

REGIONAL THREAT WATCH: ASIA & THE MIDDLE EAST

MAJOR TERRORIST GROUPS

Matthew Henman examines the terrorist groups presenting the largest regional security threat

Jabhat al-Nusra

Jabhat al-Nusra is a Sunni militant Islamist group that operates in Syria. The existence of the group first became public with the release of a video statement on militant Islamist Internet forums on 24 January 2012, in which its leader, Al-Fateh Abu Muhammad al-Golani, announced the group's emergence amid the anti-government uprising throughout Syria that had begun in March 2011. The group's primary objective is the overthrow of the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the creation of an Islamic state under sharia law. The group is active throughout Syria and has a particularly strong presence in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Deir ez Zour, and Deraa, and in the towns surrounding the capital Damascus.

Jabhat al-Nusra's increasingly prominent profile within the Syrian conflict saw the United States government designate the group as an alias of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and therefore as a foreign terrorist organisation, in December 2012. In

addition to claiming the group had, at that point, been responsible for more than 600 attacks in Syria, the designation accused the group of having been founded by former AQI operatives and of receiving direct guidance from AQI leader Ibrahim al-Badri (alias Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).

This was seemingly confirmed on 9 April 2013 when a Baghdadi statement claimed that AQI had sent Golani to Syria in July 2011 to form a militant group with purported AQI militants already present inside Syria. The statement added that henceforth the group would be subsumed within AQI and be known together as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In early 2014, these divisions led to serious and sustained fighting with ISIL – subsequently renamed the ISIS or Islamic State – across the country, making it Jabhat al-Nusra's main non-state rival, although localised co-operation continued periodically until late 2014.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was formed in December 2007 as an umbrella group that would enable the numerous Pakistani pro-Taliban groups operating in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa to co-ordinate their activities and consolidate their growing influence in the region. The constituents of the TTP already posed a significant threat throughout the FATA and in areas of Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa, regularly confronting and defeating Pakistani security forces, while their ability to deploy suicide bombers made them a threat throughout the rest of Pakistan, even in military strongholds such as the garrison city of Rawalpindi. In addition, their control of much of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border enabled them to forge strong operational links with the Taliban, and with al-Qaeda and affiliated groups based in the region.

Following the failure of two high-profile government peace initiatives in early and mid-2008, military operations against the group increased, particularly in Bajaur Agency in August 2008, Swat in April/May 2009, and South Waziristan in October 2009. The death of Hakimullah in a November 2013 UAV strike prompted the TTP to renew its threats against the US, but under the leadership of Maulana Qazi Fazlullah the TTP has continued to express a willingness to negotiate with the government, while maintaining a steady tempo of attacks.



Communist Party of India – Maoist

The Communist Party of India – Maoist (CPI-M) is a left-wing militant group operating primarily in the Indian states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bihar. The group aims to overthrow state governments in its areas of operation and establish communist administrations in their place.

CPI-M operational activity has increased significantly since 2009, with then-prime minister Manmohan Singh re-iterating that year that the CPI-M was the single greatest threat to India's internal security. Since then, the CPI-M has continued to conduct a low-level armed campaign primarily targeting security forces and local government officials in its primary areas of operation, while demonstrating an ongoing ability to launch periodic large-scale, co-ordinated attacks.



Islamic State

The Islamic State, previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is a Sunni militant Islamist group that was founded in Iraq in October 2004 when the leader of Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, pledged fealty to then-al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and changed the name of his group. While initially known as Tanzim Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the group subsequently created a series of front organisations, the longest lasting of which was the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which became ISIL in 2013.

The disavowal of the group by the al-Qaeda central leadership in early 2014 meant that ISIL was no longer a front organisation for an al-Qaeda affiliate, and should be considered a group in its own right. After the group's announcement in June 2014 that it had re-established the khilafa, or caliphate, in territory running from the Syrian governorate of Aleppo in the west to the Iraqi province of Diyala in the east, it renamed itself the Islamic State.

Since April 2013, the Islamic State has been operating openly in the anti-government insurgency in Syria. The push towards Baghdad, coupled with the beheadings of four Western nationals in Syria in August, propelled the group's notoriety to the international level, and by late September an anti-Islamic State partnership led by the United States began conducting air strikes against the group in both Iraq and Syria. Despite this, the threat posed by the Islamic State has not diminished across early 2015.



The Taliban

The Taliban is a militant Islamist group dedicated to the implementation and enforcement of a strict Deobandi form of sharia (Islamic law) throughout Afghanistan. The group originated in the Pashtun belt of southern and eastern Afghanistan in 1994 as a reactionary force against the violence, lawlessness, and corruption of local warlords, in the years of civil war that followed the defeat of the Soviet Union in 1989.

While initially offering only low-level opposition to the new government of President Hamid Karzai, since 2006 there has been a significant escalation in Taliban operations, with the group carrying out an intensifying asymmetric insurgency. The key elements of this insurgency have been the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and small-arms ambushes to target foreign and Afghan security forces in rural areas, alongside the use of suicide and mass-casualty attacks in urban areas, in an attempt to cause insecurity and undermine the rule of the Afghan government. While the Taliban lacks the capability to overthrow the government – even after the withdrawal of the majority of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel from the country at the end of 2014 – there is equally little prospect that it will itself be defeated. Meanwhile, attempts to engage the Taliban in peace talks aimed at a negotiated settlement to the conflict have made little progress to date.

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