

## The Shifting Extremist Threat in Southeast Asia

Sidney Jones, Director  
*Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), Jakarta*

The threat of extremist violence in Southeast Asia has risen over the last twelve months, although the danger of foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq to mobilise local groups remains more a concern for the near future than a documented fact. The risk comes mostly from groups in the region that are either inspired or directed by ISIS rather than from combat veterans coming back from fighting in the Middle East. The capacity of those groups, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, remains low.

Several developments, however, bear watching:

- Cross-border travel is rising, particularly to the southern Philippines, in response to ISIS calls to join the jihad there. The number of foreign fighters with pro-ISIS forces remains low (likely under 20), but it could rise even as intensive military operations by the Philippine armed forces kill more militants in central Mindanao, Sulu, and Basilan.
- Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi pro-ISIS groups are finding more in common, and Bangladeshi extremists are recruiting among migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia, traveling to Syria from Kuala Lumpur and in a few cases, looking for ways to get to Mindanao.
- The emergence of a new Rohingya armed insurgency on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border could spark new recruitment in the Rohingya community in Malaysia, attract trainers from ISIS or Al-Qaeda-linked groups in Bangladesh or Pakistan, inspire extremist Indonesians and Malaysians to try assist their fellow Muslims or lead to attacks against Myanmar government buildings or officials.
- The role of women in violent extremism has become increasingly important as male leaders decide they are less likely to invite suspicion. Women themselves are pushing for a more active role, and marriages in Syria and Iraq increasingly unite Southeast Asian women with foreign fighters from a variety of countries.
- The number of people being deported from Turkey back to Malaysia and Indonesia is rising as it becomes more difficult to cross into Syria (and as a few fighters who want to return make their way back to Turkey and get caught). The number of deportees are stretching police monitoring capacity and social services resources, as the deportees present both a risk and an opportunity, so far poorly utilised, to design and test reintegration programs to weaken extremist networks.

- The difficulty of entering Syria from Turkey means the numbers waiting in pro-ISIS safehouses in Turkey has risen, increasing the interaction with other groups while waiting, including with militant Uighur groups, and raising the importance of the ISIS-designated heads of these hostels.

## Jihad in the Philippines

Even as military operations intensify, men and money are making their way to Mindanao. The appeal of ISIS has produced an alliance linking Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) members in Basilan and Zamboanga, former members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in Lanao del Sur, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Sarangani, and converts to Islam from Luzon, the Visayas, and elsewhere. International outreach is directed by a Malaysian, Dr Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah, who appears to have contacts throughout the region as well as to ISIS central.<sup>108</sup> The arrest of an Indonesian militant, Suryadi Mas'oe'd, in March 2017 provided insights into recruitment and travel routes to Mindanao as well as to efforts to purchase firearms there for use in Indonesia. In May 2017, an Indonesian ISIS member issued a call over social media to urge Indonesians to join the fight in the Philippines or to attack the Philippines embassy if they did not manage to leave.<sup>109</sup> Initially, the ISIS base was in Basilan under former ASG commander Isnilon Hapilon; military operations and the wounding of Hapilon in November 2016 appears to have shifted the nerve center to Lanao del Sur where the so-called Maute group prevails. The Philippines remains the only place in Southeast Asia where pro-ISIS groups can claim to hold territory.

ISIS supporters in the Philippines call themselves collectively “Islamic State-Eastern Region” (Daulah Islamiyah – Wilayah al-Mashariq) though they have not been formally recognized as such by ISIS central –not that formal recognition would make any operational difference. The ISIS central media bureau claimed credit for two small bomb explosions in the Quiapo neighbourhood in April and May 2017 despite police denials that they were linked to terrorism. ISIS also claimed responsibility for the June 2, 2017, attack at a Manila casino. Although the Duterte government insisted the perpetrator was a disgruntled employee with no link to terrorist groups, subsequent statements from pro-ISIS media in Mindanao suggested he was a recent convert to Islam and acted in the name of ISIS. Whatever the truth, there will likely be more attacks in the capital.<sup>110</sup>

## The Bangladesh connection

The attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka in July 2016 and subsequent arrests

<sup>108</sup> Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), “Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia,” Report no. 33, 15 (October 2016): 8-9.

<sup>109</sup> Message relayed over Telegram through someone using the name @Dari\_Situ.

<sup>110</sup> Jim Gomez, “ISIS claims deadly Manila explosion -- but police claim motive was ‘personal feud’,” *The Independent* (7 May 2017), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/manila-explosion-isis-philippines-islamic-state-rodriago-duterte-a7722796.html>. Accessed 7 August 2017.

exposed some of the links between Malaysia and Bangladesh. For instance, several of the attackers had studied at Malaysian universities (and one of the masterminds had grown up and studied in Canada).

The interregional ties, however, are more extensive. Singapore and Malaysia have both found extremist cells in the Bangladeshi migrant worker community (a tiny fringe of an overwhelmingly law-abiding population). All were trying to recruit for operations back home; they showed no interest in violence in their host countries. In February 2017, however, Malaysian police deported two Bangladeshis who had contacted Dr Mahmud in Mindanao and were planning to leave to join him.

Perhaps of even greater concern is the emergence in mid-2016 of a new armed Rohingya insurgency on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Initially called Harekat al-Yakin (Faith Movement) and since March 2017 Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the group reportedly has members trained by Pakistani militants and is recruiting in the Rohingya communities in southeastern Bangladesh and Malaysia.<sup>111</sup> Indonesian and Malaysian jihadis have long been interested in helping defend their fellow Muslims in Myanmar and they may see ARSA as a potential partner, even if thus far, the rebels have shown no interest in non-Rohingya help. Still, as violence on both sides in Myanmar's Rakhine state increases, ARSA could become more open to establishing regional ties.

### **The rise of women combatants**

The arrest of two female would-be martyrs in Indonesia in December 2016, one of them intent on bombing the presidential palace in Jakarta, put the region on notice that suicide bombing was no longer a male preserve. Several aspects of the case are worth noting. First, the women were looking for a path to martyrdom through bombing at the same time that an Indonesian ISIS leader in Syria, Bahrin Naim, had decided to seek out women candidates, believing they would attract less suspicion than men. Second, ISIS had initially ruled out any role of women in combat except in self-defence, seeing women largely in reproductive and teaching roles, but began to be more flexible as conditions in Syria and Iraq deteriorated. Third, both of the women were former migrant workers, underscoring the importance of understanding the specific dynamics of radicalization at work within the migrant community and designing prevention programs accordingly.

Women are strongly represented among Indonesian and Malaysian nationals in Syria and among pro-ISIS deportees sent back from Turkey, in part because the caliphate has proved a strong draw for families. In the first three batches of Indonesians returned in 2017, 79.2% of the 136 deportees were women and children. In many cases, women have been the drivers behind efforts to get to Syria; they wanted to bring their children up in a caliphate because they believed they would experience the purest form of Islam. The need to understand female extremist networks and the social and business ties that bind them is urgent, as is the need to develop reintegration programs for those returning. The Indonesian government has belatedly recognized the need, but unfortunately lacks the capacity for

<sup>111</sup> IPAC, "How Southeast Asian and Bangladeshi Extremism Intersect," Report no. 37, 8 (May 2017).

sustained follow-ups.

Little information is available about the marriages of Southeast Asian widows and girls in Syria, but there have been documented marriages of Indonesian and Malaysian women with French, North African, and Iraqi fighters. Indonesian fighters have also married Syrian women. The intermarriages are a phenomenon unique to the Syrian conflict; with one or two exceptions, Southeast Asian women did not go to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. The marriages could have implications for future cross-regional collaboration among extremist organizations.

### **Foreign fighters and the long way home**

It is safe to say that all security agencies in the region are concerned about the return of foreign fighters, but there is little sign of an influx yet –indeed, there are still would-be fighters in Indonesia and Malaysia trying to leave. Many more fighters are getting killed, one of the most notable in recent months being the Malaysian Mohammed Wanndy, who died in a drone strike in Raqqa on April 29, 2017. Malaysian police officials say that of the more than 250 people arrested in Malaysia for suspected ties to ISIS, a third were recruited by or had contact with Wanndy.<sup>112</sup> The May 23, 2017 takeover of Marawi city in Mindanao by pro-ISIS militants was a wake-up call that the more immediate threat may be from extremists in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere trying to join the fighting directly without ever having set foot in the Middle East.

While there have been reports of some Indonesians trying to leave Syria and Iraq, it is very difficult to do so given the current state of the conflict. In addition, those who have married local spouses may try to stay in the region. It is also important to underscore that not all those who joined ISIS did so with the intention of undertaking violence at home and would necessarily be a threat if, and when, they get back. Nevertheless, it would only take a few combat veterans with the intention of carrying on the war at home to turn the current network of largely hapless would-be terrorists into a much more serious threat. It became clear during the attack in central Jakarta in January 2016, for example, that the terrorists were not sure what to hit and did not know how to use firearms. Members of pro-ISIS cells have also had difficulty making workable bombs from online instructions. They need direct face-to-face training, and this is what returning fighters could provide.

Statistics on Southeast Asians having joined ISIS remain difficult to pin down, as most countries do not distinguish between adults and children or between returnees (those who have been in Syria) and deportees (those who were caught before they could cross the Turkish border). As of May 2017, police statistics for Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines were as follows:

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<sup>112</sup> Hata Wahari and Colin Forsythe, “Drone Strike Killed IS Militant Wanndy, Malaysia Confirms,” *BenarNews* (9 May 2017), <http://www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/malaysia-wann-dy-05092017155015.html>. Accessed 7 August 2017.

<b>ISIS supporters</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Philippines</b>
Nationals in Syria (adults and children identified by name)	510 (397 males, 113 females)	53 (24 adult males, 12 adult females, 17 children)	1 identified by name (5 others on video, but not identified)
Killed	84	35	?
Deported	400+	?	0
Returned	62	8	?

The Indonesian figures on returnees, however, include people who travelled to Syria to deliver humanitarian aid linked to several different armed groups, not just ISIS, and who had no intention of taking part in combat. It is not an accurate figure of those who participated in military training or actual fighting.

### **Caught in Turkey**

The growing difficulty of crossing into Syria has increased the responsibility of the ISIS liaisons who run safehouses in Istanbul and Turkish border towns for the often poorly informed Southeast Asians still hoping to join the caliphate. These safehouses become important contact points with stranded would-be fighters and their families from other regions of the world as well as with groups that have bases inside Turkey. One of these is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) whose members have turned up fighting in Poso, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia; plotting bomb attacks on Indonesia’s Batam island, near Singapore; and perhaps taking part in the Erawan shrine bombing in Bangkok in August 2015. In the Indonesia cases, trial dossiers of the six Uighurs arrested there have shown that the links to Southeast Asian militants went through pro-ISIS Indonesians in Syria, their liaisons in Turkey, and Turkish nationals of Uighur descent who traveled from Turkey to Malaysia.<sup>113</sup>

### **Implications for Canada**

The risk of any violence in Canada from Southeast Asian extremist groups is extremely low. None of the pro-ISIS groups in Indonesia, Malaysia or the southern Philippines have links to Canada, and any extremists in the Bangladeshi or the tiny Rohingya communities will be far more interested in supporting groups at home than in their host country.

The risk to Canadians in Southeast Asia is another question. The major target in Indonesia remains the police, with other government officials second. Shi’a communities have been targets in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines; the only fatalities have been in the latter. While there have been instructions circulated to militants encouraging attacks

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<sup>113</sup> For a detailed description of one such case, see: IPAC, “Marawi, the ‘East Asia Wilayah’ and Indonesia,” Report no. 38 (21 July 2017): 18-19. Two Uighurs are on trial in Bangkok for the Erawan shrine bombing as this report went to press but their organizational affiliation remained unclear.

on foreigners, including the knifing of foreigners in upscale neighbourhoods or of surfers on Indonesian beaches, there have been no actual attempts. In the wake of attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2016, Indonesian extremists also discussed plots to target the Jakarta International School and Jakarta's international airport, but they decided security was too tight in the first and the plotters in the second were arrested before they could do anything. The return of an ISIS fighter with the ability to train and organize a mass casualty attack in which Canadians could be caught up remains a possibility in Indonesia and Malaysia (a Canadian died in a terrorist attack in Jakarta in January 2016) though police in both places have a good handle on existing networks. The skills exist at present to carry out such an attack in Manila.

As regional ties continue to grow, however, attacks could just as easily happen in Myanmar, Bangladesh, or Thailand. While the southern Thailand insurgency remains an ethno-nationalist movement, it is clear from the testimony of some pro-ISIS detainees that there are a few ISIS supporters in Thailand who have been willing to work with regional counterparts on the instructions of ISIS central.

At the moment, the author believes there is not much that Canadian aid can accomplish in terms of countering violent extremism (CVE). The region is awash with counter-terrorism funding: much of the funding is given to civil society organizations with low absorptive capacity or to government counter-terrorism agencies with already bloated budgets. As such, huge amounts of money are being wasted on CVE programs of dubious value. Targeted programs are still useful, however: Canadian initiatives such as the training of police through the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation have been welcome and should continue. One very concrete need is for common procedures across the region for taking, recording, storing and, when necessary, sharing DNA samples in conflict situations, such as the fighting between government and pro-ISIS forces in Marawi. The best antidote to extremism, however, may lie in strengthening democracy and governance programs. For example, the more corruption can be tackled, the fewer the opportunities terrorists will have to acquire false documents, cross borders illegally, acquire arms, and communicate with friends in prison.

In short, Canada could indeed make a genuine contribution to the fight against extremist violence in Southeast Asia through such initiatives, which are perhaps less targeted or self-evident than CVE programs, but more effective in the long run in promoting Canadian interests and ensuring regional security.