

# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

## ISIS in the Pacific: Assessing Terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Threat to the Homeland

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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the subject of the threat of ISIS in Southeast Asia. It is a pleasure and privilege to appear before you today.

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I have been asked to offer my assessment of terrorism in Southeast Asia especially in relation to ISIS. Let me begin by saying that any assessment of the threat posed by ISIS in Southeast Asia must begin with the observation that terrorism is not a new phenomenon in the region. During the era of anti-colonial struggle, terrorism and political violence were tactics used frequently by various groups. Since 9/11, Southeast Asia has witnessed several terrorist incidents perpetrated mostly by the Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist organization and its splinter groups. These incidents include the October 2002 Bali bombings, the August 2003 J.W. Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta, the bombing of Super Ferry 14 in the southern Philippines in February 2004, the September 2004 Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta, further bombings in Bali in October 2005, and further bombings at the J. W. Marriott (again) and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Jakarta in 2009. From this last series of attacks to the Jakarta attacks earlier this year, there has not been a major urban terrorist incident, although sporadic violence had continued in the form of clashes between security forces and militant groups, especially in the southern Philippines and also in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, Indonesian security forces discovered a major militant training camp in Aceh which involved a number of jihadi groups. Several reasons can be cited to explain this hiatus: improved counterterrorism capabilities of regional security forces, disagreements within the jihadi community over the indiscriminate killing of Muslims, and rivalry and factionalism among jihadi groups that have reduced their capabilities and operational effectiveness.

Against this backdrop, the ISIS-inspired attacks in Jakarta on January 14, 2016, the April 9, 2016 attack on Philippine security forces in the southern island of Basilan conducted by groups claiming allegiance to ISIS, and a recent spat of kidnappings in southern Philippines serve as a timely reminder of the persistent threat that terrorism continues to pose to Southeast Asian societies. ISIS has emerged as the signal expression of this threat, in part, because of the speed with which it has gained popularity in the region. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced on June 28, 2014 (the first day of Ramadhan) that a caliphate had been formed by ISIS, the announcement captured the imagination of the radical fringes across Southeast Asia. The announcement was followed by a comprehensive and effective propaganda campaign that conveyed the impression of ISIS's invincibility and validation from god. July and August that year witnessed a series of *bay'at* (pledge of allegiance) to

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<sup>1</sup> There were bomb attacks in Bangkok during this time but these were not linked to ISIS or any other Muslim terrorist groups. There were also bombings in Myanmar in 2013, but the identity of the perpetrators remains unknown.

ISIS taken by radical groups and clerics from Indonesia and the Philippines. It was the audacity of its announcement of the caliphate and forcefulness of its communications strategy that set ISIS apart from other groups. In September, the Southeast Asian dimension of ISIS was given something of a formal expression with the formation of Katibah Nusantara, a Southeast Asian wing of ISIS formed by Malay and Indonesian speaking fighters in Syria. Katibah fulfills several functions: it provides a social network to help Southeast Asian recruits settle in, training for those among them who would eventually take up arms, and communications with the network of pro-ISIS groups operating in Syria. By dint of these developments, the threat posed by ISIS in Southeast Asia is real, and it has been growing since mid-2014. Nevertheless, the extent of the threat should also not be exaggerated.

### **The ISIS Threat in Perspective**

On present evidence, no ISIS-aligned group has developed the capability to mount catastrophic, mass casualty attacks in the region. Four civilians were killed in the Jakarta attacks. By comparison, 130 were killed in the Paris attacks, on which the Jakarta attacks were purportedly modelled. Because of improved legislation and operational capabilities that have gradually developed over the years since the October 2002 Bali bombings, Southeast Asian governments have managed for the most part to contain the threat posed by terrorist and jihadi groups.

An accurate assessment of the number of Southeast Asians currently in Iraq and Syria is difficult to make. Most reasonable estimates place the number at 700-800. The majority are Indonesians, with an estimated 100 Malaysians as well, and a few from Singapore and possibly, the Philippines. In both real and proportionate terms, these figures are a mere fraction of the recruits coming from Europe and Australia.<sup>2</sup> Nor do they all carry arms. A significant number (about 40%) are women and children below the age of 15. These women and children have followed the men to Syria in support of their efforts to fight in a holy war, and also to live in a pristine “Islamic State”. Of the Southeast Asians who carry arms, some have already been killed in the conflict zones, especially in battles with Kurdish forces. Finally, not all Southeast Asians fighting in the conflict zones are fighting for ISIS. There are some known to be fighting with other rebel groups as well as the Al-Nusra Front.

In keeping with the need for proper perspective, we should also bear in mind that despite the hype, there is at present no “ISIS Southeast Asia,” nor has ISIS central formally declared an interest in any Southeast Asian country. For the most part, the presence of ISIS in Southeast Asia is expressed in the form of radical groups and individuals who have taken oaths of allegiance to ISIS. In other words, the ISIS phenomenon is imbricated with indigenous jihadi agendas and movements. This should prompt a further consideration: the appeal of ISIS in Southeast Asia differs depending on the country. In Malaysia and Singapore, it has mostly been the eschatological ideology and theology of ISIS that has attracted a following. In Indonesia, while ISIS does have religious appeal, other reasons have also been cited to explain its attraction. These include kinship networks and loyalties, group/personal rivalries, and personal and pragmatic interests. As a consequence, the jihadi

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Delman, “ISIS in the World’s Largest Muslim Country: Why are there so few Indonesians joining the Islamic state?” *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2016.

landscape in Indonesia is considerably more complex and variegated compared to other Southeast Asian countries. In the southern Philippines, groups that have long engaged in violence for political and criminal reasons are now claiming allegiance to ISIS. It is also worth noting that while Khatibah Nusantara was established in Syria as the Southeast Asian wing of ISIS, not all foreign fighters from the region have joined it. For instance, rather than aligning themselves with the Indonesian-led Khatibah, some Malaysians are known to be fighting alongside French, Algerian, and Tunisian foreign fighters instead. A likely reason for this is rivalry and disagreement with the Indonesian leadership.

A final observation is in order, regarding the pressing matter of foreign fighters returning to Southeast Asia. Given how terrorism in Southeast Asia was previously catalyzed by returnees from the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union, it should hardly be surprising that the scenario of hardened militants returning from Syria with ideology, operational knowledge, and frontline experience to mount attacks in the region is one that exercises security planners. This is a potential threat that cannot be taken lightly. But it should also be viewed in context. Three points are instructive in this regard:

First, the returnees known to regional governments and currently in custody are essentially deportees who failed in their efforts to gain entry into Syria. They are not fighters who have returned of their own accord or were sent back by ISIS central for purposes of launching attacks in the region;

Second, in the 1980s, the primary objective of Indonesian radicals and jihadis in Afghanistan was not so much the defeat of Soviet forces, but to obtain training and experience in order to return to fight the repressive regime of President Suharto as revenge for its hardline position against Muslim groups. With the democratization of post-Suharto Indonesia, this situation no longer holds;

Third, given the currency of ISIS's eschatology at least among certain segments of its Southeast Asian support, it stands to reason that many among them could well decide to stay the course in Syria to fight the great end-times battle.<sup>3</sup> This is more likely now that ISIS has been losing considerable swathes of its "Islamic State" territory – approximately 40% in Iraq and 10% in Syria, and has called for a new front to be established in Libya. In other words, while the threat of returnees wrecking havoc is certainly real, there are equally compelling reasons why many foreign fighters might in fact not return to Southeast Asia. In this respect, the greater threat may well be that the idea and phenomenon of ISIS would provide greater inspiration for local jihadis to continue waging what are essentially localized struggles.

### **The Nature of the Problem in Indonesia**

Indonesia was the victim of the first ISIS-inspired attack in Southeast Asia. This occurred on January 14, 2016, when self-proclaimed followers of ISIS set off

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<sup>3</sup> Narrated by Ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of Allah said: "O Allah bless us in our Shām! O Allah bless us in our Yemen." They said: "And in our Najd" He said: "O Allah bless us in our Shām! O Allah bless us in our Yemen." They said: "And in our Najd" He said: "Earthquakes are there, and tribulations are there." Or he said: "The horn of Shaitan comes from there." – Jāmi' al-Tirmidhi.

bombs at a Starbucks outside the Sarinah mall and at a nearby police outpost, and gunfire broke out on the streets at Jalan Tamrin in the heart of Jakarta.<sup>4</sup> While the casualty toll was limited, it could have been higher had the militants succeeded in conducting the attack on a much larger and more popular shopping mall, as was the original intent (but they were discouraged by the tight security at that mall).

The fact is that while Indonesia is often touted for its “moderation” in Islamic thought and practice, a radical Islamic fringe has been part of the Indonesian social and political landscape for a long time. During the Second World War the Dutch East Indies (as Indonesia was then known) was occupied by imperial Japan. Towards the end of the occupation, the Japanese military administration deliberately adopted a policy of politicizing the Muslim population and encouraging the assertion of Islamic identity. While the intent was to stoke indigenous ill-will against the Dutch, it effectively created, radicalized, and empowered an entire generation of youth, many of whom eventually took up arms not only against returning British and Dutch forces, but later also against the Republican Indonesian government that was subsequently established. Their rallying cry was jihad; and their objective was the implementation of Islamic law as a fundamental organising principle for post-independence Indonesian society. Led by charismatic self-proclaimed religious leaders such as Kartosuwirjo, radicalized youth established the Darul Islam Indonesia movement (Islamic State of Indonesia) and waged armed struggle against the Dutch. This armed struggle continued after transfer of power in 1949, this time against the Republican government in Jakarta. The Darul Islam movement presented an alternative vision of Islamic society to Indonesians, a vision they were prepared to usher into reality through the use of political violence. While generations of Darul Islam leadership have since been eliminated, the vision itself, and many of the networks built on it, remained intact and informs much of present-day radicalism and jihadism in Indonesia, including the forms that are aligned with ISIS.

Meanwhile, the mainstream of Indonesian society was itself in the throes of an Islamisation process triggered as much by internal factors as it was by the widely discussed phenomenon of the “global Islamic resurgence.” Since the constitutional debates in 1945, a segment of the Indonesian political class has agitated for the implementation of *shari’a* in the country. These efforts were defeated by due process in 1945, 1959, and 2001, but have never been entirely eliminated. Many chose to read this as indicative of the unpopularity of Islamic strictures as a formal principle of governance. Yet, other segments of the Muslim leadership saw this as evidence of an urgent need for greater Islamic proselytization – *da’wa* – in Indonesia.

For the first three-quarters of President Suharto’s 32-year New Order rule, Muslim activism was depoliticized and circumscribed. This had the effect of catalyzing a vibrant Islamic intellectual milieu as Islamic social movements moved underground and into the campuses. Among other things, it found expression in the rise of a number of *da’wa* groups and Muslim student associations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their activities flourished with funding from Saudi Arabia. Similar to what happened in neighbouring Malaysia, before long graduates of these groups and associations would come to control the levers of power as they entered the bureaucracy and positions of leadership.

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<sup>4</sup> Sidney Jones, “Battling ISIS in Indonesia,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2016.

Fastforward to the fall of Suharto in the late 1990s, this vibrant “apoliticized” milieu quickly morphed and surfaced as a dynamic terrain of Islamic activism comprising groups with multiple shades of doctrinal affiliations. Many of these were reformist and liberal groups that embraced democracy and human rights as wholeheartedly as they did Islamic culture and tradition. But another less appealing side also emerged, comprising groups that drank from the wells of Darul Islam radicalism. The most vivid, but by no means only, expression of this phenomenon was the Jemaah Islamiyah, created by the late Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, two Indonesian Islamic clerics of Arab origin with deep roots in Darul Islam as well as the *da’wa* movement. What is significant about Jemaah Islamiyah is the fact that it was built not only around Afghan veterans, but more importantly, kin networks of Darul Islam supporters and their disaffected descendents. Jemaah Islamiyah, as we know, masterminded a number of terrorist attacks in Indonesia through the 2000s, the most devastating being the Bali bombings. Less visible to the world – but no less bloody – was the violence perpetrated by Jemaah Islamiyah and other jihadi groups in the Eastern Indonesian islands of Sulawesi, Maluku, and North Maluku. Since the 2009 attacks on the J.W. Marriott and the Ritz Carlton hotels in Jakarta, Indonesian jihadi activity has moved away from targeting foreigners and has focused on the Indonesian police. This pattern held until the ISIS-inspired attacks in Jakarta in January 2016 in which civilians were also killed.

After a frustrating initial period of denial, the Indonesian government eventually managed to circumscribe the activities of Jemaah Islamiyah and killed and/or captured a considerable number of its leadership and membership. Yet, Jemaah Islamiyah still exists. More disconcertingly, it has consolidated, and has not disavowed violence in pursuit of its objective of the creation of an Islamic state. Likewise, notwithstanding two peace accords, residual grievances and the threat of violence continues to cast a long shadow over places like Poso in Central Sulawesi, which remains a hothouse for jihadi activity including those of self-proclaimed ISIS militants. The fact that Uighurs were found in the training camp of Santoso’s pro-ISIS group, *Mujahidin Indonesia Timur* or the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia, in Poso further attests to a new phenomenon – foreign fighters who are using Poso for purposes of training and, possibly, transit to Syria.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to mention that in Indonesia, Jemaah Islamiyah are at odds with ISIS for reasons of theological and personality differences. Ironically, because of their anti-ISIS position, Jemaah Islamiyah has been granted a public platform from which they have readily denounced ISIS. An example is how Abu Tholut (Imron), a convicted terrorist serving a prison sentence in Indonesia, has been given airtime to criticize ISIS. While any denunciation of ISIS is understandably welcome, the fact that the Indonesian government is enlisting Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the U.N. and whose membership includes hardline militants, to do this cannot but give pause. As mentioned earlier, Jemaah Islamiyah, which has a following that is far larger than ISIS in Indonesia, has never renounced the use of violence to achieve its ends. In fact, Jemaah Islamiyah has over the years managed to regroup, consolidate, and recruit.<sup>6</sup> Finally, a

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<sup>5</sup> “Two Chinese Uighurs Killed in Poso Terrorist Shootout,” *Jakarta Globe*, March 16, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> “Extremist group Jemaah Islamiyah active again, recruiting and collecting funds,” *Straits Times*, February 15, 2016.

significant number of Jemaah Islamiyah members currently imprisoned are expected to be released towards the end of the year when their sentences run out. Indonesia does not as yet have any strategy to deal with released terrorists in terms of rehabilitation. Simply put, the arid reality is that while ISIS is commanding attention today, it may well be Jemaah Islamiyah – with its organizational strength, funding, and more established support base – that will pose a graver terrorist threat in Indonesia.

### **The Nature of the Problem in Malaysia**

There are an estimated 100 Malaysians in Syria and Iraq, of which more than ten are women. More than ten are also known to have already been killed on the battlefield, mostly in Syria (one known casualty in Iraq as of 2015). Although there has not been a successful terrorist attack in Malaysia, police raids in recent months have uncovered efforts to mount such operations in the country, including an alleged attempt to kidnap the country's political leadership. In 2015 alone, more than a hundred alleged ISIS-sympathizers were arrested in the country.

Any attempt to understand the context and nature of the terror threat posed by ISIS in Malaysia must begin with an examination of the climate of religious conservatism and intolerance in the country, to which the UMNO-led “moderate” government has contributed by way of its institutions, affiliates, and policies. This climate of religious conservatism and intolerance has created fertile conditions for ISIS ideology to gain popularity, to wit, the reality is a far cry from the “moderate” image of Malaysia that the government of Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak has tried to portray.

Islam has unfortunately become heavily politicized in Malaysia. Malaysia's dominant political party, UMNO, is a Malay-Muslim party that was created with the main objective of, at least in theory, promoting and defending Malay-Muslim supremacy. According to the party's narrative, this supremacy is coming under siege from various cultural (read: non-Malay) and religious (read: non-Muslim) quarters and hence has to be staunchly defended. Given that Malaysia has a Malay-Muslim majority population, it should come as no surprise that UMNO's chief political opponents are also Malay-Muslim parties who equally brandish religious credentials as a source of legitimacy. The consequence of this is a condition whereby the political parties try to “out-Islam” each other, leaving non-Muslims and minority Muslim sects and movements marginalized in their wake. But the politics merely expresses the perpetuation of an exclusivist brand of Islam that is divorced from the religion's historically enlightened traditions, and which has no intention to encourage pluralism or compromise. Because politics in Malaysia is now a zero sum game as UMNO struggles to cling on to power by focusing on its religious credentials, religion has also become a zero sum game.

Related to this is the fact that this politicization of Islam is taking place against a backdrop of a state which has taken upon itself to police Islam and curtail any expression of faith that departs from the mainstream Shafi'i tradition. Yes, the *ummah* may be universal and Islamic confessional traditions may be diverse, but in Malaysia there is very little room for compromise beyond the “Islam” sanctioned by the state. The Shi'a are legally proscribed, and several smaller Islamic sects are

deemed deviant and hence, banned. All this happens despite the existence of constitutional provisions for freedom of worship. Needless to say, attempts by various fringe quarters in Muslim society to move discourse away from an overly exclusivist register have run up against the considerable weight of the state, who appoint and empower religious authorities that define and police “right” and “wrong” Islam.

Finally, rather than extol the virtues and conciliatory features of Islam’s rich tradition, many Malay-Muslim political leaders have instead chosen to use religion to amplify difference, to reinforce extreme interpretations of Malay-Muslim denizen rights, and to condemn the “other” (non-Muslims) as a threat to these rights. For fear of further erosion of legitimacy and political support, the Malay-Muslim leadership of the country have circled the wagons, allowing vocal right-wing ethnonationalist and religious groups to preach incendiary messages against Christians and Hindus with impunity. In extreme cases, they have even flippantly referred to fellow Malaysians who are adherents to other religious faiths openly as “enemies of Islam.” Until recently even state-sanctioned Friday sermons have on some occasions blatantly taken to referring to non-Muslim Malaysians as “enemies of Islam.”

Granted, Malaysia is now a member of the anti-ISIS coalition, and its leaders have finally started to act against inflammatory rhetoric targeted at non-Muslim and minority Muslim sects. Yet, given the reality that is the religio-political climate in Malaysia today, it should hardly be a surprise that Malaysia is now struggling to deal with the appeal of extremist ideas of a group such as ISIS. Such is the potential depth of this appeal, ISIS sympathizers have been found even within the security forces (although some news reports have exaggerated their numbers). A particular concern for Malaysian authorities is the proliferation of Malay-language radical websites and chat groups that are pro-ISIS in orientation. This indicates that there is clearly a Malaysian audience for ISIS-related propaganda. It also renders the dangers of self-radicalisation more acute, and the prospects of “lone-wolf” terrorism more likely.

### **Assessing Counterterrorism Efforts in Southeast Asia**

Unlike the 1990s, when they were caught offguard by the return of Jihadis from Afghanistan, regional security forces have been alert to the threat that potential returnees from Syria and Iraq might pose. In part, this is because counterterrorism has already been a matter of policy priority since the 9/11 attacks (when investigations revealed that some of the planning took place in Southeast Asia) and the Bali bombings in October 2002. The declaration of the caliphate in mid-2014, and revelations that Southeast Asians were fighting in Syria, have further hastened counterterrorism efforts in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

In Indonesia, counterterrorism operations mounted by both Detachment-88 (Densus-88 or National Police Counterterrorism Squad) and the BNPT (National Counterterrorism Agency) have pinned down militant ISIS sympathizers in Poso, Central Sulawesi. In Malaysia and Singapore, security agencies have used internal security legislation to curtail ISIS-inspired activity and arrest suspected ISIS sympathizers. In the Philippines, while several militant groups have sworn allegiance to ISIS, their activities remain confined to the southern regions of the archipelago, in



Sulu, Basilan, and Mindanao. That being said, authorities in Philippines are worried that an attack may happen in Manila.

In response to the Jakarta attacks earlier this year, Indonesia is currently in the process of tabling significant amendments to existing laws pertaining to terrorism (Law No.15/2003 on Terrorism). The general objective behind these revisions appears to be to allow security forces to pre-empt acts of terrorism rather than merely react to them after they have occurred. A series of recommendations for legal reform have been submitted to the parliament to that effect, and await parliamentary debate. These recommendations include, among other things, introduction of some form of detention without trial for purposes of investigation, a redefinition of terrorism (to include not just physical acts but also hate speech, symbols, etc), swifter approval of electronic surveillance, and the arrest of individuals involved in military training overseas and the revoking of their citizenship (this is a direct response to the problem of Indonesian foreign fighters in Syria).

There has also been considerable pushback against the ideology of ISIS, although more can certainly be done. Indonesia is home to two of the largest Muslim mass movements in the world – Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. NU and Muhammadiyah claim memberships of 40 million and 30 million respectively. Both are considered mainstream Muslim organizations widely accepted and popular among Indonesians (hence their large memberships). Their leaders and clerics are respected internationally as Islamic scholars of considerable repute. Noteworthy too, is the fact that both have launched their own programs to counter the narrative of ISIS, and indeed, of other radical groups. Similar efforts at countering the ISIS narrative can be observed in Malaysia and Singapore, albeit on a smaller scale. Nevertheless, such efforts could perhaps be further enhanced by greater cooperation and collaboration among them, especially given that the threat posed by ISIS is transnational in nature.

The situation in their prison system poses a major problem for Indonesian counterterrorism efforts. Pro-ISIS and pro-Jemaah Islamiyah Jihadi ideologues have been recruiting easily in Indonesia's prisons. At issue is how these radical clerics, such as Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman, the chief ISIS ideologue in Indonesia, are allowed to mingle with "gen pop" on a regular basis (in fact, Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir were in constant communication over text messaging while both were in different prisons – Ba'asyir in Pasir Putih and Aman in Kembang Kuning – and it is likely that Aman eventually persuaded Ba'asyir to swear allegiance to ISIS, which he did on July 8, 2014 only to rescind it later).<sup>7</sup> This being the case, their radical ideas and sermons have enjoyed easy access to a ready, disaffected audience. In addition to this, corruption, incompetence, poor monitoring, and poor supervision of visits have all contributed to the ease with which radical ideas propounded by jihadi ideologues and recruiters are allowed proliferate among "gen pop". Hence, reform of the prison system is urgent, if not an absolute priority.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the region as a whole is the policing and governance of the triborder waters encompassing the Sulu Sea (Philippines), waters off Sabah (Malaysia), and the Celebes/Sulawesi Sea (Indonesia). This porous and

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<sup>7</sup> Yuliasri Perdani and Ina Parlina, "Govt to tighten prison security following Ba'asyir's 'baiat,'" *Jakarta Post*, July 7, 2015.

ungoverned region has presented, and will continue to present, a major problem by virtue of the ease of movement for militants and terrorists across borders (see attached picture). This region has developed their own political economy over many decades, which involves not just the movement of militants and terrorists, but also human and arms trafficking. Local authorities are often either unable to curtail such activities or, indeed, complicit in them. The challenge posed by the ungoverned space in this triborder area will require multi-national cooperation to surmount. None of the regional states can do it alone. They do not possess the capabilities required to police this vast and complex space, nor the authority to do so given that such efforts will necessarily involve cross-border operations. Moreover, as evident from the difficulties faced by regional security forces to apprehend militants from Jemaah Islamiyah and other groups ensconced in the Sulu archipelago, this region has already emerged as a safehaven for terrorists. With the “Pivot” strategy in place, the U.S. should consider exploring how to facilitate cooperation among regional states on this matter. There is also a definitive U.S. interest in this, given that American citizens have been kidnapped before by groups operating in this region.

At present, there is ongoing conversation and exchange of intelligence and information in various forms between Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. But cooperation needs to be taken a step or two further, to involve joint patrols and where necessary, joint operations. Of course, such efforts could run up against rigid mindsets, obsolete paradigms, and the perennial reluctance to compromise sovereignty, but the harsh reality, as mentioned earlier, is that none of the regional states are capable of doing this on their own. Much in the same vein, cooperation between agencies within the various Southeast Asian governments – specifically, between the military, police, and intelligence - can also be improved. These two areas are where the United States can perhaps make a contribution by way of training programmes and transfer of operational knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The emergence of the phenomenon of ISIS in Southeast Asia and the traction it appears to have garnered is illustrative of how resilient but also evolutionary the threat of terrorism has become. Because of this, regional governments must remain vigilant to ISIS-related developments, particularly in terms monitoring both returnees as well as communications between militants in Syria and their counterparts and followers back home. They must equally be prepared to evolve with the threat in terms of counterterrorism strategies, narratives, and cooperation.

At the same time, in our anxiety over ISIS, we must be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. There are multiple groups operating in Southeast Asia that are intent on using some form of political violence to further their ends. Many are at odds with each other; not all are seeking affiliation to, or enamored of, ISIS. Indeed, while ISIS appears an immediate concern, a case can be made that the longer term, possibly more resilient, terrorist threat to the region may not come from ISIS but from Jemaah Islamiyah, for reasons explained earlier. It is also imperative that the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia be kept in perspective. Whether from ISIS or Jemaah Islamiyah, the threat of terrorism is not an existential one for Southeast Asia. Though eliminating terrorism altogether would be a tall order, the threat is certainly

manageable if the correct balance of perspective and policies are taken, and cooperation among regional states is enhanced.

The operational capabilities of Southeast Asian militant and terrorist groups, including those aligned to ISIS, remains limited. There is little evidence that groups have developed the sophistication and know-how to mount mass casualty attacks. However, we must be mindful that given the resilient and evolutionary nature of terrorism in Southeast Asia, this situation could well change. One possible factor that could prompt this change is a deliberate shift of attention of ISIS central to Southeast Asia, leading to the dispatch of hardened fighters to the region. This however, seems unlikely for the present as ISIS is preoccupied with its immediate priority of holding ground in Iraq and Syria, and possibly expanding its fight to Libya and Europe.

ISIS-related activity in Southeast Asia poses no immediate threat to the American homeland. Thus far, there has also not been any indication of any specific desire on the part of ISIS-inspired militants to target offshore American interests such as embassies and/or commercial enterprises. This does not mean however, that there is no need for vigilance. The Jakarta attacks could be indicative of a return to the targeting of foreigners. Meanwhile, U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition successes in Syria and Iraq might elicit a call from ISIS central to its sympathizers and supporters worldwide to strike at the United States. On this score, it would serve U.S. interests to cooperate even more closely with regional partners in the fight against ISIS, and more generally, terrorism, in Southeast Asia.

