

# The Islamist Militant Threat in Bangladesh

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## Overview

The July 2, 2016, attack on a bakery in Dhaka's Gulshan diplomatic district in which 20 hostages—including an American, 9 Italians, and 7 Japanese—were killed, marks a recent escalation in Islamist militant attacks in Bangladesh. Two police and six militants were also killed in the incident. This escalation is despite crackdowns by the Awami League Government of Sheik Hasina on both Islamist militants and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami political party. Foreigners, as well as secularists and minorities, are being targeted in these terrorist attacks as Islamist militants pressure Bangladesh to abandon its secular roots in favor of an Islamist fundamentalist national identity.

Overlaid on top of existing political tensions is an apparent rivalry between Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (IS). The two groups, and their supporters, appear to be engaged in a struggle for leadership of the Islamist militant movement in Bangladesh that may be fueling recent attacks. The Islamic State appears to view local unallied militants as rivals. Continued denial by the government that there are increasing links between Bangladesh-based militants and AQIS or the Islamic State may complicate efforts to address the problem. Bangladesh is attractive to jihadists because it is a politically destabilized Muslim majority nation that could offer inroads to both Burma, through the alienated Muslim Rohingya refugee group, or to neighboring India.

## Islamist Militant Groups

[Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh](#) (JMB) gained notoriety for conducting bombings across Bangladesh on August 17, 2005. The group aims to establish the rule of Islam in Bangladesh through armed struggle and opposes democracy. The group also opposes the occupation of Muslim lands by the United States and the United Kingdom. Media reports indicate that JMB may have ties to the Islamic State.

[Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh](#) (HuJI-B) was established in 1992 by returnees from the war in Afghanistan. Its goals include the establishment of Islamic rule in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have

been recruited by HuJI-B through Madrassas and elsewhere. Reportedly, [HuJI-B maintains links with AQIS](#) and the Taliban. HuJI-B may also have ties to Pakistan.

[Ansar al Islam](#), a successor organization to the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), reportedly has connections to [AQIS](#) and has approximately 200 trained members. In January 2016, Singapore arrested and deported 27 Bangladeshis it suspected of plotting attacks in Bangladesh. Singapore believed they were supporters of either the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. Fourteen of those deported were charged by Bangladesh with being members of ABT.

[IS influence in Bangladesh](#) is a relatively new phenomenon. India-based experts have observed that Bangladesh Islamist groups now appear to be in regular contact with the Islamic State but there is no evidence of the Islamic State providing direct material support to Bangladeshi militants. An IS video issued after the Gulshan attack called for more attacks against "crusader nations" and pointed to Bangladesh as part of a bigger battlefield to establish the cross-border caliphate.

[One recent analysis of Islamist militants in Bangladesh](#) focuses on Ansar al-Islam and its linkages to AQIS as well as an unnamed pro-IS faction led by Tamin Chadhury also known as Shaykh Abu Ibrahim Al-Hanif. Others share a similar view that the new wave of militancy in Bangladesh [may be coalescing around Ansar al-Islam and a reformed JMB](#).

### Recent Attacks, the Islamist Threat, and Government Response

Islamists have killed approximately 50 people in Bangladesh over the past 3 years. In February 2015, [Avijit Roy](#), an American secular blogger visiting Bangladesh, was hacked to death with machetes by Islamist militants. Attacks in recent years have targeted secular bloggers, atheists, LGBT advocates, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Shiite, Sufis, and foreigners, and appear to be expanding in scope from attacks on individuals to attacks against larger targets and police. The July 2<sup>nd</sup> attack in Gulshan was followed on July 7<sup>th</sup> by an attack on a police station at Sholakia Eidgah that killed five and wounded over a dozen people. The Gulshan attack was conducted by relatively affluent and educated young men. Some have observed that many of these attacks appear aimed at silencing those who are thought to criticize Islam. Some of the attacks have been claimed by AQIS while others have been claimed by the Islamic State. American-based [Bangladesh expert Ali Riaz](#) has [observed](#) that "ISIS or AQIS won't have to be physically present. Ideologically speaking, they have made inroads." Some observers conclude that these attacks demonstrate that Bangladesh, which had a reputation for a moderate form of Islam that was relatively resilient to Islamist attempts to radicalize the state, is now losing its battle of ideas with Islamism. One source observes that although only approximately 30 Bangladeshis went to fight with the Islamic State in Syria, there are fighters from other nations that have Bangladeshi backgrounds. Some of these have [reportedly played a role by funding attacks in Bangladesh](#).

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan stated that the Gulshan attack was carried out by home-grown radical elements. Other sources blamed the Gulshan attack on JMB, even as the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. This continues the successful strategy of [blaming militant attacks on the opposition](#) Bangladesh National Party or the Jamaat-e-Islami in order to marginalize them. The government [detained 11,000](#), including 176 Islamic Militants, in June 2016. Some accused the government of rounding up opposition supporters under the pretext of fighting terrorism. The recent escalation of terrorist violence may mark a new phase in the ideational struggle for the soul of Bangladesh.

It was announced at the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S.-Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue in June 2016 that Bangladesh will be a participant in the U.S. Counterterrorism Partnership Fund. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stated that "... [Prime Minister] Hasina's continuing efforts to undermine the political opposition in Bangladesh will probably provide openings for transnational terrorist groups to expand their presence in the country." For additional background on Bangladesh, see CRS In Focus IF10214, [Bangladesh](#), by Bruce Vaughn.