

AUSTRALIA-NEW ZEALAND TRACK 1.5 MEETING

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ISLAMIC STATE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Introduction

The arrival of Islamic State brings a new and more troublesome dimension to terrorism in South-east Asia. It is experienced, well-funded and technologically savvy. It can give direction to, and provide resources for, existing terrorist groups however ineffective they might have previously been. There have been Islamic State-inspired incidents in both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur in recent months.

The Jakarta attacks took place on instruction from an Indonesian in Syria affiliated with Islamic State and were directly funded by it. They were the first known Islamic State-endorsed attacks in the region. Those rounded up after the incident in Kuala Lumpur included two police officers.

Broadening its reach

Fortunately both incidents could be described as amateurish, casualties compared with similar incidents in Europe, were very light. That could change.

Islamic State has stepped up its messaging to the region which is included in its five year expansion plan. The call for a regional caliphate is inspiring fringe Jihadis. A professionally-produced Islamic State news site using Bahasa began publishing in May with the aim of broadening its reach. In June a propaganda video released by ISIS in five languages including Bahasa and Tagalog called on its supporters in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, who had been unable to join the caliphate in Syria, to join the Mujahedeen in the Philippines instead. Some Islamic State videos now carry Indonesian sub-titles and one earlier this year depicted Indonesian children training with AK-47s. As part of its plan to boost its regional profile, Islamic State has linked with the notorious Abu Sayyaf group.

There are an estimated 700 to 800 South-east Asians in Iraq and Syria. Some have been killed and some are women and children. But it is still a significant number. As losses intensify in the Middle East combat-hardened veterans with access to funding and resources will see better opportunities for their new skills in their own region rather than in foreign deserts.

Islamic State functions best in ungoverned or very poorly governed spaces. The southern Philippines is an ideal environment as are the tri-border waters stretching from Sulu to Sulawesi where security forces, especially the Philippines military, are over-stretched

and poorly-equipped and inter-state cooperation has been hampered by sovereignty issues.

Islamic State has endorsed Abu Sayyaf's tactics by naming one of its leaders as head of Islamic State in South-east Asia. Malaysian and Indonesian militants are known recently to have joined Abu Sayyaf. The recent spate of kidnappings and beheadings by Abu Sayyaf elements underline the inability of local security forces to deal effectively with this group.

In his 16 April testimony to the United States House of Representatives, Joseph Chinyong Liow, Lee Kuan Yew chair in South-east Asia Studies and Senior Fellow at Brookings Foreign Policy Program, observed that this region had developed its own political economy over many decades. This involved not only the movement of militants and terrorists, but also human and arms trafficking. Local authorities have been unable to curb these activities and indeed have been complicit in them. The only solution is a multinational approach by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Abu Sayyaf is not the only terror group closely linked to Islamic State. Katibah Nusantara led by Indonesian militants in Syria claims to represent South-east Asians fighting on behalf of the Islamic State and is understood to have some 200 fighters based in Raqqa. The group's members are actively spreading Islamic State propaganda, recruiting new members, and fostering terrorist networks back in their own countries.

Its Indonesian leadership is, however, resented by some Malaysian militants who prefer to operate separately. Some home-grown groups have cultivated a strong social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, and use encrypted forms of communication such as WhatsApp and Telegram to plan and conduct attacks, raise funds, and attract new members.

One of the attractions of Islamic State is that unlike Al Qaeda, it does not try to control terrorist operations provided they deliver pain and suffering. The proliferation of such groups could lead to further fragmentation, it could also lead to their competing with each other to deliver the most ambitious attacks in order to secure greater funding and resources. Rohan Gunaratna notes that Islamic State has sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to groups in South-east Asia to plan, and execute attacks.

Although attention has focussed more on the potential for terror attacks in Indonesia and southern Philippines, we should not overlook Malaysia where Islamic State has tapped into growing religious conservatism. There is a proliferation of Malay-language radical websites and chat sites that are pro-Islamic State in orientation. A Pew poll last year found that some 11% of Malaysians sympathised with Islamic State, the comparable figure in Indonesia was only 4 %.

Australian scholar Greg Fealy notes that for every million Malaysians, 8.5 have set out to join Islamic State. The comparable Indonesian figure is 1.4. The figure for Australians incidentally is much higher at 14 per million.

For the time being there seems to be few signs of an Islamic State presence in Southern Thailand. Terrorist groups there are nativist in inclination focussing on ethnicity and history. Their religiosity is generally expressed in nationalist terms. A more repressive approach to the South by the military regime, however, could engender connections with Islamic State.

Myanmar is more troubling. Foreign-based jihadists are taking advantage of the Rohingyas' situation in Rakhine state to build support for their cause. The April 2016 issue of Dabiq, which is the mouth-piece of Islamic State referred to plans being developed in Bangladesh to launch operations in Myanmar. Al Qaeda is also stirring this pot.

Competition between IS and Al Qaeda has led to the creation of Harakah al-Yaqin which in videos released in Bengali, Arakanese and Arabic just two weeks ago, urged foreign-based Rohingyas to join its followers to fight Myanmar security forces, and has asked local religious leaders to issue fatwa to legitimise a violent struggle. Does the recent attack on Myanmar Police border posts which resulted in a large number of casualties on both sides signal the start of a wider campaign? This group's videos are now circulating among jihadists in Indonesia and the Philippines and have been translated into Malay, Tagalog and Thai.

Countering Islamic State

In Indonesia counter-terrorism operations mounted by the National Police Counterterrorism Squad and the National Counterterrorism Agency have been able to contain militant IS sympathizers in Central Sulawesi. Indonesia is now strengthening its counter-terrorism legislation to enable the authorities to pre-empt attacks. In Malaysia and Singapore tough internal security legislation has been effective in dealing with suspected Islamic State sympathizers.

A retributive approach, however, must be balanced by countering the jihadist narrative. Efforts to counter the Islamic State narrative are occurring in both countries. Singapore's Religious Rehabilitation Group is an excellent example of a restorative approach with its emphasis on social discourse on extremism through dialogue, publications and community engagement in schools, mosques and online communities.

In Indonesia mention should be made of the counter-narrative programmes launched by two of the largest Muslim mass movements in the world, (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah).

Jemaah Islamiyah

While attention is now firmly focussed on Islamic State the continued existence of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) should not be overlooked. It opposes Islamic State for ideological and leadership personality reasons, but it has not disavowed violence and has recently regrouped and consolidated in its own pursuit of an Islamic state.

The Indonesian authorities appear inadvertently to be enlisting JI in their campaign against Islamic State, but in doing so are giving JI unwelcome credibility. It has a larger following in Indonesia than Islamic State. A significant number of JI leaders are likely to be released from prison later this year as they will have completed their sentences. The Indonesian prison system is a fertile recruiting ground for terrorists of various persuasions.

Conclusion

The tide is turning against IS in the Middle East, but that is no cause for complacency. ASEAN countries need to give much greater emphasis to the sharing of intelligence, Myanmar needs to address the plight of the Rohingyas, and Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines need to cooperate to better police the troubled tri-border waters region. The initial agreement their three defence ministers have reached on Sulu Sea Trilateral patrols is a very welcome start, but operationalising the concept has its challenges not least deep-seated sovereignty issues. According to Indonesia's Defence Minister the initial approach is for coordinated rather than joint patrols.

Given the sovereignty issues this more modest approach is probably the best we could expect. There is reportedly agreement on hot pursuit albeit only in emergency situations, and on the establishment of command posts in each country. Joint naval exercises are to be held to operationalise the agreement and consideration is being given to air surveillance which would be a key component of any effective monitoring system.

Australia and New Zealand need to give greater emphasis to this threat. This calls for an examination of current intelligence-sharing arrangements. It also calls for greater support for the South-east Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, for enhanced police support for regional police counter-terrorism capabilities and ongoing support for Singapore's Information Fusion Centre at Changi.

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