

Profiles of Islamist Militants in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Since the early 1980s, Bangladeshi militants have joined wars in Libya, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to fight for what they defined as the Ummah. Foreign cases of perceived Muslim suffering have always played a significant role in the escalation of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. Originally, violent Islamists emerged principally in the Madrassas and came from poor families with rural backgrounds. The recent wave of Islamist militancy associated with the arrival in 2013 of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State has dramatically altered the character of Islamist militancy. Online radicalization is playing a much larger role and militant organizations are increasingly recruiting urban youths attending secular educational institutions, from both the upper and the middle classes. This Research Note explores the new profile of Islamist militants in Bangladesh by examining the biographies of the deceased Islamist militants who were killed by security forces in different operations and gunfights during the period between June 2016 and December 2018. The authors use data acquired from three newspapers renowned for covering Islamist militancy issues as well as information provided by Bangladeshi security forces. Data have been limited to deceased militants because their militancy was proven by their violent actions, at least in a number of cases.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Islamist, Militant, Radicalization, and Terrorism

Introduction

The problem of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh first came to the public's attention in the early 1980s and its rise has been inextricably linked with global phenomena. This first became evident when some Bangladeshis joined Palestinians to fight for an autonomous Palestine state in the early 1980s with some being sent to Libya for training.[1] The Muslim Millat Bahini (MMB), the first militant organization in Bangladesh, surfaced in 1986 under the leadership of Major Matiur Rahman. Its members had connections to transnational groups, something which became apparent when 27 passports with visas were recovered from their camp.[2] In this respect, the Afghan war can be said to have opened the Pandora's Box of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. It is claimed that around 3400 Bangladeshis joined the struggle in Afghanistan and then returned to their country with both a more radical ideology and tactical experience of violent activism.[3] Since then, through the creation of almost 133 militant organizations, [4] these veterans from Afghanistan have tried to transform Bangladesh to emulate a Talibanized Afghanistan.[5] Among the organization created for that new objective, the Harkat-ul-Jihad Al Islami Bangladesh (HuJIB) formed in 1989, the Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in 1998, and the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) in 1998 are best known because of their countrywide network, the ferocity of their terrorist attacks and the number of their activists. JMB received attention from the world media in 2005 when it exploded 459 bombs simultaneously in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts.[6] However, it faced an initial setback because its leadership was arrested and sentenced to capital punishment due to their connection with the killing of civilians in 2006.

These organizations drew inspiration from the Taliban's ideology but also from Al Qaeda's (AQ) whose objectives were global, with the ultimate goal of establishing a neo-Caliphate.[7] As is well known, a chain of events took place during the 1980s, triggered by the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 in support of their local agent, the Afghanistan Communists. The national Afghan resistance eventually led to the creation of AQ which still continues to inspire Jihadism around the globe, including in Bangladesh.[8] Bin Laden's Al Qaeda focused mainly on the Middle East, Pakistan and Africa. After Bin Laden's death in 2011, however, his deputy, Ayman Al Zawahiri was set in charge of the organization and started broadening its field of operation to include the Indian Subcontinent. In September 2014, through an online video message, AQ declared the existence of 'Qaedat al-Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)', with Asim Omar as its Emir, and stated its

objective of imposing sharia rule also in that region.[9]

Even before the formation of AQIS and the declaration of a Global Caliphate by the Islamic State in June 2014, both IS and AQIS established contact with Bangladesh. AQIS and IS are contemporaneous in terms of starting secret operations. According to Riaz, these two militant organizations created the current wave of Islamist militants.[10] AQ was deemed by analysts to have had a connection with the Jama'atul Muslemin (JM) since 2007. It finally launched its secret operations in Bangladesh in 2013, under the name of Ansar al-Islam (AAI) or the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). AAI claimed responsibility for the murders of four self-proclaimed atheist bloggers and the publisher of a book penned by one of these.[11] As a result, violent militant activities have been on the rise in Bangladesh since 2013. Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani was considered to be the spiritual figure of AQIS in Bangladesh. Rahmani was found guilty of killing the blogger Rajib Haider and was consequently sentenced to five years in jail whilst two other students of North South University were sentenced to death for taking part in the direct killing mission.[12] On the other hand, in 2013, Bangladesh also came under the influence of IS or *Daesh* even before it declared in June 2014 its ambition of establishing its own 'global Caliphate'. [13] The Bangladeshi diaspora community played a key role in introducing *Daesh* in Bangladesh. Different cells worked simultaneously to bring other militant outfits together under its banner. These cells include a Facebook group the 'Ex-cadet Islamic Learning Forum' supervised by Japanese Bangladeshi, Saifullah Ozaki [14], and the Jund At Tawhid wal Khalifa (JTK, 'Soldiers of Monotheism and the Caliphate') led by the Canadian-Bangladeshi, Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury.[15] Both of these cells started operations in 2013.

While talking about the current upsurge of Islamist militancy, it must first be noted that the country has witnessed several waves of radicalization. The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) advanced with two waves of militancy in Bangladesh. The first wave constituted by Afghan veterans which ranged from 1999-2005. The second wave consists of technologically advanced militant radical groups such as the Hizbut Tahrir (HT), the Hizbut Tawhid and the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT).[16] In the same line of argument, Rahman (2016) also concluded his analysis by focusing on two waves—pre-2006 and post-2013 militant outfits.[17] Ali Riaz (2016) divided these two waves into five generations of militants in Bangladesh on the basis of their transformation when it came to tactics and objectives. According to him, the returnees (around 3000) of the Afghan war (1979 to 1992) formed the first generation of Islamists militants. The emergence of JMB marked the second generation of Islamists militants. Under the leadership of Asadullah Galib, Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman (Bangla Bhai), JMB established a strong foothold in northwestern part of Bangladesh. Riaz's third generation is qualitatively different from previous outfits as they have international connections and a global agenda. The Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) falls under this category.

As HuJIB and JMB were struggling due to the measures adopted by security forces they renewed a group named the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). ABT was inspired by Anwar al Awlaki and led by local Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani. ABT started recruiting members from 2012 onwards. The group represents a new, younger generation of jihadists in Bangladesh, who use the cyberspace extensively to propagate Jihadist ideology and to publish training manuals to guide terror attacks. Although ABT is inspired by AQIS, Riaz described members and followers of the AQIS (Ansar Al Islam) and the IS (Neo JMB) as the fifth generation of militants in Bangladesh. The defining feature of the new generation is that they are inspired by, and connected to, transnational terrorist groups, and they intend to pursue not only their objective of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh but also participate in the global militant Islamist movements.[18] While BEI, Rahman and Riaz focused on types or forms of militancy, Barkat distinguishes a total of four phases of militancy. Barkat contends that the country has been going through the 4th phase of Islamist militancy. Every time a silent phase was followed by a violent phase. The first phase (1992-1996) started with the induction of the Harkatul Jihad Bangladesh (HuJIB) in 1992, which, as noted above, was influenced by the Taliban's ideology. Their involvement in the bombing and killing were not reported at that time. Barkat has described this phase of Islamist militancy as 'militancy in dormant form'. By contrast, the second phase (2000-2006) can be characterized as 'militancy in active form'. Barkat indeed argues that by the late 1990s Mujahedins began arriving in Bangladesh with Jihadi arms training, Jihadi motivation, relevant connections and organizations, and sources of funding. This phase of Islamist militancy was essentially violent and involved many killings and bombings. The third phase (2007-

2013) saw a relative lull in terms of active militancy. During that time, Jihadists organized and reorganized for future operations. The final phase (2013 onwards) has again been an active phase and one more forceful than the 2nd phase. During this latest phase, an attempt has been made to bring together all militant outfits to establish Al Qaeda's master plan: instituting the Caliphate in all Muslim majority countries by 2024.[19]

Perhaps, though, it can be argued that Bangladesh is going through a *fifth stage* since July 2016, one that has been silent and has gone unnoticed because of a major military crackdown. The latest wave of militancy associated with the arrival of IS and AQIS is qualitatively different from the previous waves due to its massive use of online information technology. In earlier times, militant Islamist groups in Bangladesh did not really use much IT. JMB's history shows that JMB was primarily using traditional methods of communications like handbills, leaflets and books. Their technological prowess was very limited. But now we have reached a stage where as soon as an attack is taking place, pictures of the scene are being posted live. The cyber aspect has really added a whole new dimension. It has also transformed the way new militants are recruited. In the past, recruiters were essentially going to Madrassas, to schools, and to mosques to find new members. It was a very traditional form of recruitment. They were trying to recruit people who were unemployed, giving them some money and hope for a better future. Now the major part of recruitment is done through the internet and the people who have the most access to the internet are urban youths. A survey conducted by the police on 250 extremists thus shows that 82 percent of them were originally inspired by social media propaganda and 80 percent of them used Thrima, Wechat, Messenger, as well as other communication apps.[20] It was also reported that recruitment efforts have been conducted by IS-linked militants among the Bangladeshi diaspora communities that can be found in different countries of the world.[21] According to one intelligence report, at least 38 Bangladeshis have travelled through various countries to reach Syria and join *Daesh*. [22] With the arrival of IS and AQIS in Bangladesh the paradigm has clearly shifted from offline to online radicalization.

This brings up a new question for researchers to examine: what is the profile of those successfully targeted for radicalization online? From the start it must be noted how sparse the literature on contemporary Bangladeshi militancy actually is. Bangladesh, the third-largest Muslim country in the world, is a densely populated country in terms of people living per square kilometer and has been facing the challenges of unemployment, deprivation, political unrest, corruption and socio-economic traumas. Momen and Begum (2005) put emphasis on a lack of good governance, corruption, unemployment, oppression, repression, injustice, illiteracy, lack of law and order, and poverty as possible reasons for the growth of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh.[23] Ganguly (2006) in his study argued that the political use or abuse of Islam by the ruling elites had created a social and political space for Islamist militancy to thrive.[24] In the same line, Mia (2017) has also blamed socio-economic disparity and political unrest as the key factors behind the growth of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh.[25] While these scholars have focused on internal factors, Barkat contends that external causes in fact override internal causes. According to him, the crisis of dollar economics, the sharp growth of the petro-dollar in the world economy and its volatility, the Soviet attack on Afghanistan, the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent overreaction by the United States in the form of the so-called Global War on Terror, then the war against Iraq, the interventions in Libya and Syria, the doubts and mistrust towards people of Muslim identity in the developed world, the unjust form assumed by globalization and the spread of alien culture through electronic media are deemed to be the main external reasons that have encouraged Bangladeshi youths to join Islamist militancy.[26] Although attempts have been made to understand the causes of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, what has not yet been sufficiently investigated is the alignment of Bangladeshi militants with IS and AQ, which saw the pattern of recruitment shift towards the middle class and even upper class urban youths, a phenomenon which this Research Note seeks to highlight.

Although Islamist militancy is growing in Bangladesh, it has not received enough attention from terrorist researchers and in particular not with respect to the latest changes in the profiles of those recruited. By using systematic search engines such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Cambridge Core, and Google Scholar, one can only identify two publications exploring the elusive profiles of contemporary Bangladeshi militants and these two works were written by the same author, Ali Riaz [27], using newspaper reports about militants that were arrested. However, suspected militants cannot be counted as militants until their connection with militancy

has been proven. By contrast with Riaz' study, this Research Note explores the socio-demographic profile of proven Bangladeshi Islamist militants, based on information about deceased terrorists found in three renowned newspapers.

Profiling Islamist Militants

Cesare Lombroso, a forensic physician and criminologist, first shifted the focus from crime to criminal in his groundbreaking work the 'Criminal Man' published in 1876. His theory contends that an individual commits crimes due to the biological and environmental causes, which do not come from free will. So, he treats criminals as abnormal.[28] In this tradition, some scholars have focused on some personality characteristics that are said to lead to the adoption of terrorism. For example, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford [29] have put emphasis on the 'authoritarian personality'; Post [30] and Crayton [31] on 'narcissism'; Awan [32] on 'anomie'; Pearce and Macmillan [33], Taylor and Ryan [34], Cooper [35], and Hacker and Hacker [36] on some variations of 'insanity'; Lezak [37], Gazzaniga [38], and Mesulam [39] on lack of "cognitive capacity"; Pettit [40] on "aggressive temperament"; Hacker [41] and Kellen [42] on "novelty seeking"; and Juergensmeyer [43] on "thrill" and "revenge-seeking" due to humiliation.

These psycho-pathological schools treat the individual terrorist "in isolation, searching for deviant character traits." [44] Sprinzak argues that psycho-pathological traits cannot be ruled out entirely but that socio-political factors need to be considered as well. [45] The work of Sageman [46] points out that no research has confirmed that radicals indeed have strikingly different psychological traits, [47] while other scholars contend that "terrorists are normal people [exposed] to an abnormal situation." [48] Terrorism scholars such as Crenshaw [49], Bjørge [50], Veldhuis and Staun [51], Borum [52], and Victoroff [53] focus on socio-politico-psychological factors that together with the environment influence individual behaviour. Therefore, it is hard to find distinctive features of terrorists for extrapolative purposes. [54]

However, Charles A. Russell and Bowman H. Miller analyzed profiles of over 350 urban terrorists of diverse nationalities for a period of 10 years and concluded that they were mostly unmarried males of 22 to 24 years of age with some university education. [55] In the South Asian context, Basit argued that most of Jihadists drew from urban areas with middle class and upper class backgrounds and they mostly belong to 18-30 age group. [56] While some researchers such as Bux, [57] and Horgan [58] came to the conclusion that most terrorists were 'demographically unremarkable', other scholars such as Krueger, [59] Krueger and Laitin, [60] Laitin and Shapiro, [61] Richardson, [62] Kepel, [63] found some similarities among terrorists. Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter examined ample data on profiles of militants and suggested following traits as summarized here by Ali Riaz:

- A. There is no single "terrorist personality."
- B. Until recently at least, most terrorists have shared some basic attributes in terms of socioeconomic background and educational achievement. These similarities have tended to cut across cultures, regions of the world, and time periods.
- C. The socioeconomic and educational profile of that particular subset of violent extremists represented by Salafi jihadists has experienced significant changes since 2003. The trend toward increasing diversity in the socioeconomic background of global jihadists is likely to intensify in the years ahead.
- D. While violent extremists do not share a single profile across countries and time periods, they may do so within a specific country and at a particular historical juncture.

Therefore, Riaz recommends that "there is no catch-all 'profiling' of terrorists for global use, but [that] one can be found in a specific country at a specific time, and that profile has analytical value." [64] This recommendation has driven our present Research Note to examine the socio-demographic profile of Bangladeshi militants.

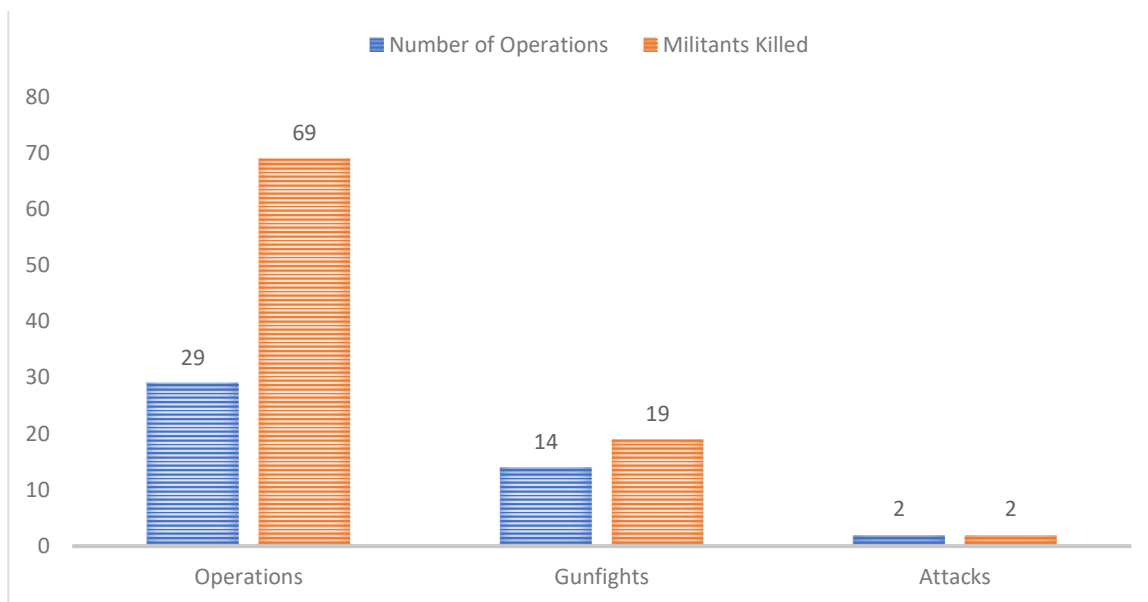
Methodology

A quantitative research approach has been used for data analysis in this Research Note. It employs tabular analysis techniques to understand the profiles of Islamist militants in Bangladesh. Data on Islamist militants killed in operations, gunfights and attacks with security forces in Bangladesh have been collected from three daily newspapers—two English language ones and one published in Bengali, for a period of two and a half years, between June 2016 and December 2018.[65] It must of course be noted that the individuals discussed can only be described as “alleged” militants and that concerns have been expressed in a number of cases about the veracity of these allegations of militancy. Some international human rights organizations claim that operations carried out by the Bangladeshi security forces, often violated fundamental human rights and some could thus be considered to be ‘extrajudicial’ killing. The lack of transparency and of accountability on the part of law enforcement agencies has been highlighted, [66] making it difficult for researchers to make very strong claims based on the information they provide to the media. At the same time, one can be confident that a significant proportion of the alleged militants were indeed involved in violent militancy and that the figures gathered in this study indicate trends which subsequent research ought to examine more closely.

This Research Note drew on the printed version of the *Daily Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star* and the information they provided was triangulated with the *Dhaka Tribune* reports available online. For online triangulation using the Google search engine, readers can use the additional information provided in an appendix at the end of this Research Note. The rationale behind choosing the newspapers listed above is the fact that these newspapers are available online in both Bengali and English. As they are in English these papers can be consulted by the wider research community working on Islamist terrorism. The *Daily Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star* are the largest in terms of both online and print circulation; these are also considered to be the most influential newspapers in Bangladesh. In 2005, they were first to bring to public attention the issue of militancy and since then have monitored it closely. The *Dhaka Tribune* has also earned a national reputation for its crime reporting and for several investigative reports on Islamist militancy in Bangladesh, focusing on IS and AQIS. Prompted by the Holy Artisan Café attack of 1 July 2016, the first author of this Research Note also started collecting data published from June 1, 2016 and thus, started examining the trend as it already appeared one month before the attack took place and subsequently for a period covering roughly two and a half years.

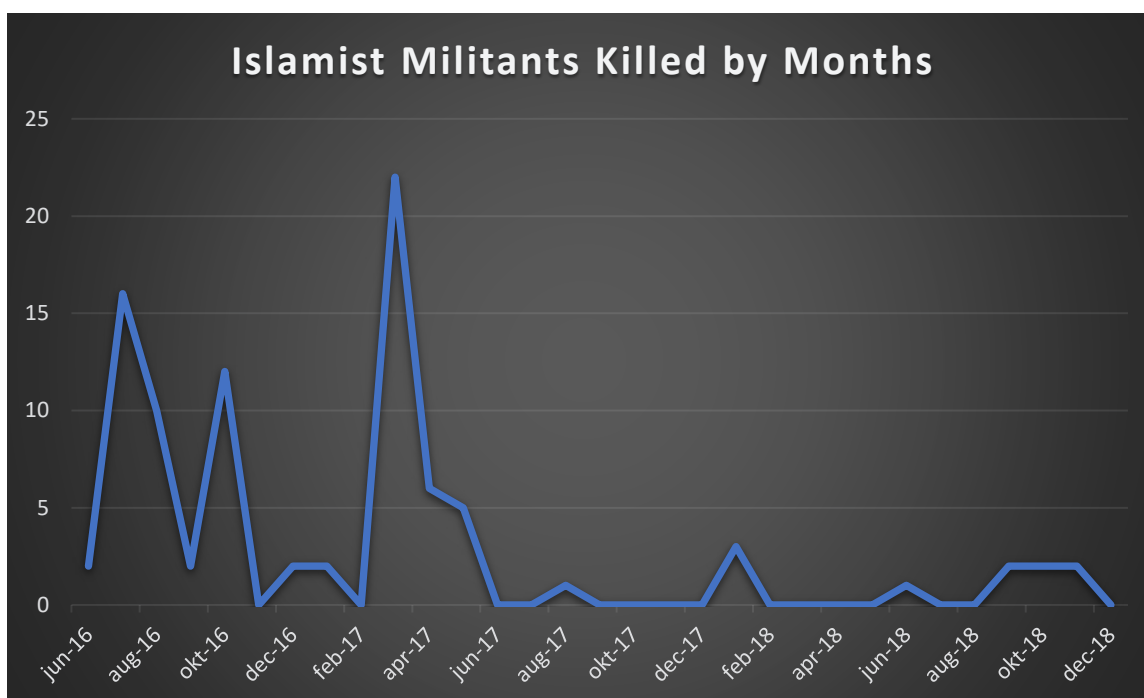
As stated above, the objective of this Research Note being to uncover the profiles of ‘alleged’ Islamist militants in Bangladesh, it was decided to collect information only about those militants killed by security forces during the above-mentioned span of time. The Research Note could not focus on arrested militants and those traveled to Syria because very few lawsuits were resolved and not enough information was available on those who had traveled to Iraq and Syria. As a result, only the newspaper reports that described the details of Islamist militants were identified. For ensuring the consistency of information, the three newspapers were cross-checked and in any case of discrepancy, some information was verified through consulting the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC). Attempts were made to avoid double count. The researchers have identified that during this time security forces carried 29 operations and 14 gunfights; and another 2 attacks were carried out by militants in Dhaka and Kishorganj. In total, 90 Islamist militants were killed by the security forces during this period. The following figure shows how Islamist militants were killed.

Figure 1: How Militants Were Killed



69 Islamist militants were killed in 19 of 29 operations carried out by the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, the Detective Branch (DB) of Bangladesh Police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) while 19 were killed in 14 gunfights and the rest of 2 got killed when Islamists militants attacked security forces in Dhaka on 24 March 2017 and on 7 July 2016 in Kishoreganj. Operations, gunfights and attacks were not centralized in any particular area of the country but Dhaka division, Sylhet division, Chittagong division and Rajshahi division were noteworthy for operations. The following figure shows when militants were killed, month by month.

Figure 2: Killed by Months from June 2016 to December 2018



The line graph shows that most of the militants were killed between July 2016 and April 2017. Numbers reached a peak in April 2016 but the process is still continuing. Since the Holy Artisan Café attack the security forces have taken the militant challenge very seriously and have tried to find their hideouts, although from the later part of 2017, they have, to a certain extent, shifted their focus from the militancy issue to drug criminals. This is indicative of the absence of any systematic counter terrorism strategy in Bangladesh.

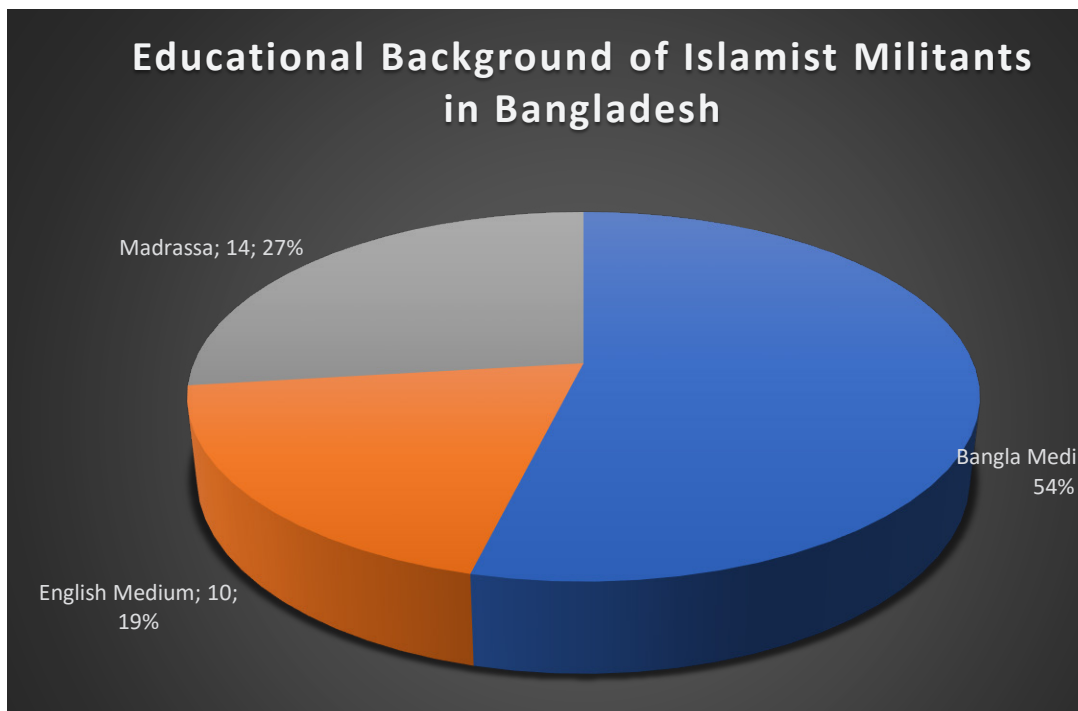
Findings

The findings of our Research Note are discussed in seven broad categories: educational background, occupation, gender, age, economic status, organizational affiliation, and residential location.

Educational Background (52 Islamist Militants)

It was possible to collect from newspaper reports information on the educational background of 52 Islamist militants; the education of the other deceased militant was, however, not divulged. This information yields startling findings: 73 percent (38) of these Islamist militants came from secular educational institutions while only 27 (14) percent came from religious institutions or madrassas. This result differs from that of two previous studies on this subject (Riaz 2016 and Riaz 2018) based on 21 samples, which contend that almost 50 percent of Bangladeshi militants come from religious institutions. But, it agrees with these on the issue of the involvement in acts of violent militancy in Bangladesh of students in Western-oriented institutions where English is the language of instruction. Our study found that only around 20 percent of militants comes from Western-oriented institutions. Out of 14 madrassa students, two students received education both from Bangla and Madrassa medium level institutions. Out of 10 students taught in English two had foreign passports from Canada and America. Two of the students educated in English were radicalized while studying on the Malaysian campus of Monash University whereas five militants were radicalized while pursuing their graduation at the BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) University (one fighter), and the North South University (four militants). And, of the remaining, three were radicalized while they were studying A Level. All “English medium” students were from different renowned schools such as, Scholastica (2), Turkish Hope (3), Sanidel (1), Academia (1), Mastermind (1), American International (1) and BIT (1). Students from different sections of art, science and business joined the militancy. They were pursuing a range of degrees: BBA (Bachelor in Business Administration), MBA (Masters in Business Administration) and studied a variety of disciplines, Computer Science, Engineering at Honours and Masters Level. This Research Note, therefore, confirms Mark Sageman’s claim that over 50 percent of Islamist militants have had higher education, which clearly undermines the popular belief that it is illiteracy that tends to produce most militancy.[67]

Figure 3: Educational Background (n=52)



Occupation (48 Islamist Militants)

Information about the occupations of Islamist militants was not available for all individuals, only for 48 of them. Among them 90 percent (41) were students, which differs from Riaz’s findings that only around 35 percent were students and most of them were from diverse backgrounds. Our research found that only seven militants were recruited from different professional groups: they were an army major, workers, a school teacher, non-governmental job, an expatriate and banker. Among these militants was Tamim Choudhury, as stated above a Canadian citizen. He is regarded as a charismatic leader of IS in Bangladesh and has been identified by the IS journal Rumiya [68] as the head of the military wing of IS in Bangladesh. Major Murad, a retired major of Bangladesh army, was a military trainer of the ‘Neo JMB’.[69] Tanvir Kaderi alias Abdul Karim, a banker provided shelter to other operatives of the radical group, and sold his Toyota Axio-2009 car on April 20, 2016; the money he obtained from the sale was later used to fund the Holy Artisan Café attack on July 1, 2016.[70]

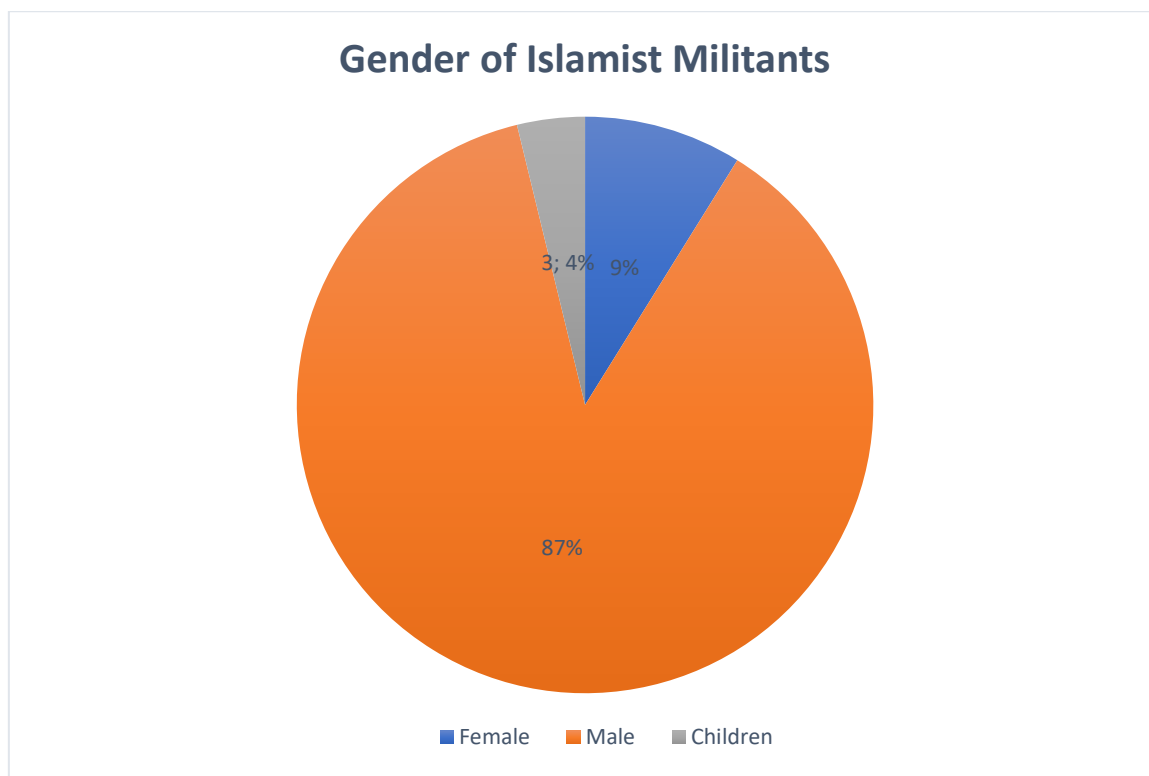
Figure 4: Occupations of Islamist Militants (n=48)



Gender (79 Islamist Militants)

Most of the Islamist militants were identified as male (69 out of 79) but in Bangladesh some females (9 percent) are also involved with the Islamist militancy. However, it must be noted that female involvement with extremism has been rising. Riaz’ (2016 and 2018) findings show that out of 112 militants, there were only two females. These research findings concur with Baker’s study, in which out of 242 Jihadists only five were identified as women.[71] In most cases in Bangladesh, female members had been influenced by their husbands. In this way, a marital relationship is a major factor in female radicalization. Islamist militants such as Sumon, Kamal Hossen of Bandarban, Musa of Sylhet, Lokman of Dinajpur and Sazzad of Rajshahi played a significant role in the radicalization of their wives. Lokman of Rajshahi and Kamal of Bandarban even radicalized their full family including children and women. In these cases, the families were acting as units of militancy.[72]

Figure 5: Gender of Islamist Militants (n=79)

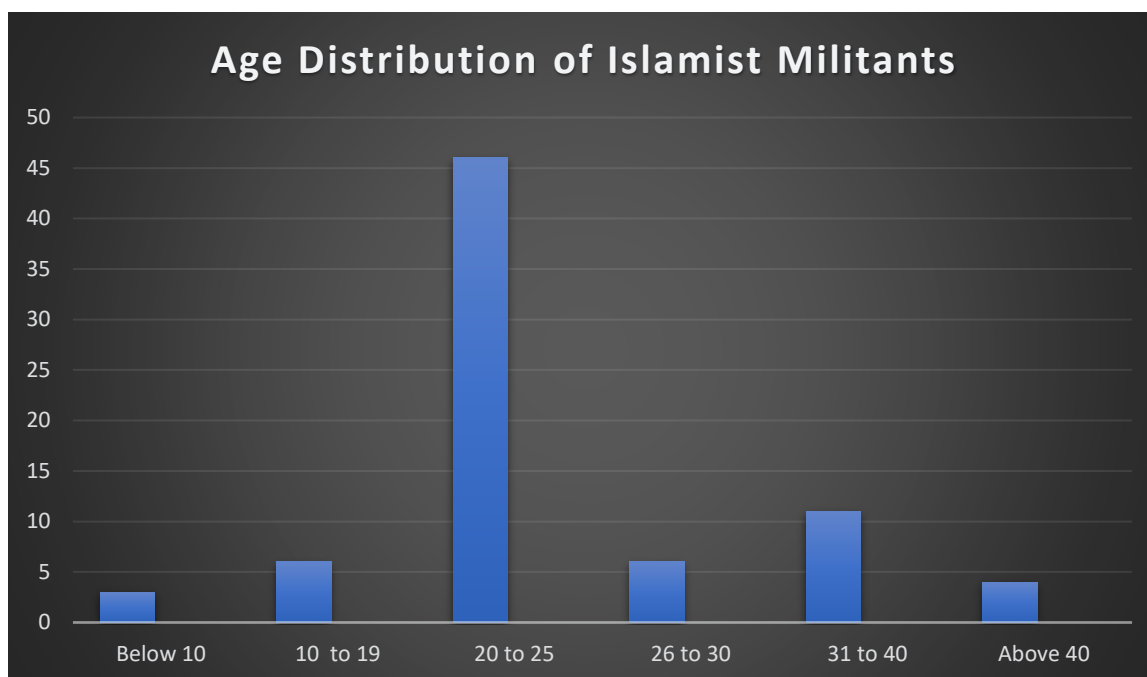


Age Group (78 Islamist Militants)

One of the most important factors of engagement in terrorism is age. Farrington contends that youths participate in “dangerous and high-risk activities.” Statistics show that youths of the 15-25 age group is more prone to criminal activities. With terrorism, Bakker points to the same age group vulnerable to militancy.[73] Of the 90 killed Islamist militants, information about the age of 78 militants was collected from three different newspapers. Data show that most of the Islamist militants (46 out of 78) belonged to the 20-25 age group and they were mainly university students, at both graduate and post-graduate level. A substantial portion of Islamist militants also came from the 31-40 age group. This Research Note’s result concurs with the findings of Riaz (2016 and 2018) that nearly 94 percent of militants were between 18 and 40 years of age. Teens and unemployed youths of the 26-30 age group are also vulnerable to online radicalization. Some children are also being directed towards militancy by their parents. The oldest man found was about 50 years of age and belonged to the Jamaatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh (JMB). He was responsible for the radicalization of his family and, when the security forces were trying to capture him, [74] he committed suicide, using self-made explosives together with his wife (aged 45), son (aged 18), daughter (aged 17), and a follower (aged 22). Most of the IS

like-minded 'Neo-JMB' militants appear as being under 40 years of age. This tends to confirm the appearance of a new wave of violent militancy, distinct in character from previous manifestations.

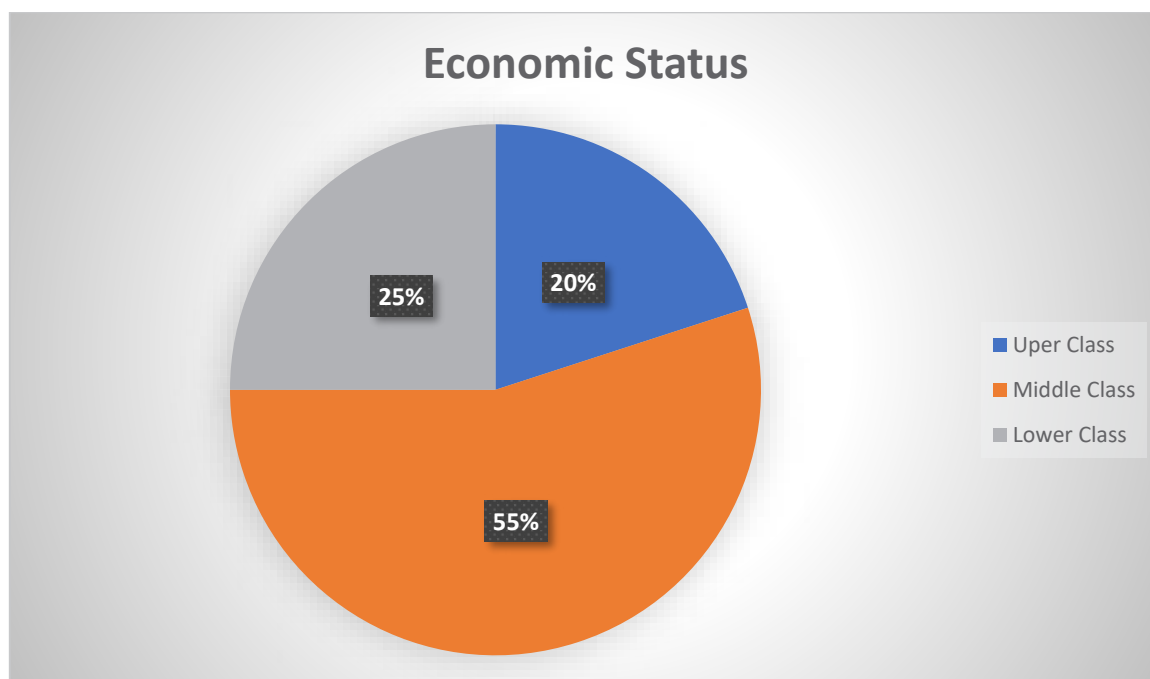
Figure 6: Age Distribution of Islamist Militants (n=78)



Economic Status (60 Islamist Militants)

It has been a difficult task to determine the economic status of Islamist militants in Bangladesh. Very few newspaper reports deal with the economic status of militants because Islamist militants of this wave of IS and Al Qaeda are mainly students. However, unsurprisingly, we have found that those militants from English-medium educational institutions are from upper class backgrounds, those from Bangla-medium institutions are mainly from middle class backgrounds, and those from madrassas are mainly from the lower class backgrounds. Considering this fact and the information received from newspapers, it seems that the middle class is increasingly being targeted for radicalization; 55 percent (33 out of 60 militants) were from this social background. A significant number of youths (20 percent) from the upper class was also targeted for radicalization. Nevertheless, lower class youths remain vulnerable to violent radicalization.[75] In this regard, the studies of Riaz and Sageman, based on 53 and 172 samples in Bangladesh and the Middle East respectively, contend that about 75 percent of Islamist militants belonged to the upper class and middle class. [76] This startling finding undermines the hypothesis that poverty breeds extremism. When it comes to the higher echelons of society, reports show a variety of profiles. Doctors, teachers and engineers have joined the militancy. Students from internationally renowned universities like the campus of Monash University in Malaysia have also succumbed to the ideology of Jihadism. The government minister's nephew and teacher's son, Saad al Nahid, was accused of attempting to kill blogger Asif Mohiuddin. Later, Rohan Ibn Imtiaz, the son of a leader of the ruling party, was killed in the Gulshan Holy Artisan Café attack in July 2016. Asif Adnan, the son of a Justice, and Wadud Jummon, the son of a doctor couple, were arrested on charges of engaging with violent extremism. The son of the former army officer, Azwaj and the star of the Close-Up TV show [77], Tahmid Rahman Safi, son of former Election Commissioner were also engaged with Islamist militancy.[78] These varied profiles show that the elites have also been touched by radicalization. A high level of education, a degree of Westernization or close links to government or military elites are no obstacles to radicalization and to some extent may in fact promote it.

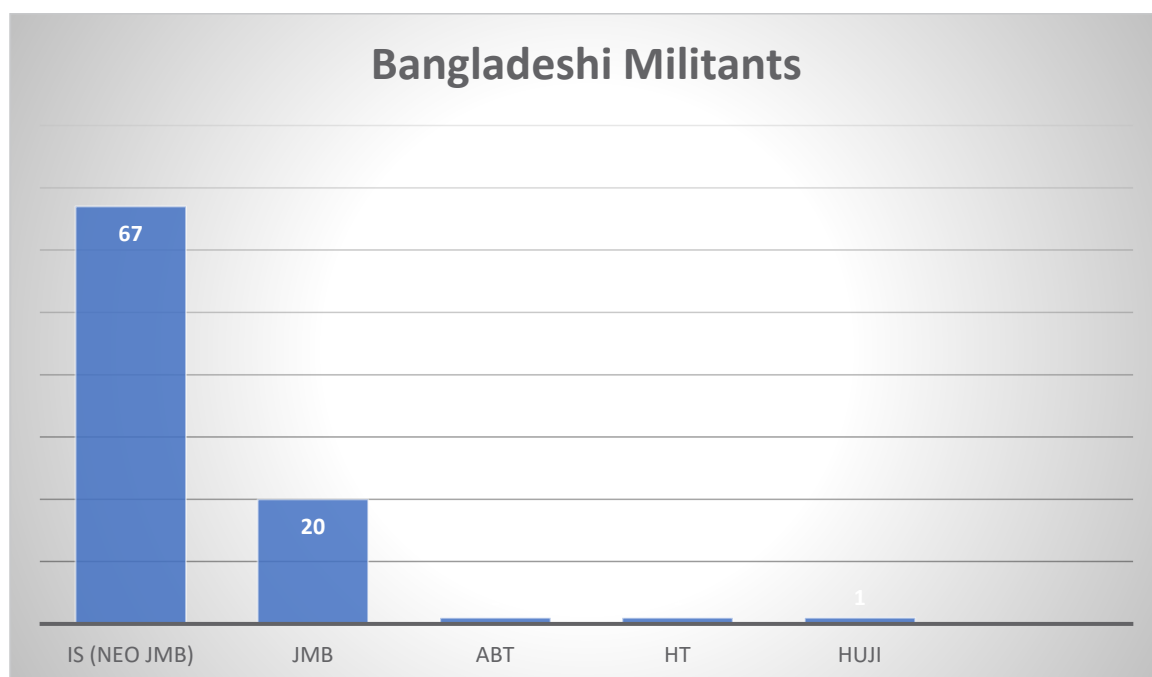
Figure 7: Economic Status of Islamist Militants (n=60)



Organizations of Islamist Militants (90 Islamist Militants)

The bar graph shows that a number of Islamist militant organizations such as the IS like-minded ‘Neo-JMB’, Al Qaeda like-minded ‘ABT’, old JMB, HT and Pakistan based HuJI are still functional in Bangladesh. But the striking fact is that 75 percent (67 out of 90 militants) of Islamist militants were primarily influenced by IS. IS has clearly overtaken other Islamist militant organizations in Bangladesh. Riaz, in his study profiling Bangladeshi militants, noticed a trend in 2016 showing the growth of IS but noted also that JMB remained the dominant militant group in Bangladesh.[79]

Figure 8: Organizations of Islamist Militants (n=90)



One of the possible reasons is that the ideological momentum was shifting to IS because it acquired a territorial basis (Raqqa and Mosul) and in mid-2014 proclaimed a global Caliphate, invoking Islamic apocalyptic ideas. [80] The posting of a video message in English with Bengali sub-titles by a Bangladeshi IS soldier fighting in Syria explains the apocalyptic ideas.

“Subhan Allah, know the hereafter is near, know the *kiyamat* (doomsday) is near, know that you will be questioned and know you will be asked what did you do for your *deen* (religion)? Remember the end time is very near. Soon the time will come when we will *insaAllah* fight with Isa Ibne Mariam (Jesus Christ). You will be biggest loser if you sitting at home and doing nothing.”[81]

As a result, *Daesh* appointed a Khalifa for Bangladesh on 18 June 2015, a Bangladeshi it named as Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al Hanif.[82] These two factors probably inspired more Bangladeshi youths to join IS. This might be because IS’ declaration of a ‘Global Caliphate’ with a concrete territorial basis in Iraq and Syria seemed to support the Prophet’s prophecies. On the other hand, although Al Qaeda-oriented AAI, ABT and AAI2 were involved in a number of killings of secular bloggers, LGBT workers, Sufis and secular publishers, only one AQ follower was killed by security forces [83] but many of them had been arrested. The old JMB whose ideology as derived from the Taliban has struggled to survive in the era of IS and AQIS with 22 percent of Islamist militants in our sample being JMB followers. Moreover, JMB has been trying to become an international organization with the creation of the Jamaatul Mujahedin India (JMI) in 2018.[84]

Residential Location (73 Islamist Militants)

It has been widely assumed that Islamist militants mainly come from the northern part of Bangladesh as this area is the one most affected by poverty [85]. Riaz’s two studies did not shed any light on the subject of which area the militants came from. However, recent demographic data indicate that no particular area is less vulnerable. Rather, it is becoming more obvious that Islamist militants are mainly drawn from urban areas with an upper or middle class character.

The largest number of Islamist militants in Bangladesh (12 out of 67) have come from Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. Rajshahi and Dinajpur, two important administrative cities of Bangladesh, stand second with nine militants from each city. Another two cities, Comilla and Norshindi, located very close to Dhaka, have so far supplied eight militants. Other militants come from other cities of Bangladesh.[86]

Conclusion

This study reveals some worrying trends in contemporary Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. Even if this Research Note cannot offer a definite socio-demographic profile of Islamist militants in Bangladesh due to its explorative nature (and also due to the limitations of the data based on militants killed in encounters with security forces over a period of 31 months). However, from the data it is quite evident that the IS like-minded ‘Neo JMB’, the AQIS like-minded AAI and ABT and the old JMB are today very active in Bangladesh. IS has obviously overtaken all other organizations because of the appeal of its ‘Global Caliphate’, based on Islamic apocalyptic ideas. Militant organizations have mainly targeted students in their recruiting efforts and those recruited, mostly males, belong to the 15-25 age group.[87] A majority of Islamist militants has been drawn from mainstream educational institutions (college and university students), very often coming from educated and relatively wealthy families from upper and middle class urban backgrounds.

A growing number of students from English medium-level institutions have also been joining Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. This finding is in line with what Sageman found already in 2004 [88]; his study examined 172 militants and concluded that around 70 percent of Islamist militants were well educated and came from upper and middle class backgrounds. But this Research Note diverges from Sageman’s on the issue of marriage.[89] At the beginning of the 21st century, Sageman contended that 73 percent of Islamist militants were married

and had children. However, the present research found that in the case of contemporary Bangladesh very few militants were actually married.

More generally, this study casts serious doubt about the widely held views about Bangladeshi Islamist militants—as summarized by Riaz [90]—that ‘poverty breeds extremism’, ‘deprivation encourages individuals to join militancy’ and ‘Madrassas are the incubators of terrorism’. Finally, this study identifies four worrying trends of Bangladesh’s Islamist militancy: (i) women increasingly being used for violent radicalization, (ii) families acting as terrorist cells, (iii) the increasing use of self-made weapons, and (iv) a home-grown ambition for engaging in internationalism. If Bangladesh becomes a new hub of Islamist terrorism, [91] all the questions raised by this Research Note warrant closer attention, in particular that of knowing why the apocalyptic ideology of IS has had such resonance among the very young—and this despite their high level of education.

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Appendix

Operations Carried by the Security Forces

1. Operation ‘Thunder Bolt’ in Dhaka on 2 July 2016, which killed 5 Neo JMB Militants.
2. Operation in Zhinaidah on 14 July 2016, which arrested 4 Neo JMB Militants.
3. Operation in Bogra on 19 July 2016, no arrest and no killing happened.
4. Operation ‘Storm 26’ in Dhaka on 25 July 2016, which killed 9 Neo JMB Militants.
5. Operation ‘Hit Strong’ in Narayanganj on 27 August 2016, which killed 3 Neo JMB Militants.
6. Operation at Rupnagar, Dhaka on 2 September 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
7. Operation at Azimpur, Dhaka on 10 September 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
8. Operation in Tangail on 8 October 2016, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.
9. Operation in Gazipur on 8 October 2016, which killed 9 Neo JMB militants.
10. Operation in Dhaka on 8 October 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
11. Operation at Ashkona, Dhaka on 24 December 2016, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.
12. Operation at Sitakunda on 15 March 2017, which killed 5 Neo JMB militants.
13. Operation ‘Twilight’ in Sylhet on 24 March 2017, which killed 4 Neo JMB militants.
14. Operation ‘Hit Back’ at Nasirpur, Mauluvibazar on 29 March 2017, which killed 7 Neo JMB militants.
15. Operation ‘Maximus’ at Borohat, Mauluvibazar on 31 March 2017, which killed 3 Neo JMB militants.
16. Operation ‘Strickout’ at Katbari, Comilla on 31 March 2017, no killing or arrest.
17. Operation at Kalibari, Mymensing on 3 April 2017, which arrested 7 Neo JMB militants.
18. Operation Moheshpur Upazela, Zhinaidah on 7 April 2017, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.
19. Operation in Zhinaidah on 22 April 2017, no killing or arrest.
20. Operation ‘Eagle Hunt’ in Chapainabganj on 27 April 2017, which killed 4 JMB militants.
21. Operation ‘Sun Devil’ in Rajshahi on 12 May 2017, which killed 5 JMB militants.
22. Operation at Chuadanga, Jhenaidah on 16 May 2017, which arrested 2 Neo JMB militants.
23. Operation in Jhenaidah on 16 May 2017, no killing or arrest.
24. Operation in Norshingdi on 21 May 2017, which arrested 5 Neo JMB militants.
25. Operation in Chapainabganj on 24 May 2017, which arrested 3 JMB militants.
26. Operation at Ashulia, Dhaka on 17 July 2017, which arrested 4 Neo JMB militants.

27. Operation 'August Bite' in Dhaka on 15 August 2017, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
28. Operation at Nakhal Para, Dhaka on 12 January 2018, which killed 3 JMB militants.
29. Operation in Norshingdi on 16 October 2018, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.

Gunfights

1. Gunfight with security forces in Madaripur on 18 June 2016, which killed 1 HT fighter.
2. Gunfight with security forces in Dhaka on 19 June 2016, which killed 1 ABT fighter.
3. Gunfight with security forces in Kishorganj on 7 July 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
4. Gunfight with security forces in Rajshahi on 3 August 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
5. Gunfight with security forces in Mymensing on 4 August 2016, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.
6. Gunfight with security forces in Tangail on 21 August 2016, which killed 2 JMB militants.
7. Gunfight with security forces in Bogura on 29 August 2016, which killed 2 JMB militants.
8. Gunfight with security forces in Dhaka on 7 January 2017, which killed 2 Neo JMB militants.
9. Gunfight with security forces in Rajshahi on 2 March 2017, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
10. Gunfight with security forces in Brahmanbaria on 16 March 2017, which killed 1 HUJI fighter.
11. Gunfight with security forces in Jashore on 24 June 2018, which killed 1 JMB fighter.
12. Gunfight with security forces in Munshiganj on 8 September 2018, which killed 2 JMB militants.
13. Gunfight with security forces in Mymensing on 4 November 2018, which killed 1 JMB fighter.
14. Gunfight with security forces in Bogura on 6 November 2018, which killed 1 JMB fighter.

Attacks

1. Attack to security forces in Kishorganj on 7 July 2016, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.
2. Attack to security forces in Dhaka on 24 March 2017, which killed 1 Neo JMB fighter.