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Countering terrorism in Bangladesh

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Perspectives on the terrorist threat in Bangladesh have often gravitated between extremes. However, the truth is somewhere in between. Traditionally considered a moderate, Muslim-majority country, Bangladeshis have shown little inclination to replace personal piety with theocratic government or religious violence. Instead, citizens have shown a fierce dedication to democratic government despite several attempts to install autocratic government. Yet, ongoing news reports of active militants captured, arms caches hidden in schools and connections to regional and international criminal and terrorist organizations suggest that the threat is clear, present and cannot be neglected.

The emergence of groups like Harakatul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh, Jamatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Ahl-e-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh following the return of Bangladeshi mujahedeen from the Afghan wars infused political violence in Bangladesh with the language of *jihad* and tactics borrowed from terrorist groups abroad. Acts like the August 2005 serial bombings, consisting of nearly 400 simultaneous bombs in all but 1 district in Bangladesh and attacks on prominent persons in 2004-05, brought terrorism in Bangladesh onto international radar screens. However, attacks to date have focused on transforming domestic politics. Nonetheless, reported connections of Bangladeshi militants to foreign terrorist groups and criminal syndicates abound, such as Harakatul Jihad al-Islami in Pakistan or ganglord Dawood Ibrahim's infamous "D-Company", believed responsible for the 1993 bombings in Mumbai. In combination cultural, familial and ideological connections that transverse porous borders in South Asia, these factors suggest future actions are likely to be transnational in scope.

Bangladesh is no stranger to political and ideological violence, which cautions against an exclusive emphasis on Islamist groups, though they have gained the most attention in the post-9/11 era. Bangladesh has long faced an insurgency by the Rohingya Solidarity Organization seeking control of the Rakhine state in Myanmar as well as a tribal autonomy movement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts [CHT]. The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute reported in 2008 that Leftist violence in the country was on par with, and even exceeded at times, violence by jihadist groups. As one senior South Asian diplomat observed, more people have been killed due to political violence in Bangladesh than terrorist attacks, situating the threat amongst complex political and social challenges, the relationship among which should be reflected in strategies to counter such violence by the Government of Bangladesh [GoB] and its international partners.

The highly partisan and confrontational nature of politics in Bangladesh has created an enabling environment for the emergence of militant groups by normalizing the use of violence to express political disagreement and promoting a culture of impunity. The two dominant political parties, the left-of-center Awami League [AL] and the right-of-center Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP] are centered on highly influential leaders who govern them with little tolerance for dissent. This is also translated into a "winner take all" mentality by the ruling party in parliament, leaving little space for a "loyal opposition." Opponents have regularly resorted to walkouts or general strikes—*hartals*—which often generate violence and economic damage Bangladeshis can ill afford. Moreover, the civic administration is highly politicized and public service has become a means of acquiring access to the national purse strings, often to compensate for expensive campaigns that involve the use of armed gangs, or *mastaans*, to intimidate rivals.

A related concern to that of terrorism in Bangladesh is that of violent religious radicalization, and the replacement of the traditionally tolerant, liberal and private practice of Islam in Bangladesh into one shaped by stricter Wahabbi influences imported from the Middle East. Though this may be symbiotic with the emergence of religious militant groups, it is also an independent concern. Changes in language and dress, such as replacing the Persian "*Khuda Hafiz*" prevalent in Bangladesh to the Arabized "*Allah Hafiz*" for 'goodbye', the donning of the white robe or *thoub* for men and the *Burqa* or *Hijab* for women, in place of traditionally colorful *lungis* or *sarees* and an intolerance for traditional Bengali arts and culture are publicly visible changes underscoring these fears. Additionally, periodic violence against the Ahmadiyya and Hindu communities stokes fears that Bangladesh may become less hospitable to minorities.

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The threat of terrorism in Bangladesh is clear, present and cannot be ignored

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The highly partisan nature of Bangladesh politics is an enabler for militant groups

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Traditional liberal Islam is being replaced by a stricter version imported from the Middle East



This increasing religious tenor of public and political discourse has been widely ascribed to the rise of Jamaat, the most influential Islamist party in Bangladesh. However, despite over thirty years of activity they have been unable to develop a substantial mainstream constituency, in large part due to allegations of war crimes during the independence struggle in 1971. Nonetheless, in developing a reputation for integrity in office and a network of social services for the rural poor, Jamaat, or more militant groups outside the political system, can pose a significant challenge to secular governments branded as corrupt, self-serving and unable to provide for citizens' basic needs in Bangladesh. Broad disillusionment with the government and the dividends of democracy will serve to feed their strength; despite fifteen years of elections, the state-society relationship remains problematic and government often falls short of meeting democratic requirements beyond elections, such as the rule of law, vertical and horizontal accountability and effective governance.

The story in Bangladesh is however also shaped by a number of positive trends which contribute to the resilience of both state and society in the face of threats like terrorism and violent religious radicalization. A strong sense of nationalism, based on a carefully balanced mix of Bengali culture and Islam, prevents the populace at large from favoring policies that unduly tip the scales towards one or the other. Undoubtedly, Islam plays a major role in the private lives of a large majority of Bangladeshis; however, as a recent Gallup poll demonstrated, a large majority of Bangladeshis say that a democratically elected government is very important to them (61%) or "essential and something they cannot live without" (32%). A vibrant civil society sector, including innovative non-governmental organizations, has led to initiatives to promote micro-credit, women's empowerment through education, healthcare and entrepreneurial opportunities and helped the government expand the delivery of essential social services. Human rights advocates and the media also serve as a watchdog against government excesses. An innovative political mechanism, such as the interim caretaker system, has to date allowed for smoother transfers of power.

Each of these provides Bangladesh with some tools to boost its resilience in the face of militants' rhetoric about the failures of the state, its illegitimacy compared to a theocratic state or caliphate and to address grievances arising from poor service delivery, which might make militant groups more attractive recruiters.

Though Bangladesh is increasingly less dependent on foreign aid, international actors have long been key stakeholders in the country. Additionally the regional nature of the threat—and it would be naïve to think that Islamists in Bangladesh aren't watching events in Pakistan and India and vice versa—underscores the importance of international and multilateral cooperation in South Asia. However, the scope and impact of international engagement is also constrained by difficult political relationships in the region, a lack of sustained attention in international fora and existing political will among national elites.

The counterterrorism discourse and policies developed by international partners often focus on "hard security" aspects. However, as the UN's Global Counterterrorism Strategy, passed by the General Assembly in 2006, points out, a number of development-related issues contribute to "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism." Therefore, it is vital that bilateral and multilateral efforts to address the threat adopt a more holistic approach and a closer policymaking relationship between development and security issues. Though these need not converge in public, in capitals and ministries, decision-makers need to consider taking advantage of the synergies created by their activities abroad to address both types of challenges. For example, support for improved governance and the rule of law or justice sector reform, looking at prison conditions and interrogation techniques, are usually classed as development assistance though these are vital foundations for building state capacity to address security threats like terrorism.

Initiatives by international stakeholders to address the challenges of terrorism and violent radicalization will be most effective when they are aligned with national objectives. This may sometimes require withdrawing support for programs which may be admirable in theory but ineffective in principle. For example, decades-long efforts to promote internal party democracy in Bangladesh have proved largely fruitless. Instead, funds should be directed where they have the most chance of making effective change, in line with the priorities expressed by Bangladeshis and their government. A closer study of its positive trends might also provide valuable lessons learned for other countries facing similar challenges. Though Bangladesh has not reached the levels of conflict witnessed in Pakistan – and is unlikely to in the near future – to neglect the terrorist threat in Bangladesh, with 150 million people in a volatile region beset by violence, does little to promote either national development or international security.

Terror, tribes, and the war on women in Pakistan

Rafia Zakaria



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Women are an ignored constituency in the War on Terror

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Pressure on existing social structures has left women even more vulnerable than before

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US aid to Pakistan has failed to make any specific provision for women affected by the conflict

Sakina Bibi and Gul Begum had never been to the market before in their lives. Forty-year old Sakina and her daughter in law finally made it out of the tent that had been supplied to them in the camp outside Karachi when their seven children ran out of food. They had a hundred rupees between them and fifty were taken by the rickshaw driver who took them to the market. They had to rely on the shopkeeper for correct change because neither of them could read or write and had not dealt with currency before. The two women are among the hundreds of thousands of displaced who fled their villages in the north and made their way to camps in the South. In their case, the men had sent them ahead while choosing to stay to guard the family property, which they thought would be taken over if they were not there to occupy it.

These women, part of the hundreds of thousands of displaced that have been seeking shelter in camps and relatives houses since the onset of fighting between security forces and Taliban militants in 2004, represent the most ignored constituency in the War on Terror. Not only is it nearly impossible to find statistical data on the number of women affected by the conflict that began in Afghanistan and has now bled over to the tribal areas of Pakistan, but few efforts have been made to provide systematic or targeted aid to them. According to piecemeal reports compiled by International Aid Agencies like UNIFEM and the UN Office for the Co-ordination for Humanitarian Affairs, nearly 60% of the approximate 2.5 million people displaced by the conflict are women. Like the women whose predicament is presented above, few have ever left their home villages or even their homes unaccompanied by men. Nearly 80% are illiterate and as a group they have the highest maternal mortality rate in all of South Asia. Because they have led such sequestered lives, very few are able to provide for their families in camps and the death of the men in the family has left many without recourse. Many widows who left the tribal areas at the beginning of the conflict have been forced to take shelter and face abuse at the hands of relatives in big cities like Karachi and Lahore. Many have been forced into marriages and many also into beggary and prostitution.

The internally displaced women ironically represent the most visible toll that the ongoing conflict has taken on Pakistani women. Since direct causal relations can be established between the women in the camps fleeing villages with burnt schools and off-limit bazaars these women, swathed in their *Burqas* are the image of the female cost of the conflict. Even lesser attention is being paid to the more complex conglomeration of existing tribal customs, strategic choices made by Pakistani and NATO forced to defeat the Taliban and the failure of the Pakistani state to take seriously the ever deteriorating impact of a culture of violence on the most vulnerable of their population.

While violence against women has historically been and continues to be a debilitating problem in Pakistan but unlike previous years, the escalation of the conflict and the consequent pressure on existing structures of social and tribal organization have left women, the most unprotected group in Pakistani society after religious minorities, even more vulnerable than before. According to reports compiled by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in the last eighteen months alone 808 gang rapes were reported in the country. The majority of victims were raped by groups of three or more men and then killed by immediate relatives. This astounding number becomes even more chilling when one considers the fact that the numbers compiled by the HRCP are based on newspaper clippings of reported cases; which statistically make up only a third of actual cases. The reason why the number of gang rapes is significant is because it shows a communal component to the brutalization of women that is proximately of not directly related to the ongoing civil war on the country. While there is no data available on whether these gang rapes are directly related to groups participating in the conflict, their known use as weapons of revenge and retaliation unrelated to the women themselves demonstrate how a conflict ridden society is increasingly using women's bodies as sites of warfare. This pattern is recognizably similar to the rapes of women in conflict zones in Africa and Eastern Europe. Its prevalence and increase in the years since 2004 suggests that civil conflict and violence against women are interrelated in complex and disturbing ways.

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Changing regimes whether democratic or military have neither paid attention to the ignored plight of women caught in a conflict ridden society but have instead promoted what are termed as “pragmatic” or strategic objectives as a justification for their deliberate ignorance. During his tenure, President Pervez Musharraf was the first to sign a peace deal with militant leader Azad Khan in an effort to put an end to the fighting in the region. More recently, the democratically elected Government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari made similar concessions in their peace deal with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan enacted in April of this year.

Peace deals with the Taliban have not been the only problems. Both military and civilian governments have failed to repeal overtly discriminatory laws that continue to hold women hostage under the threat of being accused of fornication or adultery by disgruntled spouses or relatives. The much touted Women’s Protection Bill passed in 2006 gave only lip service and failed to repeal the Zina and Hudood Ordinances. Furthermore, in changing evidentiary requirements it put the onus on the woman saying that she would have to produce four witnesses to the act in bringing a charge of rape against a person. Tribal customs like *Vani* (a form of honor killing) continued to remain in place even after the Bill’s passage. Indeed according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan nearly 1100 women were killed in 2008. Of these 183 were axed to death, 30 were brutally tortured. Nearly a quarter of the women belonged to minority groups and was particularly targeted for this reason and about 80 of them were minors. Despite these figures, which would undoubtedly be higher if data on unreported cases was also collected, honor killing is not prosecuted by the Pakistani state and perpetrators of the crime are permitted to go free. In one lurid display of the widespread institutional and social acceptance of such treatment of women, the brother of a provincial minister who was accused of burying three of his female relatives alive was never prosecuted. In House and Senate hearings on the issue, some Senators actually defended the practice as being part of Pakistani culture.

In addition to the impact of the ongoing conflict, the weight of patriarchal tradition and the lack of political will at the hands of both civilian and military governments, Pakistan’s women have also been ignored in the strategizing of United States and NATO forces in the region. One example of this has been the prominence given to the use of tribal Lashkars or militias in the effort to fighting the Taliban. The organization of these Lashkars has followed a model similar to that used in Iraq which empowers local tribes and even arms them against the Taliban. While the success of this venture has been difficult to evaluate, it remains nevertheless a core tactic in both NATO and Pakistani arsenal against the Taliban. Long term strategy in the region also focuses on the strengthening of the capacity of local tribes to resist and fight the Taliban in a model similar to the one used to fight the Sunni insurgency in many Iraqi provinces.

Finally, U.S aid disbursements to Pakistan, increasingly such an integral part of Pakistan’s economy have failed to make any particular provision to assist Pakistani women caught in the conflict and left without recourse. The “Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act 2009” which set disbursement amounts of 750 million dollars a year for various economic and development projects in Pakistan made no mention of women’s issues in the Act itself. Despite the escalating rate of sexual violence faced by Pakistani women caught in a conflict torn region, the Act allowed for no construction of shelters, women’s health centers and created no basis requiring the Pakistani Government to take any development, legal or public education efforts to curb the onslaught against Pakistani women.

In failing to do so even the United States seems to have taken the position that the welfare of Pakistani women suffering silently under the cumulative weight of suicide bombings, honor killings and concerted efforts to render them invisible is simply not an issue worthy of attention. Caught in a conflict that seems to have no end, their voices remain unheard and unnoticed both by the masters at home and abroad.

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India's looming war with Maoist insurgents

Praveen Swami



“Force alone cannot be a solution”, India’s former Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil had said in 2007, in the wake of the killing of 24 police personnel by Maoist insurgents in the Elampatti-Regadgatta forests of the state of Chhattisgarh on July 9, 2007.

Patil’s remarks weren’t intended as a critique of Communist Party of India-Maoist violence. They were directed, instead, at critics who were calling for massive investments in improving police counter-insurgency capabilities.

Early this month, India’s new Home Minister, P Chidambaram laid out a very different road-map for action. In a July 7 speech to Parliament, Chidambaram said “clearing out” Maoist-held areas was his top priority—a response to repeated assertions by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that the insurgency is the principal security threat to India.

Later this winter, India plans to start pushing in an estimated 75,000 Central Reserve Police Force personnel into the central, south-eastern and south-western jungle heartlands of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI-Maoist].

But will the plans succeed? Chidambaram’s speech came just days before the slaughter of 36 police personnel at Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh. Preceded by the large-scale assault on West Medinipur district in West Bengal, and the killings of sixteen police personnel in Gadchiroli in February, the Rajnandgaon killings exposed the appallingly-deficient capabilities of police personnel in Maoist-hit areas.

Fatalities in the Maoist insurgency, Indian Home Ministry data shows, now far exceeds lives claimed by Islamist violence in Jammu and Kashmir. Figures compiled by the Union Home Ministry show a steady escalation in fatalities in the grinding Maoist insurgency in central India, from 482 in 2002 to 837 in 2007, the last year for which figures have been published. Estimates by the New Delhi-based Institute of Conflict Management, based on media reports on Maoist violence, show that fatalities by the end of June, 2009, already exceeded two-thirds of all killings in 2008.

Part of the problem is well known: like most states in India, Chhattisgarh just doesn’t have enough police personnel even to administer routine law-and-order tasks, let alone fight an insurgency.

United Nations estimates suggest countries ought have a minimum of about 222 police personnel for every 100,000 residents; many advanced countries maintain twice this level. India, figures published by the South Asia Terrorism Portal show, has a police-population ration of around 122 per 100,000 population; Chhattisgarh has a sanctioned strength of just 103 per 100,000.

Matters are made worse by large-scale vacancies, particularly at cutting-edge mid-level officer posts. National Crime Records Bureau data shows that Chhattisgarh has in service only two-thirds of the 318 Deputy Superintendents of Police and Superintendents of Police who should be on its rolls; the state had only 1,392 Sub-Inspectors and Assistant Sub Inspectors instead of the 2,194 who ought be in service. In 2006, as the Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh was gathering momentum, Bastar Division had been assigned just 8 of 38 sub-inspectors who are sanctioned to guard the area. Even now, Bastar is chronically short-staffed

But hiring more policemen won’t solve the problem. There is a larger, unaddressed problem: police forces aren’t being trained or equipped to cope with the challenge.

In Rajnandgaon, Maoists used time-tested tactics that a well-trained and led police force ought to have been able to defeat. Early in the morning, Maoists executed two policemen at Madanwada, who had been compelled to leave their outpost—an outpost that was fortified, but lacked toilets. Knowing reinforcements would be called in, they then waited in ambush. Superintendent of Police Vinod Kumar Choubey and 30 other police personnel were while driving towards Mandanwada.

Dozens of police personnel have died in similar ambushes—for example, the July, 2007, attack which claimed the lives of 17 policemen near Motu, in Orissa, or last August’s attack in Jharkhand which killed 12. Police have been instructed to travel on foot or motorcycle—but prudence is not always possible in the face of the need for a rapid response to crisis.

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India is planning to pump in up to 75,000 central police personnel to combat Maoists

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The growing Maoist insurgency has emerged as India’s most bloody conflict

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Poor police training, capabilities and infrastructure have facilitated the Maoist upsurge



Poor training was also responsible for February's killings of Maharashtra police personnel in Gadchiroli, is just across the state border from Rajnandgaon. Hundreds of Maoist militia members surrounded a police patrol while guerrillas fired at the police from a distance—reportedly drawing over 1,000 rounds of ineffective and un-aimed fire in return. When the police ran out of ammunition, Maoist militia swarmed over the police, hacking off the limbs and gouging out the eyes of their adversaries.

None of this, is, of course, exceptional to Maoist-hit states. Just how poor the training of India's police personnel was graphically illustrated in June, when Ghanshyam Kewat, a small-time bandit, engaged over 400 policemen for nearly 50 hours—killing four and securing his escape before finally dying in chance engagement with a separate police patrol.

Chhattisgarh has set up elite counter-insurgency units modeled on the Andhra Pradesh Police's Greyhounds, who are trained at a combat school run along the lines of the Indian Army's famed School of Jungle Warfare in Vairangte. Despite this, police fatalities have risen year-on-year since 2005. In Andhra Pradesh, the Greyhounds succeeded in the context of the development of overall police infrastructure and training. Chhattisgarh has, by contrast, has done little to improve the training, equipment and infrastructure of its force as a whole.

Paid salaries on par with unskilled labor, recruited on the basis of minimal educational qualifications, obliged to work without overtime for eighteen hours a day or longer, and provided no regular on-job training, police forces in states like Chhattisgarh are reaching breaking point.

Last year, during Supreme Court hearings, Solicitor General Gopal Subramaniam candidly admitted that the Chhattisgarh government was finding it difficult to find recruits to the police. "Policemen", he said, "are not ready to step into the forests".

Unlike the Indian state, the Maoists have worked to a long-term plan. Back in December 1999, the People's War Group—which, in September, 2004, merged with the Maoist Communist Centre to form the CPI-Maoist—decided to create a core zone out of reach of state forces.

Key party functionaries and resources were relocated in what the CPI-Maoist calls the Dandarakanya Special Zone, centered around the dense, un-surveyed forests of Abujhmadh in Chhattisgarh's Bastar Division. Abujhmadh was later declared the Maoists' Central Guerrilla Base Area; party institutions, like its central committee, and significant leaders like Muppala Laxmana Rao also began functioning out of the forests.

Chhattisgarh Police officials estimate that the CPI-Maoist built an armed force of over 5,000, equipped with assault rifles, mortar, and a range of improvised explosive devices. In addition, there are estimated to be some 20,000 volunteers, equipped with everything from rifles to bolt-action rifles. In 2002, according to figures published by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Chhattisgarh recorded 55 fatalities related to Maoist violence. By 2007, the last year for which the Ministry has published data, the killings had increased almost nine-fold. Chhattisgarh that year recorded 435 insurgency related fatalities. Of these, 198 were of security force personnel and 171 of civilians.

Earlier this year Shivdhar Reddy, a highly-respected counter-insurgency expert who serves as Deputy Inspector-General of Police at the Andhra Pradesh Police's Special Intelligence Bureau, provided a bleak assessment of what could lie ahead.

"The intensified Maoist activity in Koraput and Malkangiri districts in Orissa", Reddy noted, "indicates that they are going beyond the control of the administration." Reddy said it would take at least two years of concerted action to stem the tide.

What now lies ahead? Media accounts have represented the Union Government's police-surge as looming hammer-blow against the insurgency. In practice, it is more likely to prove a limited holding operation. External forces, India's unfortunately rich counter-insurgency experience shows, can take years to acquire local intelligence. The Central Reserve Police Force, moreover, suffers from crippling officer shortages and lacks an organic intelligence organization.

India's counter-insurgency successes—among them Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Tripura and Andhra Pradesh—were built on an overall enhancement of police capabilities. Andhra Pradesh, which defeated a powerful Maoist insurgency, invested not just in its much-vaunted Greyhounds jungle-warfare unit, but in training its personnel, developing intelligence capabilities, and building a network of well-equipped police stations. Andhra Pradesh has 1,579 police stations to serve its 2,75,045 square kilometer territory. By way of contrast, Chhattisgarh has just a fifth as many police stations—350—although it, at 1,35,191 square kilometers, is half as large.

What the Home Ministry hopes is that the central forces it is now pumping in will be able to restore some semblance of order, if not law, while police modernization programs it is funding kick in over the next few years. The strategy is less than optimal—but better than no action at all.

Thailand's Southern Insurgency: Risks and Trends

Nelson Rand



Thailand's deep south remains embroiled in an Islamic insurgency that is the single most lethal conflict in Southeast Asia. It is also the single greatest security challenge to the Thai state. The conflict zone consists of the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and parts of Songkhla, which historically belonged to the Malay Kingdom of Patani until it was annexed by Thailand over a century ago. Since then, rebellion and insurgency have plagued the region, with the latest phase of the conflict beginning in 2004. The insurgents, while never publically stating their demands or claiming responsibility for their attacks, are believed to be fighting for an independent Islamic state for southernmost Thailand, which is populated mainly by Ethnic Malay Muslims as opposed to Thai Buddhists.

Violence in Southern Thailand has intensified in recent months. The month of Ramadan (21 August to 19 September) was particularly deadly, which saw over 40 people killed and the detonation of two truck-bombs. In June, at least 36 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded in 93 incidents, including one of the deadliest attacks of the conflict to date – a shooting attack on a mosque in Narathiwat province during evening prayers that killed 11 and injured 12.

The attack on al-Furqan mosque in Narathiwat's Joh Ai Rong district, an insurgent stronghold, highlights one of the many potential risks of the insurgency in Southern Thailand—that it may mutate into a wider sectarian conflict between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims. While the perpetrators and their motive for the mosque attack remain unclear, there is much speculation that it was carried out by Thai Buddhist vigilantes as opposed to insurgents. "The emergence of unidentified armed groups and revenge attacks is another factor that might lead to the escalation of the violence," warns Dr Srisompob Jitpiromsri, director of Prince of Songkhla University's Deep South Watch, a group that tracks the violence.

Similarly, a recent report released by Non-Violence International, a Washington DC-based group that promotes peaceful resistance, warns that the training and arming of civilian militias by the Thai government to aid in the counter-insurgency effort is having detrimental effects. "Firearms proliferation and the creation of civilian militias in Southern Thailand is exacerbating religious and ethnic polarization and communal violence as social ties are breaking down and ethno-religious discrimination intensifies—ultimately fuelling insecurity, human rights abuses, and enhancing the culture of violence already dominant in the region," says the report entitled *Rule by the Gun: Armed Civilians and Firearms Proliferation in Southern Thailand*.

Training and arming civilian defense forces in Southern Thailand is a key aspect of the government's counter-insurgency strategy. At present, such forces number over 50,000, complimenting military and police forces that number around 60,000. The government and security forces argue that civilian defense forces are necessary to help protect villages, infrastructure, and officials (and for self-defense), while critics such as Non-Violence International argue that the practice fosters arms proliferation and fuels ethnic and communal tensions. However, in the case of Southern Thailand, what few critics mention – including Non-Violence International – is that the vast majority of civilian defense force members (about 80 percent) are ethnic Malay Muslims. That such groups fuel ethnic and communal tension then is a rather dubious claim, considering the vast majority of those armed belong to same group, in this case Malay Muslims. Nevertheless, the proliferation of weapons among civilians in Southern Thailand inevitably heightens the risk of the conflict expanding. "Numerous armed conflicts show that civilian proliferation of firearms among civilians and the expansion of civilian forces increase insecurity, instead of diminish it," adds the Non-Violence International report.

Another potential risk of the insurgency in Southern Thailand is that it will change from a predominantly separatist-driven struggle to a wider Jihadist-driven fight hijacked by foreign elements. Although this threat exists, there are four key points that should be stressed in regards to the current nature of the insurgency: attacks have so far been contained to the operational territory of the insurgents, there has never been a suicide bombing, there is no concrete evidence that foreign terrorist groups are directly involved in the violence, and the area has yet to attract foreign Jihad fighters. Nevertheless, the risk that the nature of the insurgency will change is ever

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1 The insurgency in southern Thailand is the most lethal conflict in Southeast Asia

2 The insurgency threatens to mutate into a wider conflict between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims

3 The training of militia groups by the Government could also have detrimental effects



present and there are several alarming points and trends that should be noted in regards to the foreign element of the insurgency.

First, while foreign terrorist groups have not been directly linked to the violence, there is strong evidence that many of Southern Thailand's insurgents have received training from them, especially from Jemaah Islamiyah [JI], Southeast Asia's largest terrorist network. It is known that many of the insurgents formerly 'studied' in Indonesia, while Thai military intelligence has received several credible reports of JI members entering Southern Thailand at various times throughout the past several years. Furthermore, many of the older insurgents served with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, where the roots of al-Qaeda took form. It should be assumed that relationships have been maintained and that the insurgents of Southern Thailand have the ability – if they choose to do so – to communicate and link with al-Qaeda. It is also likely that new relationships are being formed now as Thai intelligence officials say some 300 Malay Muslims from Southern Thailand are currently studying in Madrassas in Pakistan.

Second, Jihadist websites in Malaysia and Indonesia have called for Muslims to go to Southern Thailand and wage a Jihad against the Thai state. While there is no evidence that such websites have resulted in any foreign recruitment to the insurgency in Southern Thailand, their messages are chilling and they highlight the risk that Southern Thailand could become a battleground for foreign Jihadists.

Third, Southern Thailand is a designated area of operations for JI. The area falls under Region 1 (or Matiqi 1) of JI's military-like structure, along with Malaysia and Singapore. While JI is not directly involved in Southern Thailand's insurgency and has never launched an attack in Thailand, the threat is ever present.

As for recent trends of the insurgency in Southern Thailand, there are in turn three that should be noted. First, since late 2007 there has been a dramatic decline in the number of insurgent attacks in Southern Thailand. In 2007, which was the deadliest year of the insurgency to date, there were an average of 157 attacks per month. In 2008, this dropped to an average of 88. Many analysts attribute this dramatic drop in attacks to successful counter-insurgency policies and tactics by the Thai Army that has included the restructuring of the army's operations in the South, a troop surge, more aggressive military tactics, and the complementation of military tactics with community development projects and civil affairs outreach programs. Others, however, contend that the decrease in the number of attacks may be simply a strategy shift by the insurgents to focus more on the quality of attacks as opposed to quantity. This leads to the second notable trend of the insurgency: attacks have become more lethal.

While 2008 saw a 50 percent decline in the number of insurgent attacks from 2007, there was only about a 30 percent decline in casualty figures – meaning each attack on average caused more casualties in 2008 than in 2007, a trend that is continuing in 2009. Car and motorcycle bombs are becoming more frequent – and generally causing more casualties than they did prior to 2008. On 25 August for example, on the fifth day of this year's Ramadan, a 110-pound bomb hidden inside a pick-up truck was detonated in the center of Narathiwat city, wounding 42 people in one of the most powerful bombings of the conflict. While the launching of more lethal attacks may be a deliberate change of tactics by the insurgents out of choice, another theory contends that the insurgents are launching fewer but more lethal attacks simply because they are losing support. According to this theory, because the insurgents cannot go for quantity anymore (because it takes more people to launch more attacks), they have had to settle for quality (because the quality of attacks is not contingent on the number of attackers).

The third trend, related to the second one, is that the insurgents are using more sophisticated technology in their bombings, specifically for their trigger devices. Recent bomb attacks have been triggered by radio transceivers as opposed to mobile phones, which are much more efficient as they can be used from a greater distance and their signals are much more difficult to block. This is the same technology used by bombers in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, this does not necessarily mean the insurgents are receiving a higher level of training or are being helped by outsiders as such improvements could be simply copied and are not that difficult to implement.

While the insurgency in Southern Thailand shows no sign of abating, security officials are generally optimistic that they are gaining the upper-hand on the insurgents, citing the drastic decline in the number of insurgent attacks since late 2007 as proof. However, the potential risks and the insurgency's recent trends discussed above all suggest that the security forces need to be as vigilant as ever in their counter-insurgency campaign. The end, it seems, is far from near.



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