

From Dhaka to Singapore: The Growing Involvement of Bangladesh in the "World of Global Jihad"

By Siegfried O. Wolf, Jan 26 2016

Against the persistently recurrent official statements that Bangladesh has no links with internationally acting terrorist organisations like Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda, there are more and more indications how deeply the Islamic fundamentalists of the South Asian country are involved in the "world of the global jihad".

One of the latest examples of such is 2015 detention of 14 Bangladeshi nationals, who were part of a group of 26 construction workers in Singapore. The authorities of the city-state found clear evidence that these Bangladeshi nationals were supporting armed jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), and planned to take part in extremist activities elsewhere, and also shared jihadist material. Already in 2013, the 14 formed a growing terrorist group but not in order to carry out attacks on the island but to 'wage holy war' oversea, especially in their home country. The arrest of these radical Islamists under the Internal Security Act (ISA) is a decisive moment since it was the first time that a jihadist terror cell comprising foreigners has been uncovered in Singapore. Furthermore, there is also a compounded threat that the South East Asian State could also move into the focus of terrorists as a target.

However, after interrogation the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) stated that the 14 detainees have links to the domestic radical group Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT, also known as Ansar Bangla). ABT, an Islamist group which is banned in Bangladesh under Article 18 of the anti-terrorism act, is known for its attempts to suppress freedom of speech in general and independent, liberal and secular thinking in particular. In result, each academic and independent intellectual, blogger or cultural personality who poses a threat to the fundamentalist Islamic teachings and lifestyle is considered a potential target of ABT.

One of their major aims of ABT is to promote their adapted notion of Islam and thus, act to silence any critics of extremist religious doctrines, organized Islam, and the intolerance of Islamist radicals. The spiritual leader of ABT Jashim Uddin Rahmani, a fanatic cleric was jailed in December 2015 for demanding the killing of Ahmed Rajib Haider. Furthermore, they

published a 'global hitlist' of bloggers, activists, writers, and cultural figures claiming that they will get murdered if they are not following the demands and lines of ABT. As such, ABT is responsible for threatening and attacking of numerous secular thinkers as well as openly abetting the killing of them. There are also reports that Shiites and Sufi Muslims as well as several foreigners have been killed too. In this context, it is interesting to mention that not only ABT and international jihadists networks are linked but that ABT is also actively recruiting Bangladeshi college students for the IS. As the latter one claimed responsibility for the killing of several foreigners. Here, a significant query calls for- what is the Bangladeshi state doing about this and why it seems that the authorities failed to tackle the issue of the Islamic fundamentalism and increasing international linkages?

Generally, one can state that the country's political establishment still seems to be ignorant when it comes to the realization of the full threat of Islamic fundamentalism. The way how authorities and analysts are downplaying or ignoring the growing influence of terror groups like ABT and their links with international jihadist networks of Islamic State and Al-Qaeda (especially Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, or AQIS) is perturbing since it will open further space for the promotion and entrenchment of a fundamentalist ethos in Bangladesh. Just banning militant religious organisation like ATB is not enough. The country needs a comprehensive concept against religious fundamentalism accompanied by a coherent and stringent counter-terrorism strategy. Until now, the few measures carried out by the current government to contain the radical (militant) Islamist threats remain ineffective, especially if one looks at the mobilising capacities of the Islamists and the domestic and international activities of 'officially' banned organisations. Most importantly, the unprofessional actions against radical Islamist organisations did not have the desired effects. Instead of eradicating the threat, radical Islamists were able to portray themselves as being unjustly persecuted.

The ban of the JI is such an example. Bangladesh's decision-makers did not understand that the costs of ignoring Jihadism are much higher than narrow political ends and electoral benefits from radicalized sections of the country's electorate. Bangladesh should not do the same mistake like Pakistan, allowing or even encouraging domestic militancy and international terrorist groups to use Bangladeshi territory as a launch pad for Jihadist activities. Therefore, ABT stands not only for Bangladesh's growing involvement in the international Jihadist networks, as the Singapore presence of ABT clearly emphasizes the embeddedness of this group in the 'world of the global Jihad'. But what is to note is the new

assertiveness, self-confidence and self-perception of Bangladesh's jihadists who find an expression in the willingness to operate as a group independently overseas. This marks a decisive departure from activities of former generations of militant Islamic fundamentalists, who went abroad fighting under the banner of another jihadist group, such as the Mujahedeen or Taliban in Afghanistan.

To sum up, the presence of ABT members in Singapore can be seen as an indication: First, that ABT is looking beyond Bangladesh borders to promote and participate in Jihadi activities, not just limited to South- but also in South East Asia; secondly, that they are trying to build-up their own international network to carry out Jihadi activities; thirdly, they are operating independently of the financial and logistic support of worldwide acting terror groups like IS or al-Qaeda. Therefore, the diktat of the moment is that the government of Bangladesh with its security agencies must work out a concrete and comprehensive strategy to counter the domestic and global Jihadist threats. If not, ABT and other Islamist group will not only threaten Bangladesh but will lose the country's very essence of democracy, secularism, and tolerance.



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