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

There is no longer any question as to if the Islamic State will attempt to establish some presence in Southeast Asia; the group has already done so and intends to do more. The larger and far more pressing question is how successful will it be applying its motto of ‘remaining and expanding’ in the region. Much like the overall issue of foreign fighters, the issue of the Islamic State’s potential power projection in and from Southeast Asia is one prone to simultaneous and conflicting exaggeration and downplaying of the threat. Currently the extremist threat across several countries in the region is limited but it is growing.

It will take concerted and thoughtful multi-national efforts to limit the threat to manageable levels. Action and support now will have significant returns on investment; the longer the problem festers, the more costly and less effective the corrective measures will be. The threat can be summed up as such: it is a trend line heading towards a fault line if not addressed. Failure to counter the threat and ideology of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia will have severe near-and-long-term consequences.

In terms of numbers of foreign fighters estimated to have traveled to Syria for extremist purposes, southeast Asia is a relative success story. The high end of estimates is that 1,000 people from the region have made the decision to travel. Other estimates suggest 600 to 700, with most of those coming from Indonesia. Malaysia and the Philippines each have seen perhaps 100 of their citizens go to Syria; Singapore reports just two. Given the large population of the region, the overall and per capita numbers of foreign fighters are a positive indication of a region resistant to the twisted Islamic extremism espoused by groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

The low numbers of people traveling to Syria also means a relatively low level of returnees, an issue that is a real concern world wide and in Southeast Asia, given the damage a handful of trained fighters can do on a civilian population. The difference between the November 2015 Paris attacks that killed 130 and the January 2016 Jakarta attack that killed four (plus the four attackers) was training. The risk of trained fighters slipping undetected into countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, or the Philippines and plugging into existing extremist groups such as Abu Sayaf and serving as trainers and force multipliers is a real risk.

The risk is greatest in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, with the Philippines having the most severe persistent extremist threat in the form of Abu Sayaf. The group has pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a pledge accepted by the Islamic State. As the fortunes of the Islamic State worsen in Iraq and Syria, it is likely the group might announce a new state or wilayah in Southeast Asia. The southern part of the Philippines, where the central government is unable to exert consistent control, would make an ideal sanctuary for the Islamic State.

There have always been pockets of persistent and violent extremism in the region. Geography works against the central governments in the expansive island countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The arc of returning foreign fighters is a long one, with the 1980s and 1990s fighters who returned from Afghanistan still creating problems with groups such as Abu Sayaf and Jemaah Islamiyah.

The Islamic State has already worked its way into Southeast Asian criminal terror networks, as al-Qaeda had previously and continues to do so. Kidnapping, piracy, and smuggling provide much needed consistent revenues for terrorist groups in the region. On April 25, 2016, two days ago, Philippine president Benigno Aquino III ordered the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to immediately conduct operations to reduce four hostages taken by Abu Sayaf in September 2015. The order came as the deadline for ransom had passed. Along with Abu Sayaf, smaller extremist groups Ansar al-Khilafah, Katibat Marakah al-Ansar, and Katibat Ansar al-Sharia have also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

While the region has a well-deserved reputation and reality for being resistant to religious extremism, that resistance is being severely tested. Concerns over wahhabist mosques and madrassas continue, particularly in Malaysia. The long-held assumption that Southeast Asia isn't 'fertile ground' for religious extremism is less true now than ever. Malaysia has begun to crack down on what it calls extremist mosques, but the scope of the problem is rather large given the 30-year effort, funded by Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, to spread wahhabism in the region. Vulnerable communities already disaffected from the central government can be coated in this 'kerosene of intolerance' from extremist mosques, needing the smallest spark to ignite into sustained extremism against anyone perceived as different or threatening.

Furthermore, the Islamic State has shown it doesn't need 'fertile ground' to thrive; like a weed it simply needs to take root anywhere and then spread. Places

outside the government's effective control, which exist in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are more than enough for the group to settle in and then work its way into the major cities. There will be several indications when this process begins in earnest.

First, attacks will increase in both frequency and lethality. These attacks will more resemble Paris than Jakarta, unfortunately, as the value of combat training and terror sanctuary become evident. The successes in the region over the last 15 years in combating terrorism and reducing large terrorist attack were hard earned and sadly will have to be re-earned again as the threat level rises to levels not seen previously due to the size and spread of the Islamic State.

Second, there will be a slow building of pressure and then attacks against bloggers, authors, newspapers, and other voices that run counter to the 'us versus them' ideology of bin-Ladenism. This is happening now in Bangladesh, where persistent political violence and gangs have merged with the extreme ideology of the Islamic State to create a deadly environment for anyone with a different viewpoint. Silencing other voices is crucial to the Islamic State's monopoly of message. Intimidating and assassinating people with platforms such as newspapers or websites is straight out of the extremist playbook. It will be a sign that governments have failed to adequately counter the threat if these types of crimes begin to pop up in Kuala Lumpur, Manila, or Jakarta. Once that begins, it is exceedingly difficult to break the pattern.

Countering this threat now and for the long-term is a challenge with which the region will need substantial assistance from the United States and other countries. There are long-standing ties and liaison that have proven extremely effective and beneficial in addressing the threats of the past but that will need to be reassessed and likely increased to match the new reality. Militarily, the Philippines will continue to need help combatting Abu Sayaf and other extremist groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Legally and politically, countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia are trying to balance civil rights with the increased need to detain people with extremist ties and intentions. Malaysia has arrested over 100 people on suspicion of ties to the Islamic State, and has enacted the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) which increased the length of pre-trial detentions. Indonesia is considering similar legislation as well. It will be, as it is in every country, a delicate balance between liberty and security, with excessive legal persecution likely to lead to more of the behavior it was intended to prevent. Lastly, each country will need to increase its respective efforts at countering violent extremism both ideologically and socially. Singapore has been in the forefront of this, though its model will be difficult to scale for its much larger neighbors. Increased assistance from the U.S. in all three facets of the fight

against the Islamic State in Southeast Asia is needed to help avoid much greater threats.