biiss journal

Ayesha Binte Towhid

GLOBAL TRENDS OF ONLINE RADICALIZATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: BANGLADESH'S EXPERIENCE AND ITS SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

Besides being a global health catastrophe, the Covid-19 pandemic has raised several more concerns, the alarming rise of online radicalization being one of those. Violent extremist groups across the world exploited the crisis in different manners to push forward their agenda. In most cases, these groups resorted to social media platforms and messaging services to radicalize, recruit, mobilize and instigate attacks. The violent extremist groups in Bangladesh have also engaged in similar acts. Against this backdrop, the paper aims to provide a broad overview of the global trends of online radicalization and a deeper insight into the issue in Bangladesh. The paper finds that globally, there are several observable patterns in the groups' online narratives and overall radicalization process, regardless of their ideologies. In the case of Bangladesh, the online radicalization activities during the pandemic is a continuation of the process seen in the past few years, but the organizations capitalized on the crisis and constructed new narratives surrounding it. Compared to the global trend, there are thematic resemblances with many of the narratives and specific relevance with the contents of transitional faith-based violent extremist groups. Overall, it is perceived that exploitation of the pandemic and the pandemic-induced life condition in Bangladesh is likely to have both short and long-term security implications, some of which are already starting to surface.

Keywords: Online Radicalization, Social Media, Violent Extremist Groups, Security, Extremist Narratives.

1.   Introduction

Starting from the first outbreak of the coronavirus to the virus taking over the entire world within weeks, the pandemic has evolved in several phases. The initial months of anxiety were replaced with a momentary sigh of relief, only to be engulfed with renewed fear amidst new waves of infections. All these brought unprecedented changes and challenges in almost all aspects of life. It exposed several vulnerabilities, which became a fertile ground for exploitation. Violent extremist

---

Ayesha Binte Towhid is Research Officer at Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). Her e-mail address is: ayesha@biiss.org

groups across the ideological spectrum exploited the fear of this disease and the pandemic-induced life conditions as an opportunity to accelerate their radicalization efforts. In most cases, online platforms and communication services became central to their strategies.

In recent years, online radicalization has been a widely discussed topic, particularly after the Islamic States (IS) began to weaponize information and communication technologies (ICT) in ways never anticipated before. Extremist groups of other ideologies soon followed suit. While there was already an upward trend of online radicalization in most parts of the world, the pandemic seemed to have catapulted it. The chaos and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic took a toll on the mental and emotional well-being of individuals and caused significant disruption in the socio-economic and political fabrics of almost all countries. The combination of isolation, restriction in movement, shut down of leisure activities, closure of educational institutions, disruption in economic opportunities, governance issues, social polarization and unrest brought by the pandemic created scope for transnational and the local violent extremist outfits to radicalize different target groups using social media and other online forums.[1]

Several new factors are also in play. Due to Covid, many people are undergoing long periods of isolation, and many are forced to leave their comfort zone and live in a changed social surrounding. In this period of uncertainty, the in-group and out-group rhetoric have become popular across media platforms. The promises of belonging and purpose propagated by extremist groups seem to have become captivating for many people in this situation. With overwhelming fear, anxiety, frustration, boredom, distress and less interaction with peers, the degree of insecurity is heightened compared to any previous times. Moreover, the scopes through which red flags of behaviour change and vulnerability to radicalization are noticed in regular times, like through interaction with teachers, friends, colleagues and family have reduced to a large extent.[2] The convergence of these unforeseeable events and circumstances originating from Covid and the pandemic-induced life condition depicts a 'perfect storm' for radicalization across the globe.[3]

---

[1] United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), *Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism and Terrorism*, Geneva: UNITAR, Division of Peace, 2020.

[2] Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "We're living in a perfect storm for extremist recruitment. Here's what we can do to stop it", *CNN*, 19 July 2020, available at https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/19/opinions/online-radicalization-risk-pandemic-miller-idriss-united-shades/index.html, accessed on 18 March 2021.

[3] "COVID-19 and isolation contribute to radicalisation 'perfect storm', warn UK police", *Reuters*, 18 November 2020; Paul Cruickshank and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: A Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and Counterterrorism with Audrey Kurth Cronin, Lieutenant General (Ret) Michael Nagata, Magnus Ranstorp, Ali Soufan, and Juan Zarate", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 6, June 2020.

The target range and scope of violent extremist groups have also expanded exponentially. The pandemic brought a host of new internet users, and the existing users began to spend an extended time online, becoming the new normal. In the first few months of 2020, total internet hits surged by between 50 per cent and 70 per cent.[4] Simultaneously, there has been a sharp increase in extremist online material and engagement with that content. In this regard, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres cautioned that the pandemic has "highlighted vulnerabilities to new and emerging forms of terrorism, such as misuse of digital technology". He also warned that organizations like "ISIS, Al-Qaida and their regional affiliates—as well as NeoNazis, White Supremacists and other hate groups—sought to exploit divisions, local conflicts, governance failures and grievances to advance their objectives."[5] This exhibits that violent extremist groups across race, religion and ethnicity have tailored their radicalization process centring the pandemic and such acts are likely to bring new dimensions to the global online radicalization landscape.

The online radicalization landscape in Bangladesh is also similar to the evolving global scenario. The violent extremist groups in Bangladesh have interpreted the pandemic from their respective ideologies and customized narratives for different online media, resulting in a surge in radical online content. Members of banned outfits have also attempted to migrate as foreign fighters after being radicalized online.[6] These denote significant security implications for the country and demand attention from experts and academics.

In this backdrop of evolving global and national security concerns, the paper aims to provide a broader overview of the global trend of online radicalization during the pandemic and specific insights regarding online narratives and the engagement process of active violent extremist groups in Bangladesh. It also aims to highlight the short and long-term security implications for the country. For that purpose, three research questions are identified. First, how have the violent extremist groups of different ideologies exploited the pandemic in their online radicalization efforts? Second, how did violent extremist groups in Bangladesh conduct the online radicalization process in this period? Third, what are the security implications for Bangladesh?

To answer these questions, both primary and secondary data are explored. The research is a qualitative one, and the pandemic is used as the key determinant.

---

[4] Mark Beech, "COVID-19 Pushes Up Internet Use 70% And Streaming More Than 12%, First Figures Reveal", *Forbe*s, 25 March 2020.
[5] United Nations, "Secretary-General Warns Terrorists Are Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic, Calls for Vigilance, at Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week Opening", available at https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20161.doc.htm, accessed on 22 April 2021.
[6] Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "17 JMB members arrested on their way to Saudi Arabia", *Dhaka Tribune*, 05 May 2020.

For developing an overview of the global trends, two categories are highlighted: (a) faith-based violent extremist groups and (b) racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist groups. The groups are selected based on their active involvement in using online platforms for radicalization. Discussions regarding the global part are mostly based on secondary data from international organizations, reports of selected government departments, reputed publications and studies of think tanks and academic institutions.

For the Bangladesh part, the paper mainly looks into the online radicalization process of three active violent extremist organizations in Bangladesh, i.e., Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Neo-JMB, Ansarullah Bangla team/Ansar Al Islam (AAI). Primary data is collected through in-depth interviews with law enforcement agency officials from Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit and Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU) in Bangladesh. The interviews provided the practitioner's insight regarding the radicalization process and compensated for the scarcity of literature on the topic in Bangladesh. Researchers and security experts in Bangladesh are also consulted. Primary data also involve analysis of selected social media pages and channels known for sharing content related to these violent extremist groups. Secondary data is collected from reputed journals and reports on terrorism, extremism, and online radicalization in Bangladesh and analysis of selected English and Bangla newspapers reports.

As the pandemic is an ongoing phenomenon, content analysis is limited from January 2020 to April 2021. In this period, besides the havoc caused by the coronavirus, several major domestic and international events in different parts of the world, including Bangladesh, have been incorporated into the narratives of the violent extremist groups. However, this paper limits its discussion to the online extremist contents, which explicitly involved coronavirus-related messages and exploited the pandemic-induced life conditions.

The paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, section two defines key concepts related to the topic. Section three provides a global overview of narratives and audience engagement methods of online radicalization during the pandemic. Section four highlights the online radicalization landscape of Bangladesh in this period. Section five identifies some significant security implications for Bangladesh. Section six concludes the paper.

2.   Defining Key Concepts

While the threat of online radicalization is quite evident, there are several complexities and grey areas among the stakeholders within the country and between

the countries in clearly defining the terms associated with the topic. As this paper addresses the topic in a broader context, it is even more challenging to put forward definitions inclusive of all perspectives. Nonetheless, it is essential to discuss the key concepts of this paper to provide clarity regarding how these terms are operationalized.

2.1.   *Radicalization*

Radicalization is a frequently used term and can denote a wide array of activities. According to Veldhuis and Staun, in the broader sense, radicalization can mean the active pursuit or acceptance of far-reaching societal changes in society that may or may not involve the use of violence. However, when academics discuss the topic from a threat assessment perspective, the focus is more on the narrower aspect of radicalization, i.e., the active pursuit or acceptance of the use of violence to attain the stated goal.[7] In this regard, Wilner and Dubouloz suggest "Radicalization is a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence. It is both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour."[8] In this paper, this line of thought would be used to define radicalization.

2.2   *Online Radicalization*

Radicalization is a complex process and involves several stages. However, there is a commonality among the currently active violent extremist groups in the process, i.e., the focus on online platforms for radicalization. It is a very convenient method as it is easy, affordable, often difficult to trace and can give direct access to potential recruits at any part of the world, just through a few clicks. It enables to reach a large audience with dynamic messages and narratives, encourages interaction and facilitates recruitment.[9] Bermingham defines it as "a process whereby individuals through their online interactions and exposures to various types of internet content, come to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political conflicts".[10] After being influenced by the radical narratives found in different online

---

[7] Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2011, pp. 7-36.

[8] A. S. Wilner and C. J. Dubouloz, "Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2010.

[9] Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*, Cambridge: RAND Europe, 2013.

[10] Adam Bermingham, Maura Conway, Lisa McInerney, et al., "Combining Social Network Analysis and Sentiment Analysis to Explore the Potential for Online Radicalisation," paper presented in the Conference on *ASONAM 2009: Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*, organized by IEEE Computer Society,

platforms, several instances of these radicalized people mobilizing offline. This includes officially joining violent extremist organizations in their home country, radicalizing their peers, participating in violent acts as part of the organization or as lone offenders and even migrating to a different country as foreign fighters. In this paper, attention will be given to this severe aspect of online radicalization.

While several models explain the radicalization process through traditional methods, the current trend of online-based radicalization does not entirely fit into those moulds. The preference of online platforms and the types of engagement also differ from country to country. In this regard, Rappler and Asia Foundation developed a "Social Conversion Funnel" that helps to visualize the process largely.[11] As per the model, the top layer of the recruitment funnel consists of open social media platforms. After connecting through public platforms, the conversation would shift to common internet-based messaging applications, such as WhatsApp. In the next stage, the potential recruits would be directed to more secure messaging services. In the final stage, physical contact would be made to include the person in the organization formally. While there is no mention of such models in the existing literature in Bangladesh, in-depth interviews with law enforcement agency officials found a resemblance with this model in Bangladesh. Although there is a need for further research, it is a good starting point to analyze the online radicalization process in Bangladesh.

2.3   *Violent Extremist Groups*

Online radicalization has become a very efficient tool for violent extremist groups, but it is difficult to define violent extremism and extremist groups in an acceptable way to all. While there is no denying the security threat possessed by these actors, there are several complexities in reaching common ground in defining, labelling and proscribing such groups. In this paper, violent extremist groups will be analyzed based on two broad categories.

2.3.1   *Faith-based Violent Extremist Groups*

The first names that come up in this category would be IS, Al-Qaeda and their affiliated groups. While these groups are often termed as Islamist/Islamic terrorists, Jihadist, faithbased extremist, faithbased terror groups etc., the paper addresses them as violent extremist groups who justify their actions based on an extremist interpretation and misinterpretation of Islam.

Athens, Greece, on 20-22 July 2009.

[11] The Asia Foundation and Rappler Inc, *Understanding Violent Extremism: Messaging and recruitment strategies on social media in the Philippines*, Manila: The Asia Foundation and Rappler Inc, 2018.

There is also a growing trend of groups belonging to Hinduism and Buddhism using online platforms to instigate violence against minority communities. For example, in India, "#coronajihad" was widely used on Twitter, accusing "Muslims of engaging in a form of jihad by spreading the infections to India's Hindu majority".[12] But these groups are usually referred to as ethno-nationalist groups. Hence, in the faith-based violent extremist category, this paper mainly focuses on IS, Al-Qaeda, their affiliates in different regions and the three active violent extremist organizations in Bangladesh, namely, Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Neo-JMB, and Ansarullah Bangla team/Ansar Al Islam (AAI).

2.3.2   *Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist Groups*

Over the last few years, the threat from violent extremists groups based on race and ethnicity has heightened alarmingly in many parts of the world, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States and countries across Europe. Groups with extreme right orientation form a large part of this category. They are labelled differently by different stakeholders, for example, right-wing extremists (RWE)[13], right-wing terrorism[14], violent extreme right-wing (XRW)[15] and Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (RMVE).[16] Considering the debates, this paper identifies these groups based on the definition used by United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED). CTED denotes 'extreme right-wing terrorism' as "a unique form of political violence with often fluid boundaries between hate crime and organized terrorism. It is not a coherent or easily defined movement, but rather a shifting, a complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements (online and offline) espousing different but related ideologies, often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities, xenophobia, Islamophobia or anti-Semitism".[17] In this category, White Supremacists and Neo-Nazis would be specifically highlighted. Eco-fascism will also be briefly discussed as they are often closely associated with such racist motivations. Eco-fascist groups value

---

[12] Mohammed Sinan Siyech and Kalicharan Veera Singam, "Global Threat Landscape: India", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2021.
[13] Europol, *Written contribution to JPSG: Reporting on the fight against right-wing extremism and terrorism (RWE)*, The Hague: Europol, September 2020.
[14] Seth G Jones and Catrina Doxsee, *The Escalating Terrorism Problem in the United States*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 17 June 2020.
[15] Kacper Rekawek, Alexander Ritzmann and Hans-Jakob Schindler, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*, Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, 2020.
[16] Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021*, Washington, DC: Director of National Intelligence, 01 March 2021.
[17] United Nations Security Councils-Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate "Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism", *CTED Trends Alert*, April 2020.

the preservation of the planet over human life, in particular, black, Asian and ethnic minority lives.[18] Eco-fascism has several manifestations, but mainly was seen as an online fringe movement until the Christchurch and El Paso shooter justified their actions based on this extreme ideology.[19] While many levels of security concerns surrounding these groups are identified, this paper only focuses on the online radicalization aspect. It also gives an overview of their activities in cyberspace during the pandemic.

3.   Global Trends of Online Radicalization During the Pandemic

Based on the ideological base and motivation, the violent extremist groups have very different approaches to achieving their goals. However, they all have exploited the fear and uncertainty surrounding the virus and the pandemic-induced life conditions to accelerate their radicalization efforts. The way faith-based violent extremist groups, e.g., IS, Al-Qaeda and their affiliates exploited state collapse, wars and geopolitical upheaval in the Middle East, similarly exploited the pandemic.[20] Likewise, violent extremist groups based on race and ethnicity also used the pandemic to intensify hatred and repurpose existing racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric with a pandemic related to spin. Online platforms and communication services became a hub for these activities. To analyze the global trend of such activities, the narratives and methods of interaction of different groups are analyzed in this section.

3.1   *Online Narratives Surrounding the Pandemic*

Creating narratives that resonate well with the target audience is one of the most significant aspects of radicalization. In this case, first, there is an official narrative of the violent extremist groups in their designated publications, media centres, websites and social media handles. Then the contents are picked up by the support groups and disseminated in different ways, including the exact message, loose interpretation, contextualization, personalization, etc. All these generate multiple types of interactions in the target base's social media platforms and message boards, many of which are again used as concepts for newer content. Overview of contents from a combination of sources gives an idea of the kind of narrative and messaging dwelling in a particular organization in a specific time, in this case, the pandemic. The main themes around which the coronavirus related narratives evolved are briefly discussed below:

---

[18] Sarah Manavis, "Coronavirus crisis gives eco-fascism a boost", *Financial Review*, 12 June 2020.
[19] Joel Achenbach, "Two mass killings a world apart share a common theme: 'ecofascism'", *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2019.
[20] International Crisis Group, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016

3.1.1   *The Virus as a Blessing for Some and Curse for the Rest*

At the beginning of the pandemic, the entire world was taken aback by the unpredictability of the disease. The information kept constantly changing and understanding the virus appeared unfathomable. At that time, a trend of violent extremist groups creating content according to their interpretations of the virus, its origin and whether or not to view it as a blessing or curse was visible.

The Islamic States propagated the virus as a curse and punishment from the Almighty for the oppressors and non-believers. Analysis of ISIS-affiliated publication Al-Naba shows that the organization framed its narratives based on the different stages of its spread. In January 2020, when the disease was still dominant in China, *Al-Naba* reported that "a new disease spreads death and panic" in "communist China". It was seen as a form of God's punishment for oppressing the Uyghur Muslims.[21] When Iran suffered an outbreak, the newsletter referred to it as an exemplary punishment from God for "Shiite Muslim idolatry".[22] Soon after, as the virus spread across other parts of the world, IS publicized it as "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmare" and highlighted how the virus was capable of paralyzing the western nations.[23] The April 2020 newsletter further highlighted vindictive messages against the Western countries.
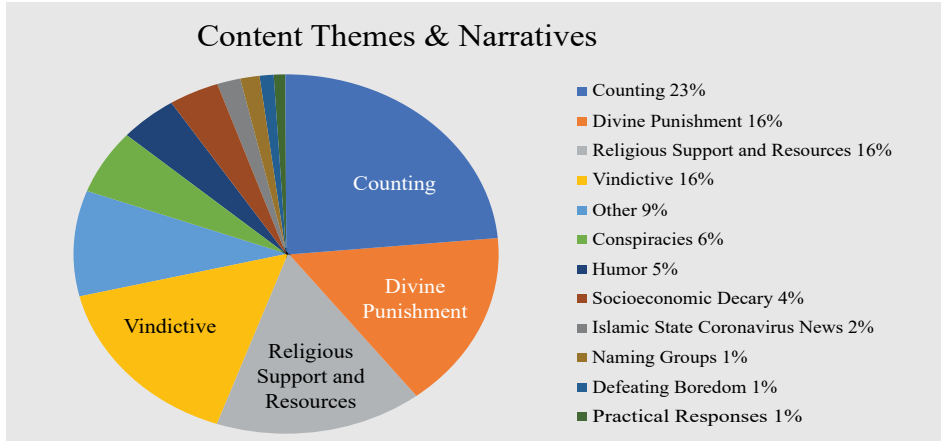
---

[21] Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?" *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2020, p. 265.
[22] International Crisis Group, *Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020.
[23] Ibid.

Figure 1: Several Key Narratives of Pro-Islamic State Coronavirus Content Published in the Global Terrorism Index Report 2020[24]

Content Themes & Narratives

- Counting 23%
- Divine Punishment 16%
- Religious Support and Resources 16%
- Vindictive 16%
- Other 9%
- Conspiracies 6%
- Humor 5%
- Socioeconomic Decary 4%
- Islamic State Coronavirus News 2%
- Naming Groups 1%
- Defeating Boredom 1%
- Practical Responses 1%

Pro-IS groups in different social media platforms generated several contents based on these official narratives. The Global Terrorism Index Report 2020 analyzed some online content and broadly categorized it into a few themes, as illustrated in Figure 1. Some IS-inspired groups also added their interpretation to it. For example, IS-inspired groups in Indonesia saw the virus as "ta'un" or plague and a "dress rehearsal for a dukhon, an occurrence of a hot cloud that will cover parts of the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, before the appearance of the promised Islamic messiah, known as Imam Mahdi, ahead of the Day of Judgment."[25] Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) described the Covid-19 pandemic as a plague and a divine punishment against the disbelievers but at the same time, a source of mercy and a blessing for Muslims.[26] Most discussions of these faith-based violent extremist groups and their supporters were centered on these narratives for the first few months.

Similar to AQIS, the Eco-fascists saw the virus as a blessing for the selected community. As many parts of the world went on a lockdown, supporters of this ideology propagated that "we are the virus, coronavirus is the cure".[27] They disseminated several manipulated and fake images on social media platforms showing that without human intervention, the earth is healing itself, animals are returning to

---

[24] Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis, *Pandemic Narratives: Pro-Islamic State Media and the Coronavirus*, Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2020.

[25] Arlina Arshad, "Indonesian terrorists 'wait for end of world' as coronavirus bites", *The Straits Times*, 18 May 2020.

[26] Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, *How Extremist Groups are Responding to Covid-19*, London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020.

[27] Sarah Manavis, op. cit.

cities, etc. While many of these online contents seemed harmless, in reality, these were mostly disseminated through a coordinated approach and have far-reaching consequences. Such activities can have a slow-drip effect and encourage dedicated eco-fascists to justify violent actions against particular communities for saving the environment.

3.1.2   *Call for Weaponizing the Virus*

Some groups took their radicalization narratives a step further by encouraging their followers to weaponize the virus and spread the disease among people and communities they blame to be responsible for different social problems affecting them or want to harm these selected communities as part of their organization's ideology. For example, in the Neo-Nazi affiliated Telegram group "CoronaWaffen", followers were asked to spread the virus by coughing on minorities or going to places where religious or racial minorities gather.[28] In several online forums in the United States, Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists encouraged infected members to spread the virus to Jews and police officers. In response, the FBI's New York office issued an alert stating that members of extremist groups are encouraging the intentional spread of the virus through bodily fluid, personal interactions and by visiting crowded areas like political offices, business centers, markets and places of worship.[29]

Faith-based groups also encouraged similar acts. In the May 2020 publication of the pro-IS 'Voice of Hind' magazine, supporters were encouraged to spread the virus among disbelievers and security forces.[30] The requirement of "less effort" in this method of harming the targets was specifically highlighted.[31] In pro-IS Indonesian groups, ISIS supporters felt that the pandemic presented the best opportunity to strike the government preoccupied with containing the disease. As a possible method of attack during this period, they called on virus-stricken militants to deliberately infect those they consider their enemies, such as the police.[32] Although it is difficult to assess whether the supporters of all these groups have carried out such actions, conversations surrounding the weaponization of the virus were quite evident in their online discussions.

---

[28] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), *Stop the Virus Disinformation: The Risk of Malicious Use of Social Media during COVID-19 and the Technology Options to Fight it*, Turin: UNICRI, November 2020.

[29] Josh Margolin, "White supremacists encouraging their members to spread coronavirus to cops, Jews, FBI says", *ABC News*, 23 March 2020.

[30] Nur Aziemah Azman, *"*The Islamic State (IS): Maintaining Resilience in a Post-Caliphate, Pandemic Environment", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Volume 13, No. 1 January 2021.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Arlina Arshad, op. cit.

3.1.3   *Blaming a Particular Community for the Virus*

In many cases, a particular community was made responsible for the virus and the pandemic-induced conditions. While in most cases, the faith-based groups reinforced their rhetoric of blaming the non-believers and the West for the plight of Muslims, the groups belonging to other ideologies had specific accusations. Some right-wing extremist groups in Europe declared that exterminating the immigrant population and restricting ethnic minorities from receiving medical treatment is a solution to the current health crisis.[33] In the United States, groups following similar ideologies blamed Asians for spreading the virus. Asian-Americans have been the victim of a record number of harassment and assaults in this period. The Neo-Nazi groups accused the Jews of being responsible for their plights. In the US, law enforcement officials thwarted plots to attack Jewish centres.[34] This reflects that these groups have used the pandemic to reinforce hate, intolerance and stigmatization against selected communities.

3.1.4   *Undermining Trust in Government and Call for Changing the Status Quo*

After the initial phase of uncertainty surrounding the virus started to settle down, the online radical narratives shifted to the socio-economic and political conditions brought by the virus. Faith-based violent extremist groups used this scope to highlight their "perceived shortcoming of democratic states" and reinstate their call for establishing Khilafat and Shariah law.[35] As governments across the world started to take strict measures to curb the spread of infection, many violent extremist groups started active online campaigns against the actions of government bodies. Many narratives undermined trust in the authority, projected their ideologies as superior and promoted "accelerationist" ideas to accelerate the demise of the current order through violence and fear.[36] There were a series of anti-lock-down protests and demonstrations against wearing masks by these groups. Many groups also questioned the vaccination drive and flooded their social media groups with conspiracy theories discouraging people from getting inoculated. Neo-Nazi groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) in Sweden and Kohti Vapautta! (KV) in Finland, reinforced racist ideologies and incited their support bases.[37] In Germany, similar groups used the pandemic to accelerate recruitment trends of neo-Nazis and White Supremacists and their narratives reflected the growing lack of trust in the system.[38]

---

[33] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), op. cit.
[34] Masood Farivar, "How Far-Right Extremists Are Exploiting the COVID Pandemic", *VOA*, 25 April 2020.
[35] Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, November 2020.
[36] Ibid.
[37] United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), op. cit.
[38] Colin P. Clarke, *From COVID to the Caliphate: A Look at Violent Extremism Heading into 2021*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, December 2020.

3.1.5   *Encouraging Individual Attacks*

Besides reemphasizing the call to Jihad, faith-based groups like IS and AQIS called on their supporters to take whatever measures possible to fight the disbelievers. In an audio speech in May 2020, the ISIS spokesman Abu Hamza al Qurashi instigated the fighters in Syria and Iraq for bolder attacks by saying, "We advise you to be harsh upon the disbeliever enemies of God…Address them with sharp swords and ignite the expeditions and do not stop the raids. And do not let a day pass for the apostates and their Crusader masters without disturbing their life."[39] Similarly, in Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, chatter and info-graphics encouraged supporters to plan actions on their own. The group called on the believers to conduct a strike in their communities in any way they could, like vehicular or stabbing attacks.[40]

The groups belonging to racial and right-wing extremist ideologies are decentralized and have a history of carrying out independent attacks. The pandemic-related narratives are likely to accelerate the radicalization process and encourage such actions. Hence, attacks from lone offenders might see an uptick in the coming days.

3.2   *Content Creation, Dissemination and Engagement*

Following the formulation of issue-based narratives, the violent extremist groups focus on dissemination and engagement with those contents in the next stage. The supporters and sympathizers of these groups circulate the content on several publicly accessible platforms and actively interact with the target audience to guide people to the following stages of radicalization. In many cases, it starts with sharing a subtle version of the radical content. Sharing disinformation and conspiracy theory is an integral part of this process. Besides texts and videos, meme culture is prevalent. Such contents comprise a big part of racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist online groups. Podcasts are also becoming quite popular for these groups. These are very creatively made and have a higher engagement rate in comparison to plain texts. Moonshot CVE made an assessment of White Supremacist search traffic in the USA from 30 March to 05 April 2020, and compared it to national and state averages for the eight months before March 2020. It found that there was a 13 per cent nationwide increase in engagement with White Supremacist content on Google.[41] Such patterns of online extremism are also on the rise in Canada. Moonshot

---

[39] Andrew Hanna, *ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic*, Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 08 June 2020.
[40] Tova C. Norlen, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism", *Connections*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2020, pp. 11-24.
[41] Moonshot Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), *The Impact of Social Distancing on Engagement with Violent Extremist Content Online in the United States*, London: Moonshot CVE, April 2020.

CVE collected data of average weekly searches for violent far-right content in six largest Canadian cities, six weeks before the declaration of the state of emergency and six weeks after and found that search for violent far-right radio and podcasts increased by 330 per cent.[42]

For faith-based groups, written publications and video content continue to remain the most popular. During the pandemic, interest in these content increased manifolds. For example, in May 2020, only seven AQIS channels on YouTube have Covid related content witnessed a spike of over 100,000 new subscriptions.[43]

3.3   *Redirecting to Less-Controlled Platforms*

It is also essential to take note of the platforms on which the Covid related extremist content got disseminated. Usually, popular social media platforms were the most sought place for online radicalization as they provided a broad audience base. Although the choice of messaging apps was different based on the popularity among the user base in different countries, platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were common for most groups. However, during the pandemic, there was a shift in the preference of these online platforms.

After facing a series of backlashes for allowing dangerous Covid related content on their platforms, big technology companies like Facebook and Google gradually strengthened their content management regulations. For example, between April and June 2020, Facebook took down 22.5 million posts on Facebook for violating hate speech rules. Furthermore, it also removed 7 million Covid-19 related misinformation from its main social media site and Instagram. In addition, it put warning notes on 98 million Covid-19 misinformation posts on Facebook during that period.[44] In February 2021, the company also decided to ban misinformation related to all vaccines to curb the rise of anti-vaccine rhetoric.[45] Despite these actions, extremist groups are starting to redirect the followers to less controlled and encrypted channels, websites and messaging apps that cater to a selected audience. These sites have more scopes of sharing extremist materials and less chance for law enforcement agencies to monitor. For example, the supporter base of faith-based violent extremist organizations has started to prefer various smaller encrypted messaging platforms such as Hoop, Rocketchat, and Threema.

---

[42] Moonshot Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), *The Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian Search Traffic*, London: Moonshot CVE, June 2020.

[43] Robert Muggah, "The Radicalization of Bangladeshi Cyberspace", *Foreign Policy*, 27 November 2020.

[44] Rachel Lerman, "Facebook says it has taken down 7 million posts for spreading coronavirus misinformation", *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2020.

[45] Kari Paul, "Facebook bans misinformation about all vaccines after years of controversy", *The Guardian*, 08 February 2021.

Besides redirecting the audience to other sites, there is also a trend of making encrypted messaging services and less-controlled alternative platforms a primary base for online radicalization. Right-wing violent extremists have increasingly shifted to 4Chan, Endchan, 8kun (formerly 8Chan), Discord, Gab, MeWe, Reddit, Telegram, Vkontakte, Wire, Twitch, and other online communication platforms.[46] Telegram and Signal have seen a record number of new users during the pandemic.[47] Although migration to less-controlled platforms started before the pandemic, it is speculated that this trend is being reinforced during the pandemic as vigilance on the mainstream platforms is perhaps at an all-time high. The migration to private channels on messaging platforms makes it very difficult for law enforcement agencies to track their activities.[48]

It can be seen that regardless of the ideological difference, the overall trend of online radicalization during the pandemic had similarities. In all cases, there was an active measure to accelerate the efforts. All groups witnessed an increased rate of interaction with extremist content and attempted to redirect people to less-controlled sites or migrate entirely. There are observable patterns in the narratives too, for example, viewing the virus as a blessing and curse, call for weaponizing the virus, holding selected communities responsible for the problem, incitement of hate and violence against them, encouraging anti-government activities, call for disrupting the existing political structure and joining their cause.

4.   Violent Extremism and Online Radicalization in Bangladesh

Similar to the evolving global phenomenon, violent extremist groups in Bangladesh have also incorporated Covid related content as part of their online radicalization process. Online radicalization was already a big concern in Bangladesh following the incidents of the past few years. According to a study of Bangladesh Police, 82 per cent of 250 people arrested for involvement in terrorist activities were radicalized through social media between 2015 and 2017.[49] Case analysis of arrestees in the following years also depicts a similar proportion of around 80 per cent.[50] However, to understand how online radicalization became a predominant

---

[46] Seth G Jones and Catrina Doxsee, op. cit.
[47] Adam Clark Estes, "How neo-Nazis used the internet to instigate a right-wing extremist crisis", *Vox*, available at https://www.vox.com/recode/22256387/facebook-telegram-qanon-proud-boys-alt-right-hate-groups, accessed on 07 May 2021.
[48] Kevin Grisham, "Far-right groups move to messaging apps as tech companies crack down on extremist social media", *The Conversation*, available at https://theconversation.com/far-right-groups-move-to-messaging-apps-as-tech-companies-crack-down-on-extremist-social-media-153181, accessed on 07 May 2021.
[49] Kamrul Hasan, "Police: 82% of terrorist radicalization happens through social media", *Dhaka Tribune*, 17 February 2020.
[50] Based on interview with CTTC official on 04 May 2020.

tactic of active violent extremist groups during the pandemic, it is crucial to analyze the background in which it evolved.

The present violent extremist landscape in Bangladesh is predominantly faith-based. Faith-based violent extremism in Bangladesh has evolved in different phases since it began with the returnee Mujahideens from the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1990s. Academics and security experts have categorized this timeframe in different waves. Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) identified two waves of radicalization in Bangladesh. The first one belonged to the 1999-2005 period and the second one in post-2015. Ali Riaz divided extremists into five generations based on transformation in objectives and tactics. The fifth-generation was identified as a group that began to surface from 2012 onwards.[51] Abul Barkat perceived the development of Islamist militancy in four phases in which the fourth phase began in 2013 and has been the most forceful.[52] Through all these categorizations it can be seen that the current violent extremism landscape visible in Bangladesh is mainly associated with the local and international events which occurred in the years 2013-2014, like the escalation of tensions between radical Islamists and secularists in Bangladesh and the expansion of global terrorist landscape with IS and AQIS. However, the series of killings by Ansarullah Bangla Team (later renamed as Ansar Al Islam) and the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack by Neo-JMB, an offshoot of JMB, was a paradigm shift in the way violent extremism and violent extremist groups are viewed by Bangladesh authority and the international community. One key aspect acknowledged by all is that this latest wave of extremism comprises of groups whose members are technologically advanced and extensively use cyberspace and information technology to propagate their ideology, radicalize, recruit, share manuals and guide attacks.[53]

4.1   *Online Radicalization Process in Bangladesh*

Online radicalization in Bangladesh began as a complementary approach to the traditional process. Since 2010, there has been a gradual shift towards using online content for preaching extremism. However, around 2014, the online presence of violent extremist groups started to increase dramatically. In this phase, the target audience of the violent extremist groups changed. The new method was to infiltrate people and groups well-positioned in the society, for example, professionals, business personnel, highly educated upper-class youths, etc. The quality of content

---

[51] Ali Riaz, "Who are the Bangladeshi 'Islamist Militants'?", *Perspectives of Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2016.
[52] Abul Barkat, *Fundamentalism in Bangladesh: External and Internal Dimensions of the Political Economy of Militancy*, Dhaka: Muktobuddhi Prokasona, 2018.
[53] Shafi Md Mostofa and Natalie J. Doyle, "Profiles of Islamist Militants in Bangladesh", *Perspectives of Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 5, 2019, pp. 112-125.

also increased dramatically. The online publications were farsighted, analytical, had specific aims and were made dedicatedly. It reflected that technologically sound people were behind those contents.[54]

Following the 2016 Holey Artisan incident, the violent extremism landscape underwent significant shifts. With the series of crackdown militant hideouts, arms flow and their finance by law enforcement agencies, the organizational structure of the violent extremist groups in Bangladesh was largely dismantled. As a result, many extremist groups' members went into hibernation or underground and began to work in a decentralized and almost "work from home" model. Online platforms became the primary base of recruitment and radicalization. This trend continued during the pandemic. Although several new narratives were propagated, the overall process was a continuation of the pre-Covid months as many members of these groups were already living in a less-mobile and "lock-down" kind of situation.[55] However, the pandemic created wider scope for the groups to exploit the virus-related fear and generate several types of content related to it. The pandemic-induced life conditions also led people to seek these kinds of content, spend more time around it, echo with sympathizers and engage with group members. It also allowed exploiting the weakness of religion more than any time before. The increase in the target audience's screen time, engagement and exposure of several vulnerabilities due to pandemic created a "perfect storm" for accelerating online radicalization efforts in Bangladesh.

Based on the analysis of the online radicalization incidents in Bangladesh over the past few years, an overview of the transformation process can be obtained.[56] The first phase usually involves open social media platforms. Facebook and YouTube consist of the largest segment of social media users in Bangladesh. During the pandemic, Facebook pages like "Daily Jihadi News Paper", "Struggle for Islam in Bangladesh", "The Khilafat is Coming", "Kafir and Jalim are frightened", and YouTube channels like "Jumuarkhutbabd", "Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh", and "Ummah Network" remained very active and shared several coronavirus related content.[57] However, as law enforcement agencies and social media companies began to increase their vigilance on violent extremist content, the groups brought changes in their tactics. Instead of explicit jihadist content, toned-down versions are

---

[54] Discussion on the evolving trend of online radicalization in Bangladesh is based on the in-depth interview with Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU) official on 15 June 2021.

[55] Ibid.

[56] This analysis is based on author's observation of social media engagement, in-depth interview with CTTC official on 04 May 2021 and Cyber Life's interview of the former CTTC Chief Md Monirul Islam, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gugLru-62A, accessed on 25 April 2021.

[57] Shafi Md Mostofa, "Islamist Cyber-Radicalisation in Bangladesh During COVID-19", *Australian Outlook*, available at https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/cyber-radicalisation-bangladesh/, accessed on 15 June 2021.

created for the public platforms. Several kinds of disinformation, propaganda and conspiracy theories regarding the virus and against the government actions were spread. Potential recruits are also redirected to websites, blogs and online forums as part of the radicalization process. During the pandemic, websites and blogs like "Jundullahsite," and "Bangladesh Jihadi Group;" were very active in generating content.[58] Unlike the mass migration to alternative social media platforms by violent extremist groups in Europe and the USA, Facebook and YouTube remained dominant in the initial phase of radicalization in Bangladesh.

In this stage, the members of violent extremist groups carefully track the people who regularly engage with these contents through likes, shares and comments. Then they analyze the reactions and track profiles of these people. In the second phase, an attempt is made to directly engage with them through messages in which more content is shared. In this regard, social media gives a unique way to know about a person, his/her likes and dislikes, and what he is going through at any point in time. Extremist groups keep track of these and share content suitable for that person during that phase of the potential recruit's life. In most cases, the members conceal their original identity and speak like similar-minded friends. For example, Asmani Khatun Alias Asma, aged 28, the alleged chief of the female wing of Neo-JMB, had been secretly recruiting female members online for a long time using different pseudonyms like Bandi Jibona and Nikhoj Alo.[59] Ansar Al Islam also uses a similar method. In July 2020, ATU arrested Sabuj Sheikh, aged 26, an active member of Ansar al Islam who operated under a Facebook ID called "*Sotter Shondhane*" to propagate extremism.[60] Through this process, a vulnerable person is directed to the third phase.

Different kinds of private messaging and encrypted applications are used in the third phase. For example, Neo-JMB prefers to use Wire and Telegram,[61] and AAI is known to use Hup and Tam Tam apps.[62] Signal, Threema and Wechat are also used by these organizations. During the conversation, several kinds of publications, audios and videos are shared. Some of these are the publications of groups, and many of these are Bangla translated versions of books, newsletters and relevant content of transnational extremist groups. Through very high skilled editing and illustrations, radical content is made attractive for the target groups. This also demonstrates that the current member of these organizations is very skilled in digital media content creation. Apart from the surface web, a portion of the radicalization process also shifts to the dark web.

---

[58] Ibid.
[59] "Head of 'Neo JMB' female wing nabbed by CTTC", *The Daily Star*, 05 February 2020.
[60] "Ansar al Islam man arrested in Narayanganj", *The Daily Star*, 28 July 2020.
[61] Mohammad Jamil Khan, "'Neo JMB' rising again?", *The Daily Star*, 29 September 2020.
[62] Sheikh Sabiha Alam, "Militants not sitting idle, online member collection continues", *Prothom Alo*, 01 July 2020.

After these successive online phases, scopes open up for offline interaction. For example, Ansar al Islam used platforms like Facebook, Messenger, Whatsapp to promote extremist propaganda in different stages and eventually recruited young people by meeting them in person.[63] In some cases, a reverse process is also seen where it begins through physical contact and then shifts online. In this method, a member of a violent extremist outfit engages with his or her peers and introduces the person to the world of online radical content and then following successive steps, the person's thought process is transformed.[64]

While there is no definite framework to describe the online radicalization process in Bangladesh, it can be seen that regarding the choice of online media platforms and the sequence of the steps of transforming a person into a violent extremist, the scenario in Bangladesh has resemblance with the "Social Conversion Funnel" developed by Rappler Inc and Asia Foundation for the Philippines which illustrates that recruitment begins in public platforms and then progresses to correspondences through messaging apps as seen in Figure 2.[65]

Figure 2: Social Conversion Funnel of Online Radicalization in the Philippines[66]

---
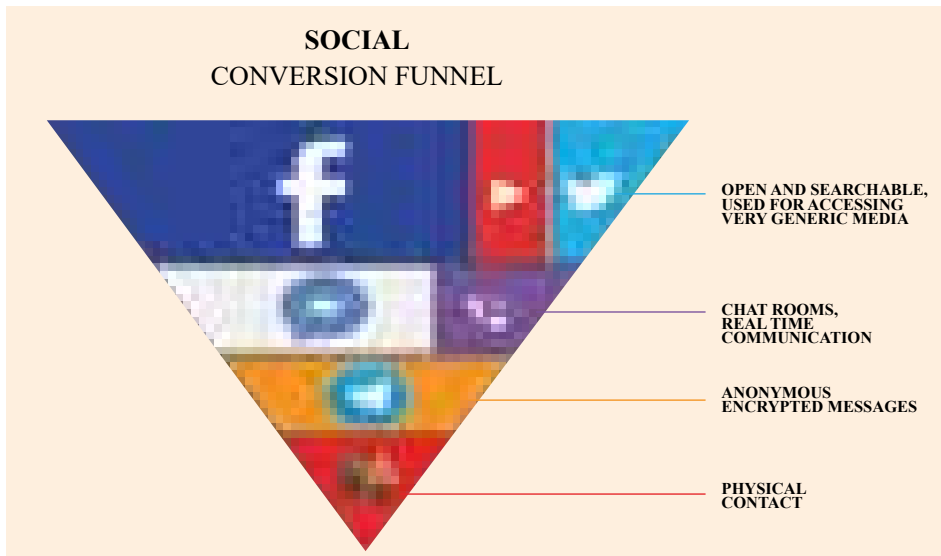
[63] Iftekharul Bashar, Global Threat Landscape: Bangladesh, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2021.

[64] Based on an interview with CTTC official on 04 May 2020.

[65] Pia Ranada, "New study shows how PH extremist groups use social media to recruit", available at https://www.rappler.com/nation/new-study-shows-how-extremist-groups-philippines-use-social-media-recruitment, accessed on 24 June 2021.

[66] The Asia Foundation and Rappler Inc, op. cit.

Even though physical mobilization became difficult due to the Covid related restriction and vigilance of law enforcement agencies, violent extremist groups could continue their radicalization efforts through the different stages of this conversion funnel. Online platforms became the primary tools to keep these organizations afloat.

4.2   *Covid-19 Related Narratives of Violent Extremist Groups in Bangladesh*

In the process of online radicalization, preparing the right kind of narrative for a particular target audience is extremely crucial. Capitalizing on the current events is also very important. Violent extremist groups in Bangladesh have been actively engaged in creating and disseminating content based on the different stages of the pandemic. They endorsed the official publication of their organization and broadcasts of their spiritual leaders. They also extensively translated and contextualized the content of transnational faith-based violent extremist groups. While many of the coronavirus-related narratives were local, they also had similarities with the global trends.

First, the virus was seen as an indication of the end of the world. In this regard, one narrative that has managed to cause both online radicalization and offline mobilization is the "end of the world and arrival of Imam Mahadi". This narrative resonated very well with the members and sympathizers of JMB and Neo-JMB. In this regard, the audios and videos of Syed Mostaq bin Arman became very popular. Through his speeches on YouTube, he invited Muslims to join jihad at *Ghazwatul Hind* as a soldier of Imam Mahdi.[67] Many people were influenced by this and made attempts to join him as his soldiers. In May 2020, the CTTC arrested 17 JMB members from Dhaka who were preparing to migrate to Saudi Arabia to meet Imam Mahadi in the guise of Tablighs going to Saudi Arabia. Among the arrestees were students, engineers, doctors and agriculturists.[68] According to police statements, the arrestees were radicalized through the online sermons of Syed Mostaq, and they coordinated among themselves to migrate and join him in the force of Imam Mahdi. Previously, in January 2020, four students from Bangladesh Agricultural University went to Saudia Arabia for Umrah and did not return. According to CTTC officials, the student got associated with Syed Mostaq in that country.[69]

The narratives surrounding this particular topic were very vivid. Newspaper reports referred to CTTC officials saying, "The arrestees said the coronavirus

---

[67] "Court sends 17 JMB members on 'jihad mission' to jail", *The Daily Star*, 05 May 2020.

[68] "সৌদি আরবে কথিত হিজরত চেষ্টা, ১৭ জন গ্রেপ্তার (17 people arrested while attempting to migrate for alleged Hizrat in Saudia Arabia)", *Prothom Alo*, 20 May 2020.

[69] "ওমরাহ করতে গিয়ে চার ছাত্র নিখোঁজ (Four students missing while gone for Umrah)", *Prothom Alo*, 08 March 2020.

epidemic would bring down wrath from the skies, smoldering everything, leaving no guards at the borders to stop them. The sun would not rise for the next 40 days, the sky would be covered with smoke, the infidels would all die, but the believers would have only a slight cough."[70] This narrative of Imam Mahadi is very similar to the contents seen in the pro-IS Indonesian violent extremist groups. If the YouTube search trend in Bangladesh is analyzed, it can be seen that there is a significant spike in April 2020 for "Imam Mahadi" related content. It needs to be noted that Imam Mahadi is part of Islamic belief, and it is common for people to search content related to him. Previously in many crises, this belief has been exploited in extremist narratives. However, what has dramatically changed during the pandemic is its apparent acceptability. It is concerning when that narrative justifies Jihad and call for migrating to join as his soldiers.

Secondly, the coronavirus was seen as a curse from the Almighty. In this regard, the narratives of Ansar al Islam and its new spiritual leader Sheikh Tamim Al Adnani were dominant.[71] Through the videos of his dedicated YouTube channel "Ummah Network", AAI propagated that coronavirus is a repercussion of *Kufri* acts across the world and a curse from the Almighty in Bangladesh as it runs in contradiction to Shariah Law. Many of AAI's contents reinforced their rhetoric of Western power's oppression of Muslims. Moreover, they celebrated the havoc caused by the pandemic in the Western countries and saw this as a fall of the West. Hence, there were stark similarities with the narrative of transnational faith-based organizations.

While the narratives about the virus were dominant in the early stages, issues related to socio-economy and governance became prominent in the later stage. Similar to the global trend of using the pandemic to undermine trust in government, groups in Bangladesh generated anti-government propaganda and extremist content. During the pandemic, AAI pushed forward its narratives of calling democracy '*kufri*' and instigated general people by undermining government's several actions. They highlighted the weaknesses of the health sector in a provocative manner.[72] They claimed that the democratic government and capitalist economy were not capable of fighting the pandemic, and thus, it needs to be displaced.[73]

The banned terrorist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir attempted to use the pandemic as a scope of resurgence. In February 2020, the group announced to hold

---

[70] Arifur Rahman Rabbi, "17 JMB members arrested on their way to Saudi Arabia", *Dhaka Tribune*, 05 May 2020.

[71] Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Ansar Al Islam: Regrouping by stealth", *The Daily Star*, 07 March 2021.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Analysis of videos propogating AAI realted messages on selected YouTube channels.

a webinar to introduce a draft constitution to establish *Khilafah* in Bangladesh.[74] The group conducted such webinars from abroad where they undermined the government's handling of the pandemic and reinforced that establishing *Khilafah* in Bangladesh would be able to handle such situations effectively.[75]

Similar to the global trend of calling for action, groups in Bangladesh used the pandemic for a renewed call to join Jihad. Through the sermons and video lectures, a sense of urgency was instigated in the audience. Analysis of social media contents shows that Ansar-al-Islam put out several narratives surrounding *Ghazwatul Hind*.[76] The contents of their support base also resonated with this. Through several sermons, AAI called on its supporters to seize this opportunity where the 'victory of Islam is close by' and 'the next world order will be run by Muslims'. In the comment section of these videos, supporters are seen to cherish and pledge allegiance to the call.[77]

Indeed, the narratives of local organizations in Bangladesh are similar to the global trends of viewing the virus as a curse, undermining the political system and reinforcing the call to take action. It resembles with the narratives of IS and AQIS and their support groups regarding the end of the world narrative, vilifying the Western governments and democracy and calling to establish Shariah rule and *Khilafat*. However, when it comes to weaponizing the virus, groups in Bangladesh seem to have restrained.

5.   Security Implications for Bangladesh

Violent extremism is regarded as a major security threat in Bangladesh, and the government has adopted a zero-tolerance policy. Since 2016, law enforcement agencies have conducted several counter-terrorism operations, cracked down terrorist networks, attacked hideouts, neutralized and apprehended several members of violent extremist groups. While these efforts succeeded in addressing the offline mobilizations of such groups to a large extent, the online threat is hard to contain. The threat has been amplified with the evolving trend of online radicalization during the pandemic and is likely to have a series of short and long-term implications.

5.1   *Alarming Rise of Online Radicalization*

While terrorist incidents in Bangladesh have been very low during the pandemic, online radicalization is alarmingly high. According to SecDev's research

---

[74] Muktadir Rashid, "CT monitors Hizb ut-Tahrir webinar move", *New Age*, 27 February 2020.
[75] Based on interview with CTTC official on 04 May 2020.
[76] Iftekharul Bashar, op. cit.
[77] Analysis of videos propogating AAI realted messages on selected YouTube channels.

of violent extremist content in Bangladesh, the number of interactions per Facebook post on violent extremist channels has surged by 250 per cent in only one year. Between April and June 2019, there was an average of 99 interactions per post, but during the same months in 2020, it increased to 347 interactions per post.[78] Membership in online forums and subscriptions to YouTube channels have also significantly increased. In February 2020, AAI spiritual leader Sheikh Tamim al-Adani's YouTube channel "Ummah network" had 382,000 subscribers,[79] but in May 2021, the number increased to 723,000.[80] The Covid related narratives also seemed to have accelerated such engagements. Although engagement does not give a conclusive result, the reaction analysis says a lot about the severity of the issue. Such a level of interaction with provocative and extremist content indicates a high risk of radicalization.

5.2   *Risk of Exploiting Vulnerability of Youths*

Young people remain particularly vulnerable during the pandemic as they are likely to spend more time online due to the closure of educational institutions, shut down of leisure activities and lost employment opportunities.[81] In Bangladesh, education institutions have been closed since 16 March 2020, right after the first few cases of Covid were detected in the country. Around 1.94 crore students are passing days in uncertainties over the future of their academic life. Academics and education experts view that academic loss and psychological stress will keep affecting them for a long time.[82] On top of it, many youths are getting access to a long period of unsupervised screen time. These conditions make a large portion of the students vulnerable to online radicalization. As youths consist of most social media users, they are more at risk of coming across radical content.

---

[78] Robert Muggah, op. cit.
[79] Animesh Roul, "Fugitive Bangladeshi Ideologue Tamim al-Adnani Spearheading Virtual Jihadist Campaign", *Militant Leadership Monitor, Jamestown Foundation,* Vol. 11, No. 2, February 2020.
[80] YouTube subscribers of "Ummah Network" as of 04 May 2021.
[81] United Nations Institute for Training and Research, op. cit.
[82] Shahin Akhter, "Students suffer irreparable loss, still in uncertainty: experts", *New Age*, 18 March 2021.

Figure 3: Facebook Audience Insight for Bangladesh[83]
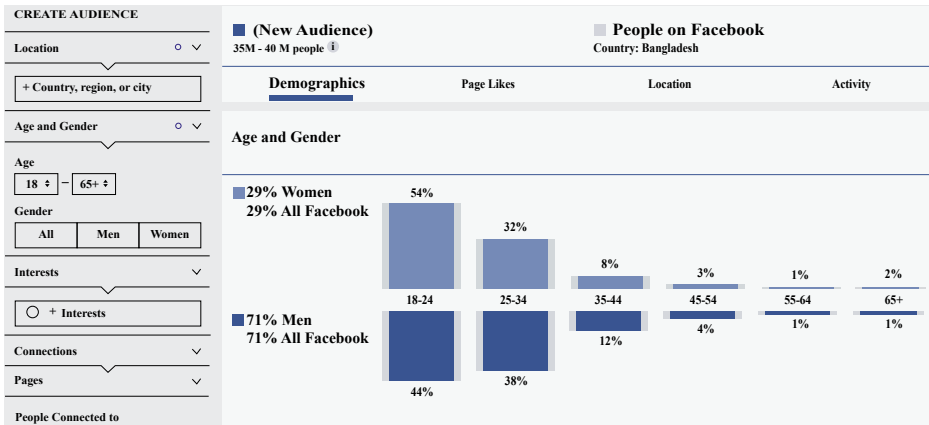
Facebook remains the most popular platform in this regard. As per Facebook Audience Insight in Figure 3, Bangladesh has 40 million users, of which 71 per cent are men and 29 per cent are women. Of the 71 per cent men, 44 per cent belong to the 18-24 age group, and 38 per cent belong to the 25-34 group. Women aged 18-24 comprise 54 per cent and those aged 25-34 comprise 32 per cent.[84] For both genders, it can be seen that the younger generation aged 18-34 comprise almost 80 per cent of Facebook users. Violent extremists groups customize several attractive Facebook content fit for this age group. Thus, people belonging to this demography tend to come across extremist content, and once they engage, there is a high risk of falling into the conversion funnel.

5.3   *Risk of Lone Offenders*

Globally there has been a sharp rise of lone offenders or lone wolf terrorism in the past few years. During the pandemic, violent extremist groups of different ideologies, particularly the IS and AQIS, encouraged such acts. There is a risk that Bangladeshi groups inspired by such ideologies can adopt such thoughts. This was reflected in the recent event where Al Sakib, an active member of AAI and Ali Hasan Osama, also known as "Banglar Osama", a preacher of provocative speeches on YouTube were arrested for planning sword attack on law enforcement agency's officials in the National Parliament Complex of Bangladesh on 06 May 2021.[85] According to the primary statement of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP),

---

[83] Screenshot taken using author's Facebook account.
[84] Facebook Audience Insights, available at https://www.facebook.com/ads/audience-insights/people?act=203309894&age=18-65&country=BD, accessed on 21 April 2021.
[85] "CTTC arrests 2 over 'plan to attack Jatiya Sangsad', provocative speech", *The Daily Star*, 06 May 2021.

Sakib was inspired by videos of radical sermons on social media. He planned the attack by forming a Facebook and Messenger group of 313 people and urged them to meet in front of the parliament with swords and flags to carry out the attack. Ali Hasan Osama was accused of inspiring Sakib in this attack.[86] This incident has close similarity with the recent lone offender events seen in other countries. This is alarming for Bangladesh.

5.4   *Increasing Trend of Self-Radicalization*

Self-radicalization is when a person takes inspiration from different ideologies, develops his own ideas and radicalizes on his own without official support from any organized group. Grievances against the system or specific community are usually a key factor. This is also a growing problem in Bangladesh that requires a deeper insight into the social fabric of the internet generation.

In recent years, Bangladesh has seen an exponential rise in internet users. Several factors contributed to these processes, such as widespread internet, free social media packages and affordable smart devices. This has further increased during the pandemic. This has given rise to several filter bubbles in online platforms. On the one hand, a large segment of progressive, advocates for women empowerment, sympathetic to the LGBTQ causes, accepts liberal western values in terms of lifestyle choices, speaks against sexual violence and promotes diversity and tolerance for other religions. On the other hand, large groups possess very rigid conservative Islamic values and are not tolerant of most of the ideas promoted by the above group. While these groups are very comfortable in their filter bubbles and echo chambers, social platforms give ample scopes for them to access each other's bubble. When the bubble collides, more often than not, it leads to a series of actions starting from heated keyboard clashes to machete yielding death threats. However, the people behind it are not always part of any organized extremist outfit. According to the former CTTC chief Monirul Islam, the law enforcement authorities are observing this trend of fundamentalists posting provocative content on the internet, but most of those who spread such content is not connected to any terrorist organization or network."[87] Although all of these issues are not directly related to the pandemic, the pandemic-induced life conditions seem to have accelerated it. These are likely to have long-term security implications that need to be attended to.

---

[86] "তলোয়ার নিয়ে সংসদ ভবনে জঙ্গী হামলার পরিকল্পনা, গ্রেপ্তার ২ (Plan to conduct terrorist attack on Jatiya Sangsad, 2 arrested)", *bdnews24.com*, 06 May 2021, available at https://m.bdnews24.com/bn/detail/bangladesh/1887691 ?fbclid=IwAR1j3VJeAOSJ6G1Fb90i4VH4MqzCQtUsa37n-5w2HE0njbQbeQdMZTkQfpU, accessed on 06 May 2021; "সংসদে হামলার পরিকল্পনায় গ্রেপ্তার দুই জঙ্গী (2 Terrorists arrested for planning attack on Sangsad)", *NTV online*, 06 May 2021.

[87] Ariful Islam Mithu and Raihana Sayeeda Kamal, "Has Covid-19 provided radical groups with fertile hunting ground?", *The Business Standard*, 29 July 2020.

5.5   *New Vulnerabilities and its Long-term Implications*

As the Covid situation evolves in phases, so do the security concerns surrounding it. As this is an ongoing crisis, it is not easy to conclusively study its impact on radicalization and online radicalization. The Covid related narratives give a peek into the kind of issues brewing under the surface, but an overall assessment of the security implications will be possible once the world has come out of this state. The pandemic exposed several existing faultiness and created new vulnerabilities which are likely to have long-term implications. During the interview with Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU) official, these factors were highlighted. It is seen that there have been significant changes in the mental and emotional health of people. The philosophy of life has changed for many, and there are apparent shifts from the materialistic perception. In society, different kinds of cruelties, crimes and inter-personal violence have increased.[88] The socio-economic conditions also changed drastically. The disruption in income and instability will likely have resulted in a growing sense of frustration and anger against society.

While all people are going through these changes, some groups are more vulnerable to the impacts. Mass migration of students from educational institutions to their hometowns has brought changes in the social circles of youths. In many cases, their personal and economic independence has been curbed. The sense of victimization, anger, irritation and reduction of tolerance makes them very exposed. Similar changes are also seen among professionals and workers losing jobs and going back to hometowns. Change in their surroundings and problems in reintegration is also likely to create vulnerabilities.[89] Practitioner's observation finds that the propensity to get involved in offences increases among people who feel frustrated and victimized. Thus, it is important to read the society and observe these changes as there is a risk that these factors can influence the overall radicalization landscape in Bangladesh and thus the online aspect.

6.   Conclusion

The Covid-19 created a 'perfect storm' for violent extremist groups to reinforce their extremist ideologies by exploiting the fear and uncertainty of people. These groups have used the crisis to intensify existing fault lines, create new ones and carefully customize narratives that propagate their core values but are relatable to the pandemic. Online platforms have been extensively used to engage, radicalize and recruit target groups. Literature review and analysis of social media contents

---

[88] Jamil Khan and Muntakim Saad, "Cruelties rising in chaotic time", *Daily Star*, 27 June 2021.
[89] This analysis is based on the interview with Anti Terrorism Unit (ATU) official on 15 June 2021.

showed that violent extremist organizations have produced and disseminated several kinds of extremist narratives in different pandemic stages. Globally, the common trend is to label the virus as a blessing for the in-group and a curse for the out-group. Many of the narratives were vindictive, and minority communities have blamed the virus and pandemic-induced situation. There were also calls for weaponizing the virus and encouraging individual attacks. Many narratives also advocated for a change in the status quo and sought to undermine government and political system trust. Changes were also brought in the content selection and engagement in different online platforms.

In Bangladesh, violent extremist groups have also used the pandemic and pandemic-induced living conditions to accelerate their radicalization efforts. Although the overall process remained similar to the previous years, new narratives were constructed surrounding the crisis. When compared to the global trend, it can be seen that there are thematic resemblances in many areas and specific similarities with the contents of transnational organizations such as IS and AQIS. All these are likely to have security implications both in the short and long term. However, the precaution of the law enforcement agencies and combined efforts of relevant government bodies in Bangladesh and the social media companies have addressed the problem to some extent. For example, SecDev documented a 43 per cent reduction of extremist content on roughly 400 social media channels between April and September 2020. Additionally, over 90 per cent of Bangla channels affiliated with the Islamic State were removed between April and June 2020.[90] However, the threat is far from over and continues to evolve with the advancement of technology and the adaptive nature of violent extremists groups.

There are also several challenges in addressing the issue. Online radicalization is a very personal activity, and in most cases, it is difficult to monitor in the initial stages. Moreover, online activities of violent extremists groups are often operated by members living outside the country, hence difficult to trace. These groups and their members are very resilient and continue to bounce back under different identities after being removed or de-platformed. Actions to identify and filter Bangla language content remain inadequate and the gap between tech companies' policies and governments' policies remains wide. While the complexities are understandable, finding a way to navigate around these is crucial at the moment. The country's security apparatus needs to be vigilant of this evolving trend and incorporate the newer dimension in its policies. Moreover, a whole of society approach to address the underlying factors and take responsible measures to prevent a vulnerable person from undergoing this transformation are crucial.

---

[90] Robert Muggah, op. cit.

ANNEX

The following law enforcement agency officials were interviewed for this paper.

1. Additional DIG Md. Moniruzzaman, Anti Terrorism Unit, Bangladesh Police, Bangladesh. (Date of Interview: 15 June 2021)

2. Md. Nazmul Islam, Assistant Police Commissioner, Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime (CTTC), Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Bangladesh. (Date of interview: 04 May 2021)

The author would like to acknowledge the valuable inputs of BIISS faculty members in this research.

Sample Questionnaire:

1. What is the current trend of online radicalization in Bangladesh?

2. What are the main online platforms used for the radicalization process in Bangladesh?

3. Is there any significant online activity capitalizing on the pandemic?

4. What are the changes in the online radicalization process during the pandemic in Bangladesh?

5. What are the key Covid-related narratives used by JMB, Neo-JMB and Ansarullah Bangla Team and their support groups?

6. What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the Covid related narratives of organizations in Bangladesh and the transnational violent extremist organizations?

7. What are the security implications for Bangladesh?