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Katibah Nusantara: Islamic State's Malay Archipelago Combat Unit

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

While the self-proclaimed Islamic State has been identified as a serious security threat worldwide, the establishment of the Katibah Nusantara, a dedicated Southeast Asian military unit within IS, is a new direct challenge to Southeast Asia.

Commentary

WHILE THE presence of Southeast Asian fighters in the self-proclaimed Islamic State is well-known, what is less noticed is the rising importance of IS' strategy of waging a global jihad. While the Malay-speaking jihadists who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s formed the backbone of the Jemaah Islamiyah in the 1990s and the first decade of 2000, IS seems to have more grandiose plans for its Malay Archipelago fighters.

This is evident from Islamic State's establishment of the Katibah Nusantara, a Malay-based combat unit, with serious consequences for Southeast Asian security. The Katibah Nusantara is a dedicated fighting force. Its capability was most evident in early April 2015 when the unit scored its first major combat success by capturing five Kurd-held territories in Syria. This battle-field success was highlighted in the jihadi and Islamic State's social media, especially in the Indonesian and Malay languages, partly to entice new recruits to join the cause.

IS' Malay Archipelago Combat Unit

Katibah Nusantara has also been expanding its recruitment drive for fighters and supporters through videos and printed press in the Malay language. While Bahrumshah, a former charismatic Jemaah Islamiyah member in Indonesia has been active, this has reached new proportions with the use of young Malay and Indonesian children to propagate the cause, especially in the social media.

Katibah Nusantara is likely to gain importance in IS' strategic goals of establishing a world-wide Caliphate. The combat returnees for IS could be mobilised to undertake attacks in Southeast Asia. Unlike JI which had members who were returnees from the Afghan war, this time, the region would be confronted with a far stronger force in terms of numbers, ideology and military training and combat experience.

Katibah Nusantara has also been playing a part in connecting the local extremist networks, leading to the 'glocalisation' of IS' danger through nexus with local groups in the region. It also gives hope and support to the local outfits in the region by legitimising their causes, which have suffered from security operations since the 2002 Bali bombings. The downward slide of jihadist appeal and success in Indonesia and even Malaysia since 2009 has been reversed by Katibah Nusantara's success in Iraq and Syria.

Importance of Malay-speaking fighters in IS

The growing reach of Katibah Nusantara could lead to its expanding influence in Islamic State's decision-making process, in turn leading IS giving greater priority to Southeast Asia as its war zone. Already, there are indications with IS suggesting Poso in Indonesia as its training ground and the possible declaration of Southeast Asia as part of its wilayah or province within the Islamic Caliphate.

In addition to the arrest of more than 100 IS supporters in Malaysia and a smaller number in Indonesia, the foiling of planned attacks in Malaysia by IS supporters is indicative of the danger Katibah Nusantara poses to the region. A recent IS posting on the social media also identified Singapore as a possible target for attack with new groups in the Philippines pledging allegiance to Islamic State.

While Malay-speaking fighters, mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia, constitute a small proportion of the more than 30,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries currently fighting in Iraq and Syria, more significant is the growing importance of the Southeast Asian group.

With more than 700 and 200 fighters from Indonesia and Malaysia respectively, and a smaller number from the Philippines and even Singapore, the Malay-speaking fighters are being organised for a number of reasons, including the fact that they emanate from Southeast Asia where a sizeable number of world's Sunni Muslims reside. About 30 groups in Southeast Asia have already pledged allegiance to IS.

Launch of the Malay-Speaking Combat Unit

On 26 September 2014, the *Katibah Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyah* or the Malay Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was formally launched, headquartered in Al-Shadadi, in the Syrian province of Hasaka. This is reminiscent of the Jemaah Islamiyah's Al-Ghuraba cell that was based in Karachi, Pakistan which formed the hub for Malay-speaking jihadists fighting in Afghanistan.

The Katibah Nusantara is headed by an Amir, officially identified as Abu Ibrahim al-Indunisiy. Most of the leaders appear to be Indonesians even though many Malaysians are part of it. The unit is subdivided into various departments including those handling combat fighters, snipers, heavy weapons, tactics and strategy, and military management.

The primary objective of the combat unit is to assist IS to achieve its jihad goal of establishing an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as part of the wider Caliphate. Ideology is a major factor binding these fighters. The Malay unit facilitates communication among its members and directs their combat tasks. It facilitates the day-to-day challenges confronting Malay-speaking jihadists as they are operating in a largely Arabic-speaking environment and face difficulties communicating with other foreign jihadists.

The unit assists families in Indonesia and Malaysia whose husbands or children are in Iraq and Syria, including those who have perished in combat. The unit motivates the fighters to continue their struggle through religious classes and prevent disillusionment or retreat from the combat zone, especially in the face of Western Coalition attacks. It also performs the task of recruiting new fighters by providing a more conducive environment of fellowship, providing the pull factor for those intent on supporting IS.

While Islamic State has surfaced as a major threat world-wide, this has become even more compelling for Southeast Asia with the establishment of Katibah Nusantara. The formation of a combat unit for the Malay Archipelago requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach

with strong international support in response. Failure to counter it could have severe security ramifications for the region, similar to what Boko Haram and Al-Shabab are perpetrating in Africa.

Jasminder Singh is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg