

**BANGLADESH: INTENSIFIED ACTIVITIES OF AL-QAEDA-LINKED TERRORIST GROUPS RISK TO CONTRIBUTE TO FURTHER RADICALISATION OF MUSLIM POPULATION**

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Since the beginning of May, series of security incidents triggered concerns over the rise of terrorism threat in Bangladesh. Challenged not only by the presence of already existing local radical islamist groups but also by the recent declared development of activities within the country of “international” terrorist organisations, Bangladesh is becoming another area of competition between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, highlighting the global trend.

The most recent threat posed to the country came from the Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh. In its statement, issued on May 29, the group warned that there would be more targeted killings in the country in the upcoming days. The statement also suggests that the group would increase the attacks and expand the areas of operation.

The statement particularly says that the group intends to target not non-Muslims but those who are insulting the Prophet or anyone who does not allow the rulings of Shariah: “We have no problem with the atheist bloggers, atheism or with other religions or belief but we will not tolerate anyone insulting our Prophet Muhammad. We are targeting those who are insulting our Prophet Muhammad in the name of atheism”.

To recall, the group Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh has claimed responsibility for the murder of Rajshahi University teacher Shafiul Islam in November 2014.

The threat was issued just days after the Interior Ministry banned on May 25 the terrorist group Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), following reports on the group’s possible links to AQIS and suggestions that this it is behind a recent wave of attacks against atheist bloggers in the country.

Ansarullah Bangla Team is an Islamist terrorist group which was established in 2007 but it ceased its operations for several years and re-appeared in 2013. Police believe that the group could be linked to Jamaat-e-Islami which is the biggest Islamist party in the country. In 2013, the leadership of the group was taken by Maj Ziaul after 2 of

the group's leaders, Redwanul Azad Rana and Mufti Muhammad Jasimuddin Rahmani were arrested on murder charges. Almost a month later the chief of ABT's operations Didar Hossain fled to Pakistan after a police crackdown on the group members. It is highly believed that the extremist organisation has played a role in the murders of at least 4 bloggers.

The two detained leaders were both charged with the murder of Rajib Haider, a blogger who was assassinated on February 15, 2013. According to authorities, Mufti Jasimuddin was the instigator and Redwanul Azad Rana was the plotter of the murder. Rana is also considered by police as the mastermind behind the assassination of Avijit Roy, an atheist American blogger, who was murdered on February 26, 2015. Almost one month later, on March 30, Washiqur Rahman, a 27-year-old blogger was hacked to death at Dhaka's Begunbari area. According to the police, the victim was killed few meters away from his house and 2 men were arrested immediately after the murder as locals attacked them and handed them over to police. The suspects detained confessed their link to one of ABT's leaders. Later on May 12, another atheist blogger, Ananta Bijoy Das, was stabbed to death in Sylhet city by 4 assailants.

The abovementioned murders claimed by ABT were also claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and this became one of the principal arguments for security authorities to suspect Ansarullah Bangla Team of being linked to Al-Qaeda or of trying to copy it.

According to Dhaka's Metropolitan Police joint commissioner, there were no confirmed reports that Al-Qaeda or AQIS have any real activity in Bangladesh and, according to him, the Ansarullah Bangla Team rather copied the international terror outfit than really established contacts with the terrorist network.

Monirul Islam, the DMP Detective spokesperson, also stated that ABT copies Al-Qaeda and that they follow their strategies. Although there is no information so far on direct links between the 2 groups, there are indications that ABT has been trying for a long time to get connected to the international terrorist network. The establishment of ABT was apparently influenced by Anwar al-Awlaki, a senior recruiter who was planning terrorist attacks for Al-Qaeda.

The threat from Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh and the ban of Ansarullah Bangla Team took place less than a month after AQIS, the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which represents today the youngest regional branch of Al-Qaeda, issued a statement claiming responsibility for a series of targeted killings in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The video, posted online on May 2, is considered as the first declaration of AQIS presence in the region since the group was proclaimed on September 3, 2014 by the Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The 9-minute video, entitled "From France to Bangladesh: The Dust Will Never Settle Down", included, among other statements, a claim of responsibility for 6 targeted killings in Bangladesh and Pakistan. In the video the leader of AQIS, Asim Umar, also issued a clear threat against the Prime Minister Narendra Modi in relation to "a war against Muslims" as his name was referred for the first time on a video along with

other 'enemies' of the group. The activists for whose assassination the terrorist group took credits were:

- Rajib Haider, a blogger who was murdered on February 15, 2013 in Bangladesh;
- Muhammad Shakil Auj, the dean of Islamic Studies at the University of Karachi who was murdered on September 18, 2014 in Pakistan;
- Shafiul Islam, professor at Rajshahi University who was murdered on November 15, 2014 in Bangladesh; (this murder was also claimed by Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh)
- Aniq Naz, a Pakistani blogger;
- Avijit Roy, an atheist American blogger, who was murdered in Bangladesh on February 26, 2015;
- Washiqur Rahman, a blogger who was killed on March 30, 2015 in Bangladesh (the latest two were allegedly perpetrated by Ansarullah Bangla Team).

Before the release of this video, 2 more attacks were claimed by AQIS, namely the killing of Fazal Zahoor, a senior officer of the Pakistani army on September 2, 2014, perpetrated by AQIS operatives, as well as attempted missile attacks against Indian and American ships from a Pakistani frigate on September 6.

It should be mentioned that at least 3 murders of bloggers, claimed by AQIS, were perpetrated before the establishment of the group so they can be interpreted as a move to improve the image of the group in the media and to prove its influence in the region. They are also used by many security analysts as an argument to support the version of alleged strong links between AQIS and Ansarullah Bangla Team and Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh.

While the presence of direct ties between Ansaru Bangla Team, Ansar Al-Islam Bangladesh and AQIS can not be proved at the present time, it is clear that the Bangladeshi groups both are largely inspired by Al-Qaeda ideology and are likely to perpetrate further attacks either under the direct guidelines from AQIS or just in a move to copycat it.

At the same time one should recall that domestic Islamist groups in Bangladesh represent an attractive recruiting field not only for Al-Qaeda, but also for the Islamic State, whose efficient online propaganda campaign represents today one of its key advantages. In an attempt to tackle the growing influence of IS in the region, the video published by AQIS on May 2 clearly represented a propaganda document targeting to attract attention to the presence and importance of the group in the region. Indeed, if the declaration of the creation of AQIS by Al-Qaeda triggered an important media effect, over the past months the presence of the group in the media remained limited.

Another clear advantage of Islamic State in comparison to Al-Qaeda is the possibility to offer to its followers to join jihad in Syria and Iraq and to approach the Islamic Caliphate. The increasing number of Bangladeshi nationals, either joining Islamic State in Syria and Iraq or arrested within the country on suspicions of ties with the international terrorist group, clearly prove this trend. So far, according to Bangladeshi authorities, at least 40 nationals joined international jihad zones, while

according to some independent experts the real number can be much higher due to important scale of economic migration from Bangladesh that can not be controlled by the state so far.

The recent arrest of an IT manager at a subsidiary of Coca-Cola Co, International Beverages Private Ltd, on charges of links to the Islamic State, demonstrated that the terrorist group indeed is increasing its presence in the country, contrary to AQIS for which there were no reports of arrests of members almost since its establishment.

Al-Qaeda, increasingly challenged by IS terrorist group, created AQIS to replicate its success in Iraq and to counter increasing power of IS in the Indian sub-continent, and namely in Bangladesh. Latest security trends reflect that both terrorists groups are gaining ground in the country, rising risk of large-scale terrorist attacks in this predominantly Muslim country.

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