

CGS-UNDP Papers: 1

# RECENT TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH VARIATIONS AND RESPONSES

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**Recent Trends and Patterns of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh:  
Variations and Responses**

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**Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS)  
University of Dhaka  
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## **Foreword: A Naivety Confessed**

I was naive. A conviction in me drawn from the spirit of Bangladesh's independence anchored on unqualified commitment to secular values, democratic tolerance and peaceful blooming of diversities of identity including religion, sect, culture and ethnicity led me to expect that whatever challenges Bangladesh may face, violent extremism will never take any grounding in independent Bangladesh to an extent worth worried about. Accordingly, in the wake of 9/11 attacks I used to almost despise questions of my non-Bangladeshi friends - experts in security and strategic studies - if Bangladesh, principally as a 'Muslim majority state' would be soon taking the Taliban course. I thought and used to tell them they didn't really understand what Bangladesh was about and what the people of Bangladesh dreamt and stood for, which are far from anything to do with violent extremism, not even fundamentalism of any sort.

Not that I wished away the long term implications of dissolute re-advent by then of use of religion in politics based on deliberately designed game plans of successive military regimes. I was also not unaware of the strategic and political roots of the violent ethnic conflict in Chittagong Hill Tracts based on a vicious institutionalization of "us" and "them" based on ethnic identity which, like politicization of religion, was also inconsistent with the key elements of historical experiences that led to the articulation of separate nationhood of Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, I kept on trying to convince myself that violent extremism, if at all, will have no grounding of substantial concern in the absence of any genuine resonance at the socio-political values and spirit of the common people of Bangladesh. This however until such time as partisan political use of religion became one of the most convenient tools in the eternally confrontational zero-sum game of mainstream political space.

Grounds were thus prepared for Bangladesh to eventually witness a surge of incidents bearing syndromes of violent extremism nourished by

an apparently venomous collusion of internal factors with external linkages. For obvious reasons, parallel with political and security concerns, academic and research interest has grown more than ever before to facilitate enhanced understanding of the factors and dynamics of perceivably formidable prospect of growth of violent extremism in Bangladesh.

Against this background, this study on “Recent Trends and Patterns of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh: Variations and Responses” adds good value to the existing literature on the subject. It offers valuable insights into the recent trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh based on secondary data generated by the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). It analyses various trends of increase and decrease of violent extremism and finds a positive correlation between mainstream political instability and increasing incidents of violent extremist by observing two periods. It explores the origins and growth of three leading local actors of violent extremism and their international connections. It finally presents a brief review of government response to the problem and the extent of their effectiveness. As the author expects, the study does provide a handy set of data and analysis for the reader to understand the nature and recent trends of violent extremism in Bangladesh and an overview of how it has so far been countered.

I read a draft version of this report knowing well about its specific scope and limitations for which its readers may not expect any analyses here of the deeper and wider political, strategic, religious or even socio-economic and cultural factors as well as various processes and dynamics of violent extremism witnessed so far in Bangladesh. Nor does it indicate its future potential in the country. Such issues I hope would be undertaken by some other initiatives sooner than later.

**Iftekharuzzaman**  
Executive Director  
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## **Abstract**

This study investigates trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh based on the database of Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). By analyzing the increasing and decreasing tendency of violent extremism with temporal and spatial variations, this study reveals several interesting findings: such as incidents related to violent extremism witnessed a downward trend in the last three years; Rajshahi is the second most violent extremism-prone city after Dhaka; and JMB, AAI and Neo-JMB are the three most active VE groups in Bangladesh. Also, this study finds a positive correlation between mainstream political instability and increasing incidents of violent extremist by exploring two periods. The paper also provides a comprehensive overview of the origin and development of three major actors of violent extremism and their connections with transnational violent extremist groups. In the third and final section, this study analyzes major CVE efforts and their effectiveness in Bangladesh. The project contributed in existing literature on violent extremism in Bangladesh by providing a data-based quantitative analysis. An in-depth analysis of three most prominent actors of violent extremism in Bangladesh also supports the quantitative analysis. Hopefully, this analysis will be useful to understand trends of VE in Bangladesh, prevent and counter violent extremism, and to implement CVE and PVE strategies.

# Recent Trends and Patterns of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh: Variations and Responses

Saimum Parvez\*

**Abstract:** *This study investigates trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh based on the database of Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). By analyzing the increasing and decreasing tendency of violent extremism with temporal and spatial variations, this study reveals several interesting findings: such as incidents related to violent extremism witnessed a downward trend in the last three years; Rajshahi is the second most violent extremism-prone city after Dhaka; and JMB, AAI and Neo-JMB are the three most active VE groups in Bangladesh. Also, this study finds a positive correlation between mainstream political instability and increasing incidents of violent extremist by exploring two periods. The paper also provides a comprehensive overview of the origin and development of three major actors of violent extremism and their connections with transnational violent extremist groups. In the third and final section, this study analyzes major CVE efforts and their effectiveness in Bangladesh. The project contributed in existing literature on violent extremism in Bangladesh by providing a data-based quantitative analysis. An in-depth analysis of three most prominent actors of violent extremism in Bangladesh also supports the quantitative analysis. Hopefully, this analysis will be useful to understand trends of VE in Bangladesh, prevent and counter violent extremism, and to implement CVE and PVE strategies.*

Bangladesh witnessed a sudden surge of violent extremism related incidents in recent years, between 2013 and 2016 in particular. Although the number of attacks has decreased and a large number of violent extremists have been arrested or killed since 2017, there are possibilities that Jihadi organizations could re-organize and re-group in the future if they get conducive environment. Understanding the trends and patterns and explaining the causes of violent extremism involve multifarious

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aspects. Violent extremism in any country is associated with complex and intricate causal variables. Bangladesh is not an exception. The extant literature identifies multivariate factors, including ideological, political, socio-cultural, and individual, behind the origin and development of violent extremism in Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> Ahmed argues that mis-governance of the state, marginalization of communities, and national deprivation, all contribute directly to the reproduction of violent extremism.<sup>2</sup> Current literature also explains how politicization of religion and secularism has dragged the nation into turmoil<sup>3</sup> and delineates how the Islamists employ various cultural products to reach out to the general populace and propagate their political ideology.<sup>4</sup> Existing literature also highlights that traditional social and family values, some of which are based on strict Islamic culture, are receding or getting mixed with Western ideals with globalization and modernization. This perceived negative impact of modernization on conservative Islamic society triggers radicalization in Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> Some of the extant literature also finds that the extremist

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<sup>1</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, *Terrorism in the 21st Century: Perspectives from Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2009); Farooq Sobhan, *Trends in Militancy in Bangladesh: Possible Responses* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2010); Shahab Enam Khan, "Bangladesh: The Changing Dynamics of Violent Extremism and the Response of the State," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 28, no.1, (2017): 191-217; Saimum Parvez, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Bangladesh," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, ed. Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) 425-437; Imtiaz Ahmed, *Understanding Terrorism in South Asia: Beyond Statist Discourses* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Naila Kabir. "Bangladeshe Dharmasroyi Rajnitir Shasantantrik Punurutthan [Resurgence of Religion Based Politics in Bangladesh]," In A. Riaz (Ed.), *Samprodaikata o Maulabad [Communalism and Fundamentalism]* (Dhaka: Ankur Publishers, 1995) pp.30-41.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Riaz., & M. A. Naser, "Islamist politics and popular culture". In A. Riaz, & C. Fair (Eds.), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*. (New York: Routledge). pp. 136-152

<sup>5</sup> Moinul Khan, "The Islamic Resurgence Why Bangladesh is a Case Apart". *PhD Thesis*. Center for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

groups motivate and indoctrinate by using distorted interpretations of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

In one recent study, authors analyze 150 violent extremist profiles and find some interesting common socio-demographic characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Their findings suggest that militancy in Bangladesh is young-male dominated, with a growing number of individuals from well-off and well-educated backgrounds. Also, both the home-grown and transnational militant outfits are active in Bangladesh. The study shows an emergence of new violent groups with possible transnational connections and finds that social networks, such as friends, teachers, family members, and influential persons, play a significant role in radicalization. Bangladeshi militants are heavily dependent on the Internet for recruitment, propaganda, mobilization, communication, and fundraising. Interestingly, a large number of militants became involved in violent extremism in relatively short time; they went missing for three months to one year before surfacing as a militant. The study collects evidence that in most of the cases transformation from an otherwise normal individual to a complete militant takes only ten months to one year. Despite remarkable contribution of these studies in existing literature on violent extremism in Bangladesh, the number of data-based quantitative analysis is very limited. To prevent and counter violent extremism, and to implement CVE and PVE strategies, the importance of understanding the trend and nature of the threat is monumental. Against this backdrop, this project investigates trends and patterns of violent extremism and countering violent extremism efforts in Bangladesh.

In the first section, this study explores the major trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh based on the existing

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<sup>6</sup>BEI. "The Role of Education in Countering Radicalization in Bangladesh". Report published by *Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI)*. Dhaka, 2015, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Ali Riaz & Saimum Parvez, "Bangladeshi Militants: What do We Know?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 6, (2018).

database of Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) and compares the data with another database. This section also analyzes the increasing and decreasing tendency of violent extremism with temporal and spatial variations. Second, the study also explores the background and development of three major actors in violent extremism and their connections with transnational violent extremist groups. In the third and final section, this study discusses major CVE efforts and their effectiveness in Bangladesh.

### **Radicalization, Violent Extremism and Political Violence: A Conceptual Analysis**

Before going into major trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh, it is essential to analyze the key concepts associated with it. Although the definitions of violent extremism still vary, the extant literature has reached to a consensus that the process of involving in violent extremism starts with radicalization.<sup>8</sup>Scholars suggest that radicalization is a process in which ‘individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence. It is both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour.’<sup>9</sup>In the process of radicalization, both individuals and groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims.<sup>10</sup>However, every individual with radical beliefs does not necessarily become involved in violent

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<sup>8</sup>Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models

and Empirical Research,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 37-62.

<sup>9</sup>A. S. Wilner and C. J. Dubouloz, “Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization,” *Global Change, Peace & Security (formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change)* 22, no. 1 (2010): 38.

<sup>10</sup>T. Stevens and P. Neuman, “Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2009: 10.

extremism, the approval and justification of violence might be limited only in thoughts, not turning into action. Thus, scholars distinguish between violent and cognitive radicalization.<sup>11</sup>Cognitive radicalization is “a process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a completely different belief system. Violent radicalization, which often turns into violent extremism, occurs when an individual takes the additional step of employing violence to further the views derived from cognitive radicalism.”<sup>12</sup>

Among numerous models on the process of radicalization into violent extremism, three frameworks received wide acclaim from academicians and policy makers.<sup>13</sup>In the first model, Borum proposed four stages of terrorist mindset. The framework begins by framing grievance generated from unsatisfied event or condition (*It's not right*). In the second stage, the aggrieved individuals or groups believe that the grievance is unjust (*It's not fair*). The injustice leads to accusation of a target policy, person, or nation (*It's your fault*). In the last stage, the responsible party is then vilified—often demonized—(*You're Evil*). This vilification facilitates justification or motivation for violence.

### Figure 1: Borum's Four-Stage Model of the Terrorist Mindset

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<sup>11</sup>Lorenzo Vidino, “Countering Radicalization in America,” Special Report 262, November 2010, United States Institute of Peace, p.4  
[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR262%20-%20Countering\\_Radicalization\\_in\\_America.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR262%20-%20Countering_Radicalization_in_America.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Randy Borum, op. cit.



The four stages of Borum’s framework mainly deal with involvement phase of the process of violent extremism. In another model, Precht adds pre-radicalization and actual engagement in the terrorist acts with the involvement phase. By analyzing the militant Islamist radicalization process in Europe, he proposes a four-phase "typical pattern of radicalization": *Pre-radicalization; Conversion and identification with VE ideology; Indoctrination and increased group bonding; and Actual acts of VE or planned plots*. He considers violent extremism as a “sociological phenomenon where issues such as belonging, identity, group dynamics, and values are important elements in the transformation process. Religion plays an important role, but for some, it rather serves as a vehicle for fulfilling other goals. A common denominator seems to be that the involved persons are at a crossroad in their life and wanting a cause.”<sup>14</sup>

Precht also identifies three categories of motivational factors for radicalization; a) Background factors, b) Trigger factors and c) Opportunity factors. The *Background factors* include personal struggles with religious identity, experiences with discrimination, and lack of

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<sup>14</sup> Tomas Precht, “Home Grown Terrorism and Islamist Radicalization in Europe: From Conversion To Terrorism,” Danish Ministry of Defense, December 2007

social integration. The *Trigger factors* are the people— such as a mentor or charismatic leader—and events—such as policy actions—that might provoke or incite either antipathy or activities. The *Opportunity factors* depend on an individual's degree of access and likelihood of exposure to extremist ideas or adherents within her or his sphere of activity. These include physical and virtual spaces such as the Internet, mosques, prisons, and social groups.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2: Precht's four-phase "typical" pattern of radicalization



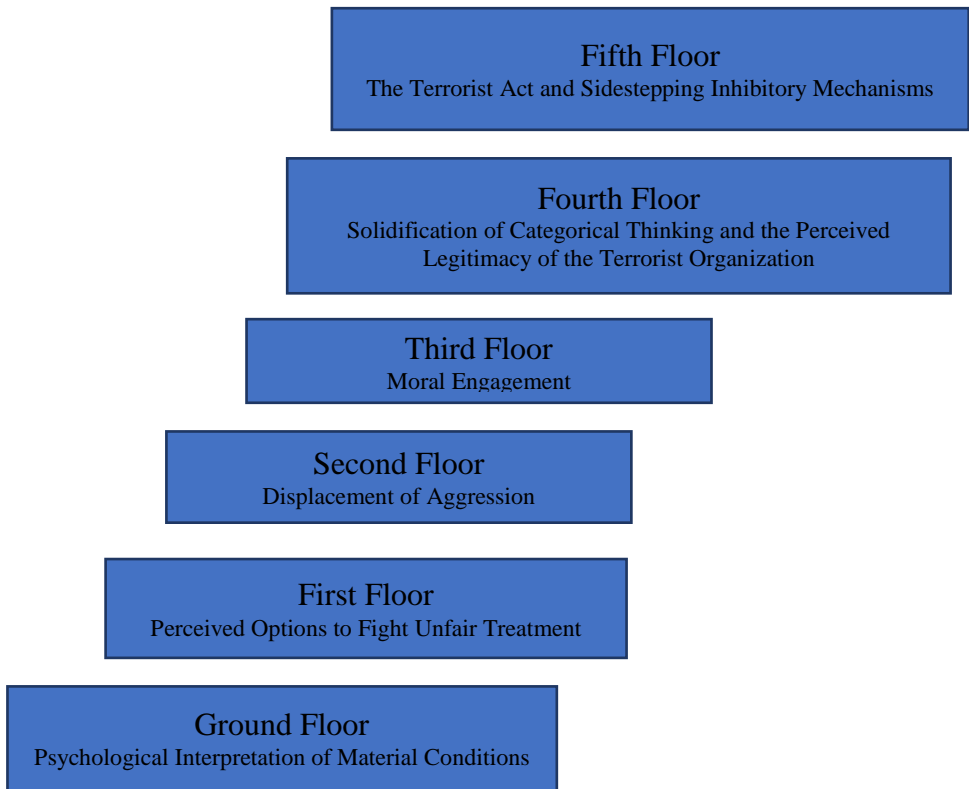
The third model, named as "Staircase to Terrorism", sees violent radicalization as a gradual process, which has six successive stages.<sup>16</sup> Moghaddam argues that just like a staircase, an individual gradually ascends from the ground floor to the fifth floor and becomes a full-fledged violent extremist. He argues that the feelings of discontent and perceived deprivation lay the foundation.

Figure 3: Moghaddam's "Staircase to Terrorism" Model

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60 (2005): 161-169.



According to this model, initially the aspirant violent extremist wants to fight against the perceived deprivation. The unsuccessful attempts to end deprivation lead to frustration and produce feelings of aggression. At this stage, violent extremists create the perceived culprits or enemies responsible for their deprivation. As their anger towards the enemy builds up, they become increasingly sympathetic towards extremist ideology and to the VE groups that act against their perceived enemies. Some of those sympathizers eventually join a VE group that advocates for and engages in violent extremist attacks. Among these VE group members, some overcome any barriers to action and actually engage in a VE attack.<sup>17</sup> According to Moghaddam, not everyone who starts from the

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

ground floor reach the top floor; as fewer and fewer people ascend to each successive level. A relatively small number of individual eventually progresses to the top level and commits a terrorist act. As it is observed in above discussion, in most of the definitions, radicalization refers to an increasing degree of extremism, intolerance of beliefs, feelings, and behaviours which may or may not be violent in nature. However, if not violent, radicalized individuals are more likely to be sympathetic to extremism. Thus, radicalization can be defined as a social and psychological process of increasing commitment to extremist political or religious ideology. Also, not all of the radicalized individuals turn into a violent extremist; only a few eventually engage in violent incidents.

Some scholars do not distinguish between terrorism and political violence. Some even view the “Jihadi” terrorism as a global social movement. By providing a different conceptualization of the problem, they argue for abandoning the term “terrorism” and advocate using more politically neutral term “political violence”.<sup>18</sup> This branch of literature identifies how a social movement turns violent, and organizations and individuals justify the use of violence. Broadly, the social movement theories identify existence of three conditions for causing violence; political, social, and cultural.<sup>19</sup> By analyzing the radical groups in Italy, Ireland, and Spain, one study suggests that the lack of political opportunities such as exclusive political system, non-functional

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<sup>18</sup> Jeff Goodwin, “Review Essays: What Must we Explain to Explain Terrorism?,” *Social Movement Studies* 3 (2004): 259-265; Donatella della Porta, “Research on Social Movements and Political Violence,” *Qualitative Sociology* 31, no. 3 (2008): 221-30.

<sup>19</sup> Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 1995; della Porta, Donatella, and Wagemann, Claudius. 2005. “Patterns of Radicalisation in Political Activism: Research Design.” Veto project Report. Florence EUI. Snow, A. David and Benford D. Robert. 1992. “Master Frames and Circles of Protest.” In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Morris D. Aldon and Mueller C. McClurg, 133-155. New Heaven: Yale University Press

democracy, and state repression is likely to produce violent escalation.<sup>20</sup> The political causes could descend from the state level to organization level, where “competitive violence” or competition among and within the organizations sometimes lead organizations to take the violent path.<sup>21</sup> Several studies suggest that when a group inside an organization becomes dissatisfied with the leadership, feels betrayed for any perceived injustice, and becomes frustrated with the organizations non-violent approach, it creates a new organization with violent mandates. The frustration and dissatisfaction could come from the belief that the existing non-violent strategies have failed to provide adequate political avenues to bring desired changes or are taking too much time. At this point, social movement theories argue, the violent groups use violence as a primary or instrumental way to reach greater goals.

### **Scope, Data and Method of the Study**

Although this study acknowledges the important interconnection and interdependence between political violence and violent extremism, it limits its scope to only incidents and actors of violent extremism, more specifically the Jihadist groups. In a country like Bangladesh, where mainstream political parties often employ violence against each other in forms of violent strikes, road blockades, and targeted killings, an attempt to demarcate incidents of mainstream political violence and violent extremism is challenging. However, acknowledging this difficulty, this study considers a group as a violent extremist organization when it does not support democratic system, nor does it participate in national elections; and justifiesthat violence is the only way to get rid of the existing political system and establish a state that would strictly follow their version of Islam.

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<sup>20</sup> Donatella della Porta, “Research on Social Movements and Political Violence.” *Qualitative Sociology* 31 no. 3 (2008): 221-30.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

Data for this study have been mainly gathered from Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) database. By following a detailed and comprehensive codebook, the database collects and compiles violence related information from 13 national and local newspapers. The BPO data help this study find the current trend and pattern of violent extremism in Bangladesh. This study also collects data from the South Asian Terrorism Portal (SATP) to find the number of incidents between 2005 and 2019. For the analysis of main VE actors and counterterrorism efforts in Bangladesh, this study employs document analysis method. Data for these two sections are collected from publicly available sources, such as newspaper reports, journal articles, semi-academic commentaries, and government, non-government, and international non-government organizations' reports. The main three actors of VE in Bangladesh, Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), Ansar al Islam (AAI), and Islamic State/Neo-JMB, have been selected in terms of their frequency of involvement in attacks and the number of arrests of their members.

## **Section 1: Trends and Patterns of Violent Extremism (VE) in Bangladesh**

The BPO data provide trends and patterns of VE in last three years in Bangladesh, including the number of violent extremism incidents, deaths, injuries, raids by law-enforcement agencies, and arrests. By analyzing the pattern, it has been observed that although the number of violent extremism related incidents increased from 99 in 2016 to 131 in 2018, fatalities decreased significantly; total deaths observed a downward trend, from 67 in 2016 to 57 in 2017, and 15 in 2018, and the number of injuries declined from 24 in 2016 to only 9 in 2018.

Table 1: Consequences of Violent Extremism (2016-2018)<sup>22</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Incidents</b>	<b>Deaths</b>	<b>Injuries</b>	<b>Arrests</b>
2016	99	67	24	233
2017	185	57	86	405
2018	131	15	9	332

Not surprisingly, the number of incidents has a positive correlation with the number of arrests, both of which gradually increased in these three years. It should be noted here that BPO data set the criterion of violent extremism in broad terms, as it includes incidents perpetrated by one of the Islamist political parties and its student wing (Jamaat-e-Islami and Shibir) in its database. Also, BPO data include arrests of the suspected militants, which creates an unavoidable selection bias as these suspects may or may not be convicted as violent extremists at the end of their trials.

Table 2: Number of violent extremism related incidents (2005-2019)<sup>23</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Incidents</b>
2005	595
2006	332
2007	325
2008	192
2009	265
2010	328
2011	213
2012	272
2013	702
2014	271

<sup>22</sup> Data for this table have been collected from the BPO database.

<sup>23</sup> Compiled from South Asia Terrorism Portal. at <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/bangladesh>.

2015	335
2016	298
2017	263
2018	135
2019 <sup>24</sup>	67
<b>Total</b>	<b>4562</b>

The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) records year-wise data of violent extremism related incidents in Bangladesh. A comparison between BPO and SATP data reveals difference in number of incidents, especially in the first two years, 2016 and 2017. In comparison to BPO's 99 and 185 incidents in two respective years, SATP records show larger number of incidents, 298 and 263 respectively. However, the number of incidents in 2018 is almost similar. Also, both SATP and BPO records show a decreasing trend of VE related incidents in recent years. An analysis of year-wise number of violent extremism related incidents from 2005 to 2019 in Bangladesh shows two significant patterns. First, violent extremism in Bangladesh has a downward trend in recent years, particularly from 2014. This decreasing tendency could be a result of multiple factors, including effective counterterrorism efforts, weak internal organizational strength due to factions among the violent extremist groups and declining strength of transnational VE groups, such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in particular. Second, incidents of violent extremism increased dramatically in two certain years, in 2005 and 2013. Why did these two years witness such a surge in violent extremism incidents? The next section explores possible explanations behind this puzzle.

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<sup>24</sup> As of October 09, 2019.

## ***Probable correlation between political instability and violent extremism***

Not only the incidents related to violent extremism, Bangladesh witnesses political violence in different forms including clashes between mainstream political parties, political killings, violent strikes, road blockades, and hurling Molotov cocktails to create panic and cause injuries among the rival groups. In fact, the number of fatalities caused by these incidents of political violence is much higher than the casualties resulted from the incidents related to violent extremism. A pertinent question is, whether the high number of violent incidents caused by political incidents also correlates with increasing incidents related to violent extremism.

Most of the existing literature blames various aspects of violence-prone political culture, instability and acrimonious rivalry between two main political coalitions for the growth of violent extremism in Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> Riaz & Parvez put it nicely: “political instability, marginalization of opposition parties, growing authoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime, proliferation of intolerance, polarization of society, and lack of space for religio-political parties within the mainstream have become the hallmarks of contemporary Bangladesh, especially since 2009.”<sup>26</sup> In another study, Zaman argues that “in the case of Bangladesh,... it is the nature of the prevailing political culture, exacerbated by a crisis of identity, which is playing the important role in the growth of extremist politics and the resulting violence”.<sup>27</sup> He further

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<sup>25</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Bombs and Ballots: Terrorism, Political Violence, and Governance in Bangladesh,” Report published by International Peace Institute, USA, 2010; BEI, “Towards Developing a Counter-narrative to the Islamist Extremist Narrative in Bangladesh,” *Bangladesh Enterprise Institute*. November 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Ali Riaz and Saimum Parvez, “Violent Extremism in Bangladesh An Assessment of Domestic and International Dimensions,” Report prepared by MSI for USAID, Dhaka, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Rashed-uz-Zaman, “Bangladesh: Between Terrorism, Identity and Illiberal Democracy-The Unfolding of a Tragic Saga,” *Perceptions* 17, no. 3 (2012): 151-177.

contends that Bangladesh's political culture reflects a profound ideological void and political bankruptcy of the leadership. Also, the ubiquitous presence of violence puts a question mark on the survivability of the country, for such violence inevitably tends to escalate, gives birth to coups and countercoups and helps spawn extremist organizations. Similarly, other studies identify bitter rivalry between two major political parties, fierce enmity overpower between top leaderships, and "revenge politics" as major causes behind the space for a fertile ground for violent extremism.<sup>28</sup> However, whether empirical evidence supports these claims deserves more deliberation.

As the previous section showed, the year 2013 witnessed an abnormal surge of violent extremism and 702 such incidents were recorded. Similarly, the number of political violence occurred in 2013 was also unprecedented; an astounding number of people, 24680 to be exact, were either killed or injured in that year<sup>29</sup>. There is high chance that this abnormal increase in violent extremism related incidents in 2013 is associated with political turmoil on the ground. In 2013, Bangladesh witnessed an emergence of two competing camps: The Shahbagh movement, and the Hefazat-i-Islam (HI, literally, Safeguard of Islam). The Shahbagh Movement emerged in the wake of the International Crime Tribunal verdict in early February sentencing the JcI leader, Abdul Quader Mollah, to imprisonment for a life. The movement gradually became highly partisan, openly supporting the one-sided election.<sup>30</sup> In response, sensing an existential threat to Islamist political groupings, smaller Islamist parties and organizations resuscitated HI, an

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<sup>28</sup>Alyssa Ayres, "Political Polarization and Religious Extremism in Bangladesh," Statement presented before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, United States House of Representatives. 1st Session, 114th Congress. Council on Foreign Relations. April 30, 2015; Neil DeVotta and David Timberman, "Violent Extremism and Insurgency in Bangladesh: A Risk Assessment," MSI: USAID, 2012.

<sup>29</sup>Saimum Parvez, "Explaining Political Violence in Contemporary Bangladesh," in *Political Violence in South Asia*, eds. Ali Riaz, Zobaida Nasreen and Fahmida Zaman (Abingdon: Routledge) 2018, p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Ali Riaz, "Bangladesh's Failed Election," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 2(2014).

umbrella organization of Islamic scholars associated with privately operated, traditional *qawmi* madrassas.<sup>31</sup> HI announced a 13-point obscurantist agenda, which included the introduction of an anti-blasphemy law carrying the death penalty; an end to the “pro-women” development policy; a ban on men and women mixing in public; and a call for the Ahmadiyya sect to be declared non-Muslim. The HI leaders claimed that the organizers of the Shahbagh movement (who also were prominent bloggers) had demeaned Islam and dishonored the Prophet in their blogs and online comments. The statements and actions of the two camps contributed to the further polarization of political environment and provided legitimacy to extremist thinking and rhetoric within mainstream politics and society. Taking advantage of this extremely polarized society, widespread violence among the competing political groups and political instability due to a highly controversial national election, the violent extremist groups might be re-organized and re-grouped in Bangladesh. Among the attacks, the brutal killings of self-proclaimed atheist bloggers, publishers, foreign nationals, and attacks on minority religious gatherings and individuals, caught international attention.

Similarly, political instability and high number of the incidents of political violence in 2005-2006, which started because of the disagreement between two main political alliances over forming caretaker government to conduct national election, correlate with increasing number of violent extremism related attacks. In 2005 and 2006 the number of incidents related to political violence was 9,307 and 21,639, respectively<sup>32</sup>. The number of violent extremism related incidents was 595 in 2005, and 332 in 2006, which was higher than those of the latter years, when the country’s political situation was relatively

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<sup>31</sup> Saimum Parvez, “The Press, National Identity, and the Shahbagh Movement: A Study of the Contemporary Politics of Bangladesh,” MA Thesis, The George Washington University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015. 1588866, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/4370e102f3c19bb6e785ae1ba6fe5fe8/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

stable. Although only these two periods do not strongly support the claim that political instability and violence create favorable ground for violent extremists to regroup, reorganize, thrive and to increase the number of terror attacks in Bangladesh, they suggest a correlation which deserves further research in future. Along with political instability, coercive state responses could be a cause for increasing violent extremism.<sup>33</sup> On one hand, hard measures such as extra-judicial killings could restrain the events of violent extremism, on the other hand, these measures also restrengthen the violent extremists' 'victimhood' narrative.

### ***Divisional distribution of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh (2016-2018)***

The BPO database recorded the events of VE in eight divisions of Bangladesh between 2016 and 2018 and listed the number of violent extremism related events, deaths, injuries, and property damages. By the number of incidents, the most VE-prone division was Dhaka, with 167 events and 78 deaths in the three-year period. It is not surprising considering the huge population and size of Dhaka, which happens to be the capital and biggest city in Bangladesh. Also, the presence of most of the important government and non-government establishments in Dhaka probably made it the most sought-after target for the violent extremist attacks. Rajshahi came second with 101 events and 23 deaths. According to the last population census conducted in 2011, the population of the region was nearly three times fewer than Dhaka.<sup>34</sup> Considering the population boom in Dhaka in recent years, it is safe to assume that difference of the number of population between these two divisions will be even higher than what it was in 2011. However, despite of comparatively low population, the data shows that Rajshahi became a

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<sup>33</sup> della Porta,. "Research on Social Movements and Political Violence," op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> "Population and Housing Census 2011," Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/site/page/47856ad0-7e1c-4aab-bd78-892733bc06eb/->.

stronghold for violent extremists. A possible explanation of the increasing number of violent extremism related incidents in Rajshahi could be strong organisational presence of JMB and HuJIB in this region and probable cross-border connections with the violent extremist groups active in the West Bengal, India. Among other divisions; Rangpur, Khulna, and Chittagong witnessed 50,40, and 31 incidents related to VE, respectively. Although Sylhet and Mymensingh shared the same number of events, 12, the number of deaths and injuries were higher in Sylhet, 19 and 58 respectively, compared to a meagre 3 deaths and 3 injuries in Mymensingh. The most ‘uneventful’ division was Barisal, with only 5 incidents and no deaths or injuries.

Table 3: Divisional distribution of Violent Extremism in Bangladesh (2016-2018)

<b>Division</b>	<b>Barisal</b>	<b>Chittagong</b>	<b>Dhaka</b>	<b>Khulna</b>	<b>Rajshahi</b>	<b>Rangpur</b>	<b>Sylhet</b>	<b>Mymensingh</b>
<b>Incident</b>	5	31	167	40	101	50	12	12
<b>Death</b>	0	8	78	8	23	0	19	3
<b>Injured</b>	0	12	21	7	15	3	58	3
<b>Property Damage</b>	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0

### *Actor-wise temporal distribution of Violent Extremism (2016-2018)*

The BPO database also records the number of violent extremism related incidents, deaths, and injuries in each year. As the database also compiles how the major actors are involved in these incidents, it is possible to find out the most lethal violent extremist groups in terms of their frequency of attacks and number of arrests of their members. The Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh(JMB) seems to be the deadliest violent extremist group in Bangladesh in terms of the number of involvements in the VE incidents and arrests. In fact, JMB’s frequency of involvement has been gradually increasing for last three years (2016-2018); from 35

incidents in 2016 to 68 in 2017 and 76 in 2018. The number of arrests of JMB members also shows an upward trend; 57 in 2016, 154 in 2017, and 221 in 2018. Next to JMB, a new faction of JMB who gave allegiance to the Islamic State, (the Bangladesh government named this group Neo-JMB) is the most lethal group in terms of their involvement in VE incidents and number of arrests. Although Neo-JMB's involvement in the VE related incidents has been constantly lower than that of JMB, the number of deaths resulted from the incidents are very high(see table4). In 2016, Neo-JMB was involved in only 8 incidents, which is fewer than one-fourth of JMB's involvement. However, these 8 incidents caused a high death toll, 34. The unusually high death toll was the result of Neo-JMB's involvement in Holey Artisan Bakery attack, which alone caused 29 deaths. Neo-JMB associated high death toll continued in 2017; the year witnessed 54 incidents and 23 deaths. Although BPO database compiles data related to Ansar al Islam (AAI) and Ansarallah Bangla Team (ABT) separately, this study adds them together as these two are not separate organizations. In fact, ABT is only a media section of AAI. In recent years, AAI has emerged as a formidable VE group. Evidences show that AAI keeps a close connection with Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Interestingly, Harkat ul Jihad Bangladesh (HuJIB), once the fountainhead of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, has been dormant in recent years. In 2017, the HuJIB members were only involved in 6 incidents; the number was even lower in 2016, when HuJIB was involved in only 2 VE related incidents. The organization was not involved in any incidents in 2018 (see table 4).

However, this only provides an understanding regarding the strength of violent extremist groups numerically. A large number of arrests does not necessarily mean that the particular VE groups have more members or a large number of involvements in incidents does not entirely support the claim regarding their superior organizational strength. For tactical or strategic reason, a group could restrain its activities for a while. Thus, besides analyzing quantitatively, we need an

in-depth qualitative research in a larger setting and period to understand the strength of the violent extremist groups.

Table 4: Actor-wise temporal distribution of Violent Extremism (2016-2018)

Actors	2016			2017			2018		
	Incident	Death	Arrest	Incident	Death	Arrest	Incident	Death	Arrest
JMB	35	9	57	68	16	154	76	9	221
Neo-JMB	8	34	14	54	23	122	8	0	23
Ansar al Islam +ABT	1+5= <b>6</b>	1+0= <b>1</b>	1+15= <b>16</b>	7+9= <b>16</b>	0+0= <b>0</b>	18+7= <b>25</b>	10+3= <b>13</b>	0+1= <b>1</b>	15+9= <b>24</b>
HuJB	2	0	7	6	1	8	-	-	-

## Section 2: Origin and Development of the VE Actors in Bangladesh

As the BPO data demonstrated, three violent extremist groups; JMB, IS affiliated Neo-JMB and AQ affiliated Ansar-al-Islam, have been most active in Bangladesh in recent years. Their involvement in violent extremism related events and the number of deaths and injuries resulted from these events, along with the large number of arrests made by the law enforcers support the claim that these three are probably the most active violent extremist organizations in contemporary Bangladesh.

## ***Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB)***

The JMB, arguably the most violent terror outfit in Bangladesh, was established in April 1998. It all started with Shaikh Abdur Rahman; a Saudi Arabia educated man with transnational connections. Rahman's father, Abdul Ibne Fazal, a Maulana from Jamalpur district, was a renowned religious leader among the Ahle Hadith creed. Rahman was educated in Madrassas; achieved Fazil degree from the Kamal Khan Hat Senior Madrassa, Jamalpur, and Kamil degree from Sultanganj Islamia Madrassa, Rajshahi. Rahman went to Madinah University, Saudi Arabia, for further study Islamic studies in 1980. He spent five years in Saudi Arabia. During his time there, he reportedly had contact with Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and he expressed his interest to initiate 'Islamic rule' in Bangladesh to them. Probably, Muslim Brotherhood leaders suggested him to join JeI. However, upon returning Bangladesh in 1985, he contacted with JeI but was disappointed with JeI's participation in democratic politics in Bangladesh. In a confession statement, he told police that he decided to establish a separate violent extremist organization as he believed that Islamic rule in Bangladesh could not be established in a democratic way, it needed armed struggle.<sup>35</sup>

It took Rahman thirteen years to set up his own organization. In this period, he did various jobs for his living. Just after returning from Saudi Arabia, he taught at the Mirza Kasem Senior Madrassa in Jamalpur for one year before joining the Saudi Embassy in 1986. He worked as a public relations officer at the visa section of Saudi Embassy for five years. After he left his job, he started various enterprises; import of lentils, fertilizer seller and running an Arabic translation center. It was reported that he prepared himself for Jihad in these periods and wrote Jihadi books. Initially, Rahman wanted to work together with HuJI, but due to ideological differences, he planned to form his own violent extremist outfit. At the initial stage, Rahman met a leader of

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<sup>35</sup> Tipu Sultan, "Salafi ideology behind JMB's rise," *Prothom Alo*, 06 August 2016.

Lashkar-e-Taiba, Abdul Karim Tunda. In fact, Tunda had an office adjacent to a Madrassa in Dhaka. In 1997, Tunda arranged a visit to Pakistan for Rahman. With the help of Tunda, Rahman visited head office of Pakistan's Ahle Hadith organization Markaz-ud-Dawa wal-Irshad. Reportedly, Rahman also received a twenty-day long arms and ammunition training in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan. After returning from Pakistan, he established JMB the following year.

Along with Shaikh Abdur Rahman, who was the emir, another six top leaders formed the first policy making body, known as the Shura committee, of the JMB. These six leaders were: Khaled Saifullah, Hafez Mahmud, Nasrullah, Salahuddin, Shahed bin Hafiz and Rana. Later, Shahed and Rana left JMB for ideological disputes with the rest of the members of the committee. Faruk Hossain alias Khaled Saifullah, Asaduzzaman Hazari, Aatur Rahman Sani, Abdul Awal and Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai, were added in the committee in 2001. It is interesting that Rahman included his relatives (Sani was his younger brother and Awal was his son-in-law) in the Shura. However, among the new inclusions, the most infamous member was Siddiqui Islam or Bangla Bhai, who was known for his atrocities in the Northern region under the banner of JMB's sister concern Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB).

In August 2006, a new 'Shura' was constituted with Maulana Saidur Rahman, alias Abu Zafar, as the new chief of the organization<sup>36</sup>. Two years later, in November 2008, the Shura was reconstituted again. The chief explosive expert of the JMB, Jahidur Rahman, alias 'Boma Mizan', told police that the new Shura members were Maulana Saidur Rahman, Mohammad Mahfuz (alias Sohel Mahfuz), Najmul Shahid (alias Bhaigata Shahid), Mehedi Hasan Abir, Sayem and Osman (alias

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<sup>36</sup> Shamim Ashraf, "All 7 JMB Shura Men Had Links to Jamaat, Shibir," *The Daily Star*. April 28, 2006. p.1.

Shahed)<sup>37</sup>. By 2006, the law enforcement agencies nabbed almost all the top leaders of JMB. They were later executed. One of the Shura members, Nasrullah, died in an explosion in 2002. Another member, Asaduzzaman Hazari left JMB in 2003 for his ill health. The new chief Saidur Rahman was also arrested in 2010. Among the members of the Shura committee constituted in 2001 only Salahuddin is alive and acting as the current chief of JMB.

The organizational strength of JMB could be understood by the frequency and scale of violent attacks it conducted. The most well-known incident was on August 17, 2005, when JMB carried out near-simultaneous blasts in one shy of 64 districts in Bangladesh resulting in death of two people. Although the incidents seemed to be non-lethal due to the lower number of death toll, the detonation of 400–500 bombs clearly showed the organizational strength of the group across the country. Later, evidences showed that JMB conducted the attacks only to secure attentions to the leaflets they dispersed on the spot, and a high death toll was not their target. In subsequent years, the JMB killed a number of people including two judges in the southern part of the country. They carried out 26 attacks between September 2001 to December 2005, resulting in 73 deaths and 800 injuries.<sup>38</sup> The violent extremist group also introduced suicide bombing later, which was an unprecedented phenomenon in Bangladesh.

In May 2004, Shaikh Rahman claimed that the outfit had 10,000 *Ehsars* (full-time members), 100,000 *Gayeri Ehsars* (part-time recruits) and a million *Sudhis* (supporters). After the August 2005 bomb-blasts, over 700 were arrested as alleged members of JMB. In another estimate conducted during the Caretaker government (2006-2008), the number of their members was 5000. However, in a confessional statement, Maulana

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<sup>37</sup> Zayadul Ahsan and Pavitra Banavar, “Who Are the Militants?” in *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh*, eds. Riaz, A. and C. Christine Fair (New York: Routledge, 2011), 76

<sup>38</sup> Tipu Sultan, “Salafi ideology behind JMB’s rise,” *Prothom Alo*, 06 August 2016

Saidur claimed that the group had around 400 full-time members and 50,000 supporters across the country in 2010<sup>39</sup>.

In organization's prime time, JMB divided the country in several administrative zones and operated mainly in the areas where Ahle Hadith followers inhabited. Most of the members were collected from Gaibandha, Bogra, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Jaipurhat, Chapainawabganj, Rangpur, Jamalpur, Mymensingh, Kishoreganj, Tangail, Narayanganj and Satkhira. Most of their training centers were set up on the remote areas like *char* lands. JMB has its operation in India too. They opened the organization's branch in Malda in 2002. The members of this body helped JMB to bring arms and ammunitions from India to Bangladesh. Recently, Indian government claimed that JMB has a plan of making permanent bases within 10 kilometers along the India-Bangladesh border in several districts of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura.<sup>40</sup> The organization also has plans of spreading its network in South India with an overarching motive to establish Caliphate in the Indian subcontinent. India proscribed JMB in India, also known as Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Hindustan for committing and promoting acts of terrorism and engaging in radicalization and recruitment of youths for terrorist activities in India.

Almost all of the JMB leaders are from Ahle Hadith creed. The Ahle Hadith are also known as inclining towards Wahabi or Salafi ideology. Only one of the key leaders of JMB, Khaled Saifullah, was from Hanafi sect. The reason behind this could be that Khaled Saifullah came to join JMB from HuJIB, which is a predominantly a group of Hanafi followers. It should be noted here that Ahle Hadith or Salafism are not the creed of majority Muslims in Bangladesh. JMB's founder Abdur Rahman's time spent in Saudi Arabia and his connections with

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<sup>39</sup> Anand Kumar, "JMB Remains the Fountainhead of Terror in Bangladesh," Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, IDSA: Delhi, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> "India Bans JMB", *The Daily Star*, 25 May 2019,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/india-bans-jmb-1748668>

other Salafi leaders could have inspired him to establish a violent Jihadi group with Salafi thought.

The organization's goal is to establish sharia law and take over state power. On August 17, 2005, when JMB detonated 500 home-made bombs at 300 locations, they also spread leaflets under the letterhead of JMB demanding establishment of Islamic rule in Bangladesh and punishing anyone against it.<sup>41</sup> Most part of the leaflet was dedicated to justifying that the existing state, government, and its system, democracy, is flawed and they need to be replaced by Islamic *Hukumat* (rule/order). The leaflet also appealed to the lawmakers to immediately introduce Islamic rule in the country calling the existing democratic system a creation of 'Qafir' (infidels). Vehemently opposing democracy, the leaflet states "*... democracy is the product of evil power. Democracy is the main weapon to establish evil forces in the world. This evil order allows the arrest of Mujahideen who are on Allah's path.*"<sup>42</sup> Besides opposing democracy, they justified need for Jihad in Bangladesh because of India and Western power's 'invasion' and influence over Islam. When Rahman visited Pakistan in 2002, a four-page JMB manifesto was presented to Lashkar-e-Taiba acting Emir Abdus Salam Bhatti, four reasons were mentioned with importance for emphasizing the essentiality of Jihad in Bangladesh; 1. Islamic rule was absent in Bangladesh; 2. Indian hegemonic attitude; 3. Indian activities in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts; and 4. Anti-Islamic activities of western missionaries all over Bangladesh<sup>43</sup>. Later, besides government official and establishments, the jihadi group frequently targeted locally prominent NGOs and NGO-run schools, members of the judiciary and cultural activists.

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<sup>41</sup> "Leaflets ridicule democracy, ask for Islamic rule," *The Daily Star*, 18 August 2005, <http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/08/18/d5081801076.htm>

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Tipu Sultan, "Salafi ideology behind JMB's rise", *Prothom Alo*, 06 August 2016

## *Ansar-al-Islam (AAI)*

AAI emerged as a violent extremist organization in 2007. It is believed that AAI emerged from the shadow of Jamaatul Muslemin (JM). JM had a center called Research Centre for Unity Development (RCUD) in Dhaka from where JM reportedly maintained liaison between local and international Jihadi groups. According to a report of the Bangladesh home ministry's committee on militancy resistance and prevention, published in June 2013, Rezaul Razzak was the Emir of JM. However, Razzak left Bangladesh for Malaysia and lives there now. Sources of government's intelligence agencies claim that members of RCUD and JM met Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen. Before JM was disbanded, its last Emir was Ejaz Hossain alias Kargil. In 2008 he went away to Pakistan and kept contact with the members of his organization from there.

Like JMB, AAI also follows the Salafi school of thought. From their various documents, including online magazines, audio sermons and videos, it is evident that they follow Anwar al-Awlaki and they have close connections with AQIS. Interestingly, the AAI targeted young, well-educated members from well-off families and recruited several of them. However, the organization has not limited its recruitment among only wealthy section of the society, rather they successfully allured both Madrassa educated students from poor or lower middle class and well-off private school educated members. This is an important distinction between JMB and AAI, as the later recruited mainly from the Madrassa educated members. Another significant aspect of AAI is the organization's emphasis on using new communication technologies. Most of the members of AAI are tech-savvy and use Internet for various purposes, including propaganda, communication, fund raising, and attack planning.

Perhaps the most prominent among the leaders of AAI is Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, who popularized Jihad among the AAI members by his numerous sermons widely available on Internet. His sermons and

statements encouraged many aspirant jihadis and violent extremist attacks. Rahmani, the spiritual leader of AAI and *khatib* of a mosque in Basila, Dhaka was arrested in 2013. Rahmani's contribution as an important ideologue came to the surface after students from a private university were arrested for killing blogger Rajib. In his fiery sermons, Rahman urged to kill the atheist bloggers who were 'demeaning Islam and defaming the prophet'. Later, other arrested Jihadis were also confessed that Rahmani's sermon played a vital role in their radicalization phase. Jinnun Shikder and New York subway bomber Akayed Ullah are two among many Jihadis who were influenced by Rahmani.<sup>44</sup> It was known after questioning Rahmani and other AAI members that JM leader Ejaz Hossain was one of the key leaders of AAI. He kept contact and issued instructions to AAI members via Internet from Pakistan.<sup>45</sup>

After the incidents of blogger killings in 2013, AAI operatives became active again in 2015. Meanwhile, in an important development, AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared the AQ branch in the Indian Sub-Continent, known as AQIS, in September 2014 and AAI gave its allegiance to the organization. With the international linkages, AAI became stronger and more active, and conducted several attacks on bloggers, publishers, teachers, and LGBT rights activists. After the arrest of Rahmani, Ejaz Hossain alias Sajjad alias Kargil became the key leader of AAI and kept sending instructions from Pakistan. Ejaz was AAI's operational chief before becoming its new chief. Later, Ejaz was killed in a gunfight in 2015 in Karachi along with other AQ operatives.

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<sup>44</sup> Please see Rashidul Hasan, "Drawn into Militancy by Mufti Jashim," *The Daily Star*, July 21, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/drawn-militancy-mufti-jashim-1256923>; Jeffrey Gettleman, "A Mysterious act of mercy by the subway bombing suspect," *The New York Times*, December 18 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/world/asia/bangladesh-akayed-ullah-subway-bomber.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Tipu Sultan, "IS ideologues come up with extreme atrocities," *Prothom Alo*, August 07, 2016

After the death of Ejaz, Ziaul Huq, a dismissed officer of Bangladesh Army, was made military chief of AAI.

### ***“Islamic State” / Neo-JMB:***

The presence of “Islamic State” in Bangladesh is a highly debated issue. In 2015, the police claimed to have arrested ‘coordinators’, ‘recruiters’ and persons attempting to go 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.<sup>46</sup> However, the government and its law enforcement agencies started to repeatedly deny the existence of Islamic State in Bangladesh, especially after the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in July 2016. Instead of Islamic State, the government officials named the organisation ‘Neo-JMB’ and claimed that it is only a new faction of old JMB. However, the attackers involved in various violent extremism related incidents claimed that they were members of IS. The organization’s online magazine *Dabiq* also affirmed their presence in Bangladesh and published several stories on their involvement in Jihadi attacks in the country. IS came to the limelight following several attacks on minorities; Shia procession, Hindu priests, Christian priests, Buddhist monks and foreign nationals.

In 2015 and 2016, IS or neo-JMB members killed several targets. In only ten months, the outfit carried out 42 attacks; among them IS claimed responsibility for 28 attacks. The most terrible attack was conducted on 1 July 2016 when armed men sieged a restaurant in Dhaka. During the 12-hour carnage, they continued connections with their leaders via digital media and sent pictures of their killings to them. A total of 20 hostages were killed in that attack.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing aspect

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Dhaka café attack ends with 20 hostages among dead,” *The Guardian*, July 03, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/dhaka-bangladesh-restaurant-attack-hostages>.

of this outfit is their ability to attract well-educated, tech-savvy young members from well-off families. When the identities of the Holey Artisan Bakery attackers were revealed, people from the higher middle class and rich strata of the society became worried. Previously, Islamic militancy was thought as a phenomenon only limited in religious institutions and poor strata of the society. Holey Artisan incident questioned that conventional belief as it was revealed later that several well-educated students and highly qualified professionals left Bangladesh to join IS or be involved in IS inspired attacks in Bangladesh. There is a plethora of Jihadi contents available in social media, websites, online videos, and online magazines indicating their involvement in Islamic State. In a video statement from Raqqa, Syria, three Bangladeshi IS fighters called for Jihad. In another video, machete-yielding attackers of Holey Artisan Bakery recorded their statement, which was released after the attack. Also, just before the Kallyanpur shoot-out with the security officials, violent extremists recorded their statement and streamed online. Violent extremists' online magazines; *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, published several reports praising Bangladeshi violent extremists. For example, second issue of *Rumiyah* published a report on five assailants who participated in Holey Artisan Attack<sup>48</sup>. Two issues of *Dabiq* (12 and 14) published reports praising a young Bangladeshi IS fighter in Syria and attackers on Bangladeshi secular bloggers.<sup>49</sup>

### **Section 3: Counterterrorism Efforts in Bangladesh**

#### ***Legal, Policy Initiatives and Institutional Measures***

In recent time, the Bangladesh government took several important steps to curb terrorism in the country. The government has formed a new anti-

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<sup>48</sup> "The Shahuda of the Gulshan Attack", *Rumaiya*, Issue 2, Muharram 1438, p. 8-11.

<sup>49</sup> "Revival of Jihad in Bengal," *Dabiq*, Issue 12, November 18, 2015. Also see *Dabiq*, Issue 14, 1437 Rajab, April 13, 2016.

terrorism unit and two special tribunals and established a new system to ensure more control over religious institutions. Bangladesh's recent counterterrorism efforts have been initiated mainly in response to the Holey Artisan attack, after which security officials conducted several raids and arrested a large number of violent extremists. Even before the Holey Artisan attack, the Bangladesh government pursued multiple strategies to address violent extremism, which include launching counter-narrative programs in community level, forming a 17-member 'National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention' and an eight-member 'National Committee for Intelligence Coordination' in 2009. Also, the government has supplied a prescribed format for the weekly religious sermons (*Khutba*), updated the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 and the Money Laundering Prevention Act 2009 in 2012 and formed the Community Support Mechanism in 2015 with the support of the Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience – GCERF. Also, Bangladesh Bank established its Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) as an effort to comply with international standards of countering money-laundering activities. The key objective of the unit is to prevent and control of potential financing of VE.

Recently, the Bangladesh government also formed a new anti-terrorism unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police in 2017. This specialized unit has a nationwide mandate and around 600 officials, headed by an Additional Inspector General of Police.<sup>50</sup> Previously, in February 2016, Bangladesh established the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit, which has since been carrying out operations outside the capital, Dhaka, under special arrangements.<sup>51</sup> The government set up two anti-terrorism special tribunals on 5 April 2018 through a statutory regulatory order.

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<sup>50</sup>“Bangladesh clears new antiterrorism police unit,” *Bdnews24.com*, 21 September 2017.

<sup>51</sup>“Police gets nationwide anti-terrorism unit,” *The Daily Star*, 21 September 2017.

The tribunals stationed in Dhaka and Chittagong are intended to speed up trials of militancy and terrorism related offences.<sup>52</sup>

### ***International Cooperation***

Bangladesh is a signatory to fourteen UN anti-terrorism initiatives, and the country has strong intelligence cooperation with the USA and India. The US Bureau of Counter-Terrorism Report 2011 described Bangladesh as ‘a good partner’ in the Department of State’s Antiterrorism Assistance program. To boost counter-terrorism efforts in the long term, the United States initiated a four-year program called Bangladesh’s Leaders of Influence (LOI) project. Under the LOI project, at least 20,000 leaders, including approximately 10,000 imams, received training in programs that included democracy and governance. Also, USAID and the US embassy in Dhaka, in cooperation with the Home Ministry of Bangladesh, have been conducting the Community Policing Initiative. This initiative was designed to improve police–civilian relations and reduce the appeal of extremist groups. Along with bilateral cooperation with the United States and India, Bangladesh has been working closely with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for decades. Bangladesh, together with other members, signed the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism in 1987, which came into force in 1988. During the twelfth SAARC summit in 2004, the member states signed the Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. The purpose of this Additional Protocol is to strengthen the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, particularly by criminalizing the provision, collection or acquisition of funds for the purpose of committing terrorist acts and taking further measures to prevent and suppress financing of such acts. The SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk (STOMD) was established in Colombo in

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<sup>52</sup> Shariful Islam and Mohammad Jamil Khan, “Quick disposal of anti-terrorism cases: special tribunals yet to be fully functional,” *The Daily Star*, 26 May 2018.

1995. The objectives of the desk are to collate, analyze and disseminate information on terrorist offences, tactics, strategies and methods. In the third STOMD meeting on June 23, 2010, the member states decided to share information about terrorists on a real-time basis and to exchange data on many related areas such as photographs of terrorists, terrorist incidents and the profile of terrorists.

### ***Enforcement Actions***

Counterterrorism programs in Bangladesh are mainly based on hard power, which includes arresting, prosecuting or killing violent extremists. The Rapid Action Battalion and the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit have played an important role in fighting terrorism, but they have been severely criticized by human rights organizations for their trigger-happy methods, illegal detentions and extrajudicial killings. Recently, the government has introduced some ‘soft’ measures to create awareness and build social resilience against terrorism. One important measure includes the participation of religious leaders in counterterrorism programs. In 2017, around 100,000 clerics issued a fatwa condemning all types of terrorist attack, declaring that terrorist attacks are *haram* (forbidden) in Islam.<sup>53</sup> The Bangladesh government has taken steps to fight against extremist narratives by broadcasting anti-terror messages via posters, leaflets, television commercials, short films, documentaries, radio programs and newspaper advertisements. The main feature of the counter-narrative is that Islam promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence and does not allow terrorism. In an effort to regulate the curriculums of madrasahs, the government introduced a new education system called Darul Arqum in 2018. The Islamic Foundation will monitor this stream of religious education, in which a total of 1,010 madrasahs will be involved.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Mohammad Humayun Kabir and Ashish Banik, “The evaluation of Islamist radicalization and violent extremism in Bangladesh,” *BEI Journal*, (2018): 143.

<sup>54</sup> Shohel Mamun and Ashif Islam Shaon, “How successful will the new madrasa education system be?,” *Dhaka Tribune*, 19 January 2018.

Currently, the government's education boards don't regulate the Qawmi madrasahs, their curricula and governing bodies. For years, some Qawmi madrasahs have been blamed for promoting radical and extremely conservative ideologies.

In recent years, Bangladeshi violent extremists have been using the cyber-sphere for psychological warfare, publicity, propaganda, data mining, recruitment, mobilization, networking, information sharing, planning, coordination and training. To monitor terrorist activity in social media, the government established the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre. In 2016, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police launched an app called 'Hello CT' to seek information about violent extremists from the public. Similarly, the Bangladesh Police and Rapid Action Battalion launched two apps, BD Police Help Line and Report 2 RAB.<sup>55</sup> Most recently, the government passed the Digital Security Act in October 2018. Under the Act, anyone who commits any crime or assists anyone else in committing crimes through cyberspace or any other electronic medium will face a maximum of 14 years in jail, a fine of 2.5 million takas (US\$30,000), or both.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Implementation Deficits***

Allegations of human rights violations have marred counterterrorism initiatives in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's law enforcers' heavy-handed and excessive use of force reportedly involves human rights violations, extrajudicial killings and unlawful detentions.<sup>57</sup> Bangladesh's Digital Security Act 2018 includes several controversial provisions, including allowing police officials to search or arrest anyone without any warrant.

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<sup>55</sup> Md Kamrul Hasan, "In 2016, terror, anti-terror took a cyber turn," *Dhaka Tribune*, 2 January 2018.

<sup>56</sup> "President approves Digital Security Act," *The Daily Star*, 9 October 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Brad Adams, as quoted in Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: elite force tortures, kills detainees," 14 December 2006, and Amnesty International, "Bangladesh: human rights under threat as election tensions intensify," 9 January 2007.

It was passed despite concerns of journalists, media owners and human rights activists that it may restrict freethinking, freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Although the hard-power approach taken by the government has been effective at the operational and tactical levels in the short term, several reports suggest that a comprehensive counter-radicalization policy using a combination of soft and hard power might ensure a sustainable long-term solution to radicalization.<sup>58</sup>

The Bangladesh government has also been criticized for the way it has been tackling the murders of bloggers and for its continuous appeasement of the extremely conservative Islamist group Hefajat-e-Islam. One of the examples of political patronage is to make retrogressive changes to the school text books to undermine secular values and promote fundamentalism allegedly under pressure of HI.<sup>59</sup> Also, Bangladesh's controversial Information and Communications Technology Act makes it difficult for the bloggers, writers and publishers to write or publish anything critical of religion or the current government. According to the Act, people can face several years in jail for 'hurting religious sentiment' and 'publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form' or information that 'prejudices the image of the State or person'.<sup>60</sup> These controversial pieces of legislation reduce freedom of expression and create favourable ground for radicals to thrive and gain traction in society.

## **Recommendations**

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<sup>58</sup> Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI), *Towards developing a counter radicalization policy for Bangladesh*, BEI, Dhaka, June 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Ellen Barry and Julfikar Ali Manik, "To Secular Bangladeshis, Textbook Changes Are a Harbinger;" *The New York Times*, Jan. 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/asia/bangladesh-textbooks-radical-islam.html>

<sup>60</sup>Maaz Hussain, "Bangladesh criticized for slow progress in blogger murders,"VOA, 1 March 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-criticized-for-slow-progress-blogger-murders/3744833.html>.

Most counterterrorism responses in Bangladesh are being carried out on an ad hoc basis, without a long-term national strategy that would ensure effective coordination and information sharing. The Home Ministry drafted a national strategy on counterterrorism in 2012 but did not release it for further refinement and the formation of a consensus among the security agencies. In addition, Bangladesh's counterterrorism measures are often centered in Dhaka, the capital city, without a proper focus on more vulnerable regions, such as the northern and south-eastern districts. Despite the active presence of terrorists in cyberspace, online radicalization is almost unexplored as a research area in Bangladesh. Lack of research, regulation and monitoring has made cyberspace an effective tool for extremists.<sup>61</sup> Areas vulnerable to radicalization, such as prisons and educational institutions, should be taken into particular consideration in deradicalization programs. Imprisoned violent extremists exploit the system to recruit and radicalize new operatives and strengthen the radical beliefs of fellow inmates. Without effective deradicalization programs during and after prison time, in-prison radicalization could turn into a major threat to the counterterrorism effort in Bangladesh. A crucial factor in ensuring long-term counterterrorism success will be the establishment of a consensus among Bangladeshi political parties to refrain from using counterterrorism efforts as a tool to oppress their political opposition.

Violent extremism in Bangladesh is generally male dominated, but women are increasingly becoming both its victims and its perpetrators<sup>62</sup>. A recent study of public awareness and attitudes to Islamist militancy in Bangladesh found that women indicated greater support for the goals of militant groups.<sup>63</sup> Female participation in extremism has increased since the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, and the role of female Bangladeshi

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<sup>61</sup> Iftekharul Bashar, "Violent radicalisation in Bangladesh: a second wave?," *RSIS Commentaries*, S. Rajarathnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Ali Riaz and Saimum Parvez, "Bangladeshi militants: what do we know?," op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> C Christine Fair and Wahid Abdullah, "Islamist militancy in Bangladesh public awareness and attitudes," *Resolve Network*, 25 September 2017.

terrorists has ‘evolved from passive to active and from peripheral to central as suicide bombers and combatants’.<sup>64</sup> Extremist organizations are now targeting women in their recruitment drives, as women arouse less suspicion and can engage in community outreach efforts with better access to families.<sup>65</sup> However, no counterterrorism or deradicalization program specifically targeting female extremists has not been undertaken in Bangladesh. Ignoring the gender aspect of violent extremism could be a fatal weakness in the counterterrorism initiatives because of the increasing number of cases of female radicalization. Experts and law enforcement agencies often trivialize female participants as unwilling assistants to their male partners, but recent cases show that women have their own agency and have motivations similar to those of their male counterparts.

The government of Bangladesh should explore and utilize communal resilience and mitigants to counter terrorism. Fortunately, this region has some factors that make it difficult for violent extremist groups to gain traction in the community. Islam came to the region with different variations and interpretations, most of which have a long history of tolerance and blending with local traditions. Most people in the Muslim community vehemently oppose terrorism and the radical ideology associated with it. The strong position of the major religious institutions and scholars against terrorism, the presence of a vibrant civil society and development NGOs, and the rigorous scrutiny of the law enforcement agencies have made it difficult for violent extremist groups, such as AQIS and IS, to build a strong foothold in the region. Upholding the democratic political system and ensuring credible and fair national elections could mitigate political instability and in turn help to counter violent extremism in Bangladesh.

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<sup>64</sup> Mohsina Nazneen, “Growing trends of female “jihadism” in Bangladesh,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 8(2017):7–11.

<sup>65</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Bombs and ballots: terrorism, political violence, and governance in Bangladesh,” International Peace Institute, 9 February 2010.

## **Concluding Remarks: Caveats and Contributions**

This study investigates trends and patterns of violent extremism in Bangladesh based on the database of Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO). By analyzing the increasing and decreasing tendency of violent extremism with temporal and spatial variations, this study reveals several interesting findings: incidents related to violent extremism witnessed a downward trend in the last three years, Rajshahi is the second most violent extremism-prone city after Dhaka, and JMB, AAI and Neo-JMB are the three most active VE groups in Bangladesh. Also, this study finds a positive correlation between mainstream political instability and increasing incidents of violent extremist by exploring two periods. The study also provides a comprehensive overview of the origin and development of three major actors of violent extremism and their connections with transnational violent extremist groups. In the third and final section, this study analyzes major CVE efforts and their effectiveness in Bangladesh. The project contributed in existing literature on violent extremism in Bangladesh by providing a data-based quantitative analysis. The quantitative analysis is also supported by an in-depth analysis of three most prominent actors of violent extremism in Bangladesh. Hopefully, this analysis will be useful to understand trends of VE in Bangladesh, prevent and counter violent extremism, and to implement CVE and PVE strategies. However, the study only presents an analysis on mainly data collected in last three years, with the exception of data collected from SATP. For a more credible and complete picture of violent extremism, the data need to be collected from a longer span of time with more variations.

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