

# **HOW SOUTHEAST ASIAN AND BANGLADESHI EXTREMISM INTERSECT**

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## I. OVERVIEW

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Links between Bangladeshi and Southeast Asian extremists appear to be growing, fuelled by ISIS and increasing population movements across the region. If many governments in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) treat South and Southeast Asia as two separate regions in their foreign ministries and security agencies, it may be time to think about a broader geographical unit, at least as far as counter-terrorism programming is concerned.

The Bangladesh-Southeast Asian links take several forms:

- Bangladeshi migrants working in Singapore and Malaysia who recruit fellow workers for violence at home – a tiny proportion of the country's overseas workers. Many have been supporters of Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), a group responsible since 2013 for several fatal attacks on secular activists. ABT, which now calls itself Ansarul Islam, is the Bangladesh arm of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).
- Bangladeshi students from middle-class families studying at Malaysian universities who develop pro-ISIS sympathies, either at home or while in Malaysia.
- Bangladeshis who use Kuala Lumpur as the take-off point for travel to Syria.
- Bangladeshis and Southeast Asians who meet each other as ISIS fighters in Syria or Iraq.
- Pro-ISIS Malaysians or Filipinos who try to recruit Bangladeshi and Rohingya migrants in Malaysia to fight in Mindanao.
- Indonesians, Malaysians and others seeking to assist the Rohingya in Myanmar through contacts with Bangladesh-based Rohingya groups.

None of the Bangladeshis arrested thus far in Singapore or Malaysia for extremist activities has been interested in attacking his host country. The focus has been overwhelmingly on Bangladesh itself, as well as on getting to Syria – and in a few cases, to the Philippines. Many have been young men radicalised in the aftermath of the so-called Shahbagh protests in 2013, when secular Bangladeshis massed to demand maximum punishment for Islamist leaders on trial for war crimes during the 1971 independence war.

The connection made between Indonesian and Malaysian ISIS fighters with their Bangladeshi counterparts in Syria is important for two reasons. Indonesian ISIS fighters see the relentless series of attacks in Bangladesh, many of them fatal, as a model for what their own supporters at home should be doing but cannot seem to pull off. They also undoubtedly envy the praise heaped on the attackers by the ISIS leadership in its various propaganda outlets. The desire to emulate Bangladeshi extremists may be an added incentive for Indonesians to encourage violence at home.

The Syria link between Bangladeshis and Southeast Asians could also encourage Bangladeshis seeking to leave the ISIS front to think about stopping to help out in Mindanao before going home. Pro-ISIS recruiters in peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, working with Malaysians who have joined former Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon, would be happy to have more men, including Bangladeshis, to augment jihadi forces depleted by Philippine military operations. Two pro-ISIS Bangladeshi students were ready to leave in early 2017 but were caught in Malaysia and deported.

The wild card could be the new armed Rohingya insurgency operating along the Bangladeshi-Myanmar border, first called Harekat al-Yakin (Faith Movement) and later Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Indonesian and Malaysian mujahidin have long been interested in helping their persecuted brethren in Myanmar but have had no good channel for doing so. The historical ties of Southeast Asian extremists were all to the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation

(RSO) in the late 1980s and 1990s, operating out of southeastern Bangladesh but with some fighters on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Those ties lapsed in 2001 after regional governments cracked down on Jemaah Islamiyah, RSO's chief ally in the region. RSO is not behind the new insurgency, which is doing everything it can to distance itself from international terrorism and the global jihad, but ARSA leaders have turned to some South Asian extremist groups for help with training. They are portraying themselves as an ethno-nationalist movement, similar to the Aceh guerrilla organisation Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) or the insurgency in Thailand's Deep South. But the existence of an armed group on the border mounting attacks on Myanmar security forces could inspire pro-ISIS groups in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia to do more systematic recruiting among their respective Rohingya communities to find individuals willing to carry out attacks on their own.

The urgent task now is for governments, journalists and NGOs to better understand cross-regional interaction among violent extremist organisations and look for interventions that could strengthen local resistance to recruitment.

## II. TRANSBORDER MOVEMENTS

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Extremist links are being forged at a time when movement of people between Bangladesh and Southeast Asia is huge in both directions. Bangladeshis come to Southeast Asia to work in the high hundreds of thousands. Malaysia had some 285,000 registered Bangladeshi workers in 2016 and perhaps as many undocumented, Singapore had some 160,000, with some 60,000 arriving every year for relatively short stays.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority are hardworking men and women trying to improve their families' incomes at home, but a few, like migrant workers elsewhere, have been recruited into extremist study groups.

Southeast Asians travel to Bangladesh for trade and study but also to take part in activities of Tabligh-i-Jamaat, an international Muslim missionary movement founded in Lucknow in 1926. The second largest global gathering of Muslims after the pilgrimage to Mecca is the *tablighi* meeting, Biswa Ijtema, that takes place every year outside Dhaka. According to a *tablighi* source in Jakarta, some 200 Indonesian members travel to Bangladesh each month, and Bangladeshis travel throughout Muslim Southeast Asia in the thousands each year for *khuruj*, an outreach trip for preaching and proselytisation. The *tablighi* movement is conservative but completely peaceful, dedicated to making fellow Muslims more observant. It occasionally has been used as a cover by extremists, however, for facilitating cross-border travel.

A less benign form of interaction – but on a tiny scale – takes place through Hizb ut-Tahrir, the international organisation committed to a global caliphate. While avowedly non-violent, it has endorsed the use of violence by others against “enemies of Islam”, and Indonesia, which has one of the largest branches in the world, has seen a handful of Hizb ut-Tahrir members leave the organisation to cross over into violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> The Bangladesh government frequently accuses Hizb ut-Tahrir of terrorism but often without convincing evidence; it has been banned in Bangladesh since 2009. While the organisation was tolerated in Indonesia from the beginning of democratic reform in 1998, its involvement in mass demonstrations in Jakarta in late 2016 and 2017 led to renewed scrutiny of its agenda and the government announced on 8 May 2017

1 “2 lakh Bangladeshi workers register in Malaysia,” *Daily Star* (Bangladesh), 2 July 2016. See also “Singapore Second Most Popular Destination for Bangladeshi Workers in 2013,” [twc2.org.sg](http://twc2.org.sg), 2 November 2014.

2 Former HTI members include Bahrun Naim, one of the prime instigators of ISIS-linked violence in Indonesia, who has been in Syria since January 2015 and M.Fachry, jailed for recruiting ISIS members through his website [www.mustaqbal.net](http://www.mustaqbal.net) (now closed). The Bangladesh government has asserted that HT members have been involved in terrorist attacks. See for example, “Hizbut-Tahrir men attacked Madaripur teacher,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 June 2016.

that it would be disbanded.<sup>3</sup> The links between the two national branches are more in the form of occasional visits and solidarity protests in Indonesia against arrests of members in Bangladesh.

Education is also a pull factor both ways. “Several thousand” Bangladeshis were studying in public and private Malaysian universities in 2016, while Indonesians, Malaysians and Thais were studying in various schools in South Asia including Bangladesh, hundreds of them through *tablighi* connections.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to direct face-to-face interaction, social media may be playing a role. In 2017 Dhaka and Jakarta were tied for third place after Bangkok and Mexico City with the largest number of Facebook users in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Another mode of interaction is worth noting: refugee outflows of Rohingya to Bangladesh, and human trafficking from Myanmar and Bangladesh to Malaysia, with boats frequently blown off course to Indonesia or pushed back from Thailand. Some 70,000 Rohingya entered Bangladesh between October 2016 and March 2017 to seek refuge from violence in Rakhine state, adding to the hundreds of thousands already there. And traffickers regularly ply the camps to find families willing to pay huge sums to risk their lives taking a voyage by sea to Malaysia, with some hoping eventually to reach Australia. As of early 2017, UNHCR had registered some 800 Rohingya in Indonesia and nearly 56,500 in Malaysia, many of whom had lived there for decades.<sup>6</sup> The persecution of Muslims in Myanmar adds to the potential for radicalisation in diaspora communities and to the perception in extremist circles in Southeast Asia that Rohingya are ripe for recruitment.

There are transnational crime connections as well. The same Bangkok-based mafia responsible for producing fake passports on demand appears to have provided passports for trafficked Rohingya, Uighurs from China seeking to go to Turkey and pro-ISIS sympathisers wanting to travel to the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Drug syndicates, especially those selling methamphetamines known as *yaba* in Bangladesh and *shabu* in Indonesia and Malaysia also cross between South and Southeast Asia. Much of the *yaba* that finds its way into Bangladesh is produced in Shan State, Myanmar with ethnic Rohingya often acting as couriers for drug cartels.<sup>8</sup>

### III. HISTORICAL LINKS

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The historical links between Southeast Asian and Bangladesh-based extremists almost all are Rohingya-related and run through the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO).<sup>9</sup> While thousands of Bangladeshi nationals are believed to have served in Afghanistan fighting against Soviet troops, JI had little interaction with them.<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan veterans established one of Bangladesh's best-known terrorist organisations, Harekat-ul-Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HUJI-B), in 1992. Another organisation engaged in a violent campaign to establish an Islamic state, Ja-

3 “Kapolri Ungkap Rencana Pembubaran Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia”, *jawapos.com*, 28 April 2017.

4 Dietrich Reetz, “Travelling Islam: Madrasa Graduates from India and Pakistan in the Malay Archipelago”, Zentrum Moderner Orient Working Paper No.8, Berlin, 2013, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201306066922> and “Study in Malaysia: Students’ visa approval in 14 days,” *Daily Star*, 21 January 2017.

5 “Dhaka 3<sup>rd</sup> among cities with largest active Facebook users,” *Daily Star*, 15 April 2017.

6 “U.S. accepts Rohingya refugees from Indonesia,” [www.thestar.com.my](http://www.thestar.com.my), 15 February 2017 and “Figures at a Glance, UNHCR Malaysia, [https://www.unhcr.org/my/About\\_Us/@-Figures\\_At\\_A\\_Glance.aspx](https://www.unhcr.org/my/About_Us/@-Figures_At_A_Glance.aspx). UNHCR Malaysia had also registered 10,454 non-Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar as well some 45,000 individuals of other ethnicities from Myanmar.

7 “Master forger arrested in Thailand over fake passports for migrants to Europe,” *Daily Telegraph*, 10 February 2016.

8 “The Myanmar connection,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 6 December 2016.

9 Rohingya Solidarity Organisation broke away in the early 1980s from the Rohingya Patriotic Front, a small guerilla group established by Muhammad Jafar Habib in 1974. It was led by Muhammad Yunus, a medical doctor from Arakan, and initially operated mainly in the area around Chittagong, Cox’s Bazar and Teknaf.

10 The estimates of numbers of Bangladeshi fighters range as high as 8,000, but no one seems to have solid documentation.

maat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), grew out of the Islamist party Jamaat-i-Islam in 1998.<sup>11</sup> While there may have been occasional contact in al-Qaeda training camps after 1999, there were no known operational links between these organisations and JI or other Southeast Asian groups.

#### A. *Ties to the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO)*

RSO was a different matter. Cooperation between Indonesian and Malaysian extremists and Bangladesh-based Rohingya goes back to the days of the Southeast Asian military training academy on the Pakistan-Afghan border (1985-1994), led by Indonesians who later became leaders of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). The recruits were mostly Indonesians and Malaysians but included Singaporeans, Malay Muslims from Thailand, and a few Moros, Rohingya and Cham. Nasir Abas, who served as a weapons instructor at the training academy from 1987 to 1994, recalled that his students included 40 recruits who called themselves Bangladeshi, perhaps to get preferential treatment, but who were probably Rohingya and not clear whether recruited from Bangladesh or Malaysia.<sup>12</sup>

In 1994, as the civil war in Afghanistan intensified, Nasir and Riduan Isamuddin, better known as Hambali, who remains the only Indonesian detained at the U.S. prison on Guantanamo, made a visit to Chittagong and Cox's Bazar to look at possible sites for joint military training with Rohingya groups there.<sup>13</sup> They wanted a substitute for the academy on the Afghan border and talks with some of their Rohingya friends suggested that they look at Myanmar.

After landing in Cox's Bazaar, the two Indonesians, escorted by RSO leader Salimullah and several armed Rohingya militants, travelled by boat to a Rohingya village in Rakhine state, inside Burma. Nasir recalled that most of the villagers were dressed like *tablighi* members. In the end, JI decided against building a training centre there, based on two calculations. The most important was that Rohingya communities had almost no arms, making them vulnerable to Burmese army repression. The only real combat they could realistically engage in was small scale attacks or ambushes, and the Burmese army, already known for gross human right violations, would not hesitate to massacre Rohingya civilians and torch their villages in retaliation. A JI presence in Rakhine state will only worsen Rohingya suffering. The second consideration was irritation with Salimullah. Nasir and Hambali grew annoyed during the trip at his constant harping about small arms procurement rather than any interest in broader issues.<sup>14</sup> In the end, they decided to accept an offer from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to open a new academy in Mindanao.

Southeastern Bangladesh also saw increasing interaction between HUJI-B and Rohingya groups. A January 1996 raid in Ukhia, near Cox's Bazar, netted a huge arms cache and led to the arrest of 41 extremists, including a Rohingya man, and by 1999, HUJI-B and RSO were reportedly conducting joint training in several different camps.

In addition to RSO, another violent group known as Harekat-ul-Jihad al-Islami Arakan, also claimed to be fighting for the liberation of the Rohingya. Founded in 1988 by Abdus Qadoos Burmi, an ethnic Rohingya based in Karachi, it was believed to be close to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). While two small groups of Indonesians trained with LeT around 2000 and 2001, the

11 For a history of HUJI-B and JMB, see International Crisis Group, "The Threat from Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh", Asia Report N°187, 1 March 2010.

12 IPAC interview, Nasir Abas, Jakarta, 8 February 2017.

13 It is unclear whether Hambali made another visit in 1997 or 1998 as he claimed in his testimony from Guantanamo. The details are very similar to Nasir Abas's recollection about 1994, and there is no other source suggesting a second visit. It may be that in Guantanamo, Hambali recalled the date incorrectly. See Wikileaks, "Hambali - The Guantanamo Files, JTF-GTMO Detainee Assessment", 30 October 2008, <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/10019.html>. and Kenneth J. Conboy, *The Second Front: Inside Asia's Most Dangerous Terrorist Network* (Equinox Publishing, 2006).

14 IPAC Interview, Nasir Abas, Jakarta, 8 February 2017.

individuals involved remembered indoctrination on the U.S., India and Russia as enemies, with the Chechnya conflict dominating much of the training. They make no reference to encountering HUJI-A in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

### B. *The Early al-Qaeda Years*

As these developments were taking place, the al-Qaeda organisation in Afghanistan was growing in resources and influence. In February 1998, in the name of the World Islamic Front, it issued a call to holy war against the international “Crusader-Zionist alliance” led by the United States. One of the five signatories was HUJI-B leader Abdus Salam alias Fazlur Rahman.<sup>16</sup>

Within a year, President Soeharto had fallen in Indonesia; a communal conflict between Christians and Muslims had erupted in Ambon; Hambali was in Pakistan liaising with al-Qaeda about money for operations; Malaysian and Indonesian JI members had set up a cell in Karachi; JI had begun sending cadres to Camp al-Faruq in Kandahar for specialised training; and the first meeting of a regional JI-led jihadist alliance called Rabitatul Mujahidin had taken place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to discuss how Southeast Asia would respond to the call for global jihad.

The Rabitatul Mujahidin meeting in late 1999 brought together jihadists from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines – and JI’s old friend Salimullah from the RSO. But despite two more meetings in 2000 and a general endorsement of violence targeted at the Philippines government for its “all-out war” against the MILF, the regional alliance never really took off, and neither Thais nor Rohingya ever took part in JI-led violence.<sup>17</sup>

Incidental contacts with Bangladeshis and “Burmese Taliban” continued in Afghanistan, as JI sent small groups for training and Rohingyas were recruited by different groups. In general, though, Indonesian and Bangladeshi extremists were focused on their own countries and had no interest in each other’s. Malaysia-Bangladesh links were undoubtedly stronger because of the much larger presence in Malaysia of Bangladeshi migrants, Rohingya asylum-seekers and students. It is noteworthy that after Hambali’s arrest in Bangkok in 2003, his top associate, Malaysian national Zulkifli Marzuki, made his way to Bangladesh, reportedly via RSO contacts, and hid there until turning himself in to Malaysian authorities in 2007.

On the Bangladeshi side, there was joint training between the RSO and JMB in the jungle in Bandarban district between 2002 and 2005, but this never translated back into joint activity with Indonesians, Malaysians or Filipinos. By 2007, JI was decimated by arrests, and Bangladesh’s militant movement seemed temporarily crushed. If they could not even muster support for activities in their own countries, there was no prospect for a cross-regional alliance.

## IV. ESCALATION SINCE 2013

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Developments in Bangladesh and Syria, and later Myanmar, put the relationship of South and Southeast Asian extremists on a much more dangerous footing. In Bangladesh, extremist groups were getting a new lease on life just as ISIS was emerging in Syria. One reason was the anger over the trial and execution of Islamists accused of committing atrocities during the 1971 independence war. The execution in December 2013 of Jamaat-i-Islami leader Abdoul Quader Mollah

15 The two groups were the al-Ghuraba cell, a group of young Malaysian and Indonesian JI members or sons of JI members based in Karachi in 2000, and a group of seven men sent from Ambon in 2001, several of whom are still in prison in Indonesia.

16 For history of HUJI-B and JMB, see International Crisis Group, “The Threat from Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh”, Asia Report N°187, 1 March 2010.

17 A few contacts in southern Thailand helped Hambali with the transfer of money for the Bali bombing, but that was the only link.

triggered particular outrage. Violence in the name of defending Islam rose sharply, from one attack in 2014, to 25 in 2015 and 27 in 2016.

Competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS added a new element to the mix. Less than three months after Abubakr al-Baghdadi announced the new caliphate of Islamic State, his al-Qaeda rival Ayman al-Zawaheri in September 2014 announced the creation of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) that was supposed to cover India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Zawaheri was widely seen as playing catch-up. Bangladeshi extremists fell out along the divide, with Ansarullah Bangla Team (including an important cell of supporters based at the elite private North-South University in Dhaka) following al-Qaeda, and many in JMB supporting Islamic State.<sup>18</sup> The division did not preclude coordination and cooperation at an operational level, however.

While al-Qaeda supporters in Bangladesh mostly targeted secular activists, ISIS operations, often undertaken by a single individual, targeted foreign nationals, especially from late 2015 on. Attacks in the name of ISIS killed an Italian aid worker in September, a Japanese farmer in October, and an Italian priest in November 2015. They drew international media attention and fulsome praise in the pages of the online ISIS magazine, *Dabiq*.<sup>19</sup> Indonesian would-be attackers seemed like amateurs in comparison.

In the meantime, Singapore and Malaysia became concerned over the possibility of extremist cells among the Bangladeshi migrant community.

#### A. Arrests in Singapore

Between 16 November and 1 December 2015, Singapore police arrested 27 Bangladeshi workers involved in a “clandestine” religious study group that made use of extremist teaching materials. Members of the group, formed in 2013, reportedly desired to join ISIS in Syria and were angry with the Bangladesh government for its prosecution of Islamist leaders. All but one were deported, of whom fourteen were arrested on arrival in Bangladesh and the others were allowed to return home.<sup>20</sup> Bangladeshi police later claimed that the fourteen had links to the organisation Ansharullah Bangla Team (ABT), an extremist group linked to several fatal attacks on secular bloggers and other terrorist acts in Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup> In April 2016, another wave of arrests took place, when Singapore detained eight Bangladeshi construction and marine workers for establishing a radical group called Islamic State in Bangladesh (ISB).<sup>22</sup> ISB was formed by Rahman Mizanur, a draughtsman in a local construction company who had periodically worked in Singapore since 2007 on a short-term visa for semiskilled workers. He seems to have become radicalised in Bangladesh sometime in 2013, in part through reading radical material online. He returned to Singapore in December 2015, started recruiting other workers in January and by March had set up the new group.

In the trial of Rahman and three others that began in May 2016, a Singapore court said that the men had originally hoped to join ISIS in Syria but when it became clear that it was getting increasingly difficult to get there, they decided to conduct attacks in Bangladesh, with the aim

18 Animesh Roul, “How Bangladesh Became Fertile Ground for al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State,” CTC Sentinel, 25 May 2016.

19 “The Revival of Jihad in Bengal with the Spread of the Light of the Khilafah,” *Dabiq*, Edition No.12, November 2015.

20 Ministry of Home Affairs, “Arrests of 27 Radicalised Bangladeshi Nationals under the Internal Security Act”, www.mha.gov.sg, 20 January 2016. The one remaining person was jailed for twelve weeks in Singapore after trying to leave Singapore via “illegal and clandestine” means after learning of his colleagues’ arrest.

21 “IS or al-Qaeda Link Not Found”, *Daily Star*, 22 January 2016.

22 Ministry of Home Affairs, “Detention of Eight Radicalised Bangladeshi Nationals under the Internal Security Act”, www.mha.gov.sg, 3 May 2016. The eight were ISB members were Rahman Mizanur (leader); Mahmum Leakot Ali (deputy); then 29; Sohag Ibrahim, 27; Miah Rubel, 26; Islam Shariful, 27; Md Jabath Kysar Haje Norul Islam Sowdagar, 30; Zaman Daulat, 34 ; and Sohel Hawlader bin Ismail Hawlader, 29.

of overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic state under the ISIS caliphate.<sup>23</sup> The group had collected S\$1,360 [about US\$974] from their own salaries that they reportedly were intending to use for arms purchases.<sup>24</sup> The court sentenced Rahman to five years and three others to lesser terms. Two other members of the group, Zaman Daulat and Mamun Leakot Ali, were tried under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act (TSOFA).<sup>25</sup> They were sentenced to two and two and a half years respectively. Two other members of the group were not charged.

Around the same time as the eight were detained, five other Bangladeshis were arrested under the ISA. They were found not to belong to the ISB but they “possessed and/or proliferated jihadi-related materials, or supported the use of armed violence in pursuit of a religious cause”.<sup>26</sup> They were deported on 29 April and arrested on arrival in Dhaka. They were remanded for a week and were to be questioned for possible links to ABT, apparently because tracts by ABT mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani were found in their possession.<sup>27</sup>

### B. Arrests in Malaysia

Shortly after the Singapore arrests, Malaysian authorities discovered and arrested a Bangladeshi permanent resident who had long been wanted by Interpol for extremist activities. Peyar Ahmed Akash, then 37, owned a restaurant in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur and acted as a community leader for Bangladeshis from Feni district, part of Chittagong division in southeastern Bangladesh. Before coming to Malaysia, he had been arrested in September 2005 for selling four AK47s to a listed terrorist. He was sentenced to seven years but was bailed by his brother-in-law – the Jamaat amir of Feni district – and continued trading weapons, according to Feni police.<sup>28</sup> Akash went to Malaysia in 2011 and built up a successful hotel and restaurant business in Kuala Lumpur. He was accused of campaigning in Malaysia against the war crimes trials in Bangladesh, and his restaurant became a gathering place for Jamaat leaders and supporters. At the Bangladesh government’s request, Interpol issued a red alert for his arrest. He was taken into custody on 19 August 2016, then deported on 2 September.<sup>29</sup>

## V. THE HOLEY ARTISAN BAKERY ATTACK, JULY 2016

An attack on a bakery in an elite section of Dhaka on 1 July 2016 jolted authorities across the region and generated a heightened sense of danger. It was not just the high casualty toll – 22 civilians and two police – or the upper class nature of the target that was so shocking but the fact that the attackers came from well-off families and were all highly educated. Three had studied in Malaysia.<sup>30</sup>

ISIS claimed credit for the attack, which killed nine Italians, seven Japanese, six Bangladeshis, one American and one Indian. It published pictures of the assailants and their victims inside the café, first in *Dabiq*, then in a newer propaganda magazine, *Rumiyah*. Bangladeshi authorities

23 “8 Bangladeshis held in Singapore for plotting attacks back home”, *Daily Star*, 3 May 2016.

24 Ministry of Home Affairs Press Release, op. cit..

25 “2 Bangladeshis jailed for terror finance in Singapore”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 31 August 2016.

26 “8 Bangladeshis held in Singapore for plotting attacks back home”, *Daily Star*, 3 May 2016, quoting Ministry of Home Affairs Singapore.

27 The five were Mizanur Rahman, Rana, Alamgir, Tanjimul Islam and Santu Khan.

28 “Bangladeshi Held in Malaysia for Terror Link Deported”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 22 September 2016.

29 Naidu, Sumisha, “Malaysian Police Arrest 4 Terror Suspects, Including 3 Foreigners”, Channel News Asia. A Nepali and a Moroccan were arrested around the same time but for unrelated cases. See “Wanted Bangladeshi Man Arrested in Malaysia”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 26 August 2016.

30 In fact, it should not have been such a surprise. Youths from well-off families had long been involved in radical organisations. Several young Bangladeshis went to Yemen in 2009, for example, to make contact with radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. These included Tehzeeb Karim and Farzad Haq Turaj.

played down the ISIS link, insisting that all the attackers were “neo-JMB”. A few days after the attack, however, they released a list of ten youths reported as missing by their parents who were suspected of joining extremist groups.

One of them was Tamim Chowdury, later accused of being the mastermind. Born in Sylhet and raised in Canada where he earned an honours degree in chemistry from University of Windsor, Tamim was killed in a police raid on 27 August 2016, several weeks after the attack.<sup>31</sup>

#### A. *The Malaysia Links*

Several of the attackers had studied at Monash University in Malaysia, a branch of the Melbourne, Australia-based university, including:

- Nibras Islam alias Abu Muharib al-Bengal led the assault. He was the son of a successful businessman with two houses in Dhaka and nephew of a senior official in the Bangladesh government, went to Monash in 2012 to pursue an undergraduate degree in business. His friends say his attitude changed there after July 2015, when he stopped going to school and cut off all of his contacts with social media and friends.<sup>32</sup>
- Andaleeb Ahmad went to Monash between 2012 and 2015. He is believed to have gone to Turkey in 2015, returning to Bangladesh on 21 December the same year. Ahmed was suspected to be in touch with Peyar Ahmed Akash, the Malaysian restaurateur mentioned above.
- Rohan Imtiaz was raised in a secular family; his father is a local leader of the incumbent Awami League and also the deputy secretary of the Bangladesh Olympic Association. Rohan studied at the elite Scholastica high school, then majored in business at BRAC University before going to Monash.<sup>33</sup>

Several other militants not directly involved in the attack had also studied in Malaysia.

- Shehzad Rauf Arka, a Bangladeshi-American student, who was Nibras Islam’s friend at Monash, went missing in February 2016 after he returned to Bangladesh. He was killed on 27 July 2016 along with eight other young militants in a police raid in Kalyandpur, Dhaka.<sup>34</sup>
- Nazibullah Anshari, who had been sent to study marine engineering in Malaysia, left a farewell message in Facebook in January 2015 saying, “I have come to Iraq to join IS, I will not be in touch with you anymore, and won’t be coming back.”<sup>35</sup> He was on the “missing youths” list and was known to have been in Turkey, waiting to cross into Syria, in December 2015.<sup>36</sup>
- Muhammad Basharuzzaman, a North-South University graduate also on the list, went missing after he left home for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to work in a private company. He is also believed linked to the Gulshan attackers.<sup>37</sup>
- Tausif Hassan, another Monash student, reportedly went missing from his home in Dhanmondi, Bangladesh on 3 February 2016. He was later killed by the police in the

31 ‘Tamim Chowdhury, the Dhaka Café Massacre Mastermind, Is Killed in Raid: Police’, *bdnews24.com*, 27 August 2016.

32 ‘Who Are They?’, *The Daily Star*, [www.thedailystar.net](http://www.thedailystar.net), 4 July 2016.

33 *Ibid.*

34 The Indian Express, ‘Bangladesh-Origin US National among Militants Killed in Dhaka’, *Indian Express*, 28 July 2016.

35 Ellen Barry and Maher Sattar, ‘Bangladesh, Blaming Local Groups for Attacks, Seeks Suspects Tied to ISIS’, *New York Times*, 19 July 2016.

36 ‘Dhaka-Syria-Dhaka’, *Daily Star*, 3 February 2017.

37 ‘Basharuzzaman, One of 10 Missing Youths, is also an NSU Student’, *bdnews24.com*, 12 July 2016.

27 August raid. Police believe he was recruited by Nibras Islam while he was still in Malaysia.<sup>38</sup>

### B. Other Pro-ISIS Bangladeshis with Malaysia Links

Two other young Bangladeshis seem to have found or strengthened their pro-ISIS leanings in Malaysia: Junnun Shikdar (Sikder), who found his way to Syria, and Redwanul Azad Rana, who was arrested in Malaysia on 17 February and deported to Bangladesh three days later. Both were ABT members who crossed over to ISIS.

Junnun Shikdar was a former computer science major at North-South University. Radicalised, according to his father, by ABT mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, he had been arrested on 25 August 2013 for his alleged links with ABT.<sup>39</sup> After a year in prison, he was released on bail in late 2014 and after briefly returning home, left for Malaysia without telling his parents. Around August 2015, he called relatives to say he was there.<sup>40</sup> He is believed to have left for Syria in 2016, according to a police report.<sup>41</sup>

Redwanul Azad Rana was also a student at North-South where he had been a leader of ICS (Shibir), the student wing of Jemaat-i-Islami. He was also said to be a founding member of ABT and reportedly the mastermind of several of its violent attacks. In late December 2015 he was convicted and sentenced to death in absentia for the 2013 murder of activist blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. (The death sentence was upheld by an appeals court on 2 April 2017.) Seven others, five of them North-South students, were convicted and sentenced in the same case. By the time the case came to trial, however, Rana was already in Malaysia; he had entered with a doctored passport in 2014. While there, he made contact with Junnun and swore an oath of allegiance to Islamic State's al-Baghdadi. He reportedly tried but failed to go to Syria and decided to go to the Philippines instead. Before he could leave, he was arrested and on 21 February 2017, he was deported back to Bangladesh.

Another Bangladeshi with a Malaysian link, now in prison, is Aminul Islam Beg, the first Bangladeshi to be identified as working under the direction of ISIS. Reportedly also working as a regional coordinator for JMB, he was arrested on 24 May 2015, more than a year before the Holey Bakery attack. Beg had graduated in computer science and engineering from a Malaysian university and was working as the head of the IT department of International Beverages Private Ltd, a Coca-Cola subsidiary, at the time of his arrest. He was taken into custody together with another man, Sakib bin Kamal, 30, a former teacher. Police said he had acknowledged persuading 25 people to join Islamic State in Syria.<sup>42</sup>

Beg was reportedly instrumental in arranging the departure to Syria of a young man, Gazi Kamrun Salam Sohan, who had joined an online religious discussion group, EX Cadets Islamic Learning Forum, in which Beg was also active. They met in person in February 2014. Beg gave Sohan the number of a Bangladeshi living in Japan. The latter helped arrange Sohan's travel to Syria through Malaysia, Japan and Turkey. Aminul Beg dropped Sohan off at Dhaka's international airport on 9 December 2014 and he crossed into Syria from Gaziantep, Turkey two days later. In May 2015, Sohan returned to Bangladesh, disillusioned with ISIS for its killing of Muslims, and was arrested about a week later. He was held for a year and a half, apparently without charge, and released in early 2017.<sup>43</sup>

38 "2nd Tier of New JMB Militants 'on the run'", *The Independent* (Dhaka), www.theindependentbd.com, 29 August 2016.

39 "On bail, he took part in Dipan murder," *Daily Star*, 26 August 2016.

40 "Drawn into militancy by Mufti Jashim", *Daily Star*, 21 July 2016.

41 "Blogger Rajib Murder: Convicted Planner, Deported from Malaysia, Arrested", *Daily Star*, 21 February 2017.

42 "IT Chief at Coca-Cola Unitarrested as Islamic State suspect," Reuters, 25 May 2015.

43 "Dhaka-Syria-Dhaka", *Daily Star*, 3 February 2017.

### C. *Bahrūn Naim's Reaction to the Dhaka Attack*

The Dhaka bakery attack was viewed with envy by Indonesian ISIS supporters. Bahrūn Naim, one of the leading pro-ISIS propagandists and promoter of attacks in Indonesia, wrote a widely circulated tract, "Learn from the Caliphate Army in Bangladesh", lamenting Indonesia's inability to pull off anything as spectacular.<sup>44</sup> He also noted how frequently Bangladeshi militants were able to mount attacks compared to their Indonesian counterparts.

Naim starts the tract with an analysis of the current situation in Bangladesh, derived from discussions with Bangladeshi *muhajirin*, or those who joined the struggle in Syria. In many respects, he argues, Bangladesh should be far less favourable to jihad operations than Indonesia. It has far fewer jihadi publications, limited religious knowledge, too much influence from mysticism and extensive infiltration of jihadi groups by the state security apparatus. Even so, the *mujahidin* there were more successful than in Indonesia. Why?

Naim identifies five factors:

- A structured jihad "curriculum" that reaches people with vastly different levels of education and successfully avoids detection from security services.
- Dissemination of jihadi knowledge in the Bangla language across all social classes. (Bangladeshi ISIS supporters were more successful than Indonesians in recruiting from the upper strata of society);
- High motivation to carry violent jihad because of perceived involvement of foreign powers, such as India, China, and sympathy for Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar;
- Ability to learn lessons from government crackdowns and adapt tactics accordingly.
- Constant innovation in carrying out violent jihad, constantly changing tactics, targets, weapons and attack patterns.<sup>45</sup>

Naim's tract was widely circulated on Telegram and other social media.

### D. *Bangladeshis and Indonesians in Syria and Iraq*

While Bahrūn Naim's lament had little impact on improving the capacity of his followers in Indonesia, it is interesting to reflect on what the contacts between Naim and the Bangladeshi *muhajirin* could mean.

First, it is logical to assume that Bangladeshis radicalised in Malaysia or leaving for Syria from Malaysia like Junnūn Sikder or Nazibullah Anshari would be more likely to make contact with Southeast Asians in ISIS than fellow nationals who studied elsewhere or left by other routes.<sup>46</sup> The Southeast Asians have the well-established links to Mindanao, and exchanges of information with the Bangladeshis in Syria could lead to:

- More Bangladeshis in Malaysia getting contact numbers and route information for going to the Philippines.
- Plans for attacks against Philippines institutions in revenge for the deaths of pro-ISIS militants at the hands of government soldiers. (It is worth remembering that in 2000,

<sup>44</sup> "Belajar Dari Junud Khilafah Di Bangladesh", <http://innamadunyahafanaa.blogspot.com>, 22 Syawwal 1437 (28 July 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> No one seems to have clear figures on how many Bangladeshis are with ISIS. One authoritative source, the Soufan Group, had no figures for Bangladesh in its otherwise comprehensive reports on foreign fighters in 2014 and 2015.

Jemaah Islamiyah militants nearly killed the Philippines ambassador in Jakarta in a revenge attack for then President Estrada's "all-out war" against the MILF.)

- Plans for a joint operation elsewhere in the region.

Communication between the Bangladeshis and Southeast Asians could also lead to marriages, especially between Bangladeshi men and widows of Indonesian fighters, with implications for greater collaboration in the future. Indonesian women with ISIS have married North Africans, Frenchmen, Iraqis and other non-Indonesians in Syria, though thus far, there is no news about marriages to South Asian foreign fighters. That said, many Indonesian women have married Bangladeshi migrant workers whom they met in the Gulf countries or Malaysia, so the potential for cross-regional ISIS marriages is real.

Bangladeshis wishing to return home might try to find a temporary safe haven in Southeast Asia through contacts with Indonesian and Malaysian friends in Syria.

All this is speculative, of course, but if Bahrun Naim's tract indicated ongoing communication with Bangladeshis in Syria, it is worth thinking about what those exchanges could produce.

## VI. BANGLADESHIS AND JIHAD IN THE PHILIPPINES AND MYANMAR

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As of this writing, efforts to recruit Bangladeshis for the ISIS jihad in Mindanao have largely failed but this could change. At the same time, the emergence of a new Rohingya armed rebellion on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in October 2016 raised questions about whether might lead in the future to possible collaboration between Bangladeshi and Southeast Asian extremists in defence of Myanmar's Muslims. The new insurgency, however, showed no interest in having outsiders join in.

### A. Recruitment for Mindanao

The recruitment effort seems to be coming from Dr Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah, formerly a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya (note the university base again), who has been in Mindanao since April 2014. He and two other Malaysians joined the pro-ISIS Abu Sayyaf group of Isnilon Hapilon, later accepted by other pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines as the *amir* for ISIS in Southeast Asia. The most senior of the three Malaysians, Najib bin Hussein alias Abu Anas al-Muhajir, was killed in clash with the Philippines military on Basilan in December 2015. As the Duterte government stepped up military operations in mid-2016, Dr Mahmud moved to Lanao del Sur, though as of May 2017, it was unclear. His urgent mission appears to have been to find more fighters for the jihad and more resources to fund them.

Sometime in December 2016, Redwanul Azad Rana, the fugitive Bangladeshi student looking for a jihad, made contact with Dr Mahmud. Dr Mahmud put him and a friend, Ashraf, in touch with a fixer in Kota Kinabalu who could help him cross into the Philippines. Redwanul then got in touch with the recruiter, a Philippine national who was reportedly paid by Dr Mahmud for every individual he could bring across. Rana and Ashraf were arrested, however, before they could leave Malaysia.<sup>47</sup>

Two Filipinos with permanent resident status were also arrested in Sandakan, together with a female immigration officer. They were found to have helped three pro-ISIS Indonesians travel to Mindanao through Sabah.<sup>48</sup>

It remains unclear how many foreigners are in the Philippines. In late 2016, the best estimate

47 "2 Bangladeshi militant suspects arrested in Malaysia," *Prothom Alo*, 24 January 2017.

48 "Immigration officer, six others arrested for Islamic State links," *The Star* online, [www.thestar.com.my](http://www.thestar.com.my), 13 March 2017.

of knowledgeable Philippine police and military was less than ten; since then more Indonesians have joined and a few may have been killed.<sup>49</sup> In the fighting in Lanao del Sur in late April 2017, the passport of an Indonesian was found at the site of a clash between Philippine soldiers and pro-ISIS extremists.

### *B. Rohingya Militancy*

In October 2016, a Rohingya insurgency announced its presence with an attack by hundreds of men on three police posts along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border in which nine members of the Border Security Guard were killed. A widely circulated video claimed responsibility in the name of a new organisation, Harekat al-Yakin or “Faith Movement”. The group changed its name in March 2017 to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). It appears to be an ethno-nationalist movement established and led by a group of Rohingya leaders based in Saudi Arabia, and any ties to terrorist organisations are likely limited to training members received in Bangladesh and Pakistan.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, as the most detailed report available on the group notes, “The longer violence [against the Rohingya] continues, the greater the risks become of such links deepening and potentially becoming operational”<sup>51</sup>

In an unrelated incident, an Indonesian was arrested in Malaysia in December 2016, apparently hoping to undertake a terrorist attack inside Myanmar to avenge violence against Muslims there. The arrest underscores the danger that the new insurgency might raise misguided hopes among other Indonesian and Malaysian extremists that they at last had a new partner for jihad operations. It could also encourage efforts to reach out to its leaders or actual attacks in the belief that these would aid the Rohingya cause.

The new militancy among the Rohingya could be a serious headache for Malaysian authorities, given the huge size of the Rohingya community there. If Rohingya living in Malaysia are recruited into an insurgency based on the Bangladesh side of the border with Myanmar, it could become a diplomatic headache. But if a more militant Rohingya group emerges, with ties to some of the Bangladeshi extremists in a repeat of the RSO-HUJI-B collaboration in 1999, the involvement of Malaysia-based Rohingya could produce more Rohingya with combat training and military skills and the extension of violence beyond Myanmar.

## **VII. CONCLUSIONS**

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Southeast Asians and Bangladesh share so many concerns in terms of violent extremism that it would be useful to strengthen collaboration on several different fronts. Some exchanges are already taking place – a few Bangladeshis participate every year in programs of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), for example – but these could be intensified.

It would be useful to get solid case material from some of the cross-border interaction described in this report incorporated into counter-terrorism curricula of police officer training schools in all countries concerned. The Indonesian National Anti-Terrorism Agency could usefully have an office to focus on cross-border interaction among extremists that would include Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Philippines. Protocols for sharing data between Bangladesh and

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49 In mid-April the Philippine media were reporting that three Indonesians and a Malaysian had been killed in the fighting around Piagapo, Lanao del Sur, but no positive identification had been made, and it was not clear what the reports were based on. Indonesian police were trying to arrange for DNA tests as of this writing. “Malaysian, 3 Indonesians among slain militants in Lanao del Sur,” *inquirer.net*, 25 April 2017.

50 For a comprehensive analysis of this group, see International Crisis Group, “Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State,” *Asia Report No.283*, 15 December 2016.

51 *Ibid*, p.20.

Southeast Asian countries could be reviewed and strengthened.

The cooperation needs to move beyond government, however. Donors could foster more exchanges among the region's top journalists, in the interests of getting more informed reporting and better analysis from non-governmental sources on linkages among extremist movements. The same could be done with university-based research centres, with a view to collaborative cross-border research on, for example, radicalisation among Bangladeshi students in Malaysian universities, patterns of inter-marriage between Indonesians and Bangladeshis in migrant workers communities, or effectiveness of immigration and border controls in curbing cross-border movement of known extremists.

Government training programs for overseas workers and civil society organisations advocating on behalf of migrant workers could develop a module designed to strengthen resistance to radicalisation in their host country, with sharing of best practices across the major sending countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines).

All countries in the region should abolish the death penalty. Not only is it obviously no deterrent to the commission of extremist crimes, but its use in Bangladesh appears to have directly contributed to radicalisation.

There is no shortage of possible programming ideas but everything starts from a recognition that Bangladesh and Southeast Asia have common problems that can be addressed jointly.

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