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ANNUAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

Global Threat Assessment

Southeast Asia
Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore

South Asia
Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

Central Asia
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

The Reshaped Terrorist Threat in the Middle East in 2025

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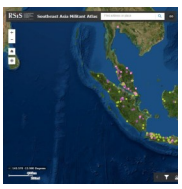
SOUTHEAST ASIA MILITANT ATLAS



Our centre has launched the **Southeast Asia Militant Atlas**, a dynamic and growing interactive map designed to provide researchers with a consolidated visual database of ISIS and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist-related incidents in Southeast Asia. Please access it via **https://tinyurl.com/ru8mjwbd**

Global Threat Situation in 2025

Kumar Ramakrishna

Selectively drawing upon the detailed regional analyses in the current volume, this overview covers the following three broad themes: 1) significant global developments and trends; 2) notable operational trends and developments; and 3) the enduring salience of a holistic, integrated approach in dealing with violent extremism.

Significant Global Developments and Trends

Israel's (Successful?) War with the "Axis of Resistance"

One significant global development occurred in the Middle East. Israel's sustained military campaign against Hamas in Gaza extended further afield. Israel severely degraded the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon through various means, including tactically innovative "pager explosions" targeting its leaders. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) also pursued Hezbollah remnants in Syria, while maintaining "offensive operations against the Houthis as part of its continued efforts to dismantle Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'".[1] Most significantly, Israel directly engaged Iran in a 12-day air and missile war in June, eliminating senior Iranian military figures and some key nuclear scientists, while also degrading Iran's nuclear capabilities. By the end of June, Israel emerged as the dominant military force in the region, appearing to have "significantly reshaped the Middle East's security landscape".[2]

Nevertheless, Israel's military exploits did not necessarily translate into durable strategic success. Hamas remained resilient, retaining "some "operational capability and authority in Gaza".[3] Furthermore, in the continuing absence of wider and sustainable peace efforts, "regional instability" and the potential for "further escalation of conflicts" cannot be ruled out in the new year.[4] The impact of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict also continued to reverberate in Southeast Asia. In Singapore, for instance, the authorities reported that a number of individuals had been self-radicalised by the conflict, with some preparing to "engage in violence overseas or in Singapore".[5]

Moreover, in mid-December, a horrific terrorist attack carried out by two gunmen against Jewish Australians celebrating Hannukah at Sydney's Bondi Beach, left at least 16 people dead. The motives of the shooters and whether they acted alone or at the behest of a "broader organisation or state sponsor" were unclear at the time of writing. However, it was noted that the attack came amidst a serious uptick in anti-Semitic harassment and intimidation in Australia and globally, since the "deadly 7 October 2023 attacks" in Israel and the ensuing "Israel-Hamas conflict".[6]

Developments in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region

In 2025, the evolving geopolitical and strategic picture in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region remained relevant regionally and further afield.

<u>The Afghan Taliban</u>

The Taliban authorities enjoyed improving relations with neighbouring states. Hence, "regional security chiefs" engaged in exchanges of visits with the Taliban, including even "the Tajik government, historically the most resistant regional government to the Taliban's harsh theocratic rule".[7] Notably, in early July, Moscow "formally recognised the Taliban government", and it was reported that the Taliban "cooperated closely with their Uzbek and Russian counterparts" in operations against the Taliban's arch-rival, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK).[8] That said, while the Afghan Taliban seemed able to "constrain" ISK, the "Emirate's main problem" was now the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan)".[9]

The Growing Influence of the TTP

Since the Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021, the "TTP has grown stronger every year".[10] The TTP, "the largest and most organised militant network" in Pakistan, has been trying to absorb "like-minded jihadist factions to forge a unified struggle" to bring about a "Taliban-style *shariah* state" in Pakistan.[11] Effectively exploiting the grievances of tribal Pashtuns on the Af-Pak border, the TTP has imitated the Afghan Taliban's "insurgency model by announcing self-styled *wilayats* (provinces), shadow ministers and military zones in Pakistan".[12] While the Afghan Taliban officially denied the TTP's presence on Afghan soil and rejected claims of supporting it materially, it supported the TTP ideologically. Kabul thus wanted Pakistan to recognise the TTP as a legal political party and "negotiate with it".[13] Islamabad, on the other hand, wanted the Afghan Taliban regime to "fulfil its commitment" under the 2020 Doha Agreement and "ensure its soil is not used to launch cross-border terrorism in Pakistan".[14] For their own reasons, the Afghan Taliban did not wish to "compromise the relationship" with Islamabad for the "TTP's sake".[15] Hence, TTP-Afghan Taliban relations "soured considerably in the second quarter of 2025".[16] The TTP's rank and file suspected some Afghan Taliban "complicity with Pakistani intelligence" in targeting TTP commanders and forces crossing into Pakistan from Afghan territory. Going forwards, therefore, the Afghan Taliban may need to tread with care on TTP matters, as the latter is "by far the most popular foreign jihadist group within the Taliban's ranks and even among the population".[17]

The TTP's influence also transcended Afghanistan and Pakistan. A leading Bangladeshi figure with the TTP was "allegedly trying to mobilise trained fighters from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border", to join the Rohingya militant groups the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), to fight against the Rakhine-based Arakan Army (AA) and the Burmese military, or the Tatmadaw.[18]

Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and Their Affiliates

The evolving geopolitical and strategic situation in the Af-Pak region in 2025 certainly had an impact on the regional fortunes of the Sunni Islamist extremist rivals, the Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda (AQ) and their respective affiliates. These networks remained functional to varying degrees, with some facing major challenges.

The Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)

One group facing serious challenges was ISK, whose operational fortunes appeared to be trending downwards. While ISK regularly skirmished with Taliban forces in the far east of Afghanistan, there was "no doubt that by mid-2025 its visibility was very low".[19] Damagingly, within Afghanistan itself, the politically ascendant TTP had been delegitimising ISK ideologically as "Kharijites" (extremists) since June 2024. Crucially, with the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, the IS global leadership apparently redirected funding originally earmarked for ISK "towards Syria, where IS sees a strategic opportunity for a relaunch".[20] Perhaps due to growing pressure in Türkiye and Afghanistan, ISK leaders had looked to Balochistan as a potential safe haven, but this turned out to be a "costly mistake" due to differences with the Baloch separatists.[21] ISK's "lack of funding and poor logistics", along with the inclement environment in 2025, compelled ISK leaders to assess that there was little point "in going on the offensive from such a position of weakness", and it was thus "decided [the group would] keep its forces in reserve for better opportunities".[22]

The Central Asian Factor

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the takeover by Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) – previously associated with both AQ and IS but now violently opposed to both[23] – represented "a major watershed in the global jihadist narrative".[24] Notably, Central Asian fighters – such as the Uyghur fighters of the AQ-affiliated Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) – played a "prominent part" in the final push to take the country.[25] A Central Asian signature was even detected on the opposing side of the new HTS government in Syria. ISK's Uzbek and Tajik propaganda continued to attack HTS, accusing the seemingly pragmatic HTS jihadist leader, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, "of betraying jihadists through his willingness to embrace the American, Russian, Chinese and other

'enemy' governments".[26] Central Asian militants linked to IS or ISK were implicated in activities in Uzbekistan, Russia, the Netherlands and Germany as well, indicating that "Central Asian militancy remains a persistent concern globally".[27]

The IS Footprint in Africa and Southeast Asia

The 2025 edition of the Global Terrorism Index confirmed that the Sahel region "now represents more than half of all global terrorism-related deaths".[28] IS continued to use its "operations in its African provinces to demonstrate its vitality and ongoing activity".[29] IS militant groups were active in Africa in 2025, especially in Nigeria, Mozambique and Central Africa.[30] The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which splintered from and is now a bitter rival of the older Boko Haram group, "scaled up its attacks against Nigeria's security forces in 2025", while Boko Haram, though "weakened by frequent assaults by ISWAP", nevertheless remained active.[31] The Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-Mozambique), operating since October 2017 and centred in the resource-rich northernmost region of Cabo Delgado, remained resilient in the face of security force pressure. Meanwhile, the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), operating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and western Uganda, continued "its lethal attacks against the civilian population".[32] Other active IS groups include the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) in the tri-border region of western Niger, northern Burkina Faso and eastern Mali, as well as the Islamic State Somalia (IS-Somalia) in the Bari region of the Puntland state of Somalia. IS-Somalia in particular played a key role as the "financial nerve centre for coordinating terror funds transfers to other IS affiliates in Africa, the Middle East and Asia".[33]

Worryingly, IS-Somalia even evinced a Southeast Asian footprint in 2025. In July, a Malaysian national, Dr Hakeem Ubeyda, was reportedly killed in a counter terrorist operation in Puntland, Somalia. Ubeyda was described as IS-Somalia's chief medical officer. IS-Somalia "reportedly includes a large contingent of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)".[34] IS displayed Southeast Asian links in other ways as well. In the second quarter of 2025, the Malaysian Special Branch detained 36 Bangladeshi nationals for being part of the allegedly IS-linked and self-proclaimed Gerakan Militan Radikal Bangladesh (GMRB) group. The group had apparently engaged in "recruitment and fund-raising among Bangladeshi nationals in Malaysia".[35] Meanwhile, in Singapore, "the continued spread of IS-inspired extremist content online" continued to cause concern.[36]

AQ and its Affiliates

Since returning to power, the Afghan Taliban, in order to improve relations with neighbouring states, has sought to restrain Ughur, Uzbek and Tajik jihadists hosted in Afghanistan. The same pressure has been applied to AQ "to avoid external operations, even though it enjoys better conditions in Afghanistan than the Central Asian jihadists".[37] That said, AQ continued operating training camps in Afghanistan in 2025, with its de facto leader, Sayf al-Adl, even inviting "would-be radicals" from any location to travel to Afghanistan for training. However, if the Afghan Taliban elects "to further solidify the improvement in relations with Pakistan", AQ's training camp activities would likely "also be subject to pressure" to cease operations.[38]

Beyond the Af-Pak region, AQ is "widely considered a less potent and immediate threat globally than the Islamic State in terms of external operations".[39] However, in Africa, particularly in the Sahel and Somalia, AQ's "regional branches are more lethal than Islamic State affiliates".[40] In Somalia, Al-Shabaab continued in 2025 to control large parts of the country, while Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), a coalition of AQ jihadists operating in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, remained "one of the most destabilising terror outfits in the region".[41] Globally, these two AQ African affiliates, Al-Shabaab and JNIM, are regarded as "dominating the group's successes".[42]

The year also witnessed an AQ nexus between South and Southeast Asia. It was reported that members of The Resistance Front (TRF), a group linked to the 2024 Pahalgam terror attack in Kashmir, India, received fund transfers from elements in Malaysia. The TRF is regarded as a front for the Pakistan-based, AQ-linked terror group, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).[43]

Far-Right Extremism

The extreme right as an overall political movement espouses "at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy", while the far right can be regarded as the "political manifestation of the extreme right".[44] Far-right extremist (FRE) groups that promote and engage in violence against racial, religious and other minority groups represent a violent subset of the extreme and far right, rooted in the "definitional foundations of othering, nativism, and authoritarianism".[45] The year 2025 was certainly not short of FRE incidents in the West, South Asia and even in Southeast Asia itself.

In the United States (US), for instance, the authoritative 2025 *Murder and Extremism in the United States* report asserted that: "All the extremist-related murders in 2024 were committed by right-wing extremists of various kinds, with eight of the 13 killings involving white supremacists".[46] Additionally, "far-right terrorism threats" were an issue in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, while in Europe, "far-right terrorism" remained a "distinct threat" as well – for instance, in the Hague, "hundreds of far-right extremists clashed with police and vandalised the offices of the centrist D66 party".[47]

FRE ideologies centred on the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory remained a concern even in non-Western Southeast Asia. In Singapore, four FRE cases identified between 2020 and June 2025 pointed to the "increasing traction of FRE ideologies" in the city-state.[48] In April 2025, for instance, reports emerged of a detained 17-year-old Singaporean boy, who, "radicalised by the March 2019 Christchurch shootings in New Zealand", had wanted to kill "at least 100 Muslims" at mosques in Singapore.[49] Seven months later, in Jakarta, a 17-year-old Indonesian student launched a bomb attack against a high school mosque, injuring 96 people. Although investigations found the attack was inspired by "criminal" and not "extremist" motives,[50] it was noted that the attacker had carried with him two airsoft guns inscribed with various Western FRE references.[51]

Malaysia was also not immune to "an increase in far-right sentiments" online, centred on "rising Malay-Muslim conservatism" with the "potential to deepen social divides and fuel exclusivism or even extremism".[52] It was suggested that such sentiments, when coupled with "extensive social media exposure", could, going forwards, "contribute to radicalisation and isolated actor attacks".[53] Such "glocalisation" of "far-right ideologies to reflect local sentiments" was evinced in "memes and social media content across Southeast Asia" and even East Asia, fuelled by social media and targeting impressionable youth.[54] At times, sustained exposure to a range of not just FRE but other ideologies, produced idiosyncratic cases of youth radicalisation. For instance, in 2025, Singapore recorded "its first incel-related radicalisation case" when a 14-year-old boy was reportedly radicalised by "a mix of far-right, far-left and IS ideologies".[55]

FRE ideologies centred on Great Replacement themes continued to manifest in South Asia as well. India witnessed an "intensification of communal violence" reportedly linked to "the spread of Hindutva ideology".[56] Vigilante "cow protection" violence remained "a defining feature of Hindutva attacks", fuelling "mob lynchings and assaults targeting Muslims and Dalits".[57] Indian Christians too faced "escalating hostility", having been on the receiving end of scores of indignities ranging from "the harassment of pastors to mob assaults during Sunday services".[58] The overall effect of this Hindutva-influenced communal unrest in 2025 was a "deep erosion of social cohesion and communal trust" towards the Hindu majority on the part of Muslims and Christians, with a concerning impact on "India's plural social fabric".[59]

The Social Media Factor

In 2025, "Islamist extremist and far-right actors alike" continued to rely on "decentralised supporter networks and localised online content-sharing ecosystems", allowing them to "sustain online activity despite intensified moderation efforts". These online networks and ecosystems in turn proliferated, increasingly becoming "key vehicles for threat actors to carry out their radicalisation and community-building efforts".[60]

Notably, geopolitical developments in the Middle East, like the conflicts in Gaza and Syria, as well as the aforementioned Israeli-Iranian conflict, remained “central narrative anchors” within the Islamist extreme online ecosystem.[61] IS and AQ deployed dissimilar social media narratives. The “rigid and uncompromising sectarianism” of IS, coupled with its global caliphate agenda, prevented it from supporting the Islamist nationalist Hamas unconditionally. Instead, IS online rhetoric emphasised that attacks on "apostate" Middle Eastern regimes were “a valid way to aid the Palestinian cause”.[62] For its part, in spite of “historical criticisms of Hamas's nationalism”, AQ was relatively muted in its “ideological critiques” of Hamas, so as to “project an image of jihadist unity” and portray itself as a “champion of the Palestinian cause”.[63]

Additionally, while official IS narratives framed Israel as an “archetypal adversary of Islam and Iran as a false champion of the Palestinian cause”, [64] AQ narratives emphasised the need to confront the "far enemy", referring to Israel and its Western allies. For instance, AQ Central, reacting to the mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, issued a statement in early 2025 affirming that “targeting the head of global disbelief is the most effective way to stand against these criminal policies of the axis of evil: America, the Zionist entity, and all the infidel Western countries”.[65]

At the same time, while IS propaganda sought to “recast post-Assad Syria” as a “theologically ordained” and “fertile ground for renewed jihad”, in the South Asian context, both IS and AQ tried to “connect geopolitical events like the long-running India-Pakistan tensions to a religious war against Muslims”, using the eschatological narrative of *Ghazwatul Hind*, coupled with selective readings of religious texts, “to radicalise and recruit followers”.[66]

Within Southeast Asia, a decentralised network of unofficial Islamist extremist supporter groups continued to adapt IS extremist tropes, “translating core propaganda and exploiting local and international grievances”.[67] For instance, pro-IS Indonesian online networks on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube connected local supporters with global IS developments “through consistent translations of the group’s major audio statements and by echoing calls to attack in Syria”.[68] The fall of the Syrian Assad regime marked a “critical inflection point for pro-IS, pro-AQ and pro-Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) supporters within the region”.[69] While Indonesian pro-AQ supporters “amplified positive framings of HTS, portraying Syria’s regime transition as divinely ordained”, pro-IS channels accused HTS of being anti-Islam and declared HTS leader al-Sharaa an apostate for engaging Western officials. Meanwhile, Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) online forums “condemned the new regime for failing to declare a caliphate”, while also disparaging al-Sharaa as a traitor.[70]

Another significant development was “IS’s gradual integration of AI into its media strategy”, with the rise of “increasingly refined generative AI (GenAI)-produced visuals across IS-affiliated publications, with machine learning tools now used to produce posters, enhance imagery and generate multilingual translations”.[71] The intensified use of AI in online propaganda was seen in Pakistan, where “all major terrorist networks” started using AI for “propaganda operations”, including the preparation of infographics, animated pictures and video recordings of operations, to “exaggerate their impact” as well as “translat[e] their bulletins into multiple regional languages”.[72] The use of GenAI, especially for purposes of disinformation and misinformation, was said to be the “next frontier for jihadist propaganda” in Africa,[73] while in Southeast Asia, the use of AI by some radicalised individuals “added another layer of complexity to the issue”.[74]

In terms of the FRE social media ecosystem in 2025, two basic trends were observed. First, the glocalisation of the core FRE ideological tenets of nativism, authoritarianism and populism continued, as these ideas circulated “beyond their oft-associated Western loci” and were “refracted through local particularities”.[75] Second, “post-organisational dynamics” further deepened, with “extremist engagement and mobilisation continuing within established organisations”, but at the same time “increasingly mediated through decentralised online networks and digital subcultures”.[76] Such mediating processes ensured that FRE “master frames” were not adopted wholesale, but rather customised and adapted to “locally resonant narratives and grievances”, often “reframing domestic anxieties as part of a broader struggle” to forestall the “perceived erosion of ‘traditional’ values”.[77] The twin dynamics of glocalisation and decentralised, networked engagement were

increasingly obvious in Southeast Asia, as evidenced by the rise of "diverse online FRE communities and subcultures", together with "several reported cases of online-driven radicalisation".[78]

The Grey Zone: Non-Violent Islamist Extremism

In 2025, as previously, subtle evidence of a continuing blurring of lines between putatively constitutional, non-violent political parties, civil society groups and violent actors, remained discernible.

In Bangladesh, the Islamist political landscape, following the ouster of the Awami League government the previous August, experienced a significant resurgence. Major political Islamist groups, such as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) and Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI), exploited the political vacuum to expand their influence, potentially normalising "extremist demands within the political mainstream".[79] The Gaza crisis proved to be a "dual catalyst, significantly accelerating the resurgence of mainstream Islamist political parties while also amplifying extremist threats in Bangladesh".[80] The BJI successfully leveraged the Gaza issue, framing the conflict "as a defence of the global Muslim community" while allying with HeI and the like-minded Islami Andolon Bangladesh to promote "intense religious emotions to advance their pro-*shariah* agendas".[81]

Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB), for its part, "moved dramatically from its previously covert proselytisation to openly mobilisation in major cities".[82] The heightened visibility of HTB's "hardline political Islam" appeared to correspond with "a concerning rise in religious extremism, intolerance and a wave of violence targeting religious minorities, secular individuals and women's rights activists".[83]

The non-violent/violent extremist nexus associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) was also discernible in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities disrupted a nine-person network linked to the banned HT, "reportedly finding firearms".[84] HT links were also observed when the Uzbek authorities, working with Russian and Afghan counterparts, disrupted attack plots within and outside Uzbekistan.[85]

In Southeast Asia, "non-violent extremist organisations" like HTI experienced "a resurgence in activity over the past year", with HTI organising mass nationwide rallies involving thousands in support of Palestine, while calling for "the establishment of a caliphate".[86] HTI also exploited nationwide protests in Indonesia in August over economic grievances, which escalated after a video of the police killing a delivery rider went viral, resulting in the deaths of at least 10 people.[87] One key HTI propaganda platform spread the narrative that the only "correct path" to "address the root problems of society" was by "establishing the *khilafah* (caliphate) and implementing Islamic *shariah* law".[88] The platform pointedly urged Indonesian Muslims to "abandon the corrupt system of democracy" and "fight to establish an Islamic state", eventually culminating in the "full establishment of Islam across the world".[89]

HTI was banned in Indonesia in 2017 due to its perceived opposition to Pancasila and the Indonesian Constitution, but it is "technically not a terrorist organisation since it has not committed any indiscriminate violence".[90] However, HTI's seeming seamless porosity between non-violent and violent modes worried the Jakarta authorities, who regarded HTI as still posing "security concerns because of its ideological similarity with violent Islamist organisations, leading to potential member crossovers".[91] It did not go unnoticed that HTI members were part of a "cross-regional pro-IS network" implicated in plots to attack the 2024 Indonesian general elections.[92]

Notable Operational Trends and Developments

In terms of more narrowly focused operational trends and developments, several key themes stood out in the 2025 survey.

The Increasing Use of Unmanned Aerial Systems

The increased weaponisation and deployment of unmanned aerial systems (UAS), or drones, were evident in conflict zones globally. In western Africa, ISWAP deployed "modified commercial drones for attacks and reconnaissance" that contributed to the lethality of its operations.[93] Similarly, Hamas proved "innovative in its military tactics by incorporating commercial drones in its weapons arsenal to expand its attack capabilities".[94] IS also continued to weaponise "commercially available drones", repurposing them to "carry and drop small munitions or explosives", exploiting their "low-cost, high-impact capability to conduct targeted attacks".[95] Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, meanwhile, reportedly also sought to acquire and adapt drones for "surveillance and potentially for delivering small payloads".[96]

The apparent standout threat group in the Middle East, as far as drone use was concerned, were the Houthis in Yemen, whose Samad and Qasef-2K series of drones were deployed for "both reconnaissance and attack missions, including targeting oil facilities and international shipping".[97] Importantly, since the Gaza conflict started, the more than 100 missile and drone attacks against shipping the Houthis have mounted in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, have significantly impacted maritime trade in the Middle East. This has compelled many shippers to take longer maritime routes around the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in increased freight costs and turning the Red Sea into "a high-risk zone".[98]

Elsewhere, the increasing use of relatively cheap commercial drones by "Pakistani terrorist networks across the ideological spectrum" was an "alarming trend in 2025".[99] Furthermore, the transfer of knowledge, skills and funds from the Taliban and AQ to the TTP and related threat groups like the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group (HGBG), proved equally crucial in the weaponisation of drones. While almost all terrorist groups in Pakistan used drones for surveillance and propaganda operations, "only factions affiliated with the TTP and the HGBG" used them for attacks. Interestingly, ISK and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) have not deployed drones for attacks so far.[100]

In Southeast Asia, resistance groups fighting against the Tatmadaw in Myanmar "increasingly used drones for offensive operations, ranging from swarm tactics to precision ambushes and targeted strikes on junta convoys and outposts".[101] These drone capabilities permitted the lightly armed people's defence forces (PDFs) to offset disadvantages in heavy weapons and to "strike effectively in urban peripheries and contested transport corridors".[102]

A Wide Range of Attack Modalities and Targets

The increasing use of drones aside, as previously, threat and armed groups globally employed a very wide variety of attack modalities against a range of diverse targets.

In Africa, to take a few IS affiliates as examples, IS-Somalia adopted "highly deadly asymmetric guerrilla tactics", including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), landmines and mobile ambushes, while ISCAP employed "agile small units" to infiltrate urban and peri-urban communities as "taxi drivers and small-scale traders".[103] Meanwhile, ISSP displayed "tactical flexibility by employing ambushes, IEDs and large-scale attacks on isolated military bases and rural areas using motorcycles", while also carrying out "devastating attacks against civilians".[104]

Baloch separatist groups in Pakistan, especially the BLA, displayed enhanced operational capabilities, shifting from attacking "low-profile targets like gas pipelines, power pylons and railway tracks" to "more daring attacks on security checkposts and military camps and convoys".[105] The BLA also deliberately blocked main highways to disrupt traffic from the rest of the country, fostering the impression that "the government is losing control over Balochistan's main road networks".[106]

In Southeast Asia, armed groups attacked a range of targets deploying a variety of tactics as well. Relatively conventional military tactics were noted in Myanmar's ongoing civil war. For instance, in Sagaing in March, "one of the conflict's fiercest engagements" occurred when local PDFs "captured dozens of soldiers and cut off reinforcements to Indaw Township".[107] Six months later, "anti-junta

forces" captured Banmauk, a mining and timber hub near Sagaing's border with Kachin State. In Salin Township, anti-junta forces struck the Tanyaung Power Plant, which supplies electricity to important military factories, "likely causing significant damage to the region's military production".[108] In sum, anti-junta resistance forces in Myanmar appeared to prefer coordinated "large-scale assaults" to "inflict substantial damage on the military's ability to operate outside urban strongholds".[109]

In southern Thailand, on the other hand, "unarmed civilians" continued to "bear the brunt of the protracted conflict".[110] Compared to 2024, civilian casualties remained slightly higher than those amongst armed combatants. Moreover, although the frequency of insurgent attacks declined slightly, "their severity and lethality increased".[111] For example, one major incident in March was a coordinated assault by heavily armed insurgents on the Sungai Kolok district office in Narathiwat, using a car bomb, assault rifles and grenades. The attack killed two defence volunteers and injured eight others, including three passing civilians.[112]

The Youth Radicalisation Challenge

Youth radicalisation remained a "significant and alarming global trend", certainly in the Middle East, "with particularly acute manifestations in Syria and Yemen".[113] In Syria, after the Assad regime fell, IS smuggled weapons into the al-Hol prison camp, where IS families are detained, to train children within the camp with the objective of preparing them to become "cubs of the caliphate".[114] IS aside, a United Nations (UN) report in June also asserted that the Houthis had "recruited 182 boys and then deployed them to the frontlines, exposing them to extreme violence".[115]

In Pakistan, the younger generation of Baloch separatists were better educated, social media savvy and attracted to more radical forms of Baloch nationalism. Baloch youth, who form more than 70 percent of Balochistan's population, remained generally alienated, which helped set the stage for "steady recruitment to the Baloch separatist groups".[116] In Bangladesh, prominent young, urban ideologues with a history of links to "groups like Ansar al Islam (AAI) and global networks like AQ" facilitated "online radicalisation", deftly exploiting digital platforms to recruit urban, educated youth.[117] In Southeast Asia, youth radicalisation remained a pressing concern, certainly in Singapore, given the increase in the number of youths dealt with under the Internal Security Act since 2015.[118] Moreover, rather than Islamist extremists alone, "terrorists of various persuasions", including those motivated by FRE and a "mix of ideologies",[119] are also getting younger.[120]

The Lone-Actor Threat

One notable operational trend that persisted was the lone-actor threat. In the Middle East, IS, given its reduced capacity for large-scale coordinated operations, "explicitly encouraged and promoted lone wolves in its propaganda, given they are difficult to prevent with their small intelligence footprint".[121] One notable example of this IS tactic was the suicide bombing inside St Elias church near Damascus on June 22, which resulted in the deaths of at least 25 people.[122] In the Malaysian context, a 2025 assessment noted that "the persistent threat of isolated actors attempting low-tech attacks using knives or improvised explosives cannot be discounted".[123] Likewise, in Singapore, the threat of self-radicalised lone actors using low-tech methods such as knife attacks in public places was also recognised.[124]

Islamist extremism aside, "most far-right violence today" is perpetrated by lone individuals as well. It is worth reiterating that these "lone actors also increasingly display erratic and personalised ideologies which either combine multiple ideological traditions or create new worldviews wholesale".[125] For example, a 2023 mass shooting at a shopping mall in Allen, Texas, involved a Latino gunman with mixed ideological leanings: he had a swastika tattoo on his chest and had also posted incel tropes online, at one point declaring, "I hate women".[126]

The Enduring Importance of a Holistic, Integrated Approach in Dealing with Violent Extremism

Finally, the year's developments affirmed that a judicious mix of hard and soft approaches, involving a calibrated application of force together with a serious, multidimensional effort to address the underlying conditions which drive violent extremism, remained crucial.

The "Hard" Approach: Strengths and Limitations

The Challenge of Kinetic Counter Terrorist Operations

In 2025, South Asia seemed to be a region of contrasts when it came to counter terrorist operations. On the one hand, the interim Bangladeshi government's perceived "'soft' approach" and "denial of the terrorism threat" were seen as a weak response to the burgeoning Islamist extremist threat in the country. This policy laxity was regarded as "disempowering CT agencies", illustrated by the fact that large specialist counter terrorist agencies were diverted to "capturing juvenile gangs and other conventional criminals".[127] On the other hand, in Pakistan, the state's "overmilitarised counterinsurgency framework", including extrajudicial abductions and killings of Baloch dissidents, contributed to sustaining the transition of the Baloch insurgency from a tribal to an urban guerrilla movement.[128]

In some African cases, an overly hard kinetic approach to the militant challenge was also discernible. The Mozambican government's "security-centric and heavily militarised operations" experienced "limited success" as they failed to address the "complex structural and historical factors" that primarily fuelled the insurgency.[129] In the Sahel, meanwhile, the militaries of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso increasingly mobilised civilian vigilantes and defence groups to bolster their "overwhelmed armies", with "limited success" as well.[130]

Overly kinetic operations were also evident in Southeast Asia. In embattled Myanmar, the Tatmadaw relied on "airstrikes, heavy artillery and scorched earth tactics to depopulate contested areas".[131] Such airstrikes "destroyed clinics and schools, intensifying mass displacement and economic collapse".[132] At the same time, in western Rakhine State, in response to the AA's "relentless" progress, the junta resorted to "increasingly desperate tactics", including "indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks on civilian areas", a flawed approach that hinted at the reality of "military overstretch".[133]

Across the border in India, the state's Maoist counterinsurgency operations were also characterised by over-reliance on military firepower. Observers documented instances of "alleged disproportionate force, custodial violence and extrajudicial killings",[134] all of which only undermined the "legitimacy of governance" among the tribal populations of the region, where the Maoist insurgents emerge from. In sum, a "purely military approach", going forwards, risks "perpetuating grievance cycles in the region".[135]

In contrast, the Indian military's kinetic response to the April 2025 terror attack by Pakistan-based jihadists in the Pahalgam region of Jammu and Kashmir state, where 26 Hindu pilgrims were killed, was arguably more measured and effective. The Indian military response involved coordinated missile and air strikes – called Operation Sindoor – against jihadist camps and military bases across Pakistan and Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The strikes disrupted the operational infrastructure of several jihadist groups, including LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).[136]

Southeast Asia provided additional examples of relatively effective kinetic counter terrorist operations. In eastern Malaysia, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) continued to play a key role in "safeguarding coastal entry points and preventing kidnapping, smuggling and militant activities".[137] ESSCOM and regional security forces also adopted UAS, advanced coastal radar systems and closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring in their operations.[138]

Laws and Other Measures

Kinetic operations aside, the hard approach also comprises legal and administrative measures, which, if well coordinated and implemented, can be effective. In 2025, several Southeast Asian states evinced this approach with some degree of success. In Singapore, in February, the government passed the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill, empowering authorities to issue restraining orders against individuals producing content that undermines Singapore's racial harmony. This legislation took close reference from the older and proven Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The measured nature of the latest amendment was evinced by a "community remedial initiative", allowing "offenders involved in less severe cases to make amends and undergo rehabilitation".[139]

In Indonesia, another piece of legislation, the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia) Law, was amended in April to permit active military officers to head the Indonesian National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and included plans to establish 22 new regional military commands as well as 100 new territorial development battalions. The military was legally authorised to conduct "hard" approaches, such as "intelligence gathering using military assets", and "soft" approaches, such as "deradicalisation seminars held at the army's local territorial command headquarters".[140] That said, the Prabowo administration was mindful of "preserving a balance between the police, the military and other state institutions involved in CT".[141]

In the southern Philippines, terrorist activities continued to trend downwards in 2025, with no major attacks occurring in the year. The security forces benefitted from a calibrated kinetic effort to eliminate terrorist leaders, while simultaneously inducing surrenders through a key legislative instrument, Executive Order 70 (EO70). Implemented in 2018, EO70 has been "instrumental in creating a framework for terrorists to surrender".[142] Under EO70, active combatants wishing to lay down their arms can "surrender themselves in exchange for protection and livelihood support".[143]

"Softer" Approaches Needed Too

Ultimately, a more holistic, integrated approach is needed to neuter violent extremism. Thus, the abovementioned "harder", kinetic elements of national power, need to be balanced with "softer" measures dealing with the underlying conditions that give rise to violent extremism in the first place.

Holistic National Action Plans

Official recognition of the need to "balance its kinetic and non-kinetic counter terrorism responses" was evident in Pakistan, which announced a new National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy in 2025.[144] The new NPVE policy seeks to "sustain kinetic counter terrorism achievements through concurrent non-kinetic policy interventions".[145] The NPVE comprises a Five-R framework: 1) revisit (educational curriculum); 2) reach out (counter extremist ideologies through mainstream and social media); 3) reduce risk (of violent extremism); 4) reinforce (the message of peace and tolerance); and 5) reintegrate (rehabilitation of former fighters and conflict-affected communities).[146] While a timely idea, the real challenge facing the NPVE going forwards will be its judicious execution.[147]

In Indonesia, BNPT commenced Phase II of the Indonesian National Action Plan Against Extremism (RAN PE) for 2025 to 2029, which emphasised "improving interagency collaboration and engaging local governments to take an active role in P/CVE".[148] Meanwhile, building on the Malaysian Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (MyPCVE) launched in 2024,[149] the Malaysian Special Branch expanded its systematic outreach efforts through the organisation of public awareness programmes. In July, for instance, the E8 Counter Terrorism Division held a public exhibition on terrorism and counter terrorism in Penang, aiming to raise awareness of the dangers of terrorist involvement, emphasise the community's role in prevention efforts, and educate the public on recognising early signs of radicalisation.[150]

Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes

Rehabilitation and reintegration programmes should aim to provide "former terrorist detainees with the tools and support necessary to rebuild their lives and become productive members of society".[151] This proved to be challenging in the Middle East, due to some extent to "insufficient funding".[152] The directors of the aforementioned al-Hol Camp housing IS youth and families, consistently complained about the "critical lack of rehabilitation facilities and psychological support necessary to deradicalise these youth".[153]

The situation seemed relatively better in Southeast Asia. One notable initiative jointly established by the seemingly rehabilitated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)[154] and Densus 88 in June was the Rumah Wasathiyah (House of Moderation) programme. Headed by very senior JI leaders, Rumah Wasathiyah aims to "engage former JI members and terrorist inmates to encourage disengagement from extremism", via various modalities such as "face-to-face seminars, online webinars and in-prison discussions with inmates convicted of terrorism offences".[155] As a relatively new initiative, its longer-term impact needs to be monitored. Additionally, while the overall recidivism rate among rehabilitated Indonesian terrorists remained relatively low, there was little room for complacency. Some recidivists subsequently assumed key leadership roles of new militant cells, reiterating the need for all former terrorists to "systematically receive consistent reintegration support".[156]

The threat of recidivism was also a concern in Malaysia. Several recent IS-linked terrorism arrests and convictions involved recidivists, "some of whom were radicalised while incarcerated",[157] due in part to prison overcrowding, which contributed to the "spread of extremist ideologies alongside other challenges".[158] Mindanao in the Philippines too faced challenges in the reintegration of former combatants. These individuals struggled to adjust to civilian life after years of conflict. Moreover, "threats of retaliation and the lack of psychosocial support" increased the "risk of recidivism".[159]

In Singapore, community-based rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives led by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) continued. Notably, Singapore expanded its rehabilitation capabilities beyond Islamic religious counselling to "encompass a wider range of extremist ideologies".[160] Newer interventions targeting self-radicalised youth were developed, including "mentorship programmes, cyber wellness initiatives and social skills development courses".[161]

Addressing Medium- to Longer-Term Structural Grievances

Finally, the 2025 survey reinforced yet again that comprehensively addressing underlying political and socioeconomic structural grievances simply has to be part of the overall policy mix in dealing with the violent extremism challenge.

This point was clear in the Middle East, where the "need for a comprehensive framework which includes clear provisions for Hamas to disarm and integrate its members into a Palestinian community" under a "unified and legitimate Palestinian government", was regarded as a key component "notably absent" from US President Donald Trump's 20-point plan for the end of the Gaza conflict.[162] In a nutshell, stability in the Middle East depends on "regional and international actors moving beyond short-term military solutions to pursue inclusive governance and cooperation to address the root causes of extremism".[163] Otherwise, the "cycle of violence and instability" could well continue.[164]

In Africa, the regions "most affected by terrorism" continue to face deeper challenges, such as political instability among elites, corruption, poor governance, violence against civilians, and human rights violations committed by armies and civilian vigilante groups.[165] Because several African countries struggle to provide basic security and social services across vast, ungoverned border areas, threat groups can step in and fill the gap. In Pakistan, the state's "neglect" of the "genuine socioeconomic grievances" of the Baloch population has also played a big role in generating support for the Baloch militants.[166]

A similar logic holds in Southeast Asia. In southern Thailand, knowledgeable observers argue that, fundamentally, "Malay Muslims" in the Deep South will continue "demanding recognition of their

distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity as well as greater self-governance" – and as long as this issue remains unresolved, the conflict is likely to persist.[167]

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore

INDONESIA

Alif Satria and Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah

The overall threat posed by Indonesian terrorist organisations continued to decline in 2025. Largely the result of Special Detachment (Detasemen Khusus, or Densus) 88's sustained pressure on pro-Islamic State (IS) groups and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s decision to disband in June 2024, terrorist activities are now at their lowest level to date. Notably, for the third consecutive year, Indonesia recorded no terrorist attacks, alongside a steady decrease in attempted plots.[1] Whereas three plots were publicly recorded in 2024, none of the suspected terrorists arrested in 2025 were found to be actively planning attacks, although some had called for others to bomb places of worship.[2] The key challenge now is for Indonesia to consolidate this period of relative calm by implementing measures that can sustainably disengage existing networks and prevent a long-term resurgence of these groups.

Organisational Dynamics

Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)

Following its disbandment in June 2024, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) has taken notable steps to demonstrate its commitment to the decision. Beyond surrendering firearms and explosives,[3] collaborating with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) to update its *madrassa* curricula,[4] and having 8,000 members pledge allegiance to the Indonesian state,[5] JI seniors in several regions have also begun cooperating with Densus 88 to develop sustainable reintegration programmes for the group's members. In Bengkulu province, for instance, JI seniors worked with Densus 88 to integrate members into the local Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) farmers' cooperative, providing them with stable livelihoods and new community networks.[6] Meanwhile, in Semarang, Central Java, JI seniors collaborated with Densus 88 and local authorities to identify members' financial challenges and facilitate access to social assistance.[7]

One of the most notable countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives jointly established by JI and Densus 88 is the Rumah Wasathiyah (House of Moderation) programme. Launched in June 2025 and led by JI seniors, such as Para Wijayanto, the group's former *emir*,[8] Rumah Wasathiyah aims to engage former JI members and terrorist inmates to encourage disengagement from extremism. Its activities include face-to-face seminars, online webinars and in-prison discussions with inmates convicted of terrorism offences. To date, Rumah Wasathiyah has conducted nine seminars across several provinces – East Java, Riau, North Sumatra, Lampung, Central Java and Central Sulawesi – as well as four in-prison discussions within the Nusakambangan maximum-security prison complex.[9] While Wijayanto has noted that the programme has been generally well received among JI members, some observers have criticised it as "detached and overly bureaucratic".[10] However, lacking a structured monitoring and evaluation framework, its long-term impact remains uncertain.

Despite this progress, the threat of dissenting JI members sustaining the organisation's struggle remains. Former JI senior Imtihan Syafi'i, for example, noted that the process of convincing JI members to abandon extremism will take time, as "this behaviour cannot immediately be erased".[11] Similarly, former JI member Khairul Ghazali observed that there are members who are still active underground, as "not all chapters have abided by the organisation's disbandment".[12] For now, however, no concrete efforts to reorganise have been observed. Rather, dissent has tended to surface in more subtle ways. Former JI leader Adung, for instance, has taken an ambivalent stance – neither openly rejecting the dissolution nor explicitly declaring his support for it.[13] Others have

continued to share classic JI texts and manuals, such as *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah* (Jihad Education), within JI-affiliated study circles,[14] avoiding direct calls for violence but quietly sustaining JI's core doctrines of Muslim victimhood, resistance and the religious legitimacy of jihad.[15]

Pro-Islamic State (IS) Groups

Pro-Islamic State (IS) groups in Indonesia have continued to remain low profile, focusing on rebuilding their networks and resources. Due to strong policing of offline activities, most supporters have migrated to online communities on mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and YouTube.[16] Recent studies have shown that within these online spaces, pro-IS networks have successfully maintained a sense of community. Propagandists, for example, continue to connect local supporters with global IS developments through consistent translations of the group's major audio statements and by echoing calls to attack in Syria.[17] Meanwhile, local "jihobbyists"[18] have sustained discourse between members by producing and sharing emotive content that taps into broader national grievances. Additionally, pro-IS Indonesian women in Syrian refugee camps remain powerful symbols of resilience, maintaining engagement by sharing day-to-day updates from their lives.[19]

This sustained sense of community online has translated into some degree of offline activity. Despite pro-IS groups' weakened state, collective fund-raising efforts via social media campaigns have persisted. Notably, most of the funds remain directed towards supporting pro-IS families – demonstrating the community's commitment to sustaining the IS cause. For example, the Anfiqu Centre, managed by Bahrun Naim's former second-in-command, Ibadurrahman, raised IDR 211,455,276 (SGD 16,493) between January and September 2025,[20] while Gubuk Sedekah Amal Ummah (GSAU) – another well-known pro-IS charity – reported disbursing IDR 306,076,000 (SGD 23,874) in the first half of 2025.[21] Despite these efforts, however, pro-IS groups' operational capacity remains at its weakest point, with communities unable to mobilise resources in a sustainable manner or facilitate travel abroad.

Newly released court documents indicate that over the past decade, several pro-IS groups have sought to address their challenges in collective resource mobilisation by attempting to establish a centralised, cross-regional command structure.[22] The most recent example was the Abu Oemar *halaqoh* (Quranic study circle) network, which, at the time of his arrest in 2023, comprised over 42 members across 13 halaqoh in West Java, Jakarta and Banten.[23] However, this was not the first time such an attempt had been made. In 2019, an unnamed pro-IS group in Lampung planned to merge local pro-IS cells with Khilafatul Muslimin – a pro-caliphate, non-violent Islamic organisation – to address the former's "lack of structure" and the latter's "lack of action".[24] While these initiatives ultimately failed and do not indicate the imminent revival of pro-IS networks, they represent a notable development in organisational capability for a network historically characterised by decentralisation and disorganisation.[25]

Darul Islam (DI)

Members of Darul Islam (DI), Indonesia's longest-standing terrorist organisation, have continued attempts to resuscitate the group, albeit with little success. Two of the three DI-linked individuals arrested in 2025 served as a recruiter and a fund-raiser.[26] Furthermore, 15 DI-affiliated charities in Jambi had their assets frozen and operations suspended in 2025.[27] These developments follow the trend of arrests made in 2024, during which police uncovered organised efforts to recruit, train and acquire weapons for DI – albeit with little success, as only bladed weapons were recovered during the arrests.[28]

The authorities' approach to DI differs slightly from that taken towards JI and pro-IS individuals, in that greater emphasis has been placed on rehabilitation rather than prosecution. At least 28 government officers in Jambi have been identified as being affiliated to DI and will receive "guidance" from the government.[29] While the softer approach is likely driven by overcrowded prisons,[30] it has also facilitated better reintegration of ex-DI members – at least 424 ex-members

pledged allegiance to Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (NKRI, or the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) and Pancasila in 2023,[31] 256 in 2024[32] and at least 30 last year.[33]

Responses: Counter Terrorism (CT) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Arrests

2025 marked the fourth consecutive annual decline in terrorist-related arrests in Indonesia over the past five years.[34] Between January and October 2025, news sources reported only the arrest of 20 suspected terrorists – a 65.5 percent decrease from the 58 arrests made in 2023, and a 94.8 percent decrease compared to 2021, when the highest arrest figures since 2020 were recorded. Importantly, this decline does not indicate a weakening of Indonesia's counter terrorism (CT) capabilities, as evidenced by the continued absence of attacks and plots. Rather, when viewed alongside qualitative assessments of Indonesia's terrorist landscape, the trend more likely reflects the diminishing prosecutable threat posed by terrorist organisations. Concurrently, however, the figures may also be influenced by the media's increasing underreporting of arrests. Notably, while 88.5 percent of arrests were reported in 2023,[35] only 29.5 percent were publicised in 2024.[36]

Out of 20 arrests in 2025, only nine had known group affiliations – three were linked to DI and six were pro-IS supporters. Among them, three in particular stood out. In August 2025, authorities in Aceh detained a DI recruiter and a fund-raiser, both of whom were public servants – one was employed at the local Religious Affairs office and the other at the local Department of Tourism office.[37] While this underscores the persistent risk of extremist infiltration into state institutions, such cases remain rare – of the 781 terrorists arrested since 2021, only 2.1 percent were government employees. The third person was an 18-year-old pro-IS supporter arrested in May 2025 in Gowa, South Sulawesi. Notably, he was the only suspect recorded to have explicitly promoted violence, urging others in a newly formed online chat group to "carry out bombings against places of worship".[38] Crucially, however, no evidence indicated any actual attack plot.

Reintegration

Reintegration programmes for former terrorist offenders have been sporadic. In April, Densus 88 launched a roadmap for ex-JI members' reintegration, divided into three phases: 1) 2024-2025: socialisation, legal actions, asset tracking and mapping of members; 2) 2026-2027: continued monitoring, repatriation and pre-integration measures; and 3) 2028: full reintegration.[39] While the effort appears systematic, there have been inconsistencies in how the programmes have been carried out. For example, JI-affiliated charities and schools in Palu, Central Sulawesi, have reportedly been shut down since JI's disbandment, despite no evidence of illegal activities, while JI-affiliated schools elsewhere have been allowed to continue operations.[40] Such unequal treatment may lead to more grievances, which could hamper reintegration efforts. Provision of assistance has similarly differed by region – ex-JI members based in Central Java speak of well-coordinated reintegration programmes, while those in Jakarta report that assistance is given intermittently.[41]

The uneven distribution of attention and support, though not a new issue,[42] became more pronounced following the release of high-profile terrorist figures, such as Umar Patek. Notably, Umar's establishment of Kopi Ramu 1966, a café located in an upscale area in Surabaya, is a story of successful reintegration. However, much of this success can be credited to the strong backing of entrepreneur and human rights advocate David Andreasmito,[43] who both financed the business and mentored Umar.[44] Before this, Umar admitted he had difficulties reintegrating – failing to secure funding for a mini market business and relying on income from speaking engagements at deradicalisation forums.[45] While commendable, Umar's success underscores the fragility of the state's current reintegration initiatives, as such crucial support is at times only available through unique opportunities like third-party interventions which are unlikely to be extended beyond high-profile terrorist figures.

Budget Cuts and the Role of the Military

The National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) lost 24.29 percent of its budget in 2025, mostly impacting business trips of Jakarta-based officers to other regions.[46] While seemingly concerning, government audits indicated that BNPT only utilised 55 percent of its allocated national budget in 2024.[47] However, this underutilisation was partly due to a reliance on foreign aid, most of which is no longer available due to the United States (US)'s freezing of funding of US Agency for International Development (USAID) projects for CT and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).[48] Nevertheless, BNPT said they will proceed to focus on playing a coordinator role and have commenced Phase II of the National Action Plan Against Extremism (RAN PE) for 2025 to 2029, which emphasises improving interagency collaboration and engaging local governments to take an active role in P/CVE.[49]

Another development on the horizon is a renewed role for the Indonesian military (TNI) in CT operations. The revision of the TNI Law in April 2025 allowed active military officers to head BNPT,[50] and included plans to establish 22 new regional military commands (Kodam) and 100 new territorial development battalions.[51] Historically, the TNI has often played a role in CT. Under Law No. 34/2004, the military was authorised to conduct "hard" approaches, such as intelligence gathering using military assets, and "soft" approaches, such as deradicalisation seminars held at the army's local territorial command headquarters. In 2019, the military also established a dedicated CT Special Operations Command (Koopsus TNI).[52] Yet, despite the new authority for active TNI officers to lead BNPT, Police Commissioner General Eddy Hartono was reinstated as BNPT's head in August.[53] This indicates that while the TNI will likely continue to play a significant role in CT – perhaps with expanded intelligence capabilities once the new regional commands have been established – the Prabowo administration is also mindful of preserving a balance between the police, the military and other state institutions involved in CT.

Outlook

Non-Violent Extremist Organisations

As violent extremist organisations have kept a low profile, authorities are turning their attention to the activities of non-violent extremist organisations. Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), in particular, has seen a resurgence in activity over the past year. Thousands attended nationwide rallies in January and February in support of Palestine, calling for the establishment of a caliphate.[54] HTI was proscribed in 2017 due to its perceived opposition to Pancasila and the Indonesian Constitution, but is technically not a terrorist organisation since it has not committed any indiscriminate violence. However, the organisation is still considered to pose security concerns because of its ideological similarity with violent Islamist organisations, leading to potential member crossovers. The now-deceased Bahrun Naim, one of the most notorious Syria-based IS leaders, was a former HTI member. More recently, members of HTI were found to be part of a "cross-regional pro-IS network" implicated in plans to attack the 2024 general elections.[55]

Repatriation

While the repatriation of Indonesian foreign terrorist fighters was much discussed this past year, hardly any progress has been made as repatriation appears to have been de-prioritised by the Prabowo administration. Efforts to repatriate Indonesians from Syria – BNPT verified that 483 Indonesians are in Syrian detention camps as of December 2024[56] – have partly been complicated by the regime change in Syria.[57] While direct repatriation from Syria has stalled, BNPT successfully brought back 41 ex-IS Indonesians from Afghanistan, Turkey, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines between December 2023 and December 2024.[58] However, unless serious efforts are made to coordinate responsible repatriation from Syria, Indonesia will be vulnerable to a looming IS threat in the future. Already, some Indonesians residing in the al-Hol camp have reportedly helped to recruit children from the camp for IS, and many more are at risk of becoming entrenched in a resurgent IS network.[59] Another key development to look out for is the return of former JI members – 16 ex-JI members from Syria and 10 from the Philippines were initially scheduled for repatriation in 2025, but this plan was postponed to 2026[60] – potentially impacting JI's disbandment

process, as many former members abroad hold seniority and combat experience conducive to splinter formation.

Recidivism

The issue of terrorist recidivism has been a persistent concern in Indonesia. Notably, the country's last terrorist attack – the 2022 Astana Anyar bombing – was carried out by the pro-IS recidivist Agus Sujatno.[61] Previously arrested in 2017 for his participation in the Cicendo bombing plot, Agus was released in 2021 and quickly reconnected with a jihadist network by working as a parking attendant at a pro-IS school.[62] That said, the overall recidivism rate among Indonesian terrorists remains relatively low. Studies by Indonesian think tanks have found that only four to 11 percent of former terrorist inmates re-engage with terrorist networks following their release.[63] This aligns with more recent research by BNPT, which found that out of 1,200 former terrorists who participated in deradicalisation programmes over the past decade, eight percent reoffended.[64]

Although no terrorist incidents involving recidivists were recorded in 2025, court documents released last year show that former terrorists have played a crucial role in the recent evolution of terrorist networks in Indonesia. A key example was the establishment of Abu Oemar's centralised halaqoh network in 2023.[65] Alongside Oemar himself, who was a former DI member released in 2021, 15 other recidivists joined his network.[66] Court documents indicated that many joined not only because Oemar was regarded as "the most senior and experienced [jihadist] figure" they knew, but also because Oemar was willing to overlook their pledged allegiance to the Indonesian state and assist them in annulling it.[67] Notably, some of these recidivists later assumed key leadership roles. One example was Abdul Halim, a recidivist who was eventually appointed coordinator of Oemar's Muara Angke cell, where he actively recruited other ex-offenders.[68] Ensuring that all former terrorists systematically receive consistent reintegration support – without the need to rely on ad hoc third-party interventions – will be key to further reducing Indonesia's terrorist recidivism rate.

Memetic Violence and Youth

On November 7, multiple explosions detonated at SMA N 72 Jakarta (72 Jakarta State High School), injuring 96 people.[69] Police investigations uncovered the suspect as a 17-year-old student from the school. Importantly, the police also found that the perpetrator had carried with him two airsoft guns inscribed with various far-right extremist references.[70] These included the names of far-right terrorists, such as Brenton Tarrant, Luca Traini and Alexandra Bissonnette,[71] and neo-Nazi symbolisms, such as the phrase "14 Words" and "For Agartha".[72]

Despite these influences, it is crucial to note that police investigations on the suspect's social media accounts did not find that he conducted the bombing in support of any *political* goal. Instead of classifying it as terrorism, Densus 88 has termed the incident as "memetic violence"[73] – violence inspired by previous, similar attacks and committed in pursuit of personal goals such as communal notoriety.[74]

Although the incident was not classified as terrorism, it underscored the growing number of Indonesian youths who are being exposed to and radicalised by extremist content. Notably, a week after the SMA N 72 bombing, the police announced that in 2025, they arrested a total of five terrorist suspects for "attempting to recruit youths and students into a terrorist network".[75] The police also noted a sharp rise in child radicalisation cases: while only 17 children had been identified as victims of terrorist recruitment between 2011 and 2017, Densus 88 conducted interventions for 110 radicalised children in 2025.[76]

It is important to note, however, that while the absolute number of children being *exposed to radical content* may have increased, the proportion of youths *arrested for joining a terrorist organisation* has remained largely consistent over the past two decades. Whereas youths made up 25.8 percent of all terrorism-related arrests in 2002,[77] they made up 26.5 percent of all terrorism-related arrests between 2021 and 2025.[78]

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PHILIPPINES

Kenneth Yeo

The terrorism threat landscape in Mindanao has declined, but underlying risk factors persist. There were no major attacks in 2025, and the terrorist surrender rate has plateaued. This suggests that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)'s kinetic operations, combined with the implementation of Executive Order 70, have stabilised violence in Mindanao. Consequently, local terrorist groups remain fragmented. Nevertheless, there have been attempts to rejuvenate the dispersed groups independently. There are also concerns over surrendered combatants, as they face financial and psychological insecurity. Overall, while terrorist groups in Mindanao are operationally weak, incomplete reintegration and persistent grievances are risk factors that the government should address.

Introduction

Terrorism in the Philippines has been concentrated in Mindanao in the southern Philippines. However, Mindanao is not a homogeneous region, and its ethno-religious diversity has historically contributed to complex social dynamics and periodic conflict.[79] The indigenous population of Mindanao is primarily Muslim. Among this populace, the Maguindanao are the largest Muslim ethnic group. Terrorist groups in Mindanao can be understood through the T3 Nexus (i.e., the nexus between Terrorist Group, Tribe and Territory), whereby terrorist group formation is largely determined by ethnicity and ancestral lands.[80]

Overall, terrorist activities in Mindanao have decreased significantly in recent years, with no major terrorist attacks occurring in 2025. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have enjoyed high rates of terrorist surrenders since 2020.[81] This is primarily because of the military's efforts to eliminate the leaders of terrorist groups to instil a sense of disillusionment within the local terrorist groups (LTGs). Nevertheless, the surrender rates plateaued in 2025, which may indicate one of two trends: 1) there are no longer enough terrorists to surrender; or 2) the demoralising effect of the Philippines' counter terrorism efforts is waning. Remnants of terrorist groups in Mindanao demonstrated resilience last year despite the exodus from local threat networks.

2025 also marked the first Bangsamoro elections since the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) was signed in 2014. These elections were critical for the United Bangsamoro Justice Party (UBJP), a political party linked to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a former rebel group which now leads the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).[82] The polls served as a litmus test for the population's support for the MILF government after the 2014 CAB.[83] Early indicators highlighted the ethnic fragmentation of political support, with some commentators arguing the UBJP only represented the Maguindanao people and not the wider indigenous population.[84] Census data in Mindanao also indicated that locals trust the Manila government more than the Bangsamoro authorities, highlighting the precarious state of the UBJP.

The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB)

The CAB was the final peace agreement between the Aquino administration and the MILF, signed in 2014 and ratified in 2019. Through the CAB, signatories agreed to end hostilities between the Bangsamoro population, otherwise known as the "normalisation track", and to allow for the transition to self-governance of the BARMM, also known as the "political track".

A plebiscite for the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which mapped out a charter for the proposed BARMM, was concluded in January 2019. While most provinces voted affirmatively, Sulu rejected the BOL by a slim margin.[85] With this vote, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was abolished and replaced by the BARMM in February 2019. The Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) was then established to oversee the transition to a new autonomous government. The first Bangsamoro elections were initially scheduled for May 2022. However, both the MILF-led BTA and the Philippine government agreed that more time was required to build BARMM institutions. Manila subsequently agreed to postpone the Bangsamoro elections to May 2025.[86]

In a related development, the Bangsamoro Electoral Code was passed in April 2023. One of the functions of the electoral code was the allocation of electoral districts. In April 2023, the BARMM districts included Cotabato City, Maguindanao del Norte, Maguindanao del Sur, Lanao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Basilan and Sulu. However, in September 2024, the Supreme Court ruled that Sulu should not be compelled to be a part of the BARMM because they had voted against the BOL.

The MILF-backed UBJP was anticipating an election that held much promise for the party. In May 2025, UBJP-backed candidates defeated entrenched political families at the provincial government polls, demonstrating widespread support for the UBJP in Maguindanao-dominated provinces.[87] Hence, the UBJP attempted to adjust the electoral districts in August 2025 to redistribute seats from Sulu to the rest of BARMM to ensure that the Bangsamoro elections proceeded as usual. However, the Supreme Court struck down the proposed changes in the electoral districts as they had been made during the campaigning period. This led to the Bangsamoro elections being rescheduled to March 2026.[88]

In March 2025, Ebrahim Murad was removed as chief minister of the BARMM and was replaced by Abdulraof Macacua.[89] Although both individuals are from the MILF, the MILF rejected the appointment of Macacua as it disregarded resolutions of the BOL passed in 2019.[90] This abrupt handover potentially strained relations between Murad and Macacua and could be a flashpoint for violence within the MILF.

Concurrently, the MILF's central committee suspended the decommissioning of former MILF fighters, citing lapses in the decommissioning process from the Philippine government.[91] It was reported that the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace (OPAPRU) had failed to deliver on its socioeconomic programmes, which resulted in the BTA's inability to support the MILF combatants' reintegration into society. While the threat landscape in Mindanao is stable today, the suspension of the decommissioning process could be another potential flashpoint that requires monitoring.

Inducing Surrender: Executive Order 70

The mass surrenders of terrorists have contributed significantly to the decline in the terrorist threat landscape in Mindanao. Executive Order 70 (EO70), implemented in 2018 by then President Rodrigo Duterte, was instrumental in creating a framework for terrorists to surrender.[92] EO70 was initially introduced to demobilise the communist terrorist groups (CTGs) in the Philippines. However, AFP units operating in areas combatting LTGs adopted the same framework to demobilise the LTGs.

EO70 differs from the earlier demobilisation efforts negotiated between Manila and the MILF. In 2012, both parties concluded the aforementioned CAB, under which the MILF agreed to demobilise 40,000 combatants from the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Force (BIAF) – the MILF's armed unit.[93] However, due to disagreements over the negotiated terms among the leadership, some BIAF

members splintered off to form the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) under the leadership of Ameril Umbra Kato.

EO70, in today's context, offers a bottom-up mechanism for demobilisation. Active combatants wishing to lay down their arms are given the opportunity to surrender themselves in exchange for protection and livelihood support. Individuals surrendering under EO70 must undergo an assessment by the Joint AFP-PNP Intelligence Committee (JAPIC), led by the AFP and co-chaired by the Philippine National Police (PNP).[94] The JAPIC certifies the authenticity of former rebels before livelihood assistance is disbursed to the surrendered combatants. However, there have been accusations that the process of obtaining JAPIC certification remains opaque.[95]

While EO70 was implemented in 2018, combatants only began to surrender in large numbers in 2020. Many were members of LTGs inspired by the Islamic State (IS), such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the BIFF and the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG). Anecdotal evidence suggests that waves of surrenders often followed the deaths of terrorist leaders. For example, 110 ASG members surrendered in Sulu in the months following the death of Hajan Sawadjaan in July 2020.[96] Similarly, the DIMG experienced three waves of surrenders following the killings of senior figures. The first occurred after October 2017, when both Maute brothers, who had been the leaders of the 2017 Marawi Siege, were killed.[97] The subsequent waves were prompted by the April 2019 killing of Owayda Benito Marohombsar (also known as Abu Dar) in an airstrike,[98] and by the July 2023 death of Faharudin Hadji Satar (also known as Abu Zacariah).[99] The surrender of Esmael Abdulmalik (also known as Abu Turaife) in 2023 also prompted the surrender of the BIFF from the Turaife faction.[100]

Despite the provision of livelihood support, surrendered combatants continue to face unique challenges. First, former combatants may find it difficult to reintegrate into their communities. Livelihood stipends provided by the Philippine government are often temporary and insufficient. Although the Manila administration offers vocational education to surrendered combatants, many lack the skills to find employment or start local businesses, having often been child soldiers with little experience interacting with civilians outside a conflict environment.

Second, there remains the perennial risk of retaliation, as surrendered combatants are often perceived by their former comrades as traitors. The risk of retaliation by these former comrades is one of the main reasons why some combatants have hesitated to surrender even when the opportunity was present. Combatants must ensure both their own safety and that of their families before approaching the AFP. For example, Ustaz Bahang – allegedly a former radical preacher – surrendered to the 45th Infantry Battalion stationed at Basilan in February 2025. However, the AFP reported that he was killed in October 2025 by unknown elements, underscoring the persistent presence of retributive violence in Basilan despite the overall downward trend.[101]

Many combatants appear to have decided to surrender because of personal connections with specific AFP soldiers.[102] According to field observations, however, soldiers in the AFP are not stationed permanently in one area and may be redeployed to other units. When this happens, surrendered combatants often reassess the viability of surrender and may rejoin another armed group for protection.

Third, there have been claims that psychosocial support has not been consistently delivered to surrendered combatants.[103] This issue is particularly acute for combatants who have surrendered in the island provinces, as it is difficult to deploy experts from mainland Mindanao to nearby Sulu and Basilan. According to local sources, the AFP currently treats the provision of financial and livelihood assistance as a form of psychosocial support. However, counselling services – widely regarded as an important component of such support – have not been extended to surrendered combatants.[104]

Additionally, efforts to support former combatants have often been compared to Manila's attempts to compensate victims of terrorism. For example, the Marawi Compensation Board (MCB) was established to compensate victims of the Marawi Siege in 2017.[105] Eight years after the siege,

however, the MCB still has not fully compensated the victims. Similarly, victims of the January 2019 Jolo Cathedral suicide bombings received only hospitalisation assistance from the Bangsamoro government in August 2020 and have yet to receive psychological counselling.[106]

Operational Environment

Terrorist groups in Mindanao today are generally uncoordinated and directionless, as there is no overall leader of the Dawlah Islamiyah movement. In Central Mindanao, Esmael Abdulmalik (also known as Abu Turaife), the leader of a faction of the BIFF, negotiated with the AFP and agreed to lay down his arms in July 2023.[107] While this weakened the BIFF, the group continues to be operational, with the Salahuddin faction continuing to fight. Today, the BIFF's Salahuddin faction is led by a certain "Muhammad Usman". Sources claim that Muhammad Usman is attempting to rebuild the faction's strength through familial networks along the marshes of the SPMS Box, a cluster of adjacent townships in Maguindanao province.[108]

To the north of Central Mindanao, the DIMG also suffers from a leadership vacuum. After military and police forces jointly killed leader Abu Zacariah in June 2023, a significant number of DIMG members surrendered to the military.[109] Unlike other groups in Mindanao, most surrendered DIMG members were under 18 years old and had allegedly participated in the 2017 Marawi Siege, indicating that the DIMG was more willing to recruit children under 10 compared to other terrorist groups in the Philippines. Informants also claim that the DIMG has not been eradicated, with efforts underway to rebuild the group in Piagapo municipality, located along the borders of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte provinces.[110]

Similar trends have been observed in the island provinces. In Sulu, the leader of the ASG, Radullan Sahiron, had long disagreed with IS's ideology and rejected the recruitment of foreign fighters to fight for local causes. While individuals such as Isnilon Hapilon and Hajan Sawadjaan pledged allegiance to IS and led their own splinters to break away from the ASG, Sahiron continued to command respect among combatants in the island provinces. In late 2022, he ordered remnants of the ASG to return to their communities. Yet, despite their surrenders, former ASG members from the Sahiron faction have continued to be isolated from the mainstream population in Sulu.

Although areas in Basilan, such as Lantawan, were declared to be ASG-free in June 2024, the province remains a hotspot for violence.[111] For example, an ambush was carried out against a United Nations Developmental Programme (UNDP) team in Sumisip in January 2025. The attack was allegedly led by Najal Buena and Oman Hajal Jalis, both believed to be MILF members.[112] This incident marked the most serious breach of the 2014 CAB.[113] Local sources also note the presence of other MILF splinter groups that are violent. The recent killing of the surrendered radical preacher Ustaz Bahang further highlights the instability in the area.[114] Moreover, surrendered ASG combatants in Basilan have refused to give up their arms, citing the need for protection from *rido* (clan violence).[115]

Conclusion

The terrorism threat landscape in Mindanao remains stable, with no major attacks from terrorist groups in 2025, and a plateau in terrorist surrender rates. This stability can be primarily attributed to the security forces' efforts to eliminate terrorist leaders while inducing surrenders through EO70. However, drivers of radicalisation persist in Mindanao, as efforts to regroup and recover continue.

One of the most pressing concerns facing Mindanao is the reintegration of former combatants. These individuals struggle to adjust to civilian life after years of conflict. Threats of retaliation and the lack of psychosocial support increase the risk of recidivism. Moreover, the perceived preferential treatment of surrendered combatants compared to victims of terrorism may aggravate community resentment and discourage further surrenders.

Despite the weakened operational capacity of terrorist groups in Mindanao, fragmented attempts to recruit and revive violent activities persist. In mainland Mindanao, Muhammad Usman is

attempting to rebuild the BIFF, while the DIMG continues to operate in Lanao. The situation in the island provinces remains largely stable, though unaddressed combatant grievances and security risks persist. Hence, while there is no longer a centralised or coordinated terrorist network active in Mindanao, the enduring challenges of reintegration and localised violence will continue.

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MALAYSIA

Rueben Dass

The terrorism threat in Malaysia persists but remains contained. The 2025 arrest of an Islamic State (IS)-linked Bangladeshi network indicates ongoing recruitment and fund-raising activities in the country. Additionally, the discovery of a Malaysian foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) in Somalia underscores continued Malaysian involvement in external conflict zones. Although no terrorist plots against the country were reported last year, the threat from isolated actors cannot be dismissed.

Domestic Threat Landscape

Terrorism Financing Networks

Between April and June 2025, the Malaysian Special Branch (MSB) arrested 36 Bangladeshi nationals aged 25 to 35 for alleged links to the Islamic State (IS).[116] The individuals were reportedly members of a self-proclaimed group, Gerakan Militan Radikal Bangladesh (GMRB), which maintained ties to IS. The group was involved in recruitment and fund-raising among Bangladeshi nationals in Malaysia.[117]

Investigations revealed that members of Malaysia's estimated one-million strong Bangladeshi diaspora – particularly those working in factories, construction sites and petrol stations – were targeted for recruitment.[118] The group used Facebook to spread radical and extremist ideologies associated with IS and employed encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram to "circulate propaganda, coordinate processes and organise activities in secret, including *ta'lim* (religious instruction) sessions and member meetings".[119]

Each group member was made to pledge a *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance) to IS before being accepted and to pay an annual membership fee of RM500.[120] Mobile payment applications such as Touch 'n Go and bKash were used to collect funds for the group,[121] which were then reportedly channelled to IS networks in Syria and Bangladesh. The network was believed to extend beyond the 36 individuals who were arrested, with sources estimating the involvement of some 100 to 150 members in the wider network.[122] There was no evidence that the group was plotting attacks in Malaysia, though some reports indicated that it intended to conduct subversive operations in Bangladesh.[123]

Legal and preventive actions were swiftly taken by the Malaysian authorities against the 36 individuals arrested. Five have since been charged in court, 15 handed over to the Immigration Department and 16 detained under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), as of July 2025.[124] Three individuals were subsequently deported to Bangladesh.[125]

In a separate incident, Indian media reported fund transfers from Malaysia to members of The Resistance Front (TRF), a group linked to the 2024 Pahalgam terror attack in Kashmir, India.[126] TRF is believed to be a front for the Pakistan-based, Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked terror group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). One of the suspects in the attack, identified as Yasir Hayat, was alleged to have received instructions from Malaysia-based militant Sajjad Ahmed Mir to transfer funds to a third individual, Shafat Wani.[127] Both Hayat and Wani were known to have previously travelled to Malaysia.[128]

Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs)

In July 2025, a Malaysian national identified as Dr Hakeem Ubeyda was reportedly killed in a counter terrorism operation in Puntland, Somalia.[129] Ubeyda was described as the Islamic State in Somalia Province (IS-Somalia)'s "chief medical officer", who "oversaw battlefield treatment for wounded fighters and managed medical logistics for IS operatives in the region".[130] IS-Somalia reportedly includes a large contingent of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Several other key IS leaders from Tunisia, Yemen, Sudan and Morrocco, including the head of the foreign fighters division, the explosives division chief, the leader of the group's policing department (*hisba*) and a key foreign liaison, were also killed in the operation.[131]

This was the first reported case of a Malaysian national being involved with IS-Somalia. As the chief medical officer, Ubeyda appeared to be a high-ranking figure within the group. Further details about him remain limited. The only other Malaysian known to have operated in Somalia was Ahmad Mustakim Abdul Hamid, who was linked to Al-Shabaab and was the first Malaysian to be charged by the Somali government for assisting the group in 2021.[132] Ahmad Mustakim had reportedly travelled to Somalia via Kenya in September 2009, after completing his studies in Yemen.[133]

The presence of Southeast Asian militants in Africa – a conflict theatre that is both difficult to access and historically hostile to outsiders – is surprising. The discovery reinforces the continued presence and threat of FTFs not only in traditional conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, but also in regions beyond the Middle East.

In Syria, over 40 Malaysians linked to IS, including women and children, are currently detained in centres such as the al-Hol and al-Roj refugee camps and Hasakah prison.[134]

East Malaysia

There were no reported instances of terrorist activity in East Malaysia in 2025. This is largely due to the significant weakening of terrorist groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Dawlah Islamiyah-Maute Group (DIMG) and other IS-linked offshoots in the southern Philippines. Groups such as the ASG have been substantially degraded as a result of counter terrorism operations by both the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and the Philippine authorities.[135] These groups have also experienced large-scale surrenders that have further diminished their capabilities.[136]

East Malaysia – particularly Sabah – shares porous maritime borders with the Philippines, and continues to face security issues such as human trafficking, illegal immigration and smuggling.[137] The possibility that Sabah will continue to serve as a transit point and rest area for militants affiliated with foreign terrorist groups cannot be ruled out.

Responses

The MSB has remained proactive and vigilant in addressing the terrorist threat in Malaysia. This is evidenced by the recent dismantling of the Bangladeshi terrorist cell and several other pre-emptive arrests across the country. Following the Ulu Tiram attack in May 2024, the MSB conducted a series of inter-state operations which resulted in the arrests of several individuals who had pledged support to IS. Some were reportedly plotting attacks within Malaysia,[138] and many have since been

charged in court. MSB officials also continue to maintain contact with and monitor former detainees.

The Malaysian authorities have also continued to repatriate FTFs. In December 2024, the government announced the repatriation of Mohammed Nazir bin Lep and Mohammed Farik bin Amin from Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba.[139] Both men were arrested in 2003 in Thailand and spent several years in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)'s custody before being transferred to Guantanamo in 2006 as "high-value detainees".[140]

They were alleged to have assisted high-profile Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member Riduan Isamuddin (also known as Hambali) in evading capture and to have acted as conduits for fund transfers to suspects involved in the 2002 Bali bombings.[141] They also admitted to having received training at AQ camps in Afghanistan in 2000.[142] The duo agreed to plead guilty and testify against Hambali in exchange for repatriation to Malaysia.[143]

The Malaysian authorities stated that Lep and Amin will undergo a comprehensive rehabilitation programme.[144] This three-phase programme includes a transition phase, a family integration phase and a continuity phase, designed to facilitate their reintegration into society. During this process, the MSB will continue to monitor and engage both men, who are also subject to an overseas travel ban for five years.[145]

The Malaysian authorities continue to maintain an open-door policy towards the repatriation of IS-linked FTFs. To date, the government has repatriated over 25 individuals from Syria and remains engaged in further repatriation efforts.[146]

Separately, the MSB has expanded its public outreach efforts through the organisation of public awareness programmes. In July 2025, as part of National Unity Week, the E8 Counter Terrorism Division held a public exhibition on terrorism and counter terrorism in Penang.[147] The exhibition aimed to raise awareness of the dangers of terrorist involvement, emphasise community cooperation in prevention efforts and educate the public on recognising the early signs of radicalisation.[148] It featured live displays of seized terrorist materials, multimedia presentations on counter terrorism operations and interactive sessions with E8 officers.[149]

On the eastern front, ESSCOM continues to play a pivotal role in safeguarding coastal entry points and preventing kidnapping, smuggling and militant activities.[150] In a recent statement, ESSCOM commander Datuk Victor Sanjos reported that no ASG-linked kidnappings have occurred in Sabah since 2020, attributing this success to enhanced strategies, strengthened security measures and close inter-agency cooperation.[151] The Malaysian home minister also noted that recent ESSCOM operations have successfully curbed the smuggling of illegal goods worth millions of ringgit.[152]

The region has also benefited from the incorporation of technological advancement and ongoing military modernisation. ESSCOM and regional security forces have adopted unmanned aerial systems (UAS), advanced coastal radar systems and closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring in their operations.[153] A notable development is the introduction of the Multi-Purpose Command Platform (MPCP) – a mobile sea base that serves as a launch point for Quick Reaction Force teams, with the capability to operate helicopters, interceptor boats, UAS and unmanned surface vehicles.[154]

Outlook

The threat level in Malaysia is assessed by the authorities to be "possible", indicating that while Malaysia could be a target of a terror attack, local terrorist networks currently show limited intention or capability. From a threat perspective, several key areas remain of concern.

First, the threat of self-radicalised "isolated actors" persists and poses a security risk.[155] These are lone offenders or small cells of radicalised individuals inspired to carry out attacks on behalf of

extremist groups. They may or may not have direct links to militants and tend to operate independently. Social media and online radicalisation play a crucial role in facilitating this trend.

A notable example is the 2024 Ulu Tiram attack. The attacker, Radin Luqman, and his family formed an isolated cell that had cut off contact with the outside world. His father, Radin Imran, had radicalised the family – including Luqman – and served as a catalyst for Luqman's eventual actions. Cases where potential attackers are completely isolated, with little or no communication with other extremists, pose significant challenges for counter terrorism intelligence and early detection efforts.

There have also been cases of isolated actors attempting to manufacture explosives and carry out attacks in Malaysia. One example is Mohammad Aabid Zarkasi, a repeat offender who was arrested for plotting IS-linked attacks and attempting to produce explosives.[156] His instructions and materials for bomb-making were likely obtained from overseas online contacts.

In this context, the threat of recidivism and prison radicalisation remains a concern. Several recent IS-linked terrorism arrests and convictions have involved recidivists, some of whom were radicalised while incarcerated.[157] Overcrowding in Malaysian prisons exacerbates this issue, contributing to the spread of extremist ideologies alongside other challenges.[158]

Third, the uncovering of IS-linked Bangladeshi and Indian networks suggests the presence of terrorism financing and recruitment activities in the country. In the past, Malaysia served as a transit point for militants moving to and from the region. Proactive efforts by the MSB to dismantle such networks must therefore continue. Vigilant monitoring of online spaces, social media and encrypted messaging platforms remains essential in this regard.

The recent killing of IS-Somalia-linked Dr Hakeem Ubeyda also highlights the threat posed by Malaysian FTFs operating in overseas conflict zones. These individuals – particularly those who have remained under the intelligence radar – pose a risk of reimporting networks, battlefield expertise and extremist ideology if they return undetected.

Malaysia has also witnessed an increase in far-right sentiments, particularly online. Rising Malay-Muslim conservatism has the potential to deepen social divides and fuel exclusivism or even extremism.[159] The "glocalisation" of far-right ideologies to reflect local sentiments is evident in memes and social media content across Southeast Asia, including in Malaysia.[160] Coupled with extensive social media exposure, this trend could contribute to radicalisation and isolated actor attacks.

Overall, the terrorist threat in Malaysia – particularly from IS – remains present but contained. Beyond limited terrorist-related activities such as fund-raising and recruitment among foreign nationals, the broader threat remains low. Nevertheless, the persistent threat of isolated actors attempting low-tech attacks using knives or improvised explosives cannot be discounted. This reflects the global shift in terrorism from large-scale, centrally coordinated operations to small-scale, inspired attacks employing simple means. While the threat is contained, it must continue to be taken seriously. Sufficient resources should be allocated to the relevant security agencies to ensure they remain agile and equipped to address the evolving challenges posed by terrorist groups.

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MYANMAR

Benjamin Mok and Iftekharul Bashar

In 2025, Myanmar's conflict deepened without a decisive shift, returning to a strategic stalemate defined by fluid frontlines, intensified drone warfare, and mounting manpower and morale pressures. Anti-junta forces expanded operations in Chin, Kayah and Sagaing, challenging the military's Dry Zone grip, while the military responded with mass conscription, air and artillery power, and urban entrenchment, reclaiming limited territory in Shan, Kachin and Kayah. In Western Myanmar, the Arakan Army (AA) seized nearly all of Rakhine State and established a parallel government, prompting the junta to form a tactical alliance with previously adversarial Rohingya militants to oppose the AA. Political manoeuvres, including ending the state of emergency, staging elections and courting foreign partners, further heightened polarisation amid a worsening humanitarian crisis. Ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and people's defence forces (PDFs) have remained tactically effective but strategically fragmented, while the military has regained short-term momentum, although its sustainability remains uncertain.

Trends

In 2025, the conflict in Myanmar deepened without producing a decisive shift. The country remains locked in a multi-faction struggle with fluid frontlines and high civilian costs. Three key trends emerged over the year. First, the strategic landscape reverted to a stalemate. Anti-junta forces expanded their presence in Chin, Kayah and Sagaing, eroding the military's grip on the Dry Zone,[161] while the junta fortified urban centres using airpower, artillery and scorched earth tactics. Targeted counteroffensives, supported by mass conscription, enabled the military to reclaim select territories, notably in Shan, Kachin and Kayah States. Second, technological adaptation intensified. Drone warfare became a defining feature of combat, with the resistance adopting swarming and precision strike tactics, and the junta reportedly using imported drones and anti-jamming systems. Third, both sides continued to face manpower and morale pressures. The military's expanded conscription highlighted its vulnerabilities, while resistance groups, though coordinated tactically, remained divided by political and ethnic fault lines.

In Western Myanmar, the Arakan Army (AA) continued consolidating power in Rakhine State, prompting Rohingya militant groups to unify and ally with the military. Against this backdrop, the junta's decision to end the national state of emergency and push ahead with elections further polarised the political landscape, raising questions about legitimacy, governance and prospects for prolonged instability.

Evolving Strategic Landscape

2024 marked a significant evolution of the strategic landscape due to territorial losses suffered by the military,[162] with a BBC study indicating that it controlled fully only 21 percent of Myanmar's territory by late 2024.[163] In 2025, this trend shifted back towards the stalemate seen in previous years. While anti-junta forces consolidated their presence beyond frontier ethnic states, the military launched multiple counteroffensives, enabled by escalated conscription, allowing partial recovery of lost territory.

Resistance Gains in Non-Rakhine Regions

Outside Rakhine, anti-junta forces continued to challenge the military's dominance in the Dry Zone and upland frontier states. According to the Myanmar Conflict Map[164] published by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), regions with frequent conflict events included Central Tanintharyi, Central Kayin, East and Southwest Bago, South Kachin, Central Mandalay, North Magway, South and West Sagaing, and North and Central Rakhine. Yangon City remained a hotspot for improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. Notably, conflict hotspots in Upper Myanmar shifted southwards over the year, encroaching on key military strongholds and moving steadily

towards the military's centre of power in Naypyidaw. Based on the IISS data, while hotspots in the Dry Zone remained west of Mandalay, new hotspots also emerged, particularly around Ngape, Salin and Nyaung-U Townships.[165]

In Sagaing, one of the conflict's fiercest engagements occurred in Katha District in March,[166] when local people's defence forces (PDFs) captured dozens of soldiers[167] and cut off reinforcements to Indaw Township.[168] In September, anti-junta forces seized Banmauk, a mining and timber hub near Sagaing's border with Kachin State,[169] in a battle that anti-junta forces claimed was led by PDFs, while the military attributed it to the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).[170] In Chin State, the fall of Falam after months of fighting consolidated control by the Chin Brotherhood, dealing another setback to junta authority in the northwest.[171] In Salin Township, anti-junta forces carried out a major attack on the Tanyaung Power Plant, which supplies electricity to key military factories, likely causing significant damage to the region's military production.[172] Fighting in the surrounding areas has continued, with the military tightening security to suppress frequent anti-junta attacks.[173] Lastly, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) has remained engaged in a fierce struggle with military forces along the Thai-Myanmar border in Kayin State, around a series of military bases.[174] These episodes highlight the continued capacity of both PDFs and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) to coordinate large-scale assaults and inflict substantial damage on the military's ability to operate outside urban strongholds.

The Junta's Counter-Strategy and Partial Recovery of Territory

The Tatmadaw nevertheless showed resilience, regaining territory in several contested theatres. In Shan State, the military recaptured Nawnghkio in July[175] and regained control of Lashio through a settlement with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), reportedly mediated by the Chinese government,[176] alleviating pressure north of Mandalay. In Kachin, counteroffensives around Hpakant restored access to jade mines,[177] depriving the KIA of a key revenue source, while the army retook the 366th Artillery Battalion headquarters near Bhamo in August.[178] In Kayah, the recapture of Moebye[179] and Demoso[180] in mid-2025 allowed the junta to re-establish partial control of supply routes linking Kayah to southern Shan. The military also entrenched itself selectively in key urban centres and transport corridors, including the Asia Highway near Myawaddy, granting it substantial control over movements in the area.[181]

These operations reflect the Tatmadaw's reliance on airstrikes, heavy artillery and scorched earth tactics to depopulate contested areas. The counteroffensives underscore a strategy of holding strategic nodes while peripheral areas remain contested, and their success largely stems from the mobilisation of allied EAOs. This highlights the military's ability to exploit divisions among EAOs to regain momentum.[182]

Western Myanmar

The Arakan Army's Consolidation of Power in Rakhine State

By late 2025, the AA had become the dominant military and political force in Myanmar's Rakhine State, largely due to strategic gains in 2024.[183] The AA solidified control over approximately 90 percent[184] of the region, encompassing all but three townships: the state capital of Sittwe, the strategically vital port town of Kyaukphyu and Manaung Island.[185]

The AA established a parallel government through its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), actively collecting "taxes" and providing administrative services to the local population.[186] This transition from insurgent force to aspiring political entity was a key development of 2025.[187]

The AA's military strategy in 2025 focused on besieging the remaining junta strongholds, with the most significant offensives targeting Sittwe and Kyaukphyu.[188] Although the AA has not fully captured these cities, it has encircled them, placing immense pressure on the junta. The battle for Kyaukphyu has been particularly important, as the city hosts a deep-sea port which serves as the

terminus for a critical China-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, a key component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[189]

In response to the AA's relentless advances, the junta has resorted to increasingly desperate tactics. Its scorched earth campaign, including indiscriminate aerial and artillery attacks on civilian areas, indicates military overstretch.[190] To compensate for heavy losses, the junta has relied on conscription laws to bring in tens of thousands of new and often allegedly poorly trained recruits.[191] It is noteworthy that the AA also enacted mandatory conscription in May 2025 and enforced a travel ban of eligible persons out of the state. The move has been criticised by human rights observers.[192]

The AA's expansion has had direct regional and international implications, affecting neighbouring Bangladesh, with reports of the group entering Bangladeshi waters and demanding unauthorised taxes on goods.[193] The AA reportedly abducted at least 235 Bangladeshi fishermen from January to September 2025.[194] The AA also expanded its network of alliances throughout 2025. As a key member of the Three Brotherhood Alliance,[195] the AA has continued to provide training and resources to other resistance groups. In 2025, its influence extended to the Chin, Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady Regions.[196]

The advances by the AA and the junta's brutal response have deepened the humanitarian crisis in the region. There have been growing accusations of mass abuses by the AA against the Rohingya population, including reports of forced labour,[197] mass displacement[198] and increased intercommunal tensions. As the AA consolidates power, the humanitarian and security situation in Western Myanmar will remain unstable.

The Arakan Army's Drugs-for-Weapons Economy

The AA's military expansion has been financed by transnational drug trafficking. According to a September 2025 report by a Bangladeshi newspaper, the AA uses profits from the sale of narcotics, like yaba and crystal meth, to purchase weapons and supplies.[199] Its operations are centred in the "Black Triangle", a remote border region that serves as a safe haven for smugglers.[200] The AA has established its own drug empire, operating at least 20 specialised syndicates. It both charges other groups for safe passage and runs its own smuggling rings.[201]

Due to increased land-based security on the Bangladeshi side, most drug smuggling has shifted to sea routes. About 80 percent of the drugs from Myanmar now enter Bangladesh via the Bay of Bengal and the Naf River, transported on fishing trawlers. The AA reportedly uses vulnerable Rohingya refugees as couriers, often disguising them as fishermen. The trade is a two-way operation, with Bangladeshi goods, such as food and building materials, smuggled into Myanmar in exchange for drugs.[202]

Rohingya Militant Realignment

The political and security landscape for Rohingya militant groups was significantly reshaped in 2025, driven largely by the AA's near-total control of Rakhine State and its alleged abuses against the Rohingya population. In a major strategic realignment, the Rohingya militant groups – the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA) and the Rohingya Islami Mahaz (RIM) – ended internal conflicts[203] and formed a unified "Four Brothers Alliance" to counter the AA. This alliance marked a sharp reversal of historical trends, with these groups now fighting alongside Myanmar's military junta – their traditional adversary – against their shared enemy, the AA.[204]

The RSO has emerged as a key militia allied with the military, with an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 fighters.[205] Throughout 2025, the RSO actively engaged in combat with the AA in northern Rakhine State. In addition to its combat role, a March 2025 report by Fortify Rights detailed serious human rights violations committed by the RSO in Bangladeshi refugee camps, including killings, abductions and torture. The report also accused the RSO and ARSA of forcibly recruiting Rohingya youth from the camps to fight on behalf of the junta in Myanmar's internal conflict.[206]

Similarly, ARSA has shifted its focus from infighting with other Rohingya groups to fighting the AA directly. The Fortify Rights report noted that ARSA and the RSO are actively fighting alongside the junta against the AA.[207] ARSA has also been accused of committing war crimes in Bangladeshi refugee camps, including killings, abductions and torture of Rohingya refugees.[208] The group's direct engagement with the AA was evidenced by a January 2025 claim that it had attacked an AA camp in northern Maungdaw Township.[209] In September 2025, ARSA claimed a major victory in the intensifying hostilities against the AA in Maungdaw, asserting that its forces had killed 35 AA fighters and captured a large base near the Myanmar-Bangladesh border.[210] This unverified assault marked a dangerous escalation in the volatile region.

It is noteworthy that ARSA's commander-in-chief, Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi, along with five associates, was arrested by the Bangladeshi authorities on March 18, 2025.[211] After the arrest, ARSA attempted to revive operations under a new acting leader, Maulana Borhan.[212] As of March 2025, ARSA was estimated to have around 5,000 fighters.[213]

The formation of the Four Brothers Alliance represents a major strategic shift, ending years of infighting and creating a unified opposition to the AA's dominance.[214] For decades, competition for recruits, funding and recognition among these groups had effectively silenced a unified Rohingya political voice.[215] The new alliance is a direct response to the AA's alleged human rights violations against the Rohingya, which have generated a new wave of support for the armed groups among the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh.[216]

This alliance between Rohingya groups and the Myanmar military is a significant development in the broader civil war. It underscores the mutual desperation of both the junta and the Rohingya groups, who have entered a tactical alliance despite their long history of animosity.

Technological Trends

Technology was further entrenched as a defining feature of Myanmar's conflict in 2025, with both resistance forces and the military adapting tactics through drone warfare and improvised systems. Resistance groups have increasingly used drones for offensive operations, ranging from swarm tactics to precision ambushes and targeted strikes on junta convoys and outposts. These capabilities have allowed lightly armed PDFs to offset disadvantages in heavy weaponry and to strike effectively in urban peripheries and contested transport corridors.[217]

The military has responded by expanding its drone fleet and integrating imported systems.[218] Reports from Karenni State[219] describe junta units using armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and deploying counter-drone technologies, such as anti-jamming modules,[220] enabling more precise strikes on resistance positions and civilian areas. This trend highlights the junta's reliance on external suppliers, including China and Russia,[221] to sustain its technological edge.[222]

Alongside drones, 3D-printed weaponry remained a feature of the battlefield. While rarely decisive, such weapons were used in training and to produce components for IEDs and drone munitions, demonstrating how local actors have continued to adapt under supply constraints.[223]

Morale and Internal Dynamics

The military faced mounting strain in maintaining manpower, prompting reliance on sweeping conscription measures. Reports indicate the recruitment of older men, prisoners and even individuals deemed mentally unfit for combat, reflecting the severity of personnel shortages.[224] Even the military high command was affected, with an untested general appointed as chief of general staff in late 2024.[225] While such practices underscore a force stretched thin, they also demonstrate the junta's determination to sustain operational capacity. This has proved effective, with an IISS report estimating some 16 new batches of recruits by August 2025, totalling around 60,000 to 80,000 men. The report linked the military's renewed ability to launch counteroffensives in 2025 to these recruitment drives.[226]

Defections persisted, aided by initiatives such as the resistance's "People's Embrace" programme, which offers incentives for soldiers and police officers to desert.[227] Despite this attrition, cohesion has remained intact among senior officers and core units, allowing the military leadership to retain control over strategy and resources.[228]

On the resistance side, morale was buoyed by battlefield successes and improved tactical coordination, particularly in joint operations across Sagaing and Chin States. However, deep divisions also persisted. The absence of a consensus on a federal framework[229] beyond battlefield cooperation left many EAOs sceptical of the National Unity Government (NUG)'s promises of inclusivity.[230] This strategic disunity continued to impede broader anti-junta consolidation.

China-brokered ceasefires with groups like the MNDAA[231] further exposed the fragility of inter-group solidarity, as Beijing sought to manage conflict along its borders. Meanwhile, social media played an outsized role in sustaining morale and solidarity among disparate resistance groups, fostering narratives of shared struggle across ethnic and ideological divides.[232] These dynamics reveal a resistance movement capable of tactical adaptation yet constrained by deep-rooted political fault lines.

Political and Humanitarian Issues

In July 2025, the junta formally ended the state of emergency imposed since the coup and announced elections for December.[233] Framed as a step towards civilian governance, these polls were widely viewed as a façade to secure legitimacy rather than a genuine transition.[234] Resistance groups, such as the NUG and most EAOs, rejected the process outright, while the AA vowed to block voting in its territories.[235] In some areas, smaller armed groups controversially agreed to provide security for the polls, further highlighting their divisive nature.[236]

Internationally, the junta sought to bolster its standing through lobbying and diplomatic outreach. Senior officials courted Russia, China and India, signing nuclear and space cooperation agreements in Moscow,[237] while retaining a United States (US)-based lobbying firm to improve ties with Washington.[238] Meanwhile, Beijing's balancing act – mediating along the Chinese border while advancing BRI projects – illustrated the broader geopolitical manoeuvring that limits resistance options.[239]

Humanitarian conditions deteriorated sharply in 2025. A March earthquake killed thousands and disrupted aid,[240] while the World Food Programme reduced rations for over a million people amid funding gaps.[241] Ongoing airstrikes destroyed clinics and schools, intensifying mass displacement and economic collapse.

Conclusion

The conflict in 2025 highlighted deepening fragmentation, a persistent stalemate and accelerating technological adaptation rather than decisive gains. Resistance forces expanded in Chin, Sagaing and Kayah, but remained hampered by the absence of strategic unity. The junta demonstrated resilience, relying on forced conscription, scorched earth tactics and external support to restore a degree of control. Looking ahead to 2026, key variables include the military's ability to sustain its manpower and airpower edge, the level of coordination among EAOs and PDFs outside Rakhine, international efforts to curb resupply, and the humanitarian consequences of contested elections and mass displacement.

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THAILAND

Rungrawee Chalermsripinyorat and Dhiramedhist Lueng Ubon

Violence in Thailand's Deep South continued to rise in 2025, with soft targets (civilians) bearing the brunt of the protracted conflict. Among the most emotionally charged incidents was a series of attacks targeting religious communities and vulnerable groups. Violence also intensified during Ramadan 2025, as the government and the Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front (BRN) failed to reach an agreement on a pre-talk ceasefire. Explosive incidents surpassed those of 2024, with insurgents unsuccessfully attempting to expand their operations beyond the traditional conflict zone. The increased use of ambush-style operations and coordinated attacks suggests a notable advancement in the insurgents' military capabilities. The peace dialogue remained suspended for over a year under the Paetongtarn Shinawatra government, amid criticism from hawkish elements in the government circles. Concerns remain that the current Anutin Charnvirakul administration's potentially short tenure could further hinder progress.

State of the Conflict in Thailand's Deep South

Increased and More Lethal Violence

Since the 2004 resurgence of a violent insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces, at least 7,764 people have been killed and 14,744 injured across 23,406 violent incidents, according to Deep South Watch data (as of September 2025).[242] As the conflict's dynamics gradually shifted from military confrontation to political negotiation following the launch of a peace dialogue in 2013, the Patani Malay National Revolutionary Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani, or BRN) became increasingly cautious in its military operations. In particular, the group sought to avoid targeting unarmed civilians to enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Although the dialogue has not yielded tangible results, it helped to reduce violence from 1,540 incidents in 2013 to 277 in 2020. However, the trend reversed thereafter, with casualties rising from 303 in 2021 to 486 in 2024 amid the dialogue's continued dormancy.[243]

In the first nine months of 2025, 478 incidents were recorded, resulting in 447 casualties – 88 deaths and 359 injuries – with signs that the violence may continue to rise. While the number of incidents rose only slightly, total casualties during this period were nearly equivalent to those recorded for the whole of 2024 (486 casualties).[244] This represents a notable escalation in human impact amid the stalled peace dialogue.

Soft targets (unarmed civilians) continued to bear the brunt of the protracted conflict. Compared to 2024, civilian casualties remained slightly higher than those among hard targets (armed combatants). Both women and children under the age of 18 remained vulnerable to attacks during this period. Women accounted for eight deaths and 41 injuries, while children accounted for four deaths and 34 injuries.[245]

Among the most emotionally charged incidents was a series of attacks against people of faith and vulnerable groups, such as women and children, which occurred shortly after the killing of Abdulroning Lateh, an alleged senior leader of the BRN's military wing, on April 18, 2025. Two days later, a bomb hidden in a motorcycle sidecar exploded near a police residence's fence in Muang district, Narathiwat province, injuring 10 people, including nine Muslim children who were passing by.[246] On April 22, assailants opened fire on a police pickup truck escorting monks on their alms round in Saba Yoi district, Songkhla province, resulting in the death of a 16-year-old monk.[247]

Other notable incidents occurred on May 2, when a 76-year-old blind woman was shot dead in Chanae district, Narathiwat province, and her son seriously injured while they were returning home from the hospital on a motorcycle. Later that same evening, gunmen fired on a house in Tak Bai district, Narathiwat province, killing three people and injuring one. Among the dead was a nine-year-old girl.[248]

By ethno-religious affiliation, casualties among Thai Buddhists totalled 183 in the first nine months of 2025, while Malay-Muslim casualties numbered 261. Although the number of Thai Buddhist casualties was lower in absolute terms, as Thai Buddhists comprise only about 20 percent of the population in the three southernmost provinces, they remained at a higher risk of being targeted by insurgent violence.[249]

During the holy month of Ramadan in 2025 (February 28 to March 29), the level of violence rose sharply compared with the previous year. A total of 71 incidents were recorded, resulting in 14 deaths and 74 injuries, whereas during Ramadan in 2024 (March 11 to April 9), 87 incidents were recorded, but with only nine deaths and 27 injuries.[250] This indicates that although the frequency of attacks declined slightly, their severity and lethality increased.

Among the major incidents was a coordinated assault on the Sungai Kolok district office in Narathiwat on March 8, when heavily armed insurgents stormed the compound, threw grenades, opened fire with assault rifles and detonated a car bomb. The attack killed two defence volunteers and injured eight others, including three passing civilians.[251] The scale and coordination of the attack suggests that the perpetrators possessed advanced combat training, reflecting a sustained level of military capability within the insurgent group.

In the first nine months of 2025, a total of 116 explosions were recorded, surpassing the 103 bombings documented throughout the previous year. This indicates an increase in the frequency of indiscriminate attacks.[252] Notably, a series of explosions took place in late June in tourist provinces in the Upper South, possibly linked to the conflict-affected region. This development suggests that insurgents may once again be attempting to expand their theatre of operations beyond the traditional conflict zone.

Two Pattani residents – 29-year-old Muhama and 27-year-old Sulaiman – were arrested on June 24 in Phang Nga, about 430 kilometres from the Deep South, for allegedly planting several improvised explosive devices (IEDs) at four tourist sites in Phuket, including one at the Phuket International Airport, three in Krabi and one in a car in Phang Nga. The coordinated plots were apparently not intended to cause fatalities but seemed instead to be a calculated attempt to pressure Bangkok amid the stalled peace dialogue. All of the small bombs were detected in time and safely defused. Fourth Army Commander Lt Gen Phaisan Nusang stated that the suspects confessed to acting under orders from an organisation believed to be the BRN, with the aim of causing economic disruption in tourist areas.[253]

This was not the first instance of southern insurgents conducting attacks beyond the conflict zone. In August 2016, a wave of 10 bombings and six arson attacks struck seven provinces in the Upper South, leaving four people dead and 37 others injured, including 11 foreign nationals. Most casualties occurred in Hua Hin, a popular seaside resort town in Prachuap Khiri Khan.[254]

Last year also saw insurgents demonstrate enhanced attack capabilities through ambush-styled operations targeting military personnel. On May 28, 2025, a police officer was killed and two others seriously injured in an attack on a police station in Chanae district, Narathiwat province, which the Bangkok Post described as a “sniper” attack. Forensic investigators later found that the bullets had been fired from a concealed position, with the trajectory indicating a calculated and premeditated assault.[255]

Another incident occurred on July 5, when a traffic police officer was shot dead by a gunman firing from a concealed position as he left a convenience store in Krong Pinang district, Yala province. In an apparent attempt to downplay the situation, Phaisan stated that the shooter had fired from a

distance of about 50 metres – insufficient to be considered a sniper attack.[256] Nevertheless, the increasing frequency of such incidents has led security forces to enhance self-protection measures, including the regular use of metal body armour while on duty.

Continued Enforcement of Security Laws

For over two decades, Thailand's southernmost provinces have remained under a prolonged state of exception, maintained through the enforcement of several security laws, notably martial law and the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations. Martial law permits the military to detain suspects for up to seven days without a court warrant, while the Emergency Decree allows detention for an additional 30 days without formal charges. In practice, these laws enable authorities to hold suspects for up to 37 days, often without adequate legal safeguards. In January 2025, the government lifted the state of emergency in one more district – Yaha district in Yala – leaving the Decree in force in 17 out of 33 districts across Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.[257]

First imposed in 2005 and renewed every three months since, the Emergency Decree reached its 82nd extension in October 2025. Meanwhile, martial law has remained continuously enforced across the three southernmost provinces since the 2006 coup, raising questions about the effectiveness and necessity of these extraordinary security measures.[258]

A 35-member ad hoc committee, established by the House of Representatives in October 2023 to explore ways of enhancing the peace process and peace-building in southern Thailand, finalised its policy report in August 2025. Comprising members of parliament, academics and civil society organisations, the committee proposed several recommendations to improve peace-building efforts and strengthen the dialogue process. The political will of national leaders was identified as key to achieving a sustainable resolution to the conflict. If approved by the House of Representatives, the report and its recommendations will be forwarded to the government and relevant agencies. This mechanism enables the legislature to play a more active role in supporting the peace process.[259]

Peace Dialogue Resumes After One-Year Suspension

The dynamics of the southern conflict have ebbed and flowed over the decades, shifting considerably since the initiation of the formal peace dialogue in 2013. During Paetongtarn Shinawatra's government (August 2024 to August 2025), the peace dialogue was suspended while relevant government agencies were instructed to review existing strategies for resolving the conflict. Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai assumed responsibility for security affairs – a move initially expected to bring some measure of progress. Under the previous Srettha Thavisin administration, no specific deputy prime minister had overseen security affairs. However, Phumtham was reportedly influenced by hawkish advisors, including security experts and former generals with experience in the Deep South.

Gen Shinnawat Maendet, former deputy commander of the Fourth Army Command, was believed to have had significant influence over the Pheu Thai Party's thinking on the southern conflict. Shinnawat was among the army officers from the Special Forces Command dispatched to the Deep South after the 2004 resurgence of violence. This group sought to dismantle the BRN's operational networks and curb the spread of its ideology among the younger generations.[260] Another influential hardliner, Surachat Bamrungsuk, a veteran security expert, has consistently criticised the peace dialogue and opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan towards Peace (JCPP) framework.[261] He has described the National Security Council (NSC) as "amateurish" and "directionless", accusing it of conceding too much to the BRN and claiming that the JCPP would disadvantage Thailand.[262]

In January 2025, Phumtham directed relevant agencies to reassess the strategies employed over the past two decades and instructed the NSC and relevant agencies to develop new strategies to extinguish the southern conflict. He also announced that the government would not appoint a new head of the peace dialogue panel at that time.[263]

In February, Phumtham and Chatchai Bangchuad, the newly appointed NSC secretary-general, proposed adopting a reintegration model inspired by the 66/23 policy implemented by the Thai government in 1980 during its campaign against communist insurgents.[264] The 66/23 policy regarded members of the communist movement as individuals with differing political ideologies and promoted the principle of "politics leads the military" as its core strategy. It allowed those who had joined the communists to reintegrate into society without prosecution.

Observers of the southern conflict argue that the context and nature of the insurgency in the Deep South is fundamentally different, and applying the 66/23 approach may not yield the same result.[265] Reviving this policy before reaching a peace agreement risks being perceived as a counterinsurgency operation aimed at weakening the Patani liberation movement rather than fostering peace, and is unlikely to bring structural change. Malay Muslims are expected to continue demanding recognition of their distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity as well as greater self-governance. Therefore, the 66/23 policy alone is unlikely to bring about sustainable peace in the Deep South.[266]

As the government remained reluctant to resume the peace dialogue – questioning its direction and the BRN's command and control – violence escalated during Ramadan and in the following months. In response to public outrage over the attacks against civilians, particularly children, the elderly and people of faith, the BRN issued a statement on May 5, 2025, affirming that it had no policy to attack civilians and reiterating its commitment to international humanitarian law. However, this cannot be taken as a denial, as the group has never publicly admitted or rejected responsibility for specific attacks.[267] Human Rights Watch stated: "A pledge is not enough. The BRN needs to stop committing war crimes."[268]

The Thai government and the BRN traded blame over the surge in violence during Ramadan and the months that followed. In early May, Phumtham told the media that the government had proposed to the BRN that if it could maintain peace throughout Ramadan, the government would resume peace talks and discuss alternative forms of governance, provided these remained within the framework of the Thai Constitution.[269] Around the same time, the BRN released an internal document dated February 27, 2025, claiming it had been sent to the Thai government before Ramadan but had received no response. The document proposed that the government appoint a new head of the peace dialogue panel, negotiate a 15-day bilateral ceasefire and establish a monitoring mechanism as a confidence-building measure.[270] Both sides were caught in a "chicken and egg" dispute – whether to appoint a new dialogue chief or stop the violence first – while those bearing the consequences were residents of the southernmost region.

On June 6, the BRN issued another statement asserting that the Thai government's delay in appointing a new head of the peace dialogue panel had stalled negotiations. It claimed that the escalation of violence resulted from the absence of formal talks and noted that the BRN had previously declared unilateral ceasefires to demonstrate its sincerity and commitment to peace. The statement reaffirmed that its representatives hold legitimate authority to engage in the peace process and that the BRN is prepared to use the JCPP framework to advance dialogue.[271]

In a media interview on August 14, Phumtham stated that a new head of the peace dialogue panel was expected to be appointed by the end of 2025. The government has maintained communication with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on this matter. In July 2024, Anwar appointed Mohd Rabin Basir, former director-general of Malaysia's National Security Council, as the new facilitator – just a month before the peace dialogue was suspended. As ASEAN chair, Kuala Lumpur has actively supported both Bangkok and the BRN in pursuing a negotiated settlement. Phumtham added that he had already prepared a "model" to resolve the southern conflict and compiled a list of expected members of the Thai peace dialogue panel.[272]

About two weeks later, on August 29, Thailand's Constitutional Court dismissed Paetongtarn from office for ethical violations related to a leaked phone call with Cambodia's former leader, Hun Sen.[273] Following her dismissal, Anutin, leader of the Bhumjaithai Party, secured a majority vote

in the Lower House with the backing of the People's Party and assumed the premiership in September 2025.[274]

In early October, the Anutin government appointed Gen Somsak Rungsita, former NSC chief, to head the delegation for peace talks.[275] Although this move reopened the stalled talks, the direction of the dialogue is uncertain. It is yet to be seen whether the JCPP will continue as the negotiation framework amid persistent hardline opposition. Somsak has said he will review the JCPP, noting that while the overall framework is likely to remain, its name may change if deemed too contentious.[276] The BRN expressed cautious optimism about the resumption of peace talks, emphasising its desire to see genuine political will from Thai leaders to address the conflict's root causes rather than another "political play".[277]

Outlook

Thailand's southern conflict remains a low-intensity one which receives limited attention both nationally and internationally. Violence continued to rise gradually in 2025, as the peace process stagnated during a one-year suspension under the Paetongtarn government. However, given that the conflict continues to claim lives, deprive people in this resource-rich region of economic opportunities and pose a security risk to the wider Southeast Asian region, it warrants greater attention.

The political will of national leaders is crucial to advancing a negotiated settlement and achieving sustainable peace. Anutin endorsed the appointment of a new head of the peace dialogue within days of taking office, reflecting how decisive leadership can drive the process forward. However, it remains to be seen how far and in what direction his government, expected to last until at least January 2026, can sustain the momentum. After a long suspension, rebuilding trust and confidence between the dialogue parties will take time, and the government's potentially short tenure may limit its progress. Nonetheless, if this effort lays essential groundwork, it could be carried forward by the next government after the general election.

The lack of policy coherence and continuity has long hindered peace-building in Thailand's Deep South. The growing influence of hardliners has significantly derailed the peace process in recent years. Moving forward, Thailand will require determined leadership that upholds civilian supremacy, supported by a dedicated long-term institutional mechanism – possibly modelled after the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) in the Philippines – to strengthen coordination and ensure policy continuity across successive administrations.

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SINGAPORE

Kalicharan Veera Singam

The terrorist threat to Singapore remains high, according to the Internal Security Department's (ISD) Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2025. The global Islamist threat persists, with transnational terror groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) maintaining the

capability to conduct and inspire attacks. The volatile international climate, including the Israel-Hamas war, has also contributed to an elevated threat environment, along with the growing traction of diverse extremist ideologies such as far-right extremism (FRE). Additionally, evolving technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) and the proliferation of online platforms disseminating extremist content – especially among youth – have increased security concerns for Singapore.

Radicalisation from the Israel-Hamas War

In 2025, the Internal Security Department (ISD) announced Detention and Restriction Orders for 10 self-radicalised individuals, five of whom were influenced by the Israel-Hamas conflict. In January 2025, the ISD revealed that it had arrested three self-radicalised Singaporeans, aged 21, 41 and 44, in October 2024.[278] Each had been separately radicalised by the Israel-Hamas war and was preparing to engage in violence overseas or in Singapore.[279] In February 2025, the ISD stated it had detected two other individuals who had also been radicalised by the Israel-Hamas war.[280] One was a 56-year-old Singaporean housewife who managed several social media accounts affiliated with the Axis of Resistance (AOR), a network of Islamist organisations which includes Hamas and the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (AQB).[281] The other was a 34-year-old Malaysian cleaner who was arrested in November 2024 and repatriated to Malaysia in the same month.

Despite a United States (US)-brokered peace deal between the Israeli government and Hamas in October 2025, violent radicalism in support of either side of the conflict is expected to continue and requires close monitoring. Amid uncertainties on whether the peace deal will hold, jihadist groups continue to exploit the situation to reinforce their violent narratives. Globally, the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) have inspired attacks against Israeli and Jewish interests, particularly in countries perceived to be supporting Israel.[282] While there is no immediate threat of a terror attack in Singapore, it continues to be viewed as a potential target.[283]

Beyond the risk of violence, the social impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on multi-racial societies is significant. Serious accusations of war crimes and genocide directed at the Israeli government, and the prolonged humanitarian crisis in the besieged Gaza Strip, have generated a wave of anti-Israel protests worldwide. While Singapore is unlikely to witness protests or activism of such intensity, the potential for heightened local sensitivities remains. For instance, in March 2025, pro-Palestinian activists disrupted Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs K. Shanmugam's Meet-the-People Session (MPS), which later went viral on social media.[284]

The activists' actions and subsequent remarks by former Nominated Member of Parliament Calvin Cheng criticising them were both condemned by some local leaders and groups – the former for their unruly nature, and the latter for a perceived lack of sensitivity.[285] As the conflict in Gaza drags on, and other global developments with far-reaching implications emerge, a key challenge for Singapore will be preventing legitimate expressions of opinion from crossing over into insensitive rhetoric or disruptive behaviour.

Youth Radicalisation

Youth radicalisation remains a pressing concern in Singapore, given the increase in the number of youths apprehended under the Internal Security Act (ISA) since 2015.[286] As in many parts of the world, young people in Singapore have become particularly susceptible to extremist influence and indoctrination due to their exposure to online content and the deliberate targeting of youth for recruitment by extremist actors through innovative means such as gaming platforms.[287] While there is no indication of a recent surge in cases, the incidents uncovered over the past year show that youth radicalisation remains a key concern.

In April 2025, the ISD reported the first case of a female teenager – a 15-year-old Singaporean student – being issued a Restriction Order (RO).[288] The teen, inspired by overseas female IS supporters, attempted to marry an IS fighter and start a pro-IS family in Syria. Apart from its youth dimension, this case highlighted the continued spread of IS-inspired extremist content online and

the growing use of AI in radicalisation – the teen had taken a virtual *bai'ah* (pledge of allegiance) through an IS chatbot.

The case also underscored the susceptibility of impressionable girls – not just boys, as in previous cases in Singapore – to online radicalisation. The use of AI by some radicalised individuals has added another layer of complexity to the issue.[289] The ISD report noted that while 3D-printing and AI have not yet been used in attack plots in Singapore, there is "an emerging trend of evolving technologies featuring in local youth self-radicalisation cases".[290]

Also in April 2025, the ISD revealed that a 17-year-old Singaporean boy had plotted to kill "at least 100 Muslims" at mosques in Singapore.[291] He had been radicalised by the March 2019 Christchurch shootings in New Zealand and wanted to double the body count.[292] The ISD issued a Detention Order (DO) against him in March 2025.

Singapore also recorded its first incel-related radicalisation case last year. In September 2025, a 14-year-old boy was issued an RO after being radicalised primarily by IS ideologies as well as a mix of far-right, far-left ideas. Known as a "salad bar" of extremist ideologies, this form of radicalisation is not driven by a consistent set of beliefs but draws arbitrarily from diverse sources.[293] The youth self-identified as an incel and had frequently shared incel content online.

The cases identified in the past year indicate that youth radicalisation continues to pose challenges which require continued vigilance. The rise in youth radicalisation globally suggests that Singapore's experience reflects a broader international trend, fuelled by global developments and the proliferation of new technologies that are harder to regulate effectively.

Far-Right Extremism (FRE)

Authorities in Singapore have also detected cases influenced by far-right ideologies, even though the local socio-political context is not conducive to such radicalisation. The four FRE cases identified between 2020 and June 2025 point to the increasing traction of FRE ideologies in Singapore, according to the ISD's July 2025 report.[294] In 2025, far-right politics, social movements and extremist activities continued or intensified in several Western countries. Strands of Western FRE gained unexpected support in non-Western and non-white societies, including parts of East[295] and Southeast Asia.[296] The internet and social media have played a significant role in spreading such ideas among youth globally, including in Singapore.[297]

The "revolutionary" nature of far-right ideologies – often centred around ultranationalist, racist and anti-immigrant narratives – makes them particularly attractive to vulnerable youth seeking a sense of identity and belonging.[298] The aforementioned 17-year-old Singaporean youth had identified five mosques in Jurong West, Clementi, Margaret Drive, Admiralty Road and Beach Road as potential targets for attacking Muslim worshippers leaving Friday prayers. He had also been radicalised by anti-Semitic content online and "fantasised about killing Jews", though he did not have concrete plans concerning the latter.[299]

Responses

As in previous years, Singapore continues to adopt a whole-of-society approach to countering radicalism. Robust legal and punitive measures serve as deterrents against hate speech and extremist activity. The arrests and ROs issued against potential violent actors reflect the government's continued commitment to proactively stopping those who display extremist tendencies before they can act. Alongside these efforts, softer measures such as promoting public awareness through the SGSecure Movement and community-based rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives led by the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) have continued.[300]

Singapore has also expanded its rehabilitation capabilities beyond Islamic religious counselling to encompass a wider range of extremist ideologies.[301] Interventions targeting self-radicalised youth

have been developed, including mentorship programmes, cyber wellness initiatives and social skills development courses.[302]

Notably, in February 2025, the government passed the Maintenance of Racial Harmony Bill, empowering authorities to issue restraining orders against individuals producing content that undermines Singapore's racial harmony. This act takes close reference from the existing Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act.[303] A key innovation in the amendment was the introduction of a community remedial initiative, which allows offenders involved in less severe cases to make amends and undergo rehabilitation.[304]

As in other contexts, the growing threat posed by new technologies such as 3D-printing and AI presents new challenges. The ISD has observed that these new technologies, particularly AI, have significantly reduced the time it takes for one to be self-radicalised in Singapore in recent years. It has therefore urged continued public vigilance.[305] The ISD also emphasised the need for increased cooperation between the public and private sectors, especially with technology and social media companies, to create a safer online environment.[306]

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SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan

AFGHANISTAN

Dr Antonio Giustozzi

In 2024-2025, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) reached its lowest level of activity ever, after a partial recovery in 2023-2024. Although there is some evidence that ISK has been trying to reorganise while keeping a low profile, it is also clear that the lack of a proper haven and lack of funding are undermining its viability. The role of Afghanistan-based terrorist cells in organising long-range attacks in Europe and the Middle East seems to have been compromised as well. On the other hand, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has maintained a high level of activity against Pakistan out of its Afghan hideouts. Despite some improvement in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the second quarter of 2025, igniting hopes of action against the TTP, bilaterial tensions reached a boiling point in October following Pakistan's airstrikes against the terror group in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan.

Trends

Reduced Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) activities in Afghanistan

Although in the last quarter of 2024 and first quarter of 2025, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)'s activities in Afghanistan showed a small surge from about two reported attacks per month to three, in the second quarter of 2025, its activities collapsed to almost nil. In fact, ISK has been involved in regular skirmishes with the Taliban in the far east of Afghanistan, and these small clashes generally do not get reported, but there is no doubt that by mid-2025 its visibility was very low.[1]

The decline in visible activities by ISK has been due to multiple factors. The terror group suffered some serious counter terrorism hits against its core structure. It also came under serious pressure in Pakistan's Balochistan province from the Pakistani authorities as well as from Baloch nationalist insurgents, the latter of whom attacked one of its camps in Mastung in March 2025.[2] This in turn complicated ISK's logistics in southern and western Afghanistan, at least temporarily, but ISK has retained a presence in the area, where it still has another four camps.[3]

The expanding Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) insurgency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province also forced ISK underground there. ISK's leaders appeared to have been worried by the seemingly unstoppable growth of the TTP's presence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2023-2024. Much of ISK's leadership and assets had to be moved to Balochistan, eventually exposing them. The TTP first started calling ISK "Kharijites" in June 2024, to which ISK's media responded with accusations against the TTP of links to intelligence agencies (read: India). ISK's leadership strengthened its rhetoric against the TTP in late 2024; in response, in December 2024, presumably after having moved out its vulnerable assets, the TTP's leadership ordered its men to cut off all links and communications with ISK.[4]

The Taliban, despite little reporting, kept pressure up on ISK, and were mostly successful in southern and western Afghanistan, where ISK cells are isolated and poorly supplied. ISK sources in these areas reported in the first half of 2025 that there was hardly any recruitment going on and that the group's losses could not be replaced.[5] Without supplies, ISK was considering abandoning these areas altogether.

Furthermore, some of the funding that was accruing to ISK from the Islamic State (IS)'s global leadership was likely redirected in 2025 towards Syria, where IS sees a strategic opportunity for a

relaunch. Sources within the new Syrian government have indicated intensifying efforts by IS to reclaim ground there.[6]

During the second half of 2024 and first half of 2025, ISK also appeared to have played little to no role in the organisation of long-range terrorist attacks, which had reached a peak in the first half of 2024. A source among Afghan ISK recruits in Türkiye reported in January 2025 that efforts to infiltrate members into Europe had been abandoned in late 2024.[7] This was perhaps a result of difficulties faced at a time of high alert in Europe, but it also seems clear that ISK has struggled to recover from the capture in Pakistan of Abu Munzir in the spring of 2024, which subsequently led to the detention of a number of members of his cell of operatives, who had been dedicated to organising long-range attacks.[8] Additionally, perhaps owing to growing pressure in Türkiye and Afghanistan, ISK came to consider Balochistan as a potential safe haven – due also to an understanding it had negotiated with the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) – but this turned out to be a costly mistake.[9]

The main drivers of ISK's reduced activities seem to be a lack of funding and poor logistics. ISK is nonetheless trying to adapt by focusing on infiltrating the Taliban's ranks and exploiting the crisis of other anti-Taliban armed opposition groups, such as the National Resistance Front (NRF). ISK sources maintain that the only areas where recruitment is going well are the NRF's areas of operation, such as Kapisa and other Tajik-majority areas north of Kabul.[10] Even ISK's online activities seem to have suffered from the capture of Abu Yasir al Turki – who ran the group's propaganda operations in Turkish and English – in Pakistan in June 2025.[11]

ISK sources indicated in 2025 that the group's leadership sees no point in going on the offensive from such a position of weakness, deciding instead to keep its forces in reserve for better opportunities.[12]

The TTP Keeps Up Operations Out of Afghanistan, Despite Taliban Pressure

Although the TTP has long moved most of its military assets to Pakistan, it still retains bases in Afghanistan and its leaders spend much, if not most, of their time there. This was evidenced by the killing of the TTP's self-styled governor for Balochistan, Naqeebullah Agha, near Spin Boldak in June 2025.[13] Many TTP members base their families in Afghanistan and cross the border regularly to see them. Individual commanders and networks of the Afghan Taliban continue to provide the TTP with support, particularly ammunition.[14] In May 2025, as rumours of an imminent split of the radical faction Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) away from the TTP were intensifying, the Afghan Taliban intervened by warning the leaders of JuA that if they were indeed to splinter, they would have to leave Afghanistan altogether, and that any linkage with ISK would bring immediate retaliation.[15]

However, the relationship between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban has not always been smooth and in fact soured considerably in the second quarter of 2025. The TTP's rank and file have increasingly been convinced that within the Taliban's ranks, there is complicity with Pakistani intelligence in targeting TTP commanders and in tracking TTP columns when they cross into Pakistan.[16] Even the killing of Naqeebullah Agha on Afghan territory was attributed by many TTP members to the Taliban. A new wave of arrests of TTP members in June 2025 was again attributed to the Taliban's willingness to appease the Pakistani authorities in the context of improving Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.[17]

Indeed, according to Taliban sources, at a Taliban leadership meeting in Kandahar in late March or early April 2025, the Taliban's *emir*, Haibatullah Akhundzada, raised the issue of sticking too close to the TTP. Akhundzada stated that he was not willing to compromise the relationship with Pakistan for the TTP's sake. At the meeting, Sirajuddin Haqqani emerged as the main defender of the TTP, on the grounds of the support it had lent the Afghan Taliban during their "jihad". In general, however, the Taliban's leaders seem increasingly worried about the constant friction with Pakistan.[18] The 12-day war between Iran and Israel, when the Iranian border was closed, must have served as a reminder of the constraints placed on Afghanistan by its landlocked status.

The Taliban do not seem intentioned to increase the pressure beyond the current level, which is probably what they consider the maximum the TTP can bear. The Taliban remain deeply divided over how to treat foreign jihadists in general and the TTP in particular, the latter being by far the most popular foreign jihadist group within the Taliban's ranks and even among the population.

The Taliban Emirate's Anti-ISK Measures

During the last half of 2024 and first half of 2025, the Taliban's Emirate adopted a cautious counter terrorism approach. The Taliban seem to consider that publicising clashes with ISK or detentions of its members would only serve to advertise ISK's presence in the country, and therefore tended to avoid doing so, even if from time to time information was leaked. ISK sources suggest that their losses have been underreported.[19] For sure, the Taliban have avoided large-scale operations, even in areas where ISK's presence is more firmly established. One partial exception was the spring 2025 raid against the ISK network in central Badakhshan province. The local Taliban forces and their foreign jihadist allies had long been in denial about ISK's presence there and had previously avoided taking action.[20]

The Taliban's relative inactivity against ISK during the period under review is also likely due to the perception of a declining ISK threat, even if Taliban sources have expressed concerns about insistent ISK efforts to infiltrate their ranks.[21] Taliban-released information about the outcomes of occasional raids against ISK hideouts in Kabul suggest efforts by the latter to prepare a new wave of terrorist attacks in the capital.[22]

The Taliban have also benefited from the worsening predicament of ISK in Pakistan and especially in Balochistan, as discussed above.

The Taliban Emirate's Handling of Foreign Jihadists

From 2021 onwards, the Taliban have committed to some neighbouring countries to restrain foreign jihadists hosted on their territory. After Uyghur and Uzbek jihadists were coerced into complying with the Taliban's rules in 2021-2023, in 2024, it became the turn of Tajik jihadist groups, such as Jamaat Ansarullah.

In exchange for its pledge to refrain from taking any hostile action against Tajikistan, the Taliban's leadership agreed to Jamaat Ansarullah patrolling the border, citing the Taliban's agreement with Russia.[23] Jamaat Ansarullah resumed hostile actions against the Tajik government in 2023, most likely with the help of local Afghan Taliban networks. It also started recruiting again. In a Jamaat Ansarullah booklet distributed in August 2023, resuming militant activities in Tajikistan was explicitly stated as the group's key aim.[24]

Jamaat Ansarullah sources claimed that the Taliban met with Tajik intelligence because of Jamaat Ansarullah's raids into Tajikistan. The Taliban's leadership overruled the Tajik Taliban and ordered a crackdown on Jamaat Ansarullah.[25] After the Taliban started enforcing tighter rules on Jamaat Ansarullah, including by limiting militants' movements between districts, the group's activities declined visibly.[26] After its leader Mahdi Arsalan vanished, Jamaat Ansarullah's morale plummeted, and many of its followers and operatives were disappointed. They either left the group and married Afghan women or started their own businesses.[27]

Many began to suspect that Arsalan's disappearance was connected to the Taliban's negotiations with Dushanbe to improve bilateral relations. Ibrahim, the acting head of Jamaat Ansarullah, was open to a deal between the Taliban and Tajikistan, but some members objected and the desertions resumed. They feared being forced to relocate and losing their freedom of movement, as well as potentially experiencing the same fate as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).[28]

The Taliban further tightened restrictions and requested that Jamaat Ansarullah list all members and notify the Taliban of all movements between districts, due to the risk of Jamaat Ansarullah

members joining ISK. Members of Jamaat Ansarullah complied to the demands and swore allegiance to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate.[29] The Taliban have now compelled the group to register every member.[30]

Jamaat Ansarullah's border guards were collected by the Taliban between July and August 2024 and moved to central Badakhshan, where they were instructed to remain silent until further directives were given.[31] Up until their dismissal in the spring of 2025, about 70 members of Jamaat Ansarullah had been incorporated into the Emirate's military.[32]

The announcement by Tajikistan in November 2024 that it would permit a Taliban diplomat to assume control of the Afghan Embassy in Dushanbe marked yet another watershed. Feeling abandoned by the Taliban, Jamaat Ansarullah's members became extremely concerned.[33] Finally, in 2025, the Taliban – both Tajik and Pashtun – warned Jamaat Ansarullah that the Emirate would not be able to permit Jamaat Ansarullah to remain based in Afghanistan for very long. They implied that Jamaat Ansarullah would have to move to Tajikistan or somewhere else, or else eventually be disarmed.[34] If the Taliban's pressure becomes intolerable, Jamaat Ansarullah has threatened to ally with ISK.[35]

According to sources in Jamaat Ansarullah, the Taliban's actions have greatly infuriated Al-Qaeda (AQ), with which Jamaat Ansarullah is still closely associated. According to these sources, ISK has made persistent efforts to contact Jamaat Ansarullah and other foreign jihadists to extend an invitation to collaborate. AQ has also lamented the Taliban's pressure to avoid external operations, even though it enjoys better conditions in Afghanistan than the Central Asian jihadists.[36] AQ has continued to operate training camps in Afghanistan. In June 2024, AQ's de facto leader, Sayf al-Adl, sent out an invitation to would-be radicals to travel to Afghanistan. According to Kandahar-based Taliban sources, the intention was to welcome trainees from any location.[37] Nevertheless, it appears that AQ's training facilities are primarily intended to aid the Pakistani Taliban's war efforts.[38] If the Emirate chooses to further solidify the improvement in relations with Pakistan, it is not impossible that these activities would also be subject to pressure.

Signs of a Flow of Arrivals from Syria

Rising tensions between foreign fighters in Syria and the new Ahmed al-Sharaa interim government, as well as between foreign fighters and the Syrian population, led in early 2025 to a trickle of arrivals from Syria to Afghanistan, according to a source inside one of the Central Asian jihadist outfits based in Afghanistan.[39] Very few individuals had moved to Afghanistan as of July 2025, although a delegation from Jamaat Imam al-Bukhari had visited the country from Syria in April to assess the prospect of relocating some of its members there.[40] The delegation spent several weeks in Afghanistan, was welcomed by the Haqqani network, and toured areas with Central Asian presence in the northeast and northwest of Afghanistan. The delegation's findings appear to not have been very encouraging, however, and among the options still being considered is a move to TTP-held territory.[41]

At the same time, ETIM leaders in Syria were manoeuvring to establish their Syrian-based forces as a separate entity from the original ETIM. It is not clear whether this was due to disagreements with the Afghanistan-based leadership or to the desire to gain some international legitimacy.[42]

Outlook

Although ISK is for now overshadowed by Syria, the latter of which looks more promising for the central leadership of IS, that could change in the future. In the meantime, ISK needs to maintain a minimum level of activity to advertise its survival capabilities and to keep recruiting. As of mid-2025, it was unable to do even that, and its leaders must be feeling the need to change the situation. One of its key mistakes was to start multiple wars with states and other insurgent organisations. Not only does ISK have few allies left among other insurgent groups, but it has also embroiled itself in a war with the BLA. The group is therefore seriously embattled.

The growing disaffection of AQ-linked jihadist groups with the Taliban is the best chance ISK has of staging a recovery, but these groups must be wondering what ISK has to offer them, other than the stigma of a brand that attracts the hostility of almost all states in the world.

The Afghan Taliban seem able to constrain ISK, even if not to completely eradicate it. The Emirate's main problem, as far as militant groups go, is now the TTP. It is under serious economic pressure and can ill afford to continue arguing with Pakistan about the TTP. The TTP, however, is too powerful and has connections too deep within the Afghan Taliban to simply be treated like the smaller Central Asian jihadist groups. One should therefore expect continuing friction between the Taliban and the TTP.

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BANGLADESH

Iftekharul Bashar

In 2025, Bangladesh's security situation deteriorated, largely due to a political transition that created a law enforcement vacuum and the interim government's weak, permissive response. Extremist and Islamist groups exploited this vacuum to reorganise, increase capability (including funding) and mobilise publicly. Key evidence of this included a foiled United States (US) Embassy attack plot in July, surging online radicalisation led by controversial extremist ideologues, premeditated mob violence and targeted communal attacks, including devastating attacks on various Sufi shrines. The state's failure to re-apprehend key militants and recover arms looted during the 2024 uprising, coupled with the diversion of specialised counter terrorism (CT) forces to conventional crime, resulted in an unsustainable CT posture. Heading into the volatile 2026 election cycle, the risk of conventional terrorist attacks is escalating. The primary concern is the likely transition from low-intensity attacks to the successful execution of major, high-profile terrorist attacks, unless a robust, unbiased CT policy is immediately implemented.

Trends

A Critical Backslide

2025 was a critical period for Bangladesh, with a noticeable backslide in counter terrorism (CT) gains and a widespread deterioration of law and order. This turbulent security environment emerged from the complex and fragile political transition of 2024, which saw the installation of an interim government under Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus. This transition inadvertently created a significant security vacuum, which was swiftly and aggressively exploited by a resurgent array of non-state actors.[43]

Bangladesh's Islamist political landscape in 2025 was characterised by a significant and assertive resurgence following the ouster of the Awami League government in August 2024. Major Islamist political groups, notably Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) and Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI), have capitalised on the political vacuum to expand their influence and activity. The political freedom currently enjoyed by BJI and other groups, which had been suppressed under the previous regime,

is allowing them to rapidly gain strength and dictate the terms of the political transition, potentially normalising extremist demands within the political mainstream.

BJI has re-entered mainstream politics, forming new alliances and aggressively lobbying for constitutional and electoral changes, including the implementation of proportional representation and the banning of former ruling parties.[44] Meanwhile, HeI demonstrated its street power through a massive grand rally in May 2025,[45] using misogynistic rhetoric,[46] vehemently demanding the annulment of government commissions promoting women's rights, and advocating for the constitutional re-establishment of "absolute trust and faith in Allah".[47]

Islamist political groups in Bangladesh have also forced the cancellation of women's football matches and targeted secular events, fuelled by their push for *shariah* law.[48] BJI's leadership has indicated that it will reduce the official workday for mothers from eight to five hours if the party comes to power.[49] Critics have perceived this proposal as essentially an attempt to limit women's professional careers.[50]

This heightened visibility of hardline political Islam has corresponded with a concerning rise in religious extremism, intolerance and a wave of violence targeting religious minorities, secular individuals and women's rights activists.[51] Radicals and their supporters have been active and visible on major online and social media platforms, such as Facebook[52] and YouTube, where they have continued to spread hate narratives and misinformation.[53] A noted Bangladeshi journalist covering terrorism was even threatened by pro-Al-Qaeda (AQ) elements.[54] Bangladesh also saw a drastic decline in media reports on terrorism and radicalism in 2025.

From a CT perspective, the political transition and Islamist resurgence have created a significantly heightened security risk. The interim government's policy changes have led to the weakening and sidelining of key CT agencies, creating a critical security vacuum.[55] This breakdown in the state's strategic and operational CT capacity, coupled with the mainstream normalisation of hardline rhetoric, has provided a more permissive environment for jihadist and violent extremist groups to recruit, reorganise and potentially launch attacks.[56] The surge in targeted communal violence is a direct manifestation of this rising extremism. The overall political instability increases the potential for both domestic and transnational militant activity, posing a long-term threat to Bangladesh's internal stability as well as to regional security.[57]

A Resurgence in Violent Extremism

The most significant development of 2025 was the rise of political and extremist violence. This escalation directly stemmed from the perceived "soft" approach adopted by the state following 2024's political upheaval, an environment which extremist groups seized upon with remarkable alacrity. The atmosphere of impunity, compounded by the return of previously incarcerated militants to the public sphere both online and on-ground, established fertile ground for radicalisation and reorganisation.[58]

This resurgence manifested both physically and digitally. The arrest of Shamin Mahfuz, the founder of the proscribed terrorist group Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya (JAFHS),[59] was an isolated success in an otherwise challenging year for law enforcement. However, this achievement was largely eclipsed by the controversial bail granted to over two dozen high-profile militants and radical ideologues. Among these was Asif Adnan, a prominent, young and urban ideologue with a history of connections to local groups like Ansar al Islam (AAI) and global networks like AQ. Adnan quickly became a key figure of online radicalisation, leveraging digital platforms to breathe new life into extremist networks, particularly targeting and recruiting urban and educated youth.[60] The real and present danger posed by these militants was starkly highlighted by the alleged involvement of such actors in a foiled plot against the United States (US) Embassy in Dhaka in July 2025,[61] an incident which underscored the persistent intent to strike high-value foreign interests and the growing capability for complex operations.

This re-establishment of terrorist networks was likely facilitated by their uninterrupted access to funding channels, including remittances from radicalised individuals among the Bangladeshi diaspora as well as clandestine financing, which underpinned the groups' ability to quickly reorganise and mobilise.[62]

Beyond the online sphere, the physical presence and confidence of extremist and Islamist groups became overtly visible. Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB), for instance, moved dramatically from its previously covert proselytisation to open mobilisation in major cities.[63] The "March for Khilafah" in March 2025,[64] which drew thousands of supporters to the national mosque in Dhaka, served as a clear and public display of the group's renewed organisational capacity and confidence – a sharp departure from the state-sanctioned clampdowns on HTB by the previous administration. It is noteworthy that though the Bangladesh police arrested some HTB activists,[65] the group has continued its activities both online and on the ground.

2025 also saw the emergence of the Intifada Bangladesh (IB), a radical Islamist organisation with explicit links to AQ-centric extremist groups, signalling the politicisation and mainstreaming of jihadist ideology in the post-2024 political vacuum, which demands close monitoring. Underscoring its extreme ideological foundation, a key member of the group is the radical cleric Jasimuddin Rahmani – described as a follower of AQ ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki – while some of its other members and organisers were previously arrested on terrorism charges. IB does not rely solely on secret plots; instead, it uses controversial public activism, including opposing the establishment of a United Nations Human Rights Office,[66] challenging alleged "Indian hegemony"[67] and demanding the abolition of "anti-Islamic reforms", to exploit national and communal grievances and expand its base of support. IB's agenda, which included a demand on October 24, 2025, for an investigation into and prohibition of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (a Hindu religious movement),[68] demonstrates how the group poses a direct threat to Bangladesh's secular foundations and risks escalating intercommunal violence.

The Breakdown of Law and Order: Mob Violence and Communal Attacks

The security vacuum and subsequent lawlessness were not restricted to militant activity; they became a systemic scourge. The country has been gripped by an intense surge in mob violence and clashes between rival political factions.[69] Mob violence has explicitly targeted vulnerable groups. These incidents reflect a growing atmosphere of intolerance and radicalised vigilantism that the interim government is struggling to contain.

This widespread lawlessness has seen justice increasingly meted out by vigilante mobs rather than through a functional legal system, effectively outsourcing violence to weaponised political and communal cadres. A report documented 114 people killed in mob violence between January and mid-August 2025 alone.[70] Experts have raised questions over law and order as well as the interim government's ability and willingness to contain the menace.[71]

This environment of unchecked violence has proven especially devastating for Bangladesh's religious minorities and secular voices. In particular, violence against Hindu temples, Christian churches and Sufi shrines has escalated dramatically and has often appeared to be targeted.

The Bangladesh Hindu Bouddho Christian Oikya Parishad, a civil society group focusing on protecting the rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh, reported 258 attacks on minority communities in the first half of 2025, including 20 rapes and 59 attacks on places of worship.[72] There was a significant rise in the number of attacks on Christian churches. On October 8, a crude bomb exploded in front of the Holy Rosary Church – one of the oldest and largest Roman Catholic churches in Bangladesh – in Dhaka's Tejgaon area. The attack was reportedly carried out by two men on a motorcycle, though no injuries were reported.[73] A second wave of attacks took place overnight in Dhaka on November 7, 2025, targeting St Mary's Cathedral and St Joseph's Higher Secondary School and College.[74] While the police on November 9, 2025, confirmed the attacks had caused no injuries, they stated the incidents were "certainly" aimed at terrifying the community.

No group has claimed responsibility for the bombings, and the attacks add to the existing political turmoil in Bangladesh.[75]

This surge in targeted communal violence was further underscored by the September 2025 attack on a Sufi shrine in Rajbari under the banner of a newly emerged organisation named the Iman-Aqidah Rakkha Committee (Faith and Creed Protection Committee), which killed one person and injured 50.[76] Hardline Islamist groups in Bangladesh have been waging an ideological war against the country's traditional, pluralistic Sufi heritage, marked by an increase in mob attacks on shrines since late 2024. Groups like the Towhidi Janata have targeted and damaged over 80 sites, as they view Sufi practices as heresy.

This violence is fuelled by a culture of impunity, as the interim government has been criticised for its failure to take decisive action, thereby allowing a rigid, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam to threaten the nation's unique, syncretic identity.

Transnational Linkages and Conflict Zone Travel

Adding to the domestic volatility, evidence of transnational linkages and travel to conflict zones worsened Bangladesh's persistent regional threat profile. Concrete evidence has emerged of Bangladeshi extremists actively participating in terrorist activities in Pakistan.

On September 26, 2025, a 21-year-old Bangladeshi national, Faisal Hossain, was killed while fighting for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). He was one of 17 TTP members killed during a Pakistani security operation in the Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The TTP reportedly released a video acknowledging his killing.[77] Faisal's family, who live in Bangladesh's Madaripur district, believed he had gone to Dubai for work in March 2024. This marked the fourth confirmed death of a Bangladeshi fighting for the TTP in just over a year, raising serious concerns about foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) recruitment, which has already led to arrests in Bangladesh.[78] Earlier, a Bangladeshi digital media outlet reported that at least eight Bangladeshi nationals are currently active in Afghanistan as TTP members.[79]

This confirmed travel of FTFs to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region highlights a clear, high-risk pipeline for extremism. This pipeline has been made significantly easier due to the normalisation of Bangladesh-Pakistan diplomatic relations under the current administration, which has effectively reopened travel vectors that were constrained under previous governments. These vectors not only allow new recruits to travel out of the country, but, critically, also enable seasoned fighters to return to Bangladesh and the wider region, potentially bringing advanced improvised explosive device (IED) and operational tradecraft directly from the Afghan conflict theatre. Furthermore, reports of individuals, including radical Islamist figures like Mamunul Haque, visiting Afghanistan[80] indicate active efforts to establish or reinforce direct links with groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, raising the spectre of highly trained, radicalised FTF returnees. Extremist rhetoric also continued to consistently identify India as a persistent, long-term regional target.

There have also been cases of radicalisation among a vulnerable segment of the Bangladeshi diaspora community. In June 2025, the Malaysian authorities announced the arrests of 36 Bangladeshi citizens across Selangor and Johor for their direct involvement with a radical militant movement promoting Islamic State (IS)-linked ideology and engaging in terrorism-related activities, including fund-raising and recruitment. Five of the suspects have since been charged with terrorism offences, 15 have been deported and the rest remain under investigation.[81] On September 24, a 22-year-old Bangladeshi national was expelled from Italy following an anti-terrorism investigation by the Turin police. He was deported for his heavy involvement in virtual jihadist circles, where he openly celebrated groups like AQ and IS, spread propaganda inciting hatred and possessed concerning materials, including manuals on explosives-making and guerrilla tactics, demonstrating a dangerous commitment to sectarian terrorism.[82]

Furthermore, the Gaza crisis has been a dual catalyst, significantly accelerating the resurgence of mainstream Islamist political parties while also amplifying extremist threats in Bangladesh. In

mainstream politics, the crisis has driven a shift to the right, with BJI as the prime beneficiary. BJI has successfully leveraged the issue, framing the conflict as a defence of the global Muslim community and organising massive public rallies, including a 100,000-person strong protest in Dhaka. This strategy has boosted BJI's visibility, consolidated its conservative base and provided a unifying platform for a broader Islamist alliance aimed at influencing the new interim government, with allied groups like Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) and HeI also utilising intense religious emotions to advance their pro-shariah agendas.

The Gaza conflict has also served as a powerful ideological fuel for violent extremist groups, notably AAI, significantly amplifying their radicalisation and recruitment efforts throughout 2025. AAI has systematically exploited the suffering of Palestinians in online propaganda to craft a compelling narrative of a "global war against Islam", which has been particularly effective in recruiting among young, educated and urban segments of the population. This external fervour has exacerbated the existing online radical milieu. The impact of this radicalisation was visible during an April 2025 event, when a demonstrator was photographed holding a large poster of AQ's founder Osama bin Laden. The poster highly praised bin Laden and prominently featured his quote: "America will never dream of security unless we will have it in reality in Palestine."[83]

The Rohingya Crisis

Throughout 2025, the situation along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border remained volatile, combining ongoing refugee issues with escalating regional conflicts and emergent domestic security threats. The security crisis has been compounded by the Arakan Army (AA), a non-state Rakhine ethnic armed group which has consolidated significant control over the border area, creating a complex challenge that has intensified the already dire Rohingya crisis. Bangladesh currently hosts 1.3 million[84] Rohingyas, of which 150,000 are new arrivals from mid-2024 to 2025. Bangladesh is facing growing concerns over a fresh influx of Rohingya refugees fleeing intense conflict and brutal attacks in Myanmar's Rakhine State, with many risking their lives in desperate sea crossings even as border forces step up patrols.[85]

The protracted crisis and the lack of a sustainable solution have turned refugee camps into a major security vulnerability, with the camps acting as hubs for Rohingya armed groups like the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which are now reportedly fighting across the border alongside the Myanmar military against the AA.[86] This cross-border conflict has seen immediate spillovers into Bangladesh, with stray bullets repeatedly striking the town of Teknaf in late October 2025[87] and the AA actively targeting Bangladeshis, such as by abducting at least 314 fishermen from the border area between February and September 2025, including 14 off St Martin's coast on October 1, 2025.[88]

Adding to these concerns, a source within the Bangladeshi security establishment has indicated that a leading Bangladeshi figure in the TTP is allegedly trying to mobilise trained fighters from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border to fight against the AA and the Tatmadaw, with these fighters likely to be embedded within ARSA or RSO.[89] While the TTP's link to Rohingya militancy is not entirely new,[90] the resurgence of the AA in Western Myanmar and the ongoing security vacuum has created more opportunities for the TTP to revive this linkage. Bangladesh has attempted to mitigate the threat posed by Rohingya militancy, notably by arresting ARSA's commander-in-chief Ataullah Abu Ammar Jununi on March 18, 2025, although the group is already trying to reorganise under a new leader.[91]

The growing influence of a powerful non-state actor like the AA on the border, coupled with the ongoing humanitarian crisis and funding cuts to the camps, represents a long-term threat to both domestic and regional stability.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region presented a distinct but deeply interconnected security challenge in 2025, with the Bangladesh Army maintaining an intensive counterinsurgency offensive

against the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA), the armed wing of the Kuki-Chin National Front (KCNF). The Bangladesh Army's offensive began with a successful raid on July 3, 2025, which resulted in the killing of a KNA major and another insurgent, a significant strike against the group's hierarchy.[92] This was followed by a prolonged major operation from July 25 to August 26, which culminated in the dismantling of a key KCNF training camp in the Reng Tlang hill range in Ruma Upazila. During the final raid, troops seized crucial tactical installations – including a firing range, trenches and bunkers – along with military supplies like training rifles and solar panels. The offensive demonstrated the government's sustained approach to neutralising the threat posed by the KCNF, a separatist group which seeks an autonomous state for smaller ethnic communities, and which gained notoriety after a series of bank robberies in April 2024.[93]

However, in September 2025, the CHT saw a devastating escalation of ethnic and political violence, independent of the counterinsurgency effort. On September 28, a catastrophic clash erupted in Ramsu Bazar, Khagrachhari, when a protest against the rape of a teenage Marma girl spiralled out of control, resulting in three deaths and at least 16 injuries. Arson attacks by miscreants also destroyed at least 85 shops and homes, including a three-storey building housing nine government and non-governmental organisation (NGO) offices. The destruction completely wiped out the livelihoods of the predominantly Marma community.[94]

The Failure of Response: A State Apparatus in Disarray

The state's response to these multifaceted and escalating threats was a concerning mix of denial,[95] downplaying of threats[96] and institutional paralysis. Crime analysts and law enforcement officials have stated that attempts have been made to project a sense of normalcy by labelling incidents of extremist activities as "drama". The way in which previous anti-extremism operations have been widely propagated as "drama" has served to legitimise the actions of extremists.[97]

The interim government's perceived "soft" approach and denial of the terrorism threat were cited as the most concerning aspects of its 2025 CT response.[98] This policy shift was widely described as disempowering CT agencies, sidelining experienced professionals, and creating a fundamental lack of trust and lack of coordination between the new cabinet and the security services.[99] The institutional paralysis was compounded by internal divisions and a perceived lack of security experience within the new cabinet, which often led to contradictory public statements and a breakdown in clear policy directives to the police and the intelligence services.

Official responses were often reactive and politically motivated rather than proactive and genuine. The widely publicised "Operation Devil Hunt" in February 2025, which led to the arrest of nearly 11,000 individuals, was seen by many observers as a witch-hunt intended to target political opponents rather than a sincere effort to restore law and order.[100]

The low number of high-profile militant arrests, combined with the numerous controversial bails granted to key extremist figures, severely reinforced the perception of a weakened and ineffective law enforcement apparatus. Law enforcement agencies have not been able to recover the 1,350 firearms and over 257,000 rounds of ammunition which have remained missing since the 2024 mass uprising. Officials fear many may have been sold to criminal groups. The police have yet to determine in whose hands these missing weapons have ended up.[101] It is also likely that militant groups have taken this opportunity to enhance their firepower.

The failure to re-apprehend the numerous absconded militants remains a critical concern and can be directly linked to the CT backslide. Key CT units, such as the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, which had been lauded for their successes in previous years, appeared to have their operational capacity severely hampered in 2025 due to low morale and political interference.

One year into the interim government's term, the Bangladeshi police force remains demoralised and ineffective. Following their role in 2024's violent crackdown, police officers fear reprisal, which, combined with a lack of administrative support, has caused a breakdown in the chain of command

and a reluctance to intervene in crimes. This vacuum has been blamed for rising crime rates and has been evidenced by viral videos of police officers standing passively by while crimes occur. Despite new leadership efforts, the force's own inspector general has admitted they are less than 50 percent effective.[102]

Large CT units like the Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU) and the CTTC were reportedly diverted to capturing juvenile gangs and other conventional criminals, sidelining their specialised CT mandates.[103] While Chief Adviser Dr Yunus has maintained a public rhetoric of "zero tolerance",[104] this rhetorical commitment has been widely contradicted by policy actions and the observed security vacuum, which has emboldened perpetrators and increased the sense of insecurity among minority communities.

While Bangladesh continued to pursue international security cooperation, exemplified by joint military exercises like September's "Operation Pacific Angel 25-3" with the US,[105] these external partnerships stood in stark contrast to the ongoing internal turmoil.

Outlook

The security outlook for Bangladesh is precarious and projected to escalate significantly in 2026. This is critically linked to the upcoming February 2026 election,[106] as political volatility and electoral violence are highly likely and are expected to generate widespread instability, which extremist groups are poised to exploit. With militant capabilities having grown unhindered in 2025, the primary concern is the likely transition from soft targets to the successful execution of major, conventional terrorist attacks in the short to mid term. Averting this requires a peaceful and orderly transfer of power through a free, fair and inclusive election, and, eventually, the strong political will of the incoming government to abandon the current weak security posture and to immediately implement a robust, intelligence-led CT strategy and a comprehensive approach to prevent and counter extremism in all its forms and manifestations.

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INDIA

Antara Chakraborthy

In 2025, India's internal and external security environment was marked by the convergence of traditional and emerging threats. There was a pronounced intensification of cross-border jihadist violence, including the Pahalgam terror attack in April and the subsequent launch of Operation Sindoor – India's retaliatory military campaign that precipitated the most serious India-Pakistan confrontation in over two decades.[107] This attack and escalation not only underscored the persistent threat of Pakistan-based militant networks in Indian Kashmir, but also revealed the fragility of state deterrence mechanisms in South Asia's nuclear environment.

At the same time, India's internal fault lines continued to deepen, thereby normalising vigilante behaviour and deepening Hindu-Muslim divides. Concurrently, India's long-standing insurgent movements presented a mixed picture – Maoist activity and some separatist movements continued their downward trajectories, despite episodic violence. In Northeast India, ethnic clashes, especially in Manipur, continued, generating humanitarian crises and creating fertile ground for insurgent recruitment.

External ideological currents, particularly Khalistani activism, posed an additional layer of complexity to India's counter terrorism discourse, in addition to sporadic transnational incidents impacting India's borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. At the same time, strategic frontiers such as Leh-Ladakh remained sensitive to political mobilisation and potential political unrest, further intersecting with broader India-China-Pakistan geopolitical concerns.

Taken together, all these dynamics indicate that India's security framework in 2025 has become multilayered, requiring policy responses that address both the operational and underlying societal drivers of violence.

Trends

Pahalgam Terror Attack and Operation Sindoor

In April 2025, there was a lethal assault on Hindu pilgrims in the Pahalgam region of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) state, where 26 civilians[108] – mostly Hindu men – were targeted and killed on the basis of their religious identity.[109] In the immediate aftermath, The Resistance Front (TRF), an offshoot of the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), initially claimed responsibility for the attack, but later retracted its claim.[110] It is worth noting that this was one of the deadliest attacks in Kashmir since the Pulwama attack in February 2019.[111] In response to the Pahalgam attack, on May 7, 2025, India executed coordinated and targeted missile and airstrikes – called "Operation Sindoor"[112] – against jihadist camps and military bases across Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir.[113] The strikes disrupted the operational networks of several groups, including LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).[114] JeM's chief Masood Azhar confirmed the deaths of 14 individuals, including 10 of his family members and four close associates, in a missile strike on the group's headquarters in Bahawalpur, Pakistan.[115] The strikes demonstrated the precision and reach of India's retaliation while underscoring the vulnerability of jihadist command structures, and also marked a dramatic shift from prior non-operational responses to terrorism. Pakistan responded with drone and missile counterstrikes, targeting "terrorist infrastructure"[116] in Kashmir, leading to high tension and extensive diplomatic engagement between the two countries for several days.[117] The engagement escalated over four days, bringing the nuclear-armed neighbours to the brink of armed conflict.

This confrontation quickly migrated from kinetic clashes to the domain of narratives, where competing claims of victimhood and legitimacy were fought over by both state actors and jihadist groups. India framed the attacks as a legitimate, proportionate act of counter terrorism grounded on the long-standing assertion that Pakistan has been enabling cross-border militant attacks and infrastructure.[118] Pakistan, on the other hand, denied any complicity in the Pahalgam attack and emphasised sovereign prerogatives in its defensive military attacks.[119] This produced two overlapping narratives, with each actor stressing its own grievances while legitimising coercive measures, further feeding domestic securitisation and diplomatic escalation.

Here, the prominent jihadist organisations in the region also projected their own ideological storylines and exploited discursive fissures to reinforce their own agendas. For instance, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) initially echoed the Pakistani state's defence posture against India but quickly pivoted to its default narrative of betrayal, depicting the Pakistani military as weak and tied to foreign interests.[120] The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) also ran a similar narrative and went on to add that the crisis was orchestrated by the Pakistani security apparatus to disguise internal failings, further delegitimising the army and reinforcing its anti-state propaganda.[121] LeT and its affiliated groups leveraged the Pahalgam incident to adjust their operations, reportedly shifting their activities deeper into Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province – possibly to evade Indian military strikes – and consolidating their networks for future mobilisation.[122] In contrast, JeM and HM did not issue any statements regarding the Pahalgam attack, though their broader involvement in cross-border terrorism is well documented.

Meanwhile, the Taliban in Afghanistan maintained a carefully neutral line and treated the escalation as a military dispute between states rather than a religious conflict. This reflected the Taliban's shift towards a more pragmatic state actor positioning.[123] On the other hand, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK) rejected national narratives and presented itself as the uncompromising standard-bearer for global jihadism, condemning Pakistan for cowardice and castigating the Taliban for their neutrality.[124]

Collectively, these narratives illustrate how South Asian jihadist movements appropriate India-Pakistan flashpoints for their own distinct purposes: 1) to act as recruitment tools, with groups tailoring their messaging to their target constituencies – for instance, AQIS focused on the pan-South Asian Islamists, TTP on anti-establishment militants in Pakistan, LeT on pro-Kashmir sympathisers and ISK on transnational jihadist aspirants; 2) to delegitimise rival institutions; and 3) to reinforce their ideologies within the jihadist ecosystem.

Red Fort Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) Attack

On November 10, 2025, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack occurred near New Delhi's Red Fort,[125] representing one of the most significant urban terrorist incidents in recent years. The blast, which took place in a densely populated area, killed 13 individuals and injured several dozen more.[126] The National Investigation Agency (NIA) identified the suicide bomber as Umar Muhammad (also known as Umar Un Nabi).[127] In the days following the attack, the NIA also arrested his aide, Amir Rashid Ali, a resident of J&K, under whose name the vehicle was registered.[128] Law enforcement agencies also conducted extensive raids across multiple states, including Delhi, J&K, Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.[129]

A key lead in the investigations was the Al-Falah University in Faridabad, where closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage showed the VBIED car parked on campus in the month before the attack.[130] CCTV footage also showed the car's movements across some 40 locations,[131] suggesting a high degree of premeditated planning and safe house usage within benign civilian environments.

Investigations further revealed that the explosive used in the VBIED contained a mixture of ammonium nitrate and triacetone triperoxide (TATP) – highly sensitive materials which can be obtained commercially.[132] Concurrently, NIA raids in J&K, particularly in Srinagar, uncovered the existence of multiple stockpiles of materials in various locations, suggesting the perpetrators were operating as part of a wider network.[133]

However, the motive behind the attack remains opaque. The bomber may have acted out of panic or desperation, after a major crackdown on a terror module in Faridabad resulted in the seizure of nearly 2,900 kilogrammes of explosives, detonators and weapons shortly before the Red Fort blast.[134]

Hindutva-Driven Communal Violence

In 2025, India continued to witness an intensification of communal violence, which human rights monitors and civil society groups have increasingly linked to the spread of Hindutva ideology, with most incidents clustered around religious festivals, such as Holi, Ram Navami and Ramadan, among others. Data compiled by the India Persecution Tracker, a civil society monitoring project maintained by the South Asia Justice Campaign, recorded dozens of such incidents between January and March 2025 across at least seven states, including Bihar, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.[135] For example, during 2025's Ram Navami celebrations in West Bengal, people openly brandished weapons, such as swords, tridents and axes, in processions while chanting religious slogans, despite prohibitory orders from the Calcutta High Court.[136] The normalisation of such displays has further contributed to an environment where religious festivals are increasingly polarised.

Parallel to festival-linked clashes, vigilante "cow protection" violence has remained a defining feature of Hindutva attacks.[137] Suspicion of cattle slaughter, especially cow slaughter, has fuelled mob lynchings and assaults targeting Muslims and Dalits, as noted by Human Rights Watch.[138] Christians, too, have faced escalating hostility. Indian Christian advocacy group and civil society organisation, The United Christian Forum, documented over 300 incidents between January and May 2025, ranging from the harassment of pastors to mob assaults during Sunday services.[139] In August 2025, in the Kanker district of Chhattisgarh state, a mob attacked 36 Christians after Sunday prayers, leaving two women hospitalised.[140] These attacks are often justified under the banner of fighting "forced conversions", despite a lack of evidence.

Apart from the cases mentioned above, misinformation, or "fake news", continues to act as a frequent accelerant for incidents of communal violence in India. Rumours spreading rapidly through WhatsApp groups or local networks, claiming incidents such as cow slaughter, "love jihad"[141] or the desecration of religious Hindu symbols, often serve as immediate flashpoints for mob attacks.[142] A stark example occurred in Nagpur, Maharashtra, on March 17, 2025, when rumours circulated that a Hindu holy book had been burned, which escalated into large-scale rioting by Hindutva-affiliated groups, leaving more than 30 injured and one dead.[143] The sharp increase in these attacks has also led to the normalisation of hate speech in both public and online spaces. Social media networks play a big role in amplifying anti-minority rhetoric through memes and coded language, illustrating how misinformation and targeted messaging have become central tools in instigating and legitimising anti-minority attacks.[144]

The overall effect of these trends is a deep erosion of social cohesion and communal trust, with Muslims and Christians reportedly feeling increasingly marginalised. Civil society groups and international observers have noted that these developments have frayed India's plural social fabric. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) again designated India a "Country of Particular Concern" for religious freedom issues for the sixth consecutive year.[145] Domestically, independent bodies have flagged a decline in rule of law: for instance, India's own National Human Rights Commission was downgraded for a lack of independence and failure to address communal abuses,[146] leaving minority communities increasingly exposed while deepening social divisions and communal polarisation.

Ethnic Clashes in Manipur

The ethnic violence in Manipur, which started in May 2023, between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, continued to profoundly affect the region in 2025. Chief Minister Biren Singh resigned after 21 months of violence, followed by the imposition of President's Rule in February 2025.[147] However, the underlying communal tensions remain unresolved, leading to continued security challenges and humanitarian crises. Periodic attacks have also been reported. For instance, on September 19, there was an ambush affiliated with the banned terror outfit, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which resulted in casualties among security personnel and subsequent arrests of the militants.[148] Similarly, in another incident in October 2025, security forces faced stiff resistance from a Kuki mob when they raided the residence of a United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) leader, showing the heightened state of communal tensions.[149] Insurgent groups have continued to exploit this crisis as well as the transnational spaces along the border with Myanmar, further complicating operational planning and regional security.

The ongoing conflict is primarily driven by entrenched communal and political grievances.[150] There needs to be immediate security measures to protect civilians, combined with sustained political dialogue and comprehensive rehabilitation programmes aimed at social reconciliation among the communities.[151] Without the proper addressing of these grievances, insurgent groups are likely to continue recruiting from among displaced and marginalised youth. The humanitarian impact of this conflict has been severe, with over 60,000 people displaced and living in relief camps.[152] International observers and civil society groups, including Amnesty International, have called for urgent rehabilitation measures and the return of the displaced population.[153]

Cross-Border tensions at the Eastern Frontiers: Bangladesh and Myanmar

India's eastern frontiers continued to be affected by two cross-border dynamics in 2025: 1) insurgent sanctuaries and transnational operating bases, which are being exploited by Indian insurgent groups along the porous India-Myanmar border;[154] and 2) refugee and smuggling pressures along the Bangladesh border, which are complicating security governance issues in India.[155] These phenomena are episodic but carry strategic salience, as they create staging grounds for insurgents, trafficking networks and other humanitarian flows, which interact with security operations.

In Myanmar, a wave of reported drone and air attacks struck insurgent camps in Myanmar's Sagaing and Naga-administered areas in July. Groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA-I) and Manipur-based armed factions reported casualties and deaths of senior commanders.[156] Some local media and insurgent groups attributed these strikes to Indian security forces,[157] though the Indian authorities officially denied involvement.[158] Whether or not India was directly responsible, the incidents illustrate a broader trend: the growing use of remote and precision strike capabilities to disrupt insurgent networks across borders.[159] They also highlight the diplomatic sensitivity inherent in such operations, as India must balance counterinsurgency objectives with Myanmar's sovereignty concerns and the risk of regional escalation.[160]

As Bangladesh underwent a violent government ouster in 2024, the borders remained a site for migration-related friction in 2025. The Indian authorities continued to detain and, in some cases, repatriate groups they considered illegal migrants or "security risks", including Rohingya and Bengali-origin populations. There were also several reports of cross-border smuggling[161] and trafficking of arms,[162] drugs[163] and contraband, among other things, persisting in localised corridors, creating law enforcement challenges for the border states.

In addition, there emerged a distinct socio-political narrative in India where, irrespective of citizenship status, Bengali Muslims were often conflated with "Bangladeshi nationals".[164] There are two lasting effects of this narrative: 1) it amplifies existing anti-minority sentiments, particularly against Muslim communities; and 2) it frames cross-border migration as a national security problem rather than a humanitarian or administrative challenge. This conflation of identity with foreign origin creates a layered threat perception that, while not always reflecting the actual risk, influences policing practices, local governance and community relations. In more extreme cases, it normalises anti-minority rhetoric.

Maoist Insurgency: Contraction and Residual Challenges

By mid-2025, both government and media reports indicated the Maoist insurgency had significantly decreased in scale and territorial control.[165] Official figures suggested that there was a steady reduction in active cadres, with sustained surrenders and leadership captures weakening command structures across strongholds in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha.[166] Nevertheless, episodic attacks, like improvised explosive device (IED) ambushes, continued in regions like Bastar.[167][168] However, despite a significant decline in attacks, Maoist violence still holds disruptive potential in the resource-rich tribal belts.

Concurrently, human rights groups continued to raise concerns about counterinsurgency operations, documenting instances of alleged disproportionate force, custodial violence and extrajudicial killings.[169] This also risks undermining legitimacy of governance among the tribal populations of the region,[170] from whom the insurgency historically draws its social base.[171] A purely military approach risks perpetuating grievance cycles in the region, and a more sustainable strategy that integrates rehabilitation and reintegration programmes is thus required. There also needs to be sustained investment in governance capacity, livelihood security and accountability mechanisms, to pave the way for socioeconomic development in these historically marginalised and affected areas.

Political Volatility of Leh-Ladakh

The Union Territory of Ladakh, particularly the Leh region, witnessed a marked increase in political mobilisations throughout 2025, with local groups pressing for political autonomy and full statehood.[172] Demonstrations and public assemblies have become increasingly visible, with the latest protests in September escalating into clashes with law enforcement.[173] There have also been reports of police firing tear gas and baton-charging at protesters, resulting in multiple injuries among civilians.[174] The drivers of these mobilisations are a combination of economic, cultural and political grievances. Locals are seeking to safeguard their cultural and demographic identity amid growing development of and investment in the region, while contesting employment opportunities and land-use rights. These demands also include constitutional guarantees, such as inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, to secure tribal protections.[175]

From a security perspective, these movements have not escalated into organised militancy or insurgency. However, critics note that the heavy-handed response by the state, including restrictions on public gatherings, has raised concerns regarding polarisation and political disenfranchisement.[176] Given Ladakh's strategic position along the borders of China and Pakistan, maintaining stability in the region is imperative. The region remains a critical frontier where local unrests could intersect with broader geopolitical tensions. Therefore, proactive engagement, including dialogues and conflict mitigation measures, is necessary to prevent escalation and to integrate the demands of local stakeholders into policymaking.

Other Regional and Diasporic Dynamics: Nepal and the Khalistani Movement

Other developments which shaped India's wider security outlook included its regional neighbour Nepal as well as diaspora politics, even though the direct impact of these factors remained limited. Nepal's political landscape experienced significant turbulence in 2025, marked by widespread protests that led to the resignation of Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli.[177] Primarily mobilised by the youth and called "the Gen Z revolution",[178] the protests erupted after a controversial social media ban and escalated to result in 74 deaths and over 2,000 injuries.[179] While there is currently no threat of an observable spillover effect of this violence into Indian territory, the situation in Nepal – given its political volatility as a neighbour – warrants vigilance rather than immediate concern.

Meanwhile, Sikh separatist discourse associated primarily with the Khalistan movement continued to persist in pockets of the diaspora, particularly in Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia.[180] The movement remains primarily discursive on digital platforms and has not translated into significant mobilisations within India itself, even though diaspora groups have used the alleged repression of Sikhs in India to mobilise.[181] Domestically, however, Sikh-majority regions like Punjab have remained insulated from separatist resurgence. Nevertheless, the discourse retains the potential to generate diplomatic strains, as seen in the context of India and Canada, where diaspora-linked activism has strained bilateral relations.[182] While the domestic impact of Sikh separatism remains low, the persistence of diaspora-led Khalistani narratives could also be leveraged by other hostile actors, further complicating India's diplomatic engagements.[183]

Outlook

Looking ahead, India's security landscape in 2026 is likely to remain impacted by a convergence of internal volatility and other strategic pressure points. Cross-border violence may challenge deterrence stability in the region, particularly if Pakistan-based networks attempt retaliatory strikes following Operation Sindoor. Domestically, rising communal polarisation, vigilante mobilisation and digitally amplified hate narratives will continue to strain India's internal social cohesion. On the eastern side, refugee flows from Bangladesh and Myanmar may continue to complicate border management and safety, while the unresolved ethnic fault lines in Manipur will sustain if not properly addressed. The Maoist movement's decline is promising; however, if developmental grievances in the region are neglected, there runs the risk of cyclical grievance resurgence. Meanwhile, the growing mobilisation in Ladakh may emerge as a key flashpoint for local unrest, with strategic overtones. At the transnational level, diaspora activism – particularly Khalistani discourse – will shape India's security and diplomatic moves, even if their direct impact within India

itself remains limited. Therefore, 2026 will test India's capacity to manage hybrid threats which blend conventional security challenges with socio-political and informational dimensions, requiring more integrated and community-sensitive security strategies.

About the Author

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PAKISTAN

Abdul Basit

Pakistan was the second worst-hit country by terrorism in 2025, according to the Global Terrorism Index, as the number of deaths in terrorist attacks rose by 45 percent.[184] Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan were the worst-affected regions, where most of the year's terrorist attacks occurred. Pakistan's deteriorating ties with the Taliban regime over the presence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan,[185] lack of a coherent counter terrorism policy balancing soft and hard strategies,[186] challenges in managing the porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran, and growing state-society gap, contributed to a volatile security situation.[187] The South Asian nation's internal security challenges were also linked to the absence of substantive international counter terrorism assistance, despite the revival of security cooperation with the United States (US).[188]

Introduction

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal's open-source database, Pakistan suffered as many as 893 terrorist attacks, including 22 suicide bombings, in the first 10 months of 2025, resulting in 3,285 casualties.[189] The number of violent incidents for the corresponding period in 2024 was 650, accounting for 1,648 fatalities.[190] While terrorist attacks rose year-on-year by 243 in Pakistan, the number of casualties almost doubled, with a surge of 1,637.[191] The Pakistani state's insistence on imposing a militaristic solution on Balochistan's ethnic and socioeconomic grievances as well as its political tensions with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over counter terrorism tactics, will likely increase militant violence in 2026.[192] The politicisation of key security policies and the state-society polarisation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have allowed terrorist groups to manipulate these fissures.[193]

Coupled with that, Pakistan's internal security situation is closely linked to its evolving and conflict-prone ties with Afghanistan and India.[194] If Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions over the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) persist,[195] the security situation will deteriorate further. Similarly, Pakistan's conflict with India following the Pahalgam terrorist attack in Indian-administered Kashmir also leaves space open for tensions.[196] While agreeing to a ceasefire in May 2025, India announced that another cross-border terrorist attack from Pakistan would be considered "an act of war".[197] Such hostile posturing has kept South Asia on edge, while creating multiple regional fault lines for terrorist groups, especially Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), to exploit.

Trends

Terrorists' Use of Drones and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The most alarming trend in 2025 was the use of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and artificial intelligence (AI) by Pakistani terrorist networks across the ideological spectrum. The affordable prices, commercial availability, and diffusion of drones and AI have made them low-hanging fruit for Pakistani terrorist networks.[198] Furthermore, the transfer of knowledge, expertise and funds from the Taliban and AQ to the TTP and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group (HGBG) has been equally important in the weaponisation of drones.[199]

While almost all terrorist networks in Pakistan have used drones for surveillance and propaganda operations, only factions affiliated with the TTP and the HGBG have used them for attacks.[200] According to *The Khorasan Diary*, a digital news and research portal which tracks militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, around 83 drone attacks by militants were reported until October 2025, compared to six quadcopter strikes for the same period in 2024.[201] Furthermore, all the drone attacks by militants in 2025 took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.[202]

It is important to mention that while terrorist networks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were carrying out drone attacks in 2024 as well, they were not claiming them, fearing public backlash.[203] However, this changed when Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen Pakistan (IMP), a militant alliance of the HGBG, Lashkar-e-Islam (LI) and Harkat Inqilab-i-Islami Pakistan (HIIP), started claiming them in early 2025. It also forced the TTP to openly claim drone attacks.[204] HIIP is a new militant group comprising former operatives of AQ's 313 Brigade, founded by Ilyas Kashmiri (more in *The Emergence of New Militant Groups* section below).

Other terrorist groups, such as ISK and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), have not deployed drones for attacks so far.[205] This is despite the fact that ISK was the first terrorist group in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to share five drone manuals on its encrypted social media channels. Likewise, even though the BLA and other Baloch separatist groups possess and use drones for propaganda and surveillance operations, they have not weaponised them for two possible reasons.[206] First, it is quite likely that they do not have the requisite expertise to use UAS for kinetic operations. Second, it is also possible that weaponising drones does not add any value to their existing insurgent toolkit, i.e., it does not advance their relative advantage against the Pakistani state.[207] Balochistan forms 44 percent of Pakistan's geographical landmass and is sparsely populated, which hinders the weaponisation of drones.[208] Furthermore, the loud noise emissions, low battery timings and limited payload capacities of commercially available drones, along with the province's open spaces, make it possible for the Pakistani security forces to spot and shoot down drones with greater ease.

At the same time, all major terrorist networks in Pakistan have started using AI for propaganda operations, such as preparing infographics, animated pictures and video recordings of their operations to exaggerate their impact, as well as translating their bulletins into multiple regional languages.[209] On their encrypted channels, terrorist groups have also been encouraging their social media operatives to become well versed in the use of AI by signing up for free online courses. In future, compared to the current rudimentary use of AI, its more advanced use will allow them to create tailored recruitment strategies which appeal to individuals and groups based on their ideological preferences, political leanings, social orientations and cognitive biases.[210] Such AI-enabled recruitment strategies will not only improve their online security due to anonymity, but will also enhance their reach by enabling them to approach diverse audiences online.[211]

A Passenger Train's Hijacking in Balochistan and the Evolution of the Baloch Insurgency

In March 2025, the BLA's suicide squad, the Majeed Brigade, hijacked a passenger train with more than 450 passengers on board, including serving army personnel.[212] The Majeed Brigade demanded the release of Balochistan's "political prisoners" in return for freeing the hostages. However, the government rejected its demands and carried out an operation to end the hostage crisis after a 30-hour siege. The BLA killed at least 64 passengers, including 18 soldiers, and injured 38 others.[213] During the clearance operation, 33 militants were eliminated as well. The train

hijacking was one of the worst security failures in Pakistan's history and brought into sharp focus the evolving nature of the separatist insurgency in Balochistan.

The Baloch separatist groups, especially the BLA, have improved their operational strength. From hitting low-profile targets like gas pipelines, power pylons and railway tracks in the past, they are now carrying out more daring attacks on security checkposts and military camps and convoys.[214] They have also started blocking major highways to disrupt traffic to and from the rest of the country and create the impression that the government is losing control over Balochistan's main road networks.[215] During these roadblocks, Baloch separatists carry out spot checks and kill ethnic Punjabis – after identifying them through their identity cards – on suspicion of working for the military.[216] They allege that Punjabis travelling to Balochistan on public transport disguised as labourers either serve in the military or work as government spies.[217]

The hijacking of the passenger train in Balochistan was the second incident of its kind in South Asia. In 2009, sword-wielding Maoist insurgents briefly hijacked a train in India's Jharkhand state during national elections.[218] The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the pacification of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal through a reconciliation process and the significant weakening of the Maoist movements in India's Northeast, have made the BLA South Asia's most organised and powerful insurgent group.[219] Over the years, the Pakistani state's overmilitarised counterinsurgency framework, extrajudicial abductions and killings of Baloch dissidents, imposition of handpicked governments with no grassroots legitimacy and neglect of genuine socioeconomic grievances, along with the rise of an educated middle class, have transformed the Baloch insurgency from a tribal to an urban guerrilla movement.[220] The new generation of Baloch separatists is better educated and social media savvy, subscribes to a more radical form of Baloch nationalism, and sees separatism rather than autonomy as its ultimate goal.[221] The alienation of Baloch youth, who make up more than 70 percent of Balochistan's population, has afforded steady recruitment to the Baloch separatist groups and has compounded security challenges for the Pakistani state.[222]

The Formation of Militant Alliances and Their Turf Battles

Another key trend in 2025 was the formation of inter-group militant alliances, with mergers of smaller factions into larger militant networks, and their turf battles to win the loyalties of smaller outfits. This tussle also revolved around their efforts to expand their respective areas of operation to outdo each other.[223] However, no violent clashes or propaganda warfare was witnessed between them.

In January, the inter-group competition between the TTP and the HGBG intensified after talks of a possible merger collapsed.[224] Since becoming the TTP's chief, Nur Wali Mehsud has focused on building alliances with like-minded jihadist factions to forge a unified struggle under a "one group, one *emir*" policy to bring about a Taliban-style *shariah* state in Pakistan.[225] He extended an offer to both LI and the HGBG to merge with the TTP. However, ethno-tribal differences hindered their merger, even though all are Deobandi groups, operate in geographically congruent areas, share identical goals and have a common enemy, i.e., the Pakistani military.[226]

On January 18, the HGBG and LI announced a formal alliance with a two-fold objective. First, to carry out joint attacks against the Pakistani security forces. Second, to insulate themselves from the TTP's growing influence in their traditional strongholds, i.e., Khyber and North Waziristan districts.[227] Nonetheless, the TTP's ingress into Khyber and North Waziristan has continued unabated.[228] In February, the TTP secured the loyalty of a key HGBG commander, Ali Dawar.[229] In retaliation, the HGBG poached an important TTP faction from South Waziristan, the Hamkeemullah Mehsud Karwan.[230] The HGBG and LI also formed another coalition, IMP, with HIIP. The latter emerged in March, comprising former elements of AQ's 313 Brigade.[231] As the turf battles have intensified, these militant networks have taken steps to consolidate their existing network strength and then expand.[232]

On its part, the TTP has continued to expand its networks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other parts of Pakistan. It is the largest and most organised militant network in the country, so, naturally, smaller militant factions are attracted to it. Joining the TTP enhances their power, prestige and worth within Pakistan's ever-evolving and competitive jihadist landscape. Since July 2020, more than 85 Pakistani militant groups have merged with the TTP.

The TTP Factor in Afghanistan-Pakistan Tensions

Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions peaked to unprecedented levels in October over the TTP's presence on and use of Afghan soil for cross-border attacks in Pakistan.[233] On October 9, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) targeted a vehicle carrying TTP leaders in Kabul. Concurrently, Pakistan also struck multiple militant camps in Khost, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Paktika provinces.[234] In retaliation, the Taliban struck multiple Pakistani checkposts across the entire stretch of the 2,640 kilometre-long shared border.[235]

Pakistan's decision to target the TTP and other Pakistan-centric militant networks' camps in Afghanistan was preceded by a last-ditch diplomatic effort through Chinese mediation to convince the Taliban regime to act against the TTP.[236] In April, Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar visited Kabul to revive the stalled diplomatic relations. It was the first trip by a high-level Pakistani official since February 2023.[237] In May, the Taliban regime issued a directive banning its nationals from fighting beyond Afghanistan's border, to no avail.[238] Afghan nationals continued to participate in TTP-led attacks in Pakistan, stirring tensions between the two neighbours.[239]

For now, tensions have subsided following the intervention of Qatar and Turkey.[240] Taliban and Pakistani delegations held three rounds of talks in Doha and Istanbul to come up with a workable formula to resolve the TTP challenge. Though a tenuous ceasefire was reached and has largely held,[241] the talks in Turkey remained inconclusive.[242] The Taliban want Pakistan to recognise the TTP as a legal entity, allow it to operate as a political party and negotiate with it. On the contrary, Pakistan is asking the Taliban regime to fulfil its commitment under the Doha Agreement 2020 and ensure its soil is not used to launch cross-border terrorism in Pakistan.[243] It is also important to mention that the Taliban deny the TTP's presence in Afghanistan and allegations of supporting it.[244] Their official stance is that the TTP is Pakistan's internal matter, and the Taliban can only help the two sides to negotiate if they are willing.[245]

Keeping in view the Taliban's stance on the TTP, Pakistan has warned that the existing ceasefire will not hold if the Taliban do not take measures to stop the TTP's cross-border attacks. As soon as an attack from Afghanistan's soil takes place in Pakistan, the Pakistani security forces will immediately retaliate.[246] Turkish mediators are likely to return to Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure that both sides reach a workable mechanism to address the TTP challenge.[247]

The stalemate in the Afghanistan-Pakistan peace talks has benefited the TTP. It has been exploiting the border tensions and the ethnic grievances of tribal Pashtuns living along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to expand its ideological influence. Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the TTP has grown stronger with every year.[248] It has imitated the Taliban's insurgency model by announcing self-styled *wilayats* (provinces), shadow ministers and military zones in Pakistan. Reportedly, the TTP overhauls its organisational structure every year to cope with the evolving operational environment and counter terrorism challenges.[249]

The Emergence of New Militant Groups

Pakistan also witnessed the emergence of several new militant groups in 2025, which are reincarnations of old terrorist networks, such as AQ, the TTP and the HGBG, with new nomenclatures. Most of these groups emerged when Pakistan confronted the Taliban regime with evidence of the TTP's presence in Afghanistan, demanded action against the group in accordance with the Doha Agreement 2020 and threatened retaliation in case of inaction.[250]

The new factions have allowed the long-standing terrorist networks to conceal their involvement in cross-border terrorism in Pakistan.[251] At the same time, their emergence in an already overcrowded threat landscape potentially complicates operational understanding among the security forces involved in counter terrorism.[252] These new factions also allow the TTP and the HGBG to maintain plausible deniability in navigating Pakistani pressure on the Taliban regime for supporting and sheltering them while continuing their cross-border attacks.[253]

Since Pakistan confronted the Taliban with evidence of the TTP's presence on and use of Afghan soil for terrorism in Pakistan, the terror group has stopped claiming attacks through its official propaganda arm, Umar Media. This has happened in the past as well. In 2022, the TTP stopped officially claiming attacks when it engaged in peace talks with Pakistan. Instead, a new jihadist group, Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), carried out suicide attacks across Pakistan on the TTP's behalf.[254] As a precondition for peace talks, the TTP was under an obligation to maintain a ceasefire.[255] However, it was also facing pressure from more radical factions to continue violence to strengthen its negotiation position. The TTP thus covertly allowed its radical factions to continue attacks through TJP.[256]

The first group to emerge in 2025 was HIIP, which is a front group of AQ's 313 Brigade.[257] Since the Taliban's return to power, AQ has been embedding itself with local jihadist groups in Pakistan to continue its activities. For instance, some factions of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have joined the TTP. The head of the TTP's Umar Media, Chaudhry Muneeb Jutt, is a former AQ propagandist.[258]

Other militant proxies of the TTP which emerged during the Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions include Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan Force, Tahaffuz Imarat Islami Force, Lashkar-e-Difa al-Quds, Ansarul Sharia Pakistan and Ansarul Jihad.[259] Two factions, Jaish Tahrir Hind and Jaish-ul-Hind, belong to the HGBG.[260]

Responses

To balance its kinetic and non-kinetic counter terrorism responses, Pakistan announced a new National Prevention of Violent Extremism (NPVE) Policy in 2025.[261] Given resource scarcity and capacity issues, coupled with governance deficit, Pakistan's non-kinetic responses have not complemented kinetic counter terrorism gains, thus compromising the latter. The main purpose of the new NPVE Policy is to sustain kinetic counter terrorism achievements through concurrent non-kinetic policy interventions.[262] The NPVE comprises a "Five-R" framework: 1) revisit (educational curriculum); 2) reach out (to the public with counternarratives against extremist ideologies through mainstream and social media); 3 reduce risk (of violent extremism); 4) reinforce (the message of peace and tolerance); and 5) reintegrate (deradicalisation and rehabilitation of former fighters and conflict-affected communities).[263] Though the NPVE has an elaborate implementation framework, the real challenge will be its judicious execution. Similar policies, such as the National Internal Security Policies (NISP 2014-2018 and 2019-2023) as well as the National Security Policy (NSP 2022-2026), had previously been announced; however, their implementation remained the real challenge.[264]

Following the NPVE's launch, Punjab province passed the Punjab Centre of Excellence on Countering Violent Extremism Act 2025 in June. A new eponymous think tank was also created to curb the spread of violent extremism in Punjab.[265] Following this, all four provinces in Pakistan have now passed preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) legislation. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is the most affected by terrorism in Pakistan, was the first province to pass P/CVE legislation in 2021 and establish a centre of excellence.[266] Balochistan approved P/CVE legislation in October 2024 under the anti-terrorism regime,[267] and Sindh followed suit in May 2025.[268] However, except for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, none of the provincial P/CVE centres are operational.[269] As mentioned before, the real challenge lies in the political will and institutional coherence to translate policy into practice.

Meanwhile, to further strengthen and lend credence to its narrative warfare against faith-based militant networks, a conference of religious scholars was convened in Islamabad in April, during which it was declared that violence in the name of jihad is unlawful.[270] It was part of Pakistan's efforts to build a legitimate counternarrative, grounded in religious doctrine, against extremist ideologies. The conference endorsed the killing of rebels by the security forces for instigating militant violence while declaring them as "Khawarij" (rebels or outcasts).[271] The conference's declaration also noted that militant campaigns by non-state violent actors, under the cloak of Islam, spread discord (Fasad fil-Ardh).[272] It bears mention that the Pakistan Army describes militant groups which carry out attacks in Pakistan as "Fitna al-Khawarij".[273]

In addition, to improve civil-military counter terrorism coordination, the National Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (NIFTAC) was inaugurated in May.[274] As the central body for counter terrorism strategy, the NIFTAC will combine over 50 federal and provincial departments and agencies into a unified intelligence and threat management system.[275] It will operate as a federal institution and will directly link six Provincial Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centres (PIFTACs), including those in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Reportedly, the NIFTAC will be supported by a centralised national database.[276]

On the external front, Pakistan revived its counter terrorism partnership with the United States (US) in 2025 by assisting with the arrest of ISK operative Mohammad Sharifullah, the mastermind behind the 2021 Kabul airport attack.[277] Though this resuscitated counter terrorism cooperation is not the same following the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, it is nevertheless important to address the threat posed by AQ and ISK in Afghanistan.[278] At the same time, it also creates opportunities for both countries to forge cooperation against Pakistan-centric threat groups like the TTP and the BLA.

Since 2019, the BLA has been on the US's list of Specially Designated Terrorist Groups (SDTGs).[279] In August 2025, the US State Department listed the BLA and the Majeed Brigade as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).[280] The move underscored the alignment of US-Pakistan security interests in the region. It will pave the way for greater operational coordination and intelligence sharing under the counter terrorism framework.[281] In the same month, the US and Pakistan held a counter terrorism dialogue in Islamabad and reaffirmed their joint commitment to indiscriminately fight all forms of terrorism.[282] Both countries agreed to develop effective approaches to fight terrorist groups, including ISK, the TTP and the BLA. Moreover, there was a consensus between both nations to build institutional frameworks to counter the use of emerging technologies for terrorist purposes.[283]

Outlook

Terrorist violence in Pakistan will not only persist but expand further in 2026. Pakistan's flawed Afghan policy of banking on the Taliban to address the TTP challenge has played a major part in reviving several jihadist networks in the country. The Afghanistan-Pakistan tensions over the TTP, due to the Taliban's inaction, will be a major vector of instability in Pakistan. The broader chaos ensuing from these tensions will create multiple openings for transnational terrorist groups like AQ and ISK to exploit. Newer militant factions, acting as front groups of larger militant networks, will also emerge to obfuscate the latter's culpability in cross-border terrorism.

The foregoing brings into sharp light the complexity of Pakistan's threat landscape. The country will have to combine an internal security policy which balances kinetic and non-kinetic aspects of counter terrorism with adroit diplomacy with Kabul to overcome its security challenges. The way Islamabad approaches ties with Kabul and New Delhi, manages governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, and addresses the growing state-society gap, will shape the contours of its internal security landscape in 2026.

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Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Xinjiang

Raffaello Pantucci

As with previous years, it was a relatively quiet year in terms of terrorist attacks in Central Asia. The one incident associated with terrorist groups which resulted in deaths was a prison riot in Vahdat prison some 20 kilometres east of Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital. Echoing similar incidents in previous years, reporting around the incident was sketchy but seemed to point to militants linked to the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, who either attempted an escape or tried to stir up a riot. Beyond this, there were numerous terrorism-related arrests reported across the region as well as incidents in Russia, Afghanistan and Europe involving Central Asian militants. Neighbouring Xinjiang did not see any terrorist incidents during the year and Uyghur militants were not linked to any incidents publicly. In the online space, Central Asian militant groups continued to be active (under both IS- and non-IS-linked banners), though the volume and quality of propaganda materials continued to degrade. Most complicated for the region, however, has been Syria, where large numbers of Central Asian militants remain, both incarcerated as former IS members as well as integrated into the senior ranks of the new government. The relatively fluid situation highlights a point of concern for the Central Asian authorities, which will take some time to settle down.

Central Asia's Continuing Syrian Jihad?

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime and the subsequent takeover by Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria in December 2024 marked a major watershed in the global jihadist narrative. Central Asian fighters were a prominent part of the final push to take the country, with the Uyghur fighters of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) particularly prominent in the push to take Latakia and Tartous. Videos emerged of the TIP's fighters rolling into Damascus on tanks waving the group's distinct blue flag.[1] Other Central Asian groups were less prominent as they had largely been integrated into HTS's ranks, with the Uyghurs the last large monoethnic group fighting under their own banner in Syria.

In the wake of HTS's takeover, the Central Asian governments stayed quiet. Concerned about the presence of their nationals alongside HTS, they became even more anxious when Sayfiddin Tojiboyev, a Tajik national of Uzbek ethnicity, was appointed to a senior role in the new Ministry of Defence.[2] A long-standing fighter, Tojiboyev had started his anti-government career as a member of the previously mainstream opposition party, the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). He quit the party in 2012 (IRPT was later banned in 2015) and went to Syria, where he first joined Liwa al-Muhajireen and later helped form Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, a mostly Central Asian jihadist group which fought alongside HTS (from its earlier days as Jabhat al-Nusrah). In an interview released after his appointment, he stated he had never fought with or been linked to the Islamic State (IS).[3] Reinforcing this narrative of integration with the new Syrian army, the Russian-speaking jihadist mercenary trainers Malhama Tactical re-emerged in January 2025, reportedly providing military training for the new Syrian army.[4]

Yet, since this early embrace, the reporting from Syria has pointed to a more complicated picture. In May 2025, there was an attack on the Russian airbase in Hmeimim, which some reports attributed to Uzbek fighters affiliated with the new government.[5] An unknown number of people were killed, and Russian soldiers reportedly dragged the bodies back into the base. Then, in October, reports emerged of a standoff between the Syrian authorities and a French foreign fighter group, Firqatul Ghuraba, in Harem, a village in northwest Idlib. Uzbek foreign fighters reportedly led a group of non-Syrians who came to the French group's defence when the new Syrian authorities sought to detain a senior Firqatul Ghuraba member. This led to widespread discussion online amongst Russian-speaking jihadists about the potential betrayal by the new government of their foreign supporters.[6]

This narrative is very prominent in the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK)'s Uzbek and Tajik propaganda materials. ISK continues to attack HTS, accusing President Ahmed al-Sharaa of betraying jihadists through his willingness to embrace the American, Russian, Chinese and other "enemy" governments. These concerns came to something of an apex in November when a report emerged that the Syrian government was going to repatriate Uyghurs in Syria.[7] The story was quickly denied by the Syrian government, but it highlighted the levels of anxiety that clearly exist.[8] The Chinese government has never hidden its ongoing concerns towards the Uyghur contingent in Syria (reportedly numbering as many as 15,000),[9] and the topic appears to be a prominent one in discussions between the new government and Beijing.[10] Turkey, a strong supporter of the new Syrian government, has been actively lobbying the Central Asian and other governments to engage with the al-Sharaa government.

Following in Afghanistan's Footsteps?

The path that Syria eventually takes could be similar to the Taliban regime's engagement with Central Asia since taking over Afghanistan in 2021. From an early hesitation, the region has now embraced the Taliban authorities, with regional security chiefs making regular visits to Kabul as well as hosting Taliban delegations. Even the Tajik government, historically the regional government most resistant to the Taliban's harsh theocratic rule, undertook its first senior-level public visit to Kabul in November to engage with senior Taliban officials.[11] Whilst there has been a consistent level of behind-the-scenes engagement, this formal visit signalled that the overall thrust is towards normalisation, notwithstanding reports of tensions.[12]

In mid-July, Uzbek authorities arrested a cell of around 10 ISK-linked radicals, reportedly led by a 19-year-old girl, in Namangan city.[13] A couple of weeks later, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced a series of nine arrests in Moscow, including seven foreigners, also linked to ISK.[14] This came as the chief of the Uzbek State Security Service (SSS) visited Kabul and met with the Taliban's intelligence and security chiefs.[15] Earlier in July, the Russian government had formally recognised the Taliban government as the designated authorities in Afghanistan. Reports suggest that the Taliban security authorities cooperated closely with their Uzbek and Russian counterparts in the counter-ISK operations.

External Threats?

Central Asians continued to pop up in occasional terrorist investigations outside the region. During this reporting period, the Dutch authorities jailed a Tajik national who had been recruiting for ISK,[16] while a German court ordered the repatriation of a Tajik IS member who had finished a prison sentence in the country.[17] It is not clear in the latter case if the extradition will succeed, as previous cases of Tajiks sent back from Germany have led to deaths in custody back in Tajikistan.[18] The Dutch case, however, highlighted how complex geopolitics between Europe, Turkey and the ongoing war in Ukraine have complicated European counter terror efforts.[19]

Within Russia, Central Asians continued to be reportedly involved in terrorist plots. In August, the case against the Tajiks linked to the IS-claimed Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow came to court.[20] All four suspects pleaded guilty at the beginning of the trial and are expected to receive life sentences. Meanwhile, Kyrgyz authorities jailed a man in February for praising the attack online.[21] Also in February, three Tajiks were shot by the FSB in Pskov, accused of planning a bombing at a local train station.[22] In October, the Russian authorities claimed an IS-linked Uzbek working on behalf of the Ukrainian government had been involved in plots to target Russian security officials.[23] There were numerous other lower-profile cases, highlighting the continued intertwining of threats between Russia and the region.

In an outlying case that fits a wider trend,[24] a 29-year-old Uzbek was arrested in Korea on charges of using cryptocurrencies to send money to Hamas and Katibat al-Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ).[25]

Kazakhstan

In May, Yermek Sagimbayev, the chair of the National Security Committee (NSC), announced that 43 people had been prosecuted on terrorism charges since the beginning of the year.[26] In late October, the Kazakh security forces reported that 89 people, including six foreigners, had been detained on terrorism charges since the beginning of the year.[27] Few exact plots were reported during the year, with most cases linked to "terror propagation", though in May, police presence was stepped up outside an Astana synagogue, reflecting a specific "terror threat".[28]

Kyrgyzstan

Reported detentions in Kyrgyzstan were lower in 2025, with no major plots reported to have been disrupted. Many of the arrests were of individuals who were reportedly active online talking to extremists abroad.[29] In June, a group of more than 10 was detained, accused of being part of a takfiri-jihadi organisation in possession of firearms seeking to establish an underground network in Bishkek.[30] In October, the authorities disrupted a network of nine linked to the banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir (seven had previously been detained on similar charges), reportedly finding firearms.[31] No specific plots were described in either case.

Tajikistan

The prison incident in Vahdat in February was the only lethal incident linked to terrorism in the region in 2025. Details remain sketchy, with reporting suggesting that between five and 15 were killed in the incident.[32] Reportedly, images emerged showing the IS flag on some of the individuals, with suggestions that it was either a prison break attempt or simply an attack on guards. There were similarities between this incident and earlier IS-linked prison incidents in November 2018 and May 2019, which took place at the same prison in Vahdat.[33] The authorities also claimed to have disrupted much larger operations and networks across the country throughout the year – for instance, in February, jailing 30 accused of being involved in a mass poisoning incident planned by ISK.[34] ISK's Tajik media channels continued to produce throughout the reporting period, though they were marked by regular outages which seemed to echo events in Afghanistan – suggesting their base may be across the border. At the same time, Ansarullah (which renamed itself the Islamic Emirate of Tajikistan), a modest-sized, alternative jihadist organisation, produced a continuous diet of materials throughout the year on YouTube which condemned the authorities and sought to rally the people to rise up. Both condemned the new Syrian government as well as the authorities in Kabul and Dushanbe.

Turkmenistan

There was no reporting of extremist or terrorist activity linked to Turkmenistan during this reporting period.

Uzbekistan

As highlighted above, the Uzbek authorities worked with their counterparts in Russia and Afghanistan to counter threats within and outside the country during the reporting period. No arrests were linked to specific attack plots, with some linked to Hizb ut-Tahrir[35] as well as to KTJ and ISK. In July, the authorities jailed for 16 years an Uzbek national who had been radicalised in Russia, joined ISK in Afghanistan in 2016, and ultimately reportedly played a role in supplying ammunition for a rocket launcher system used by the group to fire into Termez, Uzbekistan, in 2022.[36] The case was striking as the authorities had at the time denied anything had taken place, while ISK had played it up as part of its campaign against the Central Asian countries.

Outlook

Central Asia continues to face a low-level threat picture which is dominated by online radicalisation and connections around the world. Whilst the threat has not matured as some had expected, there is no doubt that Central Asian militancy remains a persistent concern globally. In the online space,

it has been noted that Uzbek and Tajik channels in particular found it harder to broadcast during the previous year, with clampdowns on Telegram creating problems. Some have chosen to migrate to alternative channels like TikTok, Gem Space or Rocket.Chat, but these have been equally difficult to sustain, with relatively low numbers of followers appearing in groups. Tajik-produced materials continue to be the most prominent and active, reflecting the country's continuing place at the heart of the regional threat. Going forward, how the new authorities in Syria manage their relationships with the Central Asian governments and balance that against the large extremist Central Asian diaspora they have within their borders, will be an important element to watch.

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The Reshaped Terrorist Threat in the Middle East in 2025

Ghada Soliman

The year 2025 was marked by significant violent events which have shaped security challenges the Middle East will face in 2026. Since the Gaza war following the October 2023 Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, and the subsequent capture and killing of Israeli civilians and military personnel, the Middle East[1] has undergone a profound and potentially irreversible transformation.[2] Israel has emerged as a dominant military force, expanding its war to neighbouring countries and fighting on several fronts to crack down on terrorism. However, despite its successes, these conflicts have fostered violent extremism, as extremist groups have exploited these conflicts to further their agendas. This situation has been exacerbated by the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which has triggered global protests demanding an end to the conflict and increased humanitarian aid. Against this backdrop, this study assesses the critical events that have shaped the current terrorism landscape in the Middle East.

Regional Conflicts Have Emboldened Israel

Since Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack, Israel has emerged as a dominant military force.[3] Its retaliation to Hamas' attack has expanded to other neighbouring countries in the region, with Israel fighting on several fronts. These range from Gaza,[4] where it is uprooting Hamas,[5] to Lebanon, where it has cracked down on Hezbollah[6] through pager explosions and assassinations of leaders. It has also intervened in Syria[7] to eliminate Hezbollah remnants and still maintains a presence there. It also engaged Iran[8] in a 12-day war, which occurred from June 13 to June 25, 2025, while continuing its attacks on the Houthis in Yemen. As a result, Iran suffered the loss of key military figures, including Hossein Salami, the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),[9] and several prominent nuclear scientists. Additionally, Iran's nuclear infrastructure suffered damage, with some partially destroyed. While these outcomes represent a notable achievement for Israel in degrading Iran's capabilities, they have exacerbated regional instability and increased the potential for further escalation of conflicts. Concurrently, Israel has maintained its offensive operations against the Houthis as part of its continued efforts to dismantle Iran's "Axis of Resistance".

Through these attacks, Israel's military has significantly curtailed Iran's proxies, effectively undermining Iran's long-standing forward defence strategy. Escalation continued when, in September, Israel struck Hamas leaders in Qatar,[10] an action that sent shockwaves throughout the Gulf Arab states. These events collectively suggest a fundamental shift in regional power dynamics, with Israel asserting a more pronounced military hegemony and directly challenging established alliances.

Gaza War: A Turning Point for Hamas

Hamas has demonstrated significant resilience over the past two years, even in the face of sustained Israeli military operations. This resilience stems from its ability to adapt its tactics and leverage its extensive tunnel networks and underground infrastructure. Despite suffering substantial losses in terms of personnel, weaponry and infrastructure, it has consistently managed to regroup and continue its operations. However, with United States (US) President Donald Trump's plan[11] to end the conflict in Gaza, which was proposed on September 23, 2025, the group was left with a stark choice: surrender or face intensified conflict at the expense of continued Palestinian suffering.[12]

Despite initial doubts about its feasibility,[13] Trump's plan officially took effect on October 10, 2025, following Hamas's agreement to the terms on October 3, 2025,[14] reportedly to avert direct

confrontation with the US. Hamas emphasised the importance of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip as part of this agreement. However, the truce has repeatedly been undermined by allegations of violations from both sides, leading to renewed military action and an increasing death toll. While Hamas successfully facilitated the release of living hostages, efforts to retrieve the remains of deceased hostages have proven challenging, thereby complicating progress on subsequent phases of the ceasefire, which involve more complex issues like the disarmament of Hamas and the future governance of the territory.

Gazans Under Hamas's Increased Extremism

Recent weeks have seen a significant escalation of terror within Gaza, beyond the widespread destruction and humanitarian crisis. Reports[15] indicate that Hamas has intensified its crackdown on individuals and groups suspected of collaborating with external entities, including Israel, marked by public executions of these individuals.[16] This internal repression, coupled with a statement attributed to President Trump regarding the temporary authorisation for Hamas to police the Strip, has exacerbated fear and suffering among the Gazan population, who are caught between the ongoing conflict with Israel and the internal power struggles orchestrated by Hamas. These actions appear to be a systematic effort by Hamas to enforce stricter ideological and political control, leading to increased extremism and distrust among Gazans.

Palestinian Talks in Cairo: A New Path for Gaza's Future?

The outcome of the meeting held in Cairo on October 24, 2025, to forge a unified Palestinian vision for the next phase of the ceasefire and post-war governance among Palestinian factions,[17] remains to be seen. Representatives from both Hamas and Fatah, the latter representing the Palestinian Authority (PA), attended this meeting.[18] A significant point of agreement was the transfer of the Gaza Strip's administration to a temporary Palestinian committee composed of independent "technocrats" from the region, rejecting international control proposals. However, it is still uncertain whether Hamas and other factions are willing to disarm and integrate under the PA. This uncertainty is compounded by the PA's diminished standing among Palestinians,[19] attributed to its perceived ineffectiveness in addressing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Without explicit approval from Hamas or legitimate Palestinian representatives, and with no mention of a future Palestinian state, the proposed plan directly challenges Hamas's long-standing control over security in Gaza, a domain the group is unwilling to relinquish, even if it withdraws from the political scene. It is worth noting that despite Israel having weakened Hamas, the group still maintains some operational capability[20] and authority[21] within the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir[22] has indicated that Hamas's military capabilities would not be fully eradicated, even after the planned ground invasion of Gaza City. Hamas remnants will likely continue to challenge[23] the IDF despite the latter's advances throughout the Gaza Strip.

The Resurgence of the Islamic State (IS) in a Fragmented Syria

The Gaza conflict acted as a significant catalyst and accelerant for pre-existing vulnerabilities within the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, which led to its collapse in December 2024 and the rise of a Sunni Islamist group formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda (AQ), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, as a dominant force in Syria.[24] Although HTS has rebranded itself, it still faces critical challenges in consolidating power amid rebel group infighting, concerns around legitimacy and the country's dire economic conditions. Despite the dissolution[25] of HTS, many members of the group continue to wield influence over key ministerial positions in governance and leadership structures. While this new phase initially offered hope for stability and a comprehensive national project, it has been overshadowed by escalating challenges, particularly the resurgence of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group.

IS has attempted to leverage the widespread anger in the Arab world over the Gaza conflict to its benefit. The group has actively called for terrorist operations within Arab nations, a strategy that is

anticipated to escalate crises and security challenges.[26] The group has also re-established its presence in northern and eastern Syria, particularly in the rural areas spanning Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah Governorates.

This expansion has been facilitated by a decrease in coordination within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),[27] the Kurdish-led armed group that controls the area. As a result, IS has been able to conduct more attacks on security checkpoints and supply lines, as it has capitalised on the political instability largely attributed to the interim government's lack of control. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported a significant increase in IS operations in the Syrian desert in 2024,[28] which resulted in 646 fatalities from more than 227 terrorist attacks. Another 114 attacks were recorded since early 2025[29] in Deir ez-Zor alone, involving ambushes, detonations and armed assaults against SDF posts, checkpoints and vehicles. This marks a substantial escalation compared to IS's previous resurgence in the territory in 2023. Moreover, recent reports[30] indicate that as many as 2,500 IS fighters[31] are still active in the Syrian desert,[32] primarily operating in sleeper cells.[33]

The group has explicitly encouraged and promoted lone wolves in its propaganda, given they are difficult to thwart with their small intelligence footprint. These perpetrators operate in isolation and do not rely on extensive networks or financial backing that can be tracked by law enforcement. This allows the group to project an image of continued strength and to inspire new recruits, even when its capacity for large-scale, coordinated operations is reduced. A notable example was the suicide attack[34] inside St Elias church near Damascus on June 22, 2025, which resulted in the deaths of at least 25 people and the dismantling[35] of a suspected IS cell in Idlib province, northwestern Syria, on August 7.

Concerning Trends of 2025

Foreign Fighters Remain a Threat

The number of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) has become another challenge for security in "New Syria" and across the Middle East since 2024. IS has relied on the recruitment of FTFs, integrating them into its military structure. These individuals have been attracted by IS's ideology and the vision of a so-called global Islamic caliphate, and they are crucial to its militant operations. IS continues to use advanced propaganda and social media tactics to recruit individuals worldwide. It is worth noting that the decision by Syria's interim government under al-Sharaa to bestow military ranks upon FTFs[36] was a move that reportedly received approval from Washington. However, these fighters, especially those with Salafi-jihadist beliefs, pose an ongoing threat to Syrian security due to their potential disagreement with the more pragmatic approach of the interim government. As of 2024, the US Central Command estimated that approximately 2,500 IS fighters remain in Syria and Iraq.[37] Additionally, around 9,000 IS members are detained in over 20 facilities in northeastern and eastern Syria, guarded by the US-backed SDF. These detention centres also hold approximately 42,000 family members of IS fighters in various camps. The potential movements of these individuals, whether to their countries of origin or to other nations, present widespread security concerns.

Youth Radicalisation

Youth radicalisation has emerged as a significant and alarming global trend, with particularly acute manifestations in Syria and Yemen. In Syria, following the collapse of the Assad regime, IS managed to smuggle weapons[38] into the SDF-controlled al-Hol prison camp, where IS members, along with their families and children, are detained. These weapons were reportedly for training children within the camp, with the aim of turning them into future IS cadres. There have also been efforts by IS to smuggle children out of the camp to other areas for further radicalisation, utilising methods such as transport trucks and waterways.[39]

The possible release of these detained individuals could potentially spark a new cycle of violence. It will likely enhance the group's recruitment efforts, especially among the young people[40] held

there. These children, many of whom were born in the camp and have known no other life, are reportedly being recruited by IS to become the "cubs of the caliphate".[41] Camp directors have consistently highlighted the critical lack of rehabilitation facilities and psychological support necessary to deradicalise these youth.[42] Over 60 percent of the al-Hol camp's residents, or approximately 22,000 children, exhibit distrust towards outsiders and have engaged in aggressive behaviour, such as throwing stones at security forces and camp personnel. They have also attempted to damage equipment, like cameras, belonging to members of the press who used to visit the camp.[43]

Similarly, the Houthis, the Zaydi Shia group in Yemen, which rose as a political entity following the Arab Spring in 2011 and gained international prominence during their takeover of the Yemeni capital Sanaa in September 2014, have been widely documented for their extensive use of child soldiers. As of June 17, 2025, a United Nations (UN) report[44] indicated that the Houthis had recruited 182 boys and then deployed them to the frontlines, exposing them to extreme violence. Reintegration programmes which can benefit the rehabilitation of such radical youths, however, present an unprecedented challenge due to insufficient funding. There is a need for the Yemeni government to implement a comprehensive national plan for child protection, imposing severe penalties on individuals involved in child recruitment.

Concerning New Alliances

Having taken advantage of the conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Houthis have repositioned themselves as an anti-Western entity. This shift has allowed the group to establish itself as a collaborator with various regional and international players that oppose the US and its European allies, and thus broaden its network of smuggling and financing partners while solidifying military alliances. 2025 witnessed a series of alliances that have developed and solidified between the Houthis and other non-state actors. A notable example is the connection between the group and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[45] Both have an agreement that includes mutual non-aggression, prisoner exchanges and arms transfers.

In addition, since late 2024, there has been an increasing connection between the Houthis and Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (or Al-Shabaab), the pro-AQ Salafist group in Somalia. Despite their ideological differences, both groups aim to establish themselves as cross-border entities. Reports[46] indicate that Al-Shabaab maintains connections with Al-Qaeda in East Africa (AQEA) and has sought weapons and training support from the Houthis. Both groups are keen on trading advanced systems,[47] such as surface-to-air missiles and attack drones, which are not commonly available from the Gulf of Aden's smuggling network. Despite their sectarian differences, both groups are linked through Iran's Axis of Resistance and connections to AQ, a collaboration aided by their shared anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments.

Concerning Use of Advanced Drones and Weaponry by Extremist Groups

2025 also witnessed a significant escalation in the use of emerging technologies, particularly drones and sophisticated weaponry, by extremist groups, including the Houthis, Hamas, IS, Hezbollah and AQAP, largely influenced by the ongoing conflict in Gaza. This trend represents a critical shift in asymmetric warfare.

Hamas[48] has been innovative in its military tactics by incorporating commercial drones in its weapons arsenal to expand its attack capabilities. The support provided by Hezbollah and Iran has been influential in facilitating military advancements, including its drone capabilities.

The Houthis[49] have demonstrated a remarkable evolution in their drone and missile programmes. Their unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), such as the Samad series and Qasef-2K, have been used for both reconnaissance and attack missions, including targeting oil facilities and international shipping. They have also deployed advanced anti-ship missiles, including variants of the Asef and other cruise missiles, which have proven effective in disrupting maritime trade routes. Since the onset of the Gaza conflict, the Houthis have conducted more than 100 attacks[50] against shipping

in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden using missiles and drones. This has had a significant impact on maritime trade in the Middle East, affecting key shipping routes and ports. The Houthis' attacks have significantly disrupted traffic through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait,[51] with many shippers opting for longer maritime routes around the Cape of Good Hope,[52] resulting in increased freight costs. Although there was a slight recovery in 2025, traffic has not returned to normal levels, and the Red Sea remains a high-risk zone.[53]

Likewise, IS[54] has continued to innovate in its use of technology, especially the weaponisation of commercially available drones, modifying them to carry and drop small munitions and explosives due to their low-cost, high-impact capability to conduct targeted attacks. IS[55] has also been persistent in producing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) with increasing sophistication, often incorporating readily available electronic components.

AQAP, while perhaps not at the same technological level as some other terrorist groups, has also shown an interest in the use of drones. While their primary focus remains on IEDs, suicide attacks and small arms, reports indicate efforts to acquire and adapt UAV technology for surveillance and potentially for delivering small payloads.

Conclusion

The Middle East entered the latter half of 2025 deeply fractured yet fiercely interconnected by its overlapping crises. The Gaza conflict continues to shape the region's political and security trajectory, fuelling militant recruitment, reshaping both interstate and militant alliances, and accelerating the distribution of advanced weaponry among non-state actors. Israel's expanding military operations have altered the regional balance of power, but this assertiveness has also intensified resentment and radicalisation, exacerbating the instability it purportedly seeks to suppress.

There is a need for a comprehensive framework which includes clear provisions for Hamas to disarm and integrate its members into the Palestinian community under a unified and legitimate Palestinian government, a component notably absent from Trump's 20-point plan.

At the same time, the resurgence of IS in Syria, the Houthis' growing regional influence and the persistence of extremist networks across fragmented borders, reveal the limits of purely military responses. Without coordinated regional governance, humanitarian relief and credible political reconciliation, these extremist movements will continue to exploit vacuums of legitimacy and governance. The radicalisation of youth in detention camps and conflict zones underscores the urgency of rehabilitation and education initiatives capable of breaking the cycle of extremism.

The Middle East's stability depends on regional and international actors moving beyond short-term military solutions to pursue inclusive governance and cooperation to address the root causes of extremism. Without such coordinated efforts, the region risks continuing its cycle of violence and instability into 2026 and beyond.

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Africa

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Africa continues to be the global epicentre of terrorist attacks; the latter's destabilising impact persisted in 2025, a trend that has been on a gradual rise in the past two decades. Terrorist groups, operating across the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, Mozambique and the Horn of Africa, are affiliates of both the global Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) networks.

Introduction

In 2024, there were an estimated 22,307 fatalities attributed to Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked terrorist groups in Africa. This represented a 60 percent increase compared to the 2020-2022 period. Nearly half of the fatalities (10,685) were in the Sahel. Somalia represented roughly a third of the continental fatalities (7,289). Along with the Lake Chad Basin, these regions accounted for over 90 percent of militant Islamist-linked fatalities in Africa. There was also a 14 percent rise in battle-related deaths across the continent (15,678).[1]

2025 also saw militant Islamist groups in the Sahel and Somalia expand their hold on territory. Across Africa, an estimated 950,000 square kilometres (367,000 square miles) of populated territories are outside government control due to militant Islamist insurgencies. This is equivalent to the size of Tanzania.[2]

The Global Terrorism Index (2025) confirms that the Sahel region now represents more than half of all global terrorism-related deaths, at 51 percent.[3] Deaths from terrorism have increased almost tenfold since 2019. Burkina Faso topped the international list, followed by Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mozambique and Kenya, respectively.[4]

Why Do These Groups Flourish?

Several factors account for the rapid growth and expansion of these groups. Terrorist groups in Africa, like those elsewhere in the world, are adept at leveraging existing political and socio-cultural issues, new technologies and economic marginalisation of communities – especially those at the fringe and in lawless borderlands with limited state presence – to recruit and expand their control.

Several African countries struggle to provide basic security and social services across vast, ungoverned border areas, allowing such groups to step in and fill the gaps. Coupled with financial incentives and employment opportunities for disillusioned youth in many disenfranchised communities, terrorist groups also protect locals against predatory states, other armed groups and rival communities.

Many African areas with active terrorist group presence have pre-existing illicit economies that support such groups' operations and are located in politically unstable regions ravaged by climate-induced crises and high levels of poverty. These predisposing factors increase the coercive co-option of the local populace to support such groups.

Domestic Threats Landscape in Africa – IS Affiliates and Activities

Islamic State-Somalia (IS-Somalia)

IS-Somalia**,** established by Abdiqadir Mumin, a defector from Al-Shabaab during the height of the IS caliphate a decade ago, operates in the Bari region of the Puntland state of Somalia. The group has approximately 1,000-plus fighters, primarily drawn from North Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Africa and some from Asia, as well as the local Majerteen Ali Saleban sub-clan. The elusive Mumin has, in recent times, been touted to take over the global leadership of IS. It is believed the group has raised a considerable amount of revenue through extortion and illegal taxation of businesses, telco companies and local pastoralist communities.[5] The group's central role as the financial nerve centre for coordinating terror funds transfers to other IS affiliates in Africa, the Middle East and Asia through its Maktab al-Karrar office, has made it an indispensable cog in sustaining the group's global resilience.[6]

Since December 2024, the Puntland government has launched a vigorous counterinsurgency campaign against the group, dubbed Operation Hilaac,[7] reducing its fighting force by nearly 80 percent, capturing key leaders and eliminating others. They have recovered large areas of territory and sophisticated weapons, including complex cave systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) training camps and administrative offices. The counterinsurgency efforts, supported by dozens of airstrikes[8] and technical assistance from the United States (US) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), along with widespread mobilisation by the Puntland authorities, have been largely successful compared to the federal government's campaigns against Al-Shabaab.[9]

Among the top leaders who were captured in the operations are Abdirahman Shirwac Aw-Saciid, the head of an extortion ring, and Abdiweli M Yusuf, the group's key financier.[10] In short, the significant degradation of its fighting force and the resultant dismantling of its extortion networks will bring some relief. It will disrupt the group's extortive fund-raising tactics and transfers to affiliates in central and southern Africa. However, its resilience and reliance on other African and global affiliates may keep the remnants going.

Despite nearly a year of operations and the near collapse of its extensive extortion network and transnational terror financing capabilities, as well as the elimination of several of its fighters, IS-Somalia has adopted highly deadly asymmetric guerrilla tactics. These include improvised explosive devices (IEDs), landmines,[11] mobile ambushes and further retreat into the rugged, hard-to-access Al-Miskaad Mountains, where it has been based for years.[12]

Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-Mozambique)

IS-Mozambique, also known as Ahlul Sunna wa Jamaa (locally called Al-Shabaab), began in October 2017 as a low-scale insurgency fuelled by local grievances and discourses of marginalisation in the hydrocarbon- and mineral-rich northernmost region of Cabo Delgado, close to the Tanzania border.[13]

Now in its eighth year, the group has withstood counterinsurgency operations launched by the Mozambican forces, with the support of over 5,000 Rwandan security personnel and the short-lived, two-year deployment of the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM).[14] The US and the European Union (EU) have supported the capacity building of the Mozambican security forces to strengthen the latter's counter terrorism (CT) operations. Currently, IS-Mozambique is active in several of the 17 Cabo Delgado districts and carries out attacks nearly every day against military installations and civilian populations.[15] The Mozambican government's security-centric and heavily militarised operations have had limited success, as they fail to address the complex structural and historical factors which primarily drive the insurgency.[16]

Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) – DRC

ISCAP (since 2019), also known as the Alliance Democratic Forces (ADF), operating out of eastern DRC and western Uganda, has continued its lethal attacks against the civilian population. Amid intense

pressure launched by the Ugandan and Congolese forces under Operation Shujaa, the group was subjected to coordinated aerial and ground attacks. Some of its top leaders were taken prisoner, camps were demolished and weapons were seized. However, the operation has also pushed the group out of its stronghold in North Kivu into Ituri and southwards into Lubero, creating new zones of insecurity and displacement.[17]

Adopting agile small units while infiltrating urban and peri-urban communities as taxi drivers and small-scale traders, the group has sustained its operations by blending terror financing with the licit economies of eastern DRC. Operation Shujaa has relatively loosened the ADF's grip on and embeddedness in illicit mining, including gold, timber and cocoa, as well as forced taxation and cross-border trade. However, it could easily bounce back due to its long-term expertise and resilience as one of the dozen non-state armed actors in eastern DRC. The armed conflict between the FARDC (the Armed Forces of the DRC) and the M23 (March 23 Movement) rebel group has seen the FARDC focus less on the ADF.[18] The ADF, as an affiliate of IS, benefits from terror financing, propagation of its attacks and operations on IS's media platforms, recruitment into eastern Africa, and weaponry skills transfers and capacity building from other affiliates such as IS-Somalia.

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)

ISWAP, a splinter group from and bitter rival of Boko Haram (also called Jama'atul Ahl Sunnah Liddawati wal Jihad, or JAS), scaled up its attacks against Nigeria's security forces in 2025. Between January and May 2025, the group attacked military installations in Mallam Fatoru near the Niger border and in Wajiroko, Kumshe and Katafila in southern Borno, as well as the Buni Gari military camp which houses Nigeria's 27 Task Force Brigade. ISWAP also coordinated assaults against the towns of Marte, Dikwa and Rann in eastern Borno and Damboa in western Borno. Under its campaign dubbed "the holocaust of camps", ISWAP seized weapons and key commanders, forced the retreat of military units and displaced hundreds of civilians.[19]

Though the five-nation Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Nigerian Army and the Borno state-led counterinsurgency and amnesty programme have put pressure on the group, ISWAP appears to be strategically reorganising and expanding its territorial reach to the Far North region of Cameroon as well as into Nigeria's northern Adamawa state, including a cell near the federal capital of Abuja.[20] The group's use of modified commercial drones for attacks and reconnaissance, deployment of motorcycles for nightly raids and deep integration into the illicit economies of the Lake Chad region, make the group highly lethal.

JAS, though weakened by frequent assaults by ISWAP, has in recent months made a comeback. The focus on ISWAP by regional forces has prompted JAS to regroup and expand its territories. Between June and September 2025, JAS carried out attacks against a Nigerian naval base near Lake Chad, a Cameroonian military camp near Talakatchi and an MNJTF position in Kirawa.[21] It massacred dozens of civilians on suspicions of espionage for ISWAP in Mallam Karamti and Kwatandashi villages in Borno. JAS's notorious Ghazwah wing, infamous for ransoming, robbery and extortion, provides the group with access to finances, blending jihadism with organised criminality.[22]

Additionally, Lakurawa, an emergent militant group which formed along the Sokoto and Kebbi borders in northwestern Nigeria, near the border with Niger, acts as an anti-banditry militia and poses a significant security threat. The group's activities also often blur the line between transnational organised crime and jihadism. Believed to be armed herders initially from Mali, members have married local women and used financial incentives and threats to recruit local unemployed youth into the group's ranks.[23] Its coercive enforcement of strict religious conservatism, extortion networks that raise revenue from taxing herders and businesses, kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling, and frequent attacks against government officials and communities, open a new jihadi front in northwestern Nigeria, connecting the poorly governed borderlands to the centre of Sahelian jihadism.[24] Lakurawa,

designated by the Nigerian government as a terrorist group in early 2025,[25] is believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) as an operational wing.[26]

Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)

ISSP, one of the most active IS affiliates in Africa, operates in the tri-border area of western Niger, northern Burkina Faso and eastern Mali, taking advantage of the withdrawal of international forces and subsequent reduction in CT operations as well as the ineffective counterinsurgency efforts by the three countries, which are led by military juntas following coups that overthrew civilian regimes. It is increasingly looking southwards towards the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions of Niger as well as parts of Menako and Gao in Mali, to expand its territories.[27]

With a decentralised leadership, a *shariah*-based governance structure and a reliance on local nomadic community alliances, ISSP leverages existing illicit economies fuelled by gold mining, narcotics trafficking, smuggling of migrants, extortion, and taxing of traders and herders to finance its operations. The group has shown tactical flexibility by employing ambushes, IEDs and large-scale attacks on isolated military bases and rural areas using motorcycles. In the past year, the group has carried out devastating attacks against civilians, accusing them of spying for governments or its rival Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), and against military installations belonging to regional governments. Key towns where the group orchestrated attacks include Chetoumane (Niger), Kobe in the Gao region (Mali), Banibangou (Niger), Fambita (Niger) and Manda (Niger). In Burkina Faso, ISSP primarily operates in smaller cells in the northern regions of the country, and the group is also expanding southwards to Niger's Dosso region and Nigeria's northwestern Sokoto and Kebbi states.[28]

Similar to the al-Karrar office run by IS-Somalia, ISSP and ISWAP fall under Maktab al-Furqan (the Furqan office), an elusive organisation likely based in Nigeria which provides these IS branches with operational guidance and international funding under the purview of the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) of IS global.[29]

AQ Affiliates

Al-Shabaab

Now in its 19th year, Al-Shabaab represents one of the longest-running AQ affiliates. It controls a large swath of southern and central Somalia. It engages in regular attacks against positions of the Somali National Army (SNA), the African Union Mission (AUM) forces, and Kenyan and Ethiopian forces stationed in Somalia. It also frequently attacks public vehicles and security personnel in the northeastern region and in coastal Lamu County of Kenya, which borders Somalia. The group is estimated to collect up to US$100 million annually through illegal taxation of traders, farmers and herders as well as from road taxes, charcoal sales and arms trafficking.[30]

The group regained a significant amount of territory it had lost to the SNA and Macawisley (an assortment of clan militias) during the 2022-2024 counterinsurgency operations. It is currently engaged in intense combat with the SNA, the AUM forces and clan militias over control of key towns and critical supply chains. Despite massive air support from the US and Turkey and years of capacity development support from the international community, there has been limited success in degrading the locally embedded jihadists. The growing link between Al-Shabaab and the Houthis in Yemen may offer the group lucrative arms supplies and financing which could bolster its insurgency operations in the region.

Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM)

JNIM, a coalition of AQ jihadists active in the Sahelian countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and part of West Africa, is one of the most destabilising terror outfits in the region. Just as with ISSP, it operates in the tri-border area of the three countries. It is also increasingly threatening the littoral states of Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire as it expands southwards. The three countries' military governments, which came to power through coups, expelled international CT partners and vowed to eliminate terror groups, but are barely managing despite assistance from Russia-linked private military corporations. JNIM raises revenue through illegal gold mining, control of commodity and human smuggling routes, and taxing of local communities.

JNIM has enforced blockades in western Mali, particularly in the Kayes and Nioro-du-Sahel regions, preventing fuel imports from neighbouring countries, including Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Mauritania.[31] The group has also publicly threatened transport operators. JNIM's strategy extends beyond military attacks to include economic pressure, such as cutting fuel supplies, creating scarcity and increasing costs, all of which weaken state legitimacy.[32]

Responses

Responses to terrorism in Africa vary by region. In Somalia, as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) transitions to the new African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), it faces a bleak future due to a funding gap of over US$180 million. The United Kingdom's pledge of US$30 million for non-lethal support to the Somali forces and African Union-led security efforts will be a significant boost.[33] Traditional stakeholders, facing donor fatigue, are non-committal. The capacity building of specialised units, donation of UAVs, critical air support from partners such as the US and Turkey against Al-Shabaab and similar support for Puntland's counterinsurgency operations, have been instrumental in holding terrorist groups at bay.

In Mozambique, the government's militarised approach, conducted with the support of the Rwandan forces, has been the sole response which requires a rethink to address the underlying factors that fuel the insurgency. In the DRC, the resurgence of the M23 movement and its takeover of cities in the eastern region have shifted attention away from the ADF, allowing the latter to further expand its operations despite initial losses through Operation Shujaa.

In the Sahel, the militaries of the three states are increasingly mobilising civilian vigilantes and defence groups to bolster their overwhelmed armies, with limited success. Deployment of the Russia-backed African Corps has not filled the void left by the United Nations mission and the French security forces. In the Lake Chad region, the MNJTF has carried out multiple operations, shared intelligence and logistics, and worked on amnesty and reintegration programmes despite the resurgence of terror groups.

Challenges to Counter Terrorism

Across the continent, governments and regional CT operations face funding gaps. Overreliance on external financial and aerial support is hindering the growth of locally driven, effective CT measures. The regions most affected by terrorism continue to face political instability, infighting among elites, corruption, poor governance, violence against civilians, and human rights violations committed by armies and associated civilian vigilante groups, which further marginalise the communities impacted by terrorism. Growing authoritarianism in the military-led Sahelian region is eroding goodwill and mass support for the regimes' CT operations. Their inability to curb the growing strength of jihadist groups is posing a considerable threat to their legitimacy.

Threat Outlook

In the Sahel, groups such as JNIM and ISSP may intensify their encirclement strategy, exacerbating shortages of essential goods and hindering cross-border mobility through blockades, and thereby eroding the legitimacy of states. The groups may continue to pose a threat to Benin, Togo and northwestern Nigeria as they attempt to expand their territories, unless urgent measures are taken. On a positive note, the thawing of relations between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the newly formed Alliance of Sahelian States (Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso) could lead to actual joint CT collaboration in the coming months and years.

The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI), especially in disinformation and misinformation, could be the next frontier for jihadist propaganda. The increasing use of UAVs by diverse groups, with the ability to assemble and deploy them for surveillance and attacks, is a trend to watch. Additionally, terror mobility, skills transfers, enduring global networks, and collaboration within the continent and with other affiliates and other armed actors in the Middle East, Asia and Europe, may continue to pose threats to effective regional CT measures.

The use of digital currencies and digital assets for terror financing and transfers is increasing across all terrorist groups. Countries need to collaborate, share information, strengthen anti-money laundering/counter terrorist financing laws, prosecute and dismantle terrorist financing networks, and impose targeted sanctions against jihadist-linked individuals and firms.

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Key Trends in Digital Extremism 2025: Glocalisation, Decentralisation, and Ideological Hybridisation in Southeast Asia

Benjamin Mok, Nurrisha Ismail and Saddiq Basha

In 2025, the digital extremist ecosystem consolidated rather than evolved, entrenching trends of decentralisation, localisation and hybridisation across ideological lines. The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group refocused on geopolitical crises, amplifying African operations through Al-Amaq and moral obligation narratives via Fursan al-Tarjuma, while Al-Qaeda (AQ) re-emerged with Sadaa al-Thughur (Echo of the Frontiers) to reassert relevance around Gaza. In Southeast Asia, pro-IS and pro-Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) networks adapted global events to local grievances, exploiting unrest and cultivating niche subcultures, such as jihadist nasheeds and do-it-yourself (DIY) weapons circles. Parallel far-right ecosystems glocalised Western narratives into local identity struggles, underscoring an increasingly diffused, post-organisational and cross-ideological online threat environment.

Introduction

In 2025, the digital landscape of extremism has been defined by the consolidation and deepening of trends previously observed. The persistence of these previously highlighted trends[1] has contributed to the ongoing resilience of extremist and terrorist movements, despite fewer attacks.[2] Islamist extremist and far-right actors alike have continued to strengthen their reliance on decentralised supporter networks and localised online content-sharing ecosystems, which allow them to sustain online activity despite intensified moderation efforts.

These online networks and ecosystems have in turn proliferated as they increasingly become key vehicles for threat actors to carry out their radicalisation and community-building efforts. Platform migration remains an enduring feature of this ecosystem, with actors continuing to explore lesser-known or decentralised platforms, while maintaining footholds on mainstream social media. The steady escalation of these threats has also been exacerbated by innovations in the use of artificial intelligence (AI),[3] immersive simulations such as virtual and augmented reality,[4] and the continued presence of non-mainstream subcultures[5] within the digital landscape.

In terms of online propaganda and discourse, geopolitical developments in the Middle East – such as the conflicts in Gaza and Syria as well as escalating tensions regarding Iran – remain central narrative anchors. Far-right ecosystems have increasingly localised global narratives and symbology – a process scholars term glocalisation[6] – while hybrid "post-organisational" or "salad bar" forms of extremism blur ideological boundaries.

Official Islamic State (IS) Online Activity

In 2025, the Islamic State (IS)'s propaganda has undergone a discernible rhetorical shift, with its official media apparatus increasingly foregrounding geopolitical developments rather than theological justifications.[7] This has allowed the group to push its ideological agenda within a polarised digital landscape that is increasingly focused on such geopolitical developments – the shift thus indicates that IS's media strategy continues to adapt based on a real-time understanding of the landscape and its wider trends.

Editorials and video releases have concentrated on discrediting the new government in Syria,[8] the conflict in Gaza and the widening Iran-Israel conflict.[9] The latter has risen as a particular focus in 2025, with official narratives framing both Iran and Israel as corrupt adversaries – Israel as an archetypal adversary of Islam and Iran as a false champion of the Palestinian cause. This allows IS to appeal to both Sunni sectarian sentiments and audiences frustrated with perceived political hypocrisy across the Middle East.[10]

The Al-Amaq News Agency continues to function as IS's primary news reporting arm and indicator of its operational geography. Referring to the data shown in Figure 1, the agency produced 780 publications in 2025, largely short news bulletins highlighting operational successes.[11] The majority of these video and bulletin outputs have been concentrated in Africa, numbering 530 out of 780 reports – approximately 68 percent. Operations in Nigeria were the most mentioned, numbering 188, highlighting the centrality of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in IS's global propaganda architecture. Mozambique and Central Africa remained consistent second-tier hubs of visibility, reflecting IS's portrayal of the continent as a multi-jihadist theatre. Furthermore, all 42 photo reports published were linked to operations in African theatres, with none of them referencing Syria, Iraq or Khorasan. Meanwhile, the second highest region mentioned in reports was Syria, numbering 65 out of 780, or approximately 8 percent. This suggests that IS continues to use its operations in its African provinces to demonstrate its vitality and ongoing activity,[12] as a counterpart to its editorial works which leverage global events to maintain ideological continuity.

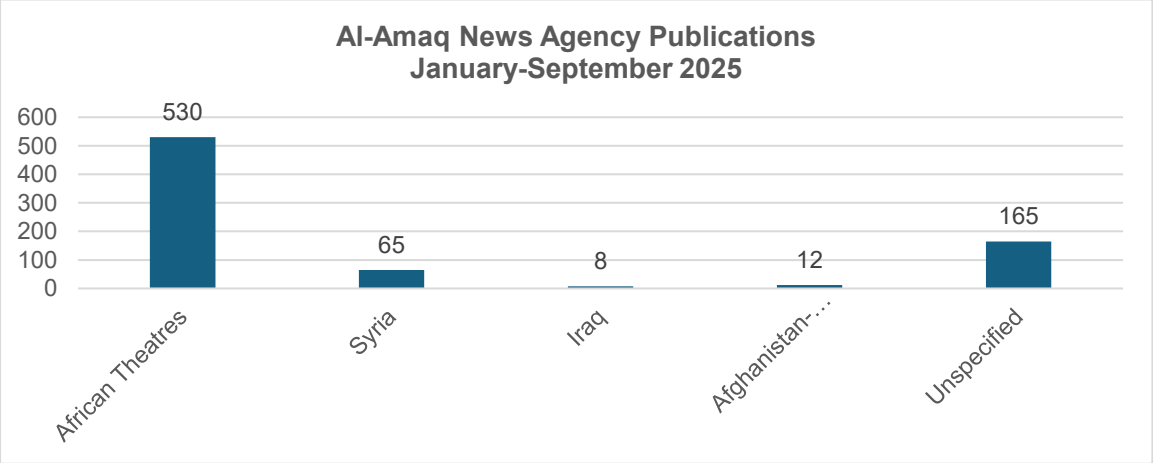

Figure 1: Al-Amaq News Agency Publications (January-September 2025)

Meanwhile, Fursan al-Tarjuma, the officially recognised umbrella collective of major IS supporter (*ansar*) media organisations, has retained its pivotal role in the dissemination and translation of central IS propaganda. Aside from its translation of central IS propaganda, which as of 2025 spans an estimated 17 languages across 13 organisations,[13] the collective's choices in what supporter-created posters and videos to translate and disseminate also provide insight into IS's evolving priorities. As seen in Figure 2, data from Halummu Media – the key English translation outlet under Fursan al-Tarjuma – indicates that the frequency at which the group translates and disseminates supporter material ebbs and flows over the year, seemingly in relation to major geopolitical developments. The peak of publications in May was likely linked to coverage of and narrative over the Iran-Israel war, while the following decline coincided with both the Ramadan period as well as a lull in major developments – an indication of ongoing difficulties in sustaining a regular output, likely due to the efforts required to source and translate such materials.

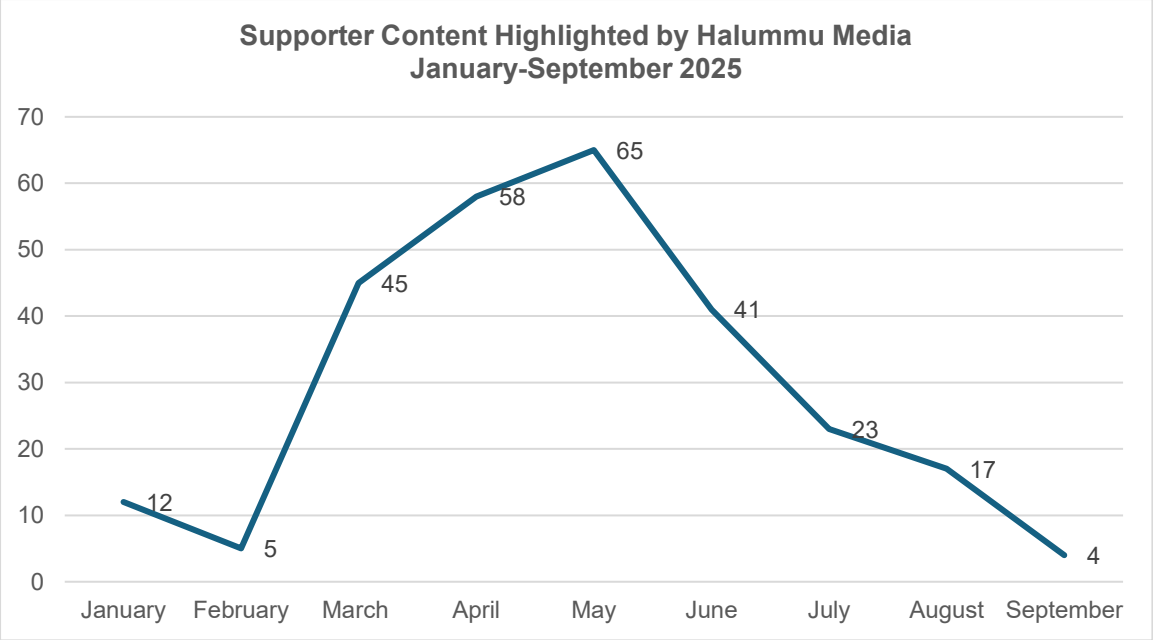

Figure 2: Supporter Content Highlighted by Halummu Media (January-September 2025)

As shown in Figure 3, the themes of supporter content chosen by Halummu Media have largely emphasised the moral obligation of jihad (205 out of 270 publications), with geopolitical commentary (22 out of 270), calls for violence and lone-actor attacks (12 out of 270), and operational security (10 out of 270) as other key themes. Notably, the calls for violence were largely aimed at audiences outside active IS conflict zones, indicating IS's continued interest in exhorting lone actors to conduct attacks, particularly in the West. It is important to note that this data simply indicates the priorities of one organisation in the collective, which may differ depending on the translation outlet analysed. Nevertheless, this framing underscores the decentralised yet interlinked nature of IS's global propaganda ecosystem, where semi-autonomous supporter groups function as amplifiers of the organisation's ideological core.

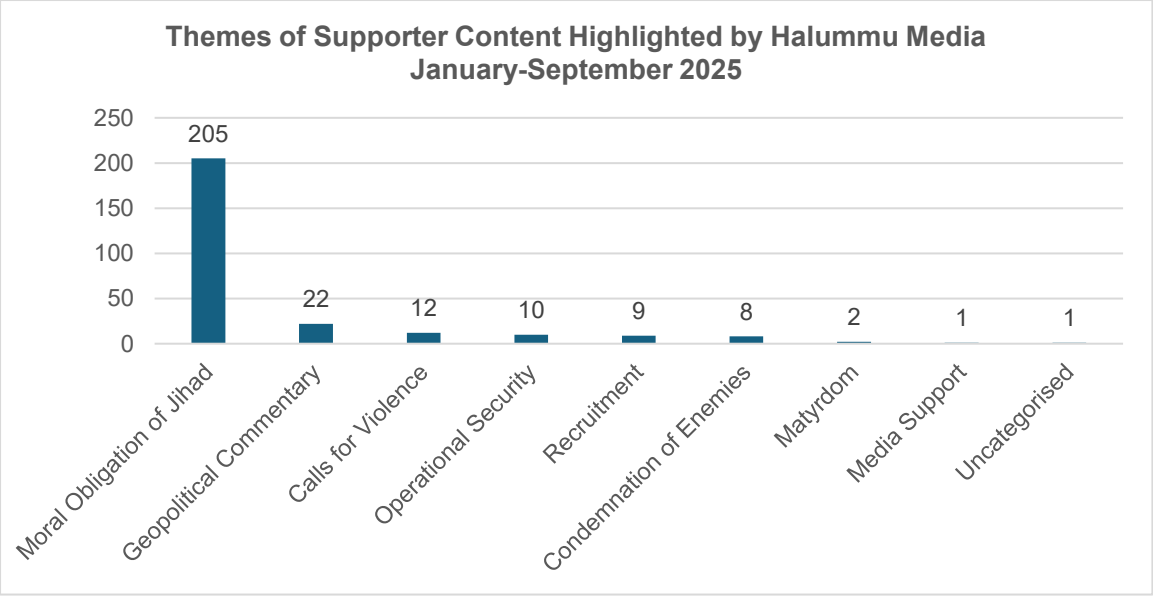

Figure 3: Themes of Supporter Content Highlighted by Halummu Media (January-September 2025)

With regard to the online infrastructure behind this dissemination, the takedown of IS's primary archival websites Al-Raud and I'lam in mid-2024[14] has continued to result in a vacuum within the group's online architecture – a gap that by late 2024 had already begun to be filled by decentralised

actors on less well-known platforms.[15] By early 2025, this void had been filled through the emergence of new archival and distribution platforms, notably Al-Fustat – a dark web repository mirroring official IS media output – and Saha Wagha, a smaller surface web and dark web hybrid site circulating *al-Naba* newsletters and audio speeches from IS leaders.[16] Both platforms restrict themselves to official IS materials, reflecting an attempt to preserve the authenticity and continuity of central messaging while distancing themselves from unofficial supporter productions. Parallel to these replacements, the TechHaven platform has become the primary hub for IS-aligned media groups, hosting a proliferation of micro-collectives such as Bengal Media, Al-Isabah Foundation, Al-Saif Media and Al-Asad Foundation.[17]

Another notable development in 2025 has been IS's gradual integration of AI into its media strategy. Analyses by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) have identified increasingly refined generative AI (GenAI)-produced visuals across IS-affiliated publications, with machine learning tools now used to produce posters, enhance imagery and generate multilingual translations.[18] These tools have resulted in lowered production barriers for IS and its supporters, enabling smaller teams to replicate the professional visual quality once limited to central media units. At the same time, such automation introduces a conflict between visibility and security: while GenAI allows IS to increase publishing frequency and evade detection, it also heightens the risk of forensic tracing through model-specific artefacts, pushing IS propagandists to experiment with stylometric obfuscation (modifying text to hide author identities) and encrypted workflows.[19]

Official Al-Qaeda (AQ) Online Activity

In 2025, Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s propaganda was defined by the launch of its new Arabic-language newsletter, *Sadaa al-Thughur* (Echo of the Frontiers), produced by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF).[20] The publication's emergence in June 2025 marks AQ's most significant media initiative in recent years and signals a renewed effort to consolidate its global messaging under a unified digital front. Distributed through pro-AQ Rocket.Chat and Telegram channels, *Sadaa al-Thughur* functions as both an ideological anchor and an attempt to re-centralise communication across AQ's dispersed regional media entities, including Al-Kata'ib (Al-Shabaab), Al-Andalus (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM) and Al-Zallaqa (Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen, or JNIM).[21]

Stylistically, *Sadaa al-Thughur* mirrors the format of IS's *al-Naba*, featuring editorials, leadership messages and illustrated battle reports accompanied by infographics. This copycat approach underscores AQ's pragmatic adaptation within the jihadist media ecosystem – replicating IS's proven outreach model while retaining AQ's distinct ideological tone.[22] The newsletter's early issues articulate four consistent objectives: 1) mobilising support for armed jihad; 2) defending the legitimacy of the *mujahideen*; 3) countering "Western misinformation"; and 4) reframing media activism as an act of worship.

Content contributions from senior figures, such as Ibrahim al-Qosi (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP), Abu Yasir al-Jazairi (AQIM) and Ali Mahmoud Raji (Al-Shabaab), illustrate coordinated narrative alignment across global and regional fronts.[23] Their writings converge on a shared grievance – Palestine, particularly Gaza – used as a rallying symbol to link struggles in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Collectively, *Sadaa al-Thughur* demonstrates AQ's attempt to reassert narrative coherence and elevate its moral authority – likely in competition with IS media efforts – by similarly fusing global threat discourse with regionally grounded legitimacy.

Extremist Islamist Activity Online in Southeast Asia

Supporter groups have emerged at the forefront of propaganda operations in Southeast Asia in recent years.[24] This decentralised network of unofficial groups recontextualises extremist ideologies to suit domestic audiences by translating core propaganda and exploiting local and international grievances. Pro-IS supporters in particular have built niche online communities through shared interests such as jihadist *nasheeds*, circulation of do-it-yourself (DIY) weapons-making manuals and various cultural touchpoints.

Pro-IS, Pro-AQ and Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)'s Responses to Global Trends

Regional supporter groups mirror global trends, republishing core propaganda in local languages and exploiting political crises to reinforce radical master narratives. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 marked a critical inflection point for pro-IS, pro-AQ and pro-Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) supporters within the region, as sympathisers across all three entities capitalised on Syria's uncertain political transition to promote their core group's ideologies and discredit rival narratives.[25] Indonesian pro-AQ supporters amplified positive framings of HTS, portraying Syria's regime transition as divinely ordained. Former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member Mas'ud Izzul Mujahid amplified this view via his outlet Andalus, long known for promoting violent sectarian narratives.[26]

Conversely, pro-IS channels branded HTS as anti-Islam and Ahmed al-Sharaa as an apostate for engaging Western officials,[27] while Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) pages condemned the new regime for failing to declare a caliphate and disparaged the new Syrian leader al-Sharaa as a traitor to *tawhid* (the oneness of God).[28] These online narratives demonstrate how Indonesian extremist actors have exploited the Syrian transition to reinforce ideological divisions and legitimise their own doctrinal positions.

Indonesian Protests

Nationwide protests in Indonesia in August 2025 over economic grievances escalated after a viral video of the police killing a delivery rider, leaving at least 10 people dead.[29] Both HTI and pro-IS supporters leveraged the opportunity to promote their extremist narratives and embed their messaging within wider public discourse.

Pro-IS Supporters

Indonesian pro-IS supporters online capitalised on domestic instability and public socio-political grievances during the Indonesian protests to justify violence and mobilise against the *kafir* (infidel) government. Online supporters, particularly on Facebook, worked to frame the police as merely pawns of the *taghut* (tyrannical) government, peddling the narrative that social unrest and state-inflicted injustice are inevitable byproducts of kafir democratic rule.[30] Pro-IS supporters incited acts of terror and violence by sharing videos of police officers being subjected to physical attacks, accompanied by claims that the blood of "*anshar taghut*" (supporters of tyrants) is *halal* (permissible), in addition to exploiting scriptural verses to justify waging war against *musyrikin* (polytheists).[31]

HTI

HTI channels used the unrest to call for the dismantling of democracy, framing it as proof that only an Islamic caliphate can end corruption and tyranny. One key HTI propaganda outlet propagated the narrative that the only "correct path" to alleviate suffering and address the root problems of society is by establishing the *khilafah* (caliphate) and implementing Islamic *shariah* law. Pertinently, the platform called for Muslims to "abandon the corrupt system of democracy" and "fight to establish an Islamic state", eventually culminating in the "full establishment of Islam across the world".[32]

Significantly, HTI-linked accounts delineated a practical method for how the organisation envisions the democratic system to be toppled and for the khilafah to be established through a three-step plan, comprising education and training, socialisation and elite buy-in, and the eventual transfer of power.[33] While the mechanics of the establishment of the khilafah are typically excluded from propaganda-centric posts, this development points to the likelihood that HTI saw this period of domestic volatility as a serious disruption to the status quo of Indonesian politics and society, and viewed this as an important opportunity for the party to signal its readiness to fill a potential power vacuum that may emerge.

Key HTI Developments

International Union of Muslim Scholars (*IUMS) Fatwa*

On March 28, 2025, the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) issued a *fatwa*, or legal opinion, concerning the Israel-Hamas war and the transgression of an earlier ceasefire that had been brokered.[34] The fatwa outlined several key rulings, including the obligation of armed jihad against the occupation in Palestine for every able-bodied Muslim in the Islamic world. In response to the ruling, Indonesia's foremost organisation of Islamic scholars, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), published an online press release in April 2025 conveying its "full support" for the decree, noting it is "obligatory for Muslims to defend Palestine".[35]

HTI supporters on Facebook were especially supportive of MUI's decision to back the fatwa and leveraged the announcement as an implicit endorsement of the obligatory nature of jihad against enemy out-groups as well as the imperative need to establish the khilafah. Key HTI-affiliated accounts, which contribute to thought leadership and propaganda campaigns in service of the khilafah cause, also capitalised on MUI's endorsement of the fatwa to amplify HTI's ideology and exclusivist narratives. These accounts called for adherents to fulfil their religious obligation of implementing "Islamic principles in all corners of the world with [*dakwah*, or proselytisation] and jihad".[36] HTI propaganda platforms also dismissed the role of diplomacy as a tool to broker peace in the region, asserting instead that jihad is the only path of recourse to overcome the crisis in Gaza.[37]

"Aksi Bela Palestina" Rally 2025

HTI organised a series of coordinated rallies in November 2024 as well as in January and February 2025, with the intent of mobilising large groups of supporters. Branded as "*Aksi Bela Palestina*" (Action to Defend Palestine), the demonstrations leveraged the Israel-Hamas war as a mobilising narrative to encourage Indonesians to call for the establishment of the khilafah and to legitimise jihad as the only solution to liberate Palestine.[38]

In response to a livestream of the Jakarta rally on January 26, which accrued over 100,000 views, online sympathisers expressed their overwhelming support for the demonstration.[39] These online supporters framed protesters as divinely sanctioned defenders of Islam, quoting the verse, "kill them where you find them".[40] The effect of the rallies in emboldening HTI supporters is embodied in the Facebook post of one HTI adherent, who declared that HTI is "not banned because it has never been banned" and that the organisation is "not resurfacing because it has never been drowned out".[41]

Diversified Community-Building Tactics in Southeast Asia

In 2025, extremist Islamist supporter groups have continued leveraging diversified tactics to cultivate sustainable extremist online communities regionally across mainstream and encrypted chat platforms.

Pro-IS Jihadist Nasheed Online Subculture

The Indonesian pro-IS online extremist ecosystem has witnessed the emergence of a nascent regional jihadist nasheed (Islamic vocal music) subculture on mainstream online platforms. On Facebook, one popular Indonesian extremist nasheed distributor has been found uploading edited videos of extremist nasheeds originally produced by IS Central and its affiliates, with translations and key calls to action in Bahasa Indonesia. These media collaterals focus on peddling explicitly violent narratives on the pretext of religious deference and obligation. The bulk of these nasheeds call for listeners who are "true believers" to engage in offensive jihad and to wage war against "enemy" out-groups in service of God and IS.[42]

Pertinently, this extremist subculture has been effective in cultivating an active and engaged radical online community. In the case of the aforementioned Indonesian nasheed distributor on Facebook, the channel administrator strategically maintains a high level of interaction with supporters, responding to their nasheed requests and accommodating their feedback. These interactions and the shared passion for nasheeds amongst supporters foster a sense of community between extremist sympathisers, exacerbating the risk of further radicalisation in terms of group expansion and potential spillover to mainstream audiences.[43]

Pro-IS DIY Explosives and Weapons Online Interest Group

In June 2025, a pro-IS channel that specialises in homemade explosives and DIY weapons making was shared in Tamkin Indonesia, the key online Indonesian pro-IS outfit under Fursan al-Tarjuma.[44] A direct link to the group was shared with Indonesian supporters, along with an image summarising the group's repertoire of homemade explosives and capabilities. This included five key areas of expertise: 1) explosive recipes; 2) improvised explosive devices (IEDs); 3) initiation systems and detonators; 4) remote initiation systems; and 5) information security resources.

Significantly, the group actively disseminates comprehensive instructions for the manufacture of homemade explosives, including information on precursor chemicals, equipment and jihadist preparedness manuals. These collaterals are intentionally designed to be accessible to beginners, thereby lowering the barrier to entry for violent extremist activity. The group also frequently employs the strategic use of outlinking, where it redirects users to external channels where more specific or technical queries can be posed directly. This enables the tailoring of explosives-making advice to individual use cases. Outlinking may also contribute to the cultivation of tightly knit sub-groups that are less subject to security surveillance.

Shifting Dynamics in Far-Right Extremism: Glocalisation and the Rise of Post-Organisational Networks

The trajectory of far-right extremism[45] (FRE) in 2025 was shaped by two distinct yet intersecting currents that reflect its gradual shift towards an increasingly decentralised, digitally networked and globally diffused ecosystem. First, the past year has seen the continued glocalisation of the global far right's ideological core – nativism, authoritarianism and populism – as these ideas circulate beyond their oft-associated Western loci and are refracted through local particularities.[46] Second, post-organisational dynamics have deepened, with extremist engagement and mobilisation continuing within established organisations, but also increasingly mediated through decentralised online networks and digital subcultures.

Glocalisation

As the global far right continues to make inroads into the socio-political mainstream, it has evolved into a transnational ecosystem of parties, grassroots movements, online communities and allied actors, through which compelling narratives of civilisational decline and the need for ethno-cultural homogenisation circulate. Yet these master frames are not adopted wholesale – they are adapted into locally resonant narratives and grievances, often reframing domestic anxieties as part of a broader struggle to defend against the perceived erosion of "traditional" values.[47] This occurs at a time when nativist populism has diffused globally, reinvigorated by United States (US) President Donald Trump's open embrace of white Christian nationalism.[48] This has been echoed by similar movements such as Japan's anti-immigrant, far-right party Sanseito.[49]

Beyond shared narratives, the transnational circulation of far-right symbols has also become increasingly evident. The recently assassinated right-wing political activist Charlie Kirk, for example, has been transformed into an "imported martyr", invoked as a symbol of free speech and traditional values.[50] His death has been instrumental in advancing a potent narrative of victimhood – appropriated not only by far-right European parties but also by transnationally linked FRE groups, such as the US-based Proud Boys, to recruit, radicalise and, in some instances, incite violent mobilisation through their online channels.[51] This symbolic appropriation has extended even to

non-Western contexts such as Korea, where a far-right youth movement organised a memorial march in his honour which echoed with anti-Chinese and Christian nationalist slogans.[52]

The same glocalising dynamic is also evident in online ecosystems. Scholars have observed, for instance, a growing ideological convergence between Hindu nationalism and the manosphere[53] – melding "patriarchal revivalism and grievance politics" in ways that mirror far-right online ecosystems in the West.[54]

Post-Organisational Dynamics

FRE, like other extremist threats across the ideological spectrum, increasingly exhibits post-organisational dynamics. Scholars note a continuing shift in how individuals engage with and are mobilised by extremism – from formal organisations to decentralised online networks which amplify shared grievances, cultivate collective identities and normalise hostility towards perceived out-groups.[55] While this undercurrent is not entirely new, nor does it indicate that FRE has fully transitioned into a post-organisational stage,[56] it nonetheless underscores the accelerating role of digital ecosystems in reshaping how extremist movements organise, communicate and sustain themselves.

Recent research examining Australian youths charged with far-right terrorism-related offences found that they displayed significantly higher levels of social media engagement.[57] The 2024 case of Jordan Patten, a 19 year old who plotted to assassinate a local member of parliament, illustrates this trend, with the white supremacist accelerationist network Terrorgram reportedly playing a "critical role" in his radicalisation.[58] Within these communities, his manifesto was circulated across affiliated channels and, following his failed attack, users dissected the incident and shared guidance for prospective assailants – underscoring how such online spaces function as hubs of collective learning and mobilisation in the absence of formal organisations.[59]

Notably, such decentralised online milieus often blur ideological boundaries and foster hybridised forms of extremism. In the United Kingdom, MUU (mixed, unclear and unstable)[60] referrals now form the largest Prevent category.[61] Recent incidents further exemplify these hybridised dynamics, with perpetrators drawing on both FRE and nihilistic violent subcultures[62] – as seen in the 2025 Annunciation Catholic Church[63] and Evergreen High School shootings.[64]

Southeast Asia's Nascent Far-Right Extremist Digital Community

Perhaps counterintuitively for some, the twin dynamics of glocalisation and decentralised, networked engagement have become increasingly evident in Southeast Asia, reflected in the rise of diverse online FRE communities and subcultures, alongside several reported cases of online-driven radicalisation.

This process of glocalisation is evident in how regional FRE actors and sympathisers appropriate and adapt the narratives and aesthetics of the global far right. Their digital propaganda – often disseminated through memes and short-form audio-visual content – demonstrates how global FRE discourse serves as a key reference point yet is often reinterpreted in ways which resonate with local cultural expressions, grievances and socio-political contexts.

For instance, the "Great Replacement" theory, the cornerstone of global FRE discourse, has been recast to reflect the specific majority-minority dynamics of the region. Among regional FRE online communities, such as the Austronesian supremacists,[65] "out-groups" – including Rohingya refugees and ethnic minorities such as Chinese and Arabs – are portrayed as demographic threats who taint the purity of "indigenous" populations.[66] Such depictions of demographic siege are often coupled with calls for violence, with Western FRE slogans like "Total N***er Death" (TND) repurposed into localised variants such as "Total Rohingya Death" (TRD) or "Total Chinese Death" (TCD).[67]

Notably, this adaptive process has also manifested in documented FRE cases in the region. In Singapore, a 17 year old who self-radicalised online, drawing inspiration from far-right extremists such as Brenton Tarrant, was detained after planning attacks on local mosques, believing this would prevent what he perceived as a "Great Replacement" of the Chinese majority by Malays and Muslims.[68]

Glocalisation further extends to the symbolic realm, where regional communities substitute Western far-right iconography with culturally resonant alternatives. The Austronesian supremacist community, for example, has replaced the *Sonnenrad*[69] with regional sun emblems such as the Indonesian *Surya Majapahit* (Majapahit Sun) and the Sun of Liberty from the Philippine flag – illustrating how global FRE aesthetics are reimagined to reflect mythologies of civilisational ascendancy.[70]

The Philippine Falangist Front (PFF)[71] exemplifies how these glocalised narratives are embedded within decentralised, post-organisational ecosystems. Its digital propaganda on mainstream social media platforms taps into frustrations over the perceived failures of the Philippine state, portraying these as symptoms of systemic decay and attributing blame to perceived enemies, such as communists, Freemasons, Muslims and LGBTQ+ communities – often with violent overtones.[72] From these public platforms, the community funnels sympathisers into more insular spaces, most notably a gaming-adjacent Discord server which functions as a hub for ideological readings, "shitposting" and casual political discussions. Here, the Discord server acts as a conduit for mobilisation, with members engaging in collective gaming activities, including Roblox scenarios that recreate the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting, alongside limited offline mobilisation through its "Activism through Action!" campaign, which encourages the public dissemination of the community's propaganda posters.[73]

At the individual level, Singapore's first recorded case of "salad bar" radicalisation underscores how these post-organisational environments foster hybrid and highly personalised extremist worldviews. The 14-year-old offender in question drew from far-right, far-left and incel subcultures while also expressing sympathy for IS, reflecting a convergence of ideological fragments facilitated by exposure to multiple online extremist communities.[74] Another case, which is still under investigation but may have an online dimension, recently transpired in Indonesia. On November 7, an attack involving explosives occurred during Friday prayers at a mosque at SMA N 72 Jakarta (72 Jakarta State High School) in North Jakarta, injuring at least 54 people.[75] While the authorities are still investigating the perpetrator's motives, the toy submachine gun found on his person was reportedly inscribed with white supremacist slogans and the names of past FRE mass shooters.[76] Such markings, which attempt to emulate the modus operandi of past FRE attacks, at the very least point to exposure to and interaction with online FRE content.[77]

Outlook

FRE has become a transnational challenge, sustained by decentralised digital networks which adapt global narratives to local contexts. In Southeast Asia, these dynamics are producing diffused and hybrid threats that existing counter terrorism frameworks – still focused on hierarchical, ideology-driven organisations – may be ill-equipped to address.

Effective mitigation requires a holistic response which integrates both the online and the behavioural dimensions of the problem. Policymakers should examine how digital platforms amplify extremist content, assess the limits of current moderation and regulation, and strengthen early-stage detection of online risks. At the same time, the increasingly individualised and hybridised nature of radicalisation calls for a shift away from traditional, ideology-based interventions towards behavioural prevention strategies which address individual vulnerabilities, strengthen community resilience to extremist narratives and build long-term societal resistance to digitally enabled radicalisation.

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Weaponising Discontent: Islamist Extremist Narratives Amid 2025 Global Conflicts

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In 2025, the Gaza war, the Iran-Israel confrontation, geopolitical developments in Syria and heightened India-Pakistan tensions, provided fertile ground for Islamist extremist groups. Both the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) attempted to weaponise grievances around these conflict areas to call for jihad and martyrdom. These themes circulated online, spilling over into Southeast Asia through imported grievances and local discontent. Practitioners must assess these narratives not only as propaganda but also as ideological grooming, requiring calibrated responses that pair security actions with credible counternarratives.

Introduction

There were several hotspots of instability in Muslim-majority regions in 2025, which resulted in mass displacement and humanitarian crises, occupations, repressive security crackdowns, regime collapses and territorial vacuums. They included the Gaza crisis, the June 2025 outbreak of war between Iran and Israel, the protracted instability in Syria since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the renewed friction along the India-Pakistan border. Taken together, these flashpoints have triggered overlapping emotional, political and religious upheavals across the Muslim world. For many, these crises are not merely geopolitical events but existential crises which challenge notions of justice, identity and global order.

Global militant groups like Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), which seek to gain recruits, ideological legitimacy and operational advantage, have framed these developments through the lens of global Muslim victimhood, eschatological prophecy and theological obligation.[1] Their narratives are carefully crafted to persuade and transform discontent into conviction and action. Among other tactics, these groups weaponise the imagery of suffering and a rhetoric of betrayal to cultivate rage, justify *takfir* (excommunication) and inspire jihad.

The weaponisation of grievances is a familiar strategy for jihadist movements.[2] However, the convergence of multiple high-profile conflicts, the rapid amplification of narratives through digital platforms and a growing number of disillusioned individuals seeking a sense of purpose, brought renewed concerns for security agencies in 2025. This article examines how Islamist extremists are capitalising on the conflicts in Gaza, Iran, Syria and Kashmir. It identifies the converging themes in their messaging and assesses the implications of this evolving landscape for the Southeast Asian region.

Global Conflicts

The War in Gaza[3]

In 2025, major global jihadist perceptions of the war in Gaza continued to vary significantly between rival groups like AQ and IS. Despite these ideological differences, both major global jihadist groups have exploited the conflict to mobilise supporters, intensify anti-Western rhetoric and incite violence.[4]

AQ Central leadership[5] and its affiliates, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Shabaab, initially celebrated the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas in Israel, praising the militants involved.[6] They framed the war as a broader "Crusader-Zionist" conflict and exploited the protracted humanitarian crisis in Gaza to fuel anger toward Western powers and call for global attacks against Israeli, Jewish and Western targets.[7]

In January 2025, AQ Central issued a statement published in response to the widespread displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. In it, the group affirmed that “targeting the head of global disbelief is the most effective way to stand against these criminal policies of the axis of evil: America, the Zionist entity, and all the infidel Western countries.”[8]

This strategy is designed to capitalise on Muslim anger by portraying AQ as a champion of the Palestinian cause. Despite historical criticisms of Hamas's nationalism and political processes, AQ remains muted in its ideological critiques to project an image of jihadist unity and capitalise on broad sympathy for the Palestinian people. This approach demonstrates AQ's populist and adaptive messaging, allowing it to broaden its appeal and mobilise supporters by aligning its rhetoric with a cause that resonates deeply with many Muslim audiences globally.

In contrast, IS has faced an ideological dilemma due to its sectarian rivalry with Hamas, but has still managed to exploit the conflict for its own purposes. IS maintains its historical animosity towards Hamas, which it views as an apostate group due to the latter’s political ties with Shia Iran, its nationalistic agenda and its failure to implement IS's strict interpretation of Islamic law.[9] After the October 7 attack, IS supporters criticised Hamas while still celebrating the attacks on Israel.

IS's rigid and uncompromising sectarianism still prevents it from offering unconditional support to Hamas. Instead, the group has adapted its propaganda to argue that attacks on its existing enemies – such as "apostate" Middle Eastern regimes – are a valid way to aid the Palestinian cause. This highlights IS's hardline ideological framework, which forces it to adapt its messaging to fit its pre-existing global caliphate agenda, rather than fully aligning with a nationalist group like Hamas.[10]

The Iran-Israel 12-Day War[11]

The 12-day war between Israel and Iran in June 2025, which saw both sides exchange air and missile strikes, has significantly reshaped the Middle East’s security landscape.[12] As Sunni jihadist groups, IS and AQ viewed the Iran-Israel war as a valuable opportunity to advance their core narratives against the United States (US) and Israel as well as their regional rivals.

IS, for example, used its *al-Naba* editorial published in June 2025 to condemn both the Israeli and Iranian regimes, portraying them as enemies of Islam “conspiring to undermine Sunni political unity”.[13] In contrast, AQ leveraged the conflict to reiterate its long-standing anti-Zionist rhetoric.

IS's focus on condemning both sides and constant emphasis on sectarian schisms were a strategic move to delegitimise the "near enemy" – the Arab governments it deems apostates – while AQ used the opportunity to emphasise the need to confront the "far enemy", referring to Israel and its Western allies.

This exploitation of the conflict for propaganda purposes highlights the ideological competition between IS and AQ, which causes each group to frame the war differently to attract support. The regional instability also provides these groups with a platform to promote their agendas and recruit new followers.

The war created a situation ripe for exploitation by jihadist groups. To gain a rhetorical advantage, AQ focused on the "Crusader-Zionist" enemy, whereas to appeal to a more sectarian audience, IS criticised the perceived failures of Arab governments.

The conflict, occurring alongside the ongoing war in Gaza and regional changes like the fall of the Syrian regime, has the potential to reignite violent jihadism in the Middle East. The resulting regional instability and intensified ideological competition could lead to the emergence of a new generation of charismatic jihadist leaders who could capitalise on public anger, thereby altering the future trajectory of militant movements in the Middle East.

The Fall of Assad in Syria

Similarly, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus in late 2024 reignited jihadist aspirations in Syria, particularly among remnants of IS, which is attempting to reclaim the country both as a battleground and as a symbol of divine destiny. Central to IS's narrative is the denunciation of Syria's emerging leadership, particularly the country's new leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, who is portrayed as having betrayed Islamic principles by seeking to normalise ties with Israel and courting international recognition.[14] IS paints Jolani as intoxicated by power and willing to sacrifice the Islamic faith for influence, warning that no ruler who collaborates with "Jewish neighbours" can ever claim legitimacy in Islam.[15]

Moreover, Syria holds eschatological significance in Islamic tradition as the epicentre of the prophesied end-times conflict. IS propaganda has rapidly capitalised on this[16] by drawing on the prophetic traditions which describe Syria as the place where believers will seek refuge during the appearance of the *Dajjal* (the antichrist), reinforcing IS's claim to religious authenticity and divine mission. Therefore, central to IS's narrative is the claim that Syria's emerging leadership should be committed to Islamic principles. In this regard, Jolani's normalising of ties with Israel and courting of international recognition[17] render him illegitimate as leader as such actions are taken as clear evidence of apostasy and moral decay.[18]

IS's rejection of the new Syrian government also extends to the latter's pluralistic vision of national unity. Concepts such as minority rights and inclusive citizenship are dismissed as foreign, Western constructs which are incompatible with Islamic law. IS insists that Islam divides the world into only two categories, Muslims and non-Muslims, and condemns slogans like "Syria belongs to the Syrians" as placing national identity above religious allegiance.

In framing itself as the only uncompromising voice for Islamic governance, IS seeks to recast post-Assad Syria as fertile ground for renewed jihad, one that is theologically ordained and free from the perceived corruption of nationalistic politics.[19]

India-Pakistan Tensions[20]

In the South Asian context, jihadist groups such as IS and AQ connect geopolitical events like the long-running India-Pakistan tensions to a religious war against Muslims.[21] In this case, using the eschatological narrative of Ghazwatul Hind[22] as well as manipulating religious texts and interpretations, they attempt to radicalise and recruit followers. The narrative is framed as a struggle based on a religious prophecy rather than a political conflict.

In May 2025, India launched missile strikes on Pakistan that targeted militant groups Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Following these developments, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)[23] declared war on India, framing the conflict as a religious obligation for Muslims in the subcontinent. Militant offshoots like the Kashmir Resistance have further exemplified this linkage

through attacks in Indian-administered Kashmir, using these incidents to amplify the Ghazwatul Hind message.

By invoking Ghazwatul Hind, jihadist groups elevate a regional political issue into a global holy war, which serves multiple strategic purposes. These include portraying the Indian authorities as oppressors of Muslims and justifying violence as a divinely sanctioned duty. The promise of reward for martyrdom or victory provides a powerful recruitment tool, reorienting potential recruits' motives from political grievances to religious destiny. This reframing helps groups like AQ appeal to a wider audience, extending their reach beyond the subcontinent.

Ultimately, the narrative of Ghazwatul Hind connects past grievances with a promised future victory, effectively transforming a geopolitical rivalry into an ideological, existential struggle.[24] In particular, *Serat ul Haq* magazine, a publication by Al-Jauhar Media, the unofficial propaganda outlet for IS followers in India, notably highlights this narrative across its production.[25] The reframing not only justifies violence and radicalisation within the subcontinent, but also elevates the local struggle to a cause of global jihad which could attract support and recruits from across the world. The aforementioned poses a significant challenge to counter-extremism efforts, even in distant regions like Southeast Asia.[26]

Converging Themes

As discussed, extremists find opportunity in grievances, drawing on common themes that transform frustration into powerful instruments of influence. Discontent is weaponised into calls for mobilisation, with both IS and AQ propaganda centering on the narrative of the *ummah* (Muslim community) under siege. Conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and across Africa are held up as proof of a global campaign against Islam, a narrative designed to foster solidarity through shared anger and despair. By positioning themselves as the only true defenders of the faith, each group reinforces its claim to establish *shariah*.

The open-ended struggle in Palestine, a sacred historical place for Muslims, further strengthens Islamists' call for action, especially after the October 7 attack and the ensuing Hamas-Israel conflict. This is reinforced through the attribution of blame to identifiable adversaries. Both IS and AQ deploy derogatory labels and selective takfir, branding leaders as *taghut* (tyrants), *Rafidah* (a pejorative label for Shia) or *murtaddin* (apostates), to strip them of legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. At the same time, anti-Western, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian rhetoric sustains a polarising "us versus them" worldview, ensuring that every grievance is anchored in an existential struggle.

The idea of jihad is then framed as an individual obligation – *fardhu ain*. This subtle but powerful shift makes participation a personal religious responsibility and portrays inaction as sinful. Through this lens, violence becomes not just permissible but obligatory, lowering barriers to engagement for potential recruits.

Alongside this, the call to *hijrah* – migration in pursuit of faith and combat – has long been promoted as both a duty and a praiseworthy act. Whether urging travel to Syria, Afghanistan or parts of Africa, IS and AQ present such journeys as a way to separate the true believer from those "trapped" in lands of disbelief, while simultaneously feeding manpower into their causes.

These elements then converge in the glorification of martyrdom. The persistence of these converging themes is evident in their repeated use across IS and AQ's central propaganda, as highlighted in the table below.

Table 1: Frequency of Key Themes in IS and AQ's Central Propaganda October 2024 – October 2025.[27]

Theme and Notes of Usage	IS[28]	AQ[29]
Target Attribution: *Use of labelling such as taghut, Rafidah and murtaddin, and anti-Western, anti-Semitic rhetoric such as "Crusaders"*	109	66
Jihad as Obligation: *Calls to view jihad as a religious duty*	33	26
Establishing Shariah: *The need to form shariah governance*	28	14
Ummah Under Siege: *Framing Muslims as victims*	20	16
Glorification of Martyrdom: *Venerate martyrs and emphasise martyrdom's divine reward*	10	23
Palestine and the Gaza Conflict: *Calls to liberate the land from the hands of the Zionist state*	4	22
State of Ignorance (*jahili*): *Consider governance other than shariah system a flaw*	14	1
al-Wala' wal-Bara' (loyalty and disavowal): *Harness exclusivity among Muslims and incite denunciation of others*	6	0
Call for Hijrah: *Migration is framed as praiseworthy and a pressing duty*	4	2
Addressing Youth: *Inspire young people to support their causes*	2	2
Apocalyptic Narratives: *References to Dabiq, Ghazwatul Hind, messianic prophecies and the antichrist.*	2	0

Implications for Southeast Asia

IS and AQ's central propaganda serves as a form of ideological grooming. They are widely circulated within online spaces. These narratives proliferate across multiple media platforms, where they are adopted and mobilised by staunch supporters, amplifying their reach and influence and making them decentralised.[30] When consumed repeatedly, they can lead disillusioned individuals to localise their own grievances, coating them with the veneer of extremist ideology. This dynamic makes the risk of radicalisation particularly high, even in relatively stable societies.

Recent cases across the region illustrate how global narratives are adapted to local contexts. In 2024, the Malaysian authorities arrested eight individuals accused of plotting attacks against the King and government officials, driven by the belief that national leaders were taghut and that a caliphate must be established.[31] That same year, the Indonesian police foiled plots ahead of Pope Francis' visit, arresting suspects who had incited violence online and amplified religious animosity rooted in extremist

rhetoric.[32] In Singapore, since the Hamas attacks on Israel, six self-radicalised individuals have been arrested for planning to participate in armed violence related to the Israel-Palestine conflict.[33]

In September 2025, a 14-year-old Singaporean was detained after exposure to pro-caliphate and anti-Semitic content online, underscoring the growing risks of youth radicalisation.[34] A similar 2021 case involved a 20 year old who had planned a synagogue attack, shaped by "ummah under siege" and martyrdom narratives. Despite no direct IS or AQ links, his worldview reflected recurring extremist narratives commonly promoted by global Islamist militants.[35] These cases highlight an increasing concern involving youths aged 20 or younger as a result of online self-radicalisation.[36]

At the same time, Southeast Asian countries face the added challenge of imported grievances. Migrant communities sometimes carry with them the political and sectarian conflicts of their homelands, making them susceptible to online propaganda that resonates with pre-existing frustrations. Arrests of foreign nationals across the region for supporting extremist entities highlight how external geopolitical struggles can be transplanted into local contexts,[37] complicating national security efforts.

These cases underscore the continuing importance of social media as a critical mode of extremist influence, particularly for susceptible individuals pursuing radical motivation. For practitioners, these trends signal the need to track not only the frequency of recurring extremist themes, but also how they resonate with local and imported grievances.

Policy Recommendations

A first priority must be to hold online platforms accountable. Digital monitoring cannot remain superficial; rather, it must be sharp enough to detect extremist content. As extremist messaging adapts fluidly to global events, practitioners – including content moderation technology employed by tech companies – must pay close attention to the cultural and linguistic nuances shaping these narratives, as well as to the techniques used to amplify them through slogans, hashtags, symbols and emojis. Alongside this, stronger cross-border cooperation in technology and intelligence sharing will be essential to staying ahead of these evolving tactics.

Equally vital is building resilience within communities and family institutions. Religious and community leaders must continue to play a significant role in facilitating secure environments for dialogue and inquiry. In addition, parents must foster pro-social mechanisms which prevent youth isolation and reduce exposure to harmful online content. Moreover, in matters of religious discourse, each family unit should have a credible point of reference, such as local clerics or trained counsellors, to mitigate the sway of extreme ideologies and anchor each individual in sound understanding.

Looking ahead, resilience should be understood not only as a defensive measure but also as a proactive means of shaping alternative visions of belonging and purpose. This can be done by offering credible counternarratives that dismantle the "ummah under siege" rhetoric and replace it with messages of empowerment and shared responsibility. Without such interventions, Southeast Asia will remain a key theatre of concern where global discontent continues to find dangerous local expression.

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Western Far-Right Terrorism in 2025 and Beyond

Jacob Ware

Domestic terrorism, especially white supremacist and anti-government extremism, poses a considerable threat to the United States (US), Europe and other Western nations. As the second Donald Trump administration redefines US national security priorities, the threat from far-right terrorism will likely persist, joined by an increasingly violent far-left movement. This report will first assess the far-right terrorism threat in the US, while also assessing what the September 2025 assassination of political activist Charlie Kirk suggests about a rising threat from the far left. It will then analyse how these threats are manifesting in Europe and beyond, concluding with an assessment of how counter terrorism developments under the second Trump administration may shape extremism and terrorism further afield.

Trends

In announcing his choice for director of the National Counterterrorism Center in his second administration, President Donald Trump arguably was most revealing in what he did not say.

His nominee, former Army Green Beret Joe Kent, would "help us keep America safe by eradicating all terrorism, from the jihadists around the World, to the cartels in our backyard."[1] However, going unmentioned were the far-right extremists who have taken the most American lives since 9/11 – let alone other manifestations of domestic terrorism that continue to challenge United States (US) national security.

Trump's apparent oversight comes despite far-right terrorism providing a consistent storyline to the first Trump administration. In August 2017, a network of overt and outspoken neo-Nazis and white supremacists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia, protesting the removal of a Confederate statue as part of a rally dubbed "Unite the Right". A terrorist attack occurred as part of the event, with one woman, Heather Heyer, killed.

About a year later, in October 2018, a neo-Nazi gunman opened fire at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in US history. In March 2019, a white supremacist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, which killed 51 people, inspired deadly shootings in Poway, California, and El Paso, Texas, later that same year.

Each of these incidents was accompanied by online statements and manifestos explicitly outlining extremist ideologies. The Texas shooter, for example, echoed Trumpian language, describing his attack as a "response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas". Trump's first term ended with the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, when a large mob sought to overturn the presidential election results that had seen former Vice President Joe Biden elected president. The ensuing investigation was the largest in Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) history.

By contrast, the first months of the second Trump administration since early 2025 have seen a troubling rise in far-left terrorism. Although much of this activity has involved low-level violent harassment of Tesla infrastructure (a reflection of the political left's hatred of Elon Musk) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, the threat reached a grim level with the assassination of conservative political commentator Charlie Kirk in September. Although the gunman's ideology was not clearly stated – much like the murderer of Melissa Hortman, the Democratic former

speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives – it nevertheless stunned the nation, leading to widespread calls for civil war and President Trump issuing a legally and strategically dubious designation of "Antifa" as a "domestic terrorist organisation". Murders of two Israeli Embassy staffers in Washington, D.C., as well as a pro-Israel protester in Boulder, Colorado, also offered reminders of the dangers of jihadist or Islamist extremism.[2]

Elsewhere, European and other Western nations continued to face uneven struggles against domestic terrorist threats in the past year, with the far right proving particularly persistent.

Threat Assessment: The Far-Right Terrorist Threat to the US

Although the US government lacks a centralised terrorism database, data compiled by various watchdog organisations have traditionally pointed to far-right terrorism as the predominant domestic terrorism threat.

For instance, in the 2025 edition of its essential *Murder and Extremism in the United States* report, the Anti-Defamation League found that "All the extremist-related murders in 2024 were committed by right-wing extremists of various kinds, with eight of the 13 killings involving white supremacists and the remaining five having connections to far-right anti-government extremists. This is the third year in a row that right-wing extremists have been connected to all identified extremist-related killings." This continues a recent historical trend, with "right-wing extremists" responsible for 76 percent of extremist killings between 2015 and 2024.[3]

Meanwhile, the Global Terrorism Index, compiled by the Institute for Economics & Peace, has found that "Since 2007, there have been 60 politically motivated attacks compared to 14 religiously motivated attacks. This change is especially marked since 2017, with five of the seven attacks in 2023 linked to individuals with far-right sympathies or connections. There were no religiously motivated attacks in 2023."[4]

In December 2023, then FBI Director Christopher Wray warned that "The number of FBI domestic terrorism investigations has more than doubled since the spring of 2020" and that "The top domestic terrorism threat we face continues to be from [Domestic Violent Extremists] we categorise as Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (RMVEs) and Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists (AGAAVEs)."[5] This author's book, *God, Guns, and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America*, chronicles the rise of this movement as a leading national security threat to the US.[6]

Data released in September 2025 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) offered the first convincing counterargument to the prevailing historical numbers. Although earlier CSIS reporting had agreed with other watchdogs, this latest edition found that 2025 saw far-left terrorism in the US outnumbering far-right violence for the first time in 30 years.[7] (The report highlighted that "In the past decade, despite the increase in the number of left-wing incidents, left-wing attacks have killed 13 victims, compared with 112 and 82 victims for right-wing and jihadist attacks, respectively.") The report set off a firestorm in the American terrorism studies academy, with many claiming the numbers would be weaponised to justify the Trump administration's promised crackdown on nebulous "left-wing" groups. One prominent counterargument, offered by terrorism scholar Jessica Davis, insisted "2025 might well be a turning point in the data, but it's too soon to say".[8]

Trump has thrust himself into the hotly debated politics around domestic terrorism. He has regularly flirted with (if not outright condoned) elements of the violent far right throughout his time on the American political scene. He told the press that the neo-Nazis rallying at Charlottesville in 2017 had been "very fine people" and encouraged the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by" during a presidential debate. He was excoriated by conservative Republicans for inspiring the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, though impeachment proceedings against him failed.[9] In perhaps the most revealing

example of his affinity with violent activists who fight on his behalf, Trump issued sweeping pardons and clemencies for the January 6 perpetrators, including those convicted of seditious conspiracy, one of the most serious criminal charges in the US.

The pardons are likely to offer significant boosts to many of America's most prominent far-right groups, from the "Western chauvinist" Proud Boys to the more typical militia groups such as the Oath Keepers. Both groups were effectively decimated by the January 6 prosecutions but will now welcome back battle-hardened leaders while earning a considerable stamp of legitimacy, which will likely drive recruitment. As a Proud Boys leader told Reuters, "A lot of people stayed away from us after there were arrests. Now they are going to feel like they are bulletproof."[10] (The Proud Boys' leader, Enrique Tarrio, meanwhile, offered perhaps the most convincing explanation of the drop in far-right terrorism: "We won. We've got what we wanted."[11]) There also remains a pressing danger that actors on the far right might deputise themselves to facilitate Trump's threats against various minority groups. The Maysville, Kentucky-headquartered Trinity White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, for instance, released a recruitment flyer depicting Uncle Sam booting out an immigrant family. "Proclamation: Mass Deportation January 20th [,] 2025," the scroll declared. "We need your HELP [.] Monitor & Track all Immigrants [.] REPORT THEM ALL [.]"[12] (Additionally, in what may be considered good news for counter terrorism but more threatening to American democracy, many January 6 defendants have considered entering the political system.[13])

For all the focus on groups, however, most far-right violence today is in fact perpetrated by individuals. In an age of social media radicalisation, lone actors can launch attacks without needing broader organisational support. These lone actors also increasingly display erratic and personalised ideologies which either combine multiple ideological traditions or create new worldviews wholesale.[14] A 2023 mass shooting at a shopping mall in Allen, Texas, involved a Latino gunman who had tattooed a swastika on his chest. He had also posted content online consistent with incel ideology, at one point bluntly declaring, "I hate women".[15] Although it was not the case in Allen, terrorists of various persuasions are also getting younger. Ken McCallum, the director general of MI5, recently warned that "One in eight people being investigated by the service for involvement in terrorism are minors […] a three-fold increase since 2021."[16]

Many of these trends were encapsulated by the first significant act of far-right terrorism in the US during the second Trump administration: a January 2025 mass shooting targeting the Antioch High School in Nashville, Tennessee. The gunman, a self-loathing, African-American 17 year old, wrote a manifesto referencing several tropes associated with white supremacy's "great replacement" theory, a conspiracy theory which insists that white people in Western countries are being steadily replaced through immigration and minority political rights in a "genocide" deliberately orchestrated by Jews and Marxists. His treatise called for "A better, neater, cleaner world by eliminating all undesirables [;] we must aid the Aryans regardless of our race."[17] He also identified the rising prevalence of youth in the movement, warning his readers that "The Feds are cracking down and taking these things extremely seriously these years due to the influx of recent minor terror attacks worldwide."

In *Foreign Affairs* magazine, the veteran terrorism scholar Robert Pape left little doubt as to the stakes of the current moment. "Violent populism – a phase of politics characterized by high levels of political violence and broad support for it – now represents a greater risk to American democracy than any competition with another country or any menace by a foreign terrorist group," he wrote, adding that "Politicians on both the left and the right are now subject to an extraordinary degree of threat."[18] The rising violence in America has economic implications, too. Multiple allied countries have issued travel advisories warning their citizens that travel to the US can no longer be guaranteed as safe, whether because of visa and border crackdowns or threats of violence.

Beyond the US: Far-Right Terrorism Threats Elsewhere

Far-right terrorism also remains a distinct threat in most Western and majority-white countries. In Europe, for instance, 2025 saw far-right riots in The Hague, as hundreds of far-right extremists clashed with the police and vandalised the offices of the centrist D66 party.[19]

In the United Kingdom, several recent arrests point to an underlying threat of lone-actor, white supremacist violence. One frightening case involved a 16 year old arrested while en route to commit an arson attack at a mosque in Greenock, Scotland. He had written that he was inspired by Adolf Hitler and Anders Breivik and was prepared to "die for my land".[20] Further south, in Peacehaven on the southern coast, a mosque was set on fire by a small group of individuals, perhaps inspired by a Yom Kippur stabbing attack several days earlier in Manchester.[21]

London witnessed one of the largest far-right rallies in the country's history in September, at which prominent far-right activist Tommy Robinson made common cause with similar movements abroad, warning, "It's not just Britain that is being invaded, it's not just Britain that is being raped. Every single Western nation faces the same problem: an orchestrated, organised invasion and replacement of European citizens is happening."[22] The London rally underscored the power that immigration continues to hold in driving far-right radicalisation and mobilisation.

Offering a valuable counterargument to fears of an ascendant violent far right, the latest edition of the University of Oslo's Right-wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, which tracks such violence in Western Europe, found that "both fatal and severe non-fatal attacks have steadily declined since 2010" and that there were no fatal attacks in 2023, while the "number of severe but non-fatal attacks in 2023 was 83, which is lower than in the early 2010s but consistent with recent years."[23]

Far-right terrorism threats also continue to plague the broader Commonwealth. In 2025, University of Oslo scholar Shandon Harris-Hogan completed an exemplary set of articles tracking far-right terrorism threats in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, three of the Five Eyes countries. The reports detailed varying threats to these lesser-covered states, with the most recent article warning of "a chronic level of severe violence occurring across Canada".[24] The FBI tipped off the New Zealand police about an imminent stabbing plot at a mosque, planned by an assailant who sought "notoriety", had sexually exploited children online and kept videos of Brenton Tarrant's assault on Christchurch in 2019.[25] (A different case in New Zealand reveals the broader dangers of extremism. The country's first-ever prosecution for spying involved a white supremacist who "was caught offering to pass military base maps and photographs to an undercover officer posing as an agent."[26]) In Australia, a group of some 50 men stormed a historical Aboriginal burial site in Melbourne, injuring several people.[27]

Singapore has also been affected by this pernicious violent movement. In 2021, a 16-year-old Christian plotted to attack two mosques to celebrate the two-year anniversary of the Christchurch attack. He was caught by the Internal Security Department.[28] 2025 saw the arrest of a 14 year old driven by a conglomeration of ideologies from Islamic State (IS) support to far-right extremism and incel ideology.[29] Singapore has endured a particularly tough challenge with youth radicalisation, with a global far-right digital ecosystem feeding "us versus them" narratives which Singaporean youth have adapted to their local context.[30]

The violent far-left reaction to the Trump administration seen in the US does not appear to have manifested elsewhere. Most global far-left terrorism in the past two years has seemingly been driven by the fallout of the October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks in Israel and the latter's subsequent military campaign in Gaza. In early October 2025, a suspected pro-Palestine protester vandalised the home of New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, after New Zealand declined to recognise a Palestinian state.[31]

Conclusion: America the Exporter

Over the past several years, the US has emerged as an exporter of far-right terrorism as well as broader gun violence.[32] In 2023, an election riot struck Brasilia in Brazil, seemingly inspired by similar grievances as in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. Elsewhere, Slovakia and Turkey, both member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), were hit by white supremacist attacks that the US Department of Justice noted were "incited" by US persons associated with a network called the Terrorgram Collective (the collective was later designated by the US government as a "specially designated global terrorist" entity).[33]

Accordingly, as the second Trump administration continues to suffer (and to struggle to counter) a rise in violence, US allies cannot delude themselves into a belief that they will be safe from a violent contagion. Singapore has already endured one such warning: in February 2025, an 18-year-old Singaporean "detained for planning to attack Malays and Muslims after being radicalised by violent far-right extremist ideologies […] was inspired by white supremacists in the US."[34] American counter terrorism failures will inspire and drive violence abroad as well. Domestic terrorism, in other words, will remain a considerable threat in the US and far beyond.

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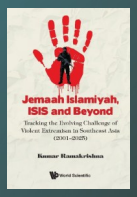

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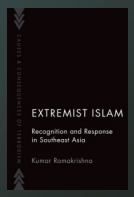

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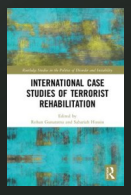

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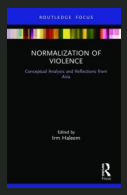

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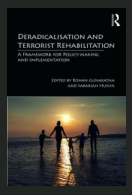

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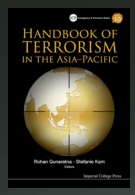

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