

Trends in Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Sub-Committee on the Asia-Pacific

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17 May 2017

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1. Trends in Terrorism

Southeast Asia is home to over a dozen armed Islamist groups that seek to overthrow their governments or secede. Most are small and very localized. At times they have tried to link up to transnational organizations. But most Southeast Asian groups tend to be very localized and with limited resources. They also tend to be highly fractious and fluid, with allegiances within groups and between them changing frequently. That said, they remain consistently lethal, despite concerted government efforts to disrupt them.

In the mid-1990s, a network of radical Salafists, known as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) pledged *bai'at* to Al Qaeda. But they did not engage in attacks against Western targets until 2002. Previously, they served as a back office for Al Qaeda and were largely engaged in sectarian conflicts in Indonesia, in which some 6,000 people were killed. After the October 2002 attack in Bali, JI was able to perpetrate one major attack a year, more or less through 2009. But that point the group was weakened by arrests and hobbled by factionalism, between those who wanted to double down on the Al Qaeda line, and those who saw it as counterproductive and espoused a return to sectarian bloodletting. There was an attempt to bridge that gap and mimic the Lashkar e-Taiba-style attacks in Mumbai in 2009. Indonesian counter-terrorism efforts nullified those efforts, and by 2010, JI was largely defunct as a terrorist organization.

The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Southeast Asia has important strategic and tactical implications. Most importantly, it has revitalized terrorist networks that had largely been defeated or had gone dormant by 2010. ISIS does pose a threat to regional security, but it is a manageable threat.¹

There are some positive trends. First, the the numbers are not that large; roughly several thousand core members in a region of over 600 million. And they are divided amongst disparate groups and cells. More importantly, they are confronting states - especially Malaysian and Indonesia - with very competent security forces that are no longer in denial about the problem. Unlike in the 2000s, Malaysian and Indonesian counter-terrorism officials have been very proactive. Malaysian and Indonesian authorities have arrested roughly 400 people since 2014 for ISIS-related activities.²

There are an estimated 1,000 Southeast Asians who have traveled to Iraq and Syria. Not all are combatants; the figure includes women, children, and dozens who have been turned back and

sent home by Turkish authorities. Indonesian officials estimated that about 500 Indonesian radicals were fighting in Syria or Iraq, and have positively identified 284 citizens actively involved in fighting; and are investigating another 516. US estimates are over 800.³ There were enough Southeast Asians in Iraq and Syria for them to organize into their own company of Bahasa speakers, Katibah Nusantara, as well as set up a school for their children. But nearly 100 Southeast Asians militants are known to have been killed in Iraq and Syria to date.

Second, recent attacks attributed to ISIS to date have been small and amateurish, though there are worrying signs that they are becoming more technically proficient.

Third, it has long been feared that ISIS would declare a *Wakilya* - a province - in Southeast Asia. To date that has not happened, and is unlikely to happen, especially with ISIS's recent battlefield losses.

Fourth, Malaysia and Indonesia have recently stood up counter messaging centers.⁴

Fifth, the defeat of Mujihideen Indonesia Timur (MIT), one of the most lethal former JI splinters, and the first large group in Indonesia to declare loyalty to ISIS, and the only one to physically control territory.

Sixth, there were four prominent Southeast Asians in Syria, Malaysian Ustadz Lofti and Mohammed Wannady, Indonesians Bahrumsyah (also known as Abu Muhammad al-Indonesi) and Abu Jandal, who were able to recruit, fundraise, and organize terrorist attacks back at home. All four have reportedly been killed. Almost every attack to date - either executed or thwarted - can be tied back to these four men in Syria, who have vast social media fanbases.⁵ But there are others waiting in the wings.⁶

But let me lay out ten concerns about specific groups and trends:

First, the reason that so few Southeast Asians have traveled to Iraq and Syria is not a lack of interest, but the logistical backlog. Indonesia arrested the two key financiers who had funded much of the travel, including Chep Hernawan.⁷ The governments in the region are sharing flight manifests and intelligence making it much harder to travel without arriving suspicion. And governments are preemptively arresting suspects.

Second, the pathways to recruitment are diverse, and very much geared for the domestic context. In Indonesia the key pathway to recruitment to ISIS cells are through JI's traditional social and kinship networks, as well as what are referred to as "anti-vice" organizations or Islamist vigilante groups.

A 2016 survey by the Wahid Center and Indonesia Survey Institute (LSI) found that 7.7 percent of Muslims in Indonesia were susceptible to radicalization, a not insignificant number.⁸ 28 percent of the respondents admitted to tolerating radical acts, such as attacking houses of worship belonging to other religions, protests or conducting "unauthorized sweeping" on venues not complying with Shariah law. While 7.7 percent of respondents said they are willing to perform radical acts, 0.4 percent said they had participated in acts already.⁹

The Indonesian government refuses to crackdown on these "anti-vice" organizations. Indeed, when there were massive demonstrations against the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta, led

by these organizations, the president actually went out and prayed with them at Friday prayers on 2 December 2016.¹⁰ Such "anti-vice" organizations played a key role in the defeat of the governor and his appalling May 2017 conviction for blasphemy.¹¹ Although the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) gets most of the attention, there are many of these "anti-vice" organizations that are key recruiters and conveyors for terrorist organizations.

Although both countries have active CVE/disengagement programs, I am concerned about both, though for separate reasons. In Malaysia, where suspects can be detained indefinitely without trial, disengagement programs are the only way for them to leave prison. On the plus side, Malaysia is small and wealthy enough to closely monitor people after release. Indonesia is altogether different, with every suspect tried in a court of law, and with unfortunately lenient sentences. No one has to go through a disengagement program as a condition for release. Some 700 Indonesian terrorism suspects or 80 percent have gone through disengagement programs.¹² And yet recidivism rates are nearing 20 percent. There are over 200 terrorist convicts currently sitting in Indonesian prisons. About 68 of them refuse to accept de-radicalization teachings.¹³ Of the more than 500 terrorism suspects recently released from prison, Indonesian security forces are unable to locate some 200;¹⁴ and some 300 convicts to be released in the next year or so.¹⁵ Indonesian prisons are overcrowded and serve as key nodes for terrorist recruitment.¹⁶ But in Indonesia, civil society organizations have augmented the poorly funded government programs. For example, one organization, Forum Komunikasi Alumni Afghanistan Indonesia, founded in 2011, is working to stem the radicalization of younger Indonesians.¹⁷ Women's groups and the Nadhalatul Ulama have played key roles in countering ISIS messaging.¹⁸ But prisons remain key recruitment grounds.

In Malaysia, a highly wired society, recruitment is primarily online. Why this matters is, that unlike Indonesia where recruitment is a very slow and gradual process, based on kinship or personal relationships nurtured over time, recruitment in Malaysia happens anonymously and quickly through ubiquitous social media. From initial contact to getting someone willing to perpetrate an act of violence has gone from years to days. More importantly, in Malaysia, recruitment has taken place across the socio-economic spectrum, including professionals, technocrats, workers, youth, and importantly security forces. Indeed, there have been 18 members of security forces in Malaysia alone, who have been arrested for supporting ISIS activities or engaging in militancy.¹⁹ On top of that is relatively high levels of support for ISIS in Malaysia. A recent Pew survey found that while only 4% of Indonesians view ISIS as legitimate, this figure grows to 11% in Malaysia.²⁰

In contrast to JI, ISIS, has focused on women,²¹ not just as recruiters and indoctrinators, but as suicide bombers in their own right.²² In JI, women played key roles in socialization and education; and more importantly in solidifying jihadist networks through intermarriage. But ISIS' online strategy of indoctrination and recruitment has given women a very proactive role.

Third, though there have only been 3 to 4 Indonesian suicide bombers in Iraq and Syria, there have been at least 8 Malaysians.²³ The genie is out of the bottle. During JI's reign of terror in the 2000s there was not a single Malaysian suicide bombers, all were Indonesians. In 2016, Malaysian police arrested a suicide bomber just before an attack and claim that a group of 8 returnees from Syria, whom they arrested, had recruited other suicide bombers²⁴. In a two-week period, from December 2015 to January 2016, 2 Malaysian suicide bombers killed more than 32 people, including 12 Iraqi policemen.²⁵ Indonesia recently arrested a female suicide bomber.

Fourth, returnees from Syria are trickling back. This matters, because these individuals will have combat and technical experience. Indonesian CT officials believe there are roughly 40 returnees from Syria, and despite efforts, many have eluded government surveillance. Nearly 20 are currently in custody being questioned.²⁶ In January 2016 an ISIS-linked cell perpetrated an attack in Jakarta. The majority of those killed, however were militants themselves. Now there are many reasons for this - including the rapid response of Indonesian police, but only 2 of the 8 militants had any form of small arms training, and they had it back in 2009-10, before being arrested. Returnees change that. In November 2016, Indonesian police arrested a man with building a bomb three times the size of that used in the 2002 Bali bombings.²⁷ Other militants have been experimenting with a range of other explosives, demonstrating a greater technical mastery. One recent suspect arrested in Indonesia had traces of TATP, an explosive rarely used in the region.²⁸

Though Malaysia has the legal tools at its disposal to detain those who have fought overseas, Indonesia currently does not. That may change soon with the passage of a new Counter-Terrorism law, but that law is problematic in many ways and represents a setback to Indonesian democratization by giving the army a greater role in internal security.²⁹

Fifth, unlike JI's wave of terror between 1998-2010, which was centered in Indonesia, ISIS also has their sights set on Malaysia. In May 2016, they launched their first successful, albeit amateurish, attack in Malaysia. There are four other publicly identified bomb plots, including one suicide bomber who was arrested, that were in advanced planning stages and acquisition of explosives. Recently the head of counter-terrorism in Malaysia revealed that some 14 separate plots had been thwarted.³⁰ An attack in Malaysia would have far greater consequences than one in Indonesia, simply because it lacks Indonesia's social resiliency,³¹ especially as the government of Najib Razak has delegitimized itself through endemic corruption.

Sixth, ISIS has inspired an unprecedented number of lone wolf attacks. This was not JI's *modus operandi*. Like everywhere else in the world, it is a challenge to clearly differentiate what is an ISIS attack, an ISIS-organized attack or simply an ISIS-inspired attack. To date, Southeast Asian members of ISIS have used social media (such as FaceBook) and communications platforms (in particular Telegram, WhatsApp, and Signal), to recruit locals who are unable to travel to Iraq and Syria, to perpetrate attacks. This was the case in the Jakarta Starbucks attack in January 2016, the Puchong nightclub grenade attack in Kuala Lumpur in May 2016, the Batam cell that tried to hit Singaporean targets,³² or the suicide bomber who targeted the Semarang police station.³³ But there have also been a number of ISIS-inspired attacks.³⁴

While these lone wolf attacks tend to be smaller, less professional and lethal, perhaps we've just gotten lucky. In mid-2016 an Indonesian man detonated himself at the guard post of a police station, killing only one policeman.³⁵ Had he managed to get inside, it would have been a bloodbath. Another man attacked a church in Samarinda, killing 2 children. All in all, Indonesian police say there have been 10 lone wolf attacks tied to ISIS.³⁶ The problem with the lone wolf attacks is that they are usually perpetrated by individuals, off the radar screens of security forces; they are harder to thwart.

Seventh, while ISIS has received the attention of security forces across Southeast Asia in the past three years, JI has quietly rebuilt its networks.³⁷ Not only that, but Indonesian authorities have actually given JI communities significant space to operate, proselytize, and indoctrinate as long as they are not involved in militant activities. Indeed, there are some in Indonesian CT

circles who see JI as an ideological antidote to the nihilistic violence of ISIS. And while ISIS communities may well endure as militants begin to trickle back, terrorist cells in Southeast Asia have a long history of fluidity. With well over 1,000 member, recruitment strong, and ISIS members potentially defecting, JI could pose a sizable threat to Indonesia should it resume violence.

Eighth, Southeast Asia remains important to ISIS, or at least in its propaganda. ISIS media arms have produced bahasa language videos, and other forms of propaganda. They have featured Southeast Asians in *Dabiq* magazine, and created a slew of online content for them in the region. Recently ISIS published a Bahasa language magazine *al-Fatihin* for Southeast Asia.³⁸ Indonesian CT officials estimate there are roughly 15,000 different websites sharing ISIS propaganda.³⁹ Southeast Asians have increasingly been featured in ISIS's grotesque beheading videos and other propaganda that glorify wagon violence.⁴⁰ While ISIS's propaganda and media arms have sharply dished their content and other social media output in the recent offensive against them, we might need to ask whether Southeast Asia will become an important *loci* of their media efforts. The technical command is there.

Ninth, after many years of steady improvement, the southern Philippines has experienced a rapidly devolving security situation, that once again threatens not just Philippine security, but regional security.⁴¹ There are some six separate "black flag" groups that have pledged their loyalty to ISIS. Most are small and individually none really gives me cause for concern. But the Ansuar al-Khalifa Philippines (AKP, but often referred to as the "Maute Group"), which pledged allegiance to ISIS and made an ISIS-style beheading video in mid-2016, temporarily seized a town in Mindanao in December 2016.⁴² More ominously, they have the tacit support of hardline members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front,⁴³ who have seen their own peace process with the government stalled since January 2015. Hardline MILF members are getting very restless. The AKP is thought to be behind a bomb that was placed in front of the US embassy in Manila in November 2016, as well as a bombing in Davao in mid-2016.⁴⁴

ISIS has sought to get these different groups under a single banner and command structure. There were attempts to do this in early 2016, but my sense is that has been more for propaganda purposes.⁴⁵ AKP has worked to reach out to ISIS cells in Malaysia and Indonesia, where militants control no territory, and the bodies of foreign fighters have been recovered after recent fighting.⁴⁶ Abu Sayyaf Group leader Isnilon Hapilon was recognized by ISIS as the leader in the region. Moreover, a Moroccan and Malaysian have been killed fighting alongside his men; so he's clearly working to rebuild international networks. Another Malaysian based cell, Darul Islam Sabah, has become a key conduit for moving people in and out of the southern Philippines, and recent arrests have included a number of foreigners.

But the real problem is the resurgence of the Abu Sayyaf since 2014. Despite the fact that it is geographically contained, offers no social service, or has no meaningful ideology, the Philippine Armed Forces have been unable to defeat the group. This is despite ample US support, intelligence sharing and straining since 2001. That Philippine president Duterte wants the final US Special Forces to leave, will only make matters worse.⁴⁷ The ASG have been involved in a renewed spate of kidnappings.

While the media is fixated on their high profile kidnappings of westerners, including the beheading of two Canadians in 2016 after sufficient ransoms were not paid,⁴⁸ the real threat posed by the ASG today, is the one to regional trade and commerce. Between March 2016 and

April 2017, there have been 19 separate maritime incidents and hostage takings, including one attempted attack. This has resulted in the capture of 70 sailors and fishermen from 6 countries, and the death of 5 more. As of the end of April, 36 have been released; 34 remain captive.⁴⁹ In addition over 40 sailors and seamen escaped capture or were not taken. This has jeopardized international trade and commerce,⁵⁰ and led to sustained diplomatic pressure on the Philippines from Malaysia and Indonesia.⁵¹

This tactic has been very lucrative. It is estimated that the ASG has received over \$7 million in ransoms in 2016,⁵² allowing them to rearm and recruit.⁵³ Of course the proceeds are shared wildly in the community, including with the Philippine security forces that are riddled with corruption. Receiving roughly \$50 million a year in counter-terrorism assistance from the US, and their cut of ransom money, there is no incentive for the Philippines to defeat the Abu Sayyaf.

Tenth, I cannot emphasize how much the ongoing ethnic cleansing against Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya community in Rakhine State resonates across Southeast Asia. The plight of the 1.1 million Rohingya, who are denied basic legal protections including citizenship, has been seized upon by Islamist media in general, and ISIS-linked media, in particular.⁵⁴ Indonesian authorities have now broken up two terrorist plots to blow up the Burmese embassy in Jakarta.⁵⁵ There will be similar attempts in the future. But the pogroms provide a new pool of talent to recruit from and networks to penetrate.⁵⁶ The situation is growing more dire by the day with some 140,000 living in squalid IDP camps, and some 40,000 others currently displaced by pogroms, much of which are perpetrated by Myanmar's security forces.⁵⁷ The rise of of an armed movement Harakat al-Islamiyah (HAY) is troubling, but not at all surprising. As attention on the "far enemy" wanes with ISIS's loss of territory and authority in Syria, there will be a renewed attention on local grievances. The Rohingya will be near the top of that list. In December 2016, Malaysian authorities arrested an Indonesian, en route to Myanmar to join the Rohingya,⁵⁸ and there has been a surge in arrests of Bangladeshi nationals across the region.⁵⁹

2. Opportunities for Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation

One of the reasons why there has been so little terrorism in Southeast Asia in the past few years despite rapid recruitment into ISIS, has been effective cooperation both amongst ASEAN states and with other partners including Australia, the United States, and in particular Turkey, which has returned roughly 100 Southeast Asians. There clearly needs to be more cooperation between Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi security services. But the important thing to note is that cooperation between security services in the region no longer requires the highest levels of political cover; such intelligent sharing has become more routinized, through ASEAN channels.

The one area where this is still lacking and requires far greater political and diplomatic support, is in maritime policing in the waters between the southern Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, which share the island of Borneo. The ability of the Abu Sayyaf to both prey on slow-moving tugs, merchant vessels, and fishing boats, as well as launch kidnapping rates into the Malaysian state of Sabah, has become one of the most pressing regional security threats. On three occasions the ASG have or attempted to board ocean going cargo vessels, most recently killing a Vietnamese crewman in November 2016.⁶⁰ ASEAN could play a lead here.

In mid-2016, Indonesia and Malaysia put considerable pressure on the Philippines to begin trilateral maritime patrols. Although in agreement was reached in principle in August 2016, it still has not been fully implemented. A large reason for this is that the naval, maritime policing, and

Coast Guard capabilities of all three countries remains relatively weak. While Malaysia has allocated more resources towards defending Sabah, there remain real limits to the resources that Indonesia in the Philippines can or are willing and able to deploy. Second, unlike the Regional Maritime Security Initiative in the Strait of Malacca, a very successful multilateral intelligence fusion center that is well staffed and resourced, there is no similar mechanism in the Sulu Sea, nor are there talks to establish one that I am aware of. The trilateral policing pact is really an *ad hoc* agreement that will take place on the water between three countries using different communication systems, with a history of miss trust towards one another, and relatively weak capabilities. Another problem is that their remain territorial disputes amongst the three. There is a maritime border dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia, while the Philippines still does not legally recognize Sabah as Malaysian territory; as such there is no demarcated maritime border between them.

3. Recommendations for US Policy-Makers

First, continue intelligence sharing and law enforcement cooperation, and whenever possible try to work in a multilateral fashion with our Southeast Asia partners.

Second, the United States should encourage trilateral maritime policing in the Sulu Sea, as well as the establishment of a fusion center between the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The United States can offer technical assistance and a limited amount of funding, trilaterally or through ASEAN.

Third, the United States should continue to support Malaysia's and Indonesia's counter-messaging centers. More importantly, it should work to ensure greater cooperation and information sharing between the two.

Fourth, the United States must continue to push Indonesia to enact meaningful prison reform; as the existing prison system is both a prime recruiting ground, and a permissive environment for leading figures to organize terror attacks from.

Fifth, the United States must take a hard look at their counterterrorism assistance to the Philippines. We have created moral hazard. We have incentivized the Philippine security forces to never finish off the Abu Sayyaf. Moreover, with the egregious human rights violations committed under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, including over 7,000 extrajudicial killings many of which were committed by the Philippine National Police, we may have to limit the security assistance that we provide to them and two other elements of security forces that have been tasked with the war on drugs. This war on drugs has been an all out assault on the rule of law and due process, while weakening the country's already weak political institutions. We should concentrate our assistance where the Philippines needs it the most and where it will not be used to further gut the rule of law. We should support maritime policing and work to build up the capabilities of the Philippines' nascent Coast Guard. And here I am not talking about the transfer of large decommissioned Coast Guard cutters which are too costly for the Philippines to repair and operate. They need small fast-moving craft that are cheap to run, service, and which would be most effective against the ASG. Most importantly, we and ASEAN together must prod the Philippine government to recommit itself to the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

Sixth, while I remain strongly in favor of continued freedom of navigation operations by the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea, only if we do them repeatedly and without fanfare. Anything less

undermines our objectives. But there are many other ways that the United States can demonstrate our commitment to regional peace and security. The United States could do more training and maritime exercises with partners in the Sulu Sea; it could conclude ship rider agreements, and support regional security operations by providing real time ISR and other intelligence. While so much media attention is spent on the South China Sea, the Lombok Strait, up through the Celebes Sea to Sulu Sea are likewise strategic sea lanes of communication that must be patrolled. This is critical for the security and economic prosperity of all ASEAN states.

¹ For more thorough treatment, see Zachary Abuza, "The Strategic and Tactical Implications of the Islamic State on Southeast Asia's Militant Groups," *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* (Fall 2016).

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¹⁹ The Malaysian Defence Ministry admits that about 1% of those being monitored by the Special Branch's Counter Terrorism Division are members of the armed forces. They bring a needed skill set. In December 2016, a Malaysian policewoman was arrested for assisting ISIS members set up social media accounts. <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/09/26/some-armed-forces-members-being-monitored-for-alleged-links-with-isis/>; <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2016/12/06/7-years-for-cop-guilty-of-hiding-terror-activities/>.

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