



FRAGMENTATION AND RESURGENCE OF ISLAMIC TERRORIST GROUPS IN ASIA

WHAT IS THE INSIGHT?

The form and scope of Islamic terrorism have been evolving, and this change is being reflected in Asia. In the period directly before and after the 9/11 attacks, terrorist groups invested in large-scale operations with a particular focus on hitting international targets. However, counter-terrorist responses have caused the fragmentation of terrorist groups, hampering their ability to carry out large-scale attacks. This does not mean that terrorism has been contained. Rather, terrorist operations have become more localized, with religious minorities and local authorities frequently targeted. Terrorist groups are increasingly intertwined with criminal elements. The success of terrorist groups in the Afghanistan and Syria conflicts could motivate a resurgence of attacks and spread terrorist activity to new hotspots.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

While a variety of terrorist groups remains active in Asia, Islamic terrorism is a common source of instability in several Asian countries. South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia collectively account for over 75% of the world's Muslim population, making countries in the region especially sensitive to changing modes of organization and operation among Islamic terror groups.

Understanding the trajectories of terrorist activity in Asia is important as changes in the form and scope of terrorism present new policy challenges. Counter-terrorist initiatives have been effective at disrupting well-organized groups in Asia, but the localization of targets may call for a novel approach to terrorism prevention that engages sub-national authorities.

HOW DOES IT IMPACT ASIA?

- **Increased Criminal Activity:** Enhanced counter-terrorism capabilities have chipped away at radical groups' ability to organize and conduct operations. In Southeast Asia, many leaders of the once disciplined *Jemaah Islamiyah* have been jailed, executed, or killed in battle. In South Asia, US military operations continue to 'decapitate' radical groups by eliminating their leaders. The resulting leadership vacuum has fragmented and decentralized many of these organizations. Consequentially, a breakdown in discipline and funding mechanisms has pushed several groups toward criminality, both in their activities and in the nature of their new recruits. The Philippines' *Abu Sayyaf* was an early adopter of this entrepreneurial turn when it expanded its kidnapping operations. In Indonesia, terrorist groups are suspected of carrying out numerous recent robberies. The stronger organizations in Pakistan and Afghanistan have also engaged in extortion and drug smuggling.



- Localization of Violence: While under a stronger al-Qaeda's influence, radical groups focused their attention on the "far enemy," namely, the US and broader Western world, and balanced their engagement in local conflicts with their strategic goal of striking foreign targets. Effective responses by security services have eroded these capabilities, especially in Southeast Asia. Fragmentation has produced a multiplicity of groups following independent tactics, sometimes in competition with each other. Operations have become more local and small-scale, with religious minorities and law enforcement authorities often bearing the brunt. For example, Indonesian radicals differ on the wisdom of assassination versus martyrdom operations. Local law enforcement officials have been targeted, with terrorists suspected in a recent string of police murders in Jakarta. Localized violence against religious minorities has also become increasingly common. Likewise, in Pakistan some groups cooperate with the security services while others wage war against them. Pakistani Shiites and Christians have increasingly become the targets of bombing campaigns.
- Dissemination of Knowledge and Tactics: The success of extremist groups in Syria and Afghanistan could bolster radical activity in South and Southeast Asia. The convergence of foreign fighters in Syria is enabling disparate groups to train and plot international operations, and there are reports that ethnic Uyghurs from China have fought in Syria. It is still unclear whether Southeast Asians have participated directly in the Syrian fighting, though the international network created by that conflict will serve as a resource for aspiring radicals groups in the region. Added to this, the drawdown of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan will leave South Asia with many veteran fighters seeking a new mission, and an embattled Pakistan will not be in a position to control them. Both factors will have a destabilizing influence, enhancing terrorist capabilities and morale.
- New Hotspots: As attention turns from Syria and Afghanistan, new conflict areas could come to the fore. Chinese authorities attribute recent attacks in that country to the influence and knowledge of Uyghur veterans of the Syrian conflict. There is also an acute risk of radicalism emerging in Myanmar where tensions between the Muslim minority and the Buddhist majority have been increasing. The Myanmar situation has already inspired an uptick of violence in Indonesia; a self-radicalized individual was recently charged with plotting to bomb the Myanmar Embassy, and Buddhist temples have been targeted in 'revenge' attacks.
- Enhanced International Cooperation: The new threat environment is likely to encourage states to increase joint anti-terror operations. Indonesia recently hosted an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3 training exercise. China has been reaching out to key partners, conducting anti-terrorism training and exercises with Pakistan, India, and Indonesia. Enhanced cooperation will hobble the ability of terrorists to train and conduct major operations.

HOW DOES IT IMPACT CANADA?

Canada has been actively pursuing its counter-terrorism capacity-building strategy in Asia, forging multilateral links with regional groups like ASEAN and enhancing bilateral assistance to frontline countries like Thailand and Indonesia. Trends in Asian terrorism may affect Canada in a number of ways. The localization of targets and the turn to criminal fundraising will draw terrorists' attention away from attacking the West, potentially making Canadians abroad less likely targets. However, over the longer term, veterans of extremist conflicts – particularly those who fought in Afghanistan – may look to strike Canadian targets in South Asia.

The changing form of Islamic terrorism has additional policy implications for counter-terrorism strategies. Canada and other donor countries have focused anti-terror capacity-building on national level agencies. As terrorist targeting shifts to minorities and local authorities, building sub-national counter-terrorism capacity will become more important.

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