IS Activity in Southeast Asia

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

The increasing number of recruits from Indonesia and Malaysia to Islamic State reflects the evolving security threat to Southeast Asia. The emerging pattern bears lessons for countries in the region.

Commentary

THE THREAT of Islamic State (IS) is the latest rendition of extremism to wash up the shores of Southeast Asia. Several Indonesians and Malaysians have migrated to the Middle East to join the ranks of IS in Iraq and Syria, reflecting the new wave of the evolving security threat posed by the militant networks dedicated to the establishment of a pristine Islamic state and the "end-times" apocalyptic battle.

Religiously-inspired extremism, fanned by the Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation, emerged as a matter of concern in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, not so much for the danger it posed to the stability of ruling governments in the region, but because it threatened to coalesce into a region-wide movement. For it was in Afghanistan that Southeast Asians from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar met and trained together, and built an incipient network. This fear became a reality at the turn of the century, when the Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah, comprising many Afghan "alumni", nursed aspirations to establish a regional caliphate with the use of force covering Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, precisely through the mobilisation of these networks.

Present scenario

Fast-forward to the present, the governments of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore consider returnees from the civil wars in Syria and Iraq to be a potential source of insecurity in their respective countries. They have good reason to be concerned. Thus far, the number of Indonesians and Malaysians known to have made their way to join the Iraq and Syrian civil wars are estimated to range from 150-300 in the case of Indonesia and 80-150 in the case of Malaysia. Apart from joining IS, many are known to have linked up with other extremist outfits in the Syrian theatre, including those that have opposed IS such as Al-Nusra Front.

Recent revelations regarding the existence of Katibah Nusantara, the Southeast Asian unit within IS, ostensibly created to improve communication with recruits from Indonesia and Malaysia who are not

conversant in Arabic or English, give pause for further thought. Even more alarming perhaps, is the creation of a Malay language school for purposes of educating and indoctrinating the children of these Malay and Indonesian-speaking recruits.

Recruitment patterns themselves have changed. In Malaysia and Singapore, social media has proven to be the primary avenue for recruitment, although in the case of Malaysia, security officials are also believed to have focused attention on a few Islamic schools. In Indonesia, while recruitment for Syria and Iraq-based groups have by and large leveraged on pre-existing extremist networks such as Jemaah Islamiyah (whose members actually joined anti-IS extremist groups), there is evidence that the idea of the establishment of an Islamic state has garnered sympathy from middle-class Indonesians.

These have hitherto been unconnected to any of the pre-existing networks nor in possession of jihadi backgrounds but are drawn to both the humanitarian call for action in support of fellow Muslims in Syria as well as the eschatological discourse of the IS.

There are also disturbing international connections that have been uncovered. In September last year, a total of seven Uighurs were found to be training in a base of the Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (the Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia) in Poso, central Sulawesi, a group that was established by a militant extremist by the name of Santoso. It has been reported that the recruitment of Uighurs took place after Indonesian extremists in Syria had discussed ways to strengthen Santoso's group with the recruitment of foreign fighters.

Evolving threat and response

What do these patterns tell us about the evolving nature of the threat from IS?

Firstly, while the number of Southeast Asians inspired by IS and who have left for the conflict zones may not be large relative to recruits from other regions, their level of commitment is deep, and the bonds they will inevitably forge difficult to break. The fact that whole family units have embarked to Syria and Iraq is disturbing on several counts. Not only does it mean that as migrants, the circumstances they face would strengthen bonds between these families, much in the same way that migrant families everywhere tend to gravitate towards those of similar nationality or cultural and linguistic background and close ranks, it also means that with children in tow indoctrination now takes place at a younger age and in the conflict zone itself.

In other words, Indonesians and Malaysians are fighting together in a way that is a cause for concern, especially when foreign fighters return to their home countries. For when and if conflict dynamics change, these extremists would have formed deep bonds that could potentially provide a basis for cross-border cooperation among them.

Secondly, the "end-times" narrative of the IS propaganda makes the threat more resilient than previous iterations of religious extremism. Here, what is striking is not so much the deterministic nature of the IS eschatology (which is common in many religions) but the fact that it calls on its supporters to be active participants in the final apocalyptic battle. Hence, although the leadership of IS may be intent on territory and statehood (i.e. creating an actual territorial and administrative Islamic "state"), their brand of eschatology is in fact encouraging a virulent and fanatical form of fundamentalism in which adherents are willing and ready to sacrifice their lives for a cause that transcends this life.

Thirdly, while cooperation between regional states has deepened and will continue to do so, counter-terrorism strategy is still confronted by considerable obstacles rooted in domestic contexts. In Indonesia for instance, corruption in the prison system remains a major Achilles' heel. Likewise, while there is doubtless also awareness that anti-terrorism legislation needs to be strengthened these efforts have been hampered by inter-agency competition between the police and military.

In Malaysia, decades of anti-Shi'a discourse tolerated, and in many instances sanctioned, by state religious authorities have fanned the flames of resentment against Shi'a Muslims and played into the hands of IS propaganda, in the process posing problems for a Muslim-led government that has always been concerned about its religious credentials.

Finally, the use of information technology by IS, not to mention imagery more commonly associated with the entertainment industry, not only distinguishes it from earlier extremist and terrorist groups, but has also had a profound effect on its audience, especially millenials. Defeating the virtual online army of extremist groups thence, whether it be Islamic State, al-Qaeda or any other such entities, will require attention to be devoted to understanding the aspirations of and appeal to digital natives through the creation and nurturing of engagement programmes specifically targeted at them.

Ultimately, countering the threat posed by Islamic State in Southeast Asia calls for less conventional strategies and a greater degree of cooperation, not only between governments but within governments. The threat of extremism has clearly evolved with new skills, new ideological commitments, and new networks. It is absolutely imperative that strategies to counter this threat evolve as well, and preferably at a faster pace.

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