

The background is a composite image. On the left, a green flag is partially visible. In the center, a soldier wearing a helmet and a balaclava is looking through the vertical bars of a metal cage. The soldier's face is partially obscured by the balaclava, but their eyes are visible. The overall tone is somber and military.

When
Counterterrorism
Becomes the

Threat

Preface

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. As the country prepares for elections scheduled for February 2026, the democratic foundations laid during the Liberation War of 1971 face their most serious test in decades. The student-led revolution of July 2024 that toppled Sheikh Hasina's government has unleashed forces that extend far beyond the immediate political transition—forces that threaten to reshape Bangladesh's democratic trajectory in ways both profound and perilous.

The convergence of three simultaneous revolutions has created an unprecedented opening in Bangladesh's political discourse. The demographic revolution has produced the world's largest cohort of digitally native young adults, impatient with traditional authority and hungry for change. The technological revolution has democratised information flows, breaking the state's monopoly on narrative control while creating new vulnerabilities to manipulation. The political revolution of July has shattered established power structures, creating space for previously marginalised voices—including those that advocate violence and extremism.

This widening of the Overton window - the range of ideas considered acceptable in public discourse - has emboldened political parties and groups that openly espouse extreme or violent views to participate in mainstream politics. Where once such forces operated in shadows, they now compete openly for influence, putting Bangladesh's democratic centre under unprecedented strain.

This special report, the first in a series examining Bangladesh's information environment ahead of the February elections, reveals how the very mechanisms designed to protect the state from extremism became instruments of political control, inadvertently creating the conditions for genuine threats to flourish. The irony is stark: by weaponising counterterrorism against political opponents, Bangladesh's previous government may have made the country more vulnerable to the real extremists it claimed to fight.

The stakes could hardly be higher. As Bangladesh's 170 million citizens prepare to choose their democratic future, understanding how information warfare, institutional credibility, and extremist adaptation interact will prove crucial not just for the country's stability, but for the broader question of whether democracy can survive in an age of digital manipulation and authoritarian innovation.

Disclaimer:

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Summary

The counterterrorism landscape in Bangladesh over the past decade tells a story of how legitimate security concerns were transformed into instruments of authoritarian rule. What began as a response to real extremist violence between 2013 and 2016 ultimately devolved into a system of political control, fueling public distrust and creating the conditions for new extremist narratives to take root. The trajectory of abuse, denial, and radicalization has left Bangladesh facing both a crisis of legitimacy and the resurgence of transnational jihadist pipelines.

The cycle began with the targeted assassinations of secular activists, bloggers, and LGBT advocates, followed by the shock of the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack. The killings revealed the presence of both Al-Qaeda-aligned and ISIS-linked networks operating inside Bangladesh, forcing the state to act. The Awami League government seized the opportunity to launch sweeping counterterrorism campaigns, such as Operation Storm-26, which drew widespread suspicion of being a staged extrajudicial execution. While the crackdowns did succeed in suppressing large-scale terrorist attacks, its scope quickly extended beyond extremists. Political opponents found themselves labeled as militants, charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act, or disappeared altogether. Between 2017 and 2024, conviction rates under the Act hovered at only seven percent, yet case filings surged around politically sensitive moments like the 2018 elections and protests against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2021 visit. The pattern revealed a deliberate repurposing of counterterrorism law: from a shield against extremists into a sword against dissent.

Testimonies collected by the Commission on Enforced Disappearances and international rights monitors underscore how systematic this abuse became. Nearly 1,800 disappearance complaints were logged, many victims reappearing under pre-scripted terrorism charges. Survivors described falsified arrest dates, coerced confessions, and torture in secret detention facilities. Officers admitted promotions were tied to the production of "militants," real or fabricated, turning counterterrorism into a quota-driven enterprise of repression. By 2024, the state's security apparatus was widely regarded not as protector but predator, a perception only hardened by the July–August crackdown that left over a thousand people dead in three weeks, according to international reports. Counterterrorism, emptied of security purpose, had become synonymous with authoritarian violence.

This abuse laid the groundwork for one of the most consequential narratives in Bangladesh's recent history: Jongi Natok (Staged Militant Drama), the claim that militancy itself was staged theatre. First emerging online in 2017, the phrase fused popular distrust with anti-India conspiracies and spread quickly across social media. Over time, repetition transformed suspicion into belief, and belief into doctrine. The tipping point came in 2025 when senior police officials publicly admitted militancy had been a "staged drama" for nearly two decades. With such statements, what once circulated as rumor gained institutional legitimacy. Extremist propagandists capitalized on this shift, weaving the "drama" claim into their messaging to delegitimize the state and bolster their own authenticity. In the public imagination, the line between fabricated and real militancy collapsed, leaving citizens primed to dismiss genuine threats as political theatre.

Extremist groups adapted accordingly. With physical attacks curtailed after 2016, they pivoted toward a long-term strategy of digital radicalization. Rather than calling for immediate violence, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and affiliated actors embedded themselves in cultural debates, moral policing campaigns, and anti-secular rhetoric. Online subscriptions to extremist-linked channels soared from under three million in 2020 to more than thirty million by mid-2025. Platforms like Facebook offered broad reach, while Telegram and niche apps provided resilience and spaces for explicit propaganda. Narratives framed secular elites as foreign agents, normalized hostility toward minorities and women, and encouraged harassment as a form of public duty. This gradual, society-wide radicalization replaced bombs with discourse but was no less strategic. It laid the foundation for a generational shift: a population more sympathetic to extremist ideology and more distrustful of the state.

While denial at home spread, recruitment abroad accelerated. Reports as early as 2022 documented young Bangladeshis traveling to Afghanistan and Pakistan to join the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Digital channels openly shared travel routes, training videos, and ideological justifications. By 2023, these recruitment pipelines had become structured ecosystems, linking Bangladeshi sympathizers with TTP propaganda and AQIS narratives. The belief that “there are no militants in Bangladesh” created the perfect smokescreen for these transnational networks to flourish. Fighters were leaving the country for active jihadist theatres even as domestic discourse insisted militancy was only a drama.

The risks of this dual strategy are stark. Bangladesh has been here before: in the 1990s, Afghan war veterans returning from the Soviet conflict seeded Harkat-ul-Jihad Bangladesh, which went on to orchestrate devastating attacks in the 2000s. Today, the risk is amplified by digital networks that allow returning fighters to reconnect instantly with vast online audiences. Battle-hardened veterans bring not only training in explosives and small arms but also prestige and global ties, accelerating the transition from online agitation to operational militancy. In a country where counterterrorism is already discredited, even a small number of returnees could destabilize the fragile balance.

In the end, Bangladesh’s counterterrorism story is not one of security restored, but of legitimacy squandered. The abuse of law, the manipulation of fear, and the erasure of distinctions between dissent and terrorism hollowed out trust in state institutions. The Jongi Natok narrative, born from this abuse, has now become a strategic asset for extremists, undermining genuine counterterrorism and amplifying digital radicalization. As recruitment pipelines feed Bangladeshi youth into foreign battlefields, the risk of history repeating itself grows more acute. Bangladesh faces not only the legacy of authoritarian repression but also the dangerous convergence of denial at home and jihad abroad, a convergence that threatens to shape its security landscape for years to come.

Key Takeaways

Counterterrorism as a Tool of Authoritarianism:

Legitimate security concerns in Bangladesh were exploited to implement authoritarian rule, transforming counterterrorism into a system of political control. This repurposing led to widespread suspicion and the erosion of public trust, creating fertile ground for extremist narratives.

Rise of the Jongi Natok (Staged Militant Drama)

Narrative: Abuses in counterterrorism led to the widespread belief that militancy is staged (Jongi Natok), which extremist groups have weaponized to delegitimize the state and promote their narratives. This narrative was amplified through digital disinformation and institutionalized by public statements from senior officials.

Domestic Growth of Digital Radicalization:

Following physical crackdowns after 2016, extremist groups pivoted to long-term digital radicalization, using social media and cultural debates to build influence and foster intolerance. This strategy resulted in a dramatic increase in subscriptions to extremist-linked online networks.

Bangladeshi Recruitment into TTP: Despite domestic denial, Bangladeshi youth are being recruited into transnational jihadist groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) through structured digital pipelines. This trend was documented as early as 2022, even as the “no militants in Bangladesh” narrative persisted.

Risks of Returning Fighters: The return of Afghan-trained Bangladeshi fighters poses a significant risk, potentially accelerating the transition from online agitation to operational militancy, echoing the rise of HuJI-B in the 1990s. These returnees bring battlefield skills, social legitimacy, and transnational links, magnified by today’s digital ecosystems.

Erosion of Trust and Legitimacy: The politicization of counterterrorism and systematic abuses have severely eroded public trust in state institutions, creating a permissive environment for extremist ideologies to flourish. This climate of pervasive mistrust meant law enforcement was viewed as partisan actors rather than credible guardians of security.

Weaponizing Counterterrorism: From Security Imperative to Political Repression

The targeted assassinations of secular activists and bloggers between 2013 and 2016, followed by the shock of the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, gave the Awami League government both the justification and political opportunity to unleash a heavy-handed counterterrorism campaign. Al-Qaeda-aligned Ansar al-Islam claimed responsibility for a string of machete killings targeting secular bloggers, publishers, and LGBT activists, while ISIS-linked militants carried out the Holey Artisan siege in July 2016, killing 22 people, mostly foreigners.¹ These episodes revealed the reality of transnational extremist influence in Bangladesh, but the state's response went far beyond neutralizing violent actors. Among others, Operation Storm-26, the police raid that killed nine suspected militants in Kallyanpur on September 26, soon after the Holey Artisan attack, became mired in controversy, with human rights groups and sections of the press alleging it was a staged extrajudicial execution rather than a genuine counterterror operation.²

Indeed, terrorism-related violence dropped significantly after 2016, with major coordinated attacks becoming rare.³ Yet the same apparatus used to suppress real extremists was quickly repurposed against political opponents, student leaders, and journalists. As the Commission on Enforced Disappearances later showed, hundreds of victims of enforced disappearance were prosecuted under terrorism charges.⁴ In this way, the legitimate security imperative created by the 2013–16 violence became the gateway for authoritarian abuse: counterterrorism secured the state against extremists but simultaneously entrenched a culture of impunity and political manipulation that hollowed out the rule of law. The Anti-Terrorism Act (2009) exemplifies this weaponization, as conviction data indicates its application as a broad political

instrument rather than a precise security measure. Between 2017 and 2024, only 52 convictions emerged from 794 resolved cases—around seven percent—yet filing surges coincided with the 2018 elections and the 2021 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visit protests.³ The Commission links these spikes directly to enforced disappearance cases where victims reappeared under ATA charges, while Bangladeshi media concluded the law was “abused most to frame victims.”⁴

By the time of its fall, the Awami League had so thoroughly politicized counterterrorism that law enforcement was widely viewed as an arm of partisan control rather than a protector of citizens. Report from the Commission on Enforced Disappearances, UN findings, and rights reports converge on the same diagnosis: counterterrorism was emptied of security purpose, recast as repression, and in the process created the legitimacy crisis later exploited by the Jongi Natok (Staged Militant drama) narrative.⁵

Counterterrorism under the Awami League became a central pillar of authoritarian rule, where laws designed to protect citizens from extremists were retooled into instruments of partisan control. The Commission on Enforced Disappearances describes this as a “consolidated strategy of repression,” involving scripted charge sheets, engineered custody gaps, coerced confessions, and media framing that branded detainees as militants before any trial.⁶ Independent investigations by OHCHR and Human Rights Watch confirm that such practices were not isolated but coordinated with political leadership.

1 BBC News, “Bangladesh Bans Islamist Group Accused of Blogger Attacks,” BBC News, May 25 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32879662>

2 “Prothom Alo, Ex-IGP, 2 Others Sued for ‘Killing 9 Youths’ in ‘Anti-Militant Drive’ in Kalyanpur,” Prothom Alo, March 24, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/crime-and-law/j46z5svlt5>.

3 International Crisis Group, Countering Jihadist Militancy in Bangladesh, Asia Report No. 295, February 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/295-countering-jihadist-militancy-bangladesh>.

4 Commission on Enforced Disappearances, *Second Interim Report*, Government of Bangladesh, July 2025, <https://coied.portal.gov.bd/site/view/publications/>

5 Commission on Enforced Disappearances, *Second Interim Report*, July 2025; OHCHR, *Fact-Finding Report*, 2025; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024*.

6 Ibid

The machinery of enforced disappearances, secret detention, and torture institutionalized fear and impunity at the heart of Bangladesh’s security apparatus. The Commission logged nearly 1,800 formal disappearance complaints, estimating the real number is much higher.⁷ Victims included students, professionals, and activists, such as a 19-year-old held for 28 days by CTTC in 2017 and a 25-year-old woman who disappeared for 24 days in 2018, both later folded into terrorism docket. Testimonies describe falsified arrest dates, torture at the TFI cell, and “pre-scripted” confessions pushed through courts—patterns that expose deliberate orchestration, not ad hoc abuse.⁸

Expansive speech laws like the Digital Security Act (2018) and its 2023 replacement entrenched authoritarian control further, normalizing the treatment of dissent as extremism. Commission evidence shows identical charge language copy-pasted into cases: posts about quota reforms, road safety, or memes about Sheikh Hasina were reframed as terrorist propaganda.⁹ Rights monitors similarly note that journalists and civil society actors were disproportionately prosecuted, with the Special Powers Act (1974) still used to hold critics without charge.¹⁰ The combined effect was to collapse the distinction between violent extremism and peaceful dissent.

Institutional incentives reinforced the cycle of abuse by rewarding officers for producing “militants,” whether real or fabricated, significantly eroding the trust on state apparatus. The Commission recorded testimony from an officer admitting that if a big militant was caught, “the sirs (seniors) get promoted very quickly.”¹¹ This admission demonstrates how performance metrics and career advancement, rather than genuine security concerns, drove persecution, turning counterterrorism into a quota system of repression. Erosion of trust was the most corrosive consequence of this pattern, leaving communities alienated from institutions meant to protect them. Survivor testimonies reveal deep suspicion: one victim admitted they delayed contacting the Commission itself because they feared it might be affiliated with India’s intelligence agency RAW.¹² This climate of pervasive mistrust meant that law enforcement was no longer viewed as credible guardians of security, but as partisan actors whose abuse hollowed out state legitimacy.

The July–August 2024 crackdown was the culmination of this system, where counterterrorism became indistinguishable from political massacre. An OHCHR fact-finding mission found systematic violations including hundreds of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, coordinated at the political level.¹³ International press reported up to 1,400 deaths during the peak three weeks of violence,¹⁴ while U.S. human rights reporting catalogued unlawful killings, torture, and arbitrary detentions throughout 2024.¹⁵ This confirmed that “counterterrorism” had become the cover story for authoritarian consolidation.

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Commission on Enforced Disappearances, Second Interim Report, July 2025

10 Ibid

11 Ibid

12 Ibid

13 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Fact-Finding Report on Human Rights Violations in Bangladesh*, February 2025.

14 Associated Press, “UN Says Bangladesh Crackdown Left 1,400 Dead,” August 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/951dc40f60d6a798eb5af5ed1d11b-bad>.

15 U.S. Department of State, *2024 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh*, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bangladesh/>.

Emergence of the Jongi Natok (Staged Militant Drama) Narrative

The ‘Jongi Natok’ narrative established the widespread belief that all militancy is fake and that no militants exist in Bangladesh—has become a strategic asset for extremist groups. Jongi Natok is the popular shorthand for the claim that militancy in Bangladesh was staged theatre rather than reality. Emerging first in 2017 as social media comments, reinforced by repetition, and institutionalized by police statements in 2025¹⁶, the phrase evolved from partisan rhetoric into a widely accepted doctrine. Its core message—that all militancy is fake and no militants exist in Bangladesh—has been amplified through digital disinformation and exploited by extremist propaganda. The result is a corrosive narrative that delegitimizes counterterrorism altogether, conditions the public to treat genuine threats as fabrications, and grants anti-state actors new credibility in Bangladesh’s contested information space. This doctrine crystallized over the past decade as political accusations, official admissions, and online amplification converged.

Disinformation networks amplified the narrative by blending it with anti-India conspiracies and “false-flag” allegations. SecDev’s monitoring of Bangladesh’s information ecosystem in 2024–25 shows disinformation pipelines that normalize Jongi Natok shorthand, fusing anti-India narratives with allegations of fabricated raids and portraying security forces as foreign proxies.¹⁷ The result is a durable heuristic: default to assuming spectacle, not threat.

Statements from high ranking officials in 2025 converted suspicion into doctrine, moving the narrative from partisan claim to institutional confession. In July 2025, Dhaka Range DIG Md Rezaul Karim Mallick publicly stated that militancy for the past 18 years was a “staged drama,” and that “in the true sense... there was no militancy.”¹⁸ When a senior police official affirms the storyline, the public inference hardens: if the state once scripted militancy, then claims of militancy now are presumptively fake.

Extremist propagandists incorporated the narrative into their messaging to delegitimize the state. AQIS-linked content and Intifada Bangladesh mobilization adopted the “drama” line to argue that militancy was manufactured by the state; by August 2025, Al-Qaeda-sympathetic actors were actively using this distrust in their organizing.¹⁹ In practice, the Jongi Natok doctrine blurs real risk signals and hands narrative initiative to anti-state actors.

16 Deutsche Welle (DW). “বাংলাদেশে জঙ্গি আছে, কিন্তু ‘জঙ্গি নেই’.” DW Bengali, July 2, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/ybsxzxyj>

17 SecDev/KIRON, *The Digital Battleground: Extremism and Disinformation in Post-Revolution Bangladesh*, October 2024, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/KIRON_Special_Report_October2024.pdf. SecDev/KIRON, *Faith, Fear, and Fabrication: The Strategic Manipulation of Faith in Bangladesh’s Narrative Wars*, December 2024–February 2025, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/KIRON_Report_Dec-Feb_2025.pdf.

18 “Terrorism was a drama once: Dhaka range DIG,” *Prothom Alo* (English), July 13, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/local-news/x6vdmic-wle>.

19 SecDev, Flashnote, *The Enemy of My Enemy*, August 18, 2025, https://www.secdev.com/KironReports/KIRON_Flashnote_18Aug2025.pdf.

The Strategic Pivot of Violent Extremism (Since 2016)

Abusive counterterrorism has already produced deep distrust, which extremists successfully turned into momentum for soft radicalization.

Heavy-handed crackdowns convinced many citizens that counterterrorism was political theatre, and this disbelief became the foundation for extremists to shift strategy. Rather than continuing kinetic attacks, VE groups embedded themselves in social media spaces and cultural debates, building reach and legitimacy through moral-policing and religious framing. The effect is measurable: subscriptions to extremist-linked online networks have risen dramatically, from a few million in 2020 to over 30 million by August 2025. This surge reflects not only digital adaptation but also a public climate that is more skeptical of the state and more receptive to actors presenting themselves as defenders of faith.

In response to the state’s hardline counterterrorism success, violent extremist (VE) groups shifted after 2016 from kinetic attacks to long-term digital radicalization and covert social influence. Following the government’s aggressive campaign after the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, which severely curtailed physical operations, VE actors adopted a strategy of “lying low” and normalizing radicalization processes. Their planning documents indicated recognition that the security environment was “not yet conducive to a large-scale, armed uprising.” Instead, they designed a generational strategy: mass, society-wide radicalization over 10–15 years to build a base of ideologically sympathetic supporters who could later provide shelter and resources when conditions favor an uprising.

The VE digital ecosystem expanded rapidly, privileging cultural polarization and moral policing over calls for immediate violence.

Content analysis shows a consistent decline in online posts directly promoting armed violence since 2021, replaced by narratives polarizing society against secular and moderate values. The scale of this digital growth is striking: extremist-linked subscription numbers increased from 2.7 million in June 2020 to 17 million in June 2023²⁰, and surged past 30 million by August 2025. This quantifiable shift illustrates the prioritization of influence-building over direct operations.

Multi-platform tactics allow VE groups to maximize both reach and resilience. Facebook remains the dominant vector, with the highest number of channels and subscribers, using coded language to reach wide audiences. At the same time, VE actors spread to niche or less-monitored platforms such as Telegram, HushUp, and SoundCloud to distribute explicit content and create redundancies in case of takedowns. This layered strategy mirrors broader insurgent adaptations worldwide: blending mainstream legitimacy with underground resilience.

Narratives attacking secular and moderate values serve as the cornerstone of VE ideological power-building.

By 2022, 40 percent of analyzed posts focused on portraying secular values as corrupt or foreign impositions. Extremist discourse frequently employs binaries like Tawhidi Janata (a righteous Islamic grassroots public) versus Shahbagis (urban secular elites, atheists, or foreign agents), framing national politics as an existential clash between Islam and secularism.²¹ Through these narratives, VE actors claim the moral high ground, incite vigilantism, and normalize hostility toward targeted groups.

Moral policing and targeted hostility extend VE influence into daily life.

Campaigns highlight interfaith relationships, women's behavior, and minority identities as arenas for public intervention, with extremists encouraging harassment, doxing, and even physical intimidation.²² By embedding radical ideology in everyday disputes, VE actors broaden their base, foster intolerance, and prepare communities for more organized mobilization when the opportunity arises.

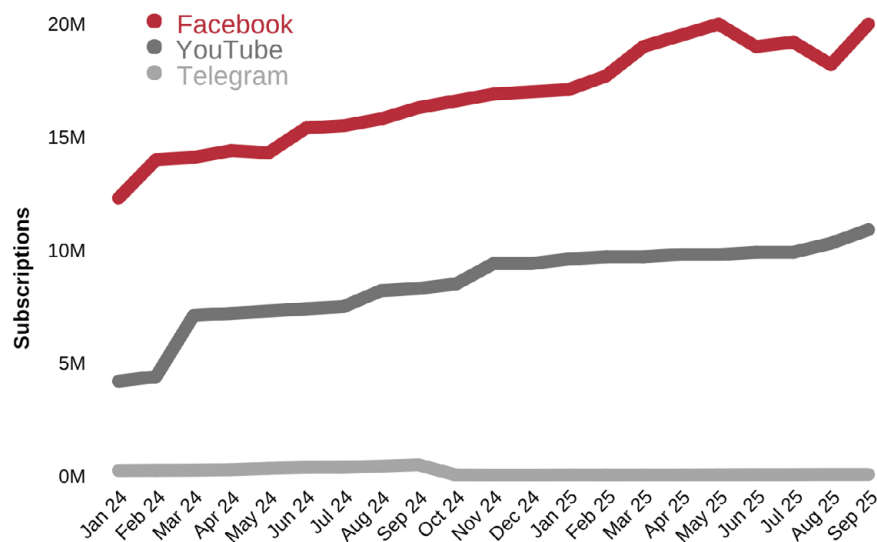


Figure 01: Trend of subscriptions to Bangla VE channels on social media platforms. Subscription is a metric that represents the number of social media accounts that consented to follow content from a given social media channel, and thus gives an idea about the popularity of that channel. It does not represent unique subscribers or individuals.

21 SecDev, Faith, Fear, and Fabrication: Narrative Wars in Bangladesh, Dec 2024–Feb 2025, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/KIRON_Report_Dec-Feb_2025.pdf.

22 SecDev, Faith, Fear, and Fabrication: Narrative Wars in Bangladesh, Dec 2024–Feb 2025, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/KIRON_Report_Dec-Feb_2025.pdf.

Bangladeshi Recruitment into Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): A Documented Trend Since 2022

In 2025, Bangladeshi media picked up the news of the death of Bangladeshi TTP fighters in Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Several Bangla TTP supporter channels claimed that a Bangladeshi named M A Ibn Taymiyyah died in Afghanistan while fighting for TTP. Later, on 15 May, a Bangladeshi news outlet covered the news in detail. The phenomenon received further attention later in September when news of another Bangladeshi's death came out where the real name of the person was reported as Faisal Hossain.²³ The deaths of Bangladeshi fighters with TTP in 2025 are not an unforeseen event but the culmination of a trajectory documented since 2022. What made it appear sudden was the power of the “no militants in Bangladesh” narrative, which blinded public opinion and domestic institutions to genuine militant recruitment. Denial created the perfect cover for transnational pipelines to flourish.

The presence of Bangladeshis fighting for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is deeply connected to the domestic narrative that “there are no militants in Bangladesh.” While the public was conditioned to dismiss militancy as political theatre, the recruitment of Bangladeshis into transnational jihadist fronts was already underway, documented as early as 2022. Several newspapers reported on the trend of Bangladeshi travelling to Afghanistan to join the Taliban in July 2021, following the declaration of US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan²⁴. In the October-December 2022 quarterly report we provided first systematic evidence of youth migrating to Afghanistan to join TTP after the Taliban's takeover, where they sought training and frontline engagement.²⁵ Bangladeshi-run online channels openly featured posts, videos, and ideological justifications for this participation. This marked the start of a pipeline from Bangladesh to South Asia's active conflict zones.



Figure 01: Screenshot of Facebook post glorifying the death of Faisal Hossain (Facebook account name: M A Ibn Taymiyyah) while fighting for TTP

²³ The Dissent. “Another Bangladeshi Fighting for TTP Was Killed in Pakistan.” The Dissent. September 28, 2025. <https://thedissent.news/bn/current-affairs/another-bangladeshi-fighting-for-ttp-was-killed-in-pakistan>

²⁴ bdnews24.com. “New Breed of Bangladeshi Mujahideen – Young Men Abandon Home to Join Afghan Militants.” *bdnews24.com*, May 12, 2021. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/new-breed-of-bangladeshi-mujahideen-young-men-abandon-home-to-join-afghan-militants>

²⁵ SecDev, *Bangladesh Violent Extremism Monitor Oct-Dec 2022*, p. 231, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/2023-01-27+Bangladesh+Violent+Extremism+Monitor+2022+Oct-Dec_Final.pdf.

By 2023, this trend had become structured in digital spaces, even as denial persisted at home. Our 2023 annual report tracked recruitment pipelines linking Bangladeshi radicalization to TTP, including users openly discussing travel routes, sharing logistical guidance, and framing the TTP as a legitimate Islamic alternative to secular governance.²⁶ Footage of training and weapons circulated online, confirming that Bangladeshi youth were not only aspiring to fight abroad but actively doing so.²⁷ Yet, because domestic counterterrorism was discredited through abusive practices, these signals failed to break into mainstream awareness.

Digital ecosystems enabled this quiet but significant outward flow, while the narrative of denial at home obscured it. Extremist channels on Telegram and other platforms provided both propaganda and step-by-step instructions for reaching the Afghan–Pakistan border.²⁸ This operational guidance was explicit, but within Bangladesh the Jongi Natok (Militant Drama) frame led many to dismiss the possibility of any genuine militant pipeline. The result was a widening gap between reality and perception: while Bangladeshi fighters were joining transnational jihad, the public remained convinced that militancy itself was a fabrication.

The dual strategy of extremist groups exploited this environment. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) argued that Bangladesh was “not yet conducive to a large-scale, armed uprising,” and thus focused domestically on ideological capture while encouraging foreign fighting abroad.²⁹ This strategy allowed extremists to build legitimacy and solidarity within Bangladesh through soft radicalization, while simultaneously contributing fighters to active theatres in Afghanistan and Pakistan.



Figure 02: Screenshot of a Facebook post from a Bangladeshi TTP fighter Tareq Hossain Mozumder. SecDev has been tracking this Facebook ID since 2022. At the right the screenshot of a video from the same person reveals his face when he was attending a live Facebook session to attract more fighters from Bangladesh.

26 SecDev, *Annual Report 2023* https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/Atticus_Yearly_report.2023.pdf.

27 Ibid

28 SecDev, *Monthly Report July 2025*, https://www.secdev.com/KironReports/KIRON_MonthlyReport_July2025.pdf.

29 SecDev, *Quarterly Report Jan–Mar 2023*, https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/Atticus_Quarterly_Jan-Mar23.pdf.

Unified Ecosystem: Domestic AQIS Sympathizers and the TTP Recruitment Pipeline

A unified ecosystem operates in Bangladesh's digital spaces, serving the dual purpose of domestic soft-radicalization and the recruitment of fighters for transnational groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This network, heavily influenced by Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Afghan Taliban, leverages plausible deniability to normalize extremist ideologies while evading direct confrontation with security agencies. Actors within this ecosystem, such as those associated with Intifada Bangladesh, spread coded sermons, moral-policing themes, and anti-state narratives without explicitly claiming allegiance to designated terrorist groups. This subtle approach, characterized by veiled language and a focus on issues like anti-transgender campaigns or opposition to secular values, allows extremist attitudes and behaviors to penetrate mainstream discourse under the radar of law enforcement, creating a fertile ground for radicalization.

On 7 March 2023, Tamim Al Adhni published a video titled কাবায়েলি অঞ্চলের জিহাদ ও পাকিস্তান রাষ্ট্রের বাস্তবতা where he glorified TTP's fight against Pakistan. The same video started appearing again after the news of Bangladeshis being killed on the Afghan border emerged in 2025.

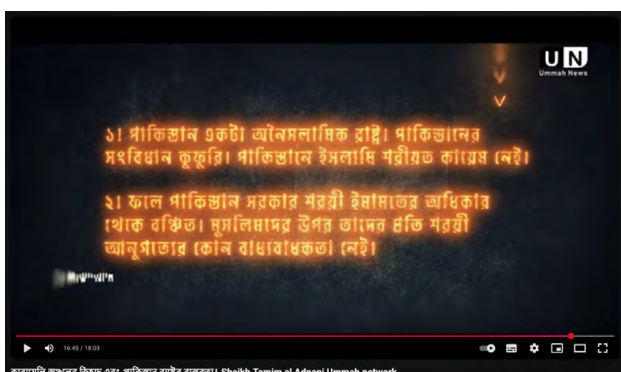


Figure 03: The AQIS video glorifying the TTP illustrates how denial at home and jihad abroad operate as two faces of the same extremist strategy. By framing Pakistan's state as illegitimate and the TTP as heirs to a historic anti-colonial struggle, the message reinforces the notion that "real jihad" lies outside Bangladesh. This allows domestic sympathizers to promote the Jongi Natok (Militant Drama) narrative and claim there are "no militants" locally, while using the same ecosystem to channel recruits toward Afghan-Pakistan battlefields. The effect is a dual-purpose infrastructure: plausible deniability shields extremist actors inside Bangladesh, while glorification of the TTP builds prestige for those who fight abroad. As with the earlier generation of Afghan returnees who seeded HuJI-B in the 1990s, this dynamic carries direct risks of spillover when fighters eventually return—only now magnified by digital networks that extend recruitment and propaganda to millions.

Network Analysis of AQIS's Facebook Ecosystem

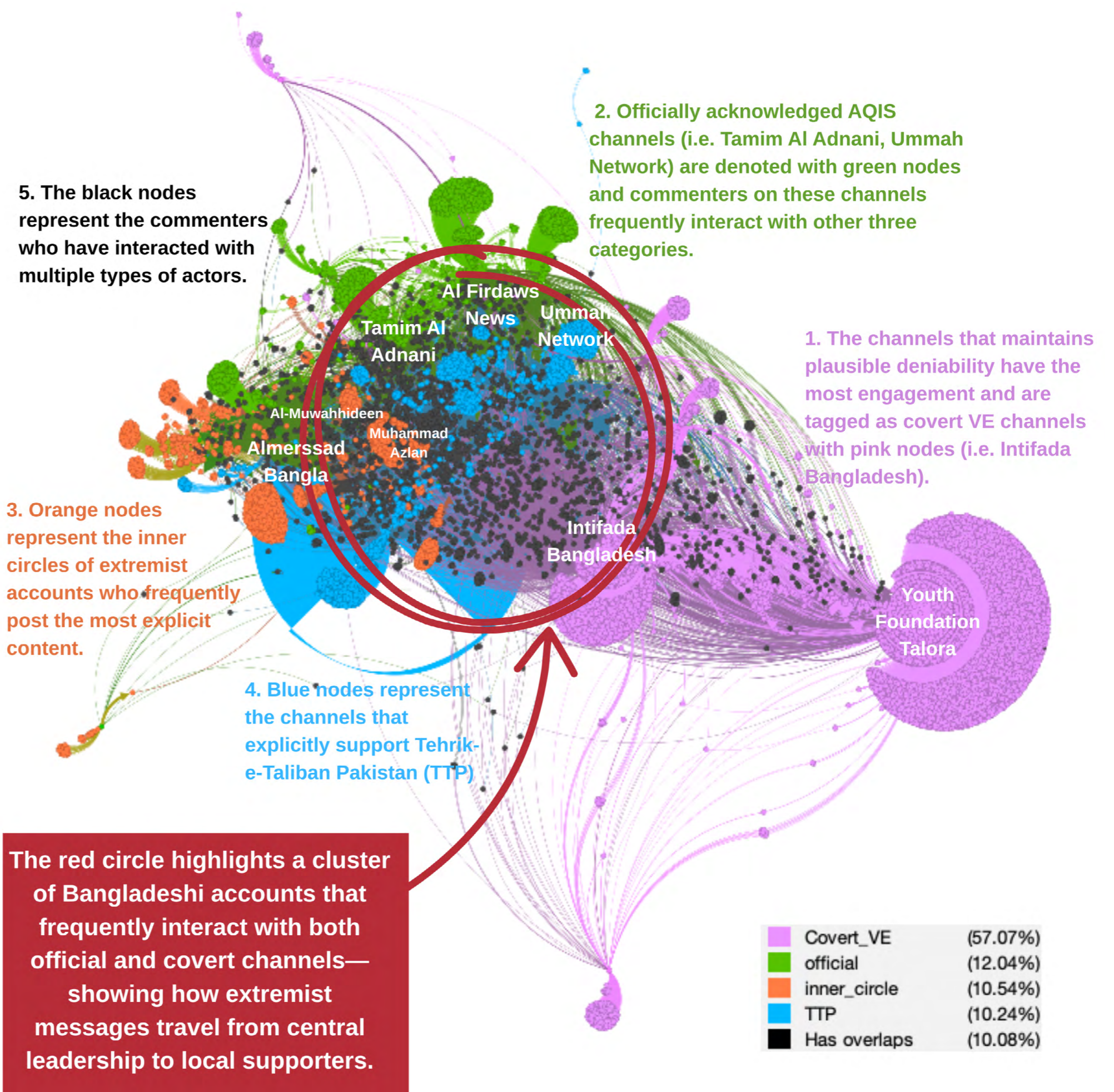
The network visualization maps commenters who engaged with posts from different categories of accounts linked to extremist or extremist-adjacent ecosystems. The graph was prepared based on 27,069 unique commenters on Facebook who commented on posts from 20 Facebook channels within the VE network. Each node represents a commenter; each edge connects individuals who commented on the same post or within the same account category. The structure thus reveals how audiences cluster around distinct but overlapping ideological spaces.

The network graph shows connection between the followers of four groups within VE digital ecosystem on Facebook: covert AQ sympathizer channels (category 1, denoted by pink nodes), officially declared AQ channels (category 2, denoted by green nodes), inner circle of online VE online accounts that openly declared their support to AQ (category 3, denoted by orange nodes), TTP channels (category 4, denoted by blue nodes).

Both the content creators and commenters are denoted by the same color. The black nodes show the commenters who interact with multiple categories above and they make up almost ten percent.

Category 1 channels include channels operated by newly formed Intifada Bangladesh, its ideologues and bit-sized news channels run by the same group of people (i.e. Youth Foundation Talora). This network has many unsuspecting followers unaware of the channels' support towards Al Qaeda who are then gradually drawn towards the more explicit channel networks. So the covert channels normalize the ideas and prime the audience for further radicalization.

The VE ecosystem network diagram gives a glimpse of various layers of Al-Qaeda's official channels and supporter channels on Facebook, showing which accounts spread propaganda and which amplify it.



Cluster-Level Analysis

1. Covert VE (57%)

This dominant cluster represents public-facing actors who engage with accounts deploying coded extremist narratives while maintaining plausible deniability. Their content often appears in religious, religio-nationalist, or moral terms, attracting mainstream and conservative commenters. The cluster's density shows a high degree of intra-group reinforcement, with limited but strategic connections to Official and Inner_circle spaces. Functionally, it serves as the ideological funnel through which users are socialized into adjacent extremist discourses.

2. Official (12%)

These commenters interact with formally branded or media-linked extremist accounts. Their position near Covert_VE indicates partial audience overlap: users drawn through deniable channels may gradually engage with more explicit organizational narratives. This cluster acts as a transitional audience, stabilizing and legitimizing the ideological shift from covert sympathy to explicit support.

3. Inner circle (11%)

Composed of high-frequency, ideologically consistent commenters, this group reinforces cohesion and maintains thematic continuity across threads. Its connective placement between Covert_VE and Official clusters suggests a maintenance function—aligning tone and narrative while policing internal discourse boundaries.

4. TTP (10%)

This group corresponds to commenters engaging with overtly militant content with high volume of TTP-linked content. Some of the accounts frequently post videos and photos from the battlefield on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Its compact structure and limited external ties mark it as a loyalist audience enclave. Interaction with Covert_VE accounts suggests selective bridging—likely where militant rhetoric is reframed in moral or justice-oriented language for broader appeal.

5. Overlaps (10%)

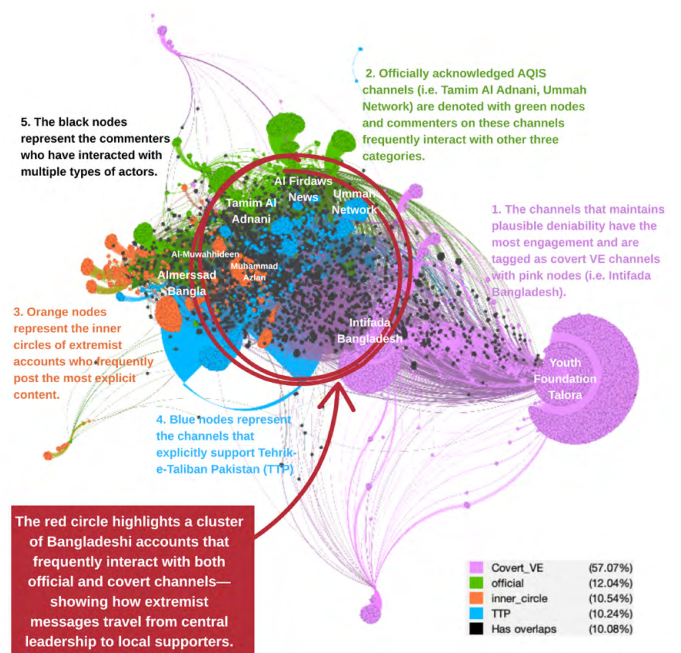
This cluster contains cross-engaged commenters active across multiple account types. Their behavioral signature indicates they are narrative carriers—users who facilitate the transfer of discourse between covert and overt ecosystems. Their engagement bridges otherwise distinct communities, sustaining ideological continuity and enabling mainstream exposure to extremist framings.

Strategic Interpretation

The network's structure illustrates that extremist engagement operates through a layered social architecture rather than direct organizational communication. The Covert_VE community supplies reach and deniability; Inner_circle enforces narrative coherence; Official channels maintain ideological reference points; and Overlaps ensures continuity and diffusion across boundaries.

Together, they form a resilient ecosystem of influence, where the most consequential activity occurs not at the militant margins but within the socially acceptable middle — the space where extremist thought becomes mainstreamed through repetition, engagement, and normalization.

These same channels, which foster domestic extremist normalization, also actively facilitate outward jihad. From late 2022 onward, Bangladeshi-run accounts have posted training videos, travel guidance, and open calls to join armed groups like TTP on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This content, often featuring individuals flaunting firearms and offering advice on migration, appears alongside AQIS framing that ties the network together. Anti-India grievances, proxy-state tropes, and praise for TTP are used to justify fighting abroad, while narratives may implicitly suggest that Bangladesh is not yet ready for a full-scale uprising. This strategic messaging, reinforced by the glorification of TTP and the Taliban as successful anti-state actors, ensures that the network's plausible public posture effectively shields its covert work of mobilizing fighters for conflicts elsewhere, necessitating countermeasures that address both the domestic and transnational fronts simultaneously.



What Afghan-Trained Returnees Would Mean for Bangladesh

If Afghan-trained Bangladeshi fighters return and begin training locals, Bangladesh faces the risk of repeating the 1990s—when Afghan war veterans seeded Harkat-ul-Jihad Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and escalated domestic terrorism—only with greater speed due to today’s digital ecosystems and the ongoing legitimacy crisis in counterterrorism. HuJI-B was established in 1992 by Bangladeshi veterans of the Soviet–Afghan war, including Mufti Abdul Hannan, who went on to mastermind major attacks such as the 2001 Ramna Batamul bombing and the 2004 attempt on the British High Commissioner.³⁰ This precedent demonstrates how combat-hardened veterans can transform isolated sympathies into organized networks with operational capability.

Returnees bring three force multipliers: battlefield skills, social legitimacy, and transnational links. Research on foreign fighter trajectories shows that returnees transfer advanced training in small arms and explosives, impart discipline and tradecraft, and re-establish ties to global jihadist networks. In Bangladesh, these multipliers would accelerate the transition from online agitation to operational cells, particularly within a public sphere where counterterrorism already lacks legitimacy due to years of abuse.

The pipeline from Bangladesh to Afghan and Pakistani theatres mirrors the HuJI-B arc, but now operates in a digitally amplified and more permissive environment. Fighters moving abroad today are embedded in a vastly larger online ecosystem—encrypted messaging, global fundraising, and propaganda channels with millions of subscriptions—allowing them to reinsert themselves into Bangladesh’s extremist networks with unprecedented speed and reach. This means a handful of returnees could reconstitute capacities that once took years to build.

³⁰ Ali Riaz, *God Willing: The Politics of Islamism in Bangladesh* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). International Crisis Group, *Bangladesh: Militancy, Violence and Politics*, Asia Report No. 121, October 1, 2006.

Strategic Implications and Outlook

The convergence of politicized counterterrorism, the widespread “Jongi Natok” narrative, and the strategic adaptation of extremist groups signals a profound transformation in Bangladesh’s security landscape with significant implications for its future stability. The success of extremist narratives in eroding public trust establishes a dangerous precedent that could be replicated in other transitional environments globally.

As Bangladesh navigates its political future, the established patterns of counterterrorism abuse and the resulting trust deficit will almost certainly intensify, creating optimal conditions for accelerated extremist normalization. The continued weaponization of security concerns and the institutionalization of fear will likely deepen public mistrust, making it increasingly difficult to counter genuine threats.

The demonstrated ability of extremist groups to pivot to long-term digital radicalization establishes a template for future influence operations. We can expect a sustained effort to exploit social media and cultural debates, leading to further polarization and an expanded base of sympathetic supporters. This digital adaptation will require comprehensive and proactive strategies to counter disinformation and protect communities from radicalization.

The documented recruitment of Bangladeshi youth into transnational jihadist groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) poses escalating risks. This outward flow, combined with the potential return of Afghan-trained fighters, threatens to accelerate the transition from online agitation to operational militancy. These returnees bring not only battlefield skills but also enhanced social legitimacy and transnational connections, which, in a digitally amplified and trust-deficient environment, could rapidly reconstitute and expand extremist capabilities.

Most critically, the erosion of trust in state institutions and the suppression of dissenting voices undermine civil society’s capacity for self-correction. Without decisive intervention to rebuild institutional credibility, protect counter-extremist voices, and counter sophisticated narrative manipulation, Bangladesh risks witnessing extremist ideologies achieve unprecedented legitimacy, while maintaining operational capabilities for violence.

The convergence of these factors threatens to transform Bangladesh’s security landscape into a multi-dimensional crisis where the very foundations of stability are challenged. This scenario would represent not merely a failure of counterterrorism policy but a fundamental subversion of societal cohesion that could provide a replicable model for extremist exploitation of vulnerable nations worldwide.

Decision-makers must urgently recognize that focusing solely on immediate security threats obscures the more systematic, long-term challenge posed by the deep-seated legitimacy crisis and the patient infiltration strategies of extremist groups. An effective response requires comprehensive approaches that address both immediate security concerns and underlying institutional credibility deficits that enable extremist exploitation, while simultaneously empowering and protecting the civil society voices capable of exposing and resisting extremist manipulation from within affected communities.



Kiron AI is SecDev's specialized platform that converts on-the-ground expertise into clear, actionable insights. The system draws from our extensive monitoring network covering Bangladesh's digital threats, extremist activities, and security developments to provide the detailed context that professionals need.

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