CENS Countering Extremism Workshop

Event Report

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Centre of Excellence

for National Security

RSiS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

NSCS NATIONAL SECURITY COORDINATION SECRETARIAT

Report on the Workshop organised by:

Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore

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The panel sessions of the workshop are captured in the conference report with speakers identified. Q&A discussions are incorporated without attribution.

Contents

Executive Summary

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) convened its annual Workshop on countering extremism from 8-11 November 2021. Held via Zoom amid ongoing travel restrictions, the Workshop brought together nine leading experts for what became a lively and thought-provoking series of discussions.

Panel One considered evolutions among violent extremist networks in Indonesia, and recent developments in counterterrorism. Speakers included Alif Satria (Researcher, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS Indonesia), Dyah Ayu Kartika (Analyst, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, IPAC), and Jordan Newton (Senior Advisor Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Justice, AIPJ2).

The following evening, Panel Two outlined current research on the psychology of radicalisation and examined the similarities among personal pathways toward different extremist narratives. Leading the discussions were Professor Arie Kruglanski (Distinguished University Professor, University of Maryland), Dr Michael Wolfowicz (Honorary Research Fellow, University College London), and Dr Leor Zmigrod (Research Fellow, University of Cambridge).

Concluding the event was Panel Three, which evaluated the Taliban's renewed governance in Afghanistan and the implications for regional Islamist militancy. Expert insight

was provided by Dr Amira Jadoon (Assistant Professor, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point), Dr Cole Bunzel (Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University), and Andrew Mines (Research Fellow, Program on Extremism, George Washington University).

The first dialogue focused on Indonesia, where terrorist networks have been decimated by counterterrorism operations in recent years. However, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) maintains significant organisational resources and a robust structure, according to Alif Satria, while Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) remains resilient through a decentralised network of autonomous cells, low barriers of entry, and a degree of international connectivity.

Online pro-Islamic State (IS) propaganda in Indonesia has reduced in quantity and quality since the fall of al-Baghdadi's caliphate, but content has diversified and remains somewhat durable across small and mainstream platforms. Meanwhile, JI's messaging increasingly resembles that of non-violent Islamist groups opposing the government, which could misconstrue activists for terrorists and potentially generate further support for violent resistance.

Looking further afield and towards the future, Dya Ayu Kartika described the dire conditions and perilous security environment faced by Indonesian nationals in the displacement camps of northeast Syria. Repatriating children is certainly complex but may be the most effective way to address the humanitarian concerns while weakening Indonesian links to global terrorist networks.

Twenty years after 9/11, terrorism and ideological violence is now diffuse and diverse, with a variety of conspiracy-fuelled narratives and identity-based convictions spawning new forms of extremism. But despite this apparent diversity of extreme perspectives, recent empirical research has highlighted substantial commonalities across different ideologies. The Workshop's second panel explored the evidence.

In a comprehensive meta-analysis of attitudes, intentions and behaviours among ideologically violent individuals, Dr Michael Wolfowicz found that psychological factors are more important ingredients for radicalisation than socio-economic or experiential conditions.

Breaking this down further, Professor Arie Kruglanski stressed the individual need for personal significance, which can be facilitated by exclusive networks and compelling narratives. Delving deeper still, Dr Leor Zmigrod's research has identified certain neuro-psychological signatures often present among those with extremist convictions, such as cognitive rigidity and impulsiveness. This cutting-edge research could have important implications for disengagement and upstream prevention initiatives.

Panel Three discussed the ramifications of recent developments in Afghanistan. Dr Cole Bunzel highlighted the threat posed by both IS-Khorasan (IS-K) and al-Qaeda (AQ) to the United States (US), but also outlined the two organisations' respective constraints, in terms of local conflicts and decapitated leadership. IS-K has stepped up attacks over the past two years, but operations have become less deadly, according to

Andrew Mines, as the group targets certain local communities and infrastructure in order to further destabilise the war-torn nation.

Regardless of the Taliban's intentions with foreign extremist groups, Dr Amira Jadoon believes the new government's limited protective security capacity may mean the nation becomes a 'passive sponsor' of terrorism. The concern for the wider region will be a possibly greater fusion between local extremist networks and transnational organisations, which may influence tactics and strategies moving forward.

Panel One—Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Updates and Evolution

Introductory Remarks and Context Setting

Cameron Sumpter
Research Fellow, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS

The end of the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria had a dampening impact on violent extremism in Indonesia, yet the collapse cannot account for the several hundred people who have been arrested and prosecuted for terrorism offences since 2018. There are now over 600 inmates convicted of terrorism offences in Indonesian prisons, whereas this figure had been fairly stable at about 300 between the early 2010s and 2018.

These numbers are partly due to the increased militant activity during the caliphate years, but also the impact of the 2018 updates to terrorism eradication legislation, which added additional avenues for prosecution, clarified provisions and further facilitated investigations.

Furthermore, regional police chiefs in all 34 of the nation's provinces have established anti-terrorism task forces, which now work in tandem with the national counterterrorism police unit, Special Detachment 88. The prison system has also seen improvements, both in terms of institutional knowledge regarding violent extremist inmates, and infrastructure, as a new super maximum-security prison was opened in 2019.

In early 2021, a new National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism (RAN PE) was issued through a presidential regulation. The Plan aims to improve relevant partnerships among state institutions, civil society organisations, and empower local governments to implement initiatives.

Challenges include budget allocation, power distance between state institutions, and capacity and relevant knowledge in the regions. However, there is already broad optimism over the Plan's structure and potential to provide contextual relevance to prevention programming, streamline efforts, and institutionalise good practice.

Contemporary Organizational Dynamics of Indonesian Terrorists

Alif Satria
Researcher, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia

As of late 2021, terrorist organisations in Indonesia are in a precarious state. The frequency and lethality of their attacks has decreased over the past five years, and the number of people prosecuted under anti-terrorism legislation has increased sharply since 2018. Senior members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) have been arrested, the central structure of Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) has been dismantled, and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) has been reduced to just four members.

While on the backfoot, JI maintains notable resources, a robust structure, and may be the most resilient of the major terrorist networks. The organisation's finances are

supported by a tax on membership, proactive charitable organisations seeking donations, and formal companies owned by the network, particularly in the palm oil sector. JI has active recruitment, education, and security divisions, and has sent small numbers of militants to train with al-Qaeda linked groups in Syria. Moreover, the organisation employs systems of internal reporting, dispute management mechanisms, and counterintelligence practices.

Following sustained police pressure, JAD has devolved into a substantially decentralised network of largely autonomous cells with an uneven distribution of skills. Its membership has weakened, but the network remains active and resilient, with low barriers of entry and a degree of international connection. Many of the JAD-connected prisoners prosecuted in 2018 are soon due for release as they received light sentences following a period of pre-emptive arrest operations.

As the object of multiple-year police-military combined operations, MIT may become defunct in the foreseeable future. The small band of militants hiding in the hills of Central Sulawesi does have connections to other organisations and prison networks, as well as notable support from some sections of the local communities. However, MIT's leaders reportedly split in June 2021 and both were shot dead by the latest iteration of the security operation tasked with their capture.

Indonesians in Syria

Dyah Ayu Kartika
Analyst, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), Indonesia

In February 2020, the Indonesian government announced that it will not repatriate citizens who joined Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, but it would consider unaccompanied children under ten years old on a case-by-case basis. To date, no significant progress has been made.

In the largest al-Hol camp there is a constant threat of violence from IS militant women toward anyone who expresses a desire to go home or violates IS rules. In July 2020, an Indonesian woman was beaten to death for violating IS rules, leaving her two sons unattended. Sexual abuse has also been reported.

Those in the camps face an increasingly desperate situation, with poor conditions in terms of food, water, and sanitation. The COVID-19 pandemic has made conditions even worse. Restrictions on movement have delayed delivery of basic necessities and limited the number of medical staff working in the camps.

According to Indonesia's anti-terrorism agency (BNPT), as of September 2021 there were 529 Indonesians in Syria: 115 are in the camps, 21 in prisons, 16 are in the Turkish borders, and the whereabouts of some 377 Indonesians are unknown. Based on a June 2019 census, there were 277 children under ten years old in two displacement camps and in prison. Among the youth

were 22 cases of child brides, who probably would not be eligible for repatriation.

These children are growing up in extreme hardship, with little formal schooling. The older ones may have witnessed or even taken part in extreme violence. All will likely receive IS indoctrination as their primary religious teaching.

Repatriation of pro-IS Indonesians from Syria is certainly a complex issue, from citizenship and data verification, to risk assessment and diplomatic issues. But the most difficult challenge may be the institutional difference between security agencies, who continue to weigh the risk of child repatriation, and social service agencies, who are only concerned with the methods of repatriation and child welfare.

Indonesia needs a plan to address this issue, with a clear roadmap and timeline. It can start with a small number of children and gradually involve more people. Bringing them home is the only option that addresses the humanitarian concerns while weakening Indonesian links to global terrorist networks.

Indonesian Extremist Activity Online: Recent Developments

Jordan Newton
Senior Advisor, Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Justice (AIPJ2)
Online pro-IS propaganda in Indonesia has decreasedin quantity and quality since the fall of the caliphate in 2019. Supporters are struggling to find useful narratives beyond

worn tropes of patience and resistance, which might inspire some to lash out at authorities but are not doing enough to energise broader recruitment.

Furthermore, a significant amount of effort is being expended on internal debates which are sapping energy from these networks. That said, content has diversified and remains somewhat durable across both encrypted chat apps and mainstream social media platforms.

Jemaah Islamiyah's online followers are faring somewhat better than those backing IS, as the organisation has sought to present a more public face, which is more dynamic than past information campaigns. The new strategy is less susceptible to blocking and content removal. JI supporters' activity therefore poses challenges for law enforcement and technology companies going forward.

JI's messaging and framing increasingly resembles that of non-violent Islamist opposition groups. This is raising the risk that some activists and groups in opposition to the current government could be misconstrued as terrorists, thereby exacerbating perceived grievances and potentially creating support for violent resistance.

Technology companies have made great strides to moderate and block malicious content and violent material is harder to find than it was five years ago. However, the total elimination of extremist views online would require fundamental change to the platforms' algorithms and business models, as well as increased resources for non-English language content. Recently leaked Facebook documents outlining strategies and

priorities suggest that such developments may be unlikely.

Civil society counter-messaging initiatives and experiments offer greater promise. There has been a visible uptick in positive content online in recent years, which is contesting spaces previously dominated by violent extremism or hate speech. Still, these 'mainstream' actors will need to avoid falling into the trap of promoting their own disinformation and hate speech through overzealous efforts to combat extremist and hard-line voices online.

Q&A

How is it possible that so much extremist content is still online? Should the tech companies be doing more?

There have been some interesting revelations from testimonies in the US Congress, where Facebook has described its approach to countering violent extremism. Two things have been revealed: one is that the primary purpose of these platforms is to make money. It is not their intention to have violent extremist or undesirable content, but where there is a choice between changing the platform in some fundamental way (so this content is completely eliminated) or maintaining a profitable business model, the latter will win every time.

The second revelation involves language. Apparently 87% of Facebook's budget to combat misinformation and hate speech is used to focus on English language material. Considering the various languages in Southeast

Asia – particularly the many languages used in the southern Philippines, for example, the task of content moderation becomes nearly impossible, given the resources allocated.

It is unclear how tech platforms can be pushed to do more. They have talking points, such as blocking 90% of such content before it even goes online. They are also most interested in scale – if it is something that involves 300 million people voting in an election, then they are likely to take action. If it involves the few thousand pro-IS and pro-AQ people in Indonesia, this seems too small a number to act upon.

How have recent events in Afghanistan impacted violent extremists in Indonesia?

The recent developments in Afghanistan have produced a surge in support for the Taliban among violent extremist groups in Indonesia. However, it is important to note that this sentiment does not equate to actual capability in terms of traveling to Afghanistan or conducting attacks domestically. Many of the Indonesians who ended up in Syria had a facilitator in Turkey, but it seems unlikely that any logistical support exists for people seeking to go to Afghanistan.

Terrorist groups are under a lot of pressure from counterterrorism operations in Indonesia, so there are significant constraints on what they can achieve. The Taliban's limited governance capacity may struggle to prevent people from entering the country, but the Indonesian authorities are much better at stopping people

at the border compared with five years ago when people were aiming to reach Syria.

The most significant impact of the Taliban's victory on extremists in Indonesia was likely the vindication that a long-term strategy can actually work. This will be particularly pertinent for JI, which has been rebuilding, and may well continue to do so over the next few years.

Have violent extremist groups in Indonesia been reaching out to non-violent Islamist groups?

JI supporters were involved in the 212 protest movement, and pro-AQ Jemaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS) reportedly instructed their supporters to vote for Prabowo Subianto in 2019, which was extremely surprising. Jihadist groups simply do not involve themselves in issues of democracy.

In 2019 and 2020 there were pro-IS Telegram groups which were trying to leverage the Islamist group Front Pembela Islam (FPI) supporters' disappointment in the presidential election (in which Joko Widodo won), and anger towards police over the perceived repression FPI members were suffering. However, IS supporters are now preoccupied with people in prison who have declared allegiance to the republic of Indonesia on video. This appears to be a significantly triggering issue for IS supporters.

One example is the police-managed DeBintal Foundation, which helps former prisoners reintegrate with society. The organisation's former militants have been entering IS chat groups on Telegram and taunting current supporters. They accuse them of being 'all talk and no action', which seems to be effective messaging.

IS is not looking like a very attractive group among potential recruits in Indonesia, not least because they are constantly arguing amongst themselves online. The situation is very different from 2014-15, when IS could claim to be taking over parts of countries and sweeping across the world. None of that energy exists anymore.

Panel Two—Current Research on the Psychology of Radicalisation: Commonality Across Ideologies

The 3N Model of Violent Extremism

Professor Arie Kruglanski
Distinguished University Professor, University of Maryland

The presentation opened by highlighting the "pandemic of radicalisation worldwide". Salafi groups like AQ and the so-called IS have yet to be defeated. In the West, far-right groups are on the rise, as seen in the events surrounding the 06 January Capitol insurrection in the United States (US). To examine the various threads of violent extremism, Kruglanski presented the '3N Model', which is an integrative framework that looks at how need, narrative, and network act as pillars for violent extremism.

What underpins individual motivations to commit violence is the first 'N' – the fundamental 'need' to 'be somebody' or have a quest for significance (QoS). While every person has their own QoS journey, only certain individuals' QoS is activated in a manner that leads to violent extremism. Activation factors include the loss of significance (i.e., being bullied or experiencing humiliation), insults to social identity (i.e., ethnic, religious, and racial identity), and the promise of 'significance gain' (i.e., the promise of martyrdom).

Connecting individual need to a violent extremist group requires a second 'N', or the 'narrative'. Narratives are firmly tied to cultural norms. Individual's QoS may be met with adversity and other challenging environments, but it does not automatically lead to violence. Kruglanski stressed that this can be explained by varying narratives that individuals are exposed to, specifically on how significance can be attained. For instance, a person exposed to the narrative that hard work and playing by the rules can lead to prominence and wealth, is given a positive path to significance. Exposure to the narrative that violent resistance to authority figures is the only path "to be somebody", could lead to violent extremism.

The final 'N' that buttresses the 3N Model is the 'network' or the in-group that supports the narrative and dispenses rewards for individuals who espouse the said narrative. The network comprises leaders that construct reality, and adherents who live that constructed world. Rewards emanating from the network involve both psychological rewards such as recognition and status, and tangible rewards such as money or other resources (e.g., land rights).

Endorsing Ideological Violence: The Role of Individual Difference in Cognition and Emotion

Leor Zmigrod
Research Fellow, University of Cambridge

The brain's relationship with radicalisation continues to be understudied. Radicalisation to violent extremism is often linked to broader situations such as exposure to socioeconomic hardship, or to individual motivations (i.e.,

to experience connectedness or belonging). There is less attention paid to the role of cognition, emotion, and the brain—in one word a potential fourth ‘N’, neurocognition.

The premise that there are psychological origins to ideological thinking dates to the 1950s. Gordon Allport found that prejudice does not emerge to target a specific ethnic group. Rather, prejudice is often linked to an individual’s wider thinking about the world.

Zmigrod goes further, linking the ‘endorsement of ideological violence and self-sacrifice to cognitive indicators. It is data-driven research based on the empirical evidence gathered, rather than theory-driven research, which often has pre-determined causal links. Research on neurocognition and radicalisation is based on large data sets, using quantitative methods. These include personality surveys, building cognitive profiles, and having respondents participate in cognitive tasks such as card sorting.

Individuals who endorse ideological violence exhibit three sets of traits. First, they are often found to have ‘cognitive rigidity’ or the inability to adapt to changing situations or newfound information. As expected, cognitively rigid subjects tend to be more politically extreme and likely to express willingness to die. The second set of traits involve ‘emotional dysregulation’. Individuals in this category are impulsive and often sensation-seeking. The latter involves seeking out intense emotional sensations and consequently greater levels of risk willingness. The final set of traits is the degree of ‘executive dysfunction’, defined as difficulty in competing mental tasks.

In conclusion, using neurocognition can be a powerful tool to evaluate individual differences. Populations are often exposed to similar radicalising influences but not everyone turns to violent extremism. From a policy perspective, neurocognition can go beyond just risk assessment of vulnerable individuals. Findings can also shape how community stakeholders involved in countering violent extremism (CVE) should engage vulnerable communities. Neurocognition research can also be used to improve interventions, diversion, and skills development programmes targeting referred individuals and at-risk communities.

Risk and Protective Factors for Radicalization: The State-of-the-Art

Michael Wolfowicz
Honorary Research Fellow, Department of Security and Crime Science
University College London

For some researchers and stakeholders, the recurring null hypothesis for countering radicalisation is that there is “no difference” between different types of radicalisation. In the West, this perspective has often been espoused by politicians. Grouping different radicalisations under a single umbrella may be expedient and politically correct, but it could impact the effectiveness of policy interventions. There is constant tension between crafting specific tools targeting a specific ideology or using the same tools for all types of radicalisation.

Building upon McCauley and Moskalenko's 'Two-Pyramid model', Wolfowicz differentiates between cognitive radicalisation (i.e., opinions, views, and ideas) and behavioural radicalisation (i.e., acts of terrorism). People who feel that they have a personal moral obligation would be a small number of a general population. On the behavioural side, actual terrorists are a small number of a larger pool of 'inert' individuals, activists, and radicals.

Given the rarity of radical behaviours, there must be individual risks factors "that explain why some turn to violence, but most do not". Wolfowicz conducted a meta-analysis, or a combination of other existing scientific studies, to identify risk factors. Two broad questions needed to be addressed: "What differentiates cognitive radicals from the general population", and "what differentiates behavioural radicals from the cognitively radicalised populations".

Wolfowicz and his collaborators looked at three outcomes: radical attitudes (justification of radical behaviours), radical intentions (intentions to engage in radical behaviours), and radical behaviours (engagement in radical behaviours). The meta-analysis covered Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, across all reported ideologies, focusing on individual-level factors.

Psychological effects are more significant compared to background factors such as socioeconomic status or experiential factors (i.e., bullying, job loss). Psychological factors largely impact the formation of radical attitudes and intentions but taper off in prompting radical behaviours. This suggests that psychological factors

have a non-linear impact on the radicalisation process. There is little heterogeneity among OECD states when it comes to the psychological risk factors for radicalisation. On the other hand, there is also very little heterogeneity across ideologies, from the far-left to Islamists.

In conclusion, radicalisations are less heterogenous than often assumed. This means that tools for combatting deviance can be used to combat radicalisation. Countries that are also alike (such as democracies) can learn from each other. There were several challenges that emerged from the meta-analysis. Commonly targeted factors such as racial integration and confronting racism have "exceptionally small" effects on radicalisation. The meta-analyses also underscored issues such as the difficulty of scaling up programmes and conducting programme evaluations.

Q&A

Would lab experiments using regular people be applicable to actual terrorists?

It would be "extremely worthwhile" to undertake such controlled experiments to help predict what attracts various individuals to violence. In real-world situations, a "situation can be very powerful" to prompt individuals to commit violence, even without the pre-existence of radical attitudes. A historical example is how the Nazi German state fostered a permissive milieu that legitimised society-wide violence against minorities.

The relationship between attitude and behaviour is not linear, however. Studies have shown there is no straightforward link between professed support for

terrorist activities and actual terrorist attacks, in different countries.

Nonetheless, attitudes do not accurately predict behaviour, yet it remains the best way to predict the occurrence of violence. Based on research, policymakers should separate assessments of radical behaviours from that of attitudes, but then also recognise the two are intertwined.

Wouldn't psychological profiling fulfil the dystopian predictions of an emerging system of "pre-crime" prevention often seen in science fiction and pop culture?

Using profiling properly requires solid ethical grounding in terms of the evidence-collection and research methods involved. To date, research on profiling and radicalisation appears to be growing in a transparent manner.

Profiles are also a snapshot of one's individual situation and temperament. It should not be considered as a definitive roadmap of an individual's future actions. There are various psychological tools that promote coping and self-affirmation that can sway an individual from violent tendencies. A person need not abandon an ideology or a narrative in full. Policies should focus on dissuading individuals from launching attacks.

How useful is using 'formers' in deradicalisation or disengagement programmes?

Using the experiences of former members of violent organisations can be useful in dissuading would-be recruits from joining. By playing up a former's disillusionment with a movement, potential recruits may

be inoculated from further radicalisation. Formers can convey to potential recruits that the latter may not be able to fulfil their search for meaning or significance.

EXIT programmes in Germany and Sweden are among the best examples of effective programmes that involve formers. However, they should be reserved for 'secondary' level interventions—programmes meant for dissuading individuals with radical attitudes from escalating to violence.

Using narratives from formers, that start with vivid accounts of deviance (i.e., drug use, gang fights, prostitution) in a 'primary' level of intervention could potentially lead to backlash. Primary interventions are meant as broad-based programmes to prevent the development of radical attitudes in a population. It has been observed that using formers prematurely could expose the population to stories of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll". This may inadvertently serve to glamorise deviance and radicalisation, instead of walking out with a sobering perspective of the perils and adversity of being in a violent extremist movement.

Panel Three—Current Research on the Psychology of Radicalisation: Commonality Across Ideologies

Regional Security & Terrorism Challenges after the Kabul Takeover

Amira Jadoon
Assistant Professor, Combatting Terrorism Center, West Point

There is an array of implications regarding the Taliban's consolidation of power, both in the immediate region surrounding Afghanistan and to global trends. Overall, counterterrorism (CT) efforts by the US coalition have delivered mixed results.

On the positive side, US presence in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years has led to two major accomplishments. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there were concerns not just in the US, that Afghanistan would be a "haven" for transnational terrorist groups. In response, American forces were able to use kinetic operations to decapitate and decimate the AQ leadership. As a result, AQ was unable to conduct a major operation again on US soil. The second positive outcome was that US presence in Afghanistan motivated and incentivised multinational coalition-building. The US along with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, and even non-NATO allies like Japan, were major contributors for building up the CT capacities of other partner nations, such as Pakistan.

The US presence was less successful, however, in using its dominant military capability to eliminate terrorist groups. Groups like AQ, IS, and the resurgent Taliban have retained their resolve and preserved their ability to recruit members. American presence in Afghanistan also failed to address the challenge of porous Afghan borders. Beyond geography, there were also broader factors that are conducive to violent extremism, such as the absence of rule of law and economic scarcity in Afghanistan.

The promise made by the US to build an offshore, over-the-horizon CT capacity remains uncertain. Jadoon stressed that the biggest risk right now is "increased volatility" in Afghanistan. Volatility will not be constrained within Afghanistan's borders but may involve opportunities for regional groups to reconsolidate. The Taliban's swift takeover has given way to the "inability of the Taliban to exercise a monopoly of violence". Taliban leaders may be unable to push back other militant organisations trying to get a foothold in Afghanistan such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.

In conclusion, the Taliban may be on its way to be a "passive sponsor" of international terrorism. The end of large-scale fighting may find the new Taliban government at odds with the thousands-strong professional fighting class that emerged during the decades-long conflict. The prospect of increased proxy warfare between rival militias supported by states like Iran can also escalate. And finally, the Kabul takeover may lead to the expansion and further entrenchment of illicit economies and terrorist financing networks.

Challenges Facing al-Qaida and the Islamic State in the New Afghanistan

Cole Bunzel
Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University

The next presentation was based on a recent article Cole Bunzel wrote for *Foreign Affairs,* "Al Qaeda Versus ISIS". Both groups continue to pose a threat to Afghanistan, the region, and the US. According to some estimates, AQ may be able to strike the US in 1-2 years, while IS-Khorasan (IS-K) based out of eastern Afghanistan can likewise do the same in 6 months.

The fundamental difference between AQ and IS-K can be traced to their respective ideologies. AQ can be considered as more "moderate" than IS-K, with the latter quick to brand their opponents as *takfir* (infidel). In executing their violent strategies, AQ has prioritised targeting the 'Far Enemy' like the US, while IS-K and IS Central would often engage in an insurgency against governments in their areas of operation.

As expected, AQ and IS have divergent opinions and modes of interaction with the Taliban. AQ was close to the Taliban in the 1990s, with even Osama bin Laden himself pledging *bayah* (loyalty) to then Taliban leader Mullah Omar. In contrast, IS claimed that the Taliban were heretics. The schism appeared after the death of Mullah Omar in 2013. IS ideological tracts deemed the founding of the Taliban in 1996 as a cause worth supporting, but subsequently contested the nationalist shift of the Taliban made by Mullah Omar's successor.

When it comes to the 2021 Taliban takeover, the divergence between AQ and IS remained stark. AQ deemed the capture of Kabul a triumph, a harbinger of more victories to come. IS, meanwhile, has derided the return of the Taliban not as military victory but a "peaceful transfer of power" from the US to a Taliban that was ready for a compromise and focused on more nationalist goals. Bunzel, however, stressed that despite the bifurcation of perspective among AQ and IS, the Taliban's actual stance is more nuanced. It is not as pro-American as it is portrayed by IS, but neither is it as fixated on waging an internationalised jihad as expected by AQ.

The Fall of Kabul and the Resurgence of the Islamic State in Afghanistan

Andrew Mines
Research Fellow, Program on Extremism
George Washington University

Since its founding in 2015, IS-K had to contend rivalries with other Islamist groups like AQ and the Taliban, and the military operations of the now-defunct Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) from 2015-2020. At its peak, ANSF operations against IS-K spanned 30 provinces, mostly near the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. This led to the dispersion of IS-K leaders and fighters to urban areas.

On the other hand, the IS-K and Taliban rivalry from 2015-2020 also saw fighting between the two groups. Fighting was reported in 16 provinces. At times, Taliban offensives "piggybacked" on operations conducted by US forces and/or the ANSF. After the Taliban took over in

August 2021, IS-K has continued to wage an insurgency and has yet to directly engage in combat for territorial control. IS-K is currently focused on assassinating Taliban leaders or ethnic minority community leaders. IS-K has also embarked on a campaign of non-lethal "economic warfare", targeting electrical pylons and fuel tanker convoys; all in a bid to undermine the Taliban's attempts to govern.

These daily, "high-volume, low-impact" attacks are part of a three-pronged IS-K strategy. Firstly, these attacks aim to isolate communities from the Taliban. Second, the dispersed nature of the attacks serves to "spread thin" Taliban fighting units. And finally, for IS-K, their offensives are meant as a show of strength, to amplify its influence and project its power. This is intended to complement the IS-K narrative that disparages the Taliban as either "puppets to the West" or "traitors" to their communities.

In conclusion, Mines sketched out IS-K's sources of resilience. One source of IS-K strength are its alliances with other militant organisations. IS-K has also used its strategic rivalry with the Taliban to outcompete the latter for influence and support among fence-sitting communities. IS-K is also able to replenish and expand its ranks through broad-based recruiting. This includes mobilising local Salafis and members of ethnic communities, such as Uzbeks and Tajiks. Its transnational recruitment pool, on the other hand, is comprised of nationals from Pakistan, and those further afield like French, Uighur, Indian, and Southeast Asian recruits. Finally, IS-K continues to obtain financial resources through illicit economic activities such as smuggling. Overall, IS-K appears able to wage a "comprehensive" method of insurgency.

Q&A

What would be the future of US 'over-the-horizon' CT capability in Afghanistan?

The vision of the US engaging in over-the-horizon (OTH) CT operations was more useful during the negotiations that preceded the withdrawal from Afghanistan. At present, it is unclear who would be the reliable partner in the region that could provide much needed intelligence into Afghanistan. Pakistan has publicly declined supporting US OTH operations.

The alternative is for the US to increase engagement with Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan. However, such a move would expose the US to further geopolitical plays by states such as Russia and China, both of whom consider Central Asia within their spheres of influence.

Given the challenge of obtaining actionable intelligence and basing rights, it is likely that the US would have to rely more heavily on its own homeland defence initiatives. Decades after the 9/11 attacks, federal agencies such as those under the Department of Homeland Security are better poised to interdict attacks against the US homeland.

Could the US and Taliban cooperate in the future against IS-K?

At present there is no "political appetite" on either the US or Taliban side to cooperate. It is more likely that countries in closer geographical proximity to Afghanistan, such as Pakistan or China, may lend support to the Taliban, to target groups like IS-K. Iran could also be a

player, stemming from their long-term trading relationship with the Taliban. Iran is concerned that greater IS-K influence could lead to increased violence against Shias in Afghanistan.

What would be the roles of the Haqqani network within the new Taliban government?

The Haqqani network could be the linchpin of a "two-faced structure" by the Taliban. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan would likely mimic the foreign policy of Iran. Soft-power and other diplomatic overtures would be made by relatively moderate Taliban personalities. Meanwhile, ideologues will drive its internal strategy, with the Haqqani network acting as a potential hard power, kinetic option.

Could international aid organisations operating in Afghanistan be considered a form of quasi-official support or used as a signal for political legitimacy?

Aid groups operating under the banner of other Muslim states are often cast as quasi-recognition of the Taliban regime as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Where aid groups are considered supportive of the Taliban, they can be considered targets of militant groups like IS-K or AQ. On the other side, evidence to support the notion that aid groups can be used as cover to facilitate the entry and sustainment of militant groups remains weak. What is more certain is how decreased levels of human security leads to greater vulnerability among communities to recruitment from violent extremist groups.