



Jihad in Trinidad

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23 February 2018

On 7th February 2018, just days before Trinidad's signature Carnival, some thirteen young men – reportedly nearly all Muslim – were arrested and detained on suspicion of plotting to carry out attacks in the country. To date, only two people have been charged with any offence – the possession of components for an unlicensed firearm – and all others have been released. Trinidadian [press reports](#) indicated the involvement of United States law-enforcement personnel and agencies in uncovering the alleged plot and Trinidadian government officials have noted the presence of radicalized cells in the country.

On a per capita basis, Trinidad has provided the highest number of recruits to Islamic State (IS, referred to as ISIS by Trinidad and Tobago's security services) in the Western hemisphere with [numbers ranging](#) between 35 active fighters to an upper estimate of 400 of fighters, families and administrators having flocked to the IS banner.

In July 2016 [the words of Abu Sa'd at-Trinidadi](#) – an IS fighter of Trinidadian extraction – appeared in issue 15 of Dabiq, the glossy online propaganda magazine of IS:

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“ You now have a golden opportunity to do something that many of us here wish we could do right now. You have the ability to terrify the disbelievers in their own homes and make their streets run with their blood. ...terrorise the disbelievers and make them feel fear everywhere, even in their own bedrooms. Due to their mere disbelief, their blood by default is lawful to spill. ”

This was the first time that the IS used one of its Trinidadian fighters to exhort his co-religionists in Trinidad to commit acts of violence against non-Muslims. At-Trinidad, also known as Asadullah, was eventually identified as being one Shane Dominic Crawford. His terrifying message came shortly after it was revealed that nine Trinidadian nationals had been detained in Turkey for trying to infiltrate into Syria to fight alongside IS, thus demonstrating the significant lure that IS has for elements of the Trinidadian Muslim population. Yet, to those studying the country, the radicalization of certain elements of the country's Islamic community – which comprises some 5% of the 1.3 million population – this is but one episode in an ongoing saga of radicalization of young Muslim men in Trinidad.

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Trinidad's first brush with militant Islamism came in 1990. On July 27, a radical Afro-Trinidadian Islamist group, the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen led by Imam Yasin Abu Bakr, an Afro-Trinidadian convert to Islam (previously known as Lennox Philip) and a former policeman, staged an armed insurrection with 113 of his followers. This led to the then Prime Minister, Arthur N.R. Robinson, most of his cabinet and several opposition Members of Parliament, plus the staff of the government owned television and radio networks, being held hostage for six days.

The insurrection left 24 dead and 231 wounded, 133 of those were wounded in an orgy of looting and arson that followed, resulting in damages amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars. Popular support for the insurrection was minimal but a total breakdown of law enforcement led to chaos, which was exploited by looters for personal gain. While the insurrection ended with the surrender of Bakr and his followers, they were acquitted of the charges brought against them by the Trinidadian courts, which upheld the amnesty granted to them to secure the lives of the hostages.

Formed in the mid-1980s, the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen began as a small quasi-criminal outfit, initially portraying itself as a vigilante group behind the mask of righteous indignation over the narcotics trade. It grew rapidly in influence and emerged as a challenge to the state as it obtained funding and training in Libya, as well as weapons through an elaborate smuggling network and began to forge alliances and seek recruits from other radical elements in various mosques. Libyan funding was reportedly routed through Muammar al-Qaddafi's World Islamic Call Society (WICS).

The Jamaat-al-Muslimeen has now spawned a series of splinter groups. Among them are the Jamaat al Islami al Karibi, the Waajihatul Islaamiyyah (The Islamic Front) and the Jamaat al Murabiteen, each having drawn their leadership from the former members of the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen. The Waajhatul Islaamiyah

has published newsletters supporting Al Qaeda and deploring American and British policies towards Muslims. However, while there is little evidence of Al Qaeda having a presence in Trinidad, the now deceased head of Al Qaeda's external operations council, Adnan Gulshair El Shukrijumah, spent some time in Trinidad, allegedly at the compound of an extremist Muslim organization in Central Trinidad.

The power wielded by these groups has helped create a fertile ground for recruitment into potential Jihadist groups. With a close nexus to urban criminal gangs, the link between extremists and criminals is often blurred. The allure of the gangs has attracted many disaffected urban youth. The membership of these groups and their associated criminal gangs keeps expanding, with recruits falling prey to the potent mix of propaganda and the lure of the perceived empowerment offered by these groups.

Enter Islamic State

Radicalisation has now acquired a new dimension with the message of IS being disseminated through social media and elsewhere on the Internet, as well as through more direct attempts at recruitment through proxies and allied groups. In this new dynamic, the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen and its affiliates, spin-offs and ideological associates and their networks in Trinidad's cities, mosques and economically less advantaged urban neighbourhoods, are ideally placed to act as *de facto* fronts for the IS or other Jihadi recruiting efforts in Trinidad. The Waajhatul Islaamiyyah's leader, Umar Abdullah, has admitted to recruiting youth for IS, though he claims to have since stopped doing so owing to its excessive brutality.

So successful has IS been in recruiting Trinidadians that several of them, including children, were featured in an IS recruiting video made in late 2015. Indeed, in the said video, one identifying himself as Abu Zayd al-Muhajir, had brought his three children to the Ar-Raqqah province in Syria; while another – Abu Khalid, a Christian convert – used the video to proclaim that Muslims in Trinidad were “restricted”. This was echoed by Zayd al-Muhajir and yet another Trinidadian, Abu Abdullah, who went so far as to encourage Muslims in Trinidad to support IS in its ambition of creating an Islamic Caliphate. A recurring theme in the video was that Islam in Trinidad was being “restricted” – a statement without basis in fact, but one which has found unusual resonance, among some elements of the Trinidadian population.

Traditionally, the extremist doctrine found most traction with Afro-Trinidadian converts to Islam, as exemplified by the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen and its affiliates. This may be a consequence of the strong links between Islam and the 1970s Black Power movement in the United States, which found considerable resonance in Trinidad. Yasin Abu Bakr, for example, openly courted the urban Afro-Trinidadian youth in his sermons, with a mix of Islamic doctrine and Black Power rhetoric. While the extent of his success is unclear, though a political party formed by him fared poorly at election time, his influence might be not inconsiderable. However, another disturbing trend, wherein more Indo-Trinidadian Muslims, usually moderate and well-integrated into society are succumbing to such propaganda, has also been observed.

From the Jihadist viewpoint, the Indo-Trinidadian Muslim population, generally better educated and wealthier than the Afro-Trinidadian converts, offers a potentially more attractive source of skilled and motivated manpower. Lured by the Salafist-jihadist doctrine, both through social media, which includes the use

of jihadi videos, and through aggressive campaigns in many of Trinidad's 85 mosques, young Muslims have been targeted for recruitment. The February 2018 raids, for example, focussed in part around the Nur-E-Islam mosque where long-standing members of its congregation have long been aware of increasing radicalization and extremist views held by a vocal minority in the mosque. One of those arrested in February 2018 and released without charge – Tariq Mohammed – is an Indo-Trinidadian Muslim belonging to one of the country's most prominent, best established and moderate Muslim families and had been previously been detained for 16 months in Saudi Arabia on suspicion of terrorism before being released, again without charge.

While there have been no local studies on the motivation behind the Trinidadian Muslims eagerness to travel to join IS fighters, it is possible that the idea of the Caliphate has captured the imagination of disaffected youth. The leader of the Waajihatul Islaamiyyah, Umar Abdullah, who is constantly monitored by an officer of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Special Branch, identified some characteristics of the Trinidadians attracted to IS. He noted that those who were recruited by IS, were arrogant, lacked patience, could not live among non-Muslims, had marital problems and firmly believed they were being marginalised as Muslims.

Conclusion

Law-enforcement action against radicals has been handicapped by an inability to sustain charges following arrests, compounding this feeling of marginalization. Shane Crawford, for example, was detained for alleged involvement to assassinate the country's then Prime Minister. He was released without charge and joined IS shortly thereafter. It is not inconceivable that the

February 2018 arrests could lead to a heightened feeling of alienation among some.

The greatest challenge facing Trinidadian officials is the lack of a coherent policy on how to combat this increasing radicalisation, or how to treat those who have already been radicalised. These problems will be compounded with the pending return of former IS fighters for which legislative provisions are now being cobbled together. There have been some efforts at outreach to moderate elements in the Muslim community but to date these have not created an effective counter narrative. In the absence of a coherent and competent joint response from the political executive, law-enforcement authorities and the moderate Muslim community, there is the risk of further radicalization.

Image credit: Nilljs/Flickr

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