



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Radicalisation and Terrorism in The Caribbean



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The most important question concerning contemporary international politics is that of young Muslims from all over the world getting radicalised and joining the ranks of the Islamic State (IS), a terror outfit striving to establish an Islamic Caliphate through an ultra-puritanical interpretation of Islam inspired by Wahhabism. The real cause of radicalisation of Muslim youths all over the world is still a subject of much debate: some scholars argue that radicalisation in modern times has not so much to do with geography, religion or heritage – rather it is seen as an individual’s desire to take action and do something significant with a black-and-white world-view, as he seeks to align himself with a virtuous cause.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, some young people, as is the case with the Tsarnaev brothers of the Boston bombings of April 2013, turn to a radical ideology in order to project the blame for their internal sufferings on the society around them.<sup>2</sup>

While the core ideology of the IS is, in large part, based on the absolute rejection of the Islamic tradition of tolerance for Christians and Jews (the “People of the Book”), the rejection of secular ideologies, and the rejection of what are

### *Key Points*

1. Why are Muslims from all over the world joining the ranks of the Islamic State (IS)?
2. There is a dangerously growing trend in the Caribbean of its Muslim population getting radicalised.
3. IS propaganda footage by a Trinidadian confirms that radicalisation is taking place in the Caribbean.
4. Connections with organised crime pose a complex terrorist threat to the region.
5. There is a lack of counter-terrorism and anti-laundering legislation in the region.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

## Radicalisation and Terrorism ...

labelled as “diluted” forms of Islam,<sup>3</sup> the IS uses the internet to attract recruits from all over the world by reinforcing the IS as a social movement devoted to the protection of Muslims and to fight the “unfair global system.” One can, therefore, argue that the people who get attracted to the IS’ ideology and join its ranks are those who feel inadequate, disrespected, full of unfulfilled ambitions, angry at real or perceived injustices, and who blame other people or state institutions for the problems in their lives. Such people, struggling with the complexities in their lives, find the IS’ good-versus-evil narrative worthwhile, and attractive enough to dedicate their lives for the organisation’s cause.

In the discourse of terrorism as a key public security issue in the Caribbean, as around the world, security concerns regarding state-based military conflict have been replaced by less institutionalised trans-national threats. These dangers constitute a new security agenda for the region.<sup>4</sup> While territorial disputes and hemispheric geo-politics were considered to be the core traditional security concerns of the region, the movement of a substantial number of Caribbean-born fighters to Syria and their clarion call to the Caribbean Muslim population to take up arms to fight in Syria constitute the contemporary security conundrum of the region.

Though there is a general lack of political violence and sub-conventional conflicts in the region, a Cubana Air flight on October 06, 1976, from Guyana to Cuba that was bombed in mid-air, shortly after departing from Barbados, and in which 73 people were killed, remains one of the most significant instances of terrorism in the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Until now, there has been only a moderate number of cases of radical Islamic actors planning, preparing for, and conducting, terrorist attacks from the Caribbean. For instance, in 1997, Cuba became the target of a dozen bombings on tourist locations, allegedly perpetrated by anti-Castro Cuban exiles. Further, in 2007, Islamic radicals from Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago were arrested for planning an attack against John F.

Kennedy International Airport in New York City.<sup>6</sup> In the post-9/11 period, analysts have argued that given the Caribbean’s traditional ties with, and proximity to, the United States (US), 9/11 had a direct bearing on the fortunes of the region.<sup>7</sup>

The unique manifestation of the states in the Caribbean is that these states possess a structural feature that is not common to other states in the international system – they are small in terms of territory, population, and economy, as well as in most cases, elements of national power and state capacity. As such, these structural features makes them inherently vulnerable to any form of external aggression, which in the present context, can be best described through the growing Islamic radicalisation of the Caribbean Muslim population.

Though *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2005*, documented that the threat of terrorism in the Caribbean remains low, Sanjay Badri Maharaj,<sup>8</sup> speaking at a seminar on “Sub-Conventional Conflicts...” conducted by the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) in February 2016, highlighted the dangerously growing trend of Trinidadian Muslims being radicalised and associating with terrorist organisations such as the IS. In trying to comprehend the magnitude of the situation wherein Caribbean Muslims are being radicalised rapidly, he pointed out that in Trinidad’s population of 1.3 million of which 5 percent comprises Muslims – numbering roughly around 65,000 – 89 were found to be fighting with the IS at present. This, according to Maharaj, is a frightening trend because of the fact that radicalisation in the region has been found to be rapid in a population which has no history of either abuse or persecution or any form of major discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, Maharaj’s assertions about radicalisation in the Caribbean seem to find resonance in various news reports wherein it has been reported that the IS perceives the residents of the small island region as being vulnerable to

radical inclinations. News reports of the arrest in St. Maarten of three people assumed to be of Syrian origin travelling from Haiti on false Greek passports, is a vindication of such assertions. In addition, Gen. John Kelly, the Commander-in-Charge of the US Southern Command, in his report to the US Senate in 2015, observed that he was troubled by the operational and financial overlap between criminals and terrorist networks in the region. According to Gen Kelly, extremists are involved in radicalising young Caribbean people.<sup>10</sup> Further, it has been argued that there exists well documented evidence that people from the Caribbean and the diaspora, often radicalised in prisons, are in Syria.

A glaring evidence of radicalisation and terrorism in the Caribbean is the IS propaganda footage which shows a man sitting besides his three children while issuing a call for the Muslims of Trinidad and Tobago to rise up. The man in the video, identified as Abu Zayd al-Muhajir, claimed to have fled from his home in Trinidad and Tobago because he had realised that Muslims there were restricted in exploiting their potentials in life.<sup>11</sup> A British diplomat, speaking on the issue of radicalisation in the Caribbean, has commented that groups like the IS could be successful in radicalising the Caribbean Muslims because many Muslim men live in conditions that are conducive for the process of radicalisation. Further, there is a perception that a lot of things that occur in *jihadist* groups elsewhere, apply in countries like Trinidad and Tobago, as the people there are exposed to gang violence, broken homes, poor education opportunities, and there is a lack of a sense of self-belonging.<sup>12</sup>

As far as terrorist threats in the Caribbean are concerned, one of its distinct features is considered to be its connection to organised crime. Well-established networks of narcotics and weapons trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, money laundering and extortion provide channels through which terrorist groups can operate with impunity. The lack of counter-terrorism and anti-laundering legislation in the region hampers local efforts to stem

the potential of fund-raising and human smuggling activities of international terrorist organisations, such as the IS, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, porous borders have allowed the southeastern Caribbean region to become a safe haven for high-profile criminals on the run.<sup>14</sup> In 2003, the Defence Minister of Suriname admitted that Ali Imron, the Indonesian given a life sentenced for his role in the October 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people, spent a year living in the Surinamese city of Mungo, where he taught at a Muslim school. Local Trinadadian papers also reported that Adnan El Sukrijumah, a Saudi native sought by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), in connection with Al Qaeda plots to attack the US, had spent time at Darul Uloom, a local Islamic institute, and that he had also been reportedly spotted in Panama in April 2001 and in Honduras in 2004.

Recent numbers indicate an increase in migration to the Caribbean of Arab Muslims. Although Caribbean societies remain mostly a harmonious mosaic of ethnicities and faiths, a propaganda video of a Trinadadian IS fighter demonstrates the susceptibility of some local Muslims to the messages of international radical Islamic organisations. Additionally, it has been found that conversions have been increasing as Islam is seen as an outlet for social empowerment. In Trinidad, for instance, the Jamaat al-Muslimeen, as well as its offshoots, the Wajihatul Islamiyyah, Jamaat al-Murabiteen and Jamaat al-Islami al-Karibi, borrow heavily from the discourse of militant black ethno-nationalist movements, including the most radical fringes of the Nation of Islam. Most followers of these groups are Afro-Caribbeans, although a high percentage of Muslim natives are of South Asian descent. The Caribbean also serves as a base for recruitment and operations of militant Islamic groups because of its proximity to the US.

According to analysts and security experts, the IS is looking beyond its traditional bastion to strengthen its position. To do so, it is seeking, through a carefully

thought through policy, ways in which it can destabilise its neighbours and export terror to its distant enemies. In other words, while the primary target may be the US and its citizens, the Caribbean and Central America's geographic location and its porous borders, and, in some cases, poor or corrupt policing, make it an attractive area to operate out of or in.<sup>15</sup> Mobile phone images seized by SEBIN, Venezuela's intelligence service, allegedly show Trinidadian Muslims arrested in Venezuela engaging in what SEBIN described as "pre-jihad training" on a firing range, using high-powered weapons.<sup>16</sup> It has been further reported that the training resembled the one that takes place in West Asia. At the same time, intelligence sources in Trinidad also said that they are fearful that some of those fighting in Syria will return to Trinidad with the radical ability to carry out violent acts.

As far as Latin America and the Caribbean in the realm of Islamic fundamentalism are concerned, John Kelly, the then-SOUTHCOM<sup>17</sup> Commander, has said that IS-inspired lone wolf attack threats to Latin America and the Caribbean are a likely potential, while self-radicalisation influenced by *jihadist* groups such as the IS and Iran's proxy Hezbollah is taking place in both Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup> However, it is important to note here that it is not clear whether the IS would carry out an attack in the Caribbean or just use the area for recruitment. What is certain is that criminal organisations trafficking drugs throughout Latin America and the Caribbean are reported to have made sophisticated advancements in moving cargo and people throughout the region. Now security experts are of the view that extremist networks like the IS have designs on capitalising on these routes.<sup>19</sup> Another worrying trend emanates from the fact that some of the radicalised Caribbean

fighters hail from Suriname, Jamaica, Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago, which have limited or no intelligence or law enforcement infrastructure to hunt them down. It has further been argued that some extremists may even benefit from the governments' corruption to maintain their cover.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, one can safely argue that it is an easy place for nefarious actors of all ideologies to operate in, being a region where government institutions are weak and political corruption is rampant. The Caribbean has instances of militarism among the Muslim communities. The Jamaat-al Muslimeen trying to launch a coup against the government in Trinidad and Tobago in July 1990, is a case in point. Since the region is a backyard for the US, the potential ability of militants from other nations to enter the US from the region is considered a major concern. Though the US has been able to attain considerable success in protecting the northern and southern land borders from smugglers and other unauthorised entries, the vast ocean routes present opportunities for traffickers. The potential for terrorism emanating out of radicalised Caribbean Muslims, especially for the US, is enormous. Research has highlighted the IS' successfully attracting the Caribbean Muslim population, besides successfully attracting recruits from the US, Europe and other Muslim countries through the allure of a supposedly pure and hardline Caliphate designed along an ancient interpretation of Islamic rules. Through proficient use of social media and electronic publications, the Daesh has been able to encourage its followers to adopt "lone wolf" attacks, or those planned and orchestrated without any outside support, which comprises the real fear for the Caribbean, which depends on the tourism industry.

## Notes

1. For details, see Margarita Bizina and David H Gray, "Radicalization of Youth as a Growing Concern for Counter-Terrorism Policy", *Global Security Studies*, 5 (1), 2014, pp. 72-79
2. Ibid.
3. For details, see John Graham (2015), "What Drives ISIS?", [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com). Accessed on July 05, 2016, URL: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-graham/what-drives-isis\\_b\\_8678314.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-graham/what-drives-isis_b_8678314.html)

## ... The Caribbean

4. Joseph S Tulchin and Ralph H Espach, "US-Caribbean Security Relations in the Post-Cold War Era" in Tulichin and Espach eds., *Security in the Caribbean Basin: The Challenges of Regional Cooperation* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), p. 5.
5. Anti-Castro exiles based in Venezuela claimed responsibility of the action. For details, see Ivelaw L Griffith and Jorge Nef, "Security in the Caribbean: State Sovereignty or Public Order?" In John Bailey and Roy Godson eds., *Public Security in the Americas: New Challenges in the South-North Dialogue* (Washington: Centre for Latin American Studies, 2004).
6. The concept for the attack involved blowing up fuel tanks and setting off a chain of explosions at the airport. For details, see R Evan Ellis, "Radical Islam in Latin America and the Caribbean", *Air and Space Power Journal*, 13, 2015, pp. 3-13
7. For details, see Stephen Vasciannie, "Security, Terrorism and International Law: A Skeptical Comment" in Ivelaw Lyoyd Griffith ed., *Caribbean Security in the Age of Terror: Challenge and Change* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004).
8. Sanjay Badri Maharaj is a law professional, and defence and security consultant based in Trinidad and Tobago
9. Excerpts from Maharaj's presentation on "Terror: A Flat Word?" in an international seminar on Sub-Conventional Conflicts: Emerging Threats and Challenges conducted by CLAWS in February 2016
10. David Jessop, "Terrorism: A Real Threat for the Caribbean," [www.caribbeannewsservice.com](http://www.caribbeannewsservice.com). Accessed on May 10, 2016, URL: <http://caribbeannewsservice.com/now/terrorism-a-real-threat-for-the-caribbean/>
11. Tom Batchelor, "ISIS in the Caribbean: Islamic State in Alarming Call to Arms to Jihadis on Paradise Isle", [www.express.co.uk](http://www.express.co.uk). Accessed on May 15, 2016, URL: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/618059/Islamic-State-ISIS-militants-expand-terror-network-Trinidad-Tobago>
12. For details, see Craig Saunders (2016), "Sun, Sea and Slaughter: ISIS Jihadis Flying to Caribbean to Recruit Young Men", [www.dailystar.co.uk](http://www.dailystar.co.uk). Accessed on June 05, 2016, URL: <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/512187/ISIS-jihadis-Caribbean-Daesh-recruit>
13. Amenda Farfel, "The Caribbean: A New Frontier for Radical Islam?" AJC Latino and Latin American Institute, [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org). Accessed on June 06, 2016, URL: [http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42d75369-d582-4380-8395-d25925b85eaf%7D/caribbean\\_briefing\\_08152007.pdf](http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42d75369-d582-4380-8395-d25925b85eaf%7D/caribbean_briefing_08152007.pdf)
14. Ibid.
15. David Jessop, "The Caribbean is Not Immune", [www.caribbean-council.org](http://www.caribbean-council.org). Accessed on June 10, 2016, URL: <http://www.caribbean-council.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Nov22-The-Caribbean-is-not-immune.pdf>
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17. The United States Southern Command.
18. Edwin Mora (2016), "Hundreds in Latin America, Caribbean Have Joined Islamic State", [www.breitbart.com](http://www.breitbart.com). Accessed on July 10, 2016, URL: <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/03/21/isis-sees-recruitment-success-in-latin-america/>
19. Paul D Shinkman (2015), "Military Fears ISIS is Eyeing Drug-Smuggling Routes to Enter US", [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com). Accessed on July 10, 2016, URL: <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/29/military-fears-isis-is-eyeing-drug-smuggling-routes-to-enter-us>
20. Ibid.

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