The Asian Security Landscape after the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

A White Paper by the Council for Asian Terrorism Research
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The Asian Security Landscape after the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

This White Paper is a collaborative product of the Council for Asian Terrorism Research. Its conclusions are derived from the deliberations of the “After Iraq Roundtable” and research papers from the proceedings of previous CATR Biannual International Symposiums.

The Council for Asian Terrorism Research (CATR) was founded in 2005 to promote specialized research that draws from the diverse expertise and perspectives of resident experts across the South and Southeast Asian regions. Through regular communication and collaboration, CATR members have developed new approaches, enhanced existing capabilities, and built integrated and cooperative efforts to counter terrorist, insurgent, and other violent transnational threats in the Asia-Pacific region. CATR represents a commitment by its member institutions to engage in an ongoing program to develop a deeper understanding of the causes that give rise to terrorism and politically motivated violence, to forge more effective national and regional responses to share best practices in counter-terrorism/ counter-radicalization.

To this end, CATR held a series of roundtable discussions in Sydney, Australia in May 2008. The goal was to define the likely medium- to long-term effects of the war and occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan on regional stability and the landscape of terrorist, insurgent, and violent transnational threats in the CATR regions of South and Southeast Asia.

The roundtables were organized around two worst-case scenarios:

- Following a U.S. troop withdrawal, Iraq becomes an ungovernable failed state, creating security conditions similar to those that prevailed in Afghanistan during the 1990s and facilitated the rise of the Taliban and the establishment of safe havens within which Al Qaida and other jihadist organizations trained cadres and developed terrorist strategies and tactics.
- Continuing instability in Iraq contributes to a broader Sunni-Shi’a power struggle in the Persian Gulf region that expands Iranian influence and threats to destabilize key Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia.

Participants in the roundtable also considered the lessons terrorist and insurgent groups might draw from events in the Middle East and how the resulting changes in the way those groups operate could shape future security challenges in the CATR region. Ultimately the participants sought to identify the urgent analytical priorities CATR can use to help the nations of the region prevent unanticipated consequences of wars in the Middle East from becoming real threats to security and stability across the CATR region.

CATR identified four aspects of regional security that appear to be particularly at risk in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: the internal social and political stability of South and Southeast Asian nations, the evolution of non-state transnational threats to national and regional security, the security of access to energy resources among CATR nations that are highly dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and challenges to regional

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**CATR Mission Statement**

*To build a network of Asian terrorism researchers that combines:*

- Specialist country-based terrorism expertise
- Specialist language and cultural skills
- Career subject experts from a range of disciplines

*To produce:*

- High-quality, collaborative terrorism / counter-terrorism publications
- A series of bi-annual regional forums for in-depth discussion of topics and themes of shared concern and interest
- A venue for building collaborative relationships between senior counter terrorism policymakers and subject matter experts
- High-quality / low-cost analytical products
- Access to alternative analytical perspectives
stability presented by economic migration. Factors related to these concerns are deeply intertwined. This discussion of the evolution of the security landscape also looked at the problems within two timeframes:

- Those trends that are already underway, but may still be shaped by changes in circumstances and the developments of more effective regional responses
- The trends that, while not yet apparent, may emerge if stability in the Persian Gulf region breaks down, either as a result of the failure of the emerging Iraqi state; the emergence of an extremist regime, of Sunni or Shi’i orientation; or the spread of sectarian tensions in the region due to competition for regional hegemony

Such instability in the Persian Gulf will have cascading effects that could move quickly through the CATR region with potentially devastating consequences unless the states of the region begin now to develop plans and capabilities for preventing or responding to them.
Challenges to Internal Social and Political Stability

The Limits of the Afghanistan Analogy

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, studies of the roots of ideological extremism have focused heavily on the phenomenon of ideological “blowback” flowing from the jihad to liberate Afghanistan from Soviet occupation in the 1980s. It has become a widely accepted premise that international financial and material support – primarily from Saudi Arabia and the United States – unintentionally legitimized the radical pan-Islamist extremism later championed by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida. The roughly 1,000 Southeast Asian mujahideen who fought in Afghanistan (out of some 35,000 foreign fighters from 43 countries) had a profound ideological impact on the evolution of Islamist political ideologies and contributed to the emergence of a number of violent extremist groups in the region through the 1990s. Whether they returned home to participate in peaceful political activity or chose to engage in terrorist or extremist violence, the Southeast Asian mujahideen's involvement in the jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s fundamentally shaped the character of Southeast Asia's radical Islamist leadership in the 1990s.

Two factors related to the emergence of veterans of the Afghan jihad as political and religious leaders proved particularly important to the evolution of the internal social and political landscape of South and Southeast Asia through the 1990s. First, status as combat veterans of the Afghan jihad afforded some of the key Southeast Asian radical Islamist leaders – including Abu Baker Bashir, Abdurajak Janjalani, Aldam Tilao, Hector Janjalani, Hambali, and other high-profile leaders of groups like Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) – a level of religious credibility and status that compensated for their general lack of formal religious training. Several Afghanistan veterans returned to their homelands to teach at conservative – and sometimes extremist – religious boarding schools (known in Southeast Asia as pensantrens or pondoks), thus passing conservative or extremist Islamist ideologies on to a new generation. Second, Southeast Asian presence in the Afghan jihad paved the way for the emergence of important ideological, business, and in some cases familial, links between Southeast Asian Islamist radicals and more militant Egyptian and Saudi Islamists. At the macro level, there were two additional ideological currents at work:

- The apparent power of jihad as a means of prevailing over an asymmetrically superior opponent, such as the Soviet Union and, later, the United States and Israel;
- After 1994, the increasing attraction of the ideologies of the Taliban and Al Qaida as a means of promoting transnational Islamic solidarity.

The potential ideological consequences of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for most of South and Southeast Asia are fundamentally different in three key respects:

- The current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan lack the deep ideological resonance of the earlier jihad against atheistic Marxism-Leninism.
- The Sunni-Shi’a sectarian hatreds that drive much of the violence in Iraq are largely alien to overwhelmingly Sunni Asian Muslim communities. As a result, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are perceived primarily as internal, civil wars between sects, tribes, and other domestic interest groups.
- Unlike the “godless” Soviet Union, the United States is not perceived as an irredeemably evil power, but as a somewhat careless great power that has become overly reliant on military force rather than the moral power of its ideals to shape the world.

Asian Muslims went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to resist the spread of atheistic Marxism-Leninism, not necessarily to advance the abstract notion of a pan-Islamic caliphate. The aggressive Saudi/Wahhabist ideological imperialism of the 1970s and 1980s had a widespread and lasting effect on the spread of conservative Islamic ideologies and practice across Southeast Asia. Moreover, several Southeast Asian nations – Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – had their own costly, domestic struggles against communism during the period of decolonization that predisposed their committed Islamists to see the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the light of a fundamental clash of religious and atheistic worldviews. The struggle of the Afghan mujahideen against their Soviet occupiers in the 1980s caught the imagination and spurred the religious enthusiasm of Muslims around the world. The most ideologically extreme element of the Asian
Muslim population felt moved to join the mujahideen. Many of those idealistic young Muslims returned to their homelands radicalized motivated to transplant the success of Afghan jihad into the political and historical landscapes of their homelands.

The political and ideological forces driving the insurgencies in Afghanistan and, especially, in Iraq are very different and, to a great extent, alien to political and social realities of Asian Muslims in the 21st century. Despite expanding Iranian political and economic influence in the CATR region, there is minimal Shi’a cultural or ideological presence among Southeast Asia’s overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim communities. In Iraq, the initial Sunni-Shi’a violence stemmed from sectarian tensions that simply do not exist in most of Asia. More recently, the emerging power struggles within the Iraqi sectarian groups – especially between Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), which includes the bulk of the foreign fighters and local tribes and “Awakening Councils” and Shi’a militias like the Mahdi Army and mainstream political parties – are (largely) seen in Southeast Asia as internal Iraqi aberrations. While a handful of Southeast Asians have traveled to Iraq to fight with the insurgents, there has been no groundswell of interest or, more importantly, financial support for those seeking to join AQI. Instead, Asian Islamism is once again driven largely by local social and political concerns.

Finally, Southeast Asia’s Muslims do not, as a rule, view the United States’ occupation of Iraq in quite the same light as the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, despite the deterioration of public support for the United States and its war on terrorism since the 9/11 attacks. Trends toward radicalization in Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, India, and Bangladesh have not been accompanied by an increase in anti-American sentiment as has been the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This is in large part because, except among the most extreme fringes of Asian Muslim society, the United States is not perceived as espousing an evil and irreligious political doctrine (as was the Soviet Union). Instead, Asian Muslims see the United States as failing to live up to its democratic ideals and its potential to lead constructive, cooperative international responses to the threat of terrorism.

As Ambassador Hussin Nayan, Director General of the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism and former Chairman of CATR, has observed, Al Qaida, JI, and other radical organizations successfully exploited a widespread view in the Muslim world that the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks was disproportionate and overly militaristic to incite enmity, gain recruits, and win tacit support among Muslim populations. Asian Muslims hoped the United States would respond to 9/11 by, in Nayan’s words, “enlarging regional cooperation, especially in the Islamic world, and upholding the rule of law.” Fortunately, were the U.S. to expand its cooperation with regional counter-terrorism efforts, show greater willingness to work within existing international frameworks (such as the United Nations), and becomes less selective and unilateralist in its observance of international laws and treaties – in particular the Geneva Conventions – the United States’ image in the region would quickly improve. In short, in Asian Muslim eyes, the United States is still not the implacable and irredeemable enemy that the Soviet Union once was.

The Influence of Al Qaida and other Internationalist Groups

Whatever support once existed in Asian Muslim communities for the notion of an Arab-led, global Islamist caliphate has largely dissipated. The principal force for regional Islamist internationalism in Southeast Asia, JI, has been weakened by effective counter-terrorism measures.

There are, however, early and increasingly disturbing signs in the Philippines and Indonesia that Al Qaida may be attempting to reestablish operational links with violent extremist groups in the region, largely through Pakistani connections. Travel to the annual hajj may also be providing opportunities for
covert liaisons. Moreover, former JI sympathizers still run religious schools in the region, and access to extremist literature on the Internet has also led to the proliferation of relatively high-quality and low-cost extremist publications, translated into local languages and dialects, that reach mass audiences where there is limited access to the Internet.

To the extent that global jihadist radicalization is spreading in Asia, the process is not being driven by Al Qaida “Central.” Instead national and international pressure from security and law enforcement forces has caused the vectors for the spread of radicalism to shift to the numerous informal familial, tribal, educational, and business ties between extremists from outside Southeast Asia, especially Pakistan. More importantly, the political and ideological agendas of even the most violent extremist groups remain substantially local.

In South Asia, for example, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), one of the most important jihadist organizations in Kashmir, has an avowedly transnational ideological agenda, but the focus of its radicalization and recruitment activities has been Indian Muslims. Its ties to Al Qaida – if they exist at all – are weak. “To vulnerable Muslim communities battered by Hindu chauvinist organizations,” according to Indian journalist Praveen Swami, “the Jamaat-ul-Dawa [the LET international umbrella organization] represents itself as an organization that can give the kinds of protection democratic institutions have failed to ensure – and provides the jihad in Jammu and Kashmir as evidence of its resolve.”

According to Muhammad Amir Rana, of the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), since the Musharraf regime’s crackdown on jihadist organizations in Pakistan, those groups have shifted their focus from external operations (primarily in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and India) to internal terrorist attacks, which have increased dramatically since 2002. In Bangladesh, according to Dr. Shaheen Afroze of the Bangladesh Institute for International Strategic Studies (BISS), the goals, threat perceptions, operational patterns, and recruiting bases of the Bangladesh groups are substantially different from those of pan-Islamists like Al Qaida and JI. Despite the similarities in ideological rhetoric, Dr. Afroze maintains that assertions of external links between Bangladeshi and transnational radical groups are largely motivated by internal political rivalries and have not been substantiated by the available data or analysis of the internal dynamics of the groups themselves. Still, the Daily Star, a leading national newspaper in Bangladesh, has reported that a few extremist groups in Bangladesh, in an attempt to regroup after recent crackdowns, are building networks under new names – Allahr Dal, Hizbut Tawhid, and Hizbut Tahrir – and undertaking more aggressive ideological campaigns using training, low-cost/high-volume publications, and infiltration of rural religious schools.

In Southeast Asia, according to Dr. Mohd K. Abdullah, the leadership of the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM) fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan after their attacks on the Malaysian government were thwarted in the 1980s. While there, the KMM established ideological and operational ties with JI that proved useful when it eventually returned to Southeast Asia and began promoting the establishment of an Islamist regime in Malaysia. Still, the JI’s internationalist ideology – which seeks to create a regional caliphate to rule over all of Muslim Southeast Asia then merge with a broader, global caliphate – runs counter to the KMM’s focus on building Islamic societies rooted in local Islamic tradition.

In short, evidence that external links are a major factor driving local terrorist and insurgent activities in Asia remains slight. Most of the recent problems in places like southern Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan are the products of government mismanagement of long-festering local unrest.

To attribute the rise of radical Islamist movements in South and Southeast Asia solely to external influences is to fundamentally misunderstand the local complexities and deep historical roots of Islamism in the region. The rise of political threats from violent extremist and insurgent groups in the CATR region reaches well beyond the ideological context of Islamist political philosophies imported from Afghanistan and the Middle East. Salient examples include protracted ethnic and communist insurgent activities in Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines, and, from 1948-1960, Malaysia. While Al Qaida, JI, and other associated groups capitalized on local Islamist ideologies to forge operational alliances in the region and promote their vision of global jihad, the local movements have historical roots in the experience of colonization, occupation, independence, post-imperialist nation building and democratization – in most cases, dating back at least to the late-19th century.

Although Professor Azyumardi Azra, Professor of History and Rector of the State Islamic University in Jakarta, Indonesia, acknowledges that the 9/11 attacks, the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq provided momentum and popular support to radical elements among Southeast Asia’s Islamists, he warns against
being misled by such short-term political phenomena. “Even though Southeast Asian Islam . . . has been viewed as moderate and peaceful,” he writes, “radicalism among Muslims [in the region] . . . has existed for at least two centuries.” It is the current global pan-Islamic dimension to Muslim radicalism in Asia is a relatively recent and not particularly deeply rooted transplant.

Even though violent extremism is not, fundamentally, an Al Qaida driven phenomenon, it still presents a threat to the security of Asian nations. Violent extremist groups may be unable to topple governments, but they have succeeded in using terrorism and insurgent violence to impose painful costs on civilian populations and undermine popular confidence in the ability of national governments to provide security. And while extremists have not made substantial progress in selling their vision of a global caliphate, they have succeeded in propagating the sense that Muslims and Muslim communities are the victims of social, political, and economic persecution. A growing percentage of Muslims agree with the idea that non-Muslims, and the West in particular, are targeting Muslims and that the so-called “war on terrorism” is really a war against Islam. Of those Muslims, a significant and increasing minority believes that Muslim communities can only be safe if they quarantine themselves from outside influences and return to the fundamental values and practices of Islam as defined by the Koran, the hadith, and the traditional practices of the early Muslim community.

In Pakistan, where the costs of internal extremist violence have been especially high recently, the vast majority of Pakistanis reject Talibanization and militant jihad and see terrorism as a threat to their national security and stability. The Pakistanis see Talibanization as an aberration resulting largely from misguided government policies. In particular, Pakistanis see the (former) Musharraf regime’s alliance with the U.S. in its war on terrorism as the source of their security crisis. A majority of Pakistanis believe that if Pakistan ended its partnership with the United States, thus bringing government policy more in line with the will of the people, the Talibanization phenomenon would begin to dissipate almost immediately.

Unfortunately, according to Amir Rana, and others who closely follow the political reality on the ground, the facts do not completely square with that opinion. Recent events demonstrate that the principal drivers of violence in Pakistan are internal and deeply entrenched. Pro-Taliban groups are expanding their networks in settled areas of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that border Afghanistan and Punjab. Media reports indicate that pro-Taliban groups have strengthened their networks in Karachi and elsewhere and are emerging as the greatest threat to Pakistan’s internal security and stability, as the September 20, 2008, suicide truck bombing of the Islamabad Marriott graphically and tragically demonstrated. Indeed, suicide and terrorist attacks, which have escalated in Pakistan in recent years, have continued unabated since Musharraf’s resignation in August 2008.

The Age of Self-Radicalization

In the end, the most pernicious ideological legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may be the rise of self-radicalization. The ability of groups in Iraq and Afghanistan to broadcast high-production-quality video of successful local attacks against Western forces, suicide bomber “martyrdom statements,” and beheadings of hostages is a valuable force multiplier for extremists of all ideological stripes. Terrorists and the extremist groups that recruit and support them operate on the cutting edge of online marketing, psychological operations, and strategic communications, and the increasing technical sophistication of extremist Web sites makes them more attractive to an online audience. The campaign for the “hearts-and-minds” of vulnerable populations, especially young people, is increasingly important. According to Kevin Zucatto of the Australian Federal Police, from the jihadist perspective, Al Qaida’s reduced ability to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks globally has been compensated for to some degree by the vastly increased pace of individual radicalization in the cyber-world.

Extremist and the New Media

Use of Satellite

The Cyber Jihad

Identity Manipulation

Internet as Preferred Platform

Information Warfare (IW)

Medium of Instruction

Database and Data Mining

Financial Operation
Some governments have begun to tackle the challenge of counteracting self-radicalization. Singapore and Indonesia have robust counter-radicalization programs that focus on re-orienting the extreme religious notions of jihadist detainees. Both programs have enlisted conservative religious scholars and Imams who can directly engage and debate with radicalized individuals. In addition, both programs include outreach to the families of detainees who are often confused, ostracized, and economically disadvantaged following the arrest of their relations on terrorism-related charges. Australia is addressing online radicalization by enlisting young people between the ages of 11 and 15 – who communicate naturally in the language of the internet and instant messaging – to assist in developing effective online counter-radicalization strategies.

If governments hope to counter the spread of violent ideologies and reverse the tide of self-radicalization, they must become creative and responsive players in the war of ideas. Governments urgently need to develop innovative, flexible, and proactive strategic communication capabilities and approaches to the war of ideas against increasingly media-savvy adversaries. As BG Muniruzzaman, Director of the Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Security Studies, has written, “Media operations are the means by which the movement and its ideology metastasizes, and there is every reason to expect this trend to continue and the ideological machinery of the extremists to develop ever greater sophistication.”

So far, in the war of ideas, non-state actors such as Al Qaeda and Sri Lanka’s Tamil separatist insurgent movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have developed a more consistently effective capacity for using soft-power to advance their ideological and political agenda than have most states. The use of soft power in counter-terrorism must become an urgent priority in all counter-terrorism efforts.

Education and Radicalization

Education also remains a major factor in the radicalization of Islamist politics in South Asia, but its role is more complex than the recent policy focus on radical madrassahs would indicate. The influence of Saudi- and Al Qaeda-funded radical madrassahs – which teach hatred of the West and of Jews, encourage the subordination of women, and discourage critical thinking – is a malignant one, especially in the poor, tribal regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan and in some of the more remote communities of Indonesia and the Philippines. A more fundamental problem, though, is the inconsistent quality of public and private education in many of the countries and communities most vulnerable to violent extremism.

Traditionally, madrassahs were simply local schools that provided free or very low cost religious education to boys (and occasionally girls) whose families would likely be unable to afford schooling for their children. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Saudis – awash with new-found oil wealth and worried about the growing influence of the revolutionary Shi’a movement blossoming in Iran – funded the establishment of strict, literalist Sunni schools and religious centers throughout the Muslim world. Thus, the fundamentalist, Puritanical religious views of Saudi Wahhabists were able to influence a much broader audience across Asia. In recent years, even some of the more radical madrassahs have begun to attract a broader, more middle class student base by expanding their curriculum to include subjects like mathematics and computer science. As a result, the traditional Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have become more attractive to middle class families, and in Pakistan, more middle-class Pakistani families living in the West are sending their sons back to the homeland to attend madrassahs and reinforce their cultural and religious identities.

The inconsistent quality of education is illustrated to a certain degree by statistics on adult literacy rates in the region. Adult literacy rates in Pakistan, for example, hover around 50%, with female literacy at 36%. The numbers in Bangladesh are slightly better, with overall literacy at 51.6% and female literacy at 45.8%. But literacy in Afghanistan is much grimmer: 36% overall and only 12% for adult women. Azhar Hussain of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy points out, for example, that the literacy rate in Pakistan is only 49% (36% for women) and the average Pakistani male receives only a 5th grade education – the average girl only a 3rd grade one. “In short,” Hussain writes, “Pakistan has failed to provide its citizens basic educational privileges. This education gap creates much demand for any institution that has a semblance of an educational program.” Muslim populations in the Southern Philippines also are educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable to the influence of militant Islamist educational institutions. There are an estimated 2,000 madrassahs in the Philippines, more than half in the southern island of Mindanao. Only 40% of these madrassahs are accredited by the Department of Education. Only 8% are under the control of the government.
In many South and Southeast Asian countries, eliminating the madrassah system is neither possible nor desired. In Bangladesh, as ABM Ziaur Rahman of BIISS explains, a three-tier education system has created “three different social classes, with the English Medium school -educated graduates [the sons and daughters of the country's elites] being the privileged ones who get jobs with ease. The Bengali Medium school students [largely from the middle class] fill up most of the remaining demand in the employment market, leaving the madrassah educated,” the largest and least advantaged segment of the population, “the most frustrated segment with the least opportunity to break into the mainstream job market.” The availability of secular education increased very slowly over the past two decades, while the number of Alia (government supervised) and unsupervised madrassahs has soared. The establishment of an Islamic state, in the view of the madrassah graduates that make up an ever growing majority of the Bangladeshi workforce, could enhance the value of their religious education vis-à-vis the more privileged graduates of private, secular schools.

Beginning in the 1980s, successive Pakistani administrations have attempted to mitigate some of the career frustrations of madrassah graduates. General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq recruited graduates into low-level positions in the bureaucracy and granted madrassah diplomas a status equal to that of degrees awarded by secular institutions in an effort to improve the career prospects of madrassah graduates. The graduates who entered the Pakistani bureaucracy under Zia have gradually risen through the ranks to positions of considerable power and responsibility in the career civil service at both the regional and national levels. Recently, President Musharraf also gave some madrassah diplomas equivalence with university degrees to enable those holding them to stand for election to posts requiring a degree, again in an attempt to offset some of the past disadvantages associated with religious education.

According to Hekmat Karzai, Director of the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul, Afghanistan, there are hardly any key madrassahs in Afghanistan that teach ideologies of hate; however, many of the thousands of madrassahs created in Pakistan (with the particular assistance of the Saudi Government during the Afghan jihad) are still in operation. Those madrassahs, which indoctrinated thousands of Muslims from across the globe in the late 1980s, continue to attract students from all over South and Southeast Asia and continue to teach narrow, literalist interpretations of Islam that foment deep and often violent hostility toward moderate forms of Islam, secularism, Israel, and the West.

In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, there are strong interest groups that continue to use religious education as a political weapon, and, as Dr. Afroze points out, neither the Pakistani nor the Bangladeshi governments are making serious efforts to abolish or “secularize” the madrassahs. In his work with some of Pakistan’s most conservative madrassahs, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy’s (ICRD) Azhar Hussain finds that Western and government pressure for secularization of madrassah curriculums is widely seen as attack on
Islam and indigenous Muslim culture. For example, Hussain asserts that under pressure from the United States, the Musharraf regime tried to persuade madrassahs to modernize their curriculum to improve the career prospects of their students. While some have done so, madrassah faculties remain suspicious of government sponsored modernization incentives and overall progress in reform has been slow. In this case, as in many others concerning the challenge of countering violent extremism, the solution lies not in forcing secularization that attacks the theology of the madrasahs but in working with religious traditionalists to provide the kind of pedagogical training that will enable religious educators to incorporate greater tolerance for critical thinking and to alternative views into their teaching styles.

The Rise of New Nonstate Transnational Threats

From Terrorism to Transnational Crime

In recent years radical organizations across South and Southeast Asia have become as much grey economy enterprises as forces for ideological and political change. The term “grey economy” refers to the conduct of legitimate economic enterprises through unauthorized, illegal, or unofficial channels in order to provide cover for illegal activities, launder money, or divert money from legitimate sources (such as charitable contributions) to illegal activities like terrorism. Increasingly, the lines between terrorist groups and traditional, transnational: organized crime are becoming blurred as terrorist and insurgent groups learn to use legitimate businesses to move money back and forth between various illicit activities, often below the radar of financial counter-terrorism.

Apart from the disruptive effects of their illegal activities – such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, etc – the emergence of these grey and black economies undermine legitimate economic growth and development in already vulnerable communities. The Taliban in Afghanistan have become increasingly involved in the drug trade from which they receive over 100 million annually. And the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines is notorious for its extortion and kidnapping-for-ransom operations.

International efforts to shut down traditional terrorist financing outlets have met with increasing success since 2002, prompting many violent extremist groups to follow the example of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and shift their fundraising and wealth management into vertically integrated, apparently legal enterprises. As Vipula Wanigasekera has pointed out, the primary difference between terrorist groups and organized crime is that, “instead of illegal money being ‘washed’ to make it legal . . . terrorist financing involves the task of filtering legitimate funds into illegal, terrorist operations.” Over the past three decades, the LTTE has developed a vertically integrated proto-economy that includes an extensive shipping empire, international telecommunications enterprises, and business franchises that reach from Europe to Southeast Asia. In fact, the LTTE’s legitimate enterprises are so profitable that it has backed away from some of its shadier activities, especially drug and human trafficking.

Setting up legal business fronts serves a number of useful purposes for extremist groups, according to Colonel Noel Miano, a fellow at the Strategic and Integrative Studies Center and former Director of Doctrine Center for the Philippine Army. It provides a constant and reliable source of funds, employment for cadres until they are needed for operations, and offers a vastly more complicated challenge to law enforcement (especially in countries that lack strong anti-terrorism laws). In addition, the investment in local economies and service infrastructures buys considerable popular goodwill in many regions.

In some cases, fundraising is too successful. As violent groups have shifted their tactics away from large, coordinated attacks, terrorism has become a relatively inexpensive pursuit. Increasingly, groups need ways to store their wealth beyond the prying eyes of the international financial system. In Pakistan, jihadist groups responded to crackdowns on terrorist financing by investing in agricultural real estate that provides both a source of income and a means to store wealth out of reach of international counter-terrorism measures.

According to Praveen Swami, after the Pakistani government effectively shut down the flow of funds to jihadists in Jammu and Kashmir, ground-level groups such as the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (H-u-M) have “succeeded in establishing a predatory relationship with the local economy – one that closely resembles the activities of organized crime groups in urban centers.” As the Indian government steps up investment in infrastructure modernization in the region, groups like H-u-M have expanded into the
protection/extortion racket and, at the same time, have gained popular support by investing the proceeds in social programs. Likewise, groups in the Philippines have invested in service businesses – medical clinics, schools – that enable them to both hide their wealth and build goodwill among the local populations that constitute the core of their support base.

**Proliferation of Terrorist Know-How**

Radical extremist and insurgent groups currently do not pose strategic or existential threats to any of the states in the CATR region. There is no risk of the rise of an international Islamist caliphate emerging in South and Southeast Asia anytime soon. Even in vulnerable Afghanistan and Pakistan, *jihadist* groups have been unable to build electoral majorities. The most dangerous legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan may not be the spread of radical ideologies but rather the increasingly rapid proliferation of terrorist technical know-how. As recently as the 1990s, terrorist engineers like Ramzi Youssef had to travel to the sites of local operations in order to assemble the necessary explosive devices. Today, local terrorist entrepreneurs can quickly download relatively simple instructions for building bombs using readily available materials from the Internet.

Since at least the early 1990s, analysts have gained a much better understanding of how terrorist tactics migrate from one group to another and from one region to another. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the proliferation of suicide bombing from its modern inception with Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, to the LTTE (inventors of the suicide bombing vest) and later to Bali, Iraq, Afghanistan, London, Jordan and Pakistan. But there are other important examples: maritime attacks (the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen and, later, the Superferry bombing in Manila), mass-casualty attacks on public transportation (in Tokyo, Madrid, London, and Mumbai), and coordinated attacks on international passenger aviation (the foiled Bojinka plot, the tragically successful 9/11 attacks, and later foiled attempts by the so-called “shoe-bomber” and the London liquid explosives plot in the summer of 2006).

Other terrorist tactics, such as the use of video-taped threats (whether in the form of statements from terrorist leaders like bin Laden and Zawahiri or the grisly video-taped beheadings that became common fare for AQ in Iraq) have proven similarly viral. Designs for new terrorist devices, including the assembly of car bombs, the use of cell phone detonators, the suicide bombing vest, and most recently IEDs and shaped charges – are now readily and widely distributed on the Internet.

The atomization of the major international *jihadist* groups like Al Qaida and JI, along with successful military operations to shut down or disperse major terrorist training camps in places like Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa, have forced some large-scale terrorist training operations to disperse. For example, because of the success of the all-out war against the MILF’s Camp Abubakar in 2000, the major JI training operations in the Southern Philippines were disrupted. Other makeshift training camps have appeared in Mt. Cararao in Lanao del Sur and are still being monitored. This makes large-scale, global terrorist operations more difficult to stage, but it has also led to the rise of a new brand of terrorists who are widely dispersed, independent of central operational and ideological control, largely self-trained, and difficult to track.

The post-9/11 regime of stricter travel security and immigration requirements has made it difficult for terrorist groups to carry out mass casualty operations far from their remote sanctuaries. Terrorist masterminds and engineers can no longer move easily from country to country, and many of them are in jail or dead. This has given rise to home-grown terrorism: the reliance on local cadres to carry out attacks in targeted countries. Terrorism in the CATR regions, as in Western Europe, is trending toward local attacks conducted by small cells of self-radicalized individuals with few traceable connections to larger, better known and more closely
endnotes


2 The practice of using marriages to solidify operational and ideological alliances is common within militant Islamist organizations. These terrorist cells, unlike larger insurgent and global terrorism organizations, need neither large numbers of recruits nor large amounts of money.22

3 The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and increasingly robust counter-terrorism enforcement in Southeast Asia have degraded the central operational and ideological control of groups like Al Qaida and JI and weakened their central command and control mechanisms. None of these developments has degraded their motivation or will to carry out future attacks. As a result of this localization of terrorism, the nature of the security, intelligence, and law enforcement challenges facing the nations of South and Southeast Asia will shift significantly.

In the face of increased pressure from law enforcement and security services, terrorist and extremist groups have developed highly specialized and sophisticated strategies for spreading their message to key audiences, recruiting new members, maintaining their support base, conducting psychological terrorism from afar, and inspiring local home-grown terrorism. In his analysis of extremist strategic communication, BG Muniruzzaman finds that “in no small measure as a result of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan,” terrorist organizations have become masterful at publicizing attacks and expanding their reach by maximizing the strategic exposure of heinous (and intimidating) images of their successful tactical operations (such as IED attacks on coalition troops and video-taped beheadings).23
Energy Security

If Iraq were to become a failed state, spreading sectarian violence and instability across the Persian Gulf region, the consequences for South and Southeast Asia could be severe. This could lead to, among other things, protracted instability for the energy security of vulnerable South and Southeast Asian states with potentially destabilizing strategic, economic, and social consequences.

As the recent spike in global oil prices clearly shows, anxiety over the effect of tension and instability in the Persian Gulf region is not limited to South and Southeast Asia. The impact of even a temporary disruption of the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf could be much more devastating for economies that are highly dependent on Middle East oil, and have narrow margins of error for absorbing increased energy costs. Many of the other countries in the region that depend most heavily on oil exports from the Middle East – Bangladesh (90% of imports), Pakistan (80%), and Sri Lanka (100%, 70% of which comes from Iran) – have little recourse for alleviating the pressure on supply and price of oil were there to be a major disruption in the Persian Gulf. Even Indonesia, which until recently was a net exporter and Asia’s only member of OPEC, has increased its dependence on oil imports from Iran.
(It exports its high-quality crude and imports lower quality oil from Iran to refine for the domestic market). Even Asia's more robust economies, like Japan (which imports 86.7% of its petroleum from the Middle East) and Australia (39%), that might be better able to absorb the pressure of a disruption of the flow of oil out of the Middle East, could not do so for long.

With the exception of Malaysia, which is a net oil and gas exporter, Asia will depend on Middle East sources for roughly 95% of its petroleum by 2010. It is imperative, then, that major oil-producing countries – such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and other Persian Gulf states – not fall under the control of radical regimes and that they maintain secure sea lines of communication in the Persian Gulf.

Were a strongly sectarian Shi'a regime aligned with Iran to emerge in Iraq in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal, Shi'a regimes would be in a position to exploit their control of 30% of the world's oil supplies to build significant strategic influence in Southeast Asia. Iran has already made significant inroads in the region and is likely to continue to build strategic influence there, especially with countries, like Sri Lanka, that are almost completely dependent on Iranian oil. In early 2008, Iran applied for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and signed a trileral agreement in principal to build the Iran-Pakistan-India oil pipeline. Although recent unrest in Pakistan makes implementation of that agreement unlikely in the short term, Iran's aggressive pursuit of economic ties in South and Southeast Asia undermines U.S. and EU efforts to use economic sanctions to push Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program.

While much of the growth in energy demand in Asia comes from China and India, those countries can diversify their sources of supply to reduce their dependence on Middle Eastern oil and are already taking steps to do so. The majority of countries in South and Southeast Asia, however, do not have such medium- to long-term diversification efforts underway, meaning their dependence on Middle Eastern oil will continue for some time to come. Should regional instability rise to the level that enabled maritime piracy and maritime attacks in the Straits of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf as it did off the Horn of Africa, the economic consequences for Asia could be dire. Severe disruption of the Middle Eastern oil supply would likely create a rush to find alternate suppliers in Southeast Asia, most notably in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. These producers, however, have neither the reserves nor the production capacity necessary to ensure continued economic growth in the region without the reliable flow of Middle Eastern petroleum.
Economic Security

The economic pressure of rising energy costs could be exacerbated by another potentially catastrophic and unanticipated consequence of a failed state in Iraq: the outflow of expatriate workers from increasingly insecure Persian Gulf countries. Analysts in South and Southeast Asian countries are concerned that economically vulnerable expatriate workers, if forced to leave the Middle East, could become a target for radicalization.

Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia all depend on expatriate labor both as a safety valve for the pressures of poverty and unemployment and as a major source of foreign capital. Some 350,000 to 400,000 Afghan nationals work in the Middle East and earn up to US $300 million dollars annually, almost 5% of the country’s gross national product (GNP). Even India, despite its rapid economic expansion in recent years, derives roughly 3% of its gross domestic product (GDP) from remittances from expatriate workers, 3 million of whom currently work in the Persian Gulf region (primarily in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE).

The dependence on labor exports is even more dramatic in the rest of South Asia. Pakistan has roughly 2.1 million expatriates working in the Middle East who account for US$3.8 billion out of US$5.5 billion in foreign remittances, which constitutes 4% of Pakistan's GDP. The 2.7 million Bangladeshi working in the Middle East send home US$3.57 billion, a substantial portion of the total foreign remittances that make up 9% of Bangladesh's GDP. According to BG Muniruzzaman, “remittances from Bangladeshis are the country’s second biggest sources of foreign income after ready-made garments. In the current fiscal year [2008] . . . remittance grew by 26%. It is expected that the export earnings during the current fiscal year will increase to US$12.5 billion while remittance flow is expected to reach US$6 billion.”

Of the South Asian states, Sri Lanka is the most dependent on labor exports and remittances for its internal social and economic security. Officially, about 1.2 million Sri Lankans, 13% of the country’s employed labor force, live and work abroad. Of those, 1 million work in the Middle East, although, the actual number is probably closer to 1.7 million, as up to 27% of Sri Lankans working abroad are not registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. In 2006, Sri Lanka relied on foreign remittances for 9.7% of its GDP (third after the export of tea and ready-made apparel), receiving about US$2.7 billion from the Persian Gulf region.

Labor export is a vital safety valve for the social pressures of rural poverty and unemployment in a Sri Lankan economy that has, for decades, struggled to accommodate its growing labor force. The official unemployment rate of 14% increases to between 35% and 40% if underemployment – the number of workers who are not in the desired capacity in terms of compensation, hours, or skill and experience levels – is also taken into account. So, the effect of a sudden repatriation of a significant portion of its expatriates in the Persian Gulf, not to mention the loss of the remittances they send home, could have a devastating effect on the Sri Lankan economy at a time when the country already faces difficult economic, political, and internal security challenges from the ongoing Tamil separatist insurgency.

In Southeast Asia, the two countries most dependent on labor export and remittances are the Philippines and Indonesia. According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, about 1.1 million Filipinos are currently employed overseas. Of these, 45.3% live and work in the Middle East, including between 1,000 and 3,000 who are working for U.S. contractors in Iraq. Filipino foreign workers in the region remit roughly 15% of the total US$14 billion in foreign remittances to the Philippines, according to the Bangko Sentral ng Philippines. Remittances by overseas workers currently account for roughly 10% of that country's GDP (and the figure growing
at a rate of 19% annually). The actual numbers, however, may be substantially higher because official tracking does not capture remittances that pass through the informal padala (have it carried) system or private remittance/courier companies. Of the top ten hosts for Filipino emigrant labor, two — Saudi Arabia (2nd after the United States) and Kuwait (7th) — are in the Persian Gulf region. Most unskilled Filipino emigrants favor Qatar and Kuwait.

As with Sri Lanka, the economic impact of a sudden and significant rate of repatriation to the Philippines could be devastating. In 2007, the country’s unemployment rate was 7.4%, and its rate of underemployment was 18.9%. As much as 80% of the Filipino migrant worker force was likely unemployed prior to emigration.

Reliable data on migrant labor from Indonesia is lacking due, first, to the failure of regional authorities to report their overseas worker registration to the central government in Jakarta and, second, to the high rate of undocumented migration, particularly to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Figures concerning remittances are unreliable for the same reasons. Official statistics state that 2.7 million Indonesians are living and working in the Middle East, with 400,000 estimated to be working illegally in Saudi Arabia alone (most overstaying pilgrim visas). Official remittances in 2005 totaled US$3 billion, but the real number is almost certainly twice that. The majority of Indonesian expatriates are still working in Asia (primarily in Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore), though most (1% of the official total) Indonesians working outside Asia are in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The Indonesian unemployment rate in 2006 was 12.5%; its underemployment rate is likely much higher given the difficulty the country has had recovering from the economic crisis of the late 1990s. The Indonesian government has shown interest in expanding its labor export programs, both as a social safety valve and a source of foreign capital to support domestic economic development — especially in the poor, rural communities that have, in the past, been most vulnerable to extremist influences. While the impact of repatriation of Indonesian workers from the Persian Gulf region might be minimal, the opportunity cost of a potentially ripe market for future labor exports and promising source of foreign capital could significantly retard the country’s future economic growth.

On the macro-economic level, the inflow of foreign exchange from expatriate workforces in the Middle East provides a vital means of sustaining reserves of foreign currency for South and Southeast Asia’s highly import-dependent economies. On the micro-economic level, the remittances from expatriate workers are often the sole income source for extended family networks and the only means of obtaining capital to pay off debts or undertake local business development. Remittances from expatriate workers provide a cushion when export earnings decline due to fluctuations in international trade.

The impact of an increasingly volatile Middle East on South and Southeast Asian economies must be assessed based on several factors. If a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq leads to an escalation of sectarian violence in the Persian Gulf region that renders Iraq ungovernable, the spillover effects could endanger expatriate workers in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, likely resulting in out-migration, whether voluntary or compelled. Moreover, if Iran increases its active involvement in the internal affairs of its neighbors (either overtly or covertly) or escalates its nuclear weapons program to trigger military retaliation by Israel or the United States, expatriate workers might also seek to leave the region. A sudden exodus of foreign workers and the resulting ballooning unemployment in their home countries would have severe economic and social consequences across the CATR regions. The increasingly important role of migrant labor in the economies of South and Southeast Asia as well as the Persian Gulf places a premium on developing cooperative intelligence, enforcement, and immigration monitoring to prevent the legitimate export of labor and expertise from becoming a cover for extremist groups to move people and money into the region.

Endnotes

The Need for Regional Approaches

Violent extremist organizations and the transnational criminal operations with which they are increasingly associated are not only more dispersed, but they are no longer confined by national boundaries. If they are to continue to see gains against terrorism and violent transnational crime, all the governments of the CATR regions will have to find effective ways to balance the need to develop supple and responsive multilateral mechanisms for detecting, tracking, interdicting, and prosecuting terrorist and criminal conspiracies with ongoing concerns over legal jurisdiction; different views of the nature of the threat; sovereignty; and inequities between large powers and small. The development of strong anti-terrorism legislation, international extradition, and other international investigative and judicial measures are particularly controversial in South and Southeast Asia because of concerns over their potential misuse to harass legitimate political opposition or otherwise disrupt legitimate civil rights. In the past, cooperation in counter-terrorism and transnational crime investigation and enforcement operations in the region have been overwhelmingly bilateral and often informal. While multilateral military and security cooperation has expanded somewhat since 9/11, particularly anti-piracy efforts in the Straits of Malacca, there remains much to be done.

CATR has identified a number of areas where institutions can pool their experience and expertise to anticipate the potential cascading effects as events unfold in the Persian Gulf region. Among the research and collaboration priorities CATR identified are the following:

- Determine the scope and nature of emerging transnational threats posed by franchised extremist organizations such as Al Qaida international.
- Investigate the current reach and future trends of self-radicalization in a virtual world that does not recognize national boundaries, to determine what innovative, cooperative tools and approaches can help the nations of the CATR regions respond effectively to this new threat.
- As the first generation of “Afghanistan veterans” age, die, or are imprisoned, research who the new generation of terrorist will be, and upon what personal networks they will depend.
- Since education is clearly a key factor in countering the spread of violent extremism, investigate how cultural education programs, within or in addition to existing public and private education, can counter the ideologies of hatred and misunderstanding.
- Identify of the links between transnational extremist networks and criminal organizations and develop regional capabilities to detect, track, and intercept the smuggling of drugs, weapons, people, and nuclear materials. Effective counter terrorism will depend on a blend of national and regional capabilities for intelligence collection, criminal investigation, physical security and consequence management. CATR seeks to provide a means for sharing best practices as well as developing cooperative capabilities, with the understanding that while international cooperation is vital to countering the rise of transnational non-state threats, it is no substitute for effective national capabilities across the region.
- Create a “CATR crisis index.” Anger is a root cause of all terrorism, regardless of its ideological bent. Such anger is most often rooted in domestic political, social, and economic factors, but external factors can also play a role. The countries of the CATR region may be unable to exert control over either domestic or external sources of anger like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they must, nonetheless, develop the capacity to detect signs of rising anger. A “CATR crisis index” can be used to monitor key indicators of rising anger and contribute to the development of proactive responses, whether individual or collective, to mitigate the risk before frustration boils over into violence or pushes disaffected groups into the fold of transnational terrorist organizations.

Endnote

Chairman of the CATR Executive Board for 2008-2009: H. E. Peter Anderson, Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (PICT), Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Past Chairmen:

2005-2006: Dr. Jamhari Makruf, Executive Director, Centre for the Study of Islam and Society, State Islamic University of Indonesia (UIN), Jakarta, Indonesia

2006-2007: General Alexander P. Aguirre (Ret.), Chairman of the Board Strategic and Integrative Studies Center, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines

2007-2008: Ambassador Hussin Nayan, Director General, Southeast Asia Region Centre for Counter Terrorism, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

CATR Biannual International Symposiums:

2005
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (18-20 April): International Symposium on the Dynamics and Structures of Terrorist Threats in Southeast Asia

2006
Goa, India (17-19 October): Third Biannual International Symposium of the Council for Asian Terrorism Research: Building More Effective State Responses to Terrorism

2007
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (5-7 November): Fifth Biannual International Symposium of the Council for Asia Terrorism Research: Understanding the Role of the Media in Spreading Ideological Extremism

2008
Sydney, Australia (6-8 May): Sixth Biannual International Symposium of the Council for Asian Terrorism Research: The Landscape of Terrorism After Iraq, 2013
Tokyo, Japan (11-13 November): Seventh Biannual Symposium of the Council for Asian Terrorism Research: Transnational Threats and Counter-Measures: The Role of Cultural Education in Countering Radicalization

Any questions concerning the Council for Asian Terrorism Research (CATR) or requests for additional copies of this White Paper can be directed to Dr. Caroline Ziemke or Dr. Katy Oh Hassig, SFRD, Institute for Defense Analyses, 4850 Mark Center Drive, Alexandria, VA, 22311, USA (cziemke@ida.org or kohassig@ida.org).