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Rohan Gunaratna
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Singapore

The Islamic Caliphate's influence in Southeast Asia

Rohan Gunaratna

Introduction

June 29, 2015 marks the first anniversary of the Islamic Caliphate (IS). As it seeks to expand its core area of Iraq and Syria, enlists support groups and individuals, and create provinces worldwide, the rise of IS presents a global threat. Despite military, diplomatic, political, economic, and other efforts by the International Community to target IS, the group has expanded operationally in theatre and its influence worldwide.

As IS eclipse al Qaeda as the dominant global threat, the world faces a hybrid threat from two networks of terrorists and extremists: Al Qaeda and IS. In Asia too, both these networks present a formidable challenge. In Southeast Asia, governments are still coming to terms with IS and its affiliated groups in the region.

The Context

The AQ-centric global threat landscape is eclipsed by an IS-AQ hybrid threat. The threat groups worldwide have either pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi or expressed support to IS. Both in the physical and virtual space, IS footprint is expanding. With Asian foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq, IS presents a growing threat to the stability and security of Asia.

Today, Asian military, law enforcement, and national security agencies are challenged by the rise of IS. The very same way, the Afghan alumni formed the nuclei of the Asian threat groups of the 1990s and 2000s, the Iraqi and Syrian veterans are likely to shape Asia's future battlespace.

Historically, Al Qaeda influenced threat groups in Southeast Asia. Several hundred Southeast Asians from Darul Islam and Jemaah Islamiyah trained in Afghanistan notably with Al Qaeda. With over 500 Southeast Asians traveling to Syria and Iraq to join IS and its predecessors, IS influence is supplanting the Al Qaeda centric groups in the region. In late 2014, IS created an IS battalion of Southeast Asian fighters called Katibah Nusantara in Rakha in early 2015, they grew to over 100 fighters. Located in al Shadadi, Hasaka Province, Syria, IS refers to the battalion as Majmu'ah Al Arkhabiliy. The group functions as an independent operational unit mounting both frontline combat and terrorist attacks including suicide attacks.

The IS has not yet created a province in Southeast Asia. If they were to create a province, IS has built networks in two countries. Eastern Indonesia, where IS affiliated Mujahidin Indonesia Timur or Southern Philippines, where IS affiliated Abu Sayyaf Group (Isnilon Hapilon faction) are likely arenas.

The Background:

The fight by IS is spearheaded by those who fought the U.S., their allies and friends in Iraq. The fight is supported by those who fought or were radicalized by other theaters of conflict. Operating under the cloak of religion, IS tapped into the cleavages in society and harnessed the differences between civilizations. The Caliphate's policies are evident: implementing Islamic law and governance as its domestic policy and preparing and conducting jihad as its foreign policy. To the IS leadership and followers, interpret sharia law in a literal sense and jihad as war against Muslims unlike them and non-Muslims. IS refers to them as apostates and infidels. To the politicized and radicalized, IS leadership is the highest authority in the world for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in the 21st century has galvanized segments of the Muslim community. Traditionally, Islam brought together diverse Muslim communities worldwide but today a segment of Muslims are indoctrinated with the idea of jihad to attack "apostates" and "infidels" with their words and actions. The IS invites Muslims to migrate to the caliphate or instigates them to wage jihad in their own home country. Either as a supporter or citizen of the Caliphate, the indoctrinated believe they are fighting for God! If they die, the radicalized followers believe, they will enter paradise, meet God, forgiven for sins and vices, can take 70 relatives to heaven and 72 virgins wait to entertain them. The IS fighters in both the core area and beyond regards themselves as mujahid or fighters of god. A mujahid is a "Muslim who fights a non-Muslim with his wealth, life and tongue in order to make the word of Allah (God) the highest."

IS Southeast Asia

In Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia, both existing groups and new groups support IS. While the Malaysians have dismantled their groups and the Filipinos are fighting their groups, the Indonesians lack the laws to target their groups. In Indonesia, the groups that support IS are:

1. Ring Banten (a Darul Islam faction):
Supporting ISIS: November 2013.
Pledged allegiance to IS: probably April 2014
2. Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT)
Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014
3. Jamaah Tauhid wal Jihad (used to be the name of Aman Abdurrahman's followers)
Pledged allegiance to IS: April 2014
4. Forum Aktivis Syariah Islam (FAKSI)
(Since December 2014 became Forum Komunikasi Dunia Islam (FKDI)/Forum Kajian Dunia Islam (FKDI)
Pledged allegiance to IS: April 2014
5. Pendukung dan Pembela Daulah (PPD)/Forum Pendukung Daulah Islamiyah/Anshorud Daulah/Panitia Bersama Pendukung dan Pembela Daulah/Lajnah Anshoru Daulah
Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014
After the government's banning of IS, it claimed it withdrew its supports for IS.
Since October 2014, the group metamorphoses into The Amir Institute
6. Gerakan Reformasi Islam (GARIS)
Pledged allegiance to IS: March 2014
Since the government's ban of IS, GARIS claimed it no longer supports IS.
7. Asybal Tauhid Indonesia
Pledged allegiance to IS: March 2014
8. Kongres Umat Islam Bekasi (KUIB)
Pledged allegiance to IS: February 2014
9. Umat Islam Nusantara (UIN)
Pledged allegiance to IS: February 2014
10. Ikhwan Muwahid Indunisy fie Jazirah al-Muluk (Ambon)
Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014
11. IS Aceh (led by Abu Jundullah)
Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014
12. Ansharul Khilafah Jawa Timur

Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014

13. Halawi Makmun Group

Pledged allegiance to IS: February 2014 – November 2014 (Halawi Makmun passed away).

14. Gerakan Tauhid Lamongan

The leader Zainal Anshori pledged allegiance to IS on February 2014.
Currently the group claimed it does not support IS.

15. Khilafatul Muslimin

Supports IS: July 2014

16. Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT)

Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014

17. Laskar Jundullah

Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014

18. Mujahidin Indonesia Barat:

Pledged allegiance to IS: July 2014

19. DKM Masjid Al Fataa (Al Fataa Mosque Administration), Central Jakarta

Support IS (organizing pro-IS events): December 2014

Response

On 4 August 2014, Indonesian government announced a ban on support for the ISIS movement and warned its citizens against joining the group's fight in Syria and Iraq. The government rejected the teachings of ISIS and expressed concern about its influence in Indonesia. However, there is no full-fledged law banning assistance to or involvement in foreign terrorist organizations in Indonesia including ISIS.

Despite the ban the most active IS affiliated Indonesian threat groups are:

1. Ring Banten
2. Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT)
3. Jamaah Tauhid wal Jihad (Aman Abdurrahman's followers)
4. Forum Aktivis Syariah Islam (FAKSI)/Forum Komunikasi Dunia Islam (FKDI)/Forum Kajian Dunia Islam (FKDI)

5. Kongres Umat Islam Bekasi (KUIB)
6. Umat Islam Nusantara (UIN)
7. Ansharul Khilafah Jawa Timur
8. Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT)
9. Laskar Jundullah
10. Mujahidin Indonesia Barat
11. DKM Masjid Al Fataa (Al Fataa Mosque Administration), Central Jakarta
12. Ikhwan Muwahid Indunisy fie Jazirah al-Muluk (Ambon)
13. Asybal Tauhid Indonesia

Despite measures, IS global expansion including in Southeast Asia is challenging the security and stability of rising Asia.

The Future

In addition to investing in intelligence-led operational counter terrorism in the immediate term (1-2 years), governments and their partners should strengthen existing and build capabilities to manage the AQ-IS hybrid threat in the mid-term (5 years) and long term (10 years).

To counter the threat effectively, governments should work with a range of civil society and other partners. By working with the social and traditional media, the focus should be to build community resilience by preventing radicalization and recruitment. In addition to creating a legal framework for prosecuting the fighters who have violated national laws, governments should work with the business, academic and NGO communities to rehabilitate and reintegrate both foreign fighters and those self-radicalized by terrorist propaganda. To manage the foreign fighter threat, Singapore's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research will host the East Asia Summit Symposium on Religious Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration on April 16-17, 2015. Working with religious bodies and educational institutions, Singapore will work steadfastly to build regional and global capacity to respond to the threat both in the physical and virtual space.

Conclusion:

IS presents an existential threat to the security and stability of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. With the meteoric rise of IS, an al Qaeda mutant, the nature of the global threat is changing rapidly. Both Europe and Asia should work together to defeat the al Qaeda-IS hybrid global threat.

With IS mastery of shock action on the ground and its exploitation of the social media, the threat is both territorial and global. As IS expands, the frontlines will shift to Europe and Asia. Although law enforcement and national security agencies are essential, the standing armies must play a frontline role to fight IS. Asia and Europe should contribute to prevent IS global expansion by striking at the heart of the terrorist empire. With the world's militaries moving from cooperation to collaboration, IS infrastructure can be dismantled and through international partnership, global harmony restored. In addition to the threat of IS and al Qaeda-directed attacks, the threat of local groups and self-radicalized homegrown cells and individuals are growing. While strengthening war fighting capabilities, the strategy for militaries is to create multinational, multipronged, multiagency, and a multijurisdictional frameworks to fight IS global expansion. While maintaining combat capabilities, the militaries should also build their reintegration capacities to deliver rehabilitation and community engagement, game changers in the fight against terrorism.

Today, al Qaeda and IS compete for supremacy of the global terrorist movement. Nonetheless, their ideology is almost identical: IS is more permissive in its brutality. If either of the apex leaders are killed, the world's two largest terror networks will unite presenting an unprecedented global threat.

As the IS threat is global, the challenge today is to build capabilities to work with partners to contain, isolate and eliminate IS at its core and in the periphery. Europe and Asia can join hands in this global imperative!