The role of religion in South Asia is rather enigmatic. While the elements from some of the world's religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have enriched the splendor of the region's civilization in various dimensions and acted as integrative forces in the society, the same forces, due to a complex web of historical, political and social factors, engendered disruptive and divisive outcome affecting adversely peace, democracy and progress in the region. Needless to mention, all the major countries of South Asia have witnessed, over the past two decades, the rise of alarming forms of religious militancy and extremism. India has seen the rise of an extremist Hindu nationalism, Islamic militancy and terrorism manifested in Pakistan, Bangladesh has witnessed the increasing political influence and extremism of radical Islam and finally, Sri Lanka seems to have been torn apart by a suicidal conflict between Buddhist nationalism and ethnic Tamil Hindu community. While the rise of religious militancy may be explained by the politico-economic, socio-cultural, historical and psychological factors peculiar to each of the South Asian polities, the fact remains that the phenomenon has, in recent times, manifested itself in some macabre forms like communal violence, intra-religious sectarian violence, and extremism and fanaticism in religion-based politics etc.
In this respect, religious militancy can be defined as violence or threat of violence associated with the growth of religious intolerance and extremism. While religious militancy has fomented hatred, intolerance, discord and bigotry in each of these countries, the real issue pertains to security implications for the region as a whole. In this respect, security needs to be conceptualized as a comprehensive challenge straddling several levels like internal, regional and international.

At the internal level, religious militancy plagues the society by accentuating problems like (i) offering raison d’être to the forces of disintegration and the terrorists; (ii) creating self-destructive internal tension and social instability; (iii) imposing hurdles on the way of democracy and governance; (iv) presenting obstacles to economic progress; (v) spawning flagrant violation of human rights; and (vi) rise of insurgency movements along religious lines etc. Owing to the fact that national, religious and historical sensitivities run across the state boundaries in the region, the internal security tension caused by religious militancy has a regional dimension as well. One thus notices the tendency of religious militancy to spill over inter-state borders for a number of reasons like common ethnic and religious groups across national frontiers, the transmigration of population, the tendency of governments in South Asia to use ‘external threat’ for nation-building, regime consolidation, managing domestic, political and economic crises. All such maleficent factors impinge on the inter-state relations and breed negative implications for the regional security as a whole. The international ramifications of religious militancy in South Asia cannot also be overlooked. Due to internal problems, each of these states suffers from an image crisis and loses credibility vis-à-vis the outside world. In the process, they become the victims of media blitz, economic boycott, uncertainty in the field of international cooperation, and unforeseen external response. In brief, all these states remain vulnerable to the
global policy initiatives of powerful nations outside the region.

It transpires from the foregone discussion that religious militancy in South Asia presents a crisis of non-traditional nature with the potential to vitiate regional peace and stability. The need, therefore, is to deal with such crisis in South Asia through a range of measures including political, economic, social and psychological etc. Against this backdrop, BIiSS, in collaboration with the German and French Embassies in Dhaka, organized an International Conference in Dhaka, from 10-13 October 2004 on the selected theme to address the following issues:

- What has gone wrong with these countries? Is religious militancy an acceptable mode to express people's national, regional and universal identities?
- Is there a failure on the part of the political, institutional, administrative, legal and judicial systems to check this ominous development? In other words, where does governance stand in combating the dangers associated with religious militancy?
- How can durable peace be established when tension, mistrust and suspicion mark the domestic scene as well as the inter-state relations in South Asia? Can the cross-border spill over effects of domestic crisis caused by religious militancy lead to inter-state tensions and even conflict in the region?
- Can a crisis, caused by religious militancy in South Asia, have any extra-regional implications?
- Finally, what measures can be undertaken to check further spread of religious militancy in the region? Can such measures be identified by levels of analysis, i.e. national, regional and international, so as to make the response process an integrated and coordinated one?

The conference spread over four days was divided into seven working sessions during which altogether fifteen papers were presented. The main focus of the conference
was the entire gamut of religious militancy, not only as it manifests itself in South Asia but also those unfolding in other parts of the world. As such, the conference covered a wide range of issues that impact on the security profile of South Asia. A good number of distinguished scholars, members of the academia, representatives of multidisciplinary professional bodies and policy makers from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, France and Germany participated in the conference. The organizers felt that the Conference would be incomplete if the young people are not heard. Therefore, the last day of the Conference, i.e. the seventh working session was devoted exclusively to young scholars of the country with the objective to take on board their views on the subject.

The present volume is a compilation of the revised and edited version of the papers presented in the conference. Some papers presented in the conference, could not, however, be included in the volume. The papers are: ‘Queries and Issues Regarding the Conceptualization of Religious Militancy’, by Mr. Ibrahim Waheed; ‘From Jihad to Politics: The Nationalization of Bangladeshi Islamist Parties’, by Mr. M. Jeremie Codron; ‘The Non-rational Idea of the Holy - Analysis of the Hindu Right in India’, by Dr. Santishree Pandit; ‘Terror as Worship: The Spiritual Manual of the Perpetrators of September 11’, by Professor Dr. Hans G. Kippenberg; and ‘War on Terrorism’ and Its Geopolitical Fall Out on South Asia’, by Dr. Jean-Luc Racine. Abstracts of these papers have been included in the Annex.

The first paper titled Root Causes of Militancy: Religion or Otherwise? by Professor M. Shamshirer Ali attempts to identify the causes of militancy at different levels: family, social, national, regional and international. Militancy at every level has a cause of its own, but every form of militancy does not have a religious root. It is rather the exploitation of religion for political purposes that generates militancy. The root causes may also lie elsewhere
like deprivation, marginalization, majoritarian dominance, ideological conflict between the US and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War and its impact on Third World countries, historical and colonial legacies, lack of enlightened political leadership and the like. Militancy need not be dealt with hard power alone. There are many moderate options of soft power to win the hearts and minds of people and to neutralize the bitterness that exists. Love, sharing and understanding are perhaps more effective means of addressing all militancy - religious or otherwise.

In his paper titled Religious Militancy in South Asia: Genesis and Characteristics, Mr. Balraj Puri is of the opinion that religion in South Asia emerged as the main basis of identity formation particularly when other aspects of identity did not get recognition or avenue of expression. Out of multiple identities of an individual or a community, the identity under threat becomes pronounced. Thus, in his view, religious terrorism becomes an expression of an ethnic identity when its non-religious expressions are blocked and its discontent is denied democratic outlet. Apart from local manifestations of terrorism, it gets linked with global terrorism.

The paper on Christian Evangelical Activity and the Reemergence of Militant Buddhism: Concerns for Internal Security by Dr. Sasanka Perera mainly deals with the present state of religious tension in Sri Lanka, which has resulted from the reaction of the majority Buddhists and the Hindus to the controversial missionary activities of the new Christian groups. Referring to the victory of as many as 10 Buddhists monks in the parliamentary election of April 2004, he finds that a clear Sinhala-Buddhist militant nationalist platform is emerging in Sri Lanka. This has occurred, as Dr. Perera argues, in the backdrop of allegations of rising Christian conversions, popular demands by Buddhists and Hindus to ban what is called 'unethical conversions' into Christianity, the increasing
visibility of Christian evangelical churches and attacks on them and the death of a popular Buddhist monk whose demise has been blamed on Christians.

Dr. Christian Wagner in his paper on *Religion, State and Conflict in South Asia*, contends that religion has always been used in South Asia as a major pillar in the process of nation-building first to use existing traditions as a source of legitimacy and second to find a common cultural denominator for the various ethnic and linguistic groups in the states. He finds that religious issues have gained more importance in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. His paper analyses and compares the different strategies of using religion in the context for nation-building in South Asia. The problems that Dr. Wagner examines are: whether religion has increased legitimacy and stability of governments; and how far religion had an impact on the international relations of South Asia.

Mr. Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, in his paper titled *Pakistan and the War on Terrorism: Impact on Regional Security*, gives an overview of the role Pakistan has played in the “War on Terrorism”, as well as the cooperation it has extended to the international community, especially the US in this connection. He highlights the impact of this war on Pakistan’s national interest, especially the Kashmir dispute, Afghanistan, Pakistan’s strategic assets, as well as its impact on domestic political dynamics. Lastly, his paper dilates on the impact on regional security of Pakistan’s efforts to curb the menace of terrorism.

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, in his paper on *Religion, Democracy and Secularism* argues that in a competitive democratic polity like India, there is bound to be religious militancy in major religious communities although religious militancy in minority communities should not be taken leniently. He admits that religion by itself is not the cause of conflict, but problem arises when it generates group identity that politically clashes with the identity of the other
community. Dr. Engineer contends that religious militancy of extreme kind is a response to the increasing process of modernization and secularization of the state. This impinges on both internal and regional security. He suggests that the problem should be addressed politically and that religious sensitivities need to be respected.

The paper titled Religious Militancy, Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue: An Islamic Perspective by Professor Syed Anwar Husain is of the opinion that no religion per se, not even Islam, offers any support for militancy and violence as a modus operandi. As regards the way out, he is of the view that the civil society initiatives can be a possible facilitator for creating an environment of interreligious tolerance. One of the potent ways by which such an egalitarian goal can be advanced by the civil society is through instituting interfaith dialogue, locally, regionally and internationally. He further suggests that the key message to be put across is that, the world gains nothing by the abusers or detractors of religion; and thus, the imperative is a proper understanding of religion.

In his paper titled Dealing with Religious Militancy: Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue, Mr. Keshav Raj Jha states that regardless of how the adherents live and practice their faith in their daily lives, such universally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood and freedom are humane values exalted by all major religions. So, religion is a system of belief that embraces all races and all beliefs, a road that brings everyone together in brotherhood. Mr. Jha believes that interfaith dialogue is a must today, and the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments and giving precedence to shared values, which far outnumber polemical ones.

The paper titled Dealing with Religious Militancy in South Asia: Regional and Extra-Regional Cooperation by Dr. Anindyo J. Majumdar advocates regional and extra-
regional cooperation in dealing with religious militancy in South Asia. This is because the impact spreads beyond the state boundaries. He suggests that states must restrain from injuring each other's interests through activities, which may be seen as leverage for diplomatic bargaining in a Machiavellian way. Instead, economic cooperation and confidence building must be accorded greater priority. Arguing that foreign interference may backfire, Dr. Majumdar suggests that quiet diplomacy, along with information exchange, intelligence cooperation, monitoring over potential agents of peril and belief in certain common elements in policies can help.

In his paper on Religious Extremism/Militancy in South Asia: Issues in Levels and Spheres of Cooperation, Dr. Ijaz Khan states that religious extremism is a global issue, with regional peculiarities. South Asian religious extremism is no exception. Conceptually, religious extremism is a default option on the extreme right side of the political spectrum. For him, it is a non-state international phenomenon. So he argues that it has to be dealt with at individual state level, regional level as well as extra-regional level, demanding cooperative actions. It also, rather more effectively, can be dealt with in the sphere of the non-state and by civil society. Dr. Ijaz Khan is of the opinion that it is a political issue and has to be dealt with at the political level. So, the role of political activists and intellectuals would be crucial.

The conference provided a unique platform to thrash out the parochial idea that religious militancy is exclusively Islamic in origin - an idea that is mostly understood globally. It came to an understanding as to the exact origin, nature and characteristics of religious militancy in the region. It brought to the forefront the issue that militancy in the region of South Asia has its own realities and dynamics and is not necessarily religious in nature; it is more a part of the agenda for political ends. Finally, the conference
opened the door for a possible inter-faith dialogue in South Asia to address the myriad problems related to religious militancy in the region.

This volume is produced by BIiSS in cooperation with the German Embassy in Bangladesh. In conformity with universally recognized freedom of expression and academic freedom, this compilation is a compendium of wide cross-section of views and opinions on the subject, and no particular religion was the object of this conference. The authors were requested to duly respect sensitivities of all religions. The individual authors are responsible for the views expressed in their respective papers. These views and opinions are not attributable to BIiSS, which is a research organization, and does not have particular position on any subject of this nature.