jihadist insurgency in Nigeria — Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram — still control a significant amount of territory in the country's northeast.

According to the latest map of northeast Nigeria from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 50 percent of Borno State re-

mains under insurgent control, as does the eastern border of neighboring Yobe State and scattered parts of northern Adamawa State (reliefweb.int, September). Attack claims and videos by ISWAP and Boko Haram, as well as local reports from the region, establish that ISWAP predominates around northern Borno and Lake Chad, while Boko Haram predominates around southern Borno and into Yobe (peccaviconsulting.wordpress.com, April 11).

The Nigerian military still controls most town centers in eastern Borno and the roads between them, albeit that safe travel is often only possible with a military convoy. The military does not, however, control the countryside, where ISWAP has managed to keep hidden 100 of the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, now in their fourth year of captivity. ISWAP also controls fishing areas around Lake Chad for taxation, and its attack and kidnapping in July of a University of Maiduguri oil exploration team in Magumeri, just north of Maiduguri, is indicative of the extent of its territorial control (vanguardngr.com, July 26).

Boko Haram's strength and territorial presence can also be extrapolated from online videos. One from November 13 shows an attack on the Nigerian military and the theft of a tank, while the group's Eid videos in 2016 and 2017 each showed several hundred people praying and Shekau's deputy, Man Chari, serving as imam (Sahara Reporters, November 13; Sahara Reporters, July 1).

The Nigerian military faces a classic counter-insurgency dilemma akin to what U.S. and Afghan forces face in Afghanistan — the insurgents have high maneuverability in the countryside; are able to resource themselves or retreat across the border into neighboring countries; and the population is either indifferent or has been cowed into submission. ISWAP militants mostly target civilians and supposed government collaborators, and in many cases have better knowledge of the cultural, linguistic and physical terrain than their military opponents.

Behind the scenes of the ground battles in northeastern Nigeria, ISWAP, Boko Haram and Ansaru are also engaged in a battle for supremacy of the jihadist movement and narrative in Nigeria. These three factions have been at odds since two key events in February 2015 and August 2016. First, in February 2015, a *shura* was held where Ansaru opted to remain separate from ISWAP, while the other insurgents, including some defectors

from Ansaru, joined the group (jihadology.net, February 10, 2015). Then, in August 2016, ISWAP itself split, with Shekau being deposed from the leadership by Islamic State (IS). He returned to lead Boko Haram, while Abu Musab al-Barnawi became leader of ISWAP (jihadology.net, August 3, 2016).

Ansaru is now mostly operationally dormant, while ISWAP and Boko Haram sometimes clash in overlapping territories. Militants and civilians generally both prefer ISWAP under al-Barnawi. Boko Haram leader Shekau is known to attack pretty much anyone who resists joining his caliphate, which functions as his fiefdom around Sambisa Forest. That has included his own top commanders if he perceives they are disloyal, whether or not there is evidence to prove that disloyalty (vanguardngr.com, January 28).

The Battle Online

The differences between these factions also play out in the virtual world. Ansaru, for example, has a Telegram account used mostly for posting verses from the Quran and generic praise of al-Qaeda leaders, such as the late Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, or the Taliban's late leader Mullah Umar.

Ansaru members have also been active on Facebook, but most of its posts have been images of Ansaru logos or re-postings from al-Qaeda groups in Syria. There is little from Ansaru in the way of social media activity to suggest it is challenging ISWAP or Boko Haram directly on the ideological field. It has also released almost no images from the battlefield since 2015. This is consistent with the assessment that Ansaru is operationally dormant but its remaining fighters are still observing the insurgency from the sidelines, perhaps waiting a future opportunity to re-enter.

Boko Haram, meanwhile, has released videos through its members' Facebook accounts and on Telegram, as well as via the website of Sahara Reporters. This triangulation of videos overcomes the longstanding problem Boko Haram faced before 2015 when it would send videos to journalists with Agence France-Presse (AFP). The news agency would release only several minutes of the videos, much to the disappointment of the militants. Boko Haram members could also upload the videos to YouTube, but one Boko Haram member lamented that this required fighters to travel long distances to find a

fast and consistent internet connection, and risked YouTube taking down the footage ([AFP](#), August 13, 2013).

Boko Haram had a Telegram account, but it was deleted without warning in early November 2017. The account used the name Khairul Huda, which was the same name as Boko Haram's grainy video branding used before Shekau declared jihad in 2010 ([Youtube](#), October 28, 2011). Nonetheless, Khairul Huda maintains a Facebook page where it continues to release Boko Haram footage and occasionally praises of IS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi — Boko Haram remains loyal to the IS, although independent of it. Finally, Boko Haram has members active on Facebook who praise Shekau and often taunt supporters of ISWAP for various reasons, such as when an alleged ISWAP member who had been active on Facebook was arrested ([cupstv.wordpress.com](#), August 15).

ISWAP has an official Telegram account, while there is also a second Telegram account and a Facebook page maintained by an ISWAP supporter who releases the group's propaganda. ISWAP dramatically upped its online profile on November 15, releasing a selection of its old videos on Amazon, Google Play, Vimeo, Dropbox, Flickr and other platforms for the first time. Previously the group's videos had only been posted on YouTube or were downloadable straight from Telegram ([archive.org](#), November 2014).

The official ISWAP Telegram account has been used to release Hausa language sermons by al-Barnawi, including his interpretations of IS theological debates, such as whether al-Baghdadi is himself an infidel for not declaring al-Zawahiri an apostate. Al-Barnawi sides with the official IS positions ([jihadica.com](#), October 3). The Facebook and Telegram account operated by an ISWAP supporter releases official ISWAP media, but its owner also independently creates material, including pamphlets criticizing groups such as the Taliban for being nationalistic, cooperating with the UN and negotiating with governments.

The overall downturn in IS' media operations may lead to such independent ISWAP media outpacing the IS-sanctioned media. ISWAP's hostage video showing the three abducted University of Maiduguri professors from the oil exploration team in Magumeri was made in al-Barnawi's name and had no official IS branding ([Youtube](#), July 28). While ISWAP shows no indication of

abandoning its loyalty to IS, the video suggests it will have little trouble generating media even if IS' media capabilities deteriorate.

Ideology Online

On the battlefield, ISWAP and Boko Haram appear content with their territorial success, but continue to occasionally stage major attacks. Footage of these can subsequently be used to remind supporters and others online that they continue to hold territory and are frustrating the Nigerian security forces.

The groups' use of virtual spaces has evolved, with social media used to engage in dialogue about ideological and factional differences, and to explain their positions to online followers who are often members of opposing factions.

As well as providing insights for analysts, another incidental consequence of the groups' online presence has been increased dialogue between the factions, although there have not been any accompanying signs of reconciliation.

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Diverging Trajectories in Bangladesh: Islamic State vs al-Qaeda

Nathaniel Barr

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

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

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

Al-Qaeda's Local Appeal

Al-Qaeda's population-centric strategy in Bangladesh aims to exploit the chasm between political Islamists

and secularists, which has become one of the defining fault lines in Bangladeshi society.

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

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

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

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

long underpinned al-Qaeda's interactions with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements.

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

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

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

Violence as a Means and an End

In stark contrast with al-Qaeda's targeted and methodical approach, IS has favored spectacular violence. The group's network in Bangladesh announced its presence in the country in September 2015 with the assassination of an Italian aid worker in Dhaka. In the following months, the group carried out several more assassina-

tions and launched multiple attacks on religious minorities, including Ahmadis and Shia.

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

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

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

IS paid little attention to al-Qaeda's criticism, however, and instead escalated its violence. The apex of the group's activities in Bangladesh came in July 2016, when

IS militants stormed the Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant in a Dhaka neighborhood popular with diplomats, expatriates and wealthy Bangladeshis, taking hostages and killing 20 civilians. IS leveraged its global propaganda machine to maximize the attention the attack received, posting pictures of, and claiming responsibility for, the massacre while its operatives were still in the bakery. It was the first time the group had claimed responsibility for an attack while it was ongoing. [6]

Differing Outlooks

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

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

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

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

off counterterrorism forces, with tensions resulting in bouts of violence between rival factions.

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

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

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

Al-Qaeda Resurgent

With its Bangladesh network still largely intact, al-Qaeda's outlook in the country is promising. Having witnessed the consequences of the Gulshan café attack, it is likely that al-Qaeda will revert to the cautious growth

strategy it pursued prior to the security crackdown, allowing it to further expand its presence.

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

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

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NOTES

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

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

[3] For instance, an article in the second issue of al-Balagh, al-Qaeda's Bengali-language magazine, criticized Hefazat-e-Islam for issuing an appeal to the Bangladeshi Supreme Court to remove a statue of a Greek goddess from the court premises. The article asserted that the

basis of Bangladeshi law was un-Islamic and contravened *sharia*, and called for Hefazat scholars to engage in jihad instead of continuing to work through democratic processes. See article written by Tamim al-Adnani, *al-Balagh*, second issue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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