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## In Focus

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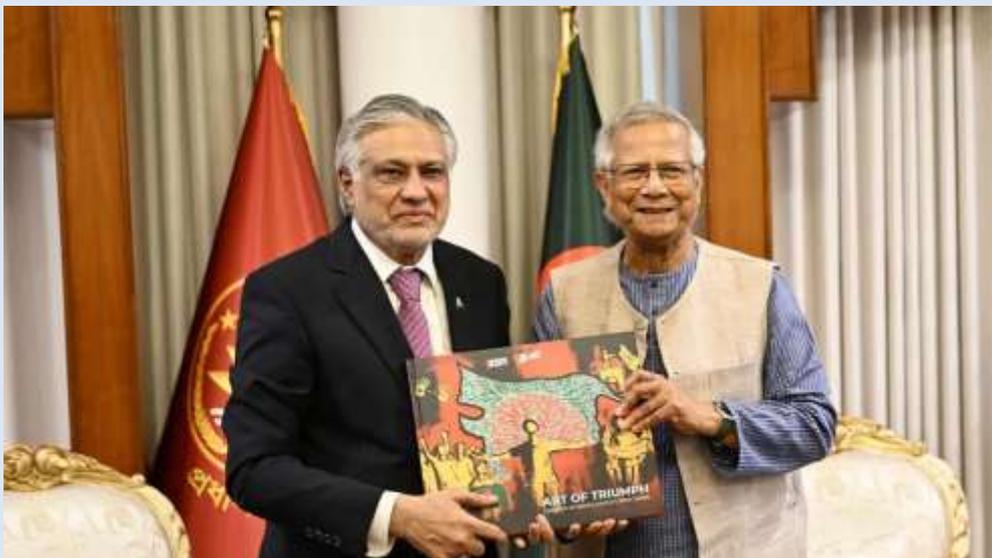
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## Islamist Extremism in Bangladesh Resurges Amid Renewed Ties with Pakistan

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## Introduction

In July 2025, Bangladesh's Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) arrested a man named Shamin Mahfuz over his alleged ties with the *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP).<sup>1</sup> Earlier that month, the ATU had also detained another individual based on similar intelligence linking him to the TTP. Concurrently, related developments were unfolding in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

In late April, a security operation in North Waziristan led to the killing of over 50 terrorists, among whom was a Bangladeshi national named Ahmed Zobaer.<sup>3</sup> In May, a Bangladeshi digital outlet, *The Dissent*, reported that Zobaer was a member of the TTP, while further noting that approximately eight Bangladeshi nationals are presently active within the group in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent arrest of 36 Bangladeshis in Malaysia in June 2025, due to alleged connections with the Islamic State (IS), further highlights the extent to which extremist ideologies have permeated Bangladeshi society.<sup>5</sup>

## The Islamist Resurgence

Although Bangladesh has occasionally flirted with Islamist extremism in the past, the current wave of radicalisation is arguably an upshot of the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. Since then, numerous reports have surfaced on fundamentalist Islamist forces finding a groundswell of support. Organisations such as *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB) and Al-Qaeda-affiliated/inspired outfits, including the *Ansarullah Bangla Team* (ABT) and *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami-Bangladesh* (HuJI-B), have since enhanced their activities.<sup>6</sup> The release of ABT chief Jashimuddin Rahmani by the interim government in the same month as Hasina's removal, along with the subsequent freeing of others accused of extremist activities, bear witness to this trend.<sup>7</sup>

Coupled with the revival of a motley of militant groups, the *Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami* (Jel) and *Hefazat-e-Islam* (HeI) are once again active in the nation's polity. Most recently, on June 01, 2025, Bangladesh's Supreme Court reinstated Jel's party registration, clearing the path for the country's largest Islamist party to contest the elections set to take place next year.<sup>8</sup> Jel's political party status was revoked by a High Court in 2013, with the Election Commission subsequently scrapping its registration in 2018 ahead of the 11<sup>th</sup> national elections.<sup>9</sup> The reversal in its fortunes happened shortly after the Muhammad Yunus-led interim government took charge following Hasina's deposition. It lifted the ban on Jamaat and its student wing, *Islami Chhatra Shibir* (ICS), which was imposed by Hasina, under an anti-terrorism law, a few days before she was forced to resign.<sup>10</sup>

These developments underscore that either the hardline Islamist forces have Yunus' blessing to consolidate power or are benefiting from the interim government's obliviousness to the radicalisation taking root. Long hailed as a poster child for development and poised to graduate the UN's Least Developed Countries list by November 2026, Bangladesh now stands at a critical turning point – one that threatens to reverse years of progress. To be sure, although Hasina had successfully clamped down on anti-India groups and had kept Islamist groups at bay, she had engaged with them conveniently to cement her power. Hasina's appeasement policy vis-à-vis the Hel is a case in point, with the latter giving her the moniker "Mother of Qawmi."<sup>11</sup>

### **Bangladesh-Pakistan Rapprochement**

It is in this context that the thaw between Dhaka and Islamabad, whose relations had remained in the deep freeze under the Hasina-led Awami League government, gains particular importance when discussing the burgeoning Islamist radicalisation in Bangladesh. Historically, Jel has been bankrolled by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Its image also remains indelibly tied to its collaboration with Pakistan during Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War. From once being a key ally of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to seeing several of its members executed under the Hasina-established International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) due to their role in the 1971 atrocities, Jel has experienced the full spectrum of Bangladesh's revenge politics.

Remarkably, Pakistan and Bangladesh are developing ties across various sectors. The foreign secretary and foreign minister of Pakistan visited Bangladesh in April and August 2025, respectively; Yunus and the Pakistani Prime Minister have met twice; direct trade has resumed for the first time since 1971; travel restrictions have eased, and even a high-level military delegation from Bangladesh visited Pakistan in January 2025. This perceptible rapprochement coincides with rising Islamist radicalisation in Bangladesh, stoking concerns in New Delhi that the Pakistani establishment could revive its strategy of encouraging Islamic identity in Bangladesh's politics. For this purpose, Pakistan may seek to deepen its ties with the BNP and Jamaat, both of which have shown a predilection for aligning with Islamabad, as seen during their coalition government from 2001 to 2006. Pakistan is also likely to play up its shared Islamic heritage with Bangladesh to frame the two as natural allies who stand in stark contrast to a 'Hindu India'. The downstream effect of this, perhaps, is that Pakistan-based terror groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), may connect with Bangladesh-based Islamist and anti-India groups.<sup>12</sup>

This, however, could be a double-edged sword for both Pakistan and Bangladesh. Once hardline Islamist beliefs and groups are nurtured in a society, their ambitions, at times, supersede their core purpose. Repercussions are often unpredictable and transboundary in nature. Pakistan continues to bear the brunt of this strategy, most visibly in its support for the Afghan Taliban's return

to power, which ultimately emboldened their counterpart in Pakistan. In a similar vein, the very extremist ideologies that Pakistan might try to cultivate in Bangladesh could potentially backfire – as already illustrated by Bangladeshi nationals joining the TTP, which remains an anti-Pakistan outfit for all practical purposes. Further, individuals driven by Islamist extremism frequently segue from one group to another, aligning themselves with whichever group offers the most benefits, financial or otherwise. Moreover, these groups typically share the same objective of enforcing an Islamic administration. That Shamin Mahfuz was found to have links with an array of fundamentalist Islamist organisations, including the JMB and ICS, vindicates this.<sup>13</sup> This is not a new phenomenon. Many JMB leaders in the past have been linked to the Bangladesh Jamaat's student wing, with some observing that JMB draws its ideological and political support from the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Here, it needs to be noted that in the aftermath of the Holey Artisan Cafe attack in 2016, Bangladesh authorities had made strides in countering extremist ideas and neutralising terrorist cells, particularly those linked to the IS. In recent years, however, warnings have surfaced about the IS regrouping. The ongoing political vacuum in Bangladesh only makes this risk more plausible than ever, as Islamist groups would seek to exploit the uncertainty by projecting an alternative system of governance based on sharia.

More broadly, developments in Bangladesh must also be analysed against the backdrop of fundamentalist Islamist groups gaining a foothold across the world. The Taliban's return to Kabul in August 2021 served as a template, while Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS; former ties to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State) taking over Syria in December 2024 provided a further boost to jihadist forces. While the TTP has rescinded its transnational agenda to focus on Pakistan, its recruitment is not solely local. The TTP's leveraging of digital platforms to indoctrinate and recruit disgruntled youth globally indicates that its recruitment process is, to an extent, transnational. In 2023, for instance, a Bangladeshi citizen was arrested in Italy for being a TTP member and for inciting terrorism and intolerance toward other communities online.<sup>15</sup> So, if not transnational in scope, the TTP is opportunistic and adaptive in character – traits typical of other violent extremist groups as well.

As such, Bangladesh's social media landscape has seen an increase in extremist content, leading to radical preachers seeing a rise in their following.<sup>16</sup> Recruitment efforts by Islamist forces, then, naturally get undergirded by the general atmosphere supportive of religious extremism, with the internet playing a key role, facilitating exposure to radical ideologies. Domestically, political turmoil and the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh could provide Islamist militant groups with a fresh pool of recruits. Internationally, ongoing tensions in the Middle East, especially the crisis in Gaza, along with perceived Muslim persecution worldwide, may further radicalise susceptible individuals in Bangladesh.

The Yunus-led administration, then, has a tall order to fulfil until an elected government takes charge. To stem the tide of Islamic extremism, restoring law and order is the first step. But the morale of law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, is in a state of erosion. So is the public trust in them, owing to their excessive use of force to contain the mass protests last year that eventually toppled Hasina. Boosting their morale and adequately equipping them is crucial to rebuilding the country's counterterrorism infrastructure.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the interim government must avoid misusing anti-terrorism laws to stifle opposition (the Awami League and its student wing are banned under the Anti-Terrorism Act), as such actions are not only reminiscent of Hasina's policies but also risk undermining the credibility of laws in its fight against extremism.

Although the interim government has professed a zero-tolerance policy towards all extremist groups,<sup>18</sup> it has also retained individuals from hardline Islamist organisations as advisors. It remains to be seen whether the actions of this administration will align with its stated commitments. Until then, any further increase in radicalisation in Bangladesh would presage instability for the South Asian region, in particular India, which has long grappled with related security concerns.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Aklakur Rahman Akash, "Another held over alleged links to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," *The Daily Star*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/another-held-over-alleged-links-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan-3940316>. Accessed on August 15, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmede Hussain, "Bangladeshi nationals are joining terrorist ranks. Bigger problem is the culture of denial," *The Print*, May 19, 2025, <https://theprint.in/opinion/islamic-terrorism-in-bangladesh-ttp-isis-recruitment/2630196/>. Accessed on August 15, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "36 Bangladeshis held in Malaysia over alleged militant ties," *Prothom Alo English*, June 27, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/bangladesh-in-world-media/m1qpyqdy9i>. Accessed on August 15, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Kanchan Lakshman, "The upsurge of radical and fundamentalist Islamic elements in Bangladesh," Observer Research Foundation, March 24, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-upsurge-of-radical-and-fundamentalist-islamic-elements-in-bangladesh>. Accessed on August 10, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Bangladesh's Supreme Court restores Jamaat-e-Islami's party registration," *The Hindu*, June 01, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/bangladeshs-supreme-court-restores-jamaat-e-islamias-party-registration/article69645620.ece>. Accessed on August 16, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> "EC Registration: SC verdict on Jamaat's appeal today," *The Daily Star*, June 01, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/ec-registration-sc-verdict-jamaats-appeal-today-3907761>. Accessed on August 16, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> "Bangladesh's interim government lifts ban on Jamaat-e-Islami party," *Al Jazeera*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/28/bangladeshs-interim-government-lifts-ban-on-jamaat-e-islami-party>. Accessed on August 16, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> "PM Sheikh Hasina branded as 'Mother of Qawmi'" *Dhaka Tribune*, November 04, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/160091/pm-sheikh-hasina-branded-as-%E2%80%98mother-of-qawmi%E2%80%99>. Accessed on August 16, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Lakshman, n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Akash, n. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Cochrane, "The Funding Methods of Bangladeshi Terrorist Groups," *CTC Sentinel*, May 2009, Volume 2, Issue 5, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-funding-methods-of-bangladeshi-terrorist-groups/>. Accessed on August 18, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> "Bangladeshi arrested in Italy on suspicion of Al-Qaeda links," *The Daily Star*, November 04, 2023, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/europe/news/bangladeshi-arrested-italy-suspicion-al-qaeda-links-3460881>. Accessed on August 20, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Iftekharul Bashar, "The Rise of Radicalism in Bangladesh: What Needs to Be Done," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, December 23, 2024, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/the-rise-of-radicalism-in-bangladesh-what-needs-to-be-done/>. Accessed on August 22, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "No plan to lift ban on extremist groups," *The Daily Star*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/no-plan-lift-ban-extremist-groups-3737936>. Accessed on August 22, 2025.