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Islamic State Branches in Southeast Asia

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Preparations are underway to proclaim an Islamic State branch in the Southern Philippines, while the Indonesian military has pre-empted IS plans to declare a provincial satellite in eastern Indonesia. Such a foothold will have far-reaching consequences for the stability of the region.

Commentary

THE SO-CALLED Islamic State (IS) is likely to create IS branches in the Philippines and Indonesia in 2016. Although the Indonesian military pre-empted IS plans to declare a satellite state of the “caliphate” in eastern Indonesia, IS is determined to declare such an entity in at least one part of Southeast Asia. Preparations to proclaim an IS branch in the southern Philippines reflect the growing influence of IS ideology in the region.

The latest act of terrorist violence in Jakarta on 14 January 2016 highlights the clear danger posed to Southeast Asia by IS. Though their identities and affiliation have not been determined the modus operandi of the terrorists in attacking a major shopping mall in the commercial heart of the Indonesian capital, suggests a close parallel with similar attacks in Istanbul and Paris by IS-related groups. Although the number of casualties has been limited, thanks to the prompt response of the Jakarta police, the attacks by guns and grenades indicate a scaling up of the terror tactics employed.

After a year-long discussion between the local groups that pledged allegiance to the self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi in 2014-2015, the Shura Council appointed Isnilon Hapilon to lead the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Philippines. Hapilon is the leader of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in Basilan (the largest island in the Sulu Archipelago). If IS succeeds in creating a safe haven in Basilan and mounts

operations from the Sulu Archipelago into both Philippines and Malaysia it will pose a threat to the entire region. The creation of training camps will lure not only Southeast Asians but other nationalities as well - from Australians to Chinese Uighurs, who cannot easily reach Syria. Considering the importance given to Malaysia by Hapilon, Malaysians are likely to travel and join IS in Mindanao. The nationalities trained in the new IS province to carry out the IS vision are likely to be a threat to their home countries. In addition to enforcing the IS brand of governance, IS type beheadings and mass fatality and casualty attacks are likely.

The Context

In January 2016, IS announced the unification of four battalions in the Philippines and the allegiance of their leaders to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the IS leader. The four battalions are 1) Ansar Al-Shariah Battalion led by Abu Anas Al-Muhajir; 2) Ma'rakah Al-Ansar Battalion led by Abu Ammar; 3) Ansarul Khilafah Battalion led by Abu Sharifah; and 4) Al Harakatul Islamiyyah Battalion in Basilan led by Isnilon Hapilon, who is the overall leader of the four battalions. Al Harakatul Islamiyyah is the original name of ASG. Referring to Hapilon as "Sheikh Mujahid Abu Abdullah Al-Filipini," an IS official organ Al-Naba' reported on the unification of the "battalions" of God's fighters ("mujahidin"). The IS choice of Hapilon to lead an IS province in the Philippines presents a long-term threat to the stability and the security of the Philippines and beyond.

At the oath-taking to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, the battalions were represented by Ansar Al-Shariah Battalion leader Abu Anas Al-Muhajir who goes by the alias Abraham. Abu Anas Al-Muhajir is Mohammad bin Najib bin Hussein from Malaysia and his battalion is in charge of laws and other matters pertaining to jurisprudence. Mohammad bin Najib bin Hussein is an engineer and sundry shop owner. The other Malaysians present - Universiti Malaya comparative religion lecturer Dr Mahmud Ahmad alias Abu Handzalah and a former Municipal Council employee Muhammad Joraimie Awang Raimee – are on the Malaysian police wanted list since April 2014.

Although the leader of the Ma'rakah Al-Ansar Battalion could not attend the event, Abu Ammar sent a representative Abu Harith. The war battalion led by Abu Harith is from the island of Sulu (which is in the Sulu Archipelago), where the overall ASG group leader Radulan Sahiron is based. This demonstrated a split in ASG, where a small but important faction had defected to IS.

After pledging allegiance to IS, Ansarul Khilafah Philippines released a video threatening to deploy suicide bombers in the Philippines and make the country a "graveyard" for American soldiers. On two occasions, attempts by the group to transport weapons to Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) were disrupted by the Philippine National Police working with their Indonesian counterparts. Based in South Cotabato Province, Sarangani Province and General Santos City, Ansarul Khilafah Philippines is led by Abu Sharifah, who is also fluent in Tagalog.

Emerging Threat

The Philippines has been an important arena for domestic, regional and global terrorist groups for 20 years. Since 1994, when Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) established

their first training camp, Hudaibiyah, the Philippines emerged as the training ground for Indonesians, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Thai Muslims and Arabs. Most of the instructors were non Filipinos: they were either Indonesians or Arabs trained by Al Qaeda. In addition to the Sulu Archipelago transforming into a base for training and operations, the area is a strategic bridge linking the Philippines and Malaysia.

With the rise of IS, the ASG kidnapped hostages of various nationalities. While some hostages escaped, others were released after payment, and others were killed. The Malaysian businessman and engineer Bernard Then Ted Fen was beheaded in November 2015. The latest kidnapping by ASG was on September 2015, when a Canadian, Norwegian and a Filipina were kidnapped in Samal Island and transported by two seacraft to Basilan.

In addition to moving IS ideologues to implement the IS brand of Islam, it is very likely that IS will dispatch its explosives experts, combat tacticians and other operatives. The IS plans to declare a state in the Mindanao present a very real threat to the stability and security of Southeast Asia, a region that has hitherto enjoyed relative political stability, social harmony and economic growth.

Government Response

The Moro struggle for independence in Mindanao has been one of the world's oldest. The Government of Philippines made significant gains by engaging the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in a successful peace process brokered by the Malaysian Government. Nonetheless, the ASG, as a separate and more militant entity, as well as a few smaller groups, continue to fight to create an independent Moro homeland. The Philippine military lacks an operational capability to dismantle the insurgent and terrorist infrastructure in Mindanao especially in the Sulu archipelago.

The Philippine military has dismissed the IS publicity on the unification of the four battalions as propaganda. The sense of urgency to prevent Mindanao from emerging as an IS epicentre is not shared by all. Until an IS declaration of a satellite state, and even attacks mounted in the name of IS, it will be business-as-usual for some in the Philippines.

Shortly, IS will declare a satellite of the caliphate in the Sulu Archipelago. Ideally, President Benigno Aquino should pre-empt the IS declaration. To win Muslim hearts and minds and prevent Muslim support for IS, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) should move not in a role of containing, isolating and eliminating the ASG, but with a mandate to economically develop the region. President Aquino has to mobilise national and international resources to help achieve this mandate.

To preempt the declaration of a IS satellite state (wilayat) in the Philippines and IS branch shortly, the AFP should deploy in strength in Sulu, Basilan and Tawi Tawi. If the AFP can dominate the Sulu Archipelago, IS cannot successfully declare, operate and expand its satellite in the Philippines with implications for Malaysia, the region and beyond.

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