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Shifting Sands of Terrorism in Southeast Asia

By Joseph Chinyong Liow

Synopsis

As the terrorism landscape in Southeast Asia evolves, regional governments must deepen their collaboration post-Marawi.

Commentary

IN OCTOBER 2002, bombings on the Indonesian resort island of Bali catapulted terrorism to the top of the list of security priorities for the governments of maritime Southeast Asia. In the ensuing years, security agencies across the region were seized with the transnational and cross-regional dimensions of this threat. There was good reason for this. Investigation into the Bali bombings uncovered links to Al Qaeda.

It also emerged that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the Southeast Asian militant group, was attempting to create a Daulah Islamiyah, a regional Islamic state, in maritime Southeast Asia by means of violence. While their vision failed to materialise, Southeast Asian militants have persisted in their pursuit of cross-regional cooperation.

The Afghanistan Incubator

This pursuit has precedents that predate Bali or Daulah Islamiyah. It was incubated in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border between 1985 and 2000, when Southeast Asian militants crossed paths with fighters from other parts of the world while training alongside Mujahideen fighters then waging jihad against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It was during this time that bonds were built among the Southeast Asians who would go on to form the backbone of JI.

Yet while JI did possess a regional footprint by dint of active cells in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore, the establishment of an operational cross-

regional network proved a difficult proposition due to geography, culture, language, and divergent strategic objectives.

This was evident from conflicts such as Ambon (1999-2005) and Poso (1998-2007), where coordination proved elusive despite the presence of a range of militant groups, most of whom preferred to wage their own “jihad” independent of each other. Even at the height of Al Qaeda’s interests in Southeast Asia, the group’s priorities were more as a base for operational planning and the movement of funds than a key theatre for operations of a cross-regional nature.

Syrian Catalyst

It is against this backdrop that the outbreak of conflict in Syria in 2011 catalysed a new cycle of terrorist and militant activity in Southeast Asia and raised fresh concerns for the prospects for cross-regional cooperation between militant groups.

At the forefront this time stood ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as IS. The interest of ISIS in Southeast Asia is evident not only from regular coverage of the region in ISIS media but also in its introduction of Malay language propaganda, clearly tailored for a regional audience, and its creation in September 2014 of Katibah Nusantara, the Southeast Asian fighting unit operating under its umbrella.

Indeed, Katibah Nusantara was an effort by ISIS to bring together Malay and Indonesian-speaking fighters to overcome the language barrier that impeded effective tactical deployment of Southeast Asians (most of the Indonesians couldn’t speak Arabic or English while the Malaysians fared slightly better in English but couldn’t speak Arabic).

Yet the existence of this Southeast Asian unit belied differences that prevailed between the Malaysians and Indonesians in its ranks.

Indonesians were dismissive of their Malaysian counterparts based on the perception that their religious knowledge was inferior. Malaysians were relegated to menial roles in the Indonesian-led Katibah Nusantara. This explains the reluctance of Malaysians to even join Katibah Nusantara in the initial stages, preferring instead to fight with other militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq (Malaysians did join eventually).

In fact, even the Indonesians within Katibah Nusantara could not quite get along: one faction under Abu Jandal eventually split to form Katibah Masyaariq.

Comparing Syria and Afghanistan

The reality remains that engaged in the selfsame conflict, they were bonded together, however imperfectly. The valid concern is whether these ties will be transplanted back into Southeast Asia as some battle-hardened militants return with new skills, renewed ideological commitment, and established international connections. Indeed, this was precisely the scenario that Afghanistan presented two decades ago, and it certainly doesn’t take too many hardened returnees to create problems.

The Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) estimates that

among Indonesians who returned from foreign conflict zones prior to ISIS' existence, 42 were veterans of the Afghanistan conflict, 50 were alumni of the Moro struggle in the southern Philippines, and three had fought in Kashmir with the Pakistani group, Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Of the three conflicts, Afghanistan stands out for the fact that, unlike the southern Philippines which was mostly regional in scope, it was in Afghanistan that Southeast Asians came to be acquainted with – and exposed to – not only each other but foreign fighters from all over the world.

But we should also consider differences inherent in the Afghanistan-Syria comparison.

Afghanistan-Syria Divergence

First, for Indonesian fighters in Afghanistan, the largest group in the Southeast Asian contingent by far, their experience in the liberation of Afghanistan from Soviet occupation prepared them for armed struggle back in Indonesia against the Suharto government upon their return. Most Southeast Asian fighters who left for Syria, on the other hand, did so with no intention of returning.

Second, Southeast Asians in Afghanistan comprised able-bodied males who went alone, whereas a sizable number of women and children went to Syria with their husbands and fathers to live in the self-styled Islamic State.

Finally, while Southeast Asian fighters were funded to go to Afghanistan, many of those who went to Syria, especially in the initial stages, had to raise their own funds. Having liquidated property and cashed out bank accounts to make the trip, not many will be able to afford the cost of return on their own.

Not all who went to the Middle East went to join ISIS, or for that matter, even to fight. While some were doubtless drawn by the desire to live in an “authentic” Islamic state, this does not automatically mean they were prepared to fight for it (not by choice anyway).

All this is to say that regional authorities should take care not to paint all returnees with the same broad brushstroke.

Changing Nature of Militancy

The audacious five-month siege of Marawi, the most recent high profile conflict in the region, suggests that Islamist militancy in Southeast Asia is evolving on a number of counts.

First, there has been a discernible shift in militant tactics. Motivated by a desire to prove their credentials to ISIS, which continued to withhold formal recognition of southern Philippines as a “wilayah” (province), Marawi marked the first attempt at seizing and holding urban territory by pro-ISIS militants in Southeast Asia. It is not likely to be the last.

Second, recruitment patterns and profiles have changed. Barely a decade ago,

militancy in the region mostly revolved around a network of radical groups. While these groups remain active today, a pattern has emerged that sees a new generation of recruits, many educated and from middle-class backgrounds, being drawn to the ideas of a radical transformation of society through the puritanical implementation of Islamic law, yet who do not have any prior affiliation to the known radical groups.

In other words, many of these new recruits have been radicalised less via connections to known groups than by exposure through the Internet.

This leads us to the third change: technology is featuring more prominently. The use of digital and social media as a means of encrypted communication, recruitment, and propaganda has been both rampant and crucial. Through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Telegram, militants have managed to capture the imagination and augment the pool of sympathisers and potential recruits.

Technology As Enabler?

In prisons, extremist preachers who sow the ideological seeds that militancy reaps continue to enjoy access to their followers via smartphones. Technology has not only been leveraged for the purposes of communication and propaganda. During the Marawi seige, militants used commercially-acquired quadcopter drones for surveillance, and advanced heavy firearms to hold off Philippine military units.

The fact that digital media technology enables the creation of a sense of belonging that transcends geography circles us back to the important point about cross-regional cooperation and networks. Marawi is also noteworthy for the fact that it was a devastating example of cooperation on a considerable scale.

Evidently the brainchild of the Maute Group led by brothers Omarkhayyam and Abdullah, Marawi nevertheless involved other Philippine groups such as Isnilon Hapilon's Basilan faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group, as well as Malaysians and Indonesians.

Philippine authorities also reported the presence of fighters from Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, Yemen, and Singapore in Marawi, all of whom worked together under an apparent central command. The Malaysian, Mahmud Ahmad, a fund raiser for the Marawi operation, reportedly played an instrumental role in bringing Southeast Asia's pro-ISIS groups together in the conflict.

Whether this is a harbinger of things to come remains to be seen. But there is already evidence of chatter among Southeast Asian militants exhorting unity like that which was evident in Marawi.

Indeed the reality is that Southeast Asian militants will continue to attempt cross-regional cooperation, notwithstanding the proven difficulties this entails. For this reason alone, regional governments should hasten efforts to widen and deepen their own cooperation. Indeed, the seige of Marawi may be over and ISIS in its death throes, but only the most foolhardy would dare say the same about the problem of terrorism and militancy in Southeast Asia.

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