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ISIS' Amin Baco: Tri-border Emir in Southeast Asia

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

The recent recapture of Marawi City by Philippine security forces which led to the death of Isnilon Hapilon has thrown up a new emir or leader, Amin Baco. A Malaysian from Sabah, who is Amin Baco?

Commentary

IT WAS not whether but when ISIS, also known as Islamic State (IS), would appoint the successor to Isnilon Hapilon, following the death of the Emir of ISIS Philippines on 20 October 2017 in Marawi City. There were conflicting reports as to who had been appointed as the new point man of the jihadi organisation. But by early November 2017, it became clear that Amin Baco, a Malaysian, has been designated as the new leader of Southeast Asia's most embattled jihadi outfit, at the core of which is the Abu Sayyaf Group in southern Philippines.

Initially, another Malaysian, Dr Mahmud Ahmad, was believed to have been appointed as the 'Emergency Emir', but he was also killed by Philippine security forces. While the five-month Marawi siege ended in the deaths of key jihadists such as Hapilon and Mahmud, the Philippines Police Chief Director-General, Ronald Dela Rosa, said it also led to the emergence of Amin as the new ISIS emir.

Who is Amin Baco?

Initially, Amin was believed to have been killed together with some 40 other militants in the final assault on Marawi City by security forces. The Philippine police have confirmed that Amin is still alive. The 34-year-old Amin originates from Tawau in Sabah, Malaysia with the *nom de guerre* of Abu Jihad. He was a former operative of

Darul Islam Sabah, an offshoot of Indonesia's Darul Islam and the pro-Al Qaeda Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Amin, who speaks English, later shifted allegiance to the ISIS.

According to a captured Indonesian terrorist, Muhammad Ilham Syahputra, who was detained on 1 November 2017, Amin succeeded in fleeing from Marawi City. Although surrounded with 30 other fighters in a mosque in Sabala Manao village and was negotiating his surrender, he managed to elude the security forces.

Syahputra claimed that he was with Amin throughout the jihadists' assault on the Army detachment in Piagapo City in Lanao del Sur, where he operated drones for Amin. It was Syahputra who proclaimed Amin's appointment as the new ISIS Emir after Hapilon.

Of Bugis descent (from Sulawesi), Amin has established close links with the jihadists operating in the tri-border region of Sabah, Sulawesi and Mindanao. He is married to a prominent Abu Sayyaf family on Jolo island in Sulu province. His late father-in-law, Hatib Sawadjaan, was head of the Abu Sayyaf faction known as Tanum Group.

Amin Baco's Links

An expert improvised explosive device and bomb maker, Amin is believed to be a close protégé of a top Malaysian terrorist, Zulkifli bin Hir alias Marwan. When the Philippine Police's Special Action Force launched *Operation Oplan Exodus* on 25 January 2015 to kill or capture three top terrorists, Marwan was killed. Filipino bomb maker, Basit Usman, escaped but was later killed. The third high value target was Amin Baco who escaped.

He is also believed to have worked closely with two other leading Indonesian JI leaders, Umar Patek and Dulmatin. When the Ambon conflict broke out in 1999, the Sabah Darul Islam cell sent men to fight against the Christians. In 2000, Amin is believed to have trained in South Sulawesi and Pendolo, where he also linked up with various Indonesian jihadi groups such as JI, Laskar Jundullah and KOMPAK.

Amin is believed to have operated in Mindanao since 2006 and have coordinated military attacks with ASG, according to a senior Philippine police intelligence officer.

Dr Mahmud had described Amin as one of the masterminds and key fund raisers of the five-month Marawi siege that saw the Maute family team up with Abu Sayyaf and foreign fighters to set up a Caliphate in southern Philippines. Hence, his high stature among jihadists in south Philippines and probably a major factor in his rise as the new Emir.

Amin has been wanted by the Malaysian, Philippines and US governments for bombings in Basilan and Sulu, and for various kidnapping offences. He is alleged to have masterminded the kidnappings of two Malaysians in November 2002 and was also involved in a foiled kidnapping of a Chinese trader in May 2013 in Sabah. He is also believed to be involved in trafficking terrorists and firearms between South Philippines and Indonesia through Sabah.

In Sabah, Amin teamed up with a Sabahan of Filipino descent, Jeknal Adil alias Jek,

who was detained in Malaysia from 2006-09 for being a member of Darul Islam Sabah. Jek was born in Tawau to Tausug parents. Until his death, Jek has been operating in Basilan since 2012.

What Amin Baco's Rise Means

It is not the first time that a Malaysian has risen as a leader of a jihadi group in Southeast Asia. In the past, two Malaysians, Dr Azahari and Nordin Top, also led major groups like Jemaah Islamiyyah. While Amin was formerly with JI following his allegiance to the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' in April 2016, he has quickly become its leader in less than 20 months.

A strong-willed personality, his strength lies in his links with the tri-border region of Mindanao, Sabah and Sulawesi, and where he is linked to most jihadi groups operating in the region. He is also one of the longest staying foreign terrorist fighters in south Philippines.

What increases his appeal as a leader is the fact that he is closely linked with various jihadi groups, either through birth in Sabah, marriage and operations in Mindanao or through his descent, training and operations in Sulawesi.

He is one of the most experienced combatants in Mindanao today. His jihadi credentials places him in the league of Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had close ties with Al Qaeda, operated in Iraq and later, created the foundation for the birth of IS. Amin probably poses the same threat today, partly due to his close jihadi linkages in Southeast Asia.

While the Marawi siege may have ended, many of the jihadists who fought or supported the operations are still around, probably in Jolo and Basilan, the jihadi strongholds in south Philippines. With the emergence of a new Emir, the new leadership would want to prove that it is worthy of leading the organisation that was once headed by Hapilon.

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