Violent Extremism in Bangladesh: Analysing the Interplay Between Online and Offline Worlds
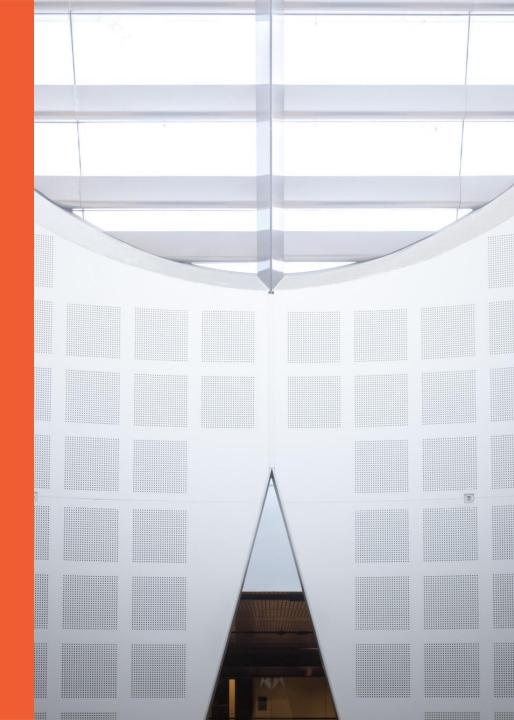
Presented by

Saimum Parvez

Doctoral Candidate

Govt. and IR

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

RQs:

How do online and offline interactions influence an individual towards violent extremism in Bangladesh?

How do the online and offline contents produced by the violent extremists in Bangladesh construct the narrative that justifies violent Jihad?

Holey Artisan Attack

Twenty people, most of them foreigners, have been killed in an attack on a cafe in Bangladesh by Islamic State. Most of the suspected Holey Artisan attackers were from well-off families and attended English medium private institutions.

NIBRAS ISLAM
- Turkish Hope School
- Monash University
- A soccer player, music fan
- 22 years old

Holey Artisan Attack

ROHAN IMTIAZ
- Scholastica School
- Monash University
- Son of a ruling party leader

Najibullah Ansari

The Daily Star

12:00 AM, July 21, 2016 / LAST MODIFIED: 02:59 AM, July 21, 2016

A marine engr, he 'left for Iraq to join IS'

- Although militant groups have been present in Bangladesh since the 1990s and the country experienced a serious surge in attacks in 2005-6, the situation began to take a turn for the worst in mid-2013.

- Various transnational terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), claimed responsibility for ghastly attacks upon religious and ethnic minorities, foreigners, liberal activists, authors and publishers.

- The attack on 1 July, 2016 by a group of youths connected to the IS on a café in the upscale neighbourhood of the capital Dhaka sent a shockwave through the country and drew international attention.

- Very few evidence-based discussions about who are these violent extremists and what is driving Bangladeshis to militancy. The profile of the 1 July attackers sent a shockwave through the middle class as it shattered the long-held (mis)perception that violent extremists are produced by religious educational institutions, namely madrasas, and they tend to come from poor families. The café attackers came mostly from upper middle-class families who were taught in 'secular' educational institutions; some of them received education from outside the country too.

- Press reports suggest that at least 20 militant organizations are active inside the country.

› Some studies examines single variable, such as "individual /collective responses against occupation of the homeland", "social networks", "quest for significance", and "relative deprivation", and "displaced identity"; others proposed multiple factors which were likely to increase individuals' propensity to violent extremism. Many terrorism studies also argue that the Internet play a significant role as a driver of radicalization. Some scholars contend that violent extremism is a process..

› John Horgan: Involving in terrorism is a process:

- Three stages- 1) Involvement 2) Engagement 3) Disengagement

› This proposition is significant because it highlights how radicalization process is non-linear, multivariate, and contextualized.

› This study draws data from the daily and on-line newspaper reports published in Bangladesh between July 2014 and August 2017, with a particular emphasis on the interviews of their families and friends, and the confession statements of the alleged extremists during the interrogations by the law enforcement agencies, some important parts of which were later published in the press.

› Altogether, I analysed 127 news reports and found data on the profiles of 112 alleged extremists. We have also conducted an in-depth analysis on 38 alleged extremists. It brings a sample of 150 extremists, which is commendable considering the dearth of empirical studies that dealt with militant profiles globally.

› Tabular analysis of the socio-demographic traits and content analysis of 38 Extremists

› Analysed 10 contents (2 leaflets, 3 videos, 3 audio sermons and 2 issues of online magazines) for their narratives.

Table 1: Age of the Alleged Violent Extremists

n= 81		
Age Groups	Number of suspected Extremists	Percentage
Below 18	1	1.2%
18-30	52	65%
31-40	23	28.39%
above 41	5	6.17%

Table 2: Occupations of the Alleged Violent Extremists

n= 65		
Occupations	Number of alleged Extremists	Percentage
Students	21	32%
Manual Jobs	13	20%
Business men	09	14.5%
Engineers	09	14.5%
Teachers	05	7.6%
Imams	03	4.6%
IT experts	02	3%
Others	03	4.6%

Table 3: Organizations of the Alleged Violent Extremists

n= 104		
Organizations	Number of alleged Extremists	Percentage
JMB	25	24%
IS	22	21%
SHB	19	18%
ABT	14	13%
HuJI	13	12%
BJG	11	10%

› "Social bonds play a more important role in the emergence of global Salafi jihad than ideology". Sageman *Leaderless Jihad*, 178

› Among the 38 Extremists, we find data regarding social relations on 22 extremists, eight of them were radicalized by friends or peers, two by teachers, seven by family members, and five by influential figures.

› The types of social relations that contributed to their radicalization varies from relatives, teachers, private tutors, and friends to influential religious leaders.

› Among the 22 Extremists, friends or peers seem to be most important actors in radicalization, as they influenced eight individuals.

› The second most important type of relationship is **family**; seven extremists were radicalized by either their spouses, parents, or siblings. For example, one family, comprised of parents, their two daughters, and one son-in-law went missing and reportedly joined IS in Syria. The father was a doctor working at a hospital at Dhaka and the mother was a professor at a college in a Southern district of Bangladesh. One of the two daughters were married. The daughter and son-in-law both were students at a private university in Dhaka. The youngest daughter was a higher secondary level student studying at one of the renowned colleges in Dhaka. According to the news reports, the doctor reportedly is serving at an IS-controlled health facility in Syria. It is not clear who, among these five family members, played the crucial role to radicalize others. However, it shows how one or more family members could draw others into the slippery path of violent extremism.

- Among the **38 i**ndividuals, I have gathered evidence that **25** used digital media, notably Facebook, Twitter, Wickr, Telegram and financial transfer applications. However, this rate could be even higher because the missing data does not confirm that rest of the 13 individuals were not the users of the internet.

- It is not clear if the extremist was mainly radicalized by the exposure towards online content. The process can work both ways. Online content may radicalize someone or he could be radicalized offline and the online content further reinforced his extreme views.

- Cases:

  - Several Holey artisan attackers were avid users of Facebook and Twitter. They used to follow IS propagandist handles on Twitter. Two key planners of the **Holey Artisan attack**, one based in Japan and another in Canada, both relied on the internet besides traditional social relations to contact, motivate, plan, and implement the attack. Even during the attack, the assailants reportedly used internet-based apps to keep their masterminds updated. Besides, in the **Kallyanpur gunfight**, when Extremists were surrounded by law enforcers and were getting prepared to fight back, they recorded audio-video clips and took photos and sent those to several destinations using the Internet. Even when they knew that probably they were going to die, they did not forget to exploit the benefits of the internet. They disseminated their ideologies and were able to reach a large audience during that nerve-racking situation.

- **Exposure** to online militant outlets worked as a first-step towards the path of extremism. For example, a 23 year old arrested militant, who was involved in the Holey Artisan attack, became radicalized by watching the videos of speeches of ABT's spiritual leader Jasimuddin Rahmani and Al Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki. Later, when he has decided to participate in "Jihad", he contacted a student of Rajshahi University who helped him to join the organization.

- In another case, one Bangladeshi female who went to Melbourne to study was reportedly radicalised by watching videos and attacked her landlord. Police also claimed that the attacker of Prof. Zafar Iqbal, a prominent writer, was also self-radicalised by internet sermons and videos.

- Another **confession statement** of a militant helps us to understand how the use of the Internet plays an important role in several stages of violent extremism; starting from generating an interest in violent extremism, sensitizing, and recruiting, to communicating after turning into a violent extremist. The militant under study joined a Facebook group, which posed as a seemingly innocent Islamic learning forum. A Bangladeshi expatriate based in Japan was the administrator of the group. One of the group members, who was a computer engineer with a degree from a Malaysian university, followed the militant on Facebook and understanding his interest, contacted him. Later, they met in person.

› IS's director of computer operations (killed in a US drone strike in Syria), one of the top ten leaders of the Islamic State and head of the organization's IT and Cyber division , was Bangladeshi. Before his death, he sent money to his father and younger brother for transferring it to an Islamist extremist organization in Bangladesh.

› He used his IT company for transferring money. According to FBI, also sent money to a militant in the USA.

› As one of his brothers moved to Spain, it is also suspected by law enforcement agencies that his brother might be responsible for financing the terror attack in Barcelona. Bangladeshi Counterterrorism unit CTTC has sent a letter to its Spanish counterpart via Interpol requesting arrest of the brother for his suspected involvement in terror financing.

› Findings show that the violent extremists use the Internet for various purposes; communicating, propagandizing, planning, and financing. I also find evidence that the Internet plays an important role in several stages, both in involvement and engagement phases.

› Involvement + Restrengthening   Engagement + Restrengthening

- Initially, the exposure to online materials generates an interest in radical ideology

- later it sensitizes and helps individual to join extremist organizations.

- In next stage, once an individual finds like-minded people or organization, the Internet makes it easier to communicate among them.

- However, online and offline factors often act together in radicalization of a militant. We have found two cases where the violent extremists may be solely radicalized online.

	Involvement			Engagement			
	Enthusiasts	Aspirants	Active roles	Attack Participation			
				Decision and Search	'pre-terrorist'	Event Execution	Post-event
Digital Media	Reach	Re-strengthen		Attack Opportunities			
	Violence Justification Narrative (Problem-Rationale-Solution)						

› The violent extremists construct a PRS (Problem-Rationale-Solution) narrative in their contents with specific logics to justify violent jihad as a way to reach to the solutions from the existing problems. (Ingram 2016, Hafez 2007, Pape 2018)

› *"If we look at the situation of Bangladesh today, [then we see how] in this territory, governments have replaced Allah's [divine] diktats with **men-made laws**. That is why they have become taghut, they have become kafirs. And, jihad as in armed/violent qital against them has become fard-e-ain. Why did the soldiers of the caliphate attack the Artisan restaurant in Dhaka? Because we have learnt from [our] prophet SW that the **ummah is like a body** – if one part of this body gets hurt, the pain is felt all over the body. That is why when the international crusader coalition attacks Sham [Syria], Iraq and Libya [with fighter jets], killing hundreds of Muslim women, men and children, that terrible imagery agitate and hurt our mujahidin brothers. And that is why, to **avenge the blood** of their Muslim brothers and sisters , they will kill the crusaders wherever they find them. "* (IS Video: Tawsif Hossain)

*"We're the soldiers of Allah. We've taken up arms **for the implementation of Allah's law** the way Prophet, Sahabis and heroic Mujahideen have done for centuries…..If the government does not establish Islamic laws in the country after this warning and, rather, it goes to arrest any Muslim on charge of seeking Allah's laws or it resorts to repression on Alem-Ulema, the JMB would go for counteraction……Those who want to give institutional shape to **democracy are the enemies of Islam**……… if they want hedayet (blessings) of Allah, both the government and the opposition should unitedly **introduce Islamic law immediately** by burying party conflicts…….Because, democracy is the product of evil power. **Democracy is the main weapon to establish evil forces in the world.** This evil order allows the arrest of Mujahideen who are on Allah's path.'"* (JMB Leaflet)

› *"As soon as he was given the good news that **he was selected for an inghimasi operation** against the Crusaders, he immediately shouted "Allahu akbar" and fell into prostration out of happiness, thanking Allah for the great blessing and asking for acceptance. He was a very obedient and disciplined soldier……Abu Rahiq was a young man known for his piety and worship. He was always focused, busy with the dhikr of Allah. (Rohan Imtiaz: Rumaiya)*

*"He was also very brave and was known for his patience throughout the training for the operation. As he was selected for the inghimasi operation, he chose his kunyah to be "Abu Muharib" because of **his love and admiration for the mujahid brother Abu Muharib al-Muhajir, also known as "Jihadi John"** in the Crusader news and media. He wanted to slaughter the Crusaders and the apostates like his brother "Jihadi John" who terrorized the kuffar of the world with his knife, alhamdulillah. He was truthful to Allah, so Allah was truthful to him and fulfilled his noble wish of terrorizing the kuffar of the East and the West before achieving shahadah. May Allah accept him and his deeds. Amin." (Nibras Islam: Rumaiya)*

The Problem Construct	Rationale (Justification of Violent Jihad as the way to reach solution from problem)	The Solution Construct
State Level (structural)	State Level Logic	State Level
The current state is taghut (anti-Islamic and an agent of Western cultural imperialism) with shirki ideology-democracy	Armed struggle or violent Jihad will oust the government and establish a 'just' state and system	Establishing a state (caliphate) that will adhere strict Islamic interpretations
Social Level	Social Logic	Social Level
Community: Muslims are facing humiliation and grievances because of their faith **Culture: Islam/Islamic culture is under threat, both globally and locally** **Culprits: The presence and influence of 'others' in society (out-group). Global and local 'others.'**	Jihad is a religious obligation to end injustice and humiliation. It is justified to attack enemies and their supporters. Enemies are not human. Victims of the Jihadi attacks deserves it. Eliminating harm and bringing benefit to community by reinforcing values Jihad will eliminate 'others', who are perpetrators, and help 'us'	End of humiliation and grievances, bringing justice Traditions restored The triumph of 'us' in society (in-group)
Individual Level	Individual Logic	Individual Level
Individuals are lacking: **Reward** **Recognition**	Jihad provides: in-group identity, promise for heaven, eliminate frustration, Certainty – in this world and after world social recognition/significance	Individuals with: in-group identity, meaning of life, brotherhood, promise for heaven, eliminate frustration, Certainty – in this world and after world Social recognition through

› Not everyone is convicted. Does not entirely represent the entire population of violent extremists.

› Data source: Difficult to obtain contents. Newspaper reports may be biased and partisan.

› Violent extremism is a process. Different region, different context, different factors. Lack of reliability.

Q&A