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Interactions of “Transnational” and “Local” Islam in Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the historical trajectory and current status of key transnational Islamic organizations, conduits and trends in Bangladesh to assess their impact on the socio-political and conflict dynamics of the country. The paper argues that Bangladesh's socio-political dynamics and a weak Bangladeshi state have fostered the proliferation of Islamic organizations and Islamist parties with transnational ties. Transnational Islamist currents have also given rise to militant organizations in Bangladesh over the past decade. The paper argues that Bangladesh will continue to witness tensions between transnational interpretations of Islam and local practices in the future, and argues for a more historically grounded and nuanced strategy to help the country oppose its militant elements while strengthening its pietist, tolerant and secularist currents.

MAIN FINDINGS

Transnational Islamic and Islamist organizations, both pietist and political, have a considerable presence in Bangladesh. In recent years, the transnational Islamist organizations have grown significantly. Bangladesh's domestic political environment over the past two decades allowed the Islamists to consolidate their position; consequently, it opened the space for transnational Islamist groups to operate with state support. If the situation remains unchanged, the space for Islamist activities will widen further. Some of these Islamist groups espouse violence, posing a threat to the country's security. The presence of transnational militant groups in Bangladesh has also increased sectarianism within the country. Some of these organizations are extending their operations to neighboring India. Local traditional Islamic practices in Bangladesh are undergoing changes due to interactions with the outside world mediated by transnational Islamic groups, the Bangladeshi diaspora community and the global media. The increased religiosity among the Bangladeshi population, palpable changes in dress, social behavior, and increased sensitivity towards religious issues are indicative of the ongoing changes. Bangladesh is likely to continue to witness tensions between local traditional Islamic practices and those promoted by transnational groups, which will have social and political implications alike.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While it is necessary to remain cognizant of the Islamists' presence in Bangladesh's political arena, the policies of Western nations should not undermine the secularist forces representing the majority of the Bangladeshi population.
- Transnational Islamist thought and organizations are impacting upon both the social and political arenas of Bangladesh; therefore, policies should be cognizant of these twin aspects in order to be comprehensive in nature.
- The local traditional Islamic traits which encourage pietist practices and the separation of faith and politics in Bangladesh should be highlighted and strengthened.
- Emphasis should be given to the enhancement of the Bangladeshi state's capacity for cultivating political goodwill to deal with transnational Islamist political networks which pose a threat to the country's security.

This study examines the interplay of transnational Islamic thought and organizations with local practices of Islam in Bangladesh. The impact of these interactions on Bangladesh, and the responses of Bangladeshi society and the state to these transnational-local exchanges are explored to see whether changes have taken place in the common understanding of religion, and how those changes have influenced Bangladesh's socio-political and conflict dynamics. Drawing on these analyses, the study attempts to map the trajectories of religio-political ideas and forces in Bangladesh.

In particular, the study seeks to answer the following specific questions:

- Which transnational Islamic/Islamist¹³⁴ groups and movements have a significant presence in Bangladesh?
- What are the primary conduits through which transnational Islamic influences are spread in Bangladesh?
- Does the presence of transnational Islamic/Islamist organizations influence the dynamics of local conflicts?

In light of policymakers' growing concerns over the transnational scope of Islamist politics, answers to the above questions will provide specific information regarding the nature and scope of transnational networks and local Islamic practices in Bangladesh, the third largest Muslim-majority country of the world.¹³⁵ As opposed to the current security-centric and generalized understanding that all transnational networks constitute a blanket threat to global security, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of the political and social milieu within which these movements are operating in Bangladesh.

The assessment of the country's socio-political and conflict dynamics will help to identify the key actors and drivers of transnational Islam in its pietistic (i.e., movements underscoring personal devotion, piety, and spirituality), Islamist and militant variants. As this paper demonstrates, comprehension of these diverse actors' and movements' specific roles within Bangladesh's socio-political ecosystem is imperative to identify those entities which pose a real threat to security and, consequently, to devise more specific and directed policies to alleviate these threats.

Following this introduction, the paper is divided into six sections. The first section comprises a background of the country, especially highlighting the interplay of religion and politics since Bangladesh's inception in 1971. This historical narrative demonstrates that, despite declaring secularism as a state principle and limiting the role of religion in politics, the Bangladeshi state in its early days failed to address the latent tension between the idea of secularism and the role of Islam in society. After 1975, Bangladesh's military rulers seized upon this tension and brought Islam into the political arena in order to gain political legitimacy. The paper's second section maps the various dimensions of lived Islam (i.e., Islam as practiced by various strata of society) in the country including the political arena. The author shows that Islam is variously understood and expressed by the people of Bangladesh. The third section briefly traces the historical antecedents of the interactions between local and transnational Islamic thought in Bangladesh to demonstrate that such interactions are not new to the country. This section also discusses the long-term impacts

¹³⁴ Throughout this paper organizations which advocate religious revivalism as a mode of personal salvation and do not seek to use Islam as a mobilizational tool for political objectives are described as Islamic organizations; while those organizations that view Islam as a political ideology with specific goals related to political and social changes are referred to as Islamist.

¹³⁵ Almost 89% of Bangladesh's population adheres to Islam. Bangladeshi Muslims are predominantly Sunni, but a small number follow the Shia tradition. The largest religious minority of the country is Hindu, comprising 9% according to the 2001 census. Christianity and Buddhism are also followed by a very small segment of the population.

of these interactions, and demonstrates that the most positive impact of these interactions has been the strengthening of the country's syncretistic¹³⁶ tradition, while the most negative impact has been the spread of sectarianism.

The responses of society and the state in recent years to transnational Islam are the focus of the paper's fourth section. It is argued that the state has facilitated—whether by choice or its inability to oppose them—the entry of both pietistic organizations, like the Tabligh Jamaat (TJ), and militant organizations, like Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), into the country. The societal responses to the influence of transnational ideas and organizations have been mixed, as this section also shows.

The content of transnational Islamic/Islamist messages and the diverse strategies employed to propagate them are discussed in the paper's fifth section. As this section shows, transnational Islamism insists on a global Muslim identity and presents the *umma* (the global Muslim community) as a political community of faith. The popular conduits for the transmission of transnational Islam's message in Bangladesh include satellite television and DVDs, on the one hand, as well as local oral traditions, on the other.¹³⁷ New modes of communication, such as *halaqa* (informal study groups), have also been popularized in recent years.

Finally, this paper presents possible future trajectories of transnational Islam in Bangladesh, drawing policy implications from the paper's central findings. The author argues that the interactions between transnational and local Islam will not be unidirectional, nor will they traverse one single trajectory. Furthermore, global and domestic political developments will influence these trajectories as much as the strengths of the forces involved.

Background

Bangladesh emerged as a secularist state in 1971 as the result of a decade-long linguistic nationalist movement and a long brutal war against Pakistan. The most significant element of the nationalist movement that brought Bangladesh into being was the replacement of religion with ethnicity as the primordial marker of identity. The country framed its constitution in 1972, incorporating secularism as one of the four state principles in the constitution, while proscribing the use of religion in politics.

The declaration of secularism as a state principle, in theory, consigned religion to the private realm, and therefore did away with the mix of religion and politics. However, the meaning of “secularism” remained vague to both the ruling elites and the common masses. The government soon began undercutting the spirit of secularism through an array of activities including broadcasting religious programs on the state-controlled media. Political leaders also began using religious expressions in their speeches. The country joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the Islamists who had collaborated with the Pakistani Army in its genocidal war against the Bengali population were pardoned through a general amnesty.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Syncretic here refers to the incorporation of local cultural practices which are not attached to conventional Islamic rituals and practices, especially those found in the Arabic-speaking Muslim world.

¹³⁷ The Internet, which has become a major conduit in many parts of the world in transmitting Islamist ideology and thoughts, is not a significant mode of transmission in Bangladesh. Given its limited reach within the country, Bangladeshi Islamists have yet to harness the potentials of the Internet.

¹³⁸ The decision came after all Pakistani military personnel, including 195 charged with war crimes, were handed over to Pakistan as a result of an agreement between India and Pakistan. The government also faced pressure from the international community, particularly Muslim countries, not to prosecute the members of the Pakistani Army and their local supporters.

At the same time, many socio-religious organizations in the country continued propagating religious messages and events tied to religion were celebrated. Not only did the tradition of *waz mahfils* (public scriptural commentary) and *urs*¹³⁹ continue, the government allowed the madrassas (Islamic seminaries), particularly of Deobandi persuasion, to impart Islamic education despite the nationalization of education. The education commission, appointed to devise a uniform education system, recommended the maintenance of religious educational institutions (REIs) and religious studies within the mainstream curriculum in its 1974 report.

A latent tension between the idea of secularism and the role of religion thus remained within Bangladeshi society. The absence of a clear understanding of secularism had an important role primarily in maintaining, and perhaps intensifying, this tension.

Islam gained a more visible role in the public arena after the demise of the Awami League government headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.¹⁴⁰ The military regime of Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) brought changes to the state principles, replacing secularism with “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah,” and allowing the religion-based political parties to participate in the political process. The regime also directly encouraged religious activities, befriended Islamists, and incorporated religious education as part of the school curriculum.

The government also insisted on the Muslim identity of the Bangladeshi population as opposed to their ethnic identity.

A closer relationship with Muslim countries in the Middle East and Gulf became the hallmark of the country’s foreign policy under Ziaur Rahman. These steps were taken further by Ziaur Rahman’s successor, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who usurped the state power in 1982 through another coup. The Ershad regime, in its bid to gain political legitimacy, declared Islam the state religion in 1988.

One of the defining features of the Ziaur Rahman and Ershad regimes was their belief in the role of Islam in public life and in politics. These regimes succeeded in bringing Islam into the country’s political discourse and strengthened the legitimacy of Bangladesh’s Islamists—both constitutionally and politically.

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¹³⁹ *Urs* is the celebration of the anniversary of the death of Sufis or saints by devotees at the saint’s shrine.

¹⁴⁰ Mujibur Rahman, his close associates, and most members of his family were brutally killed in a *coup d’etat* in 1975.

Locating Islam

The size of the Bangladesh’s Muslim population and Islam’s growing influence in public life should not obfuscate the fact that there are various meanings of Islam and its role in individuals’ lives in the country. While religiosity is important, individual practice of Muslim rituals varies enormously. Artifacts of traditional popular culture—for example, folk songs—emphasize the mystic tradition within Islam; veneration of *pirs* (saints) and *mazars* (shrines) are common practices which draw on local tradition;¹⁴¹ and the *ulama* in Bangladesh are adherents of various *madhabs* and *maslak* (ways or creed).

Lived Islam in Bangladesh can be broadly divided into two categories: social Islam and political Islam (see Table 1).¹⁴² The traditional and daily practices, social institutions which occasionally draw on interpretations of Islam, and the religious mindset of the common people comprise social Islam. The defining characteristics of this category are that its practitioners are not guided by scripturalist interpretations of Islam (i.e., literal interpretations of the Qu’ran and hadiths), are inclusive of various opinions, practice Islam without any rigidity and underscore individual piety.

Political Islam, on the other hand, is guided by the political objectives of Islamist organizations. For these organizations, Islam is a political ideology, and there is only one acceptable, “true” interpretation of Islam. These organizations insist that, for individual Muslims, working toward societal change is a sacred responsibility, no less important than their personal salvation.

TABLE 1 Variations of Islam in Bangladesh

Social Islam				
Sufi Tradition	<i>Pirs</i> and <i>Mazars</i>	Tabligh Jamaat	Traditional Institutions and Practices	“Religiosity”
Mujaddadiya; Chistiya; Nakshbandia; Quaderia	Furfura; Jainpuri; Sharshina; Chor Monai; Atrashi; Enayetpuri; Fultali <i>Mazars</i> Bayazid Bostami; Shah Jalal; Khan Jahan Ali; Maijbhandari	<i>Dawa</i> ; annual congregation; apolitical gatherings	<i>Salish</i> (informal arbitration); <i>fatwa</i> (edict); madrassa (religious seminary)	Celebration of Eid; restraints during Ramadan; use of Islamic greetings; fearful of religious sanctions, but non-followers in daily lives

¹⁴¹ While there are *pirs* who have appeared only in the last century, there are *mazars* which have existed for centuries. The widespread appeal of *pirs* and *mazars* extends beyond the Muslim community. In Table 1, the author has cited four shrines: the shrines of Bayazid Bostami located in Chittagong; Shah Jalal in Sylhet; Khan Jahan Ali located in Khulna; and Maijbhandari of Chittagong. By no means is this list exhaustive, but it is indicative of a tradition in Bengal and, later, Bangladesh which is still vibrant and appealing to a large mass of people.

¹⁴² Understandably, this categorization is simplistic and is not equipped to deal with Bangladeshi society’s rich diversity. However, the use of this category is intended to underscore the fact that there is no monolithic Islam in Bangladesh.

Political Islam

Mainstream Islamists	Radical	Militant
Islam as a political ideology; adheres to certain interpretation of Islam; <i>shari'a</i> or a variant of <i>shari'a</i> is preferred; accommodative; participants in (secular) constitutional politics; create bases with political goals in mind	Islam as a political ideology; strict political interpretation of Islam; plan to implement <i>shari'a</i> ; no desire to participate in (secular) constitutional politics; maintains close relationship with external entities; militancy—if and when necessary	Islam as political ideology and “a way of life”; orthodox interpretation of Islam; rural based; despise the “secular” nature of the constitution and the social life; maintains external connections; views militancy as a legitimate means

Notwithstanding the similarities, there are at least three broad subgroups within the political Islam category depending on the organization’s political and organizational strategies vis-à-vis electoral politics. Further exploration of the landscape of Islamist politics, particularly the pronounced goals and objectives of the extant organizations, shows that there are at least five kinds of Islamist parties currently operating within Bangladesh (see Table 2). Of these Islamist parties, those which fall within the first four categories operate within mainstream politics, while those in the fifth category are clandestine and some have been proscribed since 2005.

TABLE 2 Taxonomy of Islamist Political Parties in Bangladesh¹⁴³

Type	Distinguishable Traits	Name of the Parties
Pragmatist/Opportunist	Want to establish Islamic social order in society through the state; believe in “Islamic revolution”; participate in elections; support-base is wide-ranging	Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) Bangladesh
Idealist and Orthodox	Want a pure Islamic state; support base is largely within privately operated Deoband-style madrassas known as <i>qwami</i> madrassas	Jamiyate Ulema-e-Islam; Khelafat Andolon; Ahle Hadith; Islami Morcha; Khelafat Mojlish; Nejam-e-Islam (Some of the above political parties founded a seven-party coalition called the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), or the Islamic United Alliance.)
Pir-centric and Mazar-based	Aim to establish a state based on traditional Islam and <i>shari'a</i> ; party organized around individuals; weak support-base	Zaker Party; Islami Shashontantra Andolon (Islamic Constitution Movement); Bangladesh Tariqat Federation
Urban Elite-Centric	Want to establish <i>khilafat</i> (caliphate); internationally connected; highly educated middle class leadership; yet to take part in elections	Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh
Jihadists/ Militant Groups	Militant Islamists who aim to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh through jihad; international connection, particularly with Pakistani militant groups	Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B); Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB); Hijbut Tawheed; Shahadat-e-Al Hikma

¹⁴³ Ali Riaz and Kh. Ali Ar Raji, “Who Are the Islamists?” in Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (eds.), *Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh* (forthcoming).

It is important to note that in recent years some organizations have blurred the boundaries between social Islam and political Islam, especially those that are *pir*-centric and *mazar*-based. Until the 1980s, cases of the involvement of *pirs* in Bangladeshi politics were few and far between, and *mazars* were never associated with political activism. Urban elite-centric and militant Islamists—the two groups of parties that are more connected to transnational Islamist ideas—have emerged in the last two decades.

These categories and subcategories of lived Islam coexist within society and therefore they interact, adapt, accommodate and compete with each other. As much as they are influenced by local cultures, they bring in “external” influences and, as such, within the context of this paper, they represent “transnational” Islam. The results of these interactions are by no means predetermined. The ideas generated outside the boundaries of Bangladesh shape and reshape the practices within the country.

It is well to bear in mind that the impact on “social Islam” is distinctly different from that on “political Islam.” In the case of the former, the societal practices, articles of clothing, and social expressions are changed without any implications for the political system and often are limited to individuals. The latter, however, calls for a change in the system of governance, encourages group activities, insists on activism, and if necessary, challenges the extant political system. Therefore, these forms of impact call for different responses—from both society and from the state.

Historical Antecedents and Long-Term Impacts

The interplay of religion and social movements and political activism, and the interactions between “transnational” Islamic ideas and “local” practices in post-independence Bangladesh should not be viewed as unprecedented. On the contrary, the region now called Bangladesh witnessed the arrival of transnational Islamic ideas and movements during British colonial rule (1757-1947).

Three movements, one of which is still alive and vibrant worldwide, are worth mentioning here. They are: the Faraizi Movement, the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya, and the Tabligh Jamaat (TJ). The revivalist Faraizi movement, founded by Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840), was inspired by Muhammad bin Abdl Wahab of Hijaz and spread through a large part of eastern Bengal in the early nineteenth century. The movement took a violent form under Dudu Miyan (1819-1862) and fought battles against the British rulers.¹⁴⁴ The death of Dudu Miyan and the highly repressive measures of the colonial rulers resulted in the demise of the movement.

The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya movement, pioneered by Shah Sayyid Ahmad (1780–1831) of Rai Barelwi and Shah Ismail (1782–1831), began in northern India and reached Bengal during the 1820s and 1830s. In Bengal the movement was led by the peasant leader Sayyid Nisar Ali, alias Titu Mir (1782–1831), who fought against the British army and died in battle. In Bengal the movement also played a key role in raising funds for the mujahideen who fought against the British in the northwestern frontier region.

Although these two movements found support within the peasant community for various reasons specific to the time and context, their universal religious appeal was no less significant. Importantly, leaders of these revivalist movements underscored the role of the community as a

¹⁴⁴ It should be noted here that the movement had a class dimension to it. In many instances the participation of Muslim peasants was guided by socio-economic consideration. The Muslim peasants were protesting against the upper caste Hindu landlords and moneylenders.

group instead of the individual in attaining the goal of establishing a pure Islamic society. The Tabligh Jamaat (discussed further below), on the contrary, insists on personal piety. The movement, founded in the late 1920s by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas (1885-1944), reached Bengal within a short time of its inception and had become a principal revivalist movement by the end of the century.

The current context of interactions between local and transnational Islamic movement and ideas, therefore, has a historical background; the interactions have many antecedents—during colonial rule and afterwards. These interactions have impacted Bangladeshi society both positively and negatively. The most palpable positive long-term impact has been the strengthening of the syncretistic tradition of Islam. As such, the Islamic tradition in Bengal and, later, Bangladesh has successfully adapted to Hinduism and other religious traditions. The adaptation and accommodation of various religious and cultural traditions have enriched the experience of the Muslim community. By allowing shared customs, traditions and practices to be part of a universal faith, the adherents have learned that monolithic Islam is nonexistent and unrealistic. In the long-run, these interactions have made Islam stronger and more appealing to the people of Bangladesh. Additionally, Islam was never considered as an exogenous idea nor were Muslims seen as migrants to the country.¹⁴⁵

The most significant negative impact of transnational ideas has been the importation of sectarianism.

The most significant negative impact of transnational ideas has been the importation of sectarianism. Until recently, sectarian and denominational differences had never featured in the public discourse and treatment of individuals in Bangladesh. Shia-Sunni differences have had no relevance to the social and/or political life of the region that now comprises Bangladesh. In post-independence Bangladesh, sectarianism remained a non-issue, particularly due to the small number of adherents to Shiism. However, since the mid-1980s, denominational differences with the Ahmadiyya¹⁴⁶ community have been highlighted by a group of Islamists under the banner of the Khatme Nabuwat (KN) Movement (discussed below). KN has engendered an intolerant environment in Bangladesh, and the Ahmadiyya community has come under virulent attacks.

Recent Experience and Responses of the State and Society in Bangladesh

In recent years, the influences of transnational Islamic thought and organizations on Bangladesh's socio-political landscape have arrived through a number of channels. Some of these

¹⁴⁵ A number of scholars have documented the tradition of adaptation and inclusion of Islam in Bengal as the religion has influenced the local culture and vice-versa. The most prominent among these scholars (and their works) are: Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984); Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: OUP, 1996); and Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

¹⁴⁶ Ahmadiyya, also called Qadiani, is a small Muslim sect. Ahmadiyyas are the followers of reformist Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908) who hails from Qadian, in Punjab, India. Ahmadiyyas claim to practice the Islam that was taught and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Some Muslim groups—from both Sunni and Shia sects—insist that the Ahmadiyyas are non-Muslims. The acceptance of the finality of the Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet has been cited as the main source of contention between the mainstream Muslim sects and the Ahmadiyyas. In 1973, the Pakistani government declared Ahmadiyyas non-Muslims.

channels have been in place for some time (for example, the Tabligh Jamaat); some have emerged as unintended consequences (emerging, for example, from short-term migration of Bangladeshis to states in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf); and some have been fostered by external entities (for example, the Khatme Nabuwat Movement and Islamic charity organizations). Primarily, the social milieu has been affected by these transnational Islamic currents, but their impact is also felt within the political arena.

Some transnational influences have borne directly on the political system of the country. Two prominent ones in this regard are the urban-based Islamist organizations, such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), connected to the London-based international operation of the HT, and the militant organizations, such as the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJIB), and its front organization, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMJB), with close links to militant Islamist groups based in Pakistan. The following is a discussion of some of the key transnational organizations and influences at play in Bangladesh and state and societal responses to their presence and activities.

Tabligh Jamaat

In post-independence Bangladesh, as religion-based political parties were proscribed and the Islamist parties had lost ground due to their role in the 1971 war, the Tabligh Jamaat continued with its *dawa*, or missionary, movement. Contrary to the popular perception that TJ only targets poor, rural populations for its membership, this social movement attracts members from various levels of Bangladeshi society. The three TJ headquarters (*markaz*) established in Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong¹⁴⁷ during the Pakistan era (1947-1971) remained fully operational. With a new leadership in place (Maulana Abdul Aziz) in 1971, the TJ continued with its work.

One of the TJ's key leaders in then East Pakistan between 1947 and 1971, Mohsin Ahmed was a faculty member at the Engineering College in Dhaka. He provided leadership even after independence. The other person with considerable influence within the TJ's leadership was Maulana Ali Akbar from Brahmanbaria. In Dhaka, the Karkrail mosque was used as the venue for the TJ's annual congregation in 1954 and developed into a large mosque in subsequent years to act as the country's TJ headquarters. After holding the annual congregation in several other cities within the country, it was moved to the present venue, in Tongi, near the industrial town outside Dhaka, in 1967. The TJ's mass congregation, described as the *Bishwa Ijtima*, brings together about three million members of the movement from 70 countries.¹⁴⁸ It is the largest gathering of Muslims outside Saudi Arabia.

The Tabligh Jamaat's open and non-hierarchical structure has helped to increase its following in Bangladesh. Between 1992 and 2001, Abdul Mukit, the younger brother of Mohsin Ahmed, acted as first among equals in the collective leadership of the organization.¹⁴⁹ A *shura* (TJ's highest policy-making body), comprising seven members, leads the movement. The members include medical

¹⁴⁷ Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jamaat* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2002), 183.

¹⁴⁸ See "Three million Muslims join mass prayer in Bangladesh seeking peace," *International Herald Tribune*, February 3, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Mumtaz Ahmad, personal communication, January 2005. Professor Ahmad has done extensive fieldwork on the TJ in Bangladesh and Pakistan over the years.

doctors, engineers, and educators, among others. The leadership is reflective of the composition of its membership as the movement has a large following within the educated segments of society.¹⁵⁰

The state's response in the early years was to disregard the TJ's existence as if it was a fringe movement with a very small following. But in the post-1975 period the movement began to attract the attention of the government and opposition politicians alike. Since then, Bangladesh's president, prime minister, members of the cabinet, and the leader of the opposition each year attend the last day of the TJ's mass congregation to join the final prayer.¹⁵¹ The members of the TJ travel within and outside the country in groups, and the Kakrail mosque hosts hundreds of TJ followers from various countries all year round.

Observers attribute the success of the TJ in Bangladesh and elsewhere to the organization's non-controversial and non-sectarian message, direct personal appeal, the movement's building of communities through communal living during the *gasht* (travel), and mutual moral-psychological support during the TJ's *chillahs* (40 days of travel in a group).¹⁵² One of the interesting results of the growing visibility and popularity of the TJ is the transnational dimension of the movement.¹⁵³

If the TJ has brought a non-hierarchical, open, inclusive, community-based understanding of Islam to public attention in Bangladesh, the Khatme Nabuwat movement and the short-term migrants have brought a completely opposite concept of Islam from abroad. The migrants' exposure to a strict "Islamic" practice in Middle Eastern countries has fueled orthodoxy and emphasis on textual Islam. The latter runs counter to Bangladesh's syncretistic tradition, but has gained salience in recent years.

Khatme Nabuwat Movement

The denominational difference with the Ahmadiyya community was first featured at the local level in Brahmanbaria, a district town southeast of Dhaka, when Syed Abdul Wahed, a *pir* and the head *maulana* (scholar) of a local school, began preaching Ahmadiyya thought in 1912. In an effort to counter this preaching, a madrassa of Deobandi persuasion named the Jamia Yunusia Madrassah was founded in 1915 by Maulana Abu Taher Muhammad Yunus of Muzaffarpur, India. The tension arising over the Ahmadiyya community remained local until 1987.¹⁵⁴

In the late 1980s, the Jamia Yunusia Madrassah and *ulama* connected with the madrassa took the lead in founding the Bangladesh chapter of the Khatme Nabuwat Movement, modeled after a similar organization in Pakistan, to demand that the Ahmadiyya community be declared non-Muslim. It should be stressed that the KN did not grow from within Bangladesh, but was cultivated by activists with direct connections to the Pakistani organization. With the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh witnessed a growing tendency to identify Muslims

¹⁵⁰ For example, the newly appointed (2008) chief justice of the Bangladesh Supreme Court, Justice Ruhul Amin, is reportedly a member of the TJ. Muhammad Yeahia Akhter, in a survey of 20 Tabligh members found that six of them are civil servants, four are teachers, three businessmen, two students, two engineers, a non-government employee, a banker and an army official. 14 of the respondents of the survey are 40 years or older; 16 of them either have a baccalaureate or higher degree. Muhammad Yeahia Akhter, *Tabligh Jamaat: Imani Andolonon Somajatik Bisleshon* (Tabligh Jamaat: Sociological Analysis of the Faith Movement, in Bengali) (Dhaka: Adorn Publication, 2006), 144-147.

¹⁵¹ In 1996, the government led by Khaleda Zia permanently allocated 160 acres of land for the TJ's mass congregation. In 2000, the government of Sheikh Hasina announced that the land would be handed over to the TJ. *Ibid.*, 84 and 89.

¹⁵² Discussions with Mumtaz Ahmad helped the author in identifying these factors in the TJ's success.

¹⁵³ Although the TJ officially does not insist that Islam transcends boundaries of the nation-state and, therefore, that a sense of global community among Muslims must be formed, many Bangladeshis have nevertheless derived this message from the presence and works of the TJ. This observation is based on the author's conversations with a number of people in January 2008 in Bangladesh. Respondents were from various socio-economic strata of society.

¹⁵⁴ For instances of recent attacks on the Ahmadiyya community see, Ali Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Complex Web* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 35-36; and *Breach of Faith: Persecution of the Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh*, Human Rights Watch 17, no. 6(C) (June 2005).

by their denominational affiliation. The demonization of and virulent attacks on the Ahmadiyya community, and demands to declare them non-Muslims (*a la* Pakistan) is a case in point.

The attacks on the Ahmadiyya community, which have increased significantly in recent years and had received the tacit support of the government between 2001 and 2006, have contributed to social tension and conflict in Bangladesh. The rise of the KN and subsequent incidents of violence with the possibility of long-term consequences akin to Pakistan are a striking example of how local and external Islamic groups cooperate to construct an issue with disturbing impacts on society and politics.

Short-Term Migration

Between 1976 and January 2002, the number of Bangladeshis who migrated on short-term employment contracts to foreign countries was about three million, of which 82% went to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Libya, Bahrain, and Oman. Saudi Arabia alone accounts for half of the workers who migrated from Bangladesh during this period. These unskilled young male workers with little education, mostly drawn from Bangladesh's rural areas, stayed abroad on average for about four years, during which time they were exposed to a very restrictive religious environment. With very little understanding of the social dynamics of the host countries, the migrants concluded that these countries represented ideal Islamic societies. Often the migrants returned with a very different idea of Islam, thanks to the social system of these countries.

The presence of retrogressive social values and less tolerant interpretations of Islam in the birthplace of the religion were thus misunderstood as authentic Islam. Upon the migrants' return, they insist on practicing their newly acquired religious values at home, within their families and the community, and attempt to reproduce these values through establishing madrassas of Deobandi persuasion. This devastating social cost brought by the economic opportunities of short-term migration has never been adequately dealt with by the state or society. Economic consideration has compelled the state to expand the labor market and export more unskilled and semi-skilled labor to the above mentioned countries. Although unintended, this has opened the door to varying, and often intolerant, interpretations of Islam in Bangladesh.

Islamic Charities

The idea of less-tolerant Islam has also become more influential due to the proliferation of so-called Islamic charity organizations in Bangladesh. These charity organizations include: the Kuwait-based Restoration of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS, *Jam'iyyat Ihya' al-Turah al-Islami*) and Dawlatul Kuwait; the Saudi-based Al-Haramian Foundation and Hayatul Igachha; South Africa-based Servants of Suffering Humanity (SOSH); Emirates-based Al-Fujira; the Dubai-based Al-Ansar Al-Khairiah; the Bahrain-based Dawlatul Bahrain, and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). These organizations have funded or supported madrassas and social organizations which teach and propagate scripturalist, sectarian and militant Islamic ideology.

The process began in the late-1970s, but took a leap in the 1990s as more and more organizations arrived and the government did not monitor their activities.¹⁵⁵ In the 1980s and the 1990s, Islamic charities were allowed to operate in areas where the work of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had been severely restricted. Many of these organizations were found to be

¹⁵⁵ For details of the activities of these organizations and their roles in supporting militant groups, see Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 83-86.

directly supporting the Ahle Hadith group in Bangladesh which founded a number of madrassas throughout the rural areas. These madrassas have been used as recruiting and training centers for members of the militant group Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (discussed below).

New Faces of Transnational Islam

The most prominent representatives of transnational Islamist ideology in Bangladesh's political arena are the clandestine organizations, particularly the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, and the open, emerging group, the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).

The genesis of the HuJIB can be traced back to its origin in Pakistan. The Pakistani organization came into being in the early 1980s as a group of supporters for the Afghan resistance. In the early 1990s, the organization expanded its operation in other parts of the world. The expansion plan was guided by its ideological position—to initiate a struggle for Muslim rights in non-Muslim countries such as the Philippines and Myanmar. In this context, Myanmar was high on the priority list of the HuJI's international organizers.¹⁵⁶

It was during the expansion phase of the organization that Shafiqur Rahman, a Bangladeshi who took part in the Afghan war, was contacted and the HuJI's Bangladesh chapter began its clandestine operation.¹⁵⁷ It is widely reported in the press that

Abdur Rahman Faruqi was the first to lead HuJI's Bangladesh chapter, but died in Afghanistan in 1989. Maulana Rahmatullah, alias Shawkat Osman, alias Sheikh Farid, now leads HuJIB.¹⁵⁸

The existence of the organization came to light on April 30, 1992, a week after the mujahideen emerged victorious in Afghanistan. The Bangladeshi participants of the war expressed their delight at a press conference in Dhaka where the speakers identified themselves as members of HuJI-Bangladesh.¹⁵⁹ Until 1996 HuJIB's activities were largely restricted to the southeastern hills close to the border with Myanmar which suggests that their initial objective was to use Bangladesh as a launching pad to influence the Rohingya movement (the Muslims of Myanmar who fled the

The most prominent representatives of transnational Islamist ideology in Bangladesh's political arena are the clandestine organizations, particularly the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh, and the open, emerging group, the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).

¹⁵⁶ Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁷ It is worth mentioning that, beginning in 1984, Bangladeshi Islamists organized a "volunteer corps" to join the Afghan jihad. Some 3,000 people under the leadership of Abdur Rahman Faruki were "motivated" to travel in several batches to Afghanistan and fight alongside other volunteer mujahideen. Over the following four years at least 24 of them died and ten were disabled. In 1988, a delegation of ten self-proclaimed *ulama* from Bangladesh visited Afghanistan. See, *Islami Biplob* (Islamic Revolution), a bulletin published from Sylhet. Also see: Julfikar Ali Manik, "Huji kingpin's coalition link keeps cops at bay," *Daily Star*, November 7 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Intelligence sources interviewed in Dhaka, December 2006; Bertil Lintner, "Bangladesh: Breeding ground for Muslim terror," *Asia Times*, September 21, 2002; Zayadul Ahsan, "Profiles show them interlinked," *Daily Star*, August 28, 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Interview of reporters including Zayadul Ahsan in Dhaka, in December 2005; Ahsan and a number of reporters were present at the press conference.

persecution of the Myanmar military and took refuge in Bangladesh). HuJIB built a number of training camps in the southeastern hill districts.

In 1996, the arrests of 41 HuJIB militants in a training camp in a southeastern district town with a huge arms cache exposed the HuJIB operations and their bases.¹⁶⁰ The organizers immediately moved to districts in the northern and northwestern parts of the country. The HuJIB and the homegrown militant group called the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) joined forces in 1998. HuJIB operatives arrested on various occasions claimed that the organization has about 15,000 members, though this number could not be verified.

HuJIB has been involved in a number of operations since 1996, including several attempts to assassinate Sheikh Hasina. On July 20, 2000 the group planted a 76 kg bomb in a public venue in Kotalipara where Hasina was scheduled to visit.¹⁶¹ An early discovery of the bomb saved the life of the then prime minister. The group made another attempt on August 21, 2004. It attacked a public gathering in the capital Dhaka organized by the then opposition party, the Awami League. A series of grenade attacks on the gathering cost 23 lives including that of a central leader of the party. Hasina escaped unhurt, although she was the primary target, according to the confessional statements of the key HuJIB leaders.¹⁶² The organization, in conjunction with the JMB, exploded 450 homemade bombs throughout the country on August 17, 2005 followed by a number of suicide attacks.¹⁶³

The connections between the external militant organizations and Bangladeshi groups are no longer one-way. For example, the HuJIB is reported to have developed close connections with militants in Pakistan and India. HuJIB operatives arrested in India in 2006 and 2008 have confessed that they received training and funds from Pakistan's Jaish-i-Muhammad and Lashkar-i-Tayyiba.¹⁶⁴ The organization has also trained militants in Bangladesh to engage in subversive activities in India, three operatives arrested in India told New Delhi police. The confessional statements also indicate that militant leaders from Pakistan had traveled to Bangladesh to recruit, organize, train and disburse funds.

Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh

The Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh (HTB) is the country chapter of the London-based HT. The HT launched its Bangladesh chapter on November 17, 2001. This chapter was established at the initiative of a professor of Dhaka University. He came into contact with the HT while studying in England and, upon his return to Bangladesh, he organized a small group at the university.¹⁶⁵ The party spokesperson Muhiuddin Ahmed is a faculty member at the university.

The HT envisions a *shari'a*-based *khilafah* (caliphate) state. The HT is the only Islamist organization to speak of the *khilafat*, and to acknowledge its international connection. Interestingly, the HT in Bangladesh "has been gaining most momentum through its activities at the country's

¹⁶⁰ Case number 100/96, Special Tribunal, Cox's Bazaar.

¹⁶¹ The event was reported in the press at the time of the incident, and later acknowledged by Mufti Hannan, a leader of the HuJIB during interrogation. See Asraful Huq, "Harkatul Jihad banned - Crackdown on militant outfits," *Independent* (Dhaka), October 18, 2005.

¹⁶² "Abu Zandal confesses to carrying out Aug 21 attack," *Daily Star*, February 21, 2008; and, "Aug 21 attack was aimed at killing Hasina: Huji leader confesses before court," *Daily Star*, April 26, 2008.

¹⁶³ For a summary of events, see Riaz, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh*, 1-2.

¹⁶⁴ "HuJI Bangladesh has connections with Indian and Pakistani Militants, Mursalin and Muttakin tell Delhi Police," (in Bengali), *Prothom Alo* (Dhaka), May 16, 2008.

¹⁶⁵ It is worth mentioning that the HT's British chapter has a significant presence among the second and third generation British-Bangladeshis living in London. For details see, Ed Hussain, *The Islamist* (London: Penguin, 2007).

universities.”¹⁶⁶ What makes the HT distinctly different from other Islamist political organizations, including the clandestine ones, is that its political agenda is global, not confined to Bangladesh. The final stage of the three-stage revolution envisioned by the HT, according to the organization’s documents, is: “establishing government, implementing Islam generally and comprehensively, and carrying it as a message to the world.”¹⁶⁷

Until 2005, HTB members did not take part in any street agitation. During the political crisis in late 2006, HTB activists organized several public discussion programs and a roundtable to press their position. HTB members have also been involved in various agitation programs since 2006. After the 2007 declaration of emergency, for instance, 22 HTB activists were arrested at a secret meeting.¹⁶⁸ They were released in April without charge. In September 2007, HTB took the lead in organizing protests against publication of an allegedly blasphemous cartoon in a local daily newspaper. In April 2008, HTB activists were at the forefront of the protest against the government’s women’s development policy. These demonstrations became violent and the police were attacked.

Jamaat-i-Islami’s Transnational Links

While the majority of Bangladesh’s Islamist parties operating within mainstream politics have few external links, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) maintains a close connection with its counterparts elsewhere, particularly in Pakistan. The connections are not openly acknowledged but neither are they denied by JI’s leaders. However, Maulana Nawabzada Nabiullah Khan, a confidant of and adviser to the *amir* (chief) of Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan insisted in an interview in 1999 that during Zia-ul Haq’s regime, “two secret meetings of the JI leaders of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh were held at Peshawar and Multan at which the leaders of India and Bangladesh agreed to work under the overall direction of Pakistan’s JI for this purpose [i.e., destabilizing Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir].”¹⁶⁹

The transnational connection of the JI Bangladesh is not only through Pakistan, but more significantly through the Bangladeshi diaspora in England, particularly in East London. The JI has a significant presence within and receives support from the Bangladeshi community. The transnational connection via England began developing in the late 1970s when former JI activists established the Dawat-ul Islam. The leadership included Chowdhury Muinuddin, Abu Sayeed and Lutfur Rahman, all of whom were members of the Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan until 1971 and were allegedly members of the paramilitary forces which supported the Pakistani Army in 1971.

The establishment of the Dawat-ul Islam, its youth fronts—the Young Muslim Organization (YMO) and the Young Muslim Sisters—and a number of charity organizations in the late 1970s created a more visible and strong network within the Bangladeshi community. The changing

¹⁶⁶ Mahfuz Sadique, “Islam’s New Face?” *New Age* (Dhaka), December 12, 2005, <http://www.newagebd.com/2005/nov/04/eidspecial05/non-fiction03.html>.

¹⁶⁷ “The Method of Hizb-ut Tahrir,” http://www.khilafat.org/newPages/Hizb/htahrir.php#The_Method. This is the official website of the HUT Bangladesh chapter.

¹⁶⁸ “22 Hizbut Tahrir men held while holding secret meet in city,” *Daily Star*, March 31, 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Islam Watch, “What Islam Wants: Let’s Hear From Pakistan Jamat-e-Islami Leader, Maulana Nabiullah Khan,” http://www.islamreview.com/articles/What_Islam_Wants.shtml; and B Raman, “Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami: The Hidden Agenda,” *South Asia Analysis Group Paper*, August 27, 1999. Nawabzada also commented: “Bangladesh was not a result of a language riot. The very idea that they are Muslims will bring the Bangladeshis to Arabic. We already fund heavily the Arabic language courses all over India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. From Morocco to Iraq people speak in Arabic; I don’t see any reason why from Morocco to Burma we will not bring Arabic to the people. Even Bangladesh will start speaking in Arabic. That time there won’t be any Bangladesh where the country name itself has the name of the language. Yes. Right now our aim is just for reunification without touching on the language issue of Bengali. JI of Bangladesh is working towards this aim.”

political landscape at home—i.e., the rise of the Islamists, particularly the JI, in Bangladesh—was far more than a source of moral encouragement for the Islamists abroad as material support also began to arrive.

The Dawat-ul Islam gradually established its influence over the East London Mosque. According to one observer, “The East London Mosque (and its affiliate, the London Muslim Centre [LMC]) shares the ideology of the Jamaat-e-Islami. The mosque is no fringe organization; it was at the centre of the campaign that helped elect the local Respect party candidate and vocal critic of Britain’s New Labour government, George Galloway, in the 2005 general election.”¹⁷⁰ One of the Dawat-ul Islam’s key developments was also the establishment of Muslim Aid in 1985. The organization soon became a global network.

In 1989, a group of Dawat-ul Islam members left the organization and established the Islamic Forum for Europe (IFE) under the leadership of Muinuddin. The YMO followed Muinuddin’s leadership and switched their allegiance to the IFE. Both Dawat-ul Islam and the IFE continued to maintain their contacts with the Jamaat-i-Islami of Bangladesh.

The protests against Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* accelerated the universalization of the message of oppression, and its transcendence from a culturally defined and spatially limited (Bengali) community to a global (Muslim) community. The most significant effect of the Rushdie affair was that it created a national network of Islamists, initially the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) and later the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), both led by the followers of JI ideologue Abul Ala Mawdudi. The events, especially the communication among activists from other countries and the use of an extant JI network in England showed that the JI is no longer just a “national” organization but is capable of leading a transnational movement. Gilles Kepel, documenting the organization of the protest both in South Asia and Britain, concluded that, “the speed of the operation showed the efficiency and perfect coordination of the ‘Islamist International’ created by Mawdudi’s disciples, which was able to run parallel campaigns in India and Britain.”¹⁷¹

State and Societal Responses

As noted above, the Bangladeshi state, since 1975, has maintained a close relationship with other Muslim countries and has never opposed the idea of external influence. A combination of factors, consequently, such as political expediency, desire for short-term gains, infiltration of Islamists within the civil administration, inefficiency of the bureaucracy, lack of intelligence capabilities, and a favorable political environment allowed a dangerous liaison to develop between militant and charitable Islamic organizations in the country. The state’s limited response at the initial stage weakened its ability to halt their proliferation. The societal impact notwithstanding, the law and order situation in Bangladesh deteriorated, and soon these organizations posed a threat to the fragile democracy.

The response of the state, in regard to the militant groups, especially the HuJIB and the JMB, represent the pattern developed since 1996. The government of Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) paid little attention to the growing strengths of the militant groups. The government disregarded the early signs of the emerging network and the intelligence reports were not given due consideration.

¹⁷⁰ Delwar Hussain, “Bangladeshis in east London: from secular politics to Islam,” *Open Democracy*, July 7, 2006, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/bangladeshi_3715.jsp.

¹⁷¹ Gilles Kepel, *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (translated by Susan Milner) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 131.

The militants, on the other hand, intensified their activities, primarily because of their opposition to the ruling party which they considered as a secular party. The victory of the four-party alliance, comprising the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), in the general elections of 2001 provided a hospitable environment to these groups.

However, not only has the government continuously and vehemently denied the existence of any such groups, some members of the government have provided help and support to these groups. The remarks of Mufti Abdul Hannan, the operational commander of the HuJIB, after being arrested illustrate this point clearly. Hannan, who was convicted by a court in 2003 in absentia for attempting to kill the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina in 2000, remained a fugitive until October 1, 2005. When taken into custody Hannan claimed that he had been given assurances by the former home minister that he could safely stay within the country.¹⁷² He told journalists that he had filed a mercy petition to the

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then home minister Air Vice Marshal (retired) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury on the latter's advice.¹⁷³ The existence of the connection between the militants and the BNP government was established in a case filed against a former minister. Aminul Huq, former telecommunications minister, was convicted by a court in July 2007 for abetting and aiding the militants.¹⁷⁴

The government, under pressure from the international community, banned the HuJIB on October 17, 2005. The military-backed caretaker government has intensified their efforts since assuming power in January 2007 to apprehend the leaders of the organization but recent press reports suggest that the network has remained intact.¹⁷⁵

The societal responses to the influence of transnational Islamic currents in the country have been mixed. In the past decade, mosque-attendance has risen significantly; articles of clothing identified with religion are more commonly available and used; and religious festivities are celebrated with more enthusiasm than ever before. These, in conjunction with the presence of

¹⁷² "Mufti Hannan Captured: Militant kingpin tells of Altaf's assurance of 'no fear,'" *Daily Star*, October 2, 2005.

¹⁷³ Hannan has also brought in the name of the editor of an Islamic journal, *Al-Madina*, who is also a leader of the IOJ, through whose efforts he was able to approach the minister. Altaf Hossain denied any such connection saying that, he "never met Mufti Hannan, he does not know him. So, there is no possibility of suggesting [to] him (Hannan) to submit [a] mercy petition." But the fact that a militant leader could make such a claim and that there has been some connections between the said IOJ leader and the militant is indeed disturbing, to say the least.

¹⁷⁴ "Bangladesh jails former minister," *BBC News*, July 26, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6917317.stm.

¹⁷⁵ Ali Riaz, "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: What's to be Done?" *The Progressive Bangladesh*, March 20, 2008, http://www.progressivebangladesh.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=124&Itemid=26.

the increased number of socio-religious organizations in Bangladesh, demonstrate that religiosity among the Bangladeshis has increased significantly.

But this development has also opened up the debate of what constitutes “authentic” Islamic practices and what constitutes “*bid‘a*” (innovation), which is forbidden in Islam. *Mazars* and the disciples of *pirs* have come under attacks from the Islamists, especially those Islamists with transnational links. There has been a vigorous campaign by the transnational Islamists (and the JI) to promote the idea that the veneration of *pirs* and *mazars* is contrary to the “authentic” Islam and should be shunned altogether.¹⁷⁶ On the other hand, members of Bangladesh’s civil society have defended these traditional practices and have argued that the traditional practices are, in fact, integral aspects of the Islam in Bangladesh.

Conduits, Messages and Strategies

While the rise of political Islam and the roles played by Islamist organizations in Bangladesh’s political arena have received scholarly attention, the messages transnational Islamic organizations bring to Bangladesh and their methods for disseminating these messages have not been subjected to rigorous discussion. One of the key features of transnational Islamism is that it emphasizes the “Muslim identity” as opposed to national identities bounded by culture and geography. Reference to the *umma* and the responsibilities of the Muslim community remain central to the transnational Islamists’ message.¹⁷⁷

In the context of Bangladesh, perhaps as in many other societies, we are witnessing the contestation between the reinforcement of cultural identity and its new construction represented, respectively, through Bengali/Bangladeshi identity and the Muslim identity. The construction of a new identity in Bangladesh requires new cultural artifacts and new representations; transnational organizations are engaged in presenting these new artifacts and representations through a number of media.

It is well to bear in mind that transnational ideas are not presented as messages from the outside world, but as commentary on and explanation of texts such the Qur’an and hadith in the local context. Thus, the messages are presented as “authentic” and inherently connected to the “fundamentals” but explained within a modern context which makes these messages relevant and useful.

While oral tradition remains the principal mode of communication in Bangladesh, transnational media, particularly satellite television, has also become a major conduit for the Islamist message. To use the oral tradition, traditional practices and institutions are employed. *Waz mahfil* (i.e., public commentary of scriptures), is a case in point. Traditionally, *waz mahfils*, organized in both urban and rural areas as a means of preaching Islam among the believers, have been an expression of

¹⁷⁶ In the backdrop of this debate bombs exploded in a number of *mazars*. For examples, the Faila Peer Mazar in Tangail was bombed on 17 January 2003; a year later, a bomb exploded at Shah Jalal’s Mazar in Sylhet. In both instances local Sufi singers and devotees, were the prime targets. In December 2003 hundreds of fish in the pond within the *mazar* premise of Shah Jalal in Sylhet were poisoned. People used to feed these gigantic fish in the tank in the Mazar premise with a hope that their wishes would be fulfilled. On May 21, 2004, there was another bomb attack on Shah Jalal Mazar.

¹⁷⁷ This message finds a sympathetic ear for two reasons; first, the perceived inadequacy of the “national identity” forged on the basis of the idea of the nation-state. It is now well recognized that the global economic and political processes of recent decades, commonly referred to as globalization, continually undermine the validity of the twin pillars of the nation-state—i.e., the socio-political-economic organizations that allow the state to operate, and the “national identity” that provides legitimacy to these organizations. The hegemony of the nation-state-based identity has waned, if not completely ruptured. The second reason which allows the message of transnational Islamic identity to appeal to the common masses is that the erosion of the existing identity—perceived or real—brings communities either look for refuge in their long-held beliefs or attempt to construct a new identity. Stuart Hall has aptly noted that there are three possible consequences of globalization on cultural identities: erosion, reinforcing and the construction of new identities. See Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 273-326.

piety; but since the 1980s, these gatherings have become a forum of commentary on current affairs and thus more centered on ideology rather than on theology. Although a significant proportion of the *mahfils* are conducted by *maulanas* with very little knowledge of Islamic theology, some are being taken over by Islamists with a specific political agenda.

As these *mahfils* have emerged as the most authoritative sources for the interpretation of Islam and its relevance in the lives of a large number of Bangladeshis, the *mahfils'* influence has grown remarkably. The messages are blended with local contexts and wrapped around current local and global political situations to appeal to the masses. The most notable speaker leading these *mahfils* is Delawar Hossain Saidee, a member of parliament and JI's central committee. Saidee uses a distinctly different style of rhetoric and a belligerent style of presentation, and loads his speeches with overt political content. His presentations are meant to assail the secularists, and provide an ideology-driven, politically-motivated interpretation of Islam. These speeches are recorded and sold as audio and video cassettes.

Along with traditional oral practices, new practices are introduced. The most prominent new practices include the informal group meetings, often referred to as *halaqa*, and study groups. These are employed to reach middle class and semi-literate/literate segments of Bangladeshi society. Maimuna Huq, in a perceptive exploration of these study groups in Bangladesh among JI's women activists pointed out that they are rapidly proliferating in many Muslim-majority areas throughout South Asia, and that these study circles not only revolve around the Qur'anic texts and hadiths, but also "Qur'anic commentaries and theological texts produced by authoritative traditional religious scholars, contemporary or recent."¹⁷⁸

Huq further notes that these lesson circles are a key site for "the production of a particular form of Islamic subjectivity."¹⁷⁹ Most importantly,

[These] lesson circles play a central role in the sustenance and expansion of Islamic movements in Bangladesh. They do so by helping reshape activists' conceptions of self, religious duty and others through a rhetoric that deploys specific notions of religiosity and religious identity, culture, state, the global Muslim community or *ummah*, and the current world order.¹⁸⁰

These oral practices to spread the message, despite their proliferation in recent years, only reach a small number of people. However, the reproduction in video and audio formats of *waz mahfil* speeches is intended to make them available to a larger audience. The widespread availability of the audio and video tapes, at home and abroad, has in many ways made the impact of these speeches far-reaching. But in recent years, satellite television has become the most influential way to reach a large audience in Bangladesh.

The importance and impact of global television needs no elaboration. Since the mid-1990s the Bangladeshi government has allowed global and regional satellite stations to broadcast inside the country. Hundreds of regional and global channels are now available at reasonable cost. These global media outlets have undermined the capacity of the state to control the flow of information; political boundaries are no barriers to messages communicated to an audience living in a country

¹⁷⁸ Maimuna Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: The Politics of 'Belief' Among Islamist Women," *Modern Asian Studies*, 42 (2/3) (2008): 457-8.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 459.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

far away from the producers of the messages.¹⁸¹ Islamists have begun to harness the power of satellite television in recent years. Two stations that have made their mark in Bangladesh are “Peace Television” and “Islamic Television.”¹⁸² Notwithstanding the debates on current issues and theological differences, these stations also provide information that reaffirms notions that the Muslim community worldwide faces adversity, and is subject to persecution in many places.

Future Trajectories and Policy Implications

Any discussions on the future of the interactions between “local” and “transnational” Islam in Bangladesh must be prefaced with the obvious fact that neither of these realities have a single, monolithic, homogenous shape; therefore they cannot bear a single trajectory. The variations in contents and conduits of both open up a variety of options for the future.

Despite the fluidity of the situation, four general points can be made with some degree of certainty. First, the future trajectories of the interactions between transnational ideas and local Islamic practices are neither predetermined nor unidirectional. In the age of instantaneous communication neither of them can remain immune; migration of people and ideas will affect each other in a variety of ways. Second, these trajectories will take place within the broader global political milieu for “transnational” Islam is innately connected to international events and ideas. One of the expressions of transnational Islam is the political Islam propagated by transnational groups with a global political agenda. The experiences of Islamist groups with circumscribed nationalist agendas and transnational militant/terrorist groups with a global plan will influence the course, if not equally.

Third, the media, particularly transnational media, and cultural artifacts will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the mentality of Bangladeshis at large. Cultural representations shape identity, and the cultures presented through global media are deconstructing the concept of national Bangladeshi identity. They are overriding the local traditions in many ways and thus opening the possibilities of replacing them with newer practices. Fourth, the role of the Bangladeshi diaspora deserves more attention than it has received thus far. The life experiences of Bangladeshis abroad—whether as short-term migrants or long-term émigrés—both in Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim-minority regions—is bound to have an impact. The new meaning they add to the universal message of Islam influences their social attitudes and activism.

The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that Bangladeshi society, like any other society, has been the site of contestation between these two different interpretations—i.e. universalistic and

¹⁸¹ For a discussion on the nation-state and global media, see Ali Riaz and Anthony DiMaggio, “The Nation-State, Global Media, and the Regime of Supervision” (book chapter under review).

¹⁸² Islamic Television is a local station which began its test transmissions in 2005, and full-scale operation in 2007 with the blessing of the then government headed by Khaleda Zia. This station is considered as the first Islamic channel in Bangladesh. Islamic TV broadcasts local and foreign programs. These programs include talk shows from other Muslim countries, often with voice-overs in Bengali.

Peace Television describes itself as the “Islamic spiritual edutainment international satellite television channel.” Founded in 2006, the station became available to Bangladeshi audiences in 2007. Peace TV’s goal is to remove misconceptions about Islam, claiming that it provides programs based on “authentic teachings of the Qur’an and hadith.” Peace TV is broadcast from India in English and Urdu, and is available free of cost. The programs feature speakers such as Dr. Zakir Naik, Ahmed Deedat, Dr. Israr Ahmed, Maulana Parekh, Dr. Bilal Philips, Yassir Fazaga, Abdur Rahim Green, among others. For more information about Peace TV, see <http://www.peacetelevision.tv/about.php>.

The founder and president of Peace TV, Dr. Zakir Naik, is an orator and theologian. Naik’s discussions and debates on issues ranging from teachings of the Qur’an and the Bible to Islamic dietary advice are also available in DVD format. In Bangladesh, these videos are available with voice-overs in Bengali and have a following. A seller of these videos informed the author in July 2008 that sales of the videos have increased in recent months.

particularistic—for a long time. Thus, the tension and conflict we are witnessing now within Muslim societies, in general, and Bangladeshi society should not be viewed as unprecedented or cataclysmic.

However, the situation is somewhat different from earlier interactions due to the intensity and the political nature of this contestation. The case of Bangladesh demonstrates that within the political realm organizations like the Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islam are appropriating the universalistic message, and employing different strategies to implement their goals of establishing an Islamic state. This does not mean that other mainstream Islamist political parties do not subscribe to the universalistic message of Islam. Despite being preoccupied with a national agenda, these parties also subscribe to the universalistic message and thus connect their agenda with global political developments. The JI is a case in point. The JI's organizational links with similar organizations elsewhere and its positions on domestic political issues are both shaped by the party's acknowledgement of and adherence to the global Islamist movement. The important question is whether a relationship exists (and if not, whether it will be established in the future), between the universalist and nationalist organizations. The likelihood of such an alliance is not farfetched.

The importance and influence of the Islamists in general, particularly those which represent Islam as a transnational political ideology, will depend on the domestic political environment as much as global political developments. If global politics encourages the strengthening of the sense of Muslim victimhood, due to the role of the Western countries, particularly the United States, their appeal to the common masses in Bangladesh is likely to strengthen. Bangladesh's domestic political environment over the past two decades allowed the Islamists to consolidate their position; consequently, it opened the space for transnational Islamist groups to operate with state support. If the situation remains unchanged, the space for operation will widen further.

Changes in regard to the nature and scope of the interactions between local and transnational Islam have taken place at the societal level as well. The increased religiosity among the Bangladeshi population, palpable changes in dress, social behavior, and increased sensitivity towards religious issues are indicative of the ongoing changes. These changes are in part a result of the quest for a new identity. While these changes will have little bearing on political activism, they will continue to shape the worldview of individuals. Consequently, this will sharpen the disagreement with those who favor traditional local Islamic practices. At the same time, the universalistic message of the Tablighi Jamaat will continue to appeal to a segment of Bangladeshi society.

The impacts of the transnational Islamist thoughts and organizations on Muslim society have often been viewed exclusively through the security prism; consequently, studies have only addressed the question whether these interactions pose imminent threats to Western interests. The necessity to understand the security implications cannot be underestimated; but it is well to bear in mind that the security-centric approach provides only a partial picture and reduces the options available to policymakers. Additionally, contemporary developments must not be considered as entirely new phenomena; they deserve to be understood within their proper historical and social contexts. This study of the interactions of transnational and local Islam in Bangladeshi society, therefore, underscores the need for a historically grounded and nuanced understanding of both local and transnational Islam, particularly the nature and scope of their interactions, in formulating policies toward Bangladesh.

This study has further demonstrated that transnational Islamist thought and organizations are impacting upon both social and political arenas in Bangladesh and, therefore, policies should be cognizant of these twin aspects in order to be comprehensive in nature. Time and again the

political landscape receives closer attention and influences the policymaking process. But policies which disregard one of these two aspects may expect to achieve at best a limited success.

The Islamists in Bangladesh present the classic dilemma to the Western policymakers: should the Western governments engage in a dialogue with the Islamists? Policymakers' goals should include reducing the possibility of radicalization of Islamist movements while giving Islamists a stake in the system. While it is necessary to remain cognizant of the Islamists' presence in Bangladesh's political arena, the policies of Western nations should not undermine the secularist forces representing the majority of the Bangladeshi population. More importantly, the local traditional Islamic traits which encourage pietist practices and the separation of faith and politics should be highlighted and strengthened.

This study has demonstrated that in the past decade transnational Islamist thought has given rise to militant organizations in Bangladesh. These organizations receive both ideological and material support from outside the country. Some of these militant organizations now pose a threat to the country's law and order, national security and the social fabric. These forces can only be confronted by the Bangladeshi state. However, Bangladesh will need support from the international community in its fight against militancy. Emphasis should be given to the enhancement of the state's capacity for cultivating political goodwill to deal with transnational Islamist political networks which pose a threat to the country's security.