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Building a Global Network for Security

Facing New And Old Terrorist Threats and the Need for Broadening CT and PCVE Frameworks

In recent years, new forms of political violence and terrorist threats have emerged, amplified by technological innovations and advancements, while the old ones persist, albeit in an evolved manner. The power of social media and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have fostered an operational environment conducive for the proliferation of conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation, and their intersection with violent extremism. This has resulted, among others, in the emergence of novel challenges such as "mixed" and "salad-bar" ideologies, whose adherents do not conform to one particular set of extremist ideologies. Instead, they pick from across the extremist spectrum, underscoring the "individualised" and "privatised" nature of the contemporary terrorist threat. Indeed, the US' new domestic counterterrorism strategy, primarily focused on Racially Motived Violent Extremism (RMVE) and Militia Violent Extremism (MVE), highlights the need for new and enhanced Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) frameworks.

At the same time, the traditional threat from terrorist violence persists. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021 has once again revived the old concern of transnational jihadism's revival as witnessed by al-Qaeda's formation and rise after the USSR retreated from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, and the emergence of the Islamic State following the US' retreat from Iraq in 2011. In Indonesia, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) jihadist outfit has suffered a series of operational setbacks over the past year, but retains the capacity to revive and adopt a more militant posture. Further, the ongoing pandemic has, in contrasting ways, altered the abilities and incentives of terror-sponsoring states to harbour and support violent extremism and terrorism. Hence, it is prudent and timely to assess how various militant groups and state sponsors of violence are adjusting to evolving geopolitical, geostrategic and technological trends, and their likely consequences.

Against this backdrop, the current issue features different aspects of new and old evolving terrorist threats. The first article by **Abdul Basit** explores the nexus between conspiracy theories and violent extremism enabled by social media platforms and amplified by the coronavirus' outbreak. Though conspiracy theories' role in causing violent extremism is hard to underpin, the former plays an important social, political and functional role. Almost all terrorist groups use conspiracy theories to fuel their narratives and attract recruits without necessarily being conspiracists. According to the author, the likely consequences of this nexus are more detrimental for socially less resilient states. The author proposes critical thinking in digital literacy, pre-bunking and government-tech companies partnerships, mediated by civil society organisations, to curb the proliferation of conspiracy-theories-linked violent extremism.

In the second article, **Farhan Zahid** examines the expected after-effects of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan for jihadist militancy in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The author notes that despite giving counterterrorism guarantees to the US in the Doha Agreement 2020, the Taliban are still closely allied to al-Qaeda and continue to shelter them. According to him, the Taliban are adamant to take over Kabul militarily and are extending a triumphant jihadist narrative that can inspire regional jihadist groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, among others. The author foresees the rise of militant jihadism in Pakistan and Afghanistan due to the US withdrawal and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Next, **V. Arianti** assesses the prospects for the JI's revival, amidst the Indonesian authorities' intensified counter-terrorism campaign over the past year, which has yielded scores of arrests of influential JI leaders and cadres. According to the author, despite these setbacks, JI has continued its recruitment and education activities, and appears organisationally resilient. In this respect, JI's adherence to a hierarchical structure provides the group with a strong agenda-setting capacity as well as the ability to exercise accountability and specialisation across the rank and file. Going forward, the advantages accruing from this organisational resiliency could enable JI to plan and execute attacks of

greater lethality than the more diffused and loosely organised terrorist outfits, such as the pro-Islamic State networks, that operate in Indonesia.

Lastly, **Kalicharan Veera Singam** and **Kyler Ong** argue that the prognosis for State Sponsored Terrorism (SST) in the pandemic era is mixed. On the one hand, SST has been on a prolonged downward trend in the post 9/11 era, due to factors such as the US' military counter-operations and economic pressures, as well as the emergence of transnational jihadist networks to the forefront. According to the authors, SST has likely declined further since the onset of COVID-19, as the devastating socio-economic impact felt globally has affected some states' abilities, motivations and willingness to sponsor terrorist activity. At the same time, the pressure to prop up their flagging economies could spur others to partake in illicit activities, including selling arms to terrorist groups and orchestrating cybercrimes.

Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences and the Implications

Abdul Basit

Synopsis

This paper explores how the intersection of conspiracy theories and violent extremism is producing new forms of terrorism, while making a case for their inclusion in the broader Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) frameworks. Extremist groups across the ideological spectrum have absorbed conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term effects require vigilance.

Introduction

Conspiracy theories (CT), defined as an account of events as the result of actions of a small powerful group, are not new.[1] A culture of CT has existed both in the Western and non-Western world for centuries.[2] However, with the relative decline of militant jihadism, CT, facilitated by social media and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have entered the political mainstream, producing new forms of terrorism and political violence.[3] During the COVID-19 pandemic, CT have impacted extremism of all kinds.[4] Among others, the 2021 Capitol attack by QAnon followers[5], the 2020 Christmas Day bombing near a telecommunication company in Nashville, Tennessee[6] and neo-Luddites' attacks on 5G poles in the West bring into sharp focus how CT are enabling new forms of terrorism.[7]

Violent extremist (VE) groups across the ideological spectrum use CT in their propaganda narratives to lure recruits and validate their Manichean worldviews.[8] For instance, the jihadi-Salafist groups purport a Zionist-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant, anti-Muslim coalition among Western powers.[9] Similarly,

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[1] Scott A. Reid, "Conspiracy Theory," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed on May 25, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspiracy-theory.

[2] Conspiracy theories are not falsifiable, and their committed adherents are hard to reason with. Conspiracy theories do not have to be plausible in order for individuals and groups to commit acts of violence. Taken as powerful coping mechanisms, people are unlikely to abandon them. Conspiracy theories are also hard to leave because their consumers are also their producers. Banning or de-platforming can push their believers further down the path of radicalisation. Both banning and de-platforming are taken as further evidence of their veracity.

[3] Shadi Shahsavari and Pavan Holour et al., "Conspiracy in the time of corona: automatic detection of emerging COVID-19 conspiracy theories in social media and the news," *Journal of Computational Social Science*, Vol. 3, No.2 (October 2020), pp.279-317, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-020-00086-5.

[4] Flora Deverell and Maygane Janin, "COVID-19: far-right violent extremism and tech platform's response," *Foundation Pour L'innovation Politique*, November 2020, https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/covid-19-far-right-violent-extremism-and-tech-plateforms-response/.

[5] "FBI chief says five QAnon conspiracy advocates arrested for Jan 6 U.S. Capitol attack," *Reuters*, April 14, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/fbi-chief-says-five-qanon-conspiracy-advocates-arrested-jan-6-us-capitol-attack-2021-04-14/.

[6] "FBI: Nashville Bomber Driven by Conspiracies, Paranoia," *Voice of America*, March 16, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/usa/fbi-nashville-bomber-driven-conspiracies-paranoia.

[7] Adam Satariano and Davey Alba, "Burning Cell Towers, Out of Baseless Fear They Spread the Virus," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/technology/coronavirus-5g-uk.html.

[8] Raul Rois, "Why Misery Loves Company: The Rise of Conspiracy Theory and Violent Extremism," Policy Brief, *Institute for European Studies*, November 2020, https://www.ies.be/files/IES-Policy-Brief-Raul-Rios.pdf.

[9] Ali Mashuri and Esti Zaduqisti, "We believe in your conspiracy if we distrust you: the role of intergroup distrust in structuring the effect of Islamic identification, competitive victimhood, and group incompatibility on belief in a conspiracy theory," *Typical Psychology*, Vol. 4, e11, (November 2014), pp. 1-14, https://doi.org/10.1017/jtp.2014.11.

the Western far-right movement believes in conspiracies such as "The Great Replacement" and "White Genocide" by immigrant Muslim communities, which can only be addressed by creating a White ethno-state through race war.[10] Likewise, the far-left and anti-establishment groups deem economic progress as the scheming of a handful of powerful elites.[11] Similarly, Hindutva extremists in India target the Muslim community based on myths that the latter is engaged in the so-called love, land and corona jihad.[12]

With rapid societal, political and technological changes unfolding around us, it is important to explore the intersection of CT and VE and its likely consequences. Extremist propaganda when paired with misinformation and CT carries mass appeal, especially if it is linked to prevalent sociopolitical and economic concerns.[13] The European Union's Counter Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, has warned about the emergence of "new forms of terrorism" based on "CT."[14] Thus, how terrorist groups exploit conspiratorialism to lure new recruits, further their extremist ideologies and fuel violence merits attention.

Against this backdrop, this article will examine the intersection of CT and VE, their similarities and differences, as well as their nexus with extremist violence. This study submits that alongside extremist narratives and ideologies,

the role of CT in causing VE should be included in the broader PCVE agenda. Further policy and academic research is needed to unpack the causal role of CT in fueling extremist violence. This is an exploratory paper based on published secondary sources, with the modest aim of drawing the policy and academic community's attention to this aspect of VE.

Context

CT proliferate quickly and gain widespread acceptability during crisis events, such as pandemics, natural disasters, wars and conflicts.[15] It is in this context that the question of CT causing VE should be explored. Additionally, social media platforms have also allowed disparate conspiracy groups and movements to form networks and spawn into a global phenomenon. This networking dovetails with CT to generate new forms of violence in an offline setting.

CT have been recycled in every era by adapting them to prevalent socio-political contexts. In the past, this process took years.[16] Since CT were confined to the margins of the system, self-correction, detachment and moving on for their followers was relatively easier. However, social media has fundamentally altered this dynamic by expediting their spread.[17] Concurrently, the COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated

[10] Mark Scott and Steven Overly, "Conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists around the world seize on the pandemic," *Politico*, May 13, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/12/trans-atlantic-conspiracy-coronavirus-251325.

[11] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-terrorism," *Demos*, August 2010, p.12, https://demosuk.wpengine.com/files/Conspiracy_theories_paper.pdf?1282913891.

[12] Aastha Tyagi and Atreyee Sen, "Love-Jihad (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and ched-chad (sexual harassment): Hindu nationalist discourses and the Ideal/deviant urban citizen in India," *Gender, Place and Culture,* Vol. 27, Issue 1, (2020), pp. 104-125, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2018.1557602; Mohan Rao, "Love Jihad and Demographic Fear," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, (2011), pp. 425-430, https://doi.org/10.1177/097152151101800307; Abhishek Saha, "BJP will tackle love jihad, land jihad: Amit Shah in Assam," *The Indian Express*, March 27, 2018, https://indianexpress.com/elections/amit-shah-love-land-jihad-elections-7246974/.

[13] Ayan Mohammed, Amanda Garry et al., "Extremist Manifestations: Translation of Conspiracy Theories," p 15.

[14] Raffaello Pantucci, "A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator," *CTC Sentinel,* Vol. 13, Issue 8, (August 2020), pp. 8-17, https://ctc.usma.edu/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-gilles-de-kerchove-european-union-eu-counter-terrorism-coordinator/.

[15] Scott A. Reid, "Conspiracy Theory," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

[16] Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations," *Memory Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (2017), pp.323-333, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1750698017701615.

[17] Peter Suciu, "Conspiracy Theories Have Gained Traction Since 9/11 Thanks To Social Media," *Forbes*, September 11, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2020/09/11/conspiracy-theories-have-gained-traction-since-911-thanks-to-social-media/?sh=6e20dce63ddb; Daniel Allington, "Conspiracy Theories, Radicalisation and Digital Media," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology,* February 2021, https://gnet-

the proliferation of conspiratorial narratives in different countries where they are (re)adapted and (re)molded to local milieus.[18] This localisation of conspiracy narratives allows them to gain more currency and traction.

Similarities Between CT and VE

As with VE, CT cut across educational and socio-economic levels. CT and violent extremist have five common characteristics. Both have deep-seated distrust of government institutions, political infrastructure and official/mainstream narratives, i.e., "anomie."[19] Both may be strongly associated with highly structural thinking styles.[20]

CT may fulfill basic needs which violent extremists strive for, such as the need for certainty to overcome perceived powerlessness. CT form a "monological belief system" to develop a clear and structured understanding of the world, by offering oversimplistic explanations of a complex world and hence carry a stronger emotional appeal.[21] Likewise, violent extremists also believe in an "us versus them" world view where a sharp in-group and out-group distinction, punctuated by distrust and polarisation, exists.[22]

Individuals and groups with beliefs in extreme ideologies and CT may be rooted in similar underlying psychology. CT are linked to threat perception, prejudices and negative attitudes about powerful outgroups.[23] These intentions may lead to engagement in violent political action.

In recent years, both CT and violent extremist narratives have proliferated exponentially through various social media and digital platforms. Social media's rise has created a stark increase in easily accessible and manipulated (mis)information. The social media platforms have enabled conspiracy theorists and violent extremists to swiftly reach out to wider audiences. [24] To conspiracy theorists and violent extremists alike, social media platforms offer opportunities to form virtual networks and communities of co-believers.[25] These virtual networks play a pivotal role in forging online communities where CT may facilitate VE.[26]

Differences between CT and VE

However, CT and VE are separate and should not be confused with each other. As outlined above, almost all VE groups have CT as part of their ideological and propaganda narratives, yet they cannot be termed as conspiracy theorists or vice versa, barring few exceptions such as QAnon.

Like VE, CT are linked to the question of identity, quest for significance, the need for belonging and search for a meaning in life. Adlington (2020) maintains that "Conspiracy theories generate strong social and cultural identities both of the self and evil beings plotting self's destruction and enslavement."[27] However, unlike VE, CT may not always lead to violent actions.

research.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GNET-Conspiracy-Theories-Radicalisation-Digital-Media.pdf.

[18] Silvia Mari and Homero Gil de Zúñiga et al, "Conspiracy Theories and Institutional Trust: Examining the Role of Uncertainty Avoidance and Active Social Media Use," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 0. No. 0 (2021), pp.1-20.

[19] Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, "Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: The Contingent Effect of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related morality," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2020), pp.1-2, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288.

[20] ibid.

[21] Ibid, p.3.

[22] Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis and Jolanda Jetten, "A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 10,

(November 2019), pp.1-12, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02560.

[23] Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, "Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: The Contingent Effect of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related morality," p.2.

[24] Matthew Sparkes, "How social media can nudge people into becoming conspiracy theorists," *New Scientist*, January 27, 2021, https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24933193-300-how-social-media-can-nudge-people-into-becoming-conspiracy-theorists/.

[25] Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* Vol. 40, Issue 1, (2017), pp. 77-98, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408.

[26] Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill, p.2.

[27] Daniel Allington, p. 38.

Also, CT may not be the proximate cause of militant violence.[28] There are extremist groups, such as the IRA, who do not believe in CT.[29] Conversely, there are numerous non-violent extremists and moderates who are conspiratorial like the "9-11-truth movement" or the "2012" ecological group.[30] Finally, CT may constitute the necessary but not sufficient conditions for VE. In other words, CT are one among several factors that can lead to VE.[31]

Intersection of CT and VE

In the context of VE, CT play a significant "social" and "functional" role as "multiplier[32]" and "enabler"[33] of radicalisation. Violent extremists employ CT as a "rhetorical device" to advance their ideologies, identify scapegoats and legitimise use of (indiscriminate) violence.[34] Violent extremist groups exploit conspiracies which have strong emotional appeal, such as pedophilia, child abduction, freedom struggles and victimhood narratives, to increase their influence and outreach in their immediate societies.[35]

CT serve as an adhesive force, keeping extreme groups together and pushing them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction. Those grounded in CT, often feel alienated from mainstream society and its values. This estrangement can potentially mark the first step towards radicalisation.[36]

In the context of CT intersection with VE, the following three factors merit consideration.

Cogitative Closure

Cognitive closure is intolerance for ambiguity and the desire to possess an answer.[37] Vulnerable and dispossessed individuals suffering from identity crises struggle to accommodate uncertainties and complex realities.[38] They try to make an oversimplistic sense of a complex world through structured and clear thinking.[39] Moreover, they strive for order and purity of mind in their thinking patterns.[40] In such situations, conspiratorial explanations come in handy by offering cognitive closure in an emotionally appealing manner.

The need for cognitive closure predicts belief in CT and people in need of the former tend to freeze on a conspiratorial explanation when it is in sufficient supply and official narratives are absent.[41] This allows individuals to accept information confirming a general belief without requiring particular contexts to validate that information.[42]

More importantly, individuals needing cognitive closure are more likely to adhere to in-group norms than those with a low need for cognitive closure.[43] Radicalisation most often occurs in in-group settings, and those with a high need of cognitive closure may stay with

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[28] Ibid, p.4.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Kieron O'Hara, David Stevens, "Echo Chambers and Online Radicalism: Assessing the Internet's Complicity in Violent Extremism: The Internet's Complicity in Violent Extremism," *Policy and Internet,* Vol.7, No. 4, (April 2015), pp. 401-422, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.88.
[32] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, Extremism and Counter-terrorism," p.21.
[33] Terje Emberland, "Why conspiracy theories can act as radicalization multipliers of far-right ideals," *Centre for Research on Extremism,* February 4, 2020, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2020/conspiracy-theories-radicalization-multipliers.html.
[34] Daniel Allington, p.5; Ayan Mohammed, Amanda Garry, Rukaya Mohamed and Antoine Andray, "Extremist Manifestations: Translation of Conspiracy Theories," *American Counterterrorism Targeting and Resilience*, November 2020, pp.9-14, https://americanctri.org/wp-

content/uploads/2020/11/Extremist-Manifestation-and-Translation-of-Conspiracy-Theories-Perspective.pdf.
[35] Ibid, p. 23,
[36] Daniel Allington and David Toube, "Conspiracy theories are not a harmless joke: alienated individuals are radicalised." *New Statesman*, (16–22 November 2018), pp.15–16.
[37] Gregory Rousis, "The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations," p.11.
[38] Antonio Chirumbolo and Stefano Livi et al., "Effects of need for closure on creativity in small group interactions," *European Journal of Personality*, Vol. 18, Issue 4, (June 2004), pp.265-278, https://doi.org/10.1002/per.518.
[39] Deigo Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), p.134.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Gregory Rousis, p.11.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, p.52.

highly radicalised in-groups regardless of any moral concerns.[44]

Quest for Significance

The quest for significance foretells engagement in VE through the need for closure. However, the pathways to the quest for significance leading to VE are not linear. Radicalisation, in the context of the quest for significance, is a "matter of degrees."[45] These degrees may be different for different individuals at various stages of their lifecycles. Hence, it is important to differentiate between those who possess radical views and those who actually engage in violent actions. Regardless of the end state, these trajectories are primarily contingent on individual anxieties, socio-political contexts, institutional distrust, and propensity for violence.[46]

Rousis (2018), in the context of significance quest, stresses that "social factors of radicalisation" are more important than ideational or demographic reasons."[47] Rousis, Richard and Wang (2020) note that societies which are immune to violence (like the Middle East, parts of Africa and Asia) or do not condemn particular forms of violence against certain groups, are more prone to violence and extreme attitudes.[48] In such societies, the role of CT in facilitating pathways to violent extremist can be higher.[49] Furthermore, the manner in which grievances and the proposed line of action are framed, determine whether the quest for significance would contribute to VE or not.[50]

Self-sacrifice is a critical component of the significance quest. Individuals who suffer loss of significance are more likely to engage in violence, i.e., self-sacrifice, to regain significance than those who did not experience the loss of significance.[51] For conspiracy theory-prone individuals and groups to take the path of VE, three factors are important: i) grievances; ii) culprit for the grievances; and iii) suitability of violence to address the grievances.[52]

In-Group, Out-Group Distinction

To address in-group grievances, CT define the out-group in adversarial terms. In doing so, not only group boundaries are made prominent but violence is promoted as the only workable option in an existential (life-and-death) struggle.[53] The out-group is demonised and de-humanised by hardening a sense of in-group identity.[54] This potentially increases the chances of violence in most extreme situations against the out-group.

Extremists present violence as the only option against the out-group as they do not believe in peaceful options of resistance and dissent within the system.[55] In fact, peaceful means of change are presented as unworkable.[56]

To present violence as the only recourse to address injustices, extremist groups promote the idea of "vanguardism," i.e., "spectacular acts of defiance to awake people from self-perpetuating slumber."[57] For example, al-Qaeda views itself as the vanguard of global jihadism and the group's 9/11 attack is portrayed by some as an act of vanguardism

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[44] Ibid; Contrarily, individuals who have more tolerance for ambiguity are more likely to explore new identities concerning family, friends and society. Hence, they are less likely to settle on one particular identity without exploring alternative options.
[45] ibid, p.8.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Gregory Rousis, "The Truth is Out There: The Use of Conspiracy Theories by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations," p.6.
[48] Gregory J. Rousis, F. Dan Richard & Dong-Yuan Debbie Wang, "The Truth Is Out There: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory Use by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* (November 2020), pp. 1-19, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1835654.
[49] ibid.
[50] ibid.
[51] Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization

and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism*," Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, Supplement 1, (2014), pp.69-93, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43783789?seq=1; Jeremy Ginges and Crystal Shackleford, "Self-sacrifice for a cause: The role of ideas and beliefs in motivating human conflict," *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 41 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18001693.
[52] Gregory Rousis, p.14.
[53] Daniel Allington, p. 24.
[54] Justin Reedy, John Gastil and Michael Gabbay, "Terrorism and Small Groups: An Analytical Framework for Group Disruption," *Journal of Group Research*, Vol. 44, Issue 6, (2013), pp. 599-629, https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496413501892.
[55] Deigo Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, p. 132.
[56] Ibid, p.133.
[57] Daniel Allington, p.30.

to awaken the *Ummah* (Muslim world) from its slumber.[58]

Finally, in-groups also try to discredit internal dissenting and moderate voices, which offer a different explanation, by portraying them as disinformation agents.[59] A case in point is the incumbent al-Qaeda chief Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri's critique of the militant group's former ideologue Dr Syed al-Fadal who rebutted the group's transnational jihadist narrative from prison in Egypt after 9/11.[60]

Conspiracy-Driven VE

QAnon

QAnon originated as an online conspiracy group in 2017 on the 4chan messaging board and highlights how conspiracy-driven violent incidents are translating into domestic terrorism in the US.[61] QAnon emerged from the Pizzagate conspiracy that high-ranking Democrats were allegedly involved in child sex-trafficking.[62] Adherents of QAnon also believe in a deep-state coup against former US President Donald Trump. QAnon's influence spread quickly after the COVID-19 pandemic, with its followers believing that the coronavirus was staged to divert attention from the issue of child sex-trafficking.[63]

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation classified CT like QAnon and Pizzagate as domestic terrorism threats.[64] A recent study has found that nearly one in five Americans believe in QAnon CT.[65] Likewise, a poll of the

Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core revealed that QAnon beliefs are as popular in the US as some major religions.[66] The poll found that the "American patriots may have to resort to violence" to restore the country's rightful order.[67]

More recently, QAnon has begun using CT as a framework to interpret the Bible which allows its followers to validate their beliefs and unknowingly consume misinformation. This process of combining conspiracy and spirituality is giving birth to a new phenomenon of "conspirituality."[68] Such endeavors provide like-minded individuals with platforms (in an offline setting) to exchange ideas that have the potential to translate into violence.[69]

5G Conspiracy

The launch of 5G technology coincided with the outbreak of the coronavirus, resulting in attacks on 5G masts in different parts of the UK (87 attacks), the Netherlands (30 arson attacks), Belgium, Sweden, Italy, Cyprus, Germany and France. These attacks involving arson and vandalism are based on the myth that the droplets that cause the coronavirus can be spread from 5G poles' electromagnetic waves. Also, 5G adherents blame public figures like Bill Gates and George Soros for allegedly striving to make the global vaccination drive against the coronavirus mandatory. They believe that the vaccinations include tracking chips that could be activated

[58] Colin P. Clarke, "The Future of the Global Jihadist Movement After the Collapse of the Caliphate," *Rand Corporation*, December 11, 2018, https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/12/the-future-of-the-global-jihadist-movement-after-the.html.

[59] Daniel Allington, p. 26.

[60] *Steven Aftergood, "Ideological Conflict Puts Al Qaeda on the Defensive," Federation* of American Scientists, September 22, 2008, https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2008/09/ideological_conflict/.

[61] Amanda Garry, Samantha Walther, Rukaya Rukaya, Ayan Mohammed, "QAnon Conspiracy Theory: Examining Its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalisation," *Journal for Deradicalisation*, No. 26, (Spring 2021), pp. 152-216, https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/437/265.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.10.

[64] Marianne Dodson, "FBI Labels Fringe Conspiracy Theories as Domestic Terrorism Threat," *The Daily Beast*, August 1, 2019,

https://www.thedailybeast.com/fbi-warns-against-qanon-pizzagate-in-report-highlighting-dangers-of-fringe-conspiracy-theories.

[65] Chuck Todd, Mark Murray and Carrie Dann, "Study finds nearly one-in-five Americans believe QAnon conspiracy theories," *CNBC News*, May 27, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/study-finds-nearly-one-five-americans-believe-qanon-conspiracy-theories-n1268722.

[66] Giovanni Russonello, "QAnon Now as Popular in US as Some Major Religions, Poll Suggests," The New York Times, May 27, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/us/politics/qanon-republicans-trump.html.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Egil Asper and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* Vol. 30, Issue 3, (2015), pp.367-382, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339.

[69] Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.11.

by 5G radio waves. Such anti-technology sentiments have been termed by the EU's CT Coordinator de Kerchove as "technophobia" or aversion to new emerging technologies.[70]

Neo-Luddites attacking 5G towers believe that the coronavirus lockdowns announced by different governments was a cover to weaken public resistance to the installation of 5G infrastructure.[71] Similar trends concerning radio waves' negative impact on human health also persisted in Europe in the 1990s.[72]

Militant Jihadism

For decades, CT have been the mainstay of jihadist militancy. For instance, jihadist groups opine that the US-led war on terror is a pretext to invade Muslim countries and that the US and Western nations are waging a "war against Islam." Hence, "Islam is under siege" and requires a fight back by these groups to defend the religion. Such narratives are employed by groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) to justify their extremist ideologies, attract new recruits and legitimise their excessive violence.

By linking individual grievances within the broader jihadist narrative of the Muslims' decline, the likes of al-Qaeda and IS propose militant jihadism as the desired plan of action. In doing so, they provide aggrieved individuals self-worth by allowing them to participate in events of historical importance, i.e., performing a holy duty to glorify Islam.

Soon after the spread of the COVID-19 contagion, al-Qaeda's propagandists exploited it to influence Western audiences by terming it as "divine punishment" against the latter for intervening in Muslim countries[73].

IS' position on COVID-19 changed with the virus' geographical spread. First IS termed it as God's wrath on China for mistreating Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslim community.[74] When the virus spread to Iran, the group labelled it celestial revenge on Shia Muslims for their transgressions and innovations, i.e., *bidah*, in Islam.[75] Finally, when COVID-19 inundated Europe, IS narrative shifted to castigation of the Western nations by God for destroying the group's self-styled territorial Caliphate in Iraq and Syria.[76]

Hindutva Extremism

In India, the Hindutva supporters affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its para-militant wing, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have used CT like love, land and corona jihad to target the Muslim minority, resulting in recurring communal tensions, riots and violence.[77]

The love jihad conspiracy theory opines that Muslim men in India are luring Hindu women into marriages to convert them to Islam as part of the broader war by Muslims against India.[78] Some states in India have passed anti-love jihad and anti-conversion laws to discourage religious conversions, particularly of low-caste Hindus converting to Islam, and inter-faith marriages, particularly of Hindu women with Muslim men.[79] Ironically, the same laws neglect trends like *Ghar Wapsi* (Homecoming) where Muslim families have been forcefully converted to Hinduism by the RSS.

[70] Raffaello Pantucci, "A View From the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator,"
[71] Kelvin Chan, Beatrice Dupuy Arijeta Lajka, "Conspiracy theorists burn 5G towers claiming link to virus," *ABC News,* April 22, 2020, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/conspiracy-theorists-burn-5g-towers-claiming-link-virus-70258811.
[72] Ayan Mohammed and Amanda Garry et al., p.14.
[73] Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups*?" Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, (2020), pp. 263-275, https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603.
[74] Abdul Basit, "COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, Issue 3 (April 2020),

pp. 7-12, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTTA-April-2020.pdf.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] David James Strohi, "Love jihad in India's moral imaginaries: religion, kinship, and citizenship in late liberalism," *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 27, Issue 1 (2019), pp. 27-39, https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1528209.
[78] Charu Gupta, "Allegories of "Love Jihad" and Ghar Vāpasī: Interlocking the Socio-Religious with the Political," *Archiv Orientalni,* Issue 84, No. 2 (2016), pp. 291-316.
[79] Abhishek Saha, "BJP will tackle love jihad, land jihad: Amit Shah in Assam," *The Indian Express*, March 27, 2021, https://indianexpress.com/elections/amit-shah-love-land-jihad-elections-7246974/.

The love jihad is a typical example of the in-group, out-group dynamics, where the Hindu extremists are making the group boundaries clear through the laws barring inter-faith marriages resulting in religious conversions. Several Indian states under the BJP rule have legislated against love jihad, notwithstanding that this conspiratorial notion is unsupported by data.[80] Such laws have lent credence and legitimacy to Hindu extremists' narratives in India. On June 18, in a first, Gujrat police booked a Muslim man under the love jihad law.[81]

Land jihad is allegedly a ploy by Muslims forcing Hindus to sell their native lands by involving a third party, i.e., a broker who makes a purchase offer to the owner.[82] Allegedly, the land is made "uninhabitable by stealing cattle and throwing chopped heads of the cattle in the country yard."[83] This is done to deprive Hindus of their ancestral lands and spread Muslim influence through land ownership.

Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19, RSS adherents blamed the Muslim missionary organisation *Tableeghi Jamaat's* annual gathering for waging the so-called corona jihad against India.[84] The BJP's sudden decision to enforce a lockdown by suspending inter-city travel, among other measures, left several Tableeghi Jamaat members, who came to New Delhi's *Nizam-ud-Din Markaz* from different parts of the country, stranded. The gathering, among others, was the first main vector of the coronavirus in India.[85] Several social media accounts affiliated with the Hindu right-wing spread misinformation

and falsehood dubbing it as corona jihad, while apparently ignoring several other Hindu gatherings and festivals which took place in India during the same time period.[86]

Implications of CT and VE's Intersection

The immediate risk of CT is misinformation and disinformation misleading public opinion. The long-term implications of harnessing conspiracies for continuous violence raise concerns for the PCVE community. These implications are even more acute for states with weak social cohesion. This dynamic is further complicated by the difficulties that states face, particularly when the COVID-19 pandemic has dented public confidence in them, to refute CT. Rather, the more states negate CT, the harder they get entrenched among their followers. Rebuttals are taken as further evidence of CT' veracity. Hence, states should focus on imparting critical thinking in their digital literacy syllabi to students at school and college levels to better equip them to differentiate between verifiable and unverifiable information. A general awareness campaign targeting other age groups is also required.

Unconstrained circulation of CT may produce a climate of confused and undirected radicalism. The emergence of "mixed" [87] and "salad bar ideologies" [88] are manifestations of undetected radicalism. Adherents of these two extremist categories do not fit into orthodox definitions or traditional classifications of terrorism. Rather, they (mostly lone actors and small cells) are inspired by a range of ideological beliefs that

[80] Shemin Joy, "No love jihad case, not defined in law: MHA," *Deccan Herald,* February 4, 2020, https://www.deccanherald.com/national/no-love-jihad-cases-not-defined-in-law-mha-801441.html.
[81] "Gujrat police detain 6 in First FIR Under New Love Jihad Law," *The Print*, June 18, 2021, https://thewire.in/government/gujarat-police-detain-6-in-first-fir-under-new-love-jihad-law.
[82] Karishma Hasnat, "What is 'land jihad', and why BJP has promised a law against it in Assam election manifesto," *The Print,* March 26, 2021, https://theprint.in/politics/what-is-land-jihad-and-why-bjp-has-promised-a-law-against-it-in-assam-election-manifesto/628521/.
[83] ibid.
[84] "BJP's Karnataka MP calls Delhi's Tablighi Jamaat event corona jihad," *The Print,* April 2020, https://theprint.in/politics/bjps-karnataka-mp-calls-delhis-tablighi-jamaat-event-corona-jihad/395511/.

[85] Sahil Mayaram, "Why Flinging the Term Corona Jihad at the Tablighi Jamaat Makes No Sense," *The Wire*, April 2, 2020, https://thewire.in/religion/using-corona-jihad-for-the-tablighi-jamaat-makes-no-sense-besides-being-inflammatory.
[86] Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, "The Indian government's silence over Kumbh Mela crowds during Covid-19 exposes its bias," *Quartz*, April 14, 2021, https://qz.com/india/1996084/modi-governments-silence-over-kumbh-mela-shows-its-bias/.
[87] Matt Dryden, "An Ideological Pick n Mix: The Rise of Mixed Ideologies & their Implications for Terrorist Violence," *Henry Jackson Society*, March 2021, https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/research-brief-ideological/.
[88] "The Counterterrorism Challenge of Salad Bar Ideologies," *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2021, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/.

converge, overlap—and sometimes even contradict—across the extremist eco system. Important factors linked to CT such as anomie, accelerationism, anti-Semitism, extreme misogyny and nihilism, facilitate this ideological convergence.[89] The "remix culture" within the CT may be causing this trend.[90] Moving forward, PCVE programmes, which tend to be focused on countering extremist narratives, should incorporate strategies against CT.

The 5G attacks, discussed above, are only one manifestation of new forms of political violence related to emerging technologies. Similar concerns also exist regarding automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics.[91] People fear that they will lose their jobs, if not equipped with requisite skillsets and knowledge, of automation and AI.[92] On the other hand, paradoxically, the greater penetration of robotic and drone technology would empower new social groups to carry out violence more easily.[93] Arguably, one explosive-laden drone is the equivalent of one suicide bomber.[94] Such security concerns need to be factored in while devising future PCVE policies.

Another long-term effect of this trend could be that more extreme and violent groups could forge alliances based on shared conspiracies and goals. A case in point is the National-Anarchist Movement, the Base and other far-right overtures to al-Qaeda.[95]

Finally, these trends may create a wider pool of alienated, confused and vulnerable people for the extremist groups to lure and recruit.

Conclusion

This article, keeping in view emerging security threats, has shone light on the potential risks related to the intersection of CT and VE. While establishing a direct causal-link between CT and VE is difficult, the former's role as enabler, multiplier and facilitator of the latter is undeniable. Further research is needed in this direction to develop a deeper and nuanced understanding of the links between CT and VE.

A public-private partnership of governments and tech companies mediated by the civil society organisations is also needed to free social media spaces from such malaise without compromising on freedom of speech. The role of civil society is critical in pushing back against CT. The inherent inability of states in neutralising conspiracies and reluctance of big-tech companies to remove materials deemed as harmful place civil society in an important bridging role. Research has shown that pre-bunking, i.e., stopping the spread of conspiracies before they proliferate, compared to debunking has proved more successful against the spread of CT. Policy frameworks and strategies are needed to halt the spread of CT on social media to minimise their harmful impact. CT are here to stay, and they are developing into formidable security challenges for states and societies alike. Keeping this in view, including CT, misinformation and disinformation in future PCVE strategies, alongside countering extremist narratives, is much needed.

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[89] "The Counterterrorism Challenge of Salad Bar Ideologies," *The Soufan Centre*, March 29, 2021, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-march-29/.

[90] "The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives," *Radicalisation Awareness Network,* November 24-25, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_c-n_concl_pap_impact_consp_narr_on_vrwe_vlwe_24-25_112021_en.pdf.

[91] Audrey Kruth Cronin, *Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.206-207.

[92] Abdul Basit, "How terrorist and extremist groups are exploiting coronavirus cracks in society," *South China Morning Post*, May 1, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3082368/how-terrorist-and-extremist-groups-are-exploiting-covid-19-cracks.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, p.5.

Implications of the US Forces' Withdrawal on the Af-Pak Jihadist Landscape

Farhan Zahid

Synopsis

This article assesses the security concerns emanating from the US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021 and its overall impact on the security landscape of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Further, it explores the Taliban-Al-Qaeda nexus, their rivalry with the Islamic State's local affiliates in the two countries and the overall impact of these developments on future trends of terrorism and militancy in the region.

Introduction

The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and its consequences on jihadist militancy have been the most discussed issues among the academic and policy community since 2011, when the former President Barack Obama announced the schedule of US forces' gradual exit (to be started in 2014) from Afghanistan.[1] Despite his election promises, President Donald Trump was initially not in favour of leaving Afghanistan.[2] In fact, Trump's Afghanistan-South Asia strategy brushed aside any

schedule as such timetables were seen as to only boost the morale of the Afghan Taliban. However, at a later stage he aimed for zero-troop presence in Afghanistan and issued policy statements for a complete withdrawal by May 2021.[3] The US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad[4] signed a deal with the Afghan Taliban in Feb 2020 in Qatar to signal an end to the US military involvement in Afghanistan.[5]

The Biden administration is now contemplating the complete withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021[6]. A leaked document[7] earlier this year indicated that the US has forced the Afghan government to discuss matters with the Afghan Taliban and brought them to the negotiating table. The fluctuating American policies during the last 15 years indicate the weak resolve of successive US administrations in leaving Afghanistan.

Since 2018, lengthy negotiations have been conducted in Doha, Qatar between the US and the Afghan Taliban; other countries like

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[1] Peter Baker, "How Obama came to plan for 'surge' in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2009,
https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html.

[2] Jacob Pramuk, "What Trump said about Afghanistan before he became president," *CNBC*, August 21, 2017,
https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/21/what-trump-said-about-afghanistan-before-he-became-president.html.

[3] "United States down to 2500 troops in Afghanistan, as ordered by Donald Trump," *Economic Times*, January 15, 2021,
https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/united-states-down-to-2500-troops-in-afghanistan-as-ordered-by-donald-trump/articleshow/80282104.cms?from=mdr.

[4] "Zalmay Khalilzad appointed as US Special Advisor to Afghanistan", *NPR News*, September 5, 2018,
https://www.npr.org/2018/09/05/641094135/zalmay-khalilzad-appointed-as-u-s-special-adviser-to-afghanistan.

[5] Sarah Dadouch, Susannah George and Dan Lamothe, "US signs peace deal with Taliban agreeing to full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, February 29, 2020,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-us-taliban-peace-deal-signing/2020/02/29/b952fb04-5a67-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html.

[6] Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden will withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8_story.html.

[7] Alex Ward, "The Biden administration's leaked Afghanistan peace plan, explained," *VOX News*, March 8, 2021,
https://www.vox.com/2021/3/8/22319420/afghanistan-blinken-letter-leak-peace-plan.

Turkey[8], Russia[9] and China[10] have also hosted some negotiation summits. Only Pakistan demanded a gradual withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan keeping in view its own problem of jihadist militancy.[11] One common factor that emerges after all these on-off talks is that the Afghan Taliban are not sincere in keeping their commitments, whether it is ousting Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan or reconciling with the Afghan government after the withdrawal of the US forces. The Afghan Taliban are adamant on the complete US exit[12] but their post-withdrawal intentions for peace are ambiguous. The Taliban seemingly are making an all-out effort to capture Afghanistan by force following the US departure from the country. However, given their lack of numerical strength and conventional military muscle, they are unlikely to succeed but at least the current level of rigidity, i.e., to impose a military solution instead of reaching a politically negotiated settlement with Kabul, is indicative of their resolve.

Against this backdrop, this article assesses the major security concerns, particularly the future trends of militancy, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its overall impact on the security landscape of the Af-Pak region. The study has consulted both primary and secondary sources, such as think-tank reports, newspapers and books published since the commencement of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) in 2001.

The first part of this study looks at the Taliban-al-Qaeda relations, while the subsequent section examines the role of Islamic State of Khorasan concerning the militant landscape. The final part deals with the impact of the US withdrawal on Pakistan as well as future security projections.

The Taliban-Al-Qaeda Nexus

The various US administrations' focus since the commencement of the GWOT in October 2001, has been to deny space and sanctuaries to al-Qaeda and jihadist groups affiliated with it in Afghanistan.[13] Scores of jihadist groups had found safe havens in Afghanistan and received training at al-Qaeda-run camps in Afghanistan during the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001). The US intervention in Afghanistan has been quite successful vis-à-vis al-Qaeda's presence in the country as the global terrorist entity has now lost most of its leadership and cadres. The organisational structure of al-Qaeda is in tatters. Despite al-Qaeda's global presence and emergence of new affiliates and franchises across the world, the group has been weakened considerably in Afghanistan due to consecutive US counter terrorism measures in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ostensibly, the major US concerns related to al-Qaeda seem to have been resolved, such as its ability to carry out terrorist attacks against the US homeland. Yet, al-Qaeda still exists in Afghanistan and continues to survive under the protection of the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban have time and again claimed to have shunned supporting and cooperating with al-Qaeda, but the ground evidence points to the continued cooperation and affiliation between the two groups.[14] The killings of several high-profile al-Qaeda leaders by the US and the Afghan security forces in the Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan confirms this nexus. A case in point is the AQIS chief Asim Umar's killing in 2019 in the joint US- Afghan forces' raid in Helmand

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[8] "Turkey to host10-day Afghan peace talks from April 24," *Al-Jazeera News*, April 13, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/13/turkey-to-host-10-day-afghan-taliban-peace-talks-from-april-24.

[9] "Russia hosts Afghan peace meet," *The Hindu*, March 18, 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/russia-hosts-afghan-peace-meet/article34102137.ece.

[10] Ayaz Gul, "China offers to host Afghan peace talks," *VOA News*, May 18, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/china-offers-host-afghan-peace-talks.

[11] "Pakistan calls for responsible troop withdrawal following US president Biden's announcement," *Dawn*, April 15, 2021,

https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/820643-pakistan-calls-for-responsible-troop-withdrawal-following-us-president-bidens-announcement.

[12] "Has the US just handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban?" *DW*, April 14, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/us-military-afghanistan-taliban/a-57197531.

[13] "Afghan Conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war," *BBC News*, February 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51689443.

[14] "UN report claims Taliban and Al-Qaeda remain closely aligned, no changes," *Business Standard*, June 5, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/un-report-claims-taliban-and-al-qaeda-remain-closely-aligned-no-changes-121060500089_1.html.

province, along with his second in command Abu Rehan al-Bakistani.[15]

The US concerns regarding the resurgence of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups are thus well-founded if the Taliban get an ascendant position in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal from the country. In this regard, the Taliban's stance towards al-Qaeda vis-à-vis the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), the Islamic State's official affiliate for Afghanistan, is instructive. The Taliban have never condemned al-Qaeda, nor have they mentioned in straight terms about wiping out al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In fact, they have praised al-Qaeda regularly; for example, the AQIS magazine Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad (now Nawa-e-Ghazwa-e-Hind after the US-Taliban peace accord of February 2020) has glorified Taliban military activities in its monthly issues.[16] The al-Qaeda leadership has also repeatedly pledged allegiance to successive Afghan Taliban leaders since 1999, making al-Qaeda technically part and parcel of the broader Afghan Taliban movement. On the other hand, the Taliban have a clear policy regarding the ISK, which it deems as its sworn enemy. Since ISK's emergence in February 2015, the Taliban have been vehemently fighting to deny it space in Afghanistan. The Taliban constituted a special cell which drove out ISK fighters from northern provinces of Afghanistan such as Jawzjan.[17]

Hence, the Biden administration's policy decision for a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021 would likely create much havoc in Afghanistan and the region. The state of Afghanistan would appear to experience more violence in years to come.

The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) Conundrum

Another security concern for the US is ISK's presence in Afghanistan and its growing terrorist activities. This would be a major hurdle for Afghanistan's stability in the post-withdrawal scenario as ISK is a shared concern of the Afghan government and the Taliban, even as the latter two continue their struggle against each other for control of Afghanistan in the post-US withdrawal scenario. Infighting between Afghan Taliban and Afghan government forces would only allow ISK to further spread its tentacles. Despite operations by the Afghan national security forces, the Taliban and the US forces' intelligence-based operations and drone strikes, ISK has maintained its presence in southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan and continues to perpetrate terrorist attacks in urban Afghanistan. The ISK hideouts are mostly located in south-eastern Afghanistan, but its network of operatives is all over Afghanistan and some areas of Pakistan. In the last few years, a number of ISK cells, known as the Islamic State of Pakistan (ISP), has been busted in Pakistan[18]. In 2019, IS Central announced the Walayat-e-Pakistan with its Emir being a former TTP commander Dawood Mehsud[19].

In the absence of an effective offensive strategy, as is being employed by the US forces under Operation Resolute Support, there is a strong possibility that ISK's network would rapidly grow in Afghanistan.[20] Fragile states with weak governance and dilapidated writ become favorite sanctuaries for terrorist organisations.[21] Ungoverned territories are ripe to become terrorist hideouts such as the

[15] "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia chief killed in Afghanistan," *BBC News*, October 8, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353.

[16] "After Afghan peace deal, Al-Qaeda's India affiliate shift focus to Kashmir; to rename magazine 'Nawai Ghazwa-e-Hind," *Swarajya*, March 22, 2020, https://swarajyamag.com/insta/after-afghan-peace-deal-al-qaedas-india-affiliate-shifts-focus-to-kashmir-to-rename-magazine-nawai-ghazwa-e-hind.

[17] Daniel Brown, "The Taliban reportedly just beat ISIS so badly that more than 200 fighters surrendered to the Afghan government," *Business Insider*, April 1, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/taliban-beat-isis-so-badly-200-fighters-surrendered-afghan-government-2018-8.

[18] Discussions with security officials of Pakistani police in Islamabad on May 24, 2021.

[19] Farhan Zahid, "Two new IS Walayat in South Asia: IS reinvigorates itself in Pakistan and India," *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown, Vo,17, Issue 13, July 3, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/two-new-is-wilayat-in-south-asia-is-reinvigorates-itself-in-pakistan-and-india/.

[20] Abdul Basit, "The US-Taliban Deal and Expected US Exit from Afghanistan: Impact on South Asian Militant Landscape," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (June 2002), pp. 8-14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918076?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[21] Aleksandar Pašagić, Failed States and Terrorism: Justifiability of Transnational Interventions from a Counterterrorism Perspective," *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 14, No. 3 (June 2020), pp.19-28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918297?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

current situation in failed states like Somalia, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Mozambique. An unstable post-withdrawal Afghanistan could be exploited by IS global affiliates seeking the next jihad or safe haven. Hence, an effective offensive strategy would need to be put in place, otherwise Afghanistan would likely face cross-border incursions as many Islamist militants shuttle through the porous borders of Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics.

Impact on Pakistani Jihadist Groups

It is important to assess the impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the tactical capacities of sectarian and jihadist groups operating in Pakistan such as ISP, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), among others. After the commencement of military operations against TTP and its various factions in the Pak-Afghan border areas, tens of thousands of TTP militants sought refuge in southeastern Afghanistan from where they now launch terrorist operations in Pakistan. A good number of them have also joined ISK and are now perpetrating terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The influx of TTP in Afghanistan had given rise to ISK recruitment, followed by its growing network and terrorist attacks. In a sense, it is safe to assume that the US withdrawal would have significant effects on the activities of ISK and terrorist organisations like TTP and LeJ.

The anti-Shia militant group LeJ is one of the most resilient terrorist organisations in Pakistan. The Pakistani security forces had launched a number of operations against the LeJ prior to GWOT in the 1990s but the terrorist entity managed to survive. After the launch of GWOT in 2001, the organisation became one of the most effective apparatus of al-Qaeda, and helped the latter in launching terrorist attacks in mainland Pakistan. By the late 1990s, the security forces' crackdown against LeJ was in full swing but the violent sectarian outfit shifted all of its resources to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, where it found safe havens with the blessings of Afghan Taliban. The Taliban were sympathetic to LeJ's cause and its violent activities against

the Shia community in Pakistan, and despite several requests through diplomatic channels, the Afghan Taliban refused to hand over LeJ leadership to Pakistani authorities. LeJ militants also fought by the side of Afghan Taliban against their foes, the Northern Alliance, and perpetrated terrorist attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[22]

At present, a number of LeJ cells are still operating in Pakistan. With the likelihood of al-Qaeda making a comeback after the US forces' withdrawal, the LeJ has the potential to spread its tentacles in Pakistan under al-Qaeda's strategic guidance. This would have far reaching effects on Pakistan's security landscape. The revival of al-Qaeda and LeJ would pave the way for a worsening security situation in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda, as it seems, would turn out to be the beneficiary amid this situation. LeJ's potential growth in Pakistan benefits other Afghan-based radical groups too, such as the TTP. LeJ's large pool of Deobandi madrasas would facilitate TTP's recruitment given the two organisations are ideological brethren. Both belong to the Deobandi school of thought and their inter-organisational cooperation since 9/11 is well-established and documented.

Unlike LeJ, the TTP is a fairly newer entry in the Pakistani jihadi landscape as the terrorist organisation came into being as a result of an alliance of different large and small factions of Pashtun tribes fighting against the Pakistani security forces in tribal districts of Pakistan in August 2007. Not a monolithic organisation, the TTP is a conglomerate of jihadist groups including some cells of LeJ, Harkal-ul-Mujahedeen, Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Omar, and others. Despite its more recent origins, the TTP has turned out to be the most lethal of all Pakistani jihadist groups, having perpetrated countless terrorist attacks in Pakistan.

During last two years the TTP claimed terrorist attacks have surged in Pakistan, depicting that the TTP is regrouping while being based in Afghanistan and increasing its ability to strike terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. Amid the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, this situation would likely further deteriorate.

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[22] Discussions with Mohammad Amir Rana, Director of Pakistan Peace Institute, in Islamabad on May 24, 2020

Conclusion

Departure of US forces from this two-decade long-war has remained a burning question at least since the 2009 surge of US forces in the Afghan theatre during the Obama administration. Afghanistan as a war-torn country would definitely face serious security challenges after the withdrawal of US forces and infighting, amongst already warring factions, would increase. Most importantly, if the US air force also evacuates its apparatus and squadrons, then the Afghan forces would likely lose air superiority against the Taliban.

Despite its weak writ, the Afghan government has hitherto managed to function, and the Taliban continue to face stiff resistance in capturing the Afghan urban centres. However, the government would face additional problems if Northern Alliance-type militias pop up and challenge the writ of the Afghan state. The rise of Northern Alliance-like militias is not impossible. Recently, the son of slain former Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masoud vowed to re-establish the Northern Alliance to ward off any danger of the takeover of the country by Afghan Taliban, following the US exit and other accompanying security predicaments. This would add fuel to the fire

as an already dilapidated Afghan government would not likely be in a strong position to curb a number of violent non-state actors simultaneously.

The operational void as a result of the US withdrawal, coupled with the inability of the Afghan government to hold its own against the Afghan Taliban and other internal competing forces, will likely further deteriorate Afghanistan's already weak security. Against this backdrop, it is also assessed that the US withdrawal would lead to more violence in Afghanistan and its spread in neighboring Pakistan. The withdrawal would also boost the morale of jihadist groups in South Asia, as they would definitely consider it as their great victory.

About the author

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Jemaah Islamiyah's Hierarchical Structure: Security Implications for Indonesia

V. Arianti

Synopsis

Despite the arrest of more than 100 Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members in the last two years, the militant organisation appears resilient, partly due to its hierarchical organisational structure. Such a structure has enabled JI to have a strong agenda-setting capacity and exercise accountability and specialisation within its hierarchy. Going forward, the advantages accruing from this structure may enable JI to conduct more lethal attacks compared to non-hierarchical terrorist groups, such as the pro-Islamic State (IS) outfits operating in Indonesia.

Introduction

Militant group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has suffered its worst setback since its longest serving *amir* (leader) and key administrators were arrested in mid-2019. The Indonesian authorities' counter terrorist operation against JI has since intensified, with the arrest of 63 JI members in 2020, and a further 71 others apprehended in the first half of this year.[1] Nevertheless, experts on terrorism in Indonesia observe that JI, while significantly weakened following the surge in arrests, has continued its recruitment and education activities, and retains the capacity to revive again.[2]

JI has been a hierarchical group since its inception in 1993, despite experiencing deep splintering, mainly instigated by internal disagreements over conducting attacks in Indonesia.[3] Over the decades, JI has survived, partly by modifying its organisational structure three times, all while retaining its hierarchical character. The first structure was a territorial based model. It consisted of four regions: *Mantiqi* I (covering Singapore, Malaysia, and Southern Thailand); *Mantiqi* II (most parts of Indonesia); *Mantiqi* III [Sulawesi Island of Indonesia, East Malaysia (Sabah) and the Southern Philippines]; and *Mantiqi* IV (Papua and Australia).[4] The second structure evolved around 2006, partly in response to a series of arrests against JI administrators. Then later, JI became an Indonesia-centric organisation, with a strong base in Java. This structure was designed to serve more functional purposes rather than territorial ones, and consisted of economics, education, information, propaganda, and military divisions.[5]

Analysing court documents relating to several key JI leaders arrested in May 2019,[6] this

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[1] "Indonesian Police Snare 50 Jemaah Islamiyah Suspects in Past Month", *BenarNews*, March 24, 2021, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/id-terrorism-jemaah-03242021124134.html; "The Decline of ISIS in Indonesia and the Emergence of New Cells", *IPAC* Report No. 69, January 21, 2021; "BNPT: 216 Orang Ditangkap terkait Terorisme Sejak Awal 2021", *Media Indonesia*, May 27, 2021, https://mediaindonesia.com/politik-dan-hukum/407707/bnpt-216-orang-ditangkap-terkait-terorisme-sejak-awal-2021.
[2] "23 Terduga Teroris JI Dipindahkan ke Jakarta dari Lampung", *Benarnews*, December 16, 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/23-terduga-teroris-ji-dipindahkan-ke-jakarta-12162020144046.html; Noor Huda Ismail, "Menerka Metamorfosis Jamaah Islamiyah", *Kompas*, January

11, 2021; "Analis: Walaupun Tidak Aktif Jemaah Islamiyah Tetap Dilihat Sebagai Ancaman", *Benar News*, November 17, 2021, https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/ji-terorisme-11172020181257.html.
[3] Solahudin, *NII Sampai JI: Salafy Jihadisme di Indonesia* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu), p. 256-264.
[4] "Jemaah Islamiyah in South East Asia: Damaged But Still Dangerous", *International Crisis Group*, ICG Asia Report No. 63, August 26, 2003.
[5] "Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's Current Status". *International Crisis Group*, Asia Briefing No. 63, May 3, 2007.
[6] See for instance, Verdicts of Para Wijayanto, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 308/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt. Tim.; Verdict of Sujadi Abdurrohman, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 307/Pid.Sus/2020/PN. Jkt. Tim; Agus Supanoto,

article argues that one of the key factors contributing to JI's continued resilience is its hierarchical organisational structure, developed under the leadership of Para Wijayanto, who was appointed the group's *amir* in 2009. In adopting the framework of political scientists Lindsay Heger, Danielle Jung, and Wendy H. Wong, who have assessed how group structures impact the character of violence,[7] this article examines how JI's hierarchy – analysed using three variables, namely, agenda-setting capacity, accountability, and specialisation – will likely impact the group's resilience as well as the attendant security implications for Indonesia.

Agenda Setting Capacity: Para's Leadership

JI's Consolidation

As argued by Lindsay Heger, et. al, hierarchical organisations have a strong agenda-setting capacity, established through direct and static lines of command and information dissemination. Rebuilding JI following its leadership decapitation after waves of arrests against hundreds of JI personnel and key leaders[8], Para had prioritised internal consolidation.[9] As predicted by Chalk, Rabasa, Rosenau, and Piggott in 2009, the Indonesian government's series of crackdowns on JI since 2002, forced the group to focus heavily on reconsolidation.[10]

Para emerged as a single agenda-setter and played a central role in JI's consolidation, mainly by establishing command and information dissemination structures with adequate hierarchical channels. Since

assuming the leadership, he revived JI's hierarchy by creating stronger functional divisions, compared to the group's previous organisational structures. Para instructed that each division shall have clearly delineated areas of responsibility, that did not overlap. Division leaders were also required to synchronise their tasks with other division counterparts to avoid frictions in the field. JI divisions, among others, are *dakwah* (religious outreach); education (Forum Komunikasi Pondok Pesantren/FKPP, overseeing JI's Islamic boarding schools/pesantren); *tahjiz* (logistics)[11]; and *Al Amnu wal Istikhbaro*/ALWI (Security and Intelligence). In 2016, Para expanded JI's functional structure, adding new roles – such as deputies who assisted him in various functions – and units. There were also other units set up, whose leaders were accountable to Para, such as KOSIN (*Koordinasi dan Sinkronisasi*/Coordination and Synchronisation). Aimed at resolving disputes among JI personnel at the regional level, the formation of KOSIN highlights JI's consolidation effort through mediating internal conflicts.

The Agenda: *Tamkin* Strategy

Under the leadership of Para, JI remained committed to the establishment of an Islamic state through *dakwah* (religious outreach) and jihad, as outlined by PUPJI, the organisational guideline for senior JI members[12]. As the *amir* – with a degree of autonomy to interpret and apply PUPJI to direct the organisation[13] – Para formulated a more detailed guideline, that is, *Strategi Tamkin* (*tamkin* strategy), referring to a strategy that emphasises

East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 62/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt. Tim; Verdict of Budi Trikaryanto alias Haidar, East Jakarta District Court, 2020, No. 306/Pid.Sus/2020/PN Jkt. Tim.

[7] Lindsay Heger, Danielle Jung, Wendy H. Wong, "Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24: 5 (2012), pp. 743-768.

[8] Amy Chew, "'US Still the Target': Indonesia's Arrest of Jemaah Islamiah Terrorist Leader Reveals Thousands of Recruits", *South China Morning Post*, December 12, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3113648/us-still-target-indonesias-arrest-jemaah-islamiah-terrorist.

[9] Following the arrest of Para, JI reportedly set up a committee comprising senior figures in the group to elect a new leader. The leader of the committee, Arif Siswanto, was arrested in November 2020. See: "Senior Jemaah Islamiyah Figure in Indonesian

Custody", *Benar News*, December 11 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/jemaah-islamiyah-senior-suspect-12112020140448.html.

[10] Peter Chalk, Angel Rabasa, William Rosenau, and Leanne Piggott, *The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009) in Gillian S. Oak, "Jemaah Islamiyah's Fifth Phase: The Many Faces of a Terrorist Group", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33: 11, pp. 989-1018.

[11] JI's first territorial structure, which was named *Mantiqi*, was merged under the Logistics Division and renamed *Bithonah*, covering Indonesia.

[12] Elena Pavlova, "From Counter-Society to Counter State: Jemaah Islamiyah According to PUPJI", *RSIS Working Paper* No. 117, November 14, 2006.

[13] Gillian S. Oak, Op.Cit.

methodical acquisition and consolidation of influence over territory and to build support.[14]

The *tamkin* strategy strengthens the *dakwah* core of JI – building up a sufficient base of support[15] – in addition to jihad. Named *tamkin siyasi* (political consolidation), it aims to cultivate the sympathy of Indonesian Muslims by winning their hearts and minds. In addition to long-standing JI programmes of *dakwah* through *dauroh* (sermons/religious study sessions) and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), *tamkin siyasi* introduced the *naqib* (leader) programme. The aim of the *naqib* programme is to court community leaders' sympathy for the JI cause. *Tamkin siyasi* thus justifies JI's active involvement in political mass protests, such as the 212 rallies against then Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (also known as Ahok) in 2016, which also involved allying with other like-minded Islamist groups[16]. Such participation in democracy – perceived by the jihadists as an un-Islamic system as it is man-made, and not derived from God – was only sanctioned during Para's leadership.[17] At the same time, *tamkin siyasi* complemented JI's *tamkin askari* (military consolidation), a strategy aimed towards implementing the utopian goals of expanding territory and guarding the *dakwah*, to further liberate Muslim countries oppressed by the so-called infidels. It is manifested by JI's military preparation since 2012, including the construction of underground bunkers that would be used to store weapons and ammunition, which also serve as hiding places upon conducting attacks; setting up home-made weapon factories; and training cadres prior to deployment to Syria.[18]

Counterintelligence Strategy

JI's consolidation and implementation of the *tamkin* strategy was undergirded by its counterintelligence strategy named TASTOS, an abbreviation of *total amniah sistem total solution* (total security system and total solution). TASTOS was initiated due to the arrest of multiple JI leaders and personnel, especially since the 2002 Bali Bombings. A counterintelligence handbook written by Para, TASTOS was approved by the then JI leadership, when Zarkasih assumed the *amir* position from 2005 to 2007. TASTOS identified eight security problems and their solutions, providing guidelines for JI personnel to conduct their activities safely and evade arrest. One of them was the implementation of *selter*, an abbreviation of *sel terputus* (disconnected cells), that defines the communication chain within and across JI's organisational hierarchy. A key element was that personnel at different hierarchical levels and divisions/units shall not be in direct contact with one another and had to communicate via couriers. Also, members of a certain division should not be aware of the programmes of other JI divisions. At the central leadership level, only administrators whose position within JI was directly below Para, could meet the latter personally, as arranged by his courier.

JI's agenda-setting capacity was strengthened by the institutionalisation of TASTOS within the group, when JI obliged its members to study and practise TASTOS. JI cadres in *sasana* (JI's term for their centralised training venue prior to the cadres' deployment to Syria), for instance, received routine briefings on TASTOS. Without the implementation of TASTOS over the last decade, JI's leadership could arguably have been decimated earlier. Furthermore, it is possible that most of the JI personnel who currently remain free, will continue to practise TASTOS to evade arrest, thus contributing to JI's resilience.[19]

Accountability

In hierarchies, accountability is illustrated when agents receive clear instructions from their principals.[20] Para, assisted by the JI treasurer and secretary and, since 2016, also

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[14] Definition of Tamkin Strategy was provided by Nur Aziemah Azman, Associate Research Fellow, ICPVTR.

[15] Julie Chernov Hwang, "Dakwah Before Jihad: Understanding the Behaviour of Jemaah Islamiyah", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41: 1 (2019), pp. 14-34.

[16] Julie Chernov Hwang, Ibid.

[17] "The Re-Emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah", *Institute for Policy Analysis and Conflict*, IPAC Report No. 36, 27 April 2017.

[18] V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, "Jemaah Islamiyah on the Brink of Splintering", *Indonesia at Melbourne*, November 2, 2020, https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/jemaah-islamiyah-on-the-brink-of-splintering/.

[19] "Jemaah Islamiyah's Counterintelligence Strategy", *Sentinel*, ICPVTR, March 2021.

[20] Lindsay Heger, et.al., Ibid.

by deputies, commanded the leaders of divisions and units. He had direct meetings with them regularly. in a group or one to one. Other levels of accountability were also put in place. Each head of division could set up sub-divisions or had staff to run specific functions such as *idaroh* (administration) to perform secretarial duties, including recording the status of JI membership; *tholiah* (advanced team) or multitask "troops" to source for venues for JI activities and coordinate with ALWI (Security and Intelligence) Division for security; *taqwiyah* (human resources) to improve the quality of personnel in terms of ideological, mental and physical well-being; *iqtishod* (economy) to provide entrepreneurship training for members so the latter can generate more financial contributions to JI; *khidmah* (service) to provide service for members in terms of marriage, birth, and calamity; and *tamwil* (treasury) to collect monthly *infaq* (financial contribution) from members. Each head of division could also add other sub-divisions, where necessary.

Its clearly defined hierarchy and levels of accountability allowed JI to carry out its agenda without much disruption during Para's leadership. JI's centralised enforcement, equipped with the ability to identify and punish unfaithful, ineffective members who conduct negligent or careless actions, also minimised any organisational loss[21]. JI institutionalised an enforcement unit called *hisbah*, whose leader Abu Fatih was directly responsible to Para. In May 2019, for instance, the JI leadership discussed a "punishment" for Jamal, a senior JI personnel in the Education Division, who had disobeyed instructions to meet with Para. Concerned that Jamal's disobedience would impact the division, JI's central leadership had considered ousting him if he did not repent according to Islamic law, after being reprimanded with the first warning. Accountability was not only measured by punishment, but also through a reward system. JI had rewarded personnel for faithful execution of their agenda by giving promotion

benefits such as salaries and facilities. Among loyal and effective JI cadres promoted during Para's leadership was Budi Trikaryanto, alias Haidar, who was entrusted to lead the ALWI Division from 2009 to 2015. Trained in Mindanao from 1999 to 2007, his role was critical in the formation and operationalisation of TASTOS policy in JI. He managed to effectively institutionalise TASTOS until Para's arrest; until the latter, TASTOS success had been measured by keeping the *amir*'s identity and location unknown not only to the security apparatus, but also among JI members. The implementation of TASTOS also minimised the impact of arrests of personnel in JI's Logistics Division from 2014 to 2016, keeping the rest of JI's divisions intact.[22] As the head of ALWI, Haidar also supervised JI's pre-deployment training programme to Syria in *sasana*.

Haidar's success could be one of the reasons behind his elevation to JI's general deputy in charge of overseeing all the group's activities in 2016. He was also entrusted to represent Para in meetings with the leaders of JI divisions. His promotion was likely accompanied by a salary increment as JI paid salaries to its administrators.[23] In summary, JI's accountability mechanism, which included punishment and reward mechanisms, can be regarded as contributing factors that kept JI largely unified during Para's tenure. Members largely adhered to the group's guidelines and leaders' instructions and were disciplined if they violated the rules, while also being rewarded after having done well. The splintering of JI, possibly reflecting a weakening of the accountability structure, only occurred after Para was arrested in May 2019.[24]

Specialisation

Hierarchy enables specialisation within the group, and the generation of a variety of goods and services effectively (e.g. political campaigns, providing community services, etc), in addition to violence. The group can

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[21] Lindsay Heger, et.al., Ibid.

[22] "Jemaah Islamiyah's Counterintelligence Strategy", Op.Cit.

[23] Agus Suparnoto alias Krisna, who served as the secretary of ALWI division, for instance, received a salary amounting to Rp 1.5 million (USD 107.14) in 2010. When he was promoted as the head of ALWI division in 2015 to replace Haidar, his salary increased to Rp 3 million (USD 214).

[24] V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, Op.Cit.; "Polisi Temukan Bunker Terkait Penangkapan 12 Terduga Jemaah Islamiyah", *Benar News*, https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/polisi-temukan-bunker-terkait-penangkapan-12-terduga-jemaah-islamiyah-03012021112825.html, March 1, 2021.

identify and foster specific skills, which can increase organisational capacity and effectiveness.[25] JI's specialisation has been a reflection of its *dakwah* and jihad (military) core, *tamkin siyasi* and *tamkin askari* respectively. JI's divisions/units that implement *tamkin siyasi* include the *dakwah* and education divisions, and units responsible for the *naqib* (leaders) programme, ad-hoc projects, and *iqtishod* (economy/entrepreneurship training). Divisions that execute *tamkin askari* are ALWI and Logistics divisions.

The practice of specialisation within JI is advanced to the extent that talents were identified in the early stages of recruitment. Newly recruited cadres were encouraged to pursue their studies or enhance their skills in line with the needs of various JI divisions. For example, members of JI's *Dakwah* Division were sent to continue their studies in psychology or Islamic studies in Yemen or Sudan. Personnel in the Education division were sponsored to study at various *Ma'had* (Islamic schools). Logistics division staff was also provided with scholarships to pursue their studies in law. Those in ALWI were encouraged to pursue their studies in IT – partly to acquire skills in hacking – and language (for members of ALWI's International Relations sub-division).

The most dangerous specialisation within JI is its military component; one indicator is the deployment of highly selected cadres to Syria, with the goal of not only rebuilding its military wing, but also to prepare future leaders. These cadres had undergone arguably the most rigorous "admission" to become JI members. Not only were they the best graduates of several JI linked pesantren[26], they had also passed demanding physical,

health and written academic tests on Islamic studies as well as interviews. The immediate plan for those cadres was to serve in the *sasana* unit as trainers for the next batches – each batch underwent a six-month training stint – that would be dispatched to Syria. The *sasana* programme – started in 2012 – was eventually disbanded following the arrest of several JI cadres, who were deported from Turkey in 2018, after several failed attempts to cross over to Syria.

Specialisation has arguably shielded the group from complete decapitation, at least for the time being, and this may contribute to JI's current resilience. The arrest of JI leaders and personnel has largely involved those in JI's military project, especially the Logistics Division (mainly in charge of JI's weapon assembly workshop and bunkers), ALWI Division (overseeing the *sasana* unit),[27] and JI cadres who underwent training in *sasana*.[28] Due to the size of JI's membership – estimated around 6,000 members[29] – the country's anti-terror police unit Detachment 88 will likely continue to prioritise arresting those involved in the *tamkin askari* project. This means that JI's non-violent divisions such as *dakwah* and education (which oversee tasks such as sending preachers across Indonesia to build a local support base[30] and running JI pesantren respectively) remain intact and can persist with their recruitment activities.

Security Implications

Lindsay Heger et. al. have also argued that attacks by hierarchic groups will be more lethal than those committed by non-hierarchic entities. Whilst it does not mean that non-hierarchical groups are not capable of staging destructive attacks, the authors argue that an organisational structure affects the character of violence.[31] This implies that a potential JI

[25] Lindsay Heger, et.al., Op.Cit.

[26] "Pak Karso Latih Pemuda-Pemuda Cerdas Jadi Teroris JI, Dikirim ke Suriah", *Suara.com*, December 28, 2020, https://www.suara.com/news/2020/12/28/171012/pak-karso-latih-pemuda-pemuda-cerdas-jadi-teroris-ji-dikirim-ke-suriah?page=all.

[27] In other words, the recent crackdown on JI only weakens the "seen" JI members, whose partaking inunlawful activities or hiding information are chargeable under the country's anti-terrorism law. The "unseen" members remain untouched. See: Noor Huda Ismail, Op.Cit..

[28] "House Used for Training by JI Terror Network Uncovered in Central Java", *The Straits Times*, December 29, 2020,

https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/house-used-for-training-by-ji-terror-network-uncovered-in-central-java.

[29] "Indonesia Uncovers Training Site for Jemaah Islamiah Terrorist Network in Central Java", *The Straits Times*, December 28, 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesia-uncovers-training-site-for-jemaah-islamiah-terrorist-network-in-central-java.

[30] Zachary Abuza and Alif Satria, "Kembalinya Jemaah Islamiyah", *Benarnews*, December 14, 2020, https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/opini/kembalinya-ji-12142020220134.html.

[31] Lindsay Heger, et.al., Op.Cit.

attack could arguably be more lethal compared to attacks committed by non-hierarchic terrorist groups in the country. Such an attack's potential lethality could be attributed to the same three factors described earlier that explain JI's resilience – a strong agenda-setting capability, accountability, and specialisation. In contrast, these elements are lacking or absent in non-hierarchies such as pro-IS groups and cells.

Hierarchies enable groups such as JI to successfully implement a directive because the personnel are typically more disciplined in following orders, and where accountability is established by a reward and punishment mechanism. Furthermore, the highly specialised nature of JI divisions/units means they can be more effective in their specific task(s) than unspecialised, non-hierarchical units, including in conducting attacks. The implication is that violent attacks should be more lethal when those responsible are specialists in core functions.[32]

Until today, Indonesia has not witnessed a deadly attack of comparable scale to JI's 2002 and 2005 Bali Bombings. The closest was the May 2018 family bombings on three churches in Surabaya, East Java, that left 18 fatalities, including the six bombers[33], which was committed by a spin-off of the pro-IS Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) branch in East Java. JAD, established in late 2014, had built a hierarchical structure, although it was not run effectively following the first JAD attack in January 2016.[34]. Despite facing setbacks with a series of arrests in recent years, the post-Para JI leadership, if it remains committed to the PUPJI guideline against random acts of violence[35], may prefer to maintain JI's hierarchical and centralised structure in order to implement the group's long-term vision to build an Islamic state in Indonesia, by first building a necessary support base before waging jihad[36].

Although it may take years for the group to appoint a new *amir* following Para's arrest[37] and revive JI's organisational structure, remnants of the JI hierarchy can still pose a threat in current times. Whilst there have been two JI factions that planned attacks which police discovered since last year – the Banten and Fahim factions[38] – it should be noted that JI-linked past attacks were deadly, even when they were conducted by factions or splinter cells, as witnessed in the 2003 Jakarta J.W. Marriott Bombings, the 2004 Jakarta Australian Embassy Bombings, the 2005 Bali Bombings and the 2009 Jakarta J.W. Marriott and Ritz Carlton Bombing.[39] Another security implication is that established groups can continue to be adulated by small independent groups for guidance.[40] This means that the militarily skilled JI returnees from Syria, or those trained in *sasana*, can be sought after by pro-IS cells for training; or sermons by JI ideologues can serve as a gateway into jihadism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indonesian authorities should continue the critical work of crippling JI from reviving its military wing. The December 2020 arrest of key veteran JI personnel Upik Lawanga – the most precious "asset" of JI and dubbed as "professor" – who possessed outstanding bomb-making skills and could

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[32] Lindsay Heger, et.al., Op.Cit.
[33] "Bom di Gereja Surabaya: Hati Ibu Mana yang Tega Bunuh Anaknya?". *Tirto.id*, https://tirto.id/bom-di-gereja-surabaya-039hati-ibu-mana-yang-tega-bunuh-anaknya039-cKq5, 15 May 2018) 2 June 2018; "18 Hari Dirawat, Satu Korban Bom Gereja di Surabaya Meninggal", *Detik News*, (https://news.detik.com/jawatimur/4049232/18-hari-dirawat-satu-korban-bom-gereja-di-surabaya-meninggal, 2 June 2018) 2 June 2018; "Surabaya Church Attacks: One Family Responsible, Police Say", *BBC*, May 13, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44100278.
[34] Verdict on the Proscription of Jamaah Anshor Daulah (JAD), South Jakarta District Court, No. 809/Pid.Sus/2018/PN Jkt. Sel.; "The Surabaya Bombings and The Future of ISIS in Indonesia", Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, IPAC Report No. 51, October 18, 2018.
[35] Elena Pavlova, Op.Cit.

[36] Julie Chernov Hwang, Op.Cit.
[37] "ICPVTR Webinar on Evolving Terrorism Threat in Southeast Asia by Sidney Jones", RSISVideoCast, *YouTube*, April 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdMvE59QB7U.
[38] V. Arianti and Ulta Levenia, Op.Cit; "Polisi Temukan Bunker Terkait Penangkapan 12 Terduga Jemaah Islamiyah", Op.Cit.

[39] V. Arianti, "Indonesia" in Rohan Gunaratna and Stefanie Kam *(eds)*, *Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia Pacific* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), pp. 25-52.
[40] "Arabinda Acharya & Sonal Marwah", *Nizam, la Tanzim* (System, Not Organization): Do Organizations Matter in Terrorism Today? A Study of the November 2008 Mumbai Attacks", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34: 1 (2010), pp. 1-16.

produce home-made firearms is crucial to weakening JI's military capability.[41]   In countering JI's *tamkin askari*, it is also critical to disrupt JI's financing channel, especially charities, as they provide JI with the disposable funds to run and revive its costly hierarchic structure post-Para Wijayanto[42]. Notwithstanding, it continues to remain a challenge to incapacitate JI's non-military elements, given they are not deemed to be directly involved in terrorism, as currently understood in the Indonesian legal framework.

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[41] "Begini Kondisi Rumah-Bunker Teroris Upik Lawanga di Lampung", *Detik News*, December 20, 2020, https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5302674/begini-kondisi-rumah-bunker-teroris-upik-lawanga-di-lampung.

[42] "Indonesian Police Snare 50 Jemaah Islamiyah Suspects in Past Month", Op.Cit.

State Sponsored Terrorism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kalicharan Veera Singam and Kyler Ong

Synopsis

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on violent extremism to date has been limited.[1] This article examines the extent to which this prognosis relates to State Sponsored Terrorism (SST). In recent decades, major global events including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks had significantly impacted the prevalence of SST.[2] Although no clear trend has emerged more recently, the ongoing pandemic has likely affected some states' abilities, motivations and willingness to sponsor terrorism. The empirical evidence assessed in this article suggests that state sponsorship of international terrorism has likely declined further since the start of the pandemic. Still, the devastating socio-economic impact of the crisis could incentivise some states to buffer their flagging economies through illicit activities, including by selling arms to terrorist groups and conducting various forms of cyber-crimes.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a relatively limited impact on terrorist activity, which has been on the decline since 2016.[3] SST, which is usually not included in studies assessing terrorism by non-state actors, has been on a steady downward trajectory since the 1990s. SST peaked in the 1970s and 1980s at the height of the Cold War, a period in which a significant portion of terrorist activities was carried out with state sponsorship. In addition to states designated as sponsors of terror,[4] the Soviet Bloc and a coalition of Middle Eastern states also trained, equipped and harboured terrorist groups.[5] The peak period ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism, culminating in a significant reduction in SST.[6] An intermediate phase of SST ensued and lasted from 1990 to 2001, during which some Middle Eastern and North African states became the principal state sponsors of terrorism. But their support for terrorist groups considerably declined during this period due to US military retaliations and economic pressures.[7] After the 9/11 attacks, SST entered a period of lull as transnational jihadist groups came to the fore.[8]

While the terrorist threat from SST has remained at its lowest since the 9/11 attacks, it continues to warrant attention as one of the most impactful latent threats of terrorist violence.[9] This results, in part, from the increase in SST's threat potency due to the

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[1] Raffaello Pantucci, "Mapping the One-Year Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism," Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) 13, no. 2 (March 2021), https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CTTA-March-2021.pdf.
[2] Following both events SST dropped considerably. See, Stephen D Collins, State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat, *Politics and Policy* 42, no. 1 (2014), pp. 143-144.
[3] Pantucci, "Mapping the One-Year Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism," CTTA, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CTTA-March-2021.pdf.
[4] In the 1970s and 1980s states designated as sponsors of terror, namely, Cuba, Iran, Libya, North Korea and South Yemen were credibly found to be sponsoring terrorism.

[5] D Collins, State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat, *Politics and Policy,* pp. 138-144.
[6] Ibid, p. 143.
[7] Ibid, p. 140.
[8] Ibid.
[9] State Biological Terrorism as a high impact latent threat. See, John Parachini, "Combatting Terrorism: Assessing the Threat of Biological Terrorism," Testimony of John Parachini Before the Subcommittee on National Security, Veterans Affairs, and International Relations, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives, *RAND*, October 2001, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2005/CT183.pdf, p. 6.

proliferation of nuclear technology to state sponsors of terror. Although the number of SST attacks have dropped in absolute numbers, the potential catastrophic effects from a terrorist attack carried out with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), obtained from state sponsors, keeps the potency of the threat at its highest.[10] In today's context, the pandemic has brought about significant disruptions to global political and economic systems, prompting significant debate about its implications for geopolitics.[11] As such, how states officially recognised as sponsors of terror, such as Iran and North Korea, and other states unofficially but credibly accused of sponsoring terror have reacted to the evolving geopolitical landscape can provide some crucial insights.

Defining SST

While recognised as a potent form of terrorism, there are often ambiguities and controversies over defining SST.[12] Terrorism is often defined as violence committed against non-combatants by non-state actors with political goals. Some scholars, by extension, characterise SST as referring to states' provision of training, financial aid, arms, safe haven or other kinds of assistance to operationally independent terrorist groups.[13] The dynamic is one of a patron-client relationship, where states outsource violence to non-state actors in order to achieve their strategic objectives - while avoiding costly military reprisals.

Within the literature, a distinction has been made between state sponsored and state directed terrorism. Notable cases of SST include Iran's provision of financial assistance, sanctuary and political support to Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy that is active in Lebanon.[14] Examples of state directed terrorism include the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against civilians during the Syrian Civil War,[15] and the political assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the son of late North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, allegedly on instructions of the North Korean regime.[16] As is the convention in most scholarly works and in the official designation adopted by the United States, this article uses the term SST to refer to all types of terrorist activities carried out by non-state actors, or state agents either sponsored or directed by states for political motives against non-combatant targets. The following sections assess how the ongoing pandemic could potentially impact states' abilities, motivations and willingness to engage in SST.

COVID-19's Impact on States' Abilities to Sponsor Terrorism

State sponsors of terror finance terrorist groups to cultivate a patron-client relationship which can provide the sponsoring states leverage over the groups, although this may have been constrained by the pandemic. Inability to finance terrorist groups could reduce the leverage or even undermine the relationship between the terror sponsoring states and their clients. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the

State Nuclear Terrorism as a high impact latent threat. See, Michael A. Levi, Council Special Report No. 39, Deterring State Sponsorship of Nuclear Terrorism, *Council on Foreign Relations,* September 2008, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2008/09/Nuclear_Deterrence_CSR39.pdf, p. 16.

[10] D Collins, State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat, *Politics and Policy,* pp. 138-144.

[11] "The Geopolitical Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic," Policy Department, European Parliament, September 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/603511/EXPO_STU(2020)603511_EN.pdf.

[12] Grant Wardlaw, "Terror as an instrument of foreign policy," Journal of Strategic Studies, 10:4, 1987, p. 237.

[13] Daniel Byman, "Understanding, and Misunderstanding, State Sponsorship of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2020, pp. 2-3.

[14] Marc R. DeVore, "Exploring the Iran-Hezbollah Relationship: A Case Study of How State Sponsorship Affects Terrorist Group Decision-Making," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 4/5 (2012),https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26296878.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af38888ea4212bada06d98f92ffcd25e3, p. 92.

[15] Anthony Fainberg, "Terrorist Threats: Technical and Policy Approaches to Countering Them," *AIP Conference Proceedings 1898*, November 15, 2017, https://aip.scitation.org/doi/pdf/10.1063/1.5009232, p. 6.

[16] Michael D. Shear and David E. Sanger, "Trump Returns North Korea to List of State Sponsors of Terrorism," *The New York Times,* November 20, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/us/politics/north-korea-trump-terror.html.

global economy, with especially pronounced effects on economies that were already crippled by US sanctions.[17] US sanctions are believed to have worsened the coronavirus outbreaks and reduced the ability of terrorism sponsors such as Iran and North Korea to access healthcare supplies.[18] The economic fallout from the pandemic and US sanctions have seriously depleted their ability to sponsor terrorist groups.

Iran, for instance, faced a "triple shock"[19] from US sanctions, an unprecedented health crisis and the oil-market collapse. As a result, Iran's ability to financially and materially support terrorist groups such as the Hezbollah, has declined considerably in the last year. Since the onset of the pandemic, studies estimate Hezbollah's income from Iran has dropped by 40% or by $280 million (from an estimated total annual income of $700m).[20] To reduce its reliance on Iran, Hezbollah has at least temporarily turned its focus elsewhere to finance itself.[21] Hezbollah is believed to have ramped up its various illicit activities in Europe in order to finance its activities.[22] While it is unclear at present how Iran's reduced ability to directly fund the Hezbollah could affect its control over the group, alternate funding mechanisms, such as through oil transfers[23] that could boost Hezbollah's status as a shadow government[24] in Lebanon, have been mooted.

Another example involves Pakistan, which presents a mixed picture. Pakistan was credibly accused of sponsoring terrorism in the past[25] and has allegedly continued its funding of terrorist groups during the pandemic.[26] The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey listed Pakistan for funding terrorism in 2018.[27] In the years since, Pakistan has made progress in complying with most of the action points put forward by the FATF, although "serious deficiencies" remain.[28] Overall, the combined effect of the economic fallout from the pandemic and grey listing by the FATF are likely to have disincentivised Pakistan from continuing to financing terrorism. But as the Pakistan government grapples with the pandemic and with its resources overstretched, further progress in meeting FATF's demands is expected to be slow.[29]

COVID-19's Impact on States' Motivations to Sponsor Terrorism

Financial gains, promoting ideologies and securing geopolitical interests are some motivations that drive SST. For some state sponsors of terror, the pandemic has provided renewed impetus in pursuing their objectives. In particular, sanctions during the pandemic era have had the inadvertent effect of forcing some states to pursue illicit means of generating income, such as by ramping up

[17] Alex Ward, "Trump Loves Sanctioning Foreign Countries - but He's Terrible at It," Vox, September 09, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/9/9/21420026/trump-sanctions-iran-north-korea-venezuela.
[18] Ibid.
[19] "Iran Economic Monitor, Fall 2020: Weathering the Triple-Shock," World Bank, January 4, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/iran-economic-monitor-fall-2020.
[20] Thomas Harding, "Hezbollah Suffers Blow to Funding from Iran amid Pandemic," The National News, April 22, 2020, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/hezbollah-suffers-blow-to-funding-from-iran-amid-pandemic-1.1009925.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] "Head of Lebanon's Hezbollah Says Group Is Ready to Go to Iran to Seek Fuel," Reuters, June 08, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/head-lebanons-hezbollah-says-group-is-ready-go-iran-seek-fuel-2021-06-08/.
[24] Giulia Dal Bello, "Managing a Crisis: Hezbollah's Welfare Expansion," E-International Relations, April 26, 2021, https://www.e-

ir.info/2021/04/26/managing-a-crisis-hezbollahs-welfare-expansion/.
[25] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Why Pakistan Supports Terrorist Groups, and Why the US Finds It so Hard to Induce Change," Brookings, January 05, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/05/why-pakistan-supports-terrorist-groups-and-why-the-us-finds-it-so-hard-to-induce-change/.
[26] "'Amid COVID-19, Pakistan Continues to Support Terror': India at UN," DNA India, July 08, 2020, https://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-amid-covid-19-pakistan-continues-to-support-terror-india-at-un-2831343.
[27] Adnan Aamir, "Terror-financing Grey Listing Costs Pakistan Billions Annually," Nikkei Asia, March 03, 2021, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Terror-financing-grey-listing-costs-Pakistan-billions-annually.
[28] Ibid.
[29] "Coronavirus Likely to Delay Pakistan Exit from Terror Financing Watchdog List," Voice of America, June 16, 2021, https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/coronavirus-likely-delay-pakistan-exit-terror-financing-watchdog-list.

cyber-terrorism and cyber-crimes.[30] The economic crunch has also raised the possibility of terror sponsoring states selling armaments, including WMDs to terrorist outfits.

Of particular concern is North Korea, which has faced an unprecedent economic crisis, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[31] Since the onset of the pandemic, the North Korean regime has ramped up cyber-attacks and cryptocurrency thefts to boost revenues.[32] There are also concerns that North Korea could sell sensitive WMD technologies to other sponsors of terror such as Iran or directly to terrorist groups. According to the latest United Nations Final Report produced by the Panel of Expert on North Korea, North Korea and Iran have resumed technical cooperation on Iran's ballistic missile development projects. This includes North Korea's transfer of critical parts such as "valves, electronics and measuring equipment suitable for use in ground testing of liquid propellant ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles" to Iran, with the most recent shipment having taken place in 2020.[33] Likewise, mortar rounds recently utilised by Al-Shabaab, a jihadi militant group based in Somalia, have been traced back to North Korea.[34]

The additional pressures brought about by the pandemic has likely pushed Iran and North Korea further into isolation, making their geopolitical and strategic calculations even more pertinent for regime survival. Iran, for instance, may seek to ramp up its support for terrorist groups if it feels threatened by the recent geopolitical realignments in the Middle East, including the improving diplomatic relations between Israel and some Gulf nations.[35] Barring significant progress in restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the Biden administration, diplomatic goodwill,[36] and sanctions relief for Iran, Tehran's pursuit of an arms-for-cash program remains a possibility.[37] In addition to financial gains, Iran is also motivated by its regional and strategic ambitions that would be harder to achieve without its proxies, especially if funding has dwindled. The expiration of the 13-year arms embargo, imposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on Iran in October 2020, has reinforced concerns that Iran could procure arms (in exchange for oil) and proliferate them to terrorist groups to relieve its pandemic-battered economy and in support of its proxies.[38]

COVID-19's Impact on States' Willingness to Sponsor Terrorism

Whether states are willing to sponsor terrorism is largely predicated on factors such as their abilities and motivations, as discussed earlier. The added political, economic and social pressures from the ongoing pandemic could make some states less inclined to sponsor terrorism. This is especially if they can no longer justify the costs of sanctions imposed for sponsoring terrorist outfits, and are in urgent need of humanitarian aid.[39]

[30] Morten Soendergaard Larsen, "While North Korean Missiles Sit in Storage, Their Hackers Go Rampant," *Foreign Policy,* March 15, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/15/north-korea-missiles-cyberattack-hacker-armies-crime/.
[31] Bruce W. Bennett, "COVID-19 Exacerbates North Korea's Bad Choices," *RAND*, April 20, 2021, https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/04/covid-19-exacerbates-north-koreas-bad-choices.html.
[32] Toby Dalton, "The Most Urgent North Korean Nuclear Threat Isn't What You Think," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* April 15, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/15/most-urgent-north-korean-nuclear-threat-isn-t-what-you-think-pub-84335.
[33] United Nations Security Council, *Final report of the Panel of Experts submitted pursuant to resolution 2515, S/2021/211* (2021), https://undocs.org/S/2021/211, pp. 9, 310.
[34] Ibid., p. 42.
[35] "Trends in Terrorism: What's on the Horizon in 2021?" Foreign Policy Research Institute, January

22, 2021, https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/01/trends-in-terrorism-whats-on-the-horizon-in-2021/.
[36] Michael Hirsh, "U.S. Mounts All-Out Effort to Save Iran Nuclear Deal," *Foreign Policy,* April 15, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/15/iran-nuclear-deal-biden-talks-vienna/.
[37] Abdulla and Jedinia, "U.S., Allies Fear Lifting of Arms Embargo Could Embolden Iran, Its Proxies."
[38] Robert Czulda, "What Iran Might Sell Now that the UN Arms Embargo Expired," *Atlantic Council,* October 21, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/what-iran-might-sell-now-that-the-un-arms-embargo-expired/; Namo Abdulla and Mehdi Jedinia, "U.S., Allies Fear Lifting of Arms Embargo Could Embolden Iran, Its Proxies," *Voice of America,* July 16, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/us-allies-fear-lifting-arms-embargo-could-embolden-iran-its-proxies.
[39] Jacob Kurtzer, Judd Devermont, John Goodrick and Grace Gonzales, "Humanitarian Impacts of Sudan's Removal from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List,"*Center for Strategic and International*

Sudan's recent formal delisting from the US' SST list for instance has now paved the way for its access to international financial institutions and economic aid. These are imperative to reviving an economy riven by political corruption, soaring inflation, massive debts, food insecurity, as well as a significantly weakened healthcare system, buckling under the enormous pressure exerted by COVID-19.[40]

The pandemic's crippling effects across the world has also triggered concerns that terrorist groups might have a renewed interest in using Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) weapons, especially biological ones.[41] For Iran and North Korea, which have a demonstrated interest in acquiring or possessing CBRN capabilities,[42] and also hold a long track record of working with terrorist outfits, there are therefore willing buyers for their CBRN expertise and resources. Yet there are significant reasons why countries such as Iran and North Korea may not be willing to proliferate such weapons to terrorists and other non-state actors. Financial motivations aside, states, as rational actors,[43] are cognisant of the need to weigh the perceived costs and benefits of such proliferations. This net benefit is based upon the state's consideration of several factors: (1) international norms against CBRN non-use, (2) its internal economic conditions, (3) the

cost of buying the weapon, (4) stockpile sufficiency, (5) its ability to control the use of such weapons by non-state actors, and (6) the likelihood of attribution (which depends on the traceability and plausible deniability of weapons and material origin) and subsequent retaliation.[44]

North Korea, for instance, has maintained relationships with a number of terrorist groups, having conducted terrorist training camps for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and supplied arms and ammunitions to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Al-Shabaab, to name a few.[45] It also has a fairly developed nuclear and chemical weapons program, although knowledge on its biological weapons program is opaque and potentially less sophisticated in terms of the extent of its weaponisation and delivery capabilities.[46] It is also an active exporter of ballistic missile systems, components, and technologies to other states including Egypt, Iran, Libya, Myanmar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and Yemen.[47] Pakistan and Syria are also believed to have obtained "nuclear technology or materials directly through the agency of North Korea".[48] Given this track record, its aggravated economic situation may provide additional impetus to sell CBRN weapons and related materiel to a terrorist

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Studies, April 14, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/humanitarian-impacts-sudans-removal-state-sponsors-terrorism-list.

[40] "U.S. Takes Sudan off Sponsor of Terror Blacklist," *France 24*, December 14, 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201214-us-takes-sudan-off-sponsor-of-terror-blacklist.

[41] "COVID-19 and CBRN Terrorism: Assessing the Short and Long-Term Impact," *CBRNE Central*, May 24, 2020, https://cbrnecentral.com/covid-19-and-cbrn-terrorism-assessing-the-short-and-long-term-impact/24067/.

[42] "Iranian Nuclear Ambition Unaffected by Covid-19 Outbreak, Says Janes," *Janes.com*, May 11, 2020, https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/iranian-nuclear-ambition-unaffected-by-covid-19-outbreak-says-janes.

[43] There exists a wealth of literature that debates on whether some states, like the DPRK, can be considered rational actors. A most common classification of the DPRK for example is that it is a rational "madman." This term is derived from the 'madman theory' that was conceived during Richard Nixon's presidency. Particularly, it's a 'rational' strategy to appear to be irrational as a bluff to convince the enemy to take cautious measures in case it triggers an irrationally 'mad' response. For an

overview of this theory applied to North Korea and its nuclear deterrence strategy, see Denny Roy, "North Korea and the 'Madman' Theory," *Security Dialogue* 25, no. 3 (1994): pp. 307-316, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44471459; Thomas Schelling also captures the essence of the rationality of being or pretending to be irrational in his seminal work. See Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2nd ed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 37-43.

[44] Ashley Hess, "Why North Korea Won't Give the Worst WMD to Terrorists," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2017): 91-131, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44594795.

[45] Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., "North Korea and Support to Terrorism: An Evolving History," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 2, 2010, https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=jss.

[46] "North Korea," *Nuclear Threat Initiative,* April 2018, https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/chemical/.

[47] Joshua Pollack, "North Korea's Nuclear Exports: On What Terms?" *38 North,* Special Report 9, October 14, 2010, https://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/38North_SR9_Pollack2.pdf

[48] Ibid.

outfit.[49] However, such inclinations will be balanced out by the credible fear of punitive repercussions, and other factors discussed earlier that act as deterrence against the proliferation of CBRN weapons to terrorist groups.

Conclusion

While SST has remained largely unstirred by the pandemic, an examination of this form of terrorist threat is warranted because of the financial strain the pandemic has had on some impoverished or geopolitically marginalised states, coupled with the renewed terrorist interest in acquiring biological weapons. These conditions could discourage funding of terrorist groups, but also provides additional impetus for cash-strapped states with ties to terrorist outfits to sell arms for hard currency. While the threat of CBRN proliferation to terrorist groups remains a high impact low probability event, the continued ties of some states to terrorist groups and their ability to evade sanctions and detection to engage in illicit activities render it an area of concern. International sanctions therefore represent a double-edged sword, as they may have the intended impact of driving state sponsors to return to the negotiation table, or inadvertently, push them to resort to the illicit acquisition of funds, such as selling arms to terrorist groups seeking to further their cause.

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[49] Dalton, "The Most Urgent North Korean Nuclear Threat Isn't What You Think," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 15, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/15/most-urgent-north-korean-nuclear-threat-isn-t-what-you-think-pub-84335.

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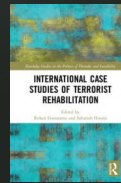
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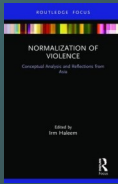
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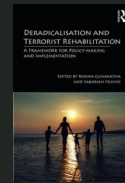
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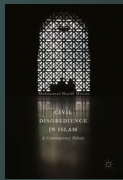
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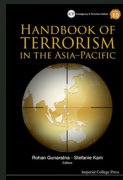
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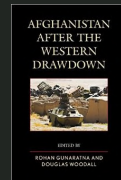
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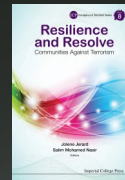
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