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**The Forms and Ecologies of Islamist militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh****By: Mohammad Azizur Rahman<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

Islamist militancy and terrorism, a major sociopolitical issue of Bangladesh today, has largely remained under-researched. This paper mainly explores the forms and ecologies of Islamist militancy and terrorism based on the content analysis of media reports and interviews with some experts in Bangladesh. Ecologies, in this paper, refer to the multiple interrelated and interdependent environments: social, political, and religious, that foster, germinate and nurture the growth of militancy and terrorism. Despite Bangladesh being globally identified as a moderate Muslim country located in South Asia, Islamist radicalization, extremism and militancy have become a major concern since the incidence of nationwide serial bomb blasts in 2005. Although an estimation of the group operatives may not be possible because these groups change names or members change groups from time to time, the presence of seventy Islamist militant outfits with thousands of militant members was identified during 1999-2010. Islamist militants carried out over 203 attacks killing 164 innocent people and injuring more than 2,658 people in this period. Using bomb explosions, these attacks targeted political parties, cultural groups, intellectuals, diplomats, movie theatres, NGO offices, and minority religious institutions. In response to these attacks, the government has adopted mostly a law-enforcement centric approach, but this study suggests a comprehensive strategy balancing enforcement, intervention and prevention urgently needed for de-radicalization and counterterrorism in Bangladesh --- the 8<sup>th</sup> most populous country and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Muslim country of the world. Although foreign journalistic and intelligence-based reports have argued that Islamist militants have links with madrassas (Islamic seminary institutions), this system has actually been in vogue for many years in the country. Research suggests that unemployment problems, poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance about religious matters among the youths are the common drivers for Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. An unfocused national educational policy on madrassas, the narrow and dated madrasa curriculum, and frustrations felt by madrasa graduates who cannot find jobs are likely to instigate the madrasa students to get involved in militancy. Political, educational, and religious interventions are must for countering radicalization effectively. Improving education policy and creating employment opportunities for the unemployed youth can begin to address the problem of Islamist militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh.

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## Introduction

Terrorism is one of the extreme forms of crime, since it involves serious violence against civilians. Since the 1990s, terrorism has become a hot topic for research because of national and transnational security concerns. Immediately after the 9/11 US attack, the international media presented Bangladesh as a new hub of terrorism after Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, Islamist militancy has become a serious law and order issue after the nationwide serial bomb blasts in August 2005 (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). Bangladesh has not been the site of any major terror attacks afterwards, and has not been listed as a terror risk country, although religious militancy has remained as a deeply rooted problem. This is evidenced by the sporadic militant attacks by Islamist outfits in the country despite the government's strict anti-terrorism position since 2006. From 2013, the media, police, government, and international actors have expressed concerns over the issue of Islamist militancy and terrorism given the rise of serious attacks on bloggers, publishers, university professors, foreigners, and members of minority religious groups. Because of these incidents, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) indicates the rise in the score from an historic low of 4.1 in 2012 to 5.47 in 2013 to 5.92 in 2014, and 'vulnerable to high terrorism risk in an early 2015 assessment (Riaz, 2016a).

The rise of Islamist militancy and terrorism in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East, and Africa was linked to various historical and politico-religious factors including the direct and indirect presence of al-Qaeda and homegrown militant groups (Millard, 2004; Abuza, 2003; Gunaratna, 2003 Hamilton-Hart, 2005; Wright-Neville, 2004). Since the 1990s, these regions have witnessed the rapid expansion of Islamic political organizations with the goal to establish an Islamic state and rule. In the post-9/11 era, the United States (US) extended the war on terrorism and has been supporting governments in these regions for counterterrorism operations. State based terrorism, killing innocent civilians in the name of war on terrorism, is associated with the problem of militancy and terrorist violence in Southeast Asian countries and has increased anger against the US and local governments (Hamilton-Hart, 2005). Religious teachings and brainwashing that deviate from mainstream Islam, radicalize and motivate people to resort to militancy and terrorism (Hamilton-Hart, 2005). Islamist groups are violent and anti-US, more activists are likely to become militants and more militants to become terrorists (Wright-Neville, 2004).

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Militancy and terrorism, terms which are often synonymously used today, are not new to either Bangladesh or other South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The words radical, extremist, militant and terrorist are used interchangeably as well (Abuza, 2003 as cited in Hamilton-Hart, 2005). There are several other terms such as insurgency, extremism and militia, which often have similar meanings or usages. Various religious, ethno-national and political rebel outfits, militant groups or insurgent groups have been operating in these countries and many of these groups are interlinked as well (Riaz, 2008; Quamruzzaman, 2010; Datta, 2007; BIPSS, 2010; Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2016; Site Intelligence Group, 2016).

Located in South Asia, Bangladesh is the 8<sup>th</sup> most populous country and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Muslim country in the world. With only 147,570 sq. km of land area, Bangladesh is home for over 160 million people (BBS, 2016). As per the 2011 population census, women constitute almost half of the population. The literacy rate is 51.8 percent (BBS, 2011). Almost half of the population is young (under age 18), and the ethnic population comprises 1.10 percent of the total population (BBS, 2011). Religion-wise, 88.8 percent of the total population is Muslim, and the rest comprises of Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists (BBS, 2012). Bangladesh has traditionally been reputed to be an inclusive, secular, and tolerant society with sustained communal harmony among Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and other communities despite being a Muslim-majority country (El-Said, & Harrigan, 2011).

Bangladesh became an independent nation state in 1971. It has a history of having being ruled for hundreds of years by foreign powers—Brahmin kings, Buddhist kings, Muslim sultans/emperors, British viceroys, and Pakistani rulers. The 1947 British Partition of India into two states (India and Pakistan) was based on religion. Indian Muslims established Pakistan in 1947 through a long socio-religious/cultural struggle against the dominant Hindu elites and British rule (Hossain, 2015). The Pakistani state was created with two territories --- West Pakistan, and East Pakistan (the present Bangladesh) detached by 2,400 km of Indian Territory. Within the framework of Islamic State of Pakistan, the Awami League (AL) fought for the regional autonomy of East Pakistan, and in response to the military crackdown of Pakistan, the people of Bangladesh engaged in a war of independence in 1971 (Hossain, 2015). Geographically, Bangladesh is the largest delta in the world created by two rivers – the

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Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides, and the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar to the south.

Bangladesh adopted its 1972 Constitution based upon four state principles --- Bengali nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy. The first president of the newly independent war-torn Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, instituted a presidential democracy. But, less than four years after independence, Bangladesh suffered a military coup and the assassination of the father and president of the nation. Military and quasi-military governments of Major Ziaur Rahman and General Hussan Mohammad Ershad, who later formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and JP (Jatiya Party) respectively, governed the country for over a decade. In 1991, Bangladesh returned to a parliamentary democracy. Two major political parties --- Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led governments over last two decades. BNP founder Ziaur Rahman's wife Khaleda Zia led the BNP and ran governments with allies of religion-based parties including JIB (Jammat-e-Islami Bangladesh) and IOJ (Islami Oikko Jote) two times from 1991-1996, and the again from 2001-2006, and the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter Sheikh Hasina led AL and formed governments with allies of left wing parties three times from 1996-2001; 2009-2014, and 2014-present. Around the 2006 national election, two parties clashed and the ruling party BNP manipulated the caretaker government (CTG) system that had served as a model for fair and free election in the country. Because of the political rivalry between these two parties, the military intervened in the nation's political affairs, and the election was delayed until 2008. The military-backed caretaker government (CTG) took place during the period of 2007-2008.

With a huge mandate, the Awami League (AL) came into power in December 2008 with an anti-militancy promise in its election manifesto. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was very serious about the issue of militancy and terrorism, and adopted a zero-tolerance policy to militancy. Due to the government's counterterrorism (CT) measures along with the political stability, Bangladesh has not witnessed any serious militant attacks during 2009-2012, until facing devastating political violence in 2013-2014. This violence was incited by two political issues: first the verdicts of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) that followed in the wake of Shahbagh Movement and was joined by a mass of people including bloggers, free thinking writers, and political activists from different progressive and secular parties; and second the

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major opposition party's demand that the 2014 national election be under the non-party caretaker government. Another political showdown in 2012 was by Hefazat-e-Islam, madrasa students and their teachers, who wanted to protect Islam from anti-Islamic policies adopted by the AL government and to protest against anti-Islamic writing by atheist bloggers and other anti-Islamic elements. Several of these political events and political violence incorporated religious elements. JIB's violence was against the ICT verdicts to war criminals. Behind the political violence around the election issue, the BNP and the JIB were involved in arson, killings and damages to properties in 2013 and 2014 to oust the government. However, the AL government handled the situation using force and political engineering which resulted in holding the election without BNP's participation (Rahman, 2015). Since 2014, the BNP has not been able to organize any strong political programs. JIB and its student wing ICS have been under the government's judicial action through the ICT to ban the JIB as a political party for its role in the liberation war in 1971.

Bangladesh has witnessed left-wing extremism and ethnic militancy since its independence in 1971. The presence of Islamist terrorist outfits and groups can be traced back to the 1990s. Islamist extremism and militant activities rose dramatically from 1999 to 2005. No Islamist militant attack was reported during 2006-2012 due to the government's hard approach and the political stability (Riaz, 2016a). But from February 2013- June 11, 2016, over 50 terror attacks took place and killed more than 50 people (Table 1). These recent militant attacks indicate the need for effective preventive approaches. Otherwise, the rise of Islamist radicalization and violent extremism can pose a serious threat to the political stability, security, and development of Bangladesh.

This paper argues that Islamic radicalization is linked to various forms and ecologies of Islamist militancy and terrorism, and law-enforcement measures alone cannot prevent Islamist militancy and extremism in Bangladesh. An integrated and comprehensive counter-radicalization strategy balancing enforcement, intervention and prevention, taking into consideration of various socioeconomic, political and cultural factors, is needed.

This paper begins with a brief description of the methods and data sources used for the study; it then presents the trends, types, and groups of Islamist militancy and terrorism, and it concludes with a discussion of the underlying issues and their implications for counter-

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radicalization associated with the threat of Islamist violent extremism and militancy in Bangladesh.

### **Methods and Data Sources**

The study mainly used content analysis of secondary sources (media reports, books, magazines, research reports and internet publications) and interviews with Bangladeshi experts. A study titled “Understanding religious militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh” was conducted by the author of this paper along with another researcher in 2010-2011 to explore the extent and nature of various Islamist militant groups and their terrorist activities, and the underlying factors of militancy, the funding sources, and the strategies and techniques used by terrorist groups in Bangladesh (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). Two widely circulated newspapers (one in Bengali, and one in English) – the Ittefaq and the Daily Star respectively – issued between 2001 and 2010 were used for content analysis. Two others - the Daily Prothom Alo (Bengali) and the New Age (English) along with other Internet sources were used to supplement the data. The same newspapers were used for updating the recent terrorist attacks in Bangladesh. Eight experts representing law enforcement practitioners, security research organizations, human rights organizations, academics and civil society members were interviewed for the study. An interview guideline was used to gather information from the respondents.

### **Trends, Types, and Actors of Islamist Militancy and Terrorism in Bangladesh**

#### **The Presence of Islamist Militancy**

Islamist radicalization, extremism, militancy, and violent political rhetoric have gained accelerated currency in Bangladesh politics in recent years. The presence of militant groups has been reported in Bangladesh since mid-1990s (BIPSS, 2010; Riaz, 2008, 2016, 2016a; Quamruzzaman, 2010; Datta, 2007; Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; BEI, 2015). The media, academics, researchers, politicians and the government have not seriously examined the

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problem of Islamist militancy and terrorism in Bangladesh before the 2000's (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011).

Since the US declared global war on terrorism after the 9/11 events, various foreign media, think tanks, and intelligence reports have expressed their international concerns claiming that Bangladesh has been becoming a regional terrorist hub linked with al-Qaeda or pro-bin Laden Jihadi terrorism that will turn it into another Afghanistan (Harrison, 2006; Vaughn, 2007; Rahman, 2004; Quamruzzaman, 2010; Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis 2009; Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2003).

The Bangladeshi governments have always denied the presence of militancy in the country, and blamed opposition parties for terrorist incidents in their respective regimes. The Awami League (AL) government (1996-2001) faced several militant attacks, and linked these attacks to the opposition Jamat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) and its student wing Islami Chatra Shibir (ICS). The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government (2001-2006) initially denied the presence of militancy, and blamed the opposition AL for terrorist incidents during its regime. But it shifted its position from denial to acceptance of the militancy problem after the 2005 nation-wide bomb blast and international pressures.

The Awami League government took a stern position against militancy and terrorism since 2009. During their two terms (2009-2014; 2014-present), they adopted a zero-tolerance policy. The recent rise of militant attacks and killings, and the political blaming of BNP and JIB for these attacks, as well as the government's denial of the presence of or links to international terror groups indicate that the rising problem of Islamist violent extremism and militancy has become a serious threat to political stability, security, and development of the country.

#### Nature of Militant Attacks

Table 1 shows the major attacks carried out by Islamist militants from 1999 to 2016 (as of June 11). After the countrywide showdown of force and strength by two Islamist militant organizations – JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), and JMJB (Jagrata Muslima Janata Bangladesh) in 2005, there were no serious terrorist incidents reported during the period between 2006 and 2012 (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; Riaz, 2016a; South Asia

Terrorism Portal, 2016). The content analysis of media reports showed that the Islamist militants carried over 203 attacks, killing 164 innocent people and injuring more than 2658 people during the period 1999-2010 (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). From 2005 to 2010, 25 terrorists were killed. The JMB alone reportedly carried out over 100 operations. These attacks mostly involved bomb and grenade explosions.

**Table: 1. Major Islamist Militant Attacks and Persons Killed (1999 – 2016)**

Year	Number of Incidents	Number of People Killed
1999	3	18
2000	1	2
2001	5	24
2002	10	27
2003	2	9
2004	9	37
2005	32	36
2006	18	03
2007	7	0
2008	6	0
2009	8	0
2010	5	3
1999-2010	92	136
2013	7	5
2015	26	30
2016	14 (June 11)	19
2013-2016	47	54
1999-2016	139	190

**Source:** Adapted from Rahman & Kashem (2011) supplemented with news reports

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Most of these militant attacks during 1999-2010 targeted the rallies of political parties (Awami League, Communist Party of Bangladesh, cultural groups (Udichi, Shatadal), cultural celebrations and fairs (New Year, fair, *jatra* (folk song), circus, international trade fair), *urs* (death anniversaries of saints), Ahmadiya mosques, churches, intellectuals, diplomats, movie theatres and NGO offices. The recent militant attacks are analogous to pre-2006 militant attacks in terms of targets including secular bloggers, writers, publishers, university professors, cultural activists, Hindu priest, Shi'ite preacher, Buddhist monk, Christian convert, Hindu businessman, LGBT magazine editor and activist, foreign-born priest, foreign nationals, and Ahmadi and Shi'ite mosques (The Prothom Alo, May 1, 2016; The Daily Star, May 22, 2016; The Daily Star, May 4, 2016; SITE Intelligence Group, 2016). In very recent times militants targeted and killed opponents clandestinely using knives, guns and sharp weapons (stabbing and hacking to death). In 2015, one militant committed a suicide attack in a mosque.

### **Number of Militant Organizations**

The exact number of militant groups or outfits in Bangladesh cannot be ascertained. According to an expert interviewee, this estimation is difficult because of the numerous definitions of terrorism. A key informant we interviewed pointed to a list including 112 militant groups while another list included 125 from another source (Table 2). Many of these outfits frequently change names or reorganize under different names (Table 3). Because of this here cannot be any reliable or accurate list of these groups for example, JMB (Jaamatul Mujaheddin Bangladesh) changed to JMJB (Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh), HUJI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami) to Chital (form of jihad), which later merged to JMB, and another new group named Islam o Muslim has emerged (See Table 3 for the major groups with their acronyms). According to the expert interviewee, this constant changing of names is not only used by militant groups in Bangladesh but also in Pakistan, e.g., Laskar e Taiyeba (LeT), and Sipahi Sahara in Pakistan.

**Table: 2. Number of Islamist Militant/Extremist Groups in Bangladesh**

Number	Source	Remarks
18 – 50	Khan (2007), Barakat (2005), Qamruzzaman (2011)	Individual researchers
12+	Ahsan (2005)	Journalist
70	Rahman & Kashem (2011)	Institutional researchers
33	Bangladesh Awami League (AL) in 2005	Political party
12	AL Government in 2009	Government
33	Intelligence reports in 2009	State security agencies

**Source:** Adapted from Rahman & Kashem (2011) supplemented with the published journals and Internet publications

The number of militant groups varies across sources such as official, political party, research studies, and newspapers (Table 2). The number of active militant groups ranges from dozens (Ahsan, 2005), through 30 (Khan, 2007) to 50 (Barakat, 2005). Qamruzzaman (2011) identified 18 such Islamist militia groups including two political parties (JIB, IOJ) and one student organization of JIB (ICS). In 2005, the then opposition party Awami League (AL) identified 33 Islamic militant groups. On March 16, 2009, the AL Government identified 12 militant outfits – the JMB, HUJI-B, HT, Ulema Anjuman al Bainat, Hizb-ut Tahrir (HuT), Islami Democratic Party (IDP), Islami Samaj, Touhid Trust, JMJB (Jagrata Muslima Janata Bangladesh), Shahadat-e al Hikma Party Bangladesh, Tamira Ar-Din Bangladesh (Hizb e Abu Omar), and Allahr Dal (Table 3). The Bangladeshi security agencies identified 33 militant groups in 2009 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2009).

From media reports alone, 70 militant outfits were identified (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). Both homegrown and foreign-linked groups have been active in Bangladesh for a long time (Riaz, 2016, 2016a; BEI, 2015). Bangladeshi militant organizations were found to have links with some foreign nationals who were linked with Pakistan based Laskar e Taiyeba (LeT), and India based Hizbul Mujahedee (HM) (BIPSS, 2010; ICM, 2011; BEI, 2015). Bangladeshi militants sheltered some of these foreigners, and they even employed them in madrassas (Islamic seminary institutions) across the country.

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## Trends of Development of Islamist Militant Organizations

This paper finds two major developments in Islamist radicalization and militancy in Bangladesh. The pre-2006 history of militancy was more driven by homegrown militant outfits led by Afghan War veterans. These groups mostly targeted members of madrassas, as well as rural, poor and unemployed youth in poverty-prone districts of the country. The Islamist radical groups in the post 2013 era were more influenced by global jihadist movements including the al-Qaeda and ISIS. The young people from non-madrassa institutions (universities, colleges) with middle class and urban backgrounds have leaned towards joining these groups.

The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) identified two waves of radicalization among Islamist militants in Bangladesh. Based on their transformations, tactics and objectives, Riaz (2016a) identified five generations of Islamist militants in Bangladesh. The first wave of radicalization occurred during 1999-2005 following the returns of Afghan war veterans in the 1990s and the generation of militant groups like Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI), Jaamatul Mujaheddin Bangladesh (JMB), and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB). The second wave of radicalization is linked to the technologically advanced extremist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), Hizbut Tawhid (HT), and Ansar Ullah Bagla Teach (ABT), who have been propagating the 'global jihadist ideology in the local language' (BEI, 2015).

The Afghan War (1979-1992) produced the first generation of militants. Since 1984, 3,000 volunteers joined the war in several batches. Between 1988 and 1992, a returnee established contact with Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) - a Pakistani Islamist organization and later founded the Bangladesh chapter - HUJI-Bangladesh (HUJIB). Most of the HUJI-B leaders were older, madrassah (particularly Deobandi) educated, and hailed from rural areas (Riaz, 2016a).

The second generation of militants is linked with the formation of a new group called Jaamatul Mujaheddin Bangladesh (JMB) by Shaikh Abdur Rahman, son of a deceased Ahle Hadith leader, and Asadullah Ghalib, leader of the Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB, Ahle Hadith Movement Bangladesh) (Riaz, 2016b). The JMB was formed to transform Bangladesh as an Islamic State. Youth educated in technical and vocational training colleges, and born and raised in urban areas were recruited by the JMB. Since 1996, the JMB initiated

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operations from the northern and northwestern parts of the country adopting the name 'Fighting in the way of Allah' (*Qital fi Sabilillah*). Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), an affiliate of JMB, was led by Shaikh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman, alias Bangla Bhai was (Riaz, 2016a).

The third generation of militants was born with the foundation of the Bangladesh chapter of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) in 2011 - a new organization with international connections by a university professor and a Commonwealth Scholar trained in the United Kingdom (Riaz, 2016a). Its members included middle class urban-based and technically skilled university students.

The fourth generation of militants is associated with another new group named the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT). It can be traced to 2007 under the name of Jamaat-ul Muslemin. The ABT came to limelight in March 2013 with funding from external source (Riaz, 2016a). But it started its recruitment from 2012 largely through cyberspace. The ABT is now renamed Ansar al Islam. The ABT is a young generation of jihadists who use multiple languages (Bengali, Urdu, Arabic and English) to communicate their messages. They initially used an Al Qaeda affiliated website - the 'Ansar al Mujahideen English Forum' (AAMEF), and later moved to another Pakistan-launched - 'bab-ul-islam.net' (Riaz, 2016a). The Ansar al-Islam is mentioned as the Bangladesh division of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (IQIS) (Site Intelligence Group, 2016). According to the ISIL's media Dabiq, IS has established contacts with the banned JMB (Riaz, 2016). ABT claimed responsibility for the killing of bloggers in 2013 in the wake of Shahbagh movement around the verdicts of the International War Crimes Tribunal (The daily Star, May 4, 2016; Riaz, 2016; Ahsan, 2016).

The fifth generation of militants include the members and followers of the AQIS and the IS) who have founded their own local organizations to pursue their objective of establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh and participate in the global militant Islamist movements being inspired by, and linked to, the transnational terrorist groups (Riaz, 2016a). The most recent groups - the Shaheed Hamza Brigade (SHB) and the Bangladesh Jihad Group (BJG) are the fifth generation militants. The police identified these groups in 2015.

Due to the government's counterterrorism (CT) measures along with the political stability during 2006-2012, the JMB, JMJB, and HUIB militants have been weakened and reorganized, causing the group Ansar Ullah Bagla Team (ABT) to emerge. The ABT, Ansar

al Islam, or the Islamic State (IS)/Islamic State (ISIS)/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has claimed responsibility for most of the recent attacks and brutal killings of professors/bloggers/ foreigners, and members of minority groups in the last one and half year. The police have claimed that the suspected militants involved with the recent killings are from home-grown JMB and ABT (Table 3). The government has denied the presence of IS or any other international terror groups, while at the same time claiming to have arrested ISIL recruiters in the recent years to demonstrate it is fighting terrorism (Aljazeera TV, 2016; Site Intelligence Group, 2016; The Prothom Alo, May 1, 2016).

**Table 3. Major Islamist Extremist Outfits/Groups in Bangladesh**

Sl.	Outfit/ Group/	Foundation, Aim, Strength
1	HUJI-B Harkatul Jihad (Movement for an Islamic Holy War in Bangladesh)	Established in 1992, banned in October 2005. Establish Islamic rule through jihad, Fight in Kashmir, freed from the aggression and influence of the west and east Transnational, reported to have links with al-Qaeda and some militia groups in Pakistan, Publish and distribute books, 6 camps in Cox's Bazar hilly areas, reported to have links with piracy, smuggling and gunrunning. Rohingya refugees are also members, recruit from madrassa financed by Arab charities Another blacklisted outfit - Tamir ud Deen was formed in 1999 by a HUJI leader Mufti Abdur Rouf, and as alleged to have transnational Islamist networks Reported to have 15,000 members
2	AHAB Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh	Established in 1994 Transnational, reported to have strong links with the movements network in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, funding from Hayatul Igaccha, Saudi Arabia and Society for the Renaissance of Islamic Legacy, Kuwait Asadullah al Galib is the leader in police custody since 2005, received

		training from JMB training centers and Pakistani madrassas Reported to have strength with 700 madrasa in 42 districts
3	HT Hizbut Towhid	Established in 1994, banned Establish Islamic khalifate through jihad Founded by Mohammad Bayezid Khan Ponni who placed himself just behind the prophets, and authored a book banned in 1998, activists use iron hammer and tobacco dust to attack
4	Shahadat al Hiqma	Established in 1996, banned on February 9, 2003 An armed group arose from Islami Chatra Shibit (ICS), Founder Syed Kawsar Hossain Siddiqui; Publishes leaflets; Connections with 5 Islamist groups; Contacts with Kashmir based LeT, Get arms training from Nepal based Maoist organizations, and Dubai based Daud Ibrahim gave funds Reported to have 36,000 members
5	JMB Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (Party of Mujahidin Bangladesh)	Established in 1998, banned on February 23, 2005 Establish Islamic rule, and end anti-Islamic forces and practices in the country Local, but has transnational connections Received BNP-JIB patronization (2001-2006), Founder Sheikh Abdur Rahman, and AHAB Chief Dr. Asadulla Al Galib as one policy maker Most front liners trained in Afghanistan Reported to have 10,000 members
6	JMJB Jagrata Muslim Janata, Bangladesh (Awakened Muslim	Established in 1998, banned on February 23, 2005 Aimed to end activities of leftwing extremist in north west east, establish Islamic rule Follower of Taliban ideology Came into limelight on April 1, 2004 to unlawfully free the country from Maoist, 9 organizational divisions, supported and patronized by a section of BNP leaders, funding from Saudi charities to build mosques

	Masses of Bangladesh)	and seminaries, carried out 100+ operations Reported to have 300,000 members
7	HuT Hizbut Tahrir	Emerg ed in 2000, banned on October 22, 2009, Originated in 1953 in Jerusalem, Aimed to establish caliphate state under a Caliph through invitation and jihad, Recruitments targeted university students, distribute inflammatory leaflets, Raised funds in the UK and within Bangladesh; Founded by Dr. Nasimul Gani and Shahnewaj and Dhaka University professor Golam Mowla, and the Chief Mohiuddin, a Dhaka University Institute of Business Administration professor Have 20,000 members according to Chief
8	IBP Islami Biplob Parisad	Established in 2001 Aimed to establish Islamic rule Former Jamat-e-Islmi (JI B) leader Moulana Abdul jabber formed, splitting from JIB preceded with Islami Samaj. Threat the prime minister to declare Bangladesh as Islamic state otherwise oust the government
9	IDP Islami Democratic Party	Established in 2008, blacklisted Aimed to Establish Islamic Shariyah law Transnational Islamist networks Founded by Afghan war veterans
10	Tamir ud Deen	Established in 1999, blacklisted Aimed to establish Islamic Shariah law Founded by a HUJI leader Mufti Abdur Rouf Alleged to have transnational Islamist networks
11	Allar Dal	Banned Aimed to establish Islamic rule through jihad Linked to AHAB and JMB,

		Use coercion to recruit, use CDs, booklets and leaflets etc. Founded by 2 former ICS activists – Matinul Islam and Babul Ansar, who were sentenced to death
12	ABT Ansarullah Bangla Team operated under Jama'atul Muslemin  Renamed as Ansar al Islam	Came to limelight in 2013, but it can be traced back in 2007, banned in 2015 Mainly aimed to silence or eliminate the critics of extremist religious doctrines Propagating the global jihadist ideology It claims to be connected to al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) It has claimed responsibility for recent killings Islamic State (IS) considers it their Bangladesh chapter It has claimed responsibility for many of the recent killings as per SITE Intelligence Group Website The present government denies the presence of IS or al-Qaeda linked group in the country The government denies the presence of al-Qaeda linked group in the country

Source: Adapted from Rahman & Kashem (2011), Quamruzzaman (2011), BIPSS (2011), SATP ([www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org)), and supplemented by news reports from The Daily Star (2001-2016); The Daily Ittefaq (2001-2016)

Militant groups have grown over the years enhancing their strengths in terms of manpower and skills, and widespread networks to conduct terror campaigns. Some militant outfits have overlap in terms of training, operations, leadership, resource mobilization and agenda. JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), and JMJB (Jagrata Muslima Janata Bangladesh) are often considered twins, and many others changed names when the government banned the mother organization (Table 3). Many of these organizations are connected to each other like JMB, JMJB, HUIB (Harkatul Jiahad al Islami Bangladesh). The JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh) used the HUJI-B (Harkatul Jiahad al Islami Bangladesh) as a training unit and (JMJB) as an operational unit (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011).

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JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), JMJB (Jagrata Muslima Janata Bangladesh), HUJI-B (Harkatul Jiahad al Islami Bangladesh), AHAB (Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh), HuT (Hizbut Tahrir) and HT (Hizb-ut Towhid) were the major terrorist groups identified by Rahman and Kahsem (2011). The Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), or Ansar Al Islam, which claims to be connected to the al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), was not in that list as it came to light in 2013 and claimed to be involved in the recent killings (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; Riaz, 2016, 2016a; BEI, 2015). Thousands of people joined these militant groups in Bangladesh (Table 3). The JMB had almost one million members (full-time and part-time), the HUJI-B had more than 25,000 activists, and the JMJB had over 30,000 militants (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). These militant outfits and their leaders were linked to financiers from several countries including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to which they had travelled.

Religious outfits had links with non-religious insurgent groups within and outside the country such as the RSO (Rohinga Solidarity Organization - Myanmar), Maoist extremists of Nepal and Indian insurgent groups – United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). Intelligence and media reports indicate that the RSO and Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, and the Indian North East ethnic insurgent groups including the ULFA were involved in arms smuggling. The RSO was an arms supplier of JMB and HUJI-B. The Rohingya (the Muslim minority ethnic group of Arakan State in Myanmar) refugees are also vulnerable to Islamist radicalization given their socioeconomic deprivations in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Many of them were linked with or targeted by Islamist extremist groups (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; The Daily Star, June 11, 2016; Mannan, 2016).

The Islamist militants have diverse socio-demographic characteristics, although the extant literature has a lacuna on the profile of Bangladeshi Islamist militants as well as the sources of motivation and the drivers of the radicalization process (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; Riaz, 2016a). According to the content analysis of media reports (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011), out of 1,033 militants arrested during 2003-2010, the majority of the militants were from JMB (542 members), followed by HuT (20 members), HT (87 members), and Allahr Dal (68 members). A recent study based on the arrest data of alleged militants gathered from press reports published in the three major dailies in 2014 and 2015 showed that the majority of the arrestees were affiliated with or desired to be affiliated with the JMB, followed by the IS, the

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Shaheed Hamza Brigade (SHB), the ABT, the HUIJIB, and the Bangladesh Jihad Group (BJG) (Riaz, 2016a). According to the news reports, the militants were mostly male, young, and employed in various sectors such as garment, transport, street vendors, or security workers, as well as professionals such as engineers, teachers, Imams, business, information technology, or criminals, primarily arms dealers, and finally students, mostly from madrassas (Riaz, 2016a). Most of the student arrestees were at the university level (have passed at least grade 12). Other than students and manual laborers, most of the arrestees were from middle-class or upper class backgrounds, and many of them had education in local including Cadet Colleges and universities and foreign institutions (Riaz, 2016a). These findings suggest that there are many other drivers than the traditional factors such as poverty, unemployment, and madrasa education that contribute to radicalization and extremism. The issue of Islamist militancy and terrorism is related to various factors --- domestic, regional, international, historical, political, economic and cultural (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011).

The government's main approach to Islamist militancy and terrorism centered on law enforcement. However, the arrest of Islamist militants and banning some militant outfits has been continued as the most visible law enforcement measure since 1998 (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). The law-enforcement-centered hard approach cannot alone solve the deeply rooted militancy problem in the country. To understand and respond to the rise of Islamist militancy and terrorism, the underlying root causes of violent extremism and radicalization need to be addressed with a combined strategy of enforcement and prevention as discussed later in this paper.

### **Factors and Underlying Issues associated with Islamist Militancy, and their Implications for Counter-Radicalization in Bangladesh**

Islamist militancy and terrorism is a complex and multidimensional problem for Bangladesh since no single explanation can be applied to understanding the roots of Islamist militancy and terrorism there. Riaz (2008) views Islamist militancy as caused by the complex web of domestic, regional and international events and dynamics in Bangladesh. Riaz (2008) argues that Islamist militancy is the result of both errors of omission (the state, politicians and the civil society failed to do things that could have stemmed the rise of militancy) and errors

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of commission (the state, politicians, and the civil society did things that worsened the situation). The rise of religious militancy and terrorism is linked to various factors, such as domestic, regional and international (Riaz, 2008); historical-political (Quamruzzaman, 2011); madrasa, political patronage (Datta, 2007); and political, economic and cultural factors (Momen, & Begum, 2005).

Most of the existing academic studies, and journalistic and intelligence reports do not view the problem of militancy, insurgency and terrorism from the historical-political contexts of Bangladesh (Quamruzzaman, 2010, 2011; Riaz, 2008; Momen, & Begum, 2005). Many foreign scholars and media reports link the issue with the upsurge of Islamist political parties, madrasa education, political patronage, and Taliban/al-Qaida presence (Datta, 2007; Harrison, 2006; Vaughn, 2007; Rahman, 2004; Quamruzzaman, 2010; Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, 2009; Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2003). Quamruzzaman (2010) identified poverty and resource deprivation, economic dislocation and social disorganization, political blame game and patronization, and easy access to arms and ideological apparatuses as the major factors of militia motivation in Bangladesh. According to some expert interviewees, actions of western countries, particularly the US that are anti-Islamic in their maltreatment and attack on Muslim countries, motivate anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment for these groups to commit terrorist acts.

The growing number of Islamist militants, networks and their activities along with the incidents of terrorist attacks since 1999 indicate that Bangladesh is very vulnerable to Islamist extremism and militancy. Fundamentalism, extremism and radicalization hide under the disguise of religion in Bangladesh. This paper is concerned primarily with two internal key factors --- domestic politics, and youth issues that are associated with educational, religious, cultural, or other contexts of Islamist radicalization and militancy, and must be effectively addressed to save Bangladesh from the rise of Islamist militancy and terrorism.

### **Political Issues**

A number of external and historical political factors cause Islamist militancy and terrorism, yet the domestic political environment is the key factor. Since 1991, the democratically elected governments led by two major political parties – the BNP and the AL,

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have followed a policy of denial that militant groups and outfits exist in Bangladesh. The denial policy and political blaming between these two major political parties on the issue of Islamist militancy and terrorism create favourable space for the rise of militancy. In the midst of the post-2013 militant attacks, the government and security agencies claimed that Islamist militancy was under control and they had successfully reduced militancy through their anti-terrorism measures. These measures included the banning of militant outfits, the surveillance of terrorist financing, and the arrest and execution of militants. The government has backtracked and covered-up its failure to curb militancy and terrorism (Riaz, 2016).

Islamist militants have grown in the midst of the political environment. Because of the confrontational politics by the two major parties – BNP and AL from the late 1980s, Islamist groups have envisioned an Islamist Bangladesh (Riaz, 2008). Both ruling and opposition parties have exercised political blaming, and the governments have neglected the threat of Islamist extremist and militancy. During the BNP-led alliance government (2001-2006), religious extremism and militant activities rose despite their denial of its existence. But under international pressure in the midst of several county-wide terrorist incidents perpetrated by terrorist groups such as Bangla Bhai, the BNP took bold law enforcement measures to fight Islamist militancy, banning militant outfits, and punishing militants. The AL-led government faced several militant attacks during its earlier tenure (1996-2001), but its response was denying and blaming the opposition not addressing the root causes. The immediate past (2009 - 2014) and the current (2014 - present) AL-led governments have adopted a zero-tolerance strategy toward militancy and terrorism.

The political environment must be conducive to the practice of participatory democracy for the success of anti-militancy programs. In a political vacuum, extremist groups and militants are taking advantage of the situation. Examples of how the present ruling party has blamed the opposition political parties are: - BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and JIB (Jammat-e-Islami Bangladesh) for the militant attacks and killings in recent years (Rahman, 2015; Riaz, 2016; The Daily Star June 11, 2016; The Prothom Alo, June 12, 2016). The BNP claimed that without the government's signal, such brutal killings or attacks would not be possible (The Daily Star, June 10, 2016). The BNP government has blamed the then opposition AL in a similar fashion. During the period of political stability (2006-2012), the government was able to handle militant groups through criminal prosecution of the militants

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and proscribing militant groups. But during the political violence during 2013-2014 and the favorable political environment caused by the political vacuum with no major opposition parties in the parliament, Bangladesh has witnessed the rise of militant groups like the JMB (Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh), the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), and even the Islamic State (IS), which have claimed the responsibility for most of the recent attacks.

At the backdrop of a dramatic increase in militant attacks and killings in May-June 2016, the police suddenly launched a week-long anti-militancy drive to catch suspected militants. The police arrested 5,324 people in the first two days out of seven-day anti-militancy crackdown (The Daily Star, June 13, 2016; The Daily Prothom Alo, June 13, 2016). Only 85 arrestees were suspected militants. The remainders were suspected criminals of other crimes including drug dealing, and firearms. This mass arrest has raised concerns of human rights violations, i.e., by arresting innocent persons including members of opposition parties, the extrajudicial execution and killing of suspected militants in gun fight/encounters, the suppression of opposition parties, as seen when its leaders were arrested under false politically driven charges, and through police corruption and abuse of power by victimizing innocent people for bribes. (The Daily Star, June 13, 2016; The Prothom Alo, June 13, 2016). Such anti-militancy drives must not be driven by a political-agenda. They should not be used to suppress political dissents and opponents. Such drives should catch the real killers based on evidence, and not let them hide, or re-organize for further attacks. Such drives must not violate human rights including the High Court directives regarding Article 54 (arrest without warrant).

The police have already been widely criticized for not adopting fair procedures in arresting, investigating crimes, interrogating criminals, collecting evidence, and reporting cases to the courts (Rahman, & Hossain, 2014; Rahman, 2010). According to an academic expert, many police officers involved in criminal investigation do not know how to investigate, or how to complete a charge sheet, or final report, or effectively manage crime scenes due to inadequate training and education, and a lack of professionalism (Rahman, & Hossain, 2014). Police officers can easily manipulate investigations by exploiting the weaknesses of existing laws. The police are also under the influence of politicians, the wealthy, and other vested interests for personal material gain (Rahman, & Hossain, 2014).

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The use of anti-terrorism and other laws for political gains have raised human rights violation issues during different regimes (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). The use of counterterrorism strategies against dissents and opponents for political gains has ultimately facilitated such groups to grow. The government's associating JIB (Jamat-e-Islami Bangladesh, JMB (Jama'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh) and al-Qaeda together and pushing the legitimate opposition into their corner helped fringe militant groups proliferate (Riaz, 2016). The current government has adopted a heavy-handed approach using the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) Act to arrest people for allegedly hurting religious sentiments or posting online criticism of the government (Riaz, 2016). Local and international human rights bodies have long pointed out these human rights violations and intolerance of freedom of expression. This kind of political environment contributes to the rise of radicalization.

Politicians should be tolerant and they must not facilitate a political environment that is conducive to the rise of extremism and militancy. In recent years, the use of extremist language by politicians, secularists or the Islamists is growing in Bangladesh. The political rhetoric has shifted dramatically from moderate to violent and intolerant. The political blaming between AI and BNP, that the other is responsible for militancy, and the political neglect of the threat of militancy due to this paralyzing rivalry has led to the weakened of an already fragile democratic political culture suffering under the pressure of domestic political issues allowing Islamist militancy and terrorism to rise in Bangladesh.

The politicization of Islam and the use of religion to gain votes is another political factor associated with the rise of Islamist militancy in Bangladesh. The BNP and the JP often used the general public sentiment to bring Islamist elements into politics. The major political parties including the AL do not want to affect their political support by removing religious elements from the political culture. The Awami League (AL) included Jamaat e Islami Bangladesh (JIB) in their alliance to oust the BNP government in 1996. Islamist forces often misinterpret Islam to convince the ignorant and religiously sensitive people to support religion based political parties such as JIB, and Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ). Some religion-based political parties mislead illiterate people in the name of Islam. Riaz (2008) categorized Islamists into three groups --- mainstream JIB, Tariqat Foundation, and Zaker Party (who participate in constitutional democracy); intermediate IOJ, Islami Shashontantra Andolon (ISA), and

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Hisbut-Tahrir (HuT) who operate within democratic polity despite reservations; and militant Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata Muslima Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), Harkatul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B), Hizb-ut-Tawhid, Shahdat-i-Hiqma, and Jaish-e-Muhammad (Table 3). According to some key informant interviewees, some political parties such as JIB and IOJ, and some student wings such as ICS (Islami Chatro Shibir) are militant organizations.

The use of militants for political purposes is a very alarming issue. Some politicians have patronized or supported militants and extremists at different times (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). During the BNP-led alliance government, political patronization was blamed for the rise of militancy, extremism and radicalization (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). According to some experts, many political leaders of the three major political parties – Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) and Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ) have links with terrorist groups (Rahman & Kashem, 2011). If the political parties do not use religion for political gains, they can make a difference. According to key informant interviews (KIIs), the general public do not support any kind of terrorism and terrorist activities, but some political parties use religion to win elections or for other political gain. In fact, many political scientists, scholars and politicians argue that the current confrontational political environment is favorable to the rise of violent extremism and violence in Bangladesh.

### **Youth Issues**

Another concern lies with the young people who become engaged in militancy and terrorism. Poverty-driven areas (southern and northern districts) and vulnerable young population groups (unemployed youths among refugee camps, madrassa students and poor people) were found to be most likely associated with the rise of religious extremism, radicalization and militancy (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; BEI, 2011, 2014, 2015). Unemployment problem, poverty, illiteracy and ignorance about religious matters (rules and regulations and laws relating to Islam) are the underlying factors and causes of Islamist militancy and radicalization in Bangladesh (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; BEI, 2015). In recent years, Islamists and radicals targeted middle class, educated, and young people (Riaz, 2016a; BEI, 2015; Sobhan, 2009). According to one key informant, most of the militants, who are

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coming from northern districts, are deprived of social and economic development. Many young people are brainwashed and motivated to join these groups for material gains (job opportunities). The role of transnational Islamic charity organizations in preaching and brainwashing distorted Islamic teachings in their funded madrassas and social organizations, and the presence of transnational Islamist political organizations like HUJI (Harkatul Jihad) and HuT (Hizbut-ut-Tahrir) bringing radical Islamist ideology are responsible for expanding international Islamist militant networks in the country (Quamruzzaman, 2010). Some NGOs were engaged in extremist activities, and some NGOs were involved in supporting militants to raise funds for training (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; BEI, 2014). Bangladeshi militants received funds from individuals and charity organizations based in the Gulf countries, USA, UK and EU, through both *hundi* (informal money transfer) and formal banks that remained undetected (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011).

The profile of recent arrestees showed that the militants were male, young, educated, and middle-class and affluent backgrounds (Riaz, 2016a). The police arrested five students from a top ranked private university called North South University in connection with the killing of a blogger named Ahmed Rajib Haider on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2013. These young people are from affluent families as education in private universities is very expensive. They belonged to the extremist organization Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), and confessed their crime in front of a magistrate (The bdnews24.com, March 10, 2013). This scenario indicates that young people in non-Islamic educational institutions (outside madrassa) are vulnerable to Islamic radicalization and extremism in Bangladesh also.

There has been a huge debate about whether madrassa education is linked to the rise of Islamist radicalization and militancy in the country. The view of some key informants is that the Madrassa (Islamic seminary) education system can be associated with militancy while others strongly denied the linkage between madrassa education and militancy (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). According to the majority of the experts, the Madrassa style education system has been in vogue for thousands of years in the Indian Subcontinent, and terrorism or militancy did not appear until the 2000's. Quamruzzaman (2010) refuted the allegation against madrassas and pointed out that the major causes of radicalization include widespread poverty, huge youth population and unemployment, confused religious identify, unregulated money flow, lack of freedom, democracy and political space, poor governance, and the politicization

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of Islam. It is true that some Bangladeshi madrassa students joined the Afghan jihad and got involved in militant groups upon their return, using some madrassas as training camps for radicalization. This is because the unfocused educational policy makes them frustrated after completing madrassa education. The traditional madrassa curriculum focuses on religious education, and does not include modern subjects like science, maths, etc. The labor market finds that madrassa students lack knowledge, skills and competence compared to non-madrassa students. Besides, the Quami madrassa education is not integrated to the mainstream education system. Thousands of these are beyond the state regulation for the syllabus, pedagogy, and teacher recruitment.

Many of these youth issues can be explained by the common causes or explanations of terrorism in other countries such as strains including poverty, material deprivation, and unemployment (Agnew, 2010), using Islam as an emotive force by political parties (Wrights-Neville, 2004), and deviant religious teachings and brainwashing and the anti-Islam treatment such as propaganda against Islam and Muslim countries and labeling Muslims as terrorists by the US and Israel (Hamilton-Hart, 2005; Wrights-Neville, 2004). Harrigan (2011) attached the brutality and atrocity against Muslims in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kashmir along with the returning radicalized Afghan war veterans, political neglect of the threat of violent extremism, poor governance, and widespread corruption as contributing factors to the rise of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism in Bangladesh.

In order to address the problem of radicalization, Muslim-majority states have undertaken various approaches, strategies, and processes (El-Said, & Harrigan, 2011). These included counter-radicalization strategies (Morocco, Bangladesh), de-radicalization strategies (Yemen, Egypt), well-structured official programs (Saudi Arabia), individual initiatives (Jordan), and collective de-radicalization (e.g., inside or outside prison) in Egypt (Islamic Jihad in 1997, and Jihad Organization in 2007) and Algeria (Algerian Salvation Army in 1997). According to El-Said, and Harrigan (2011), important factors for the success of de-radicalization programs are the role of political leadership, families, civil society, quality of clerics and scholars, the political and developmental strength of the state, and finally the relationship between national counter-radicalization and de-radicalization efforts on the one hand, and external factors and interventions on the other. They emphasized that counter-radicalization and de-radicalization efforts must take account of the culture, mores, traditions,

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history, and rules and regulations of each country.

Expressing zero tolerance against the twin problem of militancy and terrorism, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League (AL) government announced a three-phase program ----- short, medium and long terms coming to power in 2009. The government formed a 17-member high profile committee called the National Committee on Militancy Resistance and Prevention to mobilize public opinion against terrorist activities. The government promulgated anti-terrorism and money-laundering laws, and banned 14 terror outfits in 2009. It ordered law enforcement and intelligence agencies, NGO Affairs Bureau, and the Bangladesh Bank to investigate terrorist financing (through banking or other channels like charity financing) or the engagement in militancy by finding out militants' patrons, financiers and sources of illegal arms and ammunition. Local administrations—Deputy Commissioners, Upazila Nirbahi Officers and police, lawmakers and heads of the educational institutions were advised for holding meetings for effective campaign in their respective areas to uproot extremists from the society. On April 1, 2010, the Government planned to deploy 6 million Ansar (voluntary paramilitary force) and VDP (Village Defense Party) members to combat militancy. The Deputy Commissioners (DCs) would be training the members of Ansar who in turn would engage people at the grassroots and union levels (lowest local government tier) to fight against the militancy (The New Age, October 6, 2010).

The education ministry initiated an anti-militancy campaign in schools by publishing and distributing booklets and leaflets against militancy and terrorism (Rahman & Kashem, 2011). The Islamic Foundation Bangladesh under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) undertook another anti-militancy campaign through training imams and religious leaders on anti-militancy so that they could communicate the accurate interpretations of Islam among the followers in mosques, especially after the Jumma (Friday) prayers and persuaded the people that militancy is anti-Islamic and the scriptures used by militant outfits are based on misinterpretations of Islam. The anti-militancy and counterterrorism programs of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) during 2010-2012, and 2014-2015 included the publication and distribution of leaflets, books, documentary films and audio-video (220,000 copies in 2010-2012), and the organization of seminars, conferences, trainings, and discussion meetings with the mosque Imams, religious leaders, and social elites (200,5 in 2010-2012, 1122 seminar and 2563 discussion meetings in 2014-2015). The MoRA program emphasized organizing pre-

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khutba discussions (Friday pre-sermon) at mosques to raise awareness about and counter militancy and terrorism in the country. The information ministry has developed short-films to create mass awareness about militancy.

The Awami League Government boldly promised to continue the campaign in 2009 following the caretaker government (CTG) that launched a nation-wide socio-political campaign involving religious leaders, teachers, students and local administration against the militancy during 2007-2008 (Islam, 2015; Rahman, & Kashem, 2011). The campaign of the CTG included anti-militancy sermons in mosques and statements at schools, screening plays and documentaries on TV and in public places to raise public awareness about the ills of militancy and extremism. The CTG implemented a grassroots de-radicalization program in three regions --- Cox's Bazar, Bogra, and Sylhet through creating new non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with enforcement interventions in terms of proscribing outfits, arresting and prosecuting militants (Fink, & El-Said, 2011; Rahman & Kashem, 2011).

The CTG's de-radicalization program was both reactive and preemptive in nature, hence it was described as a hybrid of counter-radicalization and de-radicalization programs (Fink, & El-Said, 2011; Harrigan, 2011). This government initiative targeted already radicalized individuals and vulnerable communities through interactive workshops, seminars, and conferences in village madrassas, and mosques with local people bringing imams, religious leaders, and influential figures from outside the project areas to deliver the accurate narrative of Islam and its relationship to peace, modernity, human rights, democracy and the role of religious leaders. Under this program, NGOs offered loans to some bright madrasa graduates for establishing small enterprises. Some graduates were offered vocational training opportunities. Some families of convicted violent extremists were offered financial assistance to educate their children to prevent the militant group's involvement (Fink, & El-Said, 2011).

However, this counter-radicalization program did not focus specifically on the rehabilitation of detainees. Media and researchers reported that some of the convicts or detainees held on terrorism or militancy charges were engaged in radicalizing other prisoners inside jails, and maintained relationships with their militant groups and mentors. Released prisoners were likely to become recidivists because of the jail environment, which lacks counseling, educational, recreational programs and includes rampant mismanagement linked to the corruption and administrative irregularities inside the prisons (Rahman, 2011). Some

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terrorist prisoners upon release were found to have become involved in serious militant attacks. Given the issues of jail environment, and the risk factors for disaffection, appropriate prison-based de-radicalization and rehabilitation programs need to be in place as well.

El-Said, and Harrigan (2011) argue the counter-radicalization strategies undertaken by the caretaker government were very effective. These grass-roots counter-radicalization, de-radicalization or disengagement programs targeted already radicalized and vulnerable communities. Bangladesh's approach to combine both law enforcement-centric and soft counter violent extremism strategy is thus a hybrid between counter-radicalization and de-radicalization (Harrigan, 2011). Despite appreciations by local and external observers, this grassroots program was not sustained or expanded into the future.

### **Implications for Counter-Radicalization**

Of the 160 million people in Bangladesh 88.8 percent are Muslims, and relatively few, as can be estimated from the number of militants arrested, and the number of members of those banned militant organizations presented earlier, are engaged in militancy or have become radicalized (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; El-Said, & Harrigan, 2011; Riaz, 2016a). This paper argues that the government is successful in combatting terrorism because of its law enforcement centric counter-terrorism measures; yet, the root causes of radicalization and the risk factors for the rise of violent extremists have remained largely unexplored, and thus appropriate counter-radicalization strategies are not in place. Below are highlighted some political interventions, and youth interventions, that must also encompass religious interventions and educational interventions.

### **Youth Interventions**

This paper argues that, given the vulnerability of the young population to radicalization, the role of education system and civil society can be effective in countering radicalization among the Bangladeshi youths. The sites of intervention thus go beyond schools, madrassas, and mosques. El-Said and Harrigan (2011) point out the importance of family and media along with other factors such as the political environment and leadership, as

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well as the local culture and context for the success of counter-radicalization programs in Muslim-majority states.

More than half of the total Bangladeshi population is below 24 years of age (BBS, 2011). More than 30 percent of the total population (about 48 million) is young (10-24 years) (UNFPA, 2014). Millions of these individuals are in schools, colleges, universities, and madrassas. As discussed earlier, the extremist groups are now targeting and attracting the middle class, educated and influential people including those in the public and private universities and professions (BEI, 2014). The Internet (social media platforms), leaflets, cell phones, and other traditional means of communications facilitated the process of radicalization among the young people. Youth are the group most vulnerable to the radicalism appeal of militant groups who use radical and extremist narratives that grossly misinterpret religion (BEI, 2015). The government should undertake programs such as counseling, awareness-raising, life skills training and income generating activities to intervene with madrasa students, Rohingya refugees and others who are already exposed or vulnerable to Islamist radicalization and extremism.

### *Educational Interventions for Youth*

Bangladesh is the second largest home for madrassas (registered) after Indonesia (BEI, 2011). Bangladesh has 37,000 madrassas (both Aliya and Qaumi) with 3340,800 students and 230,732 teachers (BEI, 2011). Another estimates indicate that so far Bangladesh has 16,000 (6,800 primary, and 9,200 post-primary) Aliya madrassas, and so far 48,000 Qaumi madrasas. Qaumi madrasas that impart pre-primary to post-graduate level Islamic education and are privately funded and remain outside government control (BEI, 2009). Aliya (from elementary to postgraduate level) madrassas are state regulated and funded by both state and private sector. Given the size of the madrasa sector, and the potential risk for breeding Islamic radicalism in these institutions, counter-radicalization strategies must focus on the madrasa curriculum, quality of teachers, and pedagogy. In some madrassas, teaching of hatred toward other religions and Western values is practiced (BEI, 2015). As discussed earlier, the unfocused educational policy and madrasa curriculum, frustration of madrasa graduates for

finding no job are likely to motivate madrasa students to become radicalized and get involved in militancy and terrorism.

The madrasa stream must be regulated by the government and integrated with the general and vocational streams. The anti-madrasa policy is not effective. El-Said and Harrigan (2011) argue that local context, i.e., the culture and traditions must be considered to make counter-radicalization strategies successful. Madrasa education system has been here for centuries, and cannot be considered breeding grounds for Islamic radicalization. Only 19 percent of arrestees in connection with militancy were found students of madrasas (Sobhan, 2009). Instead of scapegoating madrasas for producing militants or radicals, or profiling madrasa graduates, the traditional curriculum of madrasa needs to be revised, as discussed earlier, in order to produce graduates with similar academic strengths of the graduates from the general stream.

The government has undertaken the National Education Policy in 2010, and it is under implementation. It is also found that poverty, access to mainstream schools, and rural areas are associated with those madrasas where the quality of teaching and learning is problematic (BEI, 2011). Many poor families want to send their kids to mainstream schools, but they do not have access to those schools in their locality. The government needs to establish mainstream schools in needy rural and remote areas so that school-age children get education as per their desire. As envisioned in the National Education Policy 2010, the different education streams (madrasa and general) can be integrated by creating a uniform curricula and syllabus so that the madrasa graduates can be equally competitive in the job market with their counterparts. Religious and ethics course (moral education) need to be introduced, and the quality of teaching and pedagogical learning, needs to be improved. Above all, the education policy must be implemented transparently in consultation with all stakeholders.

### *Religious Interventions for Youth*

In Bangladesh, teachers, Imams, religious leaders, the media, the local leaders and communities, and families can play significant roles in the prevention of radicalization among the young people in Bangladesh. Friday sermons and pre-sermon discussion at mosques, and training of madrasa teachers and religious leaders are vital for creating awareness about the

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militancy and the evils of Islamist violent extremism. In some mosques during sermons, Imams deliver radical narratives and in some Qaumi madrassas, extremist ideologies are propagated, and militants' trainings are carried out (Rahman, & Kashem, 2011; BEI, 2011, 2015; Haque, 2006; Khan, 2006). Friday pre-khutba (sermon) and during sermons at mosques, Imams can discuss the topic of militancy, jihad, and how the radicalized groups misinterpret Islam.

### **Political Interventions**

Given the two major underlying issues as discussed above --- politics and vulnerable youth, some counterterrorism measures incorporating the issues of legal system, political culture, human rights protection, and criminal prosecution of militants and terrorist groups are discussed earlier. The national sociopolitical anti-militancy campaign and de-radicalization program as initiated by the last Caretaker Government (CTG) and later endorsed by the Awami League government must be implemented on a continuous basis given the fact that such counter-radicalization is a long-term endeavor. The initiatives undertaken by the education ministry, religious affairs ministry, and other ministries need to be properly implemented.

The grassroots NGOs funded by government have been found successful in countering militancy and radicalism in Bangladesh (El Said, & Harrigan, 2011). Civil society organizations (CSOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can mobilize the youth by providing counter-narrative (accurate interpretation of Islam) to the extremist narrative of the radical groups. The potential role of civil society in countering radicalization lies in reaching out mass people at grassroots level and working with the government in Bangladesh by reducing the appeal of extremist groups and their messages through improving religious/political education and organizing diversionary activities for young people (BEI, 2014). NGOs and CSOs can engage the youth in different socio-cultural activities and raise awareness through cultural festivals, dramas, plays, and documentaries to counter radicalization among the general people. The CSOs/NGOS can organize social, awareness raising, and advocacy campaigns and dialogues inviting recognized scholars, academics, and religious leaders. They can also collaborate with knowledgeable Ulemas in Qur'an and

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Sunnah in this regard. They can publish accurate interpretations of Islam in the form of booklets, books, leaflets, posters, and CDs for dissemination and distribution among the Muslim youths, and the general public.

The government can monitor terrorist financing or militancy through its NGO Affairs Bureau, Bangladesh Bank, and intelligence agencies. Families and local communities need to monitor if radical or extremist groups use any mosque, or madrasa for their recruitment, training, or motivational purposes, or if any teacher, imam or religious leader use radical narratives among the young people, students, or the general masses. The media, and the local government institutions can play significant role in raising public awareness against counter-narratives of the radical groups. Above all, Imams, religious leaders, and teachers of madrasas need to be trained and equipped with logistics and resources so that that they preach or teach accurate messages of Islam to keep the young and general masses away from disaffected with violent extremist and radicalization.

The government undertaking of counter-radicalization programs to address the underlying causes of the deeply rooted problem of Islamist militancy and violent extremism lacks sincerity as seen in their response to the attacks and murders since 2013 of university professors, writers, publishers, secular bloggers, gay rights activists, foreigners, policemen and members of religious minorities, including Shia and Sufi Muslims, Christians and Hindus by suspected militants. The current government has followed the hard approach like the previous governments. The hard approach, which includes the weeklong police drive, may be successful in catching the real killers, but in the long run might further complicate the problem of militancy as discussed above. Side by side police measures, and political reform, the government needs to launch concerted counter-radicalization and de-radicalization efforts to address Islamist militancy, which is largely a violent extremism problem in Bangladesh.

## **Conclusions**

Past and present Bangladeshi governments have been very serious about addressing the problem of militancy and terrorism since 2005, but they have flip-flopped on their position from denying the presence of Islamist militant groups to accepting them. A counterterrorism strategy banning major militant groups and keeping them and others in check was successful

in Bangladesh until 2013. But the coercive approach of law enforcement-centric means that utilize police, paramilitary forces and other law enforcement agencies alone seems to be inadequate. A comprehensive strategy should be undertaken to counter militancy, radicalization and extremism. The proper implementation of anti-militancy initiative undertaken by the education ministry, information ministry, and religious affairs ministry can be effective to counter-and de-radicalize the vulnerable young people as discussed in the paper.

The exercise of political blaming between the two rivalry major political parties has continued till today. To address the root causes of violent extremism and radicalization, the political will among all political parties to not politicize the problem of militancy is a must. Politicians must become tolerant, and instead of blaming different political parties, should investigate the underlying causes of militancy and terrorism to address this problem effectively in Bangladesh.

The government must not shrink the democratic space in mainstream politics. The ruling elites must not violate constitutional rights by stifling and suppressing the freedom of speech of those with different and opposing opinions. The law enforcement measures need to respect and protect human rights. The politicians must not create a political environment practicing violent political rhetoric and intolerance that can create an enabling environment for the extremists and militants to flourish in the context of multiple factors – domestic and external, religious, political and cultural as highlighted above.

There is a significant need for empirical research into the causes, networks, and operations of militant and terrorist outfits as well as the radicalization processes of young people toward becoming extremists and militants in Bangladesh.

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