

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Death of Bahrún Naim: Mastermind of Terror in Southeast Asia

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

The death of Bahrún Naim, the directing figure of terrorist attacks in Southeast Asia, demonstrates that by working together, governments can prevent and pre-empt attacks.

Commentary

ON 8 JUNE 2018, Muhammad Bahrúnaim Anggih Tamtomo alias Bahrún Naim was killed in a US airstrike as he was riding a motorcycle in Ash Shafa, Syria. Naim had been the mastermind of terrorist attacks in Malaysia and Indonesia. Upon joining Islamic State (IS), he used the cyber domain to radicalise and recruit Southeast Asians to carry out attacks. After tracking Naim for close to two years, a US counter terrorism operation killed the Indonesian high-value target.

Following the rise of IS from June 2014 onwards, many Southeast Asian recruits travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the group. A significant number of failed plots and successful attacks in the region were planned by Southeast Asian terrorists located in Syria and Iraq. They included three Indonesians - Naim, Bahrumsyah and Abu Jandal - and one Malaysian, Muhammad Wanndy. They planned to direct and inspire attacks against political and security leaders.

Naim's Background

All four masterminds have been killed - two in suicide bombings and two in decapitation attacks. On 5 November 2016, Abu Jandal was killed in a suicide mission in Mosul. On 29 April 2017, Muhammad Wanndy Mohammad Jedi alias Abu Hamzah al Fateh was killed in Raqqa, Syria. On 19 April 2018, Bahrumsyah Mennor Usman was killed at an IS meeting in a US air strike in Hajin, Syria.

There were multiple claims of their deaths including Naim faking his death to evade the aggressive coalition hunting high-value targets. While Abu Jandal and Bahrumsyah did not die in targeted killings, Wannady and Naim's deaths represented successful counter terrorist operations.

Naim was born in Pekalongan, Central Java on 6 September 1983 and was raised in Solo, which is regarded as the centre of Islamist radicalism in Indonesia. He had joined Hizbut Tahrir while he was a senior high school student and spoke Javanese, Indonesian and Arabic fluently. Most of his recruits came from Hizbut Tahrir and Tim Hisbah, a splinter group of the Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT).

After qualifying as an informatics engineer from Surakarta State University (UNS), he worked at an Internet cafe in Surakarta. Naim taught archery to Nurul Azmiat-Tibyani, an imprisoned female terrorist involved in the hacking of investment companies, because he believed that women are obligated to wage 'jihad'.

In November 2010, Naim was arrested by Indonesia's D88 for possession of ammunition in his home and was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison by Solo's District Court in June 2011. In February 2015, he left Indonesia for Syria with his two wives and children and first stayed in Raqqa.

He then moved to the Manbij town, near Aleppo, which is also called 'Little London' where he interacted with foreign fighters from Europe. Together with one of his two wives, Rafiqah Hanum they ran a travel agency to move Southeast Asians to fight for IS. Although IS' external operations wing was reluctant to support Bahrun Naim's projects, he built a support and operational infrastructure from Indonesia to Turkey, the gateway to Iraq and Syria.

Naim in Syria

Naim was the first Southeast Asian terrorist to use Bitcoins, and basic artificial intelligence to disseminate terrorist content to future attackers and supporters. In April 2017, Naim used an internet bot in his website Wahai Muslimin, which allowed visitors an interactive and instant platform to communicate with him.

Naim's 'Nuclear for Dummy' manual in his personal website inspired Indonesian terrorist Young Farmer to build a 'dirty bomb' aimed at Indonesian targets. Naim reminded IS supporters who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to obey the 'caliph's instructions'.

Naim used encrypted communication channels, mostly Telegram and WhatsApp to plot attacks and assign missions. To counter this, the Indonesian government threatened to shut down Telegram in July 2017. However, Telegram's representatives focused on blocking IS content to prevent the threat from escalating, which led to Naim's account being taken down. Naim attracted further attention after his associates led by Gigih Rahmat Dewa planned to attack Marina Bay Sands in Singapore.

Naim became elusive after he realised that he was being targeted and faked his death

in May 2017 by ending communication with his supporters and sympathisers. In July 2017, Naim's first wife Rafiqā Hanum lied to his associate Yusuf Arianto that her husband had been killed and his body had been buried.

Authorities from multiple countries believed that Bahrun Naim was killed fighting the Syrian army in Abu Hammam, Syria in November 2017. Nonetheless, he continued to operate discreetly, building social media platforms to disseminate propaganda, recruiting handlers and creating bots to spread computer generated content to large audiences.

The Future

There are emerging terrorist leaders for directing attacks from Syria and Iraq, such as Mohammed Yusop Karim Fais alias Abu Walid. Nonetheless, the death of Naim will be a hard blow to both IS central and IS regional for three reasons. First, Naim was talented in motivating his recruits and indoctrinating them to sacrifice their lives. Second, Naim was technically competent, harnessing technology to enhance terrorist capabilities. Third, Naim was hardworking, resourceful and very experienced.

Away from the glare of the international media, Southeast Asian governments disrupted multiple terrorist plots by Naim. In reality, Naim was neither a fighter nor a strategic thinker. While living in a conflict-ridden territory, he communicated securely with a laptop and limited funds to motivate his recruits to mount terrorist attacks.

Rohan Gunaratna is head, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) and Professor of Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg