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Danger of Southeast Asian Jihadi Returnees: Need for an ASEAN-wide Policy

By Jasminder Singh

Synopsis

More than 1,000 Southeast Asian combatants of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are poised to return home in the near future. Much needs to be done to preempt the serious political and security implications that these returnees will pose.

Commentary

OF THE more than 1,000 Southeast Asian combatants for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, together with 2,000-3,000 camp followers, some are poised to return home in the near future. This is likely to have serious political and security implications for the region.

The majority of Southeast Asian fighters are from Indonesia and Malaysia with a token presence from Thailand, Philippines, and possibly Myanmar. About 70 Southeast Asians are believed to have been killed in combat while another 200 or so are said to have returned. Many of the returnees in Southeast Asia were captured in transit en route to Syria. For example, more than 170 Indonesians were detained on the Turkish-Syrian border before they could cross into Syria. What is in store for Southeast Asia with IS returnees is far more serious than the Afghan returnees in the 1980s. Only a coordinated regional policy will be able to manage this potentially grave threat. This is because Southeast Asia will have to overcome a regional and extra-regional terrorist threat under the auspices of Katibah Nusantara, the IS' affiliate in the region, besides many Southeast Asians fighting for other groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate.

Reasons for Returning from the Islamic State

While for some, the aim was to permanently stay in the so-called Islamic State (IS) under its self-appointed Caliph, the geo-political and military realities, however, have dictated many to return home, with more likely to join the train. Many have returned due to disillusionment with IS. For them the dream of an Islamic paradise was shattered by the brutalities and atrocities they witnessed, especially the beheadings and wanton killings of civilian Muslims, Shias and Sunnis alike.

The highly disciplined, demanding and rigorous life style of IS was something many had not expected, especially in an environment where the Southeast Asians were a minority. Many who also hoped for glamorous jobs and assignments were given menial tasks that also disenchanting them forcing them to abandon IS.

Danger of the Returnees

The danger posed by IS returnees is three-fold. The first is dealing with individuals who have adopted and been exposed to the radical ideology of IS; it promotes intolerance and hatred towards non-believers who can be killed for not accepting its ideology. The fear is that the returnees who are steeped in radical ideology would promote the 'ISISification' of Southeast Asian religious tenets and practices, leading to cognitive and ideological shifts that would promote inter and intra-religious conflicts. It would also lead to the spread of the IS' ideology and propaganda in an attempt to win new adherents. With many issues and challenges facing local Muslims, this could pose a danger to moderate mainstream Islam in the region.

Secondly, there is also the danger that the returnees would be accepted as natural leaders of militant movements in the home country as happened following the return of fighters from Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. The returnees' prestige of having fought in 'Bumi Allah' (God's Land) can be expected to draw many recruits who have already been radicalised towards the cause of IS and greater radicalisation and terrorism. The battle-hardened and ideologically fortified returnees, with experience of having lived in the 'Islamic Caliphate', would also be able to act as a powerful magnet to recruit supporters and fighters for local militant groups and even IS.

Finally, and probably the most dangerous consequence, could be the launching of terrorist operations at home by these returnees. Armed with battlefield experience, adept in technical skills of weapons' handling, and bomb making, including killing of combatants and civilians, these combat veterans will pose an existential threat to their home countries and the wider region. They may want to continue their violent struggle against local political and religious leaders, and communities dubbed as 'enemies of Islam' and pursue a struggle in support of the IS as part of its effort to establish an Islamic Caliphate. There is also the possibility of other combatants from outside Southeast Asia entering the region in support of regional operations as seen with the Uighurs' support for Indonesian militants.

What Can the Returnees Do?

There are at least three scenarios of possible actions by returnees:

1. Regroup in the Philippines with old jihadi networks such as Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the Philippines;
2. Resume violence and sectarian conflict in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia;
3. Target foreigners in the region including foreign embassies and iconic Western economic and political interests such as hotels and shopping malls. Revive dormant groups such as Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, Arakan Rohingya National Organisation and the Pattani United Liberation Organisation. Escalate domestic violence against governments seen as pro-Western or being anti-Islamic.

The returnees' military attacks could possibly be undertaken through the following avenues:

- a. By a single terrorist, either local or external;
- b. By a single group, say the East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT);
- c. By a combination of groups as is currently ongoing in the Philippines involving the BIFF, Abu Sayyaf Group, MILF faction, Ansar Khalifa Philippines and various Malaysian and Indonesian elements; and/or
- d. By a combination of local and external terrorists, say a joint operation between the MIT and Uighurs.

What Needs to Be Done?

It has become clear that no one state can manage the threat posed by IS. It will require regional and international cooperation, including the need to get assistance from Turkey and Iraq to send captured local fighters back for charges. To begin with, states would need strong legislations to criminalise citizens fighting for terrorist groups, involvement in war or military operations other than for national purpose, and even pledging of loyalty to another state an act of betrayal and crime.

In addition to strong and deterrent punishment, Southeast Asians should be stripped of their citizenship for participating in criminal acts on behalf of another state. There would also be the need for effective de-radicalisation measures in order to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees into the society at large.

The danger posed by the 'Daesh Alumni' (as IS-linked militants are also referred to) and returnees is real and this should be addressed head-on to prevent these ideological and battle-hardened individuals from causing damage to their respective societies. This would, however, require an ASEAN-wide effort to neutralise the threat from IS in the region.

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