



SPLINTER TERRORIST GROUPS: EMERGING TRENDS OF TERRORISM IN BANGLADESH

Innovative new tactics have always been a tool of survival or expansion for terrorist groups all over the world. Activities of extremist/ terrorist groups in Bangladesh now appear to be following a new pattern. It seems that the older strategy of bigger group, rapid expansion of network and spectacular terrorist acts to capture immediate media and public attention has been abandoned for the time being due to its failure. Such tactics have also been excluded keeping in mind the strong reaction from the security apparatus and the negative public sentiments towards terrorism.

The rise of rather smaller groups in disguise of various activities gives a new impression about the emerging trend. Police in Bangladesh recently unearthed activities of a small group named 'Ansarullah Bangla Team' (Volunteer of Allah Bangla Team). Their leader Mohammad Jasimuddin Rahmani was arrested with 30 of his followers on 15th August 2013. On the previous day police recovered huge volume of Jihadist literature, documents and list of persons to be killed through terror attacks. Similar recoveries along with some small arms were made on 24th of the same month in Barisal districts. Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) predicted, in its previous publication, this emergence of splinter extremist/ terrorist groups.

Background and Context

Extremist/ terrorist phenomenon in Bangladesh came hand in hand with increased terrorist activities in the international arena. Home grown but internationally linked groups like JMB, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Harkatul Jihad Al Islami – Bangladesh (HUJI-B) and others came to being in Bangladesh emerged in the late nineties and the early years of the 21st century. This was the time period when many big international terrorist attacks took place including attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. The geographic reach of terrorist groups virtually spread over the entire globe, from New York to Bali. Interestingly the worst sufferers, apart from the WTC attack, were the people in Asian Countries especially citizens of some countries in the Middle East and in South Asia. The phenomena took the worst toll on Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. South Caucasus region of



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Russia, Mindanao of the Philippines, southern Thailand also faced terrorist actions.

This period was crucial in relation to the development of terror threat as counter terror efforts by the west and some of their eastern allies were responded with more spells of terrorist activities by the hard core and Al Qaida linked/inspired global Jihadist. This is still on and with trends of developments in Middle East and Afghanistan as being observed nowadays signals potential of new escalation.

Terrorist organizations in Bangladesh both local (e.g. Jagrata Muslim Janata) and regional (HUJI, JMB) followed, by and large, the activity patterns of their international comrades. In early 21st century Bangladesh faced several terrorist attacks including blast at the Ramna park in Dhaka during Bengali new year celebrations and attack on a rally of the Communist Party of Bangladesh in Paltan in 2001; serial bomb blasts in four cinema halls of Mymensingh in 2002; grenade attacks on an AL rally on August 21, 2004; and the simultaneous series bomb attacks at 511 places in 63 districts on August 17, 2005. In the aftermath of these deadly terrorist activities, the government of Bangladesh banned Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harkat- ul Jihad al-Islami (HUJI), Hizbut-Tahrir, Shahadat-e-al Hikma, Jagrata Muslim Janata and other listed Islamic terrorist organizations.

Government, media and civil society response to these was holistic and largely successful which included building public opinion against terrorist and conduction effective intelligence and arrest operations. All these resulted in containment and some temporary weakening of extremist activities. But there were always a possibility of resurfacing of these terrorist elements in a changed form and new tactics. The emergence of splinter groups seems to be the vindication of that.

Profile-Splinter Terrorist Groups

The ones of the splinter terrorist groups of which information is being unearthed are:

Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)-Ansarullah Bangla Team, an online-based network, came to the limelight in early March 2013 when five

students from North South University were arrested for the brutal murder of prominent blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider. The group has recently geared up its campaign for armed Jihad. Before the emergence of the Ansarullah Bangla Team, the group used to operate under different names such as Jamatul Muslimin and under the banners of different NGOs and research bodies.

Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani is the leader of the group well known amongst his followers for invigorating them with hateful and objectionable sermons. They consider Al Qaida leader Anwar Al Awlaki as their prime spiritual leader and draws inspiration from his recorded deliberations, writings etc. The group has 3000 followers and more than 100 of them put their faith in armed Jihad.

Quran Learning Course (Quran Shikha Course)- This is an effort to reorganize the banned Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) and Jama'tul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) in different parts of the country under the banner of Quran Learning Course. They have extreme hatred for the secular Awami League and the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina whom they consider anti-Islamic. They also possess a global Jihadi tone and express their perception of Muslim sufferings in the hand of the westerners in their own way. Police found evidence of their recent linkage to ex HUJI and ex JMB operatives. Their activities were recorded in places like Jhalakathi, Nilphamari etc places.

BEM- The other militant outfit BEM is now operating under new platform. It's an effort to reorganize JMB. This group now seems to be more radical than the JMB and HizbutTahrir. Surprisingly law enforcement and intelligence agencies of Bangladesh have not still found the full meaning of BEM. The name 'BEM' was just found only in several Islamic books. They have mainly emerged in a new name with similar motive in order to eliminate a number of high-profile people who are so called 'enemies of Islam'.

There are indications of few more similar groups. The law enforcing agencies are yet to find details about those.

Patterns of Activities

A certain pattern emerges so far by analysing the activities of ABT and BEM. They tend to maintain low profile, at least in the initial stages, which is a departure from the style adopted by groups earlier such as JMB and HUJI-B. These groups also change their name and form and adopt disguises. In order to avoid detection by law enforcement and security agencies, these groups also take benign names and identities.

Enhanced use of the Internet for ideological indoctrination and spreading their message is also another important characteristic of these groups. Innovative communication networks are being used for spreading Jihadi messages online. Propaganda distribution system has shifted from hand-carried cassette tapes to vastly superior online methods. Cyber services are also being used to expand networks, exchange real time information, recruitment, training and fund raising. New media platforms and blogs are also being used extensively to spread ideas as well as maximize psychological impact of terrorist act.

Use of electrifying and hateful sermons in low key localities, to avoid detection, to indoctrinate is another element of their activities.

For the first time in Bangladesh female militants were found in Patuakhali recently and this indicated the exploitation of the social norm relating to the perception of innocence of women.

These groups are also making a foray into the educated urban youth in Bangladesh. They endeavor to indoctrinate these youngsters who have access to the educated and liberal strata of society to potentially use them for terrorist activities.

New Operational Tactics

The previous operational tactic, mostly relying on conventional explosive seems to have been complimented with other tactics witnessed in recent times such as assassinations and use of small arms. Small arms are perfect for targeted killings and fit the bill of the splinter groups agenda which vilifies prominent figures from creative and liberal fields.

Training doctrine and pamphlets confiscated provides the evidence for indented use of small arms in a greater degree.

Splinter groups are now giving more emphasis on new techniques like using small arms and sophisticated weapons rather than explosives. There is a possibility that these groups may attempt suicide terrorism in the coming days. The training and indoctrinations methods used by these groups mirrors the methods used by other similar groups operating in South Asia including the Taliban. In addition to their national linkages indicators suggest that these outfits may have strong transnational linkages too. The ideological affiliations to international terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also needs to be closely observed. In light of the recent rise in female radicalisation and the arrest of female militants, the potential use of female suicide bombers also needs to be taken into account.

Funding

Links have been found between Bangladeshi splinter/ mutant terrorist groups and their associates in other countries including the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Akin to other major terrorist groups earlier, these new groups have also resorted to various traditional and non- traditional methods of terror financing to raise funds. Moreover, as a result of their operational tactics, the requirement for funding is quite low.

Ties with the Bigger/Older Groups

Going by the ideological literature confiscated from these mutant groups and the result of investigations carried out by law enforcement agencies, it can be surmised that groups such as ABT and BEM are successors to groups such as HUJI-B and JMB. There appears to be a commonality in the strategic intent espoused by JMB and HUJI-B and the ones propagated by groups such as ABT. These groups reject the current socio-political order prevalent in Bangladesh and want to create an Islamic state with a strict enforcement of Islamic law. These

groups are also against the neat balance maintained between ethnic and religious identity in Bangladesh.

International Linkage

Initial investigations suggest that in the case of ABT, they have been clearly influenced by the teachings of Anwar Al Awlaki and have followed many of the ideological material propagated by the AQAP. There are indicators suggesting the use international links for financial support, an aspect which needs to be probed thoroughly. Evidence also suggests *Quran Shikkha Course* may also be used by groups such as JMB and HUJI-B to regroup their members and revitalise their transnational linkages.

Projection

Splinters/ mutant groups are just the initial symptoms of resurgence of the elements that have survived despite sustained kinetic efforts undertaken in recent years. *BIPSS* has time and again highlighted that despite sustained Counter Terror (CT) operations, terrorist groups have continued to regroup and reorganise themselves. The efforts taken by the terrorist groups to revitalise their international linkages also presents a serious concern. The ability to tap into the operational and technical wherewithal of similar organisations in the region could act as a force multiplier for the emerging groups in Bangladesh. International linkages could also prove vital in providing the necessary inflow of financial support that is essential lifeblood for such outfits. The inclusion of small arms and the likelihood of suicide terrorism could also emerge as a lethal concoction which the CT response community will have to grapple with.

Recommendations

Some steps need to be immediately undertaken by the law enforcement and security agencies as well

as the entire CT response community:

- Efforts need to be redoubled by security agencies by creating specialised monitoring cells to constantly evaluate the threat emanating from splinter groups.
- Attention needs to be devoted to the augmentation of the capacity of law enforcement agencies to deal with these new groups.
- Coordination is key to any counter terrorism success. Hence, effective coordination at all levels between intelligence and law enforcement agencies will need to be ensured to stem the further growth of splinter groups. The overall Counter Terrorism architecture of the country needs to be clearly defined and articulated in order to avoid any duplication of effort and ensure greater synergy.
- Counterterrorism efforts should be delinked from politics. The law enforcement agencies will have to be more innovative with the rising inventive techniques of these groups. Adequate coverage of all vulnerable areas needs to be ensured.
- In addition to the rise of splinter groups, the potential rise of ‘lone wolf’ terrorism needs to be examined. All relevant agencies need to be adequately equipped to ensure effective coverage of all vulnerable areas across the country.

Final Words

Timely action in case of re-emerging terror scenario can save Bangladesh from plunging into a worsened security problem. Spreading extremism paralyses a society of all its normal functions. It is now up to the government and its relevant agencies to conduct smarter and more sophisticated counter terror action with all the past experience and willingness to take the challenges posed by new terror trends.