



Terrorism in South Asia: Bangladesh



Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

SUMMARY

In November 2019, an anti-terrorism court in Bangladesh [sentenced seven people to death](#) in connection with the [2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack that killed 22 people](#) in Dhaka. The sentencing, along with open-source reporting and Bengali-language propaganda from transnational terrorist groups, has renewed concerns about terrorism in Bangladesh. This report provides insight into the presence, current capabilities, and possible threats from terrorist groups in Bangladesh; guidance for OSAC members with travel or operations in the country; and information necessary to navigate security challenges related to terrorism.

ORIGINS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's history with violent extremism dates back to the 1990s, when veterans of the anti-Soviet fight in Afghanistan returned to Bangladesh. [Initial waves of violence](#) in the country involved two groups, Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI) and Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), who engaged in complex coordinated attacks throughout the late '90s and early 2000s. The struggle between a secular government and the role of Islam in society provides context for ongoing violent extremism in Bangladesh. Political polarization and contentious elections have also played a role in enabling the resurgence of violent extremism, leading to the emergence of militant groups across the country. (For additional reporting on the genesis of violent extremism in Bangladesh, see the OSAC report ["Militancy in Bangladesh: Background."](#) (November 2016).

TERRORISM IN BANGLADESH: GROUPS

A number of terrorist groups, both domestic and transnational, continue to pose a real threat to private-sector organizations with operations or travel in Bangladesh. These groups have a clear history of targeting Western entities and interests, including foreign travelers, writers, secular bloggers, foreign missions, and minority groups. The State Department [Travel Advisory](#) for Bangladesh assesses the country at Level 2, indicating travelers should exercise increased caution due to crime and terrorism, particularly in the southeast, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The current landscape of violent extremist groups appears to be [more integrated into transnational networks](#) than earlier generations.

FINDINGS

- AI-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State (IS) claim responsibility for **40** attacks in Bangladesh since **2015**
- Bangladeshi militants featured in multiple publications, videos, and websites of **IS** and **AQIS**
- Terror** outfits spread ideologies to solicit followers through **social media**
- No dedicated terrorist watchlist, interactive **API** system
- Judicial** sector is under-resourced for carrying out prosecutions
- Overall conviction rate is below **20%**

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

[Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh \(JMB\)](#)

Founded in 1998, [JMB became active in the early 2000s](#), recruiting and training, raising funds, running outreach programs, and mobilizing members across the north and in southern districts of Chittagong, Jessore, and Khulna. JMB's initial messaging drew on the Wahhabi-inspired Ahl-e Hadith movement, which led to its pursuit of the establishment of Islamic law. JMB championed its perception of anyone not subscribing to its interpretation of Islam—such as non-Muslim foreigners, secular figures, and religious and sectarian minorities—as [targets for violence](#). The threat from JMB gained particular prominence in its first high-profile attack on August 17, 2005. In that attack, [JMB members detonated approximately 450 bombs](#) in 63 of Bangladesh's 64 districts, killing two people and wounding more than 100 others. Investigations immediately after the attack resulted in the arrest of more than [700 JMB members](#) and affiliates. The investigation led to the [execution of a number of JMB leaders](#), including its chief, Shaikh Abdur Rahman, in 2007. Following the investigations and subsequent executions, a government-led crackdown on Islamist groups led to a respite from Islamist-related violence. The period of calm [ended with Islamist backlash](#) against secularists in 2013. Since 2015, JMB has expanded its activities beyond traditional strongholds in the north and southwest, conducting attacks nationwide.

[Al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent \(AQIS\): Ansurallah Bangla Team \(ABT\) and Ansur al-Islam \(AI\)](#)

[AQIS formed](#) following a two-year effort to consolidate violent extremist factions on the Indian subcontinent; in September 2014, al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri proclaimed it a formal affiliate. Before then, al-Qa'ida core leadership still tacitly supported or linked itself to other satellite groups operating in South Asia. One group in particular, the Islamist [Ansurallah Bangla Team \(ABT\)](#), initially formed in 2007 as an al-Qa'ida linked organization in Bangladesh.

ABT followers were particularly [inspired by the teachings of American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki](#), a senior recruiter for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). ABT's key leader, Mufti Jasimuddin Rahmani, often spoke of a duty to kill anyone who was against Islam, defined broadly to include secular bloggers and activists. In 2013, ABT militants inspired by Rahmani's sermons [killed the secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider](#), and [attempted to kill three other bloggers](#) in Dhaka, Mirpur, and Gaibandha. Authorities arrested Rahmani in August 2013 for his connection to the attacks. Around the same time, likely in response to the crackdown, ABT began to refer to itself as [Ansar al-Islam \(AI\)](#).

In 2014, al-Qa'ida leadership capitalized on rising Islamist anger with the secular government in Bangladesh. In a video entitled ['Bangladesh: Massacre Behind a Wall of Silence,'](#) al-Zawahiri urged Bangladeshis to "confront the crusader onslaught against Islam." Al-Zawahiri further urged Islamic scholars and clerics to lead protests in Bangladesh. AI militants claimed additional murders of bloggers and professors in Bangladesh, further boosted by the formal creation of AQIS. AI began referring to itself as the 'Bangladeshi wing of AQIS' from mid-2015, but similarities between the satellite group and core al-Qa'ida messaging campaigns linked the two together before then. Throughout 2016, AQIS and AI intermittently claimed responsibilities for attacks against secular bloggers and activists.

[Islamic State in Iraq and Syria \(ISIS\)](#)

Scattered ISIS counterparts in Bangladesh began to sense an opportunity to establish a coordinated footprint for the transnational group as attacks by AQIS and AI grew increasingly violent. In August 2014, a group of unidentified [Bangladeshi nationals pledged allegiance](#) to the

Islamic State in a video around the same time of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcement of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria. ISIS formally announced its presence in Bangladesh in [the November 2015 issue of Dabiq](#), its online English-language magazine. ISIS media has meticulously crafted [propaganda campaigns aimed at Bangladeshis](#), releasing *anashid* (religious chants), digital pamphlets, and videos all in the Bengali language.

ISIS in Bangladesh has found support within the [members of JMB](#), and even eulogized slain JMB leaders in a [Dabiq issue](#) titled 'The Revival of Jihad in Bengal with the Spread of the Light of the Khilafah.' [Jund al-Tawheed Wal Khilafah \(JTK\)](#), a suspected faction carrying out ISIS-inspired attacks in Bangladesh against Shi'a Muslims, foreigners, and places of worship throughout 2015, has urged Bangladeshi Muslims to participate in violence and pledged support to al-Baghdadi via video messages. Between October and December 2015, ISIS claimed a series of attacks across Bangladesh targeting religious and sectarian sites. Of a total 70 attacks since January 2015, ISIS has publicly claimed responsibility for 28.

The government of Bangladesh insists that there is no ISIS presence in the country, and that the attacks are the exclusive work of local militant groups. In June 2016, the government launched a [nationwide crackdown](#) on local groups, arresting more than 11,000 people. While it is not clear how directly ISIS is involved in operations inside Bangladesh; the transnational group has relied on local militants to carry out attacks, and worked to [brand them as Islamic State operations](#). Authorities have identified ISIS-aligned militants in Bangladesh as part of two distinct groups—either as leaderless units with an independent capability to plan operations, or as part of the 'Neo-JMB,' a pro-ISIS JMB faction.

The Islamic State's most notorious attack in Bangladesh was the violent siege at Holey Artisan Bakery restaurant in Dhaka's Gulshan area on July 1, 2016. The attack involved 5 assailants armed with guns, machetes, and explosives, and resulted in a 12-hour siege that killed two police officers and 20 foreigners, including [three students from U.S. universities](#). During the siege, the attackers separated Muslim and Bangladeshi patrons from non-Muslims and foreigners to 'test' their knowledge of Islam. They released or gave food and water to those that passed the 'test,' torturing and ultimately killing the others. The [Islamic State claimed credit for the attack](#), publishing through its [Amaq News Agency](#), claiming to have targeted the restaurant because "it was well known for being...a sinister place where the Crusaders would gather to drink alcohol and commit vices throughout the night..." (See the OSAC report, [ISIL Outside Iraq & Syria: Bangladesh](#) for additional details of the attack.)

TERRORISM IN BANGLADESH: CURRENT RISKS

Bangladesh experiences judicial impediments to the successful prosecution of terrorists and allegations of extrajudicial killings by security forces. While the Bangladeshi government has often attributed violence to local militants, [AQIS and ISIS have claimed responsibility for nearly 40 attacks in Bangladesh since 2015](#). Each group continues to use social media, publications, videos, and encrypted messaging platforms to spread its ideology and solicit followers from Bangladesh. On March 9, 2019, a [pro-ISIS magazine](#) released through Telegram featured an English-language article by an ISIS operative named Abu Muhammad al-Bengali. The article urged ISIS followers to "attack severely and send [the enemies of Allah] to hell." On August 9, 2019, the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency released [a new video in Bengali](#) claiming that the "fight for the Caliphate is not over," and urging Bangladeshi supporters to target the "near enemy."

Additionally, Bangladesh faces potential threats from returning foreign fighters. Authorities confirmed at least [50 Bangladeshi citizens traveled](#) to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS, in addition

to more than 100 persons of Bangladeshi origin. Authorities report that at least 5-10 Bangladeshi nationals have returned to the country, of whom two have gone missing upon return, and five are currently in Bangladeshi prisons. On May 8, 2019, Bangladeshi authorities arrested a Saudi Arabia-born Bangladeshi, who returned to Bangladesh after fighting in Syria. Police reports found that the man, in addition to a group of unnamed sympathizers, [were planning attacks](#) with in conjunction with different militant organizations.

Despite ongoing risks, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of attacks since a rigorous campaign against extremist groups carried out by the government. Bangladesh security forces have had success in breaking the structure of the Islamic State in the country. Following the Holey Artisan Bakery attack, [counterterrorism operations](#) resulted in the neutralization of many ISIS cells and IED-making units across the country. Bangladeshi security forces claim to have [disrupted planned attacks; captured suspected militant leaders; and seized caches of weapons, ammunition, and explosives](#). In addition to counterterrorism operations, there has been a visible community engagement campaign aimed at [countering violent extremism](#) in the country. The combination of operations against ISIS cells/sympathizers and public campaigns against extremism have led to a [significant decline in terrorist attacks](#) in recent years. While the risk from terrorism still remains, it is significantly downgraded from the level it was during 2015-2016.

TERRORISM IN BANGLADESH: INCIDENTS 2005-PRESENT

The following timeline identifies significant terrorist incidents and attacks since 2005. The comparatively low number of incidents since 2016 demonstrate the significant decline in attacks following the Holey Artisan Bakery attack and subsequent counterterrorism campaign.

Date	Incident
July 23, 2019	Bangladeshi authorities recovered and deactivated powerful IEDs planted outside two police posts in Dhaka. Neo-JMB militants used similar explosives earlier that year to target a police outpost and police vehicle in two different locations in the capital. Even though they did not detonate, ISIS claimed responsibility for planting the IEDs.
March 25, 2017	Two bombings near Sylhet killed 8 people and wounded over 40 more. ISIS claimed responsibility .
March 24, 2017	A suicide bomber attacked security forces near Hazrat Shahjalal airport (DAC) in Dhaka, injuring two police officers. ISIS claimed responsibility .
March 7, 2017	A suspected suicide bomber snuck into a temporary facility belonging to the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a counterterrorism-focused Special Mission Unit, detonating a suicide vest, killing himself, and injuring two RAB officers. ISIS claimed responsibility .
March 3, 2018	Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, a Bangladeshi author and academic , was attacked while attending a program at a university in Sylhet. The attacker had links to online ABT and AI outfits.
July 1, 2016	The Islamic State's most notable claimed attack in Bangladesh is the violent siege at Holey Artisan Bakery restaurant in Dhaka's Gulshan area. The attack involved five assailants armed with guns, machetes, and explosives, and resulted in a 12-hour siege that killed two police officer and 20 foreigners, including three students from U.S. universities.

June 11, 2016	Nitya Ranjan Pandey, a Hindu monastery worker in northeastern Pabna, dies in an attack while taking a walk. ISIS claimed responsibility .
June 7, 2016	Militants shot and killed Anando Gopal Ganguly, a Hindu priest in Jhenaidah. ISIS claimed responsibility .
May 14, 2016	Maung Shue U Chak, a Buddhist monk , dies in an attack at a Buddhist temple in Bandarban. ISIS claimed responsibility .
April 25, 2016	Militants posing as couriers killed Xulhaz Mannan , founder of Bangladesh's first and only LGBTQ magazine, gay rights activist, and local U.S. Embassy USAID employee, in his apartment. AI claimed responsibility .
April 6, 2016	AI militants claimed responsibility for the killing of law student Nazimuddin Samad, for his open atheism. Samad had been an online secular activist who protested against leaders accused of committing war crimes.
February 21, 2016	Jogeshwar Roy, a Hindu priest , died in a knife attack at the Deviganj temple near Panchagar. ISIS claimed responsibility .
November 26, 2015	Gunmen opened fire during evening prayers at a Shi'a mosque in Bogra, killing one person and injuring three others. ISIS claimed responsibility .
October 31, 2015	Militants with machetes killed Faisal Arefin Dipon, a Bangladeshi book publisher , at the Jagriti Prokashoni publishing house in Dhaka. Dipon was the head of the firm that published a book by slain secular blogger, Avijit Roy. Ansar al-Islam claimed responsibility .
October 24, 2015	A bomb attack on Shi'a Muslims at Hussaini Dalan mosque in Dhaka killed one person and injured 80 others. ISIS claimed responsibility , and a Bangladeshi court indicted 10 members of JMB for the attack.
October 3, 2015	Kunio Hoshi, a Japanese national , died in an attack in Rangpur. ISIS claimed responsibility .
September 30, 2015	Cesare Tavella, and Italian aid worker , died of gunshot wounds in Dhaka. ISIS claims responsibility .
August 7, 2015	A gang armed with machetes killed Niloy Chatterjee, an anti-extremist activist and blogger , in Dhaka. AI took responsibility for the murder via emails to media outlets.
May 12, 2015	Assailants chased down and killed Ananta Bijoy Dash, a secular blogger , in Sylhet. The violent nature of the attack resembled the murder of blogger and activist Avijit Roy. AI claimed responsibility .
February 26, 2015	Machete-wielding militants killed Avijit Roy, a prominent U.S.-based blogger visiting Dhaka, at a book fair. Roy was a secular activist whose writings defended atheism and criticized religious extremism. AQIS claimed responsibility .
November 15, 2014	AI militants claimed the murder of Shafiul Islam , a sociology professor at Rajshai University, for his opposition to the practice of women wearing full veils in educational institutions. Professor Islam had been on a 'hit list of targets' released earlier by AI.
February 15, 2013	Ansurallah Bangla Team (ABT) militants killed secular blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider, and attempted to kill secular activists Asif Mohiuddin, Sanaur Rahaman, and Tonmoy Ahmed Moon.
August 17, 2005	Approximately 450 small bombs went off in a series of carefully timed attacks in 63 of 64 districts nationwide. The blasts killed two people and

	injured several more. Printed JMB leaflets were reportedly found at the bomb sites.
--	---

GUIDANCE

OSAC members have expressed concerns over travel or operations in Bangladesh, given the uncertainty of the security landscape and recent history of attacks claimed by terrorist groups. The increased efforts of security forces to eliminate terrorist cells in the country and subsequent decline in terrorist attacks have improved the security climate, but risks for travelers persist. The potential for extremist violence in Bangladesh is ongoing; travelers should exercise appropriate caution and maintain a high level of vigilance in light of violent attacks. [The U.S. government assesses](#) that the risk still remains, but is very much diminished. Maintain a low profile when traveling in public, exercise increased personal security, and respect local customs and cultural norms. Avoid public transportation and consider the use of pre-arranged vehicle services to get around.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Organizations with operations in the region should register to be part of the [Dhaka Country Council](#) to network with like-minded security professionals and collaborate on plans for emergency scenarios. For additional information, contact [OSAC's South and Central Asia team](#) with any questions, or consult the following resources:

- [OSAC Bangladesh Country Page](#)
- [OSAC 2019 Crime & Safety Report for Bangladesh](#)
- OSAC Analysis: [Bangladesh: Terrorism Threat Persists in Updated Travel Warning](#) (January 2017)
- OSAC Analysis: [Militancy in Bangladesh: Background](#) (November 2016)
- OSAC Analysis: [ISIL Outside Iraq & Syria: Bangladesh](#) (November 2016)
- OSAC Analysis: [Al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent: Bangladesh](#) (November 2016)
- OSAC Benchmarking Report: [U.S. Private Sector Security Posture in Bangladesh](#) (September 2016)