



CHAPTER SEVEN

JIHADIST TERRORISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:

RESURGENCE AND RESILIENCE IN THE

POST-CALIPHATE ERA

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Terrorism can never be accepted. We must fight it together, with methods that do not compromise our respect for the rule of law and human rights, or are used as an excuse for others to do so.

— Anna Lindh, former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs

Abstract

Even with the fall of the ISIS caliphate, the threat of transnational jihadist terrorism persists in the Indo-Pacific. This chapter traces the evolution of transnational jihadist terrorism in the Indo-Pacific, from the rise and fall of the ISIS caliphate to the Taliban's resurgence and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Examining the evolving tactics, targets, and motivations of jihadist networks, the chapter highlights their resilience and adaptability. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and adaptive counterterrorism strategy that combines sustained pressure with efforts to address root causes, foster international cooperation, and counter online radicalization. The chapter also underscores the importance of balancing security measures with the protection of civil liberties in countering this persistent threat. Ultimately, the chapter argues that a failure to adopt a multi-dimensional approach that prioritizes both security and preventive measures could have dire consequences for stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Shifting Landscape of Transnational Jihadist Terrorism in the Indo-Pacific

The changes that have occurred in the global terrorism landscape during the last decade have been profound. The lightning-fast rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 caught the world by surprise, fueling a surge in transnational terrorist activity on a scale that had never before been seen. Tens of thousands of foreign fighters and their families from more than a hundred countries flocked to join the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, throwing the region into chaos and wreaking havoc around the world.¹

The international response was equally unprecedented, and in 2019, ISIS was militarily defeated by a U.S.-led global coalition of 86 countries and other entities united against the shared threat of terrorism. Since then, with the especially notable exception of sub-Saharan Africa, terrorist attacks worldwide have generally declined.² Yet it would be naïve to think that transnational terror networks have been permanently defanged.

Despite the many setbacks they have had to endure, takfiri jihadist groups and their supporters have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, and there is no room for complacency. This chapter focuses on the evolution of these groups in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly South and Southeast Asia. The chapter is structured chronologically, beginning with a brief recap of the period from 2014 to March 2019, during which terror networks were transformed by the rise and fall of ISIS.

The next section examines the years that immediately followed, from April 2019 to August 2021, which coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then from August 2021 to October 2023, which marked the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan. A fourth section discusses the impact of the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, which began in October 2023. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of these evolving threats for counterterrorism (CT) strategies in the region, emphasizing the need

for adaptable and comprehensive approaches that address both the immediate security challenges and the underlying factors contributing to radicalization.

The Rise and Fall of ISIS: 2014-March 2019

The wider impact of the civil war in Syria and the related return of instability in Iraq from around 2011 onwards is hard to overstate. Among the kaleidoscope of militant groups that emerged during this period, ISIS established itself as the dominant force, utilizing a combination of brutality and savvy propaganda to enhance its appeal. The group was particularly influential on the international stage, and a growing number of violent jihadists in Asia who were formerly aligned with al-Qaeda began pledging allegiance to the group in 2014—some even before the declaration of the caliphate was made that June.³ As support for the group grew, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) to the conflict zone gathered pace, and by 2017, South and Southeast Asia had each seen more than a thousand FTFs and their family members make their way to Syria and Iraq.⁴

The Establishment of Transnational Networks

The establishment of physical and virtual connections to terrorists in the Middle East further enabled the transfer of people, information, and much-needed funds, helping Asian jihadists, newly animated by what they were seeing abroad, to intensify operations at home. This led to the fracturing of transnational terrorist organizations and the outbreak of both intense ideological as well as physical infighting and competition between rival factions—particularly the Taliban and the newly established Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISK) in Afghanistan. The number of attacks soared as a result.

Between 2014 and 2018, ISK was responsible for nearly 300 attacks and more than 2,000 fatalities in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵

ISIS supporters were responsible for numerous mass casualty attacks elsewhere, including the bloody Holey Artisan café murders in Bangladesh in 2016, the siege of Marawi in the Philippines in 2017, the Surabaya suicide bombings in Indonesia in 2018, and many more. Not to be outdone, the al-Qaeda-aligned Tehrik e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) massacred 149 people, mostly children, at an army public school in Peshawar in December 2014.⁶ During this period, there were also signs that the largely dormant Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, which also stayed loyal to al-Qaeda, was positioning itself to resume armed jihad, having previously eschewed the use of violence.⁷

Counterterrorism Efforts and the Decline of ISIS: 2017-2019

The proliferation of terrorist attacks and the growing influence of ISIS-inspired ideology provoked an overwhelming response. Thanks to a sustained aerial bombardment campaign, coupled with ground operations by local partner forces, ISIS was crushed on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq. ISK suffered a similar fate in Afghanistan, as did the Maute Group and their supporters in the Philippines.

The flow of FTFs began to dry up as Turkey closed its borders with Syria, and countries adopted a more proactive approach to preventing terrorist travel and sharing of information. This was supported at the global level by Interpol's FTF database and at the regional level by programs such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Our Eyes intelligence-sharing framework, initiated in January 2018.

At the national level, authorities across South and Southeast Asia updated legislation to criminalize terrorist activities, launched new national action plans, introduced rehabilitation programs for returning FTFs and their families, and generally redoubled their efforts to counter terrorism.⁸ Many top terrorist leaders and facilitators were killed by security services, and hundreds more were

arrested. While all of this was going on, social media providers such as Twitter and Facebook had stepped up their efforts to remove terrorists from their platforms, dramatically shrinking their available territory in cyberspace.⁹

By March 2019, when ISIS lost its last sliver of physical territory in the Syrian border town of Baghouz, transnational jihadist networks were on the back foot.

After the Caliphate: April 2019-August 2021

The territorial defeat of ISIS marked the end of a chapter, but the story of transnational jihadist terrorism was far from over. Despite the many setbacks they had suffered in the preceding months, ISIS affiliates and supporters in the Indo-Pacific proved themselves to still be extremely capable in the immediate aftermath of the caliphate. The dust was still settling in Baghouz when a group of mostly affluent and well-educated young men carried out multiple, coordinated suicide bombings on the morning of Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, killing close to 300 people. Though no stranger to terrorism, this was the first attack of its kind in the small island nation and was quite unexpected. In June, the Philippines recorded its first-ever suicide bombing by a Filipino.¹⁰ This was the third suicide attack in a matter of months (the others all conducted by FTFs) in a country where such tactics had rarely before been seen, and was yet another sign of the continued insidious influence of ISIS.

ISIS's Strategic Shift to South Asia

As it sought to recover, ISIS began to rely more heavily on its affiliates and, in particular, began to focus its attention on South Asia and ISK. In May 2019, ISIS announced it was reorganizing to create new “provinces” responsible for India and Pakistan, respectively, leaving ISK responsible for Afghanistan.¹¹ It followed up in February 2020 with the launch of a new publication, “*Voice of*

Hind,” which focused on events in the Indian subcontinent in an effort to exploit local tensions and draw in more recruits from the region.¹² Just how successful these efforts have been is unclear, and the new provinces were later reabsorbed back into ISK, but in 2021, Afghanistan suffered a substantial increase in terrorist attacks and fatalities.¹³ The group was also linked to three relatively minor attacks, a plot disrupted in the Maldives, and at least three disrupted plots in India.¹⁴

The Killing of ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

In October 2019, U.S. special operations forces tracked down and killed the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Although it had been an important victory, he was quickly replaced, and in a pattern that would repeat itself as each “caliph” was killed, jihadists throughout Asia wasted no time in publicly declaring their allegiance to his successor, thereby signaling their ongoing commitment to the cause.

Challenges Beyond ISIS

While ISIS was busy restructuring, others were also active, making this an extremely challenging period. In February 2019, Jaish e-Mohammed (JeM) carried out a suicide bombing at Pulwama in Kashmir, killing more than forty Indian security personnel in what was regarded as the worst act of terrorism in thirty years of insurgency.¹⁵ A month later, an anti-immigrant right-wing extremist, who framed his attack, in part, as a reaction to the scourge of jihadist terrorism, gunned down 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which he broadcast online. This, in turn, served to inspire copycat attacks in California and Texas later that year, in which a combined 23 people were killed. Finally, for the first time in nearly twenty years, al-Qaeda again managed to strike the U.S. homeland when a Saudi airman undergoing training at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, who had long-standing, “significant” ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

dating back to 2015 and was in direct communication with them just hours before the attack, shot and killed three sailors.¹⁶

Regional and Global Counterterrorism Cooperation

In spite of these developments, terrorist attacks overall were still far below the global high point of 2015 and, in many places, continued to decline as ISIS and others came under sustained pressure from security forces and governments looked for new ways to counter the threat.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings, for example, India increased its CT support for Sri Lanka and furthermore renewed its efforts to strengthen regional CT cooperation using the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral, Technical, and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).¹⁸ Elsewhere, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines added a new land-based component to the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA), which they had established in 2017 to help curb terrorism and piracy in the Sulu and Celebes Seas.¹⁹ And, in the aftermath of the attacks in New Zealand, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern led a global initiative known as the Christchurch Call to strengthen cooperation between governments, the private sector, and civil society in countering terrorist and violent extremist content online.²⁰ Though largely reactive and not without limitations, these developments each contributed in their own way to strengthening international CT.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism

Perhaps an even greater boost for CT, surprisingly, was the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, it was feared that terrorists would be able to exploit the pandemic to their advantage, that there would be a surge in radicalization driven by popular discontent, and an explosion in the number of attacks as lockdowns were lifted.²¹ The impact of the pandemic on terrorism was in fact far more nuanced and varied depending upon the ideology and operational circumstances of different groups and individuals. Overall, however, the fears were largely overblown, and the forecasted rise in terrorism did not take

place. Instead, lockdowns and restrictions on international travel served the dual purpose of limiting the movements of terrorists, and despite their best efforts, neither ISIS nor al-Qaeda clearly managed to exploit the pandemic in a meaningful way. As the head of CT policing in Malaysia observed in January 2021, the lockdowns had been a “blessing in disguise.”²²

Return of the Taliban: August 2021-October 2023

Although ISK had emerged as one of ISIS’s most important affiliates and briefly held a significant amount of territory in Nangarhar Province to the east of Kabul, adjacent to the border with Pakistan, the Taliban had remained far and away the dominant faction in Afghanistan. The fact that the Taliban might one day return to power following the withdrawal of American troops—scheduled to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks of September 2001—was, therefore, hardly unthought of.²³ Nevertheless, the speed with which the Taliban were able to sweep across the country, crushing what little resistance they met to retake Kabul and establish themselves once again as the de facto government, sent shockwaves through the international community. The last U.S. troops had not even left before the capital fell on August 15, 2021.

Afghanistan as a Breeding Ground for Terrorism

In preceding negotiations with the United States, the Taliban had committed to preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorists who might use it as a launch pad for conducting attacks elsewhere.²⁴ However, they maintained close ties with al-Qaeda and a horde of similar groups, including the TTP, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), JeM, Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT), and others, all of whom maintained a presence in the country.²⁵ According to the United Nations, in mid-2021, there were an estimated 8,000-10,000 FTFs in Afghanistan, most of whom were tolerated, if not protected by the Taliban.²⁶ Al-Qaeda, including al-

Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was thought to have as many as 500 personnel in the country; TIP several hundred; and TTP up to 6,000.

Meanwhile, ISK, which remained bitterly opposed to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, still had around 2,000 fighters dispersed across several provinces and remained an extremely potent threat.²⁷ This was demonstrated all too clearly when, on August 26, 2021, amidst the last chaotic days of the U.S. evacuation, an ISK suicide bomber detonated his explosive vest at Kabul International Airport, killing 13 U.S. service members and an estimated 170 Afghan civilians who were among the crowds of people who had flooded the airport in the hopes of fleeing the country.

Not only were terrorists evidently still thriving in Afghanistan, but without “boots on the ground” and with no bases in neighboring countries, the United States would have to rely on much more limited, “over the horizon” methods of CT, such as signals intelligence and long-range drone strikes. Together, these factors fueled concerns that Afghanistan would once again become a breeding ground for regional and international terrorism.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban’s victory, congratulations from jihadists around the world poured in. Al-Qaeda supporters especially were greatly enthused by the Taliban’s achievement and held it aloft as an example that should be emulated.²⁸ Even some ISIS supporters, most of whom still regarded the Taliban as apostates, begrudgingly celebrated their success.²⁹ Whether driven by a desire to share in the glory or to compete with and outdo a hated rival, it was, therefore, an enormous source of motivation for jihadists of all kinds, at a time when they badly needed it.

The United States has since demonstrated that over-the-horizon CT is possible—as evidenced by the killing of al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri in a drone strike at a Haqqani guesthouse in Kabul in July 2022.³⁰ And yet, this has been the only strike of its

kind in more than two years, leaving terrorists in the region with little to fear from the world's leading superpower. With the United States largely out of the picture and the Taliban firmly in control, the threat has rapidly metastasized and increasingly begun to bleed over Afghanistan's borders.

Expanding Spillover into Pakistan and the Region

This is particularly true in Pakistan, where terrorist attacks spiked by 73% after the Taliban regained control next door.³¹ In particular, TTP, which was already on the rebound under the leadership of Noor Wali Mehsud, was further emboldened by the Afghan Taliban's victory and dramatically increased its attacks beginning in mid-2021.³²

Under pressure in Afghanistan and eager to make its presence felt across the region, ISK also stepped up its attacks in Pakistan.³³ Between them, the two groups have been responsible for hundreds of attacks and thousands of casualties since 2021.³⁴ This poses a threat not only to Pakistan but also to broader regional and international stability. The escalation in violence has strained relations between Islamabad and the Afghan Taliban, which Pakistan holds responsible for failing to rein in the groups operating on its territory. Beyond this, the escalating violence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region may inspire attacks elsewhere and act as a draw for FTFs. Jihadists in other parts of Asia have been paying close attention to events there and have shown a renewed interest in traveling to Afghanistan, among other locations.³⁵ Although this is now more difficult than it once was, it remains a possibility that cannot be ignored.

ISK's Expanding Global Ambitions

Iran, too, has found itself in ISK's crosshairs, experiencing numerous plots and attacks, most notably a double suicide bombing in the southeastern city of Kerman in January 2024, in which 95

people were killed.³⁶ ISK has furthermore demonstrated its regional ambitions with cross-border plots and attacks targeting Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, along with intensified propaganda campaigns designed to appeal to Central Asians, which appear to be having success.³⁷ Though less impactful, ISK evidently maintains tangible connections to supporters in the Maldives, while ISIS-inspired plots are also routinely disrupted in India, which is indicative of the group's continued ability to motivate and sometimes connect with individuals and cells throughout the region using online propaganda and encrypted communication applications.³⁸

Not content with destabilizing South and Central Asia, ISK has dedicated itself to external operations much further afield and is believed to have been behind nearly two dozen thwarted plots targeting Europe, Turkey, and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.³⁹ These efforts eventually succeeded when ISK operatives (all originally hailing from Central Asia) carried out a fatal shooting at a church in Istanbul in January 2024, which was followed by the deadly assault on the Crocus City Hall arena outside Moscow two months later in which more than 130 people were killed. While it is Afghanistan's immediate neighbors that are still most at risk (particularly Pakistan and Iran), the ISK threat undeniably now extends throughout Asia and far beyond, thus confirming some of the international community's worst fears.

The War in Gaza: Catalyst for Renewed Jihadist Activity (October 2023-Present)

Transnational jihadists received yet another shot of inspiration when, on October 7, 2023, a coalition of militant groups led by Hamas launched an audacious and devastating attack against Israel, in which more than a thousand terrorists stormed across the border and went on a rampage, killing an estimated 1,200 people before retreating with more than two hundred hostages.⁴⁰ The subsequent Israeli bombardment and military incursions into Gaza, which

brought widespread humanitarian suffering and killed more than 40,000 Palestinians within the first year of the conflict, has further enflamed tensions and provided fertile ground for extremist narratives.⁴¹ The longer the conflict lasts, and the further it spreads, the more that terrorists will take advantage.

*Radicalization and Propaganda:
Increasing Risk of Transnational Terrorism*

Historically, groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have never managed to insert themselves into the Israeli-Palestinian theater in a meaningful way, and both sides have been critical of Hamas to varying degrees. However, Palestinian suffering has always served as a powerful and enduring source of grievance for violent jihadists and has often been exploited for purposes of propaganda and recruitment,⁴² fueling extremist narratives across the region.

Despite the enduring doctrinal differences between al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hamas, the recent escalation of violence has further amplified these grievances, creating a potent tool for radicalization. As FBI Director Christopher Wray remarked at the outset of the war, “The actions of Hamas and its allies will serve as an inspiration the likes of which we haven’t seen since ISIS launched its so-called caliphate.”⁴³

The leading Palestinian terrorist groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have maintained a primarily nationalist and regional focus. Hamas has encouraged international protests in support of Palestinians after the most recent war began, but it stopped short of calling for attacks.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in December 2023 four suspected members of Hamas were arrested in Germany and the Netherlands on suspicion of planning attacks on Jewish institutions in Europe, suggesting a possible expansion in their operational strategy.⁴⁵

Another group that has the capability to conduct overseas attacks against Jewish targets and which has a truly global reach is

Hezbollah. The Iranian-sponsored group has launched scores of missile and drone attacks against Israel and is currently preoccupied fighting Israeli troops after they launched a ground incursion against their strongholds in southern Lebanon in October 2024. However, the group's motivation for revenge is likely to remain high for years to come, meaning that international attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets are likely to remain a distinct possibility for the foreseeable future.

Indeed, despite the continual decimation of their top leadership, along with thousands of rank-and-file fighters, both Hamas and Hezbollah are likely to retain the ability to conduct regional and transnational attacks long after the current fighting eventually dies down. In the meantime, there is no end in sight to the violence, which has spread to Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon, leaving the Middle East teetering dangerously on the precipice of an all-out regional war.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS add yet another transnational layer to the threat, explicitly calling for bloodshed worldwide. Soon after the attack on Israel, Al-Qaeda's General Command released a statement praising Hamas for what they referred to as a "major shift in the path of global jihad," calling on Muslims everywhere to "wage jihad wherever [you] can" against "everything that is Crusader, Zionist, and Israeli... in every arena, in every sea, and in every sky."⁴⁶ ISIS, on the other hand, has remained deeply critical of Hamas for what it sees as its heretical ways, yet similarly called for Muslims everywhere to support Palestinians and attack Jewish and Crusader targets, including embassies, synagogues, nightclubs, and economic interests all over the world.⁴⁷

*Global Consequences:
Rising Extremist Activity and Attacks*

There are signs that such calls for action are resonating. Just eight days after the war in Gaza began, a Moroccan asylum-seeker living

in the United Kingdom stabbed a 70-year-old man to death on the street because “Israel had killed innocent children.” Since then, there have been several ISIS-inspired attacks in Europe, which appear to have been at least partially triggered by events in the Middle East, including the non-fatal shooting of a police officer with a crossbow outside the Israeli embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, in January 2024, and a deadly stabbing spree in Solingen, Germany in August.⁴⁸ Several individuals inspired by, or connected to ISIS have also been arrested in North America during this timeframe. Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, for instance, was arrested in Canada in September 2024, accused of planning to carry out a mass shooting at a Jewish center in New York City, which he had planned to coincide with the anniversary of the October 7 attacks by Hamas.⁴⁹

Similar plots have also now begun to emerge in parts of Asia. In August 2024, a 17-year-old boy was arrested for planning a stabbing spree in Singapore, having radicalized online after being exposed to the deluge of ISIS propaganda published in response to the war in Gaza.⁵⁰ And in October, three men, one of whom had come from Iraq, were arrested by authorities in Sri Lanka in connection with a planned attack on an Israeli-run Jewish community center in the popular tourist area of Arugam Bay.⁵¹

More broadly, the conflict has fueled an upsurge in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents and hate speech in numerous countries, including Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, China, and elsewhere.⁵² Although the full details are currently lacking, this includes a number of other violent incidents outside Israeli embassies, including a stabbing in Beijing, the discovery of a pipe bomb in Cyprus, a car ramming in Tokyo, and the arrest of an armed suspect in Azerbaijan.⁵³

The war in Gaza has undeniably resulted in widespread grievance and anger, energizing transnational jihadists and providing them with expanded opportunities for radicalization and recruitment. There is now undoubtedly an increased risk of attacks

on Jewish and Western targets in countries where jihadists are present, including both South and Southeast Asia. Moreover, as the conflict zone continues to expand and regional instability spreads, there will be increasing opportunities for jihadist sympathizers to travel to the region. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has thus provided yet another lifeline to jihadist networks, which may yet enable them to recover from their currently weakened state.

**Future Outlook for the Indo-Pacific:
No Room for Complacency**

Overall, there is little question that, with the exception of groups operating in Pakistan, transnational jihadist networks in the Indo-Pacific have been on the decline ever since ISIS lost its caliphate. In 2023, there was a modest increase in attacks in the Philippines, including the bombing of a Catholic Mass at Mindanao State University in Marawi in December by ISIS East Asia (ISEA).⁵⁴ However, it is presently unclear whether this effort will be sustained, and, for the most part, the general downward trend has continued.⁵⁵ This was punctuated quite dramatically in Indonesia in June 2024 when the longest-standing terrorist group in the country, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), announced that it was disbanding.⁵⁶

*Global Consequences:
Rising Attacks and Extremist Activity*

Despite the decline in transnational jihadist networks since ISIS's caliphate fell, these groups and the ideology that drives them have proven to be nothing if not resilient. Recent geopolitical events, including the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan and the outbreak of war in Gaza, have worked in their favor. This comes at a time when many countries across the region are still recovering economically from the pandemic, and the United States is preoccupied with great-power competition with China. What does this suggest for the future of terrorism and CT in the Indo-Pacific?

Predicting the future is fraught with uncertainty, and, as history has shown, all too often, terrorists wield the element of surprise to devastating effect. That said, it is clear that transnational jihadist networks have been reinvigorated by recent geopolitical events. This portends a general, increased risk of violence, as well as the full range of supporting activities, including the production of propaganda, recruitment, fundraising, arms procurement, paramilitary training, international networking, and terrorist travel. Within this context, the emergence of new, influential leaders or ideologues, and sometimes the formation of entirely new or splinter groups (as occurred in Pakistan and Bangladesh in 2023), may also be indicative of a gathering storm. All of these elements must, therefore, be closely monitored for signs of potential resurgence.

The spectrum of potential targets for attack is practically endless and continues to grow. As discussed above, the risk associated with Jewish institutions and symbols of the West has certainly risen in response to the war in Gaza. In recent years, ISK and others (notably the ethno-nationalist Balochistan Liberation Army) have also increasingly begun to target the Chinese in retaliation for their treatment of the Uighurs and their perceived economic exploitation of the region, suggesting an increasing risk to Chinese interests overseas.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the recent success of the Crocus City Hall attack has renewed terrorists' interest in attacking music concerts, given the potential for mass casualties.⁵⁸ However, the majority of recent attacks in South and Southeast Asia have tended to focus on more localized and often opportunistic targets, especially police and security forces. Political rallies, public transportation, religious minorities, energy infrastructure, and educational institutions have also been attacked, posing a significant challenge for CT and underscoring the need for specific and timely intelligence.

*Challenges in Counterterrorism and the
Risk of Over-Reliance on Tactical Operations*

To prevent terrorists from rebounding, it is incumbent upon national authorities to maintain pressure on jihadist networks and to continue building upon the CT successes of the last decade. Sustained, intelligence-led operations by security services will form the backbone of this effort, however, this alone will not be enough. Governments have generally become very successful at arresting terrorists and preventing attacks. However, there is a danger of over-reliance on tactical-operational means of containing the threat, which all too often exacerbates underlying grievances.

Moreover, despite many successful prosecutions, there are widespread challenges with the spread of violent extremism in prisons, as well as the effective risk management of terrorist offenders on release. Given that hundreds of terrorists have been incarcerated over the last decade, and many will soon be released, this is an issue of some concern. Accordingly, it will be necessary to ensure that preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs both inside and outside of prisons are given appropriate funding and resources. Governments cannot do this alone and should, therefore, seek to strengthen cooperation with civil society organizations and others who are involved in this space. This includes social media providers, whose platforms terrorists continue to routinely abuse in spite of ongoing efforts to remove them.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Sustained inter-governmental cooperation will also be critical. This means that states must look for ways to overcome longstanding political rivalries and further strengthen cooperative efforts using multilateral institutions and agreements such as ASEAN Our Eyes, the TCA, BIMSTEC, and perhaps even the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which appears to have largely been written off as a lost cause. Equally, there must be an ongoing

commitment to sharing information, including proactively contributing to Interpol's FTF database while working to ensure that all relevant agencies have ready access to the information they need.

A related, unresolved issue that must be addressed is the hundreds of FTFs and their family members from the region still languishing in detention centers in northeast Syria. Countries of South and Southeast Asia have been hesitant to bring their citizens back. Yet, given the deplorable conditions and ubiquitous specter of ISIS within these camps, the longer this situation is allowed to drag on, the higher the associated risk is likely to be. It is, therefore imperative that countries find a way to bring their citizens back as swiftly as possible, especially the children, who are likely to be in desperate need of counseling and other forms of support. Failure to do so only increases the risk they will eventually form the next generation of terrorists.

Conclusion

While it is certainly possible to degrade and sometimes even destroy certain groups that resort to violence in pursuit of their political objectives, it is impossible to eliminate terrorism as a tactic or to eradicate the underlying ideology. Thus, while there are certainly grounds for optimism, given the general trajectory of the threat in recent years, there is no room for complacency. Terrorism is an enduring reality that is unfortunately here to stay, and as the October 2023 attack by Hamas—a group that was thought to have been contained⁵⁹—has reminded us once again, terrorists are capable of remarkable patience and repeated strategic surprise.

Besides ensuring that CT agencies are appropriately resourced and continually making efforts to further refine these capabilities as part of a comprehensive approach while simultaneously enhancing international cooperation, countries of the Indo-Pacific must also look within. Internal political instability, interagency rivalries, corruption, social, political, and economic marginalization of

minorities, and human rights violations remain significant problems in many countries, creating ideal conditions in which terrorists and violent extremists are able to thrive. Although terrorism will never disappear entirely, sustained efforts to address the underlying predisposing risk factors and grievances that terrorists exploit will help to diminish the appeal of extremist narratives over time. While terrorists across much of the region are still reeling from successful efforts to dismantle their networks, now is the time to act. Doing so will limit terrorists' ability to rebound while proactively working toward a more stable and resilient region.

Endnotes

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