"The Khilafah's Soldiers in Bengal": Analysing the Islamic State Jihadists and Their Violence Justification Narratives in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Islamic State (IS) is going through a shift in its strategy and tactics with a major organisational restructuring in the post-Caliphate phase. Instead of controlling a territory with a centralised system, the jihadist organisation is attempting to expand its ideologies via local affiliates, exploiting existing local grievances. Although South Asia receives priority in IS' ambition of expansion, the extant literature on the role of the jihadist outfit in the region, especially in Bangladesh, is scant. To address this lacuna, this study explores the development of IS affiliated groups in Bangladesh and portrays its origin, leadership, target, goals and international connections. It also explains how Bangladeshi foreign fighters were recruited for IS and who the key persons were behind Bangladeshis' IS connections. This study shows that while the Bangladesh government squarely refused to acknowledge the presence of IS in Bangladesh, IS claimed responsibilities of several attacks and indicated their long-term plan to control the region in the future. This study also analyses jihadist content, including IS' flagship magazine Dabiq, Rumiyah, their videos and Telegram channels, and finds their violence justification narrative employed in Bangladesh. It finds that there are mainly three themes in the Bangladeshi jihadist narrative: perceived crisis construct, solution construct, and justification of jihad as the only way to reach the solution from the existing crisis.

Keywords: Islamic State, Bangladesh, Jihadist Narrative, Foreign Fighters, South Asia

Introduction

Bangladesh witnessed a hostage crisis situation, perpetrated by Islamic State-affiliated operatives, on 1 July 2016. The violent extremists stormed into the Holey Artisan Bakery, a restaurant popular among foreigners in an upscale neighbourhood in Dhaka. They hacked and stabbed to death 20 hostages including Indian, Italian, Japanese, and US citizens. A twelve-hour siege ended with the security forces' gunfight with the jihadists. Two law enforcement officers and five attackers were killed in the incident. Although this particularly gruesome attack received global attention, the country has experienced several small-scale attacks and targeted killings in recent years. Jihadists have murdered at least 40 writers, publishers and activists, foreigners and members of minority faiths since 2013. Between 2013 and 2017, there were 50 incidents involving violent extremism resulting in 255 deaths and 942 wounded.[1]

The relative decline of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, and deaths or arrests of the key leaderships of the Islamic State affiliated group in Bangladesh, manifest an ebbing of their organisational strength in the country. However, in the post-Caliphate phase, the terrorist group is going through a major change in its strategy and tactics regarding organisational restructuring.[2] The organisation's concentration is now shifting from a centralised and globally coordinated effort towards local and regional struggles, exploiting grievances in various local contexts and conditions.[3] This move towards greater decentralisation of IS has important ramifications for the region of South Asia as evidenced by the recent announcement of an IS province in India in May 2019.[4] The group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, acknowledged (via a video published online in April 2019) the loss in Syria but reminded his followers that the long battle between 'Islam and its people with the crusader and his people'[5] will go on, not only in Iraq and Syria, but also by IS' far-flung franchises and affiliates. Indeed, he claimed that the coordinated bombings in Sri Lanka, which killed at least 250 people, were carried out as a 'revenge' for the group's defeat in Baghuz, the last IS stronghold in Syria.

The recent indication of IS' organisational restructuring and willingness to expand provide more reasons to

explore the dynamics of violent extremism in the region. Indeed, after two years of relative calm,[6] IS operatives are now trying to regroup[7] in Bangladesh, which is manifested first by posting a threatening message on a pro-IS Telegram channel indicating an imminent attack in Bangladesh after the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka,[8] and then claiming responsibilities of three attacks on law enforcement officers in Bangladesh between April and July 2019.[9] Despite these worrying indications, a sheer lack of studies made it difficult for researchers to understand the development of IS in Bangladesh and analyse the role of Bangladeshi foreign fighters in Syria. Notwithstanding the noticeable presence of local jihadist groups, claims of high degrees of support for militancy[10] and evidence of the connections with transnational terrorist organisations, studies on the role of the Islamic State (IS) and its affiliated groups in Bangladesh are almost absent.[11] Bangladesh, in general, has received scant attention from the experts in violent extremism, unlike other countries of South Asia.[12] To fill this gap, this study explores the impact, strategy, and ideology of the IS jihadist movement in Bangladesh by addressing its strands and illustrating its evolution. This study also investigates how content produced by IS jihadists constructs the narrative that justifies violent jihad in Bangladesh.

Violent Extremist Organisations and Their Narratives

A narrative is essentially a story that links elements and sequences together to convey specific meanings for interpreting the world.[13] It is a system of stories that share themes, forms and archetypes.[14] A large number of extant studies analyse the narratives of violent extremists;[15] some of these studies have analysed Islamist propaganda in an attempt to understand how these groups think and behave.[16] One study identifies Islamist master narratives manifested in the rhetoric of violent extremist groups and how the narratives not only provides simplistic explanations and connections between past and present events but also incorporate ideas, texts, and interpretations derived from religious scriptures.[17] In their study, Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane analysed IS' narratives in 10 issues of the *Dabiq,* the group's online magazine, and found direct references to the *crusades/crusaders* (452 times), *jahiliyya* (27 times), *hypocrites* (23 times), and *the battle of Badr* (21 times).[18] In another study, Charlie Winter compiled 1,146 incidents of Islamic State propaganda between 17 July and 15 August 2015 and identified six key narratives, namely: brutality (2.13%), mercy (0.45%), belonging (0.89%), victimhood (6.84%), war (37.12%), and utopia (52.57%).[19] Also, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Nathaniel Barr and Bridget Moreng's work provides a descriptive analysis of the narratives that Islamic State deploys to mobilize aspirant extremists to join its ranks.[20] J.M. Berger, Mohammed Hafez[21] and Haroro Ingram's[22] studies identify arguments that extremist groups employ to construct their narratives. Hafez's study describes three themes. The first theme depicts the crisis; 'Islam is under threat; Muslims are humiliated and suffering all over the world at the hands of Western 'invaders/crusaders.'[23] The second theme shows the limitations and unwillingness of the current regimes in Muslim countries to act against the West. This theme claims that existing regimes are puppets of their Western masters. The third and final theme draws a picture of optimism whereby Muslim saviours will win against their enemies and establish a true and just society based on their interpretations of Islam. Similarly, Ingram also argues that extremists create their messages by constructing crises and solutions, defining in-group and out-group identities, identifying themselves as "champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Sunni Muslims," and then using this construction as the ideological argument for why the Muslim community should "support us and our solutions (i.e., the in-group's politico-military agenda)."[24]

Berger's analysis shows that extremists use several common crisis narratives, including conspiracy, impurity, existential threat, dystopia, apocalypse and triumphalism. He argues that violent extremist groups only seek to resolve conflicts through crisis-solution constructs. Also, Alex Schmid presents three structural elements of Al-Qaeda's narrative that include grievances among many Muslims (e.g., discrimination, humiliation, chaos, corrupt rulers, etc.), a vision of a better political system (the Caliphate, and rule by Sharia), and the articulation of a strategy to address those grievances and achieve the vision through violent jihad.[25]

Following these extant theories, I argue that jihadists—and particularly those aligned with IS—employ a grand narrative to justify their violent attacks in Bangladesh. This grand narrative identifies crises, presents solutions and contends that violent armed jihad is the only way to resolve these crises. I also argue that following the

global jihadist narratives and customizing the messages by employing local contexts, Bangladeshi jihadists construct a 'Crisis-Justification-Solution' (CJS) narrative to radicalize and recruit aspiring individuals. Besides the crisis and solution construction, I include the justification presented in the jihadist narratives to 'rationalize' their violent actions.

Data and Method

The data for this study were gathered from two types of sources. First, I have collected jihadist documents, including Islamic States' online magazines, videos, and infographics, which were primarily published targeting a Bangla speaking audience. Two issues of *Dabiq* (12 & 14), and one issue of *Rumiyah* (2), published several articles on Bangladesh. The 12th issue of *Dabiq*, named *Just Terror*, published a five-page article titled *The Revival of Jihad in Bengal with the Spread of the Light of the Khilafah*. This issue also published a selection of Islamic States' attacks all across the world, mentioning four recent attacks in Bangladesh by their operatives. Issue 14 of *Dabiq* gave even larger coverage of Bangladesh; publishing a detailed interview with the Amir of 'the Khilafa's Soldiers in Bengal' (IS Bengal), who goes by the *nom de guerre* Abu Ibrahim al Hanif. The online magazine also published another story on a young Bangladeshi, Abu Jandal al-Bangali, who was killed in a battle in Syria. Among the selection of attacks, the issue mentioned three attacks on the Hindu and Shia communities in Bangladesh. The second issue of *Rumiyah* published a list of IS operations in Bangladesh carried out between Dhulhijjah 1436 –1437 (2015 –2016 AD), produced by Naba Infographic. This issue also published an 'exclusive' story on the five assailants of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, titled *The Shuhada of the Gulshan Attack,* by IS Bengal's head of military and covert operations Abu Dujanah al-Bengali, *nom de guerre* of Tamim Chowdhury. The two IS videos include one presenting three Bangladeshi foreign fighters in Raqqa, Syria, praising the Holey Artisan attackers and justifying jihad in Bangladesh, and another video produced by the IS' "Bilad al-Bengal media office", featuring the five attackers of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack which is believed to have been recorded in an unknown place sometime before the attack.[26] Second, I have gathered newspaper reports on Bangladeshi jihadists, via a Google search with keywords including 'Islamic State/IS/ISIS/ISIL in Bangladesh', 'Bangladeshi foreign fighters in Syria' and 'Neo-JMB'. Mainly, newspaper reports were collected from *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo* and *Dhaka Tribune*. *The Daily Star* and the *Prothom Alo* are the most widely circulated English and Bangla newspapers in Bangladesh. The *Dhaka Tribune* was selected for its extensive reporting on issues of violent extremism in Bangladesh. International news agencies' reports, including reports from the *British Broadcasting Cooperation (*BBC), the *Guardian* and the *Diplomat*, were also used. I have employed a content analysis of these data to analyse the development, leadership and target of the terrorist outfit and their international connections and explore their narratives and messages.

The Islamic State and Its Affiliated Groups in Bangladesh

In recent years, the Bangladeshi government has been maintaining a curious position of denying the presence of IS in Bangladesh, in contrast to several claims made by the terrorist network itself. However, as early as in 2015, law enforcement officers had claimed to have arrested 'coordinators' and 'recruiters' linked to IS, as well as persons attempting to travel to Syria. In the first six months of 2015, 17 people were arrested on suspicion of spreading IS ideology in the country and preparing to go to Syria.[27] After the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016, several policymakers began to deny the presence of Islamic State in the country. Instead of Islamic State, the government officials coined a new name for the group, 'Neo-JMB', and claimed that it was merely a new faction of Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), a local violent extremist organisation. Observers believe that the government makes this claim in order to tarnish the reputation of the political opposition in the name of counterterrorism.[28] Indeed, government officials, including the Prime Minister and Home Minister, have not only denied the presence of IS in Bangladesh but accused the main opposition political party for the attacks and blamed the opposition for conspiring to smear the government's reputation.[29] The opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), rejected the charge.[30]

How does IS react to the Bangladesh government's denial of their presence in Bangladesh? In an article published

in *Dabiq* (Issue 12), the organisation expressed its surprise. They questioned how the government denied the presence of IS in Bangladesh after its law enforcement officers' earlier claims of arresting several IS operatives and 'top IS coordinators'.[31] The article claimed that the law enforcement officers had been repeating this 'lie' of 'No IS in Bangladesh' like a 'broken record' after each attack.[32] The Bangladesh governments' denial irked the IS so much that they called it 'shameless' and 'childish'. The article says: "The murtadd Bengali government will soon realize, by Allah's permission, that shamelessly denying facts on the ground and playing childish blame games with the murtadd opposition will be of no avail to them, as the Islamic State is indeed here to stay…it is here to stay from Tunisia all the way to Bengal even if the murtaddīn despise such…"[33] In contrast to the existing Bangladesh regime's official position, the individuals involved in these attacks, such as the assailants of Holey Artisan Bakery Attack, claimed themselves that they were members of the IS. The confession statements of the returnees and arrested jihadists further indicates the obvious connections between IS and Bangladeshi recruiters.[34] The organisation's flagship magazine *Dabiq* also affirmed IS presence in Bangladesh and published several stories on their involvement in jihadist attacks in Bangladesh.[35]

While the government squarely refuses to acknowledge the presence of IS in Bangladesh, on the contrary, IS claims its vibrant presence in the country. Given such a contradictory stance, a careful analysis of the extent of the organisation's presence in Bangladesh is necessary. Either denying or exaggerating IS' influence in the country will be misleading and, as such, detrimental for the security of the region.[36] An analysis of earlier IS documents reveals that Bangladesh was categorised as an area with the presence of IS' covert units. An *Amaq* agency infographic, found in one of their telegram channels, shows that IS has three types of presence in 19 countries. The infographic, titled "Two years since announcing the caliphate 29th June 2014: Spread of the Islamic State on 29th June 2016," lists three layers of presence: a) areas of major control: Iraq and Syria; b) areas of medium control: Chechnya, Yemen, Egypt, Nigeria, Libya, Somalia, The Philippines, Niger, Afghanistan, and Dagestan;[37] and c) areas containing covert units: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Algeria, France, Tunisia, Lebanon & Bangladesh. However, the major incidents in Bangladesh, including the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, were perpetrated by IS-affiliated operatives after the timeline shown in this infographic. Thus, it is unclear whether the degree of IS influence over Bangladesh has changed after these attacks, although several IS communiqués show that Bangladesh is still considered a 'Bilad' (land or area), versus a 'Wilayat' (province).[38]

The connection between central IS and the organisation's affiliated group in Bangladesh was a win-win situation for both. By establishing a link with a global jihadist organisation, the local groups gained relevance as well as the gratification of being a part of the global jihad. Also, for a faction of Jamaat-ul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), this affiliation might provide an opportunity to re-emerge and re-group their operatives after a period of hibernation.[39] On the other hand, an affiliation with the local group aligns with IS' ambition to expand its global jihad, exploit local grievances, and establish new bases in South Asia. Moreover, IS' ambition of establishing a stronghold in South Asia faces a stern challenge by its rival group, Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).[40] A local jihadist group, Ansar al Islam Bangladesh, has already established strong links with AQIS and conducted several attacks, after Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al Zawahiri launched the branch in South Asia in September 2014. These developments provided more reasons for central IS to establish and maintain a connection with interested violent extremist group(s) in Bangladesh.

The IS affiliated group in Bangladesh was formed by a merger between two terrorist outfits; a faction of JMB (led by Sarwar Jahan) and the Jund At-Tawhid wal-Khalifah—a group formed under the leadership of a Canadian-Bangladeshi, Tamim Chowdhury. Together, these two outfits formed a new organisation called Dawlatul Islam Bengal and pledged their allegiance to Islamic State.[41] Evidence shows that Tamim was connected with Canadian foreign fighters, particularly with the 'Calgary cluster', and went to Syria before he found his way to Bangladesh. It is also speculated that he came to Bangladesh on direct orders from IS' central leadership where he adopted the *nom de guerre* Abu Dujanah al-Bengali and was appointed as the head of Military and Covert Operations. According to several IS communiques, an individual with *nom de guerre* Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif, has been nominated as the Amir of IS in Bangladesh. However, the identity of Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif is still unknown. Some observers claim that Saifullah Ozaki, a Bangladeshi origin Japanese University lecturer, was the

Amir of IS' Bangladesh chapter and Sarwar Jahan (*nom de guerre* Asim Ajwad) acted as Ozaki's representative in Bangladesh.[42] The local law enforcement agencies claim that either Tamim Chowdhury[43] or Sarwar Jahan[44] is Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif. However, the propensity of the Bangladeshi law enforcement to name individuals operating in Bangladesh as Abu Ibrahim could be linked to the government's stance that the group responsible for the attacks was homegrown.

In an article published in Islamic State's online magazine *Dabiq*, it has been claimed that after the declaration of IS 'Khilafah' in Iraq and Syria, the Bangladeshi jihadists united together to join the organisation, mainly inspired by the outfit's effective media campaign.[45] IS claimed that although the jihadists were fragmented in Bangladesh before the declaration of 'Khilafah', their online campaigns successfully united various factions of violent extremist groups together. The article asserts "…the soldiers of the Khilāfah in Bengal pledged their allegiance to the Khalīfah Ibrāhīm, unified their ranks, nominated a regional leader, gathered behind him, dissolved their former factions, performed the necessary military preparations, and hastened to answer the order from the Islamic State leadership, by targeting the crusaders and their allies wherever they may be found."[46]

The operation of Islamic State in Bangladesh can be divided into two types: First, the Bangladeshi foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to fight for Islamic State; and second, the individuals of Islamic State's affiliated group, Dawlatul Islam Bengal, who declared their allegiance to the 'Khilafat' and operated inside the territory of Bangladesh on behalf of Islamic State. With the absence of published official documents and denial of the government regarding the presence of Islamic State in Bangladesh, the exact number of Bangladeshi foreign fighters who went to Iraq and Syria to fight for IS is difficult to determine.[47] According to one news report, at least fifty had travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for IS; however, senior security officials involved in counter-terrorism estimate the number to be as low as twenty.[48] A United Nations report estimates forty.[49] Another news report claims that about one hundred violent extremists, including women, went to Syria from Bangladesh to join IS.[50]

Three Bangladeshi origin foreign nationals, Saifullah Ozaki from Japan, ATM Tazuddin from Australia, and Siful Haque Sujan from the UK acted as the key persons to connect Bangladeshi jihadists to IS.[51] Ozaki and Tazuddin were the primary connection between central IS in Syria and aspiring Bangladeshi jihadist individuals and groups, and Sujan was one of the top IT experts of IS. Internal IS documents indicate that Ozaki, Tazuddin and Sujan reached Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi through IS Shura Council member Abu Ubaydah Abd al-Hakim al-Iraqi, a senior administrator in charge of Wilayas and affiliates of IS.[52] The appointment of the Amir of IS Bengal was also approved through this channel.[53] The Cardiff-based Bangladeshi businessman, Siful Haque Sujan, who took the *nom de guerre* Abu Khaled al-Bengali, was the key IT expert of Islamic State. He supported IS hacking efforts, anti-surveillance technology and weapons development for the group.[54] Sujan left the UK in July 2014 for Syria. He was killed in December 2015 during a U.S. airstrike in Raqqa. Saifullah Ozaki aka Sujit Debnath converted to Islam from Hinduism after he left Bangladesh for Japan.[55] This Japanese-Bangladeshi jihadi and former associate professor of Ritsumeikan University played a key role in recruiting Bangladeshis for IS. At least two arrested violent extremists mentioned Ozaki's name in their court confessions. [56] Some of the individuals who travelled to Syria using Ozaki's connection were Asadullah Galib, Tahmid Rahman Safi, Dr. Arafat Hossain Tushar, Ibrahim Hasan Khan, Nazibullah Ansari, Junayed Hasan Khan, Ashraf Mohammad Islam and ATM Tajuddin.[57] Among several recruiters, Aminul Islam Beg, Sakib Bin Kamal and Ashrar Ahmed Khan Chowdhury played key roles in facilitating or inspiring foreign travel, according to the confessions of the arrested violent extremists.

The Dawlatul Islam Bengal—the organisation that was formed before pledging allegiance to IS in 2015—was led by Tamim Chowdhury, a Canadian citizen of Bangladeshi origin. He came to Bangladesh and started to recruit Bangladeshi foreign fighters for Islamic State in October 2013. Before merging with Dawlatul Islam Bengal, Tamim formed his own outfit, Junud Al Towhid Al Khalifa, which eventually declared its allegiance to IS. According to security officials, besides Tamim, Sarwar Jahan alais Manik, Abdus Samad alias Arif alias Mamu,

Mamunur Rashid Ripon and Shaikh Abul Kashem were the main leaders of Tamim's outfit.[58] This terrorist outfit has two main wings—southern and northern. The northern wing is based in Gazipur, an industrial district adjacent to Dhaka, and the southern wing is in Mirpur, one of the largest vicinities in the capital.[59] The group uses several locations in Mirpur as its training centres. The operational headquarters of the group are located in Savar and Tongi, another two cities near Dhaka.

This IS affiliated group in Bangladesh has claimed at least 30 terrorist attacks in Bangladesh between September 2015 and July 2017.[60] The second issue of *Rumiyah* published a list of IS operations in Bangladesh that occurred between 2015 and 2016. The infographic claimed that IS operatives were responsible for 24 attacks in Bangladesh in only one year; 42% of the targets were Hindus and Buddhists, 27% were Christians, 19% were 'Murtaddin' and Atheists, and the remaining 12% were 'Rafidah' or Shias. Among these attacks, the most terrible and notorious was conducted on 1 July 2016 when armed men stormed into a restaurant in Dhaka. During the 12-hour carnage, they remained in contact with their leaders via digital media and sent pictures of the slain victims to them. A total of 20 hostages were killed in that attack.[61] Islamic State leaders see this operation as a major achievement, as the attack gained considerable worldwide attention due to the killings of several foreigners. The restaurant was located in the diplomatic zone of the capital and provoked significant fear among foreigners living in the area, most of whom are embassy officials. The goal of the attackers was to limit the movement of foreigners, especially diplomats, and compel them to live in a state of fear. According to one article published in *Dabiq*, these attacks were part of IS' global strategy to send the message to the "crusader nations" that their "citizens will never enjoy any peace or security in any part of the Muslims' lands . . . as long as they continue to be at war with the Islamic State."[62]

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of IS recruitment in Bangladesh is their ability to attract well-educated, tech-savvy young members from well-off families. When the identities of IS operatives started to be revealed (following the previously mentioned arrests in 2015), people from the higher middle class and wealthier strata of society became really worried. Previously, Islamic militancy in Bangladesh was thought to be a phenomenon limited to only religious institutions and the poorer strata of society. The new generation of violent extremists emerging in Bangladesh has brought into question this conventional belief. A large number of foreign fighters who left Bangladesh to join IS—as well as many of the operatives who stayed in Bangladesh and were involved in attacks—went to private universities in the country or abroad. Among them are several who went to universities in Malaysia.[63] Thus, the IS-affiliated group in Bangladesh has successfully recruited professionals such as physicians, engineers, technologists, architects and even singers and ramp models.[64] Arrested operatives include sons of a former Supreme Court judge, former military officials, a former bureaucrat, a political leader of the ruling party, and an adviser to a former caretaker government of the country.[65]

The operations of the IS-affiliated group are not limited to conducting large-scale sieges or suicide bombings, rather the outfit has broadened the spectrum of their operations to include small scale attacks, including targeted killings of individuals whom they perceive as threats to their version of Islam. Shaykh Abū Muhammad al-Adnani—the official spokesperson of the Islamic State—explained who their targets are: "You must strike the soldiers, patrons, and troops of the tawāghīt. Strike their police, security, and intelligence members, as well as their treacherous agents. Ruin their sleep. Embitter their lives for them and busy them with themselves. If you can kill a kāfir American or European—especially the spiteful and filthy French—or an Australian, or a Canadian…including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill them in any manner possible, regardless of the method."[66] Following this directive, the IS affiliated group in Bangladesh targets the citizens of the coalition countries who fought against IS and members of law enforcement agencies. The group also targets people from minority sects, such as Shia, Ahmadis and Bahais. Hindus in particular are targeted, based on the belief that Hindus as a community—and India as a country—are the most significant local enemies for IS in this region. Reviewing the contents of IS communiqués reveals that one main goal has been reiterated several times: to fight against democracy and establish a sharia-based state in Bangladesh. IS operatives emphasize that participating in jihad is the only way to reach this lofty goal.

The Violence Justification Narrative of the IS Jihadists in Bangladesh

To explore the grand narrative of the IS jihadists in Bangladesh, this section analyses the jihadist content—including online magazines, video statements, Telegram channels, and infographics—produced by IS media outlets.

The Crisis Construct

In various statements, IS operatives describe the current state of Bangladesh as a *taghut* (tyrannical rulers who arrogate God's absolute power and use it to oppress people[67]), and its government as *anti-Islamic*. They believe that democracy is an ideology of *shirk* (worshiping anyone besides Allah) because the principles of democracy are manmade. The IS views mainstream political parties of Bangladesh—particularly the BNP, Awami League (AL) and Jamaat-e-Islam—as *murtaddins* (apostates from Islam).

In an IS propaganda video filmed in Syria, three Bangladeshi jihadists praised the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Bangladesh and called for jihad.[68] In his statement, one of the jihadists first blamed democracy (or 'manmade laws') as the problem and presented armed struggle as the solution. In his words: "If we look at the situation of Bangladesh today, [we see how] governments have replaced Allah's [divine] diktats with manmade laws. That is why they have become taghut, they have become kafirs. And jihad—as in armed fight against them—has become *fard-e-ain* (an individual obligation)."[69] Similarly, another IS operative in that video called democracy a shirk ideology and emphasized replacing democracy with Sharia law. He criticized three types of people; the government of Bangladesh, its employees, the general populace and supporters of democracy, questioning how they could 'support this *shirk* ideology called democracy' where people determined the laws of the country in Allah's stead.[70] A similar view is also found in their online magazine *Dabiq*, where it is stated that "Democracy is a religion that believes in giving people the power to legislate and make things halāl and harām, whereas that is the right of Allah alone."[71]

In their online magazines, IS also blamed three political parties—the AL, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI)—for sustaining 'manmade law' or democracy in Bangladesh. Terming the present AL government as 'secular Murtaddin', the outfit severely criticizes it and targets its employees, especially law enforcement. IS leaders reacted angrily against the Bangladeshi government after it denied their presence in the country despite their claiming responsibility for several attacks. Their online magazine *Dabiq* states, "the secular murtaddīn of the present Awami League government continue to twist the facts on the ground and play a blame game in an effort to put political pressure on the murtaddīn of both the nationalist BNP and the parliamentary 'Jamaat-e-Islami."[72] It should be noted here that contrary to the existing AL government's claim of possible connections between the opposition and violent extremist groups, *Dabiq*'s article severely criticized both the BNP and Jamaat, and categorised them as a coalition of murtaddīn. These two political parties were criticized for the trial and executions of the local jihadist group's (JMB's) top leaders, especially Shaikh Abdur Rahman. An article in *Dabiq* also claimed that that the former BNP-JeI coalition of policymakers and security officials were 'punished' for their misdeeds, referencing as examples the killings of many high-ranking officers in a mutiny of Bangladesh Border Guards, as well as court trials resulting in death penalties or life imprisonment for several JeI leaders (and a BNP leader).[73]

In contrast to the allegations of links between JeI and jihadists, IS actually considers the Islamist party as a "political party that has long committed many acts of kufr and shirk."[74] In an interview published in *Dabiq* (14) Abu Ibrahim Al Hanif, the Amir of the so-called "Khilafa's soldiers in Bengal" suggested that although some grassroots level followers and supporters of JeI "repented from their shirk and joined the ranks of the Khilāfah's soldiers in Bengal," the leadership of JeI remains "adamant upon its path of destruction and humiliation and keeps on competing with the tāghūt Hasina government in terms of who can commit more kufr."[75]

On the *societal level*, IS operatives attempt to construct the crisis that Muslims, as a community, are facing humiliation and grievances because of their faith. The outfit's societal crisis construction portrays that Islamic

culture is under threat, both globally and locally. Also, a significant aspect of crisis construction is identifying the global and local enemies or 'others.' In the case of Bangladesh, the global 'others' are Westerners, or 'crusaders' and people from different faiths. On a local level, IS narratives often target Hindus, Buddhists and converted Christians along with law-enforcement officers. In particular, their narratives portray Indian cultural and political 'invasion' as a major threat to Islamic culture in Bangladesh. For example, one of the jihadists, in his video statement, stated that Muslims all over the world should be considered as a single 'oppressed and humiliated' unit.[76] He urged the Muslims of Bangladesh to conduct more attacks like Holey Artisan Bakery to take revenge against the humiliation and torture of the community. He explains the societal bond of Muslim community and the necessity of jihad as follows: "the ummah (Muslim community) is like a body—if one part of this body gets hurt, the pain is felt all over the body. That is why when the international crusader coalition attacks Sham [Syria], Iraq and Libya [with fighter jets], killing hundreds of Muslim women, men and children, that terrible imagery agitate and hurt our mujahidin brothers. And that is why, to avenge the blood of their Muslim brothers and sisters, they will kill the crusaders wherever they find them."[77]

Abu Ibrahim, the Amir of IS Bengal, identified four types of 'crises' Bangladeshi Muslims have been facing from neighbouring India and the Hindus living in Bangladesh.[78] First, he believes that Hindus of both India and Bangladesh have been 'waging war' against Islam and Muslims for a long time. He thinks that Hindus in India openly oppress the Muslim population, however Hindus in Bangladesh "do it in a more deceptive and covert manner due to them being a minority sect here."[79] Second, Abu Ibrahim states that Hindus in Bangladesh support Indian Intelligence (RAW) efforts to destroy Islamic culture in Bangladesh. Third, he opines that Hindus in Bangladesh have been 'creating propaganda' in mass media and social media and 'spreading fahishah (lewdness and indecency)' among the Muslims in Bangladesh. Lastly, Abu Ibrahim warns the Muslims in Bangladesh that the present 'murtadd, secular' government has employed many Hindus and promoted them to high-ranking positions in law enforcement agencies, depriving opportunities to Muslim officers because the government considers Hindus to be die-hard party loyalists.[80]

Interestingly, besides the lack of sharia law or the perceived humiliation of the Muslim community, *individual crises* often lead individuals to join violent extremism. There are ample cases in Bangladesh where events such as divorce, the death of loved ones or a relationship breakup made individuals vulnerable to the recruitment strategies of IS.[81] Quintan Wiktorowicz's study shows that these idiosyncratic experiences can produce a "cognitive opening". He argues that a basic prerequisite for joining in a violent extremist group is an individual's willingness to expose him or herself to extremist messages. Generally, individuals reject the messages outright as "extreme" or "irrational." However, a crisis can create a "cognitive opening" that shakes certainty in previously accepted beliefs. It can make individual more receptive to the possibility of alternative interpretations and perspectives. Researchers also find that a quest for significance, recognition, and reward are important motivational factors behind joining jihadist groups or supporting their cause.[82] Jihadist ideologues or recruiters, in turn, try to depict the lesser value of earthly world and portray the honour and recognition of sacrifice for jihad. In several cases, well established professionals and youths from well-to-do families experienced a personal crisis and joined IS to get 'real' recognition and reward in life. In fact, the participation of one of the attackers in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack is explained in an article published in *Rumiyah* as follows: "Although he was known for his lavish lifestyle among his peers before his return to his religion, he came to realize by the mercy of Allah that faith and guidance from Allah are the most important treasures for a believer in this world and not appearance, wealth, educational background, and other material criteria that people who are attached to this lowly world compete over…."[83] The IS recruiters highlight the perceived personal crisis that no matter how much an individual achieves in his or her life, without embracing the path of jihad, life is meaningless and incomplete.

The Solution Construct

The Islamic State does not only paint a grim picture of the perceived crises that Muslims are confronting in the contemporary world, its narrative also constructs solutions to the crises. At the state level, the narrative identifies democracy, or the rule of the people, as the main problem and suggests ousting the democratic

government and establishing a Caliphate that will adhere to their interpretations of Islam. In several documents, IS' narrative portrays inevitable victory in the fight against crusaders. For Bangladesh, IS operatives have a specific goal which is clearly stated in the interview of Abu Ibrahim, the IS Amir in Bangladesh. He considers Bangladesh as an important region for global jihad due to its geographical location.[84] For IS, Bangladesh is strategically significant as it is located on the eastern side of India, whereas Pakistan and Afghanistan (IS Wilāyat Khurāsān) are located on its western side. They plan to create a strong base for jihad in Bangladesh so they can launch guerrilla attacks inside the territory of India from both its eastern and western fronts. Together with the existing IS affiliated violent extremist groups operating in India, IS wants to create chaos and instability in India. Once a favourable situation has been established in Bangladesh, they will first seek to control the regimes of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and then they will enter Indian territory with a conventional army in order to completely 'liberate' the Indian sub-continent region. They also consider Bangladesh to be an important region as the country could be used as a 'stepping-stone for jihad' in Myanmar.[85]

Thus, IS ideologues and recruiters envisage establishing a sharia-based state stretching from Afghanistan to Myanmar. No matter how impossible and far-fetched this idea may seem to be, IS operatives are not short of dreams. Take the example of Tahmid Shafi, one of IS' operatives who believed that the Caliphate will be established all over the world soon, let alone only in the Indian subcontinent: "this I want to say to the taghut government of Bangladesh. The jihad that has arrived in Bangladesh, the jihad you are witnessing today, you never saw this kind of jihad before…you will never be able to stop this jihad, until we win, and you lose, and the rule of the caliphate is established all over the world—until the rule of sharia is established."[86]

At the *societal* level, the IS narrative assures that the establishment of a Caliphate will end the humiliation and grievances of the Muslim community, establish rule of Allah by replacing man-made law and eliminate injustice from society. This utopia of the 'promised land' plays an important role in the minds of jihadists. The promise of the triumph of 'us' against the 'others' is also a crucial driving force in the motivation process of the jihadists. In Bangladesh, the jihadists construct the local Hindus as the 'other' and the source of 'crises' for the local Muslims. Their prescribed solution is to create a 'state of polarisation' between Hindus and Muslims, so that a situation of chaos, political instability, and a possible state intervention of India in Bangladesh could be prompted. This strategy is reflected in the interview of the Abu Ibrahim. He explains: "…we believe Sharī'ah in Bengal won't be achieved until the local Hindus are targeted in mass numbers and until a state of polarization is created in the region, dividing between the believers and the disbelievers."[87] In another video, which was released after the attack, machete-yielding attackers of Holey Artisan Bakery record their statement. In the 15-minute long video, both in Bangla and Arabic, the IS operatives call on Bangladeshi jihadists to launch attacks on the crusaders, atheists and apostates as revenge for the attacks on Muslims in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.[88] This video was first released by the IS's Arabic Nashir channel on Telegram. Before the publication of the video, IS' Bangla media At-Tamkin made an announcement on its website that they would release a video produced by the "Bilad al-Bengal media office."[89]

The jihadist narrative also provides *individual solutions* to the crises. The narrative constructs a solution that champions martyrdom, the achievement of ultimate recognition. One of IS' operatives explains: "We are going to fight till the end. Either we will win, or we will get victory, or we will get shahada that is martyrdom. So, there is nothing to lose for us here."[90]

Thus, the jihadist narrative focuses on the 'rewards and significance' one could get by involvement in the global jihad. The individuals who are from affluent families and/or successful in their professions may become vulnerable and frustrated for various personal reasons, or seek more social recognition, meaning or purpose in life.[91] The stories published in jihadist magazines, and statements in videos, carefully tailor the message that participation in jihad brings fulfilment in life, and that jihad provides what is lacking. Also, the relationships that the jihadists develop with their peers create an in-group identity where individuals seek recognition from their peers by sacrificing their lives at the frontline or in suicide operations against the enemies. The rewards in the afterlife, the promise for eternal bliss in heaven, also play a vital role for their jihadi motivations. As the

violent extremists start to believe that they are doing something meaningful for a just cause, they believe their involvement in the jihadi organisation and engagement in the attacks give them a purpose in life. In addition, jihadists (especially youths) often join in violent extremism for 'heroism' or 'adventure'.[92]

The Justification Construct
The construction of the justification of jihad is particularly important because this level works as a significant accelerator in the process of becoming a violent extremist. A conservative Muslim may believe in the crisis construction narrative—i.e., that Islam, Islamic culture and Muslims as a community are under threat from 'Western political and cultural invasion' and that establishing a state based on sharia law is a solution to that crisis. However, believing that the only way to reach from this crisis to solution is jihad (a violent armed struggle that authorises killing civilians) is what often makes a radicalized individual turn into a violent extremist. IS operatives from Bangladesh, in their various communiqués, repeatedly assert the need of violent jihad as the only way to establish a just state based on Sharia. Abu Ibrahim urges: "I advise you to join us and perform jihād with your wealth and your lives, as it is an obligation upon every capable Muslim. There is no way to establish the religion other than the path of qitāl (war). So leave the Dunya (world) behind and hasten to join us on the battlefield."[93]

At the *state level*, IS narratives justify violent attacks in three ways. First, they suggest that jihad is justified because the state is run by an 'anti-Islamic' system although the majority of the population is Muslim. Thus, the regimes are 'corrupt', 'anti-Islamic' and 'promoters of secularism'. Second, the governments, both the current and previous ones, are 'puppets' of the 'crusaders' and the 'enemies of Islam'. As the narratives frame the Bangladeshi government as a 'puppet', it argues that a violent jihad is the only feasible option to oust the government and establish a sharia based Islamic state. The IS affiliated group of Bangladesh has targeted members of the law enforcement agencies in several instances to show strength to their supporters and to convey the message to followers that violent attacks against the state are an essential part of jihad. Three, this jihadi narrative claims that no other Islamist political parties are either willing or capable of establishing a sharia-based state. As such, only IS can provide the 'true' and 'authentic' version of Islam in Bangladesh.

At the *societal level*, the narrative justifies violence by citing religious 'obligations' and portraying it as a duty for every Muslim to protect their community and brotherhood. Thus jihad is framed as a religious obligation to end injustice and humiliation of the Muslim community.[94] The narrative often invokes stories of the past and employs these historical stories to justify a contemporary jihad. The Jihadi contents often cite an instruction from the Prophet that said, "Perform jihād against the mushrikīn with your wealth, your lives, and your tongues."[95] Another significant aspect at the societal level is how violent extremists justify attacks on civilians. In an article published in *Rumiyah*, Abu Dujanah al-Bengali (Tamim Chowdhury), the former head of military and covert operations of the IS operatives in Bengal, justified attacks on civilians by arguing that the cost of the wars against Muslims "don't come from an abstract vacuum; rather, they come into power via the blessings of the constituency of their citizenry, those who partake in their democratic system or accept its results."[96] To him, as the civilians are paying their tax money for the huge costs of the wars and giving legitimacy to the policies formulated by their democratic states, they no longer remain innocent civilians.[97] In another article of *Rumiyah*, it is stated that the blood of "Crusader civilians from democratic nations waging war against Islam and the Muslims is more deserving to be spilled than that of other kafir civilians, whose blood is already mubah (permissible) to spill."[98] Jihadists also employ the reason 'protecting the Muslim brotherhood' in several contents. In a country like Bangladesh—where more than eighty percent of the population is Muslim—wars, images of destruction and deaths in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Kashmir have been often discussed with frustration and fury. Jihadists lure sympathizers and potential recruits by claiming that only they can 'avenge the blood' of their Muslim brothers. One jihadist calls for jihad in following way: O my brothers! [There was a time] we dreamt about waging jihad in Afghanistan, waging jihad in Sham [Syria] and different corners of the world. Now jihad has arrived at your doorsteps. Now is the time for you to join the mujahids who are working for the establishment of sharia in Bangladesh, under the [Islamic State].[99]

At the *individual level*, jihadi narratives depict how only participating in jihad can provide the ultimate rewards in life. This ultimate reward starts from achieving individual recognition, significance, and glory for sacrifice and bravery in the earthly world and eternal happiness and honour in the afterlife. A eulogy of one jihadist, published in *Rumiyah*, is a good example how jihadists appeal to potential recruits and other radicals by justifying the death for IS.[100] All through the article, the deceased jihadi is extolled for his 'selfless bravery'. [101] It is possible that the article mainly targeted young, affluent Bangladeshi youths who may find similarities with the background of the jihadist, who himself came from an affluent family. The eulogy explains why jihadists should abandon "petty pleasures of this worldly life" and embrace the 'true' path of Allah. By 'petty pleasures', they mean education, a job, a business, or marriage. Before joining IS, the jihadist's father wanted to give him the responsibility of their family business and buy him a car, while also telling him to settle down and get married. The article justifies the young jihadist's rejection of these 'temptations' and argues that by embracing jihad he was 'able to choose the eternal gardens' of heaven over the insignificant temptations of this worldly life.[102] This article also argues that the jihadist chose his *nom de guerre* to be "Abu Muharib" because of "his love and admiration" for the Abu Muharib al-Muhajir, also known as "Jihadi John", who became infamous for conducting several gruesome beheadings for Islamic State.[103] Jihadi John, a Briton in his mid-twenties, with his university education and British accent appeals more to the new generation Bangladeshi jihadists because they can connect with his lifestyle and upbringing. Like Jihadi John, these Bangladeshi jihadists went to private schools and universities, where the medium of instruction was English. Although these jihadists live in Bangladesh, they were brought up following western popular culture, some of them are even more comfortable speaking English than Bengali. A large number of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria from western countries, mostly in search of heroism, inspired these new generation Bangladeshi jihadists to join IS.

Also, throughout jihadist contents, the concept of rewards plays an important role in order to motivate violent extremists. These rewards come in various forms: the glory of martyrdom, respect from fellow terrorists, achieving fame, significance and securing heaven. For example, Rohan Imtiaz (*nom de guerre* Abu Rahiq), one of the assailants killed in the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, was praised as a 'one-man army' for his 'bravery'. According to one article of *Rumiyah*, as soon as Imtiaz got the news that he had been selected for the operation, he became excited with joy and thanked Allah for the 'great blessing and asked for acceptance'.[104] This anecdote reflects the value and glory that jihadists place on martyrdom. The way others admire and value the deceased jihadists' actions could function as inspiration for future jihadists. This is evident in one of the jihadist's video statements when he praised the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers: "Brothers! What you have done in Bangladesh has never happened before. You have created history, brothers! May Allah accept your martyrdom, amen! You have done an amazing job."[105] In sum, the jihadist grand narrative can be summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: The Crisis-Justification-Solution Narrative

Levels	The Crisis Construct	Justification	The Solution Construct
State Level	The current state is anti-Islamic, and democracy is *shir*k.	Violent jihad will oust the government and establish a 'just' state and system	Establishing a state that will strictly follow IS approved Islamic interpretations
Societal Level	Muslims are facing humiliation and grievances because of their faith; Islam/Islamic culture is under threat, both globally and locally; The presence and influence of 'others' in society (out-group).	Jihad is a religious obligation to end injustice and humiliation. It is justified to attack enemies and their supporters. Enemies are not human. Civilian killings are justified.	End of humiliation and grievances of the Muslims.
Individual Level	Individuals are lacking recognition, reward, meaning of life.	Jihad provides glory, honour and significance	Find purpose and meaning of life. Attain recognition from jihadist peers.

Conclusion

This study explores the development of the IS affiliated group in Bangladesh and depicts its origin, leadership, target, and goals. It also explains how Bangladeshi foreign fighters were recruited for Islamic State in Syria and who were the key persons behind the Bangladeshi IS connection. After closely analysing the jihadist content, this study finds that there are mainly three themes in the jihadist narrative. First, the Jihadists construct a perceived crisis, a situation where jihadists project that Muslims are oppressed solely for being Muslims; Islamic culture and lifestyle are under threat; states with Muslim majority populations are puppets of Western 'crusaders' and Hindu 'invaders'; and individuals are immersed in an anti-Islamic, depraved, and corrupt system. After depicting a grim picture of the crisis, the jihadists offer solutions to these crises: only an Islamic State based on sharia law can be the panacea of all these crises, and Muslims should take every step possible to establish it. Using this rationale, jihadists justify that armed jihad is necessary and the 'only way' to reach the solution from the existing crisis, even if it needs killings of civilians.

In the Bangladeshi jihadists' narratives, India plays an important role as a regional adversary or a local 'other'; alongside the usual global 'crusader' enemies. The political and cultural dominance of this big and influential neighbour helps to fuel the existing 'anti-Indian' sentiment in some quarters of the Muslim population in Bangladesh. This is an excellent example of how IS and its local affiliates exploit the local context and try to acquire a strong foothold in the region. Also, another worrying trend is IS' ability to attract recruits from both the well-off and poorer stratas of society. A review of profiles of the recently arrested or killed jihadists shows that small teams of operations are comprised of youths both from English medium private universities and religious institutions such as madrassas.[106] This unique levelling of economic classes and social statuses indicates the strength of the Bangladeshi jihadist ideologues' recruitment and motivational strategy.

However, it is not clear how much operational strength of the IS affiliated group in Bangladesh remains, especially after the deaths and arrests of the outfit's main leaders. Most recently, Saifullah Ozaki, reportedly IS' Amir in Bengal, has been traced in a prison in an Iraqi Kurdistan city called Sulaimaniyah. He surrendered to the CTG (Kurdistan Counter Terrorism Group) in March 2019, according to Bangladesh's intelligence agency. [107] Nine other Bangladeshi jihadists either surrendered or were arrested after the fall of the last IS hideout in Baghouz.[108] All of the known key members of the IS affiliated group in Bangladesh, including the head of Military and Covert Operations, Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury and Sarwar Jahan, were either arrested or killed in 'crossfire' with the Bangladeshi law enforcement.[109] Nonetheless, after recent attacks on the police check-posts this year, it has been found that the outfit is trying to regroup under the leadership of an unknown individual with the *nom de guerre* Abu Mohamamd Al Bangali.[110] With the deaths and arrests of the key leaders, the organisational strength of IS affiliated group in Bangladesh has been seemingly diminishing. However, it would be unwise to be complacent, as recent developments show a shift in central IS' strategy and tactics with a major organisational restructuring—one that relies more on locally affiliated groups and considers South Asia as a battlefield of priority.

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